

## Care to Share?

### A study of the extent to which an expectation sharing and setting induction exercise is an effective pedagogical tool for first year law students

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### Abstract

Student engagement in higher education is of crucial interest to many stakeholders. The government is driven by the potential economic and societal improvements through an educated people (National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, 2011). Policy makers are concerned about issues of fair and equitable access and support resources (HEA, 2015). Providers are keen to demonstrate commitment to learners, in addition to the economic imperatives driving them. Finally, and of most importance in relation to this paper, engagement in terms of learner retention and progression is important for the student at a personal level. Research shows that the first year is the most decisive in securing a favourable outcome for the learner (Blaney and Mulkeen, 2008; Diggins et al, 2010; Tinto 2007). If educators and providers can support learners during their first year, propensity for completion and progression is higher (Palmer et al, 2009). Key to a successful first year is student integration with fellow students and staff; and alignment of expectations with the educational programme (Bozick, 2007; Moore-Cherry et al, 2015). Learner induction is often viewed as requiring complex and sophisticated solutions. Whereas the reality, as born out in the proliferation of research in the area, is that induction techniques to assist with transition into higher education are frequently quite simple and related to a basic sense of the learner feeling that they matter and are cared for (Birmingham et al, 2015). Further, engagement with students as partners has been shown to be effective (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014). The aim of this paper is to present a pedagogical strategy used to help integrate and transition first year law students into their programme. This approach offers the students a voice and partnership role whilst also facilitating the lecturer to manage expectations and induct students into the programme. The student population is undergraduate first year law students. The research methodology is mixed using both qualitative and quantitative data.

**Keywords:** Student induction; student transition; student progression; student integration; student voice; expectation setting; first year experience; student well-being; student/lecturer relations; student as partner.

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## 1 Introduction

Student integration and progression command great attention, both at national and institutional levels, for a host of different reasons. National policy advocates wider access to higher education as a contributing factor to a better economy and society (National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030). Few would dispute this view; indeed, most welcome this laudable intention. However, from a pragmatic perspective it must be acknowledged that with wider access comes a student population which is more diverse in terms of preparedness and ability for higher education. For many, they are first generation students with no real frame of reference for higher education and all that it entails. Research shows that these students, who are often from socio-economic disadvantaged groups, are more reluctant to approach academic staff to share concerns and seek support (Quinn et al, 2005). Furthermore, often these students do not have the support resources outside of college. Students who would have traditionally attended university are advantaged through having access to a collective shared knowledge of higher education, often internalised through a type of osmosis as a result of living with family where college life is part of the daily discourse, thus contributing to a stronger sense of student self-efficacy. The spin off challenges and problems associated with student attrition are far-reaching. The most lamentable is the lost opportunity for the individual learner in terms of either exiting the higher education system altogether, or continuing but not securing the best experience possible. From a macro perspective, poor international perception of our education system both in terms of foreign direct investment and education as an export product is concerning. From a micro perspective, there are concerns associated with the impact on the provider, programme and associated staff that high attrition can have.

Interest in student integration and progression can be from the perspective of improved national economic and societal imperatives, or from the view that education is a liberating and empowering potential that should be available to all citizens, or indeed from an interest in helping each student to fulfil his or her own potential. Regardless of the motivation student integration and thus progression is worthy of great attention. The authors are of the belief that educators have a responsibility and obligation to enhance students' experience by helping them to become integrated in the programme they are studying from an early stage. Our research

provides evidence that supports the hypothesis that best practice pedagogy requires student involvement, partnership and integration in a way that facilitates students gaining agency and confidence in their own learning journey.

