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Delivering inductions to new students studying part-time and through distance learning in order to identify best practice for the sector

Institute of Education



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An investigation into the delivery of inductions to new distance learning and part-time students in order to identify best practice

Clare Hewitt, Head of Student Support, Institute of Education.

Introduction

This project is an initial investigation into the delivery of inductions in particular to new part-time and distance learning students in order to identify best practice for the sector. Time and resources restrict the depth in which a full investigation could be undertaken but I hope that the findings are a useful starting point for other student services practitioners across the sector to reflect on their induction practice and to get ideas for improvement where appropriate.

The project came about mainly due to the profile of students at the Institute of Education (IOE). The IOE has approximately 8,000 students that are predominantly postgraduate (85% of student population). Over half are part-time although may attend either during the day or in the evening. Our student profile (2013-14) is below:

231 undergraduate students	4723 postgraduate students
945 research students	2140 initial teacher education students
41% Full-time students	59% Part-time students

Many masters courses offer online modules and some are entirely online.

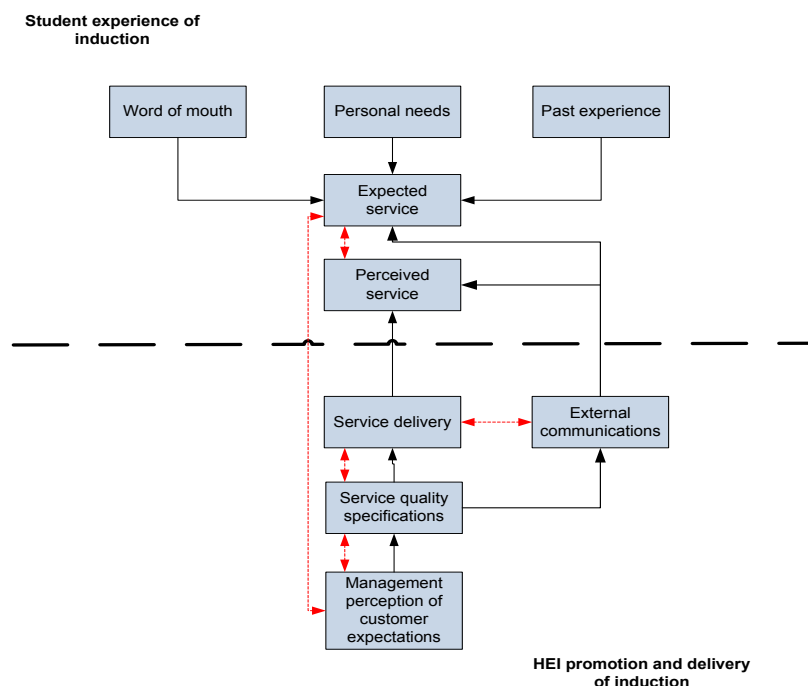
The Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (2012) research shows that part-time students show lower retention levels and also have lower attainment levels, although the reasons for this can be complex. Induction is an important part of the retention process and given the IOE profile of students I felt an investigation into our current practice as well as those of others would be useful and informative.

The project write up is organised into (different sections). It draws from the feedback given by IOE students, staff and AMOSSHE members and seeks to use that to inform the recommendations arising from this investigation. I have also considered the findings in light of previous research into new student induction although it has to be noted that much of this is focussed on the undergraduate experience rather than postgraduate experience. As noted by Ruth Whittaker "The growing diversity of the student population requires institutions to develop and

operate strategies that address these generic issues as well as those which are specific to different types of learner group.”(Whittaker, 2008) This investigation seeks to address the distance learner and part-time learner groups and find examples of best practice. It is my hope that these preliminary findings may lead to further research into the postgraduate student experience so that issues to specific to that group can be effectively addressed. This is particularly relevant in the fast-moving HE landscape where we have yet to see the full effect of undergraduate tuition fee debt on numbers of postgraduate applicants in the future. Effective conversion and retention techniques are going to be vital in maintaining this student population.

Methodology

Although it is contentious to identify the student as a “customer”, for the purposes of this project the customer service gap model proved a useful tool when creating the survey and focus group questions used. This was developed by and the premise behind the service gap model (Parasuraman, Zeithalm and Berry, 1990) is that if gaps between customer expectation and the actual service provided can be identified and closed, the customer experience will improve. Research has shown that the management of student expectations of their course and experience of university is important. (Yorke and Longden, 2007) For the purposes of this investigation the survey and focus group sought to explore the gap between expected and perceived service. The findings, although indicative only, could help inform another potential gap between management perception of student expectations and the student’s expectations of the service.



The student voice was represented in the investigation through the use of a student survey and two follow-up focus groups. The survey was brief in order to encourage

respondents and took 10 minutes to complete. It was sent to all IOE current students in March 2014. There were 215 respondents and therefore the survey results can be seen as an indicator only. The focus groups were 40 minutes long each and were conducted with volunteers from the students who responded to the survey.

