

Key issues arising from the project

Communication and liaison

Communication between university departments and liaison staff in schools and colleges is complex. For each party, there are potentially multiple linkages to be made with staff who may have different role designations in each institution, and where the named person may not be a constant year-on-year.

University provision

For staff in schools and colleges, clear contact details on each university website for key liaison personnel, not only in Student Admissions, but also in individual departments, would be valued. Where possible, University staff should engage on a departmental basis with local schools and colleges, making sure that at least one person in each department understands the learning skills and needs of applicants, disseminates this knowledge, and arranges contact between current and aspirant students. Having an individual solely responsible for the operational aspect of outreach and transition activities, such as the RSC Fellowship in Chemistry, appears to be the key to success. Support for such posts should be maintained.

School and college staff feel somewhat daunted about the number of universities which they potentially need to contact about transition events. They note that the email addresses of staff dealing with UCAS applications are supplied to UCAS. Could these addresses be made available to Universities for block mailing about open days and transition events generally? How can the University lobby to achieve this?

A consistent request from schools and colleges in this study is that Universities should feed back to them information about the graduation success of their students.

School and college provision

Schools and colleges transition provision works best where there is a designated, key individual who has overall responsibility for HE awareness-raising and for the application process. This person (and their team) would regularly 'push' individual students (from year 11 onwards) to particular transition activities such as open days, student shadowing or roadshows, and would oversee and monitor the UCAS application process.

Schools and college students ask for a clear programme of support for university application to be publicised by their school or colleges, which is updated as necessary. Applicants should be offered specific advice and activities at crucial times, such as advice on financial planning at a time before applications for funding support are due in – but not so early so that the information is 'lost' and is meaningless. They ask that schools and colleges seek feedback from current applicants to revise the schedule and the types of information offered in the future.

Schools and colleges should supportively encourage students to be proactive in their preparation for university, and to become increasingly independent in relation to their learning and study skills.

Multiple pathways for raising aspiration

Multiple strategies are needed to raise levels of self-belief among young people who may not currently aspire to University. Liaison needs to start early – in primary school – and offer a range of ways in which young people can relate to universities and imagine themselves as university students. For those nearing the end of their schooling, the main benefits are to be gained from one-to-one or small group contact with current students and engagement with ‘real’ university experience, such as living in halls and experiencing university teaching.

Transition activities need to be co-ordinated across the University, so that generic and subject-specific activities complement each other.

Parents and carers

Parents and carers are crucial to student aspiration and admission to university. This is recognised in the PARTNERS scheme, which offers specific activities for parents. It is important to have friendly accessible contact in the University for local parents and carers, with some opportunity for individual discussion and information-giving. Information on finance is particularly needed.

Schools and colleges should engage with and encourage parents of potential university students from as early on as possible.

Generic and subject-specific support networks

Networks such as PARTNERS and VETNET enable schools and colleges to access a range of activities for aspirant students. These in turn enable students to imagine themselves at university, aspire to HE study, and take up opportunities of a wider circle of events. The PARTNERS network is known and widely appreciated by students and staff in all the schools and colleges visited.

Subject-specific pathways, such as VETNET are able to work supportively with students through their Level 3 programme at school or, more often, at college, which eases transition to University. Where appropriate, this approach could be adopted more widely within the University, particularly in vocationally oriented departments.

Student induction

Induction starts before the student arrives at University, through the information and contacts sent out to incoming students. Mature students in particular need information well in advance of arrival about course timetabling and the nature and timing of assessment.

Initial induction is valuable in creating opportunities for staff and students to meet and get to know one another, for creating opportunities for students to familiarise themselves with their new environment, and for clarifying course outlines and student expectations.

It is generally agreed that the induction process lasts for the first semester, possibly the first year, not simply the first week. Benefits are seen in starting some teaching activity in the first week – possibly combined with an off-site residential experience – and in allowing time for students to take part in Freshers' week activities to establish themselves socially at University. There is general concern about an overload of information presented in Induction Week.

Continuing induction support is offered through the personal tutor system and through early feedback on progress and achievement. Opportunities for personal contact with tutors on a group and individual basis throughout the first semester and perhaps at strategic points such as revision and exam periods are valued. Students appreciate and value a supportive environment, and this may require more personal contact from tutors. Support for personal tutors therefore needs to be secure.

Finally...

The overall message from the young people involved in this project is that throughout the process of enquiry, application, transition and induction they wish to be treated as individuals, not as members of a seemingly amorphous student body. Even small amounts of one-to-one contact with current students or with University staff during this process can have a hugely positive effect.