EXPLORING TRANSITION:
THE EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS
AT NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY IN
THEIR FIRST YEAR

Final Report

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Executive Summary

The Research Centre for Learning and Teaching (CfLaT) was commissioned by the Student Opinion and Survey Group (SOSG) at Newcastle University to conduct a survey of all first year undergraduate students at Newcastle University in March 2010. The purpose of the survey was to gain some insight into the transition experiences of first year students at Newcastle University including their pre-arrival and induction experiences. Additionally, students were asked to assess their overall first year experiences so far and their experiences of teaching and learning and engagement.

SurveyMonkey was used to design and administer the survey. The survey invitation went out by e-mail on March 1st 2010 and was followed by 3 reminders at approximately weekly intervals until the survey was closed at the end of March. After checking and cleaning the data there were **4664** first year students (a number of fifth years and other invalid respondents were apparently included in the student contacts database reducing it from 4673 to 4664) and out of these **1,222** entered the survey and completed it or partially completed it. This constitutes a **26.2%** response rate (1, 222/4,664*100). Students who completed the survey were invited to participate in focus groups to discuss their experiences further. This resulted in seven focus groups with 37 students from all faculties of the University. The following sections of this report summarise the main findings from the survey and the focus groups. The main findings are summarised below.

- Overall, students across the three faculties have had very positive first year experiences across all dimensions of university life.
- While the reputation of Newcastle University is clearly an important factor drawing students here, it is clear that the location of the university within the City of Newcastle is also a major factor. Students highlighted the University's 'compactness', the cost of living and the social life as additional factors that affected their decisions to study at Newcastle University.
- Students are on the whole very satisfied with academic facilities at Newcastle University.
- While satisfaction across the majority of aspects of university life was high, focus groups revealed a mixed picture across programmes in regard to access to tutors/lecturers, support, etc.
- Most students participated in at least one form of pre-arrival activity although 206 students (only 17%) did not take part in any pre-arrival activities.
- On the whole most students are happy at Newcastle although small numbers of students are clearly not having the same positive experiences as their peers.
- The close proximity of Freshers' week and Induction week was criticised by a number of students during focus groups. The former is viewed as an important opportunity to meet and make friends with other students. The latter, while viewed as useful, sometimes clashed with Freshers' week activities.
- Perspectives on Freshers' Week activities varied by type of student especially during focus groups. Mature students and international students do not necessarily share the same enthusiasm for the type of activities that younger, white, British students seem to take for granted e.g. partying and alcohol consumption.
- Induction experiences varied from faculty to faculty and course to course but on the whole students found their induction experiences useful.

- Students are engaging with their peers and tutors/lecturers but levels of engagement in terms of communication and relationships could be better for all groups concerned.
- Students' rated teaching and learning at Newcastle University very highly.
- Some International students related difficulties they had integrating into the British University system. These revolve around the greater levels of informality between tutors/lecturers and students (some international university systems have more formal relations between students, tutors and lecturers) and relationships, or lack of them, between international students and home students.

Transition from Secondary to Tertiary education

There is an emerging body of evidence which explores the transition process, to support and encourage students going into higher education, e.g. (Yorke & Longden, 2007, 2008) and Harvey and Drew (2006). Findings from the current study resonate with research undertaken by by Yorke and Longden (2008, p. 2). They identified in their research that:

> *Poor choice of field of study, financial stress, and aspects of the student experience were the most frequently cited reasons given for non-completion by students in six varied institutions in the north-west of England.*

Some research places itself within the Widening Participation agenda and explores the experiences of working class students (Crozier, Reay, Clayton, & Colliander, 2008; National Audit Office, 2008). Transition (and successful transition at that) is a current focus across Newcastle University, which has recently funded several projects through strategic funds to explore what it is that Universities need to do and what it is that students need and want. However, despite the large-scale nature of student transition, the field is under-conceptualised and research into the process is mainly small-scale: exceptions include Harvey and Drew's (2006) meta-analysis of transition and Hillman's (2005) longitudinal study of first-year experience.