## 2 Relevant Literature

Research into student progression presents a multiplicity of factors including both social and academic considerations (Krause and Coates, 2008). Not surprisingly, problems with student attrition are found to be at its most extreme amongst first years (Blaney and Mulkeen, 2008; Diggins et al, 2010; Tinto 2007), with faculty and lecturer interaction being cited as key (Blaney and Mulkeen, 2008). Bozick (2007), and more recently Moore-Cherry et al (2015) refer to issues of loneliness and disconnect as contributors to non-completion in year one and quote Cook (2003) and Read et al (2003) who cite academic isolation as being a key factor for students disengaging. They believe that with greater awareness and attention from the educators, this risk could be reduced. By way of validation, a study by Blaney and Mulkeen (2008) found that students who lived on campus were less likely to drop out, perhaps indicating that their sense of integration and belonging to the college may have helped with their induction and transition. Furthermore, Palmer et al (2009) identified that learners' propensity to stay in higher education increases when they have a sense of belonging to the college and programme. Equally, Kuh (2007) found that students who discussed their programme and transition issues with peers and lecturers are typically more satisfied with the college experience, and are more likely to persist and attain high grades.

The risk of isolation is more prevalent with large groups of learners where the traditional lecture is the most common mode of delivery (O'Sullivan, 2011). Isolation can be both from fellow students and the academic staff and so pedagogical opportunities to help first year students integrate and reduce that sense of isolation ought to be welcomed. In drawing from their experiences, Bermingham et al (2015) offer as guidance the need to build good student/staff relationships, in addition to ensuring learners feel like they belong and matter. This, they advise, can be achieved through student involvement within an inclusive environment where "student engagement and success is everyone's business" (Bermingham et al, 2015, p.10) and not just

confined to formal student service supports. The example presented in this paper concurs with this observation and takes integration of students and expectation setting as the responsibility of front of house module lecturers as part of pedagogical practices as advocated by Bermingham et al (2015).

In addition to feelings of disconnect and isolation, the issue of erroneous expectations is presented as a contributing factor to low student retention. Frequently, students are not fully aware of the intricate and specific details of the programme on which they are studying (O'Connor, 2015). Moore-Cherry et al (2015) found that interest in and expectations of the programme play a crucial role in student attrition. Equally, Denny (2015) cites lack of information on the programme level and expectations as a key factor in student attrition during first year. Without clear insight, it is difficult for learners to have a sense of agency or identity with the programme they are studying. Opportunities to work with students to try to reduce this gap are recommended. Wingate (2007) proposes a framework to assist with transition to higher education, recommending that educators gradually develop learner competence. Expectation setting as an ice breaking activity can assist in this regard. Good pedagogical practice calls for student involvement as a means of building capacity and contributing to a greater sense of learner agency and confidence. Crowley and Mahon (2016) found that a major concern for many first year university students is a confidence issue related to their belief that they may not be able to cope with the demands of an academic environment. More recently, induction programmes that extend beyond the first few days of college life are being advocated by way of recognising that induction is more than a once off event. It takes time. Bermingham et al (2015) suggest that it can take at least the first semester, and even the first year. It is an ongoing process where competencies are nurtured from the early days in an effort to build confidence and learning to learn skills.

### **3 Research Design**

Selection of participants was purposive and non-probable. Cohen et al (2007, p.113) acknowledge that non-probability samples are “frequently the case in small-scale research ... because despite the disadvantages that arise from their non-representativeness, they are far less

complicated ... and adequate where researchers do not intend to generalise their finding beyond the sample in question". The research conducted was both qualitative and quantitative, and sought to explore the extent to which a pedagogical strategy adopted with first year law students assisted in helping them to integrate and transition into higher education, primarily through addressing their concerns and clarifying expectations. This research demonstrates a 'student as partner' approach (see Healy, Flint & Harrington, 2014) to planning and carrying out induction activities by gathering input from students and using their feedback to inform future induction techniques and approaches.