The other element of the investigation was to find out about other higher education institutions current induction practice. A short six minute survey was sent to all AMOSSHE members and 18 responded. We also carried out a search of all AMOSSHE member websites for information about new student induction and noted results. Finally we carried out interviews with academic staff and student service professionals involved in induction in order to get their views. In addition we also looked at recent research on new student experience to see if what we found in this investigation resonated or contrasted with those findings and recommendations.

IOE student survey

The IOE currently delivers induction to new students in three main ways:

- IOE welcome talk and tour – this is face to face and offered at the start of term, with some resources such as IOE library guides also being available online libguides.ioe.ac.uk/
- Course induction – a blend of face to face induction and resources on Moodle (the IOE virtual learning environment)
- Virtual induction – these are online slideshare presentations about IOE central services. www.ioe.ac.uk/induction

A short survey entitled “Improving the IOE Induction Experience” was sent to all IOE students. The aim of the survey was to discover what students expected from their induction and whether the service delivered met these expectations. By surveying the whole student population (including full-time, part-time, campus-based and distance learners) the intention was then to see whether results differed for new part-time students and distance-learners compared to the full-time and campus-based learners.

In total 215 students gave valid responses to the survey. Of these students 18.1% (39) identified as distance learners and 30.2% (65) identified as part-time students; both significant proportions of the population.

Which of the following sorts of induction did you experience?

IOE Welcome (a central talk covering Student Support, Academic Writing Centre, Library, Students Union, IT)

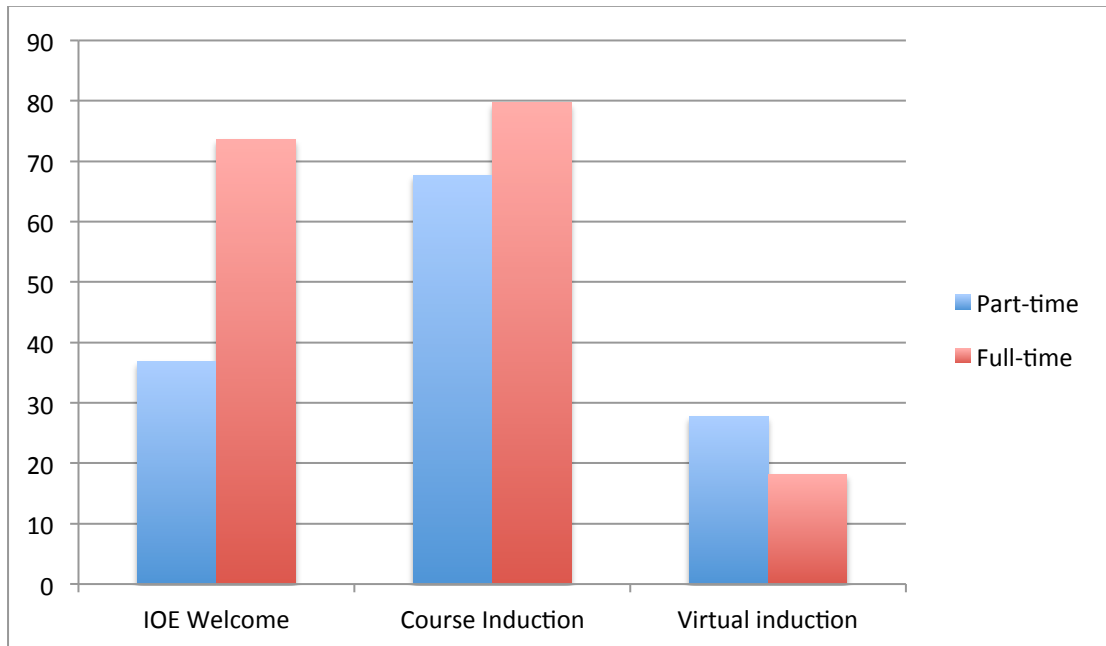
Course induction

Virtual induction (accessed via the IOE website)