International studies of student transition to university collectively emphasise the interplay between the social and academic circumstances of students, and the institutional systems which should support them. It is significant that many studies cite Tinto's seminal work on first-year student success and progression (Tinto, 1987:139-40):

(1) Students enter with, or have the opportunity to acquire, the skills needed for academic success
(2) Personal contact with students extends beyond academic life
(3) Retention actions are systematic
(4) Retention programs address students' needs early
(5) Retention programs are student-centred
(6) Education is the goal of retention programs

The essence of Tinto's (1975/1987) work is that student persistence or drop out is determined by the extent of their integration, both academically and socially, within their institution. Positive academic integration may be reflected in or by progress with the course of study, enjoyment of one's studies and positive identification with academic norms and values and role as a student. Positive social integration may be reflected in or by the number of friends a student has made, good interpersonal relationships and contact with other students and academic staff and a sense of belonging. It appears

that institutions on both sides of the transition bridge are still working out ways of achieving these principles. As part of the ongoing process of research in the area of student transition, the Research Centre for Learning and Teaching (CfLaT) was commissioned to conduct a research questionnaire and a subsequent report about the student experience of their first year in undergraduate study at Newcastle University. The principal purpose of the survey was to investigate the perception of the experience of their transition from prior education to university together with broader issues about their expectations and experiences at Newcastle University.

More specifically, the overall aim of the study was to provide the University with valuable insights into the attitudes and perspectives of undergraduate students in their first year of study – and how their experience of transition from school to university-level study was influenced by the University and induction activities. The University's aim is to enhance the transition process, to support and encourage students going into higher education and it is particularly keen to enhance the chances of student success. This study, therefore aimed to help identify successful interventions and good practice across the university.

Research Design and Methodology

Our research aims, as laid out in the research proposal, for the current piece of research were:

- To Identify 'what works' (or what works less well) in providing students with a good and positive experience in terms of transition and induction activities;
- To Identify what factors contribute to first year student drop-out, transfer or non-completion;
- And through both of the above aims, to provide evidence upon which the University can deliver international excellence in our learning, teaching and scholarship activities while providing an excellent all-round student experience.

Online questionnaire survey of students

In accordance, consultation and agreement with the Student Opinion Steering Group (SOSG), we designed and used an online survey questionnaire (via SurveyMonkey) which was sent out to all First Year students at Newcastle University. There was a selection of both open and closed questions. The areas and themes included in the Survey were:

- Students' overall views of their first year at university.
- Relevant activities students took part in before they came to Newcastle University.
- University induction experiences i.e. both induction week and induction activities throughout their first term at university.
- Views about their experiences of teaching and learning at Newcastle University.
- Levels of engagement at Newcastle University with their course, peers and tutors.

The final section of the survey was used to collect demographic data This latter section also formed the basis of a classification and sampling frame which in turn then helped us to sub-sample for our focus group discussion groups.

Sample size

The first e-mail message was followed by three subsequent reminders over the three weeks the survey was open. There were two reminders in the third week. Reminders were only sent to those students who had not completed the survey. After checking and cleaning the data there were **4664** first year students (a number of fifth years and other invalid respondents were apparently included in the student contacts database reducing it from 4673 to 4664) and out of these **1,222** entered the survey and completed it or partially completed it. This constitutes a **26.2%** response rate (1, 222/4,664*100).

Raising awareness about the survey, other than through e-mail messages, was increased and intensified prior to sending out the last two reminders in the final week through advertisements on the Student Union Website, the University plasma TV screens, Blackboard and the university's student page. It is worth mentioning at the outset that while 1,222 students started the survey, this does not mean that they all answered every question. Students skipped questions they felt they did not want to answer or felt were irrelevant to them (these seem to be predominantly questions requiring a textual response).