In the first instance (phase 1) six questions were posed and students were asked to record their views anonymously if they wished to do so (the 'induction exercise'). It was made clear that students did not have to partake in this activity and that there were no repercussions for non-participation. The lecturer collected, collated and coded this data. A light coding approach was used to analyse the data where categorisations emerged in response to the data. This was used to feed back to the learners by way of addressing concerns and clarifying expectations. Secondly (phase 2), an online survey was used to collect feedback on the effectiveness and value of the induction exercise used in phase 1. Students were sent the link, told completion of survey was voluntary, and data gathered anonymous. Consent was obtained from the students to use the data gathered and ethical approval was granted by the College Research Ethics Committee.

## 4 The Empirical Study

### (i) *Background*

Unaware of research in the area at the time, over eight years of teaching first years, the lecturer who carried out the empirical research found, anecdotally, that what was important to first year students was that someone cared about them; that they mattered; that their voice was not only heard but listened to, in a non-tokenistic way. As the years went on, the lecturer developed a way of helping her students to know that they were cared about; that they did matter and that their voices were important and would be taken seriously. This took the form of an anonymous questionnaire in the first week of lectures which asked the students a variety of questions on their hopes and expectations for the programme; their worries and concerns about the

programme; what they expected of themselves and what they expected from her. The lecturer would then address their expectations, hopes and anxieties with them the following week and refer to them again throughout the year as appropriate. The lecturer would also adjust her teaching methods to address the particular needs of that cohort of students. After some years of doing this induction exercise with her first year students, the lecturer decided to assess whether this was an effective pedagogical tool for addressing concerns, expectation setting, integration and therefore, progression.

Reflecting best practice discussed in the literature review earlier, the aims of the lecturer in doing this induction exercise with the students was four fold. Primarily, she wanted the students to know that they were cared for and that they mattered. Secondly, she wanted to know the concerns of the class so that her approach did not feed into those concerns (e.g. asking someone to talk in front of the class if that was their greatest fear) and perhaps risk putting a student off the programme in early days. Thirdly, she wanted to know what excited them about this programme and what was important to them, so that these could be realised to the best of a lecturer's ability. Finally, she wanted students to know that their voices were valued and important to her.

### ***(ii) Phase 1- Induction exercise***

During the first lecture of a particular law module (which was the first lecture of the LL.B. programme for students), students were asked to anonymously answer a series of questions. First, they were asked to '[l]ist three words to describe how you feel as you start this programme'. The aim of this was not only so that the lecturer would know how the students felt about starting the programme and therefore be sensitive to that, but also so that the students knew how they felt mattered to her. Students were then asked '[w]hat are you most looking forward to, if anything, as you begin this programme?' The main aim here was to ascertain students' hopes and ambitions for the programme so that the lecturer could provide honest feedback to them as to whether or not they could be feasibly realised. Next, students were asked '[w]hat are you most nervous about, if anything, as you begin this programme?' This was asked to give students the opportunity, in a safe anonymous environment, on day one of their programme to voice their concerns and worries. It also provided the lecturer with the opportunity to address these worries, reassure students where necessary and offer guidance on how to circumvent the concerns where

appropriate. Importantly, it ensured that the lecturer could be sensitive to these concerns over the course of delivering the module. Question 4 asked '[w]hat do you need to do for yourself this year to ensure that you can reach your full potential in this programme?' The aim here was to encourage some self-reflection early on in the programme and also for the lecturer to be able to remind them throughout the academic year what they themselves identified as elements on which they needed to improve. Question 5 asked '[w]hat do you think your lecturers can do for you to help you to reach your full potential in this programme?' The objective here was primarily to clarify whether students' expectations of the lecturer were appropriate and could be realised and to give them feedback in that regard. The final question asked students '[w]hy did you choose this programme?' This was asked so that if students had chosen this programme for a particular reason, the lecturer would do her best to ensure, within her module, that those expectations are met or at least addressed.