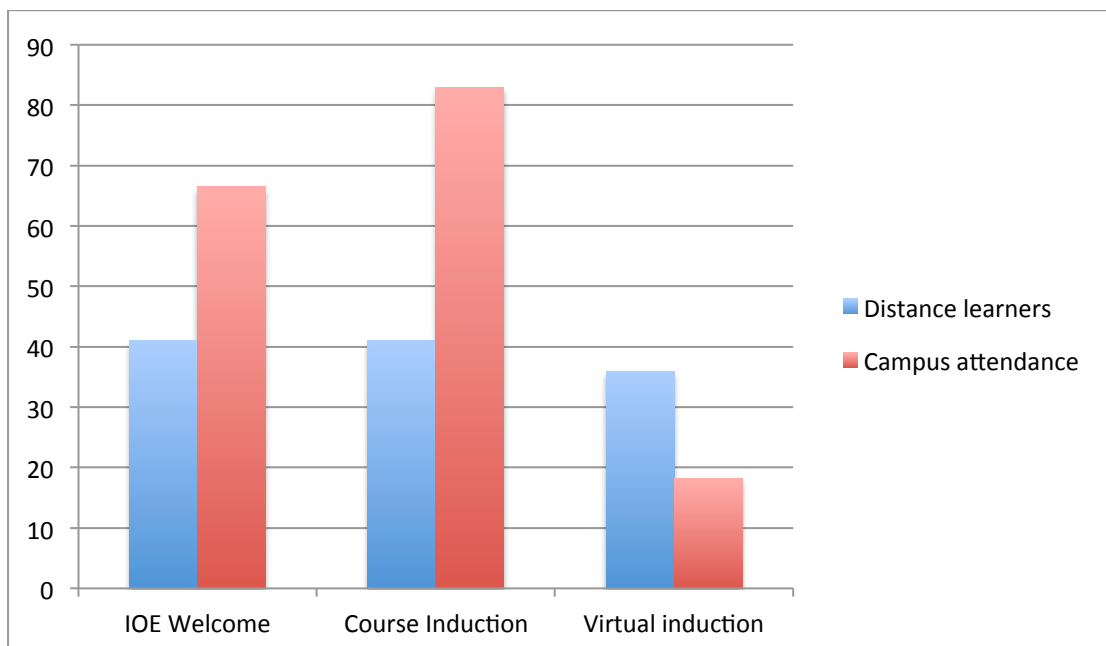
Other (please specify)

Full-time students were more likely to attend an IOE Welcome talk, with 74% attending compared to 37% of part-time students. This trend continues with course

inductions with 80% of full-time students attending one compared to 68% of part-time students. Part-time students were however more likely to experience virtual induction, at 28% compared to 18%.



The students that identified themselves as distance learners may be doing mixed mode learning as 41% of distance learners attended a face-to-face IOE welcome compared to 66.5% of those who physically attend the university. They were less likely to receive a course induction, at 41% compared with 83%. Distance learners were more likely access the virtual induction at 36%, compared with 18% of campus-based learners.



How would you rate your experience of your induction:

Very good Good Fair Poor Very poor N/A

Overall students rated IOE induction favourable with 79% rated the experience of “very good” or “good” and a further 17% rating it as fair. No students rating the experience as “very poor.” For those who attended their course induction, 78% rated the experience “very good” or “good” whilst 3% rated the experience “poor” or “very poor. For the virtual induction, 58% rated the experience as “very good” or “good”, and 9% rated the experience as “poor” or “very poor.”

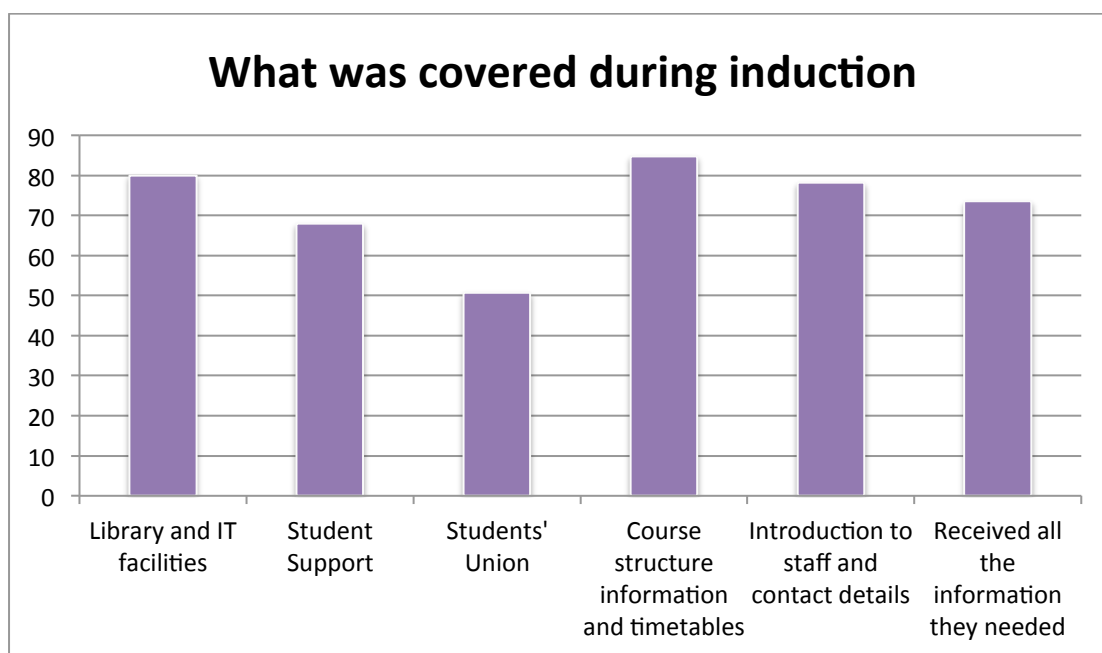
There was a 10% drop in satisfaction with IOE induction from part-time learners. One reason for this could be there were unable to attend due to other commitments. The trend continues for online induction. Although more part-time learners accessed this, 61% full time student rating the experience ‘very good’ or ‘good,’ whilst for part time students this was 52%. This could suggest that it is the content rather than the mode of delivery that causes an issue for part-time learners.

In comparison the experience of distance learners was more in line with the overall student experience. The distance learner experience of the virtual induction was better, with 69% distance learners rating the experiences as very good and good while 57% non-distance learners give the top rating. No distance learners rate the experience as ‘very poor’ but however 8% campus-based learners do. This could suggest that the induction content is satisfactory but distance learners are less likely to have accessed the inductions onsite.

What types of information did your induction cover?

Did you receive all the information you needed?

This question attempted to discover if there was a gap between students’ expectation versus their perception of induction. 75% of all students who responded to the survey saying they received all the information they needed. The information they recalled receiving is shown in the table below.



The experience was broadly similar for part-time or distance learners. 72% of part-time students compared with 73% of full-time students agreed they received all the information they needed. The areas of difference were that part-time students did not recall receiving information in their induction regarding student support available (50% compared to 76%) and the Students Union (28% compared with 62%).

This is repeated with distance learners and campus based learners. A similar percentage of distance learners and campus-based learners agreed they received all the information they needed (74% to 73%). Again there was a reduction in the percentage of distance-learning students who recalled receiving information in their induction regarding student support available (54% to 71%) and Students Union (31% to 55%). In addition a smaller percentage of distance learners recalled receiving information on course structure and timetables (74% to 87%) and staff information and contact details (70% to 80%).

From the feedback we are unable to tell whether the respondents did in fact receive the information they do not recall or not. One factor could be that while all students will access their courses so will actively seek to use information given to them in induction, not all students access Student Support or the Student Union and therefore may not recollect the information given to them at the time about these services. It is also unclear whether inductions were offered but students chose not to attend them or they were unable to attend because they did not receive the details of the sessions or had a timetable clash. The online inductions (our virtual induction and library guides) are available to all students at any point during their course. However this didn't appear to have made a difference to the experience of the students apart from the distance learner group who had used the virtual induction more and rated it more highly than campus-based students. Another issue is the timing of this survey. Many of the respondents enrolled in September/October 2013 so may have forgotten the induction. There is no imperative for new students to do

an induction unlike other elements of their courses. This in turn may mean that information is not accessed.

As all the groups gave similar feedback concerning whether they received the information they needed, we then turned to the qualitative feedback to see if any particular differences occurred or if the experience of all the groups of students stayed broadly the same.

[Qualitative feedback – what other information would you like to have received and what else could be done to improve your experience?](#)

[Comments from survey](#)

Positive comments include:

“No keep it the same! Not cutting corners has been really effective. The way I see it is that I received sufficient advice on how best to use the IOE facilities and because of that I a confident user of those facilities. So thanks.”

Similar themes arose for all students irrespective of their group regarding gaining the skills needed to undertake their course, particularly around IT and the virtual learning environment, Moodle:

“I would have liked to have received clearer and more in-depth information on how to navigate Moodle.”

“I would have liked to have a clearer outline of the VLE and where to go for help.”

“How about doing a practical journal search from the computer room very early in the course”

Some comments from part-time students did point to content of induction being an issue as they wanted their status as a part-time student to be addressed:

“Information relevant to part time course - everything was aimed at full time students.”

“It would have been useful to explain to part time students what their status actually means. For example, can't stay in student accommodation and can't get student oyster card.”

Distance learners also noted in their comments that information seems to cater more for campus-based learners.

“I feel that the university is more geared up towards students on campus - IT support frequently ask students to come in to the library to access IT support which is not possible for distance learners. [...] Generally I think it is fair to say the distance cohort of the course feel that the London based cohort have better facilities, representation and support.”

Distance learners also identified being given the opportunity to meet one another as important:

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“They should have organized more meetings with students from the same program or department so that international students do not feel so isolated”

“Maybe an online session where students could have dropped in to introduce themselves and meet each other”

The findings from the survey indicated the following:

- On the whole part-time and distance learners were less satisfied with their induction experience than full-time and campus-based learners.
- Part-time and distance learners were more likely to have accessed online induction but distance learners were more satisfied with this experience.
- Part-time students’ expectation of induction is that their particular status would be addressed in terms of what sort of experience they would have compared to full-time students. However this did not seem to have been the perception when they came to induction and indeed later in the course where they felt they were treated less favourably than full-time learners.
- Distance learners in particular mentioned wanting a mechanism by which to meet other students.