There were 48 students ( $n = 48$ ) who partook in this induction exercise. Out of the 48 students who partook, 38 ( $n = 38$ ) described themselves as feeling 'excited' as they started college and 38 ( $n = 38$ ) described themselves as feeling either 'nervous' or 'anxious'. In total, there were 81 ( $n = 81$ ) positive adjectives such as 'hopeful'; 'happy' or 'motivated' to describe how they felt and 52 ( $n = 52$ ) negative adjectives such as 'scared'; 'worried; or 'apprehensive' to describe how they were feeling.

When asked what they were most looking forward to as they began the programme, 26 students ( $n = 26$ ) were most looking forward to learning about law specifically, for example "getting a better understanding of our legal system". Some ( $n = 5$ ) were already most looking forward to the career opportunities that this degree would afford to them, for example "becoming a lawyer". Many ( $n = 13$ ) cited more personal achievement, success and development goals as what they were looking forward to most, for example "achievement – knowledge and how to apply it – success in whatever form it comes".

In response to the question of what makes them nervous as they begin the programme, there was a wide diversity of answers. The most common by far was being nervous about their own ability ( $n = 16$ ). Comments such as "[I'm nervous] that I may not excel in this course"; "I won't be good enough"; "I'm nervous about not understanding what the lecturer is talking about" and concern about "falling behind" were recurrent. Eight students ( $n = 8$ ) specified that they were nervous

about assignments and six students ( $n = 6$ ) voiced concerns about examinations already: “I’m nervous about how my exams will go”; “messaging up my exams, struggling with the workload”. Four students ( $n = 4$ ) expressed concern about socialising: “[I’m nervous about] making new friends”; “a new environment with new people”. Three students ( $n = 3$ ) expressed concern about having to speak in front of the class: “[I am nervous about] having to speak in front of the whole class”; “[I am] nervous about being called and grilled to answer a question without warning”. Others expressed concern about study ( $n = 3$ ); their own stress levels ( $n = 2$ ) and whether they would like the programme ( $n = 2$ ). Only one student ( $n = 1$ ) commented that he or she was not nervous about anything.

When asked what they needed to do for themselves this year to help them to reach their potential in the programme, the responses were less diverse. The need for self-discipline was expressed in a variety of ways by almost all students, for example “spend time in library”; “stay on top of every class in every subject so that I don’t fall behind”; “I think that I need to discipline myself and inculcate an excellent habit of reading and reading a lot”. Study ( $n = 19$ ); keeping on top of notes/revision after lectures ( $n = 5$ ); time management/routine ( $n = 8$ ) were also commonly identified as what students needed to do to help themselves reach their potential. A few ( $n = 3$ ) were more personal such as “I need to learn to put myself first before anything else”; “I need to realise I can’t do everything – learn to delegate to others in my home – I need to understand it’s ok to make time for me”; “not give myself a hard time” and “I need to prove that I’m not a waste of great potential”.

In response to the question of what, if anything, lecturers can do for the students to reach their full potential in the programme, some predominant themes emerged. The most predominant by far was that students wanted their lecturers to be patient/understanding and explain difficult concepts to them well and repeatedly if necessary ( $n = 22$ ). For example, students asked as follows: “[b]e patient where we don’t understand”; “[i]f we don’t understand something in class, we would be able to ask you to explain it again after or at the end of the class”. The next most common request related to teaching information ( $n = 6$ ). For example, “[j]ust teach and give us the revision material to maximise potential”. Five students ( $n = 5$ ) requested that they be given feedback on how to improve, for example, “I think also they need to give us feedback on our progress; what we [are] good in, what we lack. That way it will help us determine our weaknesses and strength”; “[i]t would be great if my lecturers can correct essays that we do and tell us how

we can improve". Other themes which emerged included giving notes (n = 3), entertaining/engaging the students (n = 5); being approachable/available (n = 2); helping to motivate and focus (n = 2); provide academic guidance (n = 5); provide emotional support (n = 2); facilitate the development of skills (n = 1) and not to put too much emphasis on exams (n = 1).