IOE focus groups and interviews

Focus groups

We then ran two focus groups of 40 minutes. The focus groups were attended by part-time and distance learners. All the focus group participants including the distance learners had experienced face to face inductions as well as online and course inductions. Again the experience of induction was broadly positive with the following themes emerging:

1. The participants felt that face to face meetings, inductions were most valuable and created the greatest feeling of “belonging” on the course:

“Starting a new course at a new place is always intimidating so it’s good to actually see people!”

“What I appreciated was just as much the social aspect of getting to know people from all over the world as well as the excellent information given”

Key to this was getting to know peers and staff. Former students had a vital role to play:

“...the most useful thing was talking to the ex-students, finding out tips they wish they’d known from the beginning and, you know, tips for juggling it with their other life commitments...”

“...just being able to chat about expectations and where everyone’s from....”

2. Whilst the importance of having induction online and online social networking (Facebook or virtual learning environment forums) was recognised, focus group participants felt it did not provide a like for like replacement of the face to face experience:

"...everyone on your course, including tutors, read everything you say so if I make a comment it means that everyone with access to the module can see it which makes it kind of a big deal..."

"...I posted one comment to try and start a chat but no-one responded..."

"I'm more a verbal kind of learner. If someone directs me to a web link I don't really look at it at all..."

"...it (Lync) still can't compete with face to face, at least with the technology and internet infrastructure available today..."

More positive experiences were generated either by regular involvement of a course tutor or regular activity occurring:

"I've had conversations with a fellow student online through one of our courses and we have become good friends..."

"I joined on Facebook and that's quite good they send links and stuff around, quite interesting to read"

"I think you could tell our tutor was looking at it (VLE) too, she would tell us to use it"

3. In terms of the induction content, in addition to the sense of belonging, participants mentioned gaining the skills and understanding of how the course was structured as very important. Induction materials incorporated into the course were also valued:

"I had a look at the online materials and then I understood better what to expect"

"something to do with getting back into studying... and something about the value of the knowledge you've gained in the workplace..."

"...the thing is you don't really go and find out these things til you need to write an essay. It's better if they fit that sort of thing earlier in the course..."

4. Participants did feel that their status was not recognised in following ways:
Having possession of an IOE student ID card was an important part of belonging to the university, but they are only issued onsite which is an issue for distance learners:

*"Well, the one thing that **didn't make me feel like part** of the IOE is the fact I couldn't get a student card without going to London. Actually a bit mean to deny DL students this small symbolic gesture..."*

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Opening hours of services onsite was another issue:

"...everything kind of stops at five o'clock..."

"...when things happen they need to be available in the evening and weekends as well. People aren't around..."

Interviews

Dr Clare Brooks is the programme director for the MA Education at the IOE which is a mainly distance learning programme. The points she made resonated with a number of findings from the focus groups and survey. These were:-

- Distance learners were more likely to feel induction did not apply to them and therefore did not access it
- That induction should be delivered in a variety of ways, not just in one format
- That induction materials were at their most effective when embedded in the course.

On the MA Education course, links to online library guides and an online group session on disability and wellbeing were offered via the Moodle virtual learning platform. To ensure students took in the necessary information, tasks were set for them. While the tasks did not count towards the end qualification, the expectation was that they were completed.

Although Dr Brooks acknowledged that it was important to cater for distance learners, she noted that it was important to give all students a variety of options for accessing induction. She felt it was not necessary to singling out different groups for different types of induction if a variety of options were presented. This is backed in other research:

"While recognising the importance of the specific needs of particular students groups in transition support, there is a danger that institutional strategies may define and relate to students as members of their particular target group, when students themselves would rather be defined as members of the wider university learning community" (McInnis, 2001)

It is a delicate balance for universities to strike.

The Open University (OU) is the world's first distance learning university, with over 73% of students working full or part-time as well as pursuing their studies. With a 92% student satisfaction rating with their courses (National Student Survey 2013), the OU is highly experienced at meeting the needs of distance learners and part-time learners. David Wilson, Director Student Support Teams outlined changes the OU had made to their induction process to meet the needs of their students. These were:

- Moving student support and induction away from a geographical model to a curriculum-based model. Rather than having 13 student support service in each geographical region, they are now based in a curriculum area such as Arts and Humanities

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- Focussing the support on a three step process, the first being orientation, the second giving new students the skills on how to navigate their online courses and the third to link into new students' first modules.
- Incorporating the induction into the first module of the courses which was intended to encourage students to access them.
- Using social media to set up course communities.

Although social media and online tutorials using collaborate were popular, face to face sessions are offered on many OU courses and regarded as very important by students who could attend them. This resonates with the feedback from our focus groups.

The key findings from our focus groups and interviews were:-

- Importance of a "face to face" element in induction. This could be done online although face to face was preferable.
- Importance of meeting peers on your course and becoming part of a community. This speaks to sense of belonging.
- Integrating induction materials into the course to ensure they were accessed. Alternatively finding a way to ensure they were accessed in advance although the focus group was unsure how this could be achieved.
- Recognising or catering for the different groups of learner whilst at the same time including them with the main body of learners.
- All agreed induction should be offered in a variety of ways (although the consensus was that online modes of delivery cannot yet replace a face to face experience).

AMOSSHE member survey

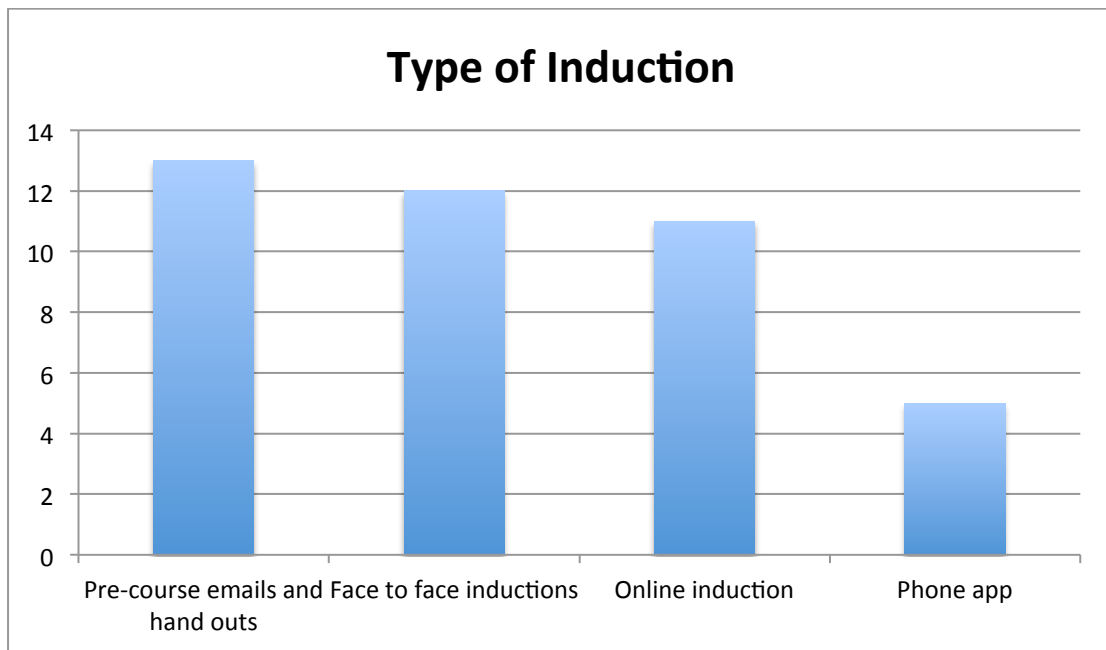
A short survey was sent to AMOSSHE members to find out how inductions were being delivered, to see if any particular methods were being used to deliver induction to part-time and distance learning students and find examples of best practice. 15 members responded to the survey, from a range of universities across the UK.

University student profiles

In comparison to the IOE, most respondents had a majority undergraduate demographic and most also had majority full-time students. Out of those five respondents stated that 0-20% students were distance learners, and 1 stated that 80-100% were distance learners.