Finally, when asked why they chose this programme, most students responded that they had an interest in law (n = 30); others jumped straight to the fact that they want a career in law (n = 14). Others (n = 3) cited reasons such as the "supportive reputation" and that it is viewed as one of the "respected degrees", or particularly worthy of mention, "[b]ecause I want to make a difference and help make this world a better place. This course is just the start".

Two weeks after the induction exercise, the lecturer addressed the class about their answers. The fact that, for each person who is feeling excited in the class, there is someone feeling nervous and anxious, was shared and students were advised as to how they might help one another through what can be a difficult transition and were reminded that their lecturers as well as other support services were there to help them too. Regarding what they were most looking forward to, the lecturer reassured them that their goals and hopes could be realised with hard work and dedication. On the issue of what concerned the students as they started the programme, they were given academic guidance and friendly advice according to the themes which emerged: social concerns; study; exams; assignments; their own ability; liking the course and stress. In relation to what students identified as what they needed to do for themselves, the lecturer told the class that they had identified what they needed to do in terms of study; time management; attendance and communication and promised to remind them of these again over the course of the academic year. Realistic advice was given to students in terms of what they could expect of their lecturer. For example, while patience, feedback and teaching of skills and information could be guaranteed, the lecturer had more limitations around availability and emotional support.

### *(iii) Phase 2 - Feedback of students on the strategy*

Online feedback on the induction exercise was given by 38 students (n = 38) being those who were present in the class on the day feedback was requested and who had also been present for the exercise on the first day. The responses elicited from the students on the efficacy of the exercise were overwhelmingly positive. In the case of 92% of the students, the exercise made them feel that their voice mattered to their lecturer (**Fig. 4.1- appendix**). The exercise

encouraged 100% of students to reflect on how they felt as they entered the programme (**Fig. 4.2 - appendix**). Almost 90% of students were clearer on what they could expect from their lecturer as a result of the exercise and the feedback given to them (**Fig. 4.3 – appendix**). According to over 95% of the students, the feedback provided after the exercise helped to address their concerns or worries as they began a new programme and the remaining 5% (n = 1) commented that “my worries are best addressed with lots of study but it was helpful” (**Fig. 4.4 - appendix**).

The exercise encouraged 100% of students to think about what they needed to do for themselves to succeed in the programme (**Fig. 4.5- appendix**). Comments in this regard included: “I felt motivated to try my best for the course”; “[i]t helped me to realise that I can do it because the help is there”; “by highlighting those issues on the first day, it has since kept these goals in my mind”. It was also suggested by one student that “it would be useful to provide a copy of what we wrote so that we can check in on our own goals throughout the year”.

Following the exercise, 95% of students reported a clearer understanding of what their lecturer could do to help them through the programme (**Fig. 4.6 - appendix**) with students commenting that “I feel the level of support in a realistic and tangible way has been outlined” and “[y]ou helped us see that you’re not only here to teach us you genuinely want to help”.

When asked if they had any other comments, 13 students (n = 13) responded with answers other than ‘no’ or ‘none’. These responses were overwhelmingly positive and included comments such as “[t]he feedback from you was very much appreciated. I think having the fears and concerns voiced openly created a sense of camaraderie”; “I feel that the exercise was very useful. It motivated me to try my best and work hard”. A couple of students commented that they still have concerns about certain aspects of their academic work such as assignments and answering problem questions.

## 5 Findings

The overall finding was that a very simple induction technique for first year students proved to be extremely effective in a multitude of ways. The overwhelming majority of students felt cared for and listened to during their first number of weeks in the programme as a result of the exercise. Furthermore, their expectations of both the programme and lecturer were clarified; their

concerns were addressed; many reported feeling more motivated, and it provided an opportunity for some self-reflection and thus setting some expectations of themselves.