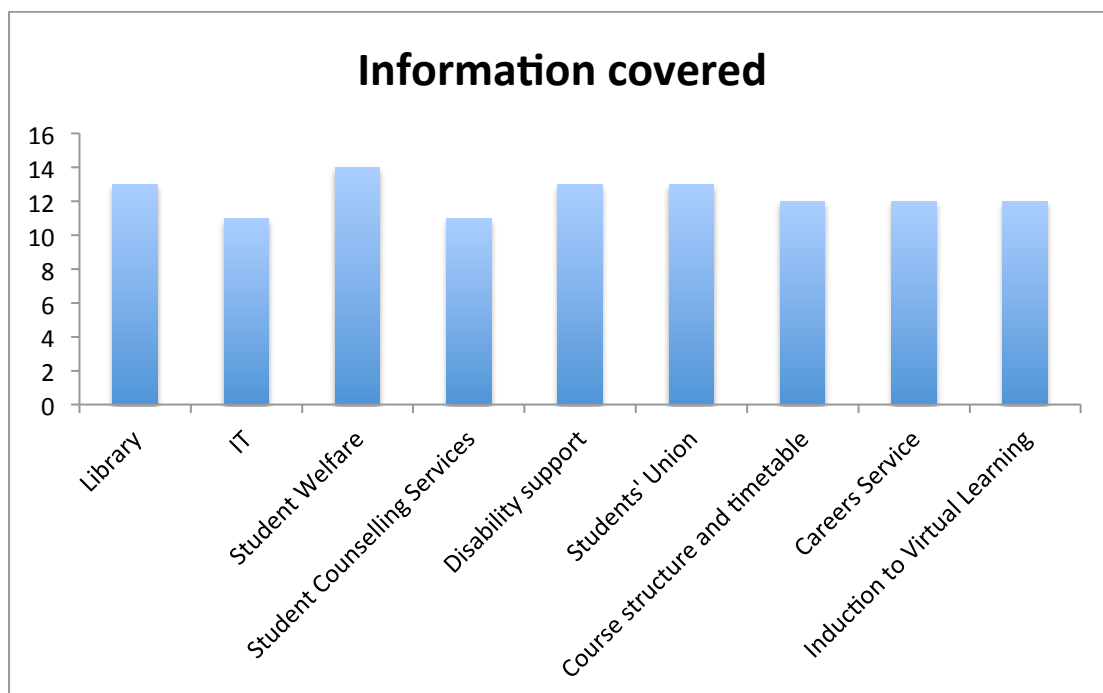
Types of induction delivered

All respondents used more than one mode of delivery for inductions.



Phone apps seem to be gaining in popularity. Other methods mentioned were “Films of students speaking to students with similar course experience” and “Online Prezzi induction”.

Type of information covered



Two members said that their inductions were tailored to their student body, which is one case was mainly distance learners and in the other, mainly part-time learners. The other respondents did not tailor inductions to these groups but noted that this was likely to be done at a course induction level. Two members stated that they have an online induction that is tailored to part-time/ distance learners, and another stated that all inductions “They can be tailored for pt and dl students.”

One of our survey findings was that some part-time and distance learners felt that the induction process was too generic (one size fits all) instead of being targeted towards their needs. Does your university differentiate the induction process for part-time and distance learning students and, if so, what have you found to be effective?

Six members stated that the university does not differentiate the induction process, or that they were not aware this took place. The members from the distance learner or postgraduate specific universities again indicated that by default the inductions are specific to these groups although one stated that they were “working on contextualising to subject/discipline area.” Again the general message was that targeting induction at specific modes of learning was done at course level rather than through central induction processes, but a number of respondents noted their students had raised similar issues and they were looking into how best to address them.

Opportunities for distance learners to meet one another

Five members stated they offered opportunities for students to meet one another at the start of their course. Of the six members that stated ‘other,’ responses were generally that they were unsure of whether this was offered or not, or that this was at the discretion of course leader/tutors.

Best practice is a method or technique that leads to better results. Overall the survey did not lead to any one clear indication of best practice probably due to the fact HEI student demographics and organisational structure can be so different. However for the purposes of this investigation we can identify where there is commonality of practice. The following trends emerged:

- Inductions are offered in more than one mode of delivery. This includes online and phone apps.
- Targeting inductions to the needs of distance learners and part-time learners is often done at course level.

The challenge in delivering central service inductions to all students is that the very nature of the induction means that it will be to an extent a one size fits all. The issue with this comes back to the customer service gap model which is the student expectation of university will be shaped by their unique circumstances. Therefore gaps between expectation and perception are inevitable. It could be argued that instead of offering central induction, centrally created materials are made available and tailored at course level and offered as an integral part of that course. This could allow for better personalisation of the induction experience.

AMOSSHE member website induction information review

We viewed all AMOSSHE member online information with the same aims as the AMOSSHE member survey. Data was collected from the websites of 129 HEIs to ascertain the characteristics of their respective induction processes. Whilst some websites had restricted access to this information, the majority had readily available information for new students as to what they should do and could expect upon arrival. The findings here could be limited by the fact that more induction materials could be sent to new students directly or be available via their virtual learning environment. Therefore the results are only representative of what is publically available via the web and do not necessarily represent all those universities induction practices. All the HEIs offered inductions, covering aspects such as IT and library / wellbeing and counselling / Students' Union / accommodation. The majority of HEIs offered some kind of fresher event or face-to-face welcome.

70 of 129 (54.3%), offered separate online materials for international students, with 19 Universities expressly offering separate inductions, with added support for airport arrivals and living in the UK.

20 out of the 129 specifically had content aimed at new part-time or distance learning students either referring to funding or how to access courses. One HEI offered open material specific to mature students from their website. Three HEIs offered mobile phone apps for their students, which required log in details to access.

Existing research findings on new student experience

Although the findings of this investigation are an indicative only of the views and practice of those that took part, many of the themes arising are reflected in recent research and policy papers on new student induction.

It is agreed that managing students' expectations of university is important and that managing their successful transition into university is a key factor in retention (Yorke and Longden, 2007). However all HEIs face a challenge when trying to ascertain what a students' perception of university and the induction they will receive due the "increasingly heterogeneous student population" (Whittaker, 2008). The part-time student profile from the 2011-12 HESA returns showed 90% of part-time students are mature and the majority have family commitments. It is unclear whether distance learners also fall into that profile, as many could be international students. The profile of part-time students also differs depending on institution. Therefore when attempting to identify best practice it is clear that both professional and academic staff knowledge of their student demographic is vital and must feed into the creation of any induction materials rather than a one size fits all approach.

Facilitating a sense of belonging is acknowledged as an important part of transition. In "Building student engagement and belonging in HE" this is identified this as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the social environment" (Thomas, 2012). Research carried

out as part of the “What Works? Student Retention and Success” programme recommended that this be facilitated through:

- Supportive peer relations
- Meaningful interaction between staff and students
- Developing knowledge, confidence and identity as successful HE learners
- An HE experience that is relevant to future goals and interests

(Whittaker, 2008)

This fits with this investigation’s focus group and survey feedback where students reported becoming part of community, meeting former students, tutor involvement in social media and developing the skills (such as how to use the library, VLE) as an important part of their induction experience.

All HEIs in this investigation offered induction through a variety of media is a necessity with use of phone apps on the rise which fits with previous research recommendations “Early engagement is essential and information should be delivered using a range of media” (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2014)

Research shows that this can create a sense of community for all students “The establishment of learning communities and peer support is increasingly being enhanced through the development of virtual communities through VLE’s (Krause 2003 as cited in Whittaker 2008)” and in fact this is recommended “Social networking and collaboration should be explicitly encouraged in teaching and learning activities” (Whittaker, 2008)

In this investigation students mentioned not accessing induction materials even though they were available. This in turn can affect the development of skills needed to access the course and in turn affect attainment levels. As shown in the IOE’s MA Education programme, incorporating induction materials in the modules accompanied with active staff involvement can help address this and this fits with national recommendations:

*“...approaches should as far as possible be embedded in mainstream provision to ensure all students participate and benefit from them”
(Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2014)*

Recommendations

This investigation has been quite ambitious in scale and would necessitate far more time and resource in order to ascertain statistically significant findings. Further targeted research into the demographics of the two groups (distance learners and part-time learners) might better show where they differ from full-time and campus based learners in terms of expectation, and more interviews and research on HEI practice could reveal any themes in practitioner perceptions and therefore service delivery to these groups of students. One assumption is that because of the difference in the way they access the course compared to full-time, campus based

learners, their needs are therefore different. However this is not necessarily the case, particularly in an increasingly fluid world of blended learning where students can move between groups fairly seamlessly. The recommendations of this investigation hold can be applied to all students and are backed by previous research in this area.

- Know your student – the better academic and professional staff understand their student demographic, the more relevant induction materials can be created. Although a note of caution is to take account of the “actual diversity of the student group and avoid generalisations based on learner profile” (Whittaker, 2008)
- Use a variety of delivery methods of induction in order to offer options for all groups of students. Online and face-to-face methods are currently deployed most often, but the use of phone apps is on the increase. Offering a face-to-face option is important as IOE students certainly identified this as being the most valuable induction experience they’d had. Online methods do not seem at this point in time to be able to recreate that experience although they are an adequate substitute for it, particularly if using a real-time option like Skype or Lync or Collaborate.
- Recognise the different status of students, particularly part-time students, and address what their experience is likely to be and what they will be able to access in terms of statutory and other support. The delicate balance to be struck for HEIs is doing this whilst at the same time not making them feel alienated from other student groups (e.g. full-time). Age can be a factor here as part-time learners are more likely to be mature learners.
- Include study skills needed for the course in any induction such as use of facilities like VLE, library and so forth. Induction materials that are embedded in a course are particularly effective, so consideration should be given to ensuring induction delivered centrally and on course are complementary, and also how centrally created induction materials can be embedded in a course (such as creating an online webinar or tasks based on a library induction for example).
- Create a sense of belonging – all the recommendations above will assist in this. Involvement of former students, peers and university staff is key. This is shown in the findings of this investigation where it was noted how social media can be a powerful force in creating a sense of community but only if there is regular staff or student engagement with it through either posting useful links or encouraging discussion.

Acknowledgements

This investigation has been made possible due to the work of Natasha Codioli McMaster. She has been the main research assistant on the project and assisted with survey design and collating responses and analysing responses. I would also like to acknowledge the participation of all the members of IOE Registry and Student Support departments and IOE academic staff, in particular Dr Clare Brooks, Dr Edel Mahony, Carolyn Hunt and Bridie Woods. Holly Cartlidge and Bhupinder Sanghera from IOE External Relations gave invaluable advice on survey design and use of Bristol online survey. I would also like to thank and acknowledge all IOE students and AMOSSHE members who took part in the survey, focus groups and interviews, particularly David Wilson, Director Student Support Teams, Open University and Denise Long, Director of Student Support and Wellbeing, UCL.

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