There were two unexpected findings from the research. One was the lack of importance which students coming in to third level seem to place on the learning of skills. While the majority of students reported a desire to be taught information about the law, only one student even tangentially mentioned the learning of skills (teamwork) and no student mentioned anything about learning legal research, writing or advocacy skills, for example. This perhaps speaks volumes about the way students coming into third level think about 'learning' as 'information gathering and storing' rather than anything skills based. However, while this is an interesting finding, a detailed analysis thereof properly belongs to a different piece of research.

The other unexpected finding of the research is perhaps more pertinent. The 'phase 1' exercise was undertaken with a primary aim of clarifying expectations of students. However, a beneficial corollary of this was the clarification of the expectations of the lecturer in relation to that particular cohort of students. Being allowed into the mind-set of the students in terms of their hopes and ambitions, their worries and even fears, helps a lecturer to pitch his or her lessons more appropriately and in a way that will benefit those particular students.

## **6 Conclusions and Future Work**

Given that the first year is the most decisive in securing a favourable outcome for learners (Blaney and Mulkeen, 2008; Diggins et al, 2010; Tinto 2007) and given that key to a successful first year is student integration with staff and alignment of expectations with the programme (Bozick, 2007; Moore-Cherry et al, 2015), assisting students to integrate into a programme using effective yet simple mechanisms is crucially important. While there is no doubt that the induction strategy used in this research was overwhelmingly successful in the early weeks of the academic year, it must not stop there. Bearing in mind the advice of Bermingham et al (2015) that the induction process can take at least the first semester, and even the first year, this induction exercise should continue to develop. It is intended that students will be reminded of their own goals and of what supports exist for them as the academic year progresses and as they face into their self-identified concerns such as assignments and examinations.

It is further anticipated that this research can be conducted again for the next number of academic years to observe any particular trends which might emerge and thus be of further benefit to future cohorts of first years. The recommendation of one participant to allow students to keep one copy of what they wrote on day one so that they can remind themselves of their own goals is an excellent idea for student motivation purposes and so will be put into practice next year. In this way, year upon year, improvement upon improvement, using the student as partner in this way, more can be done to assist first year students to integrate into their third level studies successfully and they will thus be more likely, in the words of one student involved in this research, “to achieve success – in whatever form it comes”.

Appendix



Fig. 4.1

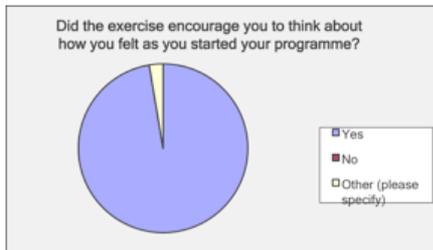


Fig. 4.2



Fig. 4.3

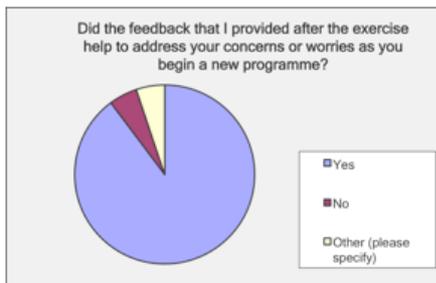


Fig. 4.4

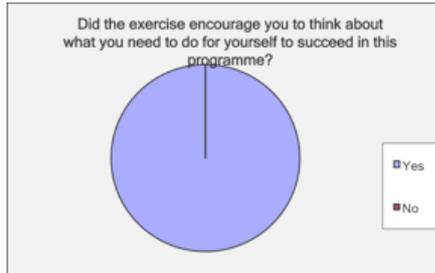


Fig 4.5

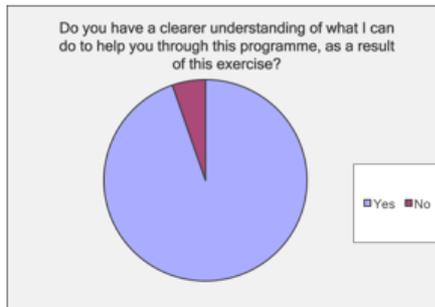


Fig 4.6

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