Focus group discussions with students

Through the survey responses and results we identified all those students who had expressed an interest in taking part in the focus group discussions and invited them to select a timeslot for a particular group. We conducted seven focus groups over a two day period and used a schedule that was based on the original survey. Groups were heterogeneous, that is, were composed of students from different faculties and programmes of study. We felt that this would encourage discussion amongst the groups about the differences – e.g. international students, different programmes of study, etc. Each focus group discussion was digitally recorded, which allowed the facilitators (Ian Hall and Jill Clark) to focus on the discussion taking place. The use of focus group discussions allowed for meaningful and detailed discussion around the experiences and views of a sample of the student population. Table 1 below provides a breakdown of the students who participated in the focus groups by faculty, gender and other demographic data. While there was a good mix of students by gender and residence i.e. UK, Non-EU and Other EU students, a comparison of the survey and focus group data shows that students from HaSS were over-represented, students from SAgE were underrepresented and students from the Faculty of medicine were more or less well represented. Thirty-seven students took part in the focus groups.

Table 1: Sample size and composition of focus groups

Faculty	Total	Male	Female	Additional demographic data
HASS	24	10	14	2 female mature students 2 female partners students 2 female European students 3 had gap years
MED	6	2	4	1 male mature student
SAGE	7	4	3	2 male international students 1 female European student 1 male European student 1 had gap year

Totals	37	16	21	

Comparison of the survey and focus group samples suggests that HASS students were over-represented in the focus groups while SAGE students were under-represented.

- Survey 48.2% HaSS; Focus Group 65% HaSS.
- Survey 33.1% SAgE; Focus Group 16% SAgE
- Survey 18.7% FMS; Focus Group 19% FMS.

This report follows the main headings in the survey. The focus in this report is to look at significant or interesting findings that may help programme directors to adapt their induction programmes and courses in preparation for the new intake of students in 2010—2011.

This report is divided into 5 main areas. An overview of responses to survey questions can be found in appendix one. We have constructed a narrative of first year student experience based around previous research in schools, colleges and Newcastle University.

Demographic data

This section summarises the number of respondents by school and faculty, gender, age etc. Students were asked to indicate their subject area rather than the faculty and school in which they were based. During the focus groups it became clear that some students were unaware of the faculty in which they were based. The list of students supplied by Student Services was therefore used to identify the faculty in which respondents were based.

A total of 1,222 students entered and completed the survey (some partially) and data concerning the ethnicity of students were not collected.

Table 2: Number and percentage of students by faculty

		Count	Table Valid N %
Faculty	HaSS	589	48.2%
	SAgE	405	33.1%
	FMS	228	18.7%
	Total	**1222**	**100.0%**

The breakdown of students by faculty in the original database of students received from Student Services (after removing 9 invalid respondents, 8 from HASS and 1 from FMS), was 2471 HASS, 771 FMS and 1,422 SAGE. In terms of percentages, the survey numbers by faculty represent 24% of the entire intake of HASS students, 28% of the entire intake of the SAGE faculty and 30% of the entire intake of the medical faculty. As stated earlier the sample of respondents constitutes over a quarter of the entire intake of first year students across the faculties and may be viewed as a useful 'indicator' of the views, opinions and experiences of the first year student intake as a whole.

Table 3: Number and percentage of students by subject area

Subject area	Count	Table Valid N %
Accounting	35	2.9%
Agriculture	37	3.0%
Archaeology	10	0.8%
Architecture	24	2.0%
Art	17	1.4%
Biology	60	4.9%
Biomedical Science	97	7.9%
Business Studies	48	3.9%
Chemical Engineering	24	2.0%
Chemistry	27	2.2%
Civil Engineering	31	2.5%
Classics	8	0.7%
Combined Honours	38	3.1%
Computer Engineering	4	0.3%
Computing Science	58	4.7%
Dental Hygiene Diploma	1	0.1%
Dentistry	21	1.7%
Economics	20	1.6%
Electrical Engineering	27	2.2%
English	61	5.0%
Environmental Science	7	0.6%
Geography	44	3.6%
Geosciences and Surveying	14	1.1%
History	55	4.5%
Joint Honours Science	17	1.4%
Law	45	3.7%
Marine Biology	16	1.3%
Marine Technology	15	1.2%
Marketing	19	1.6%
Mathematics	32	2.6%
MBBS	75	6.1%
Mechanical Engineering	27	2.2%
Media Studies	17	1.4%
Modern Languages	58	4.7%
Music	18	1.5%
Philosophical Studies	9	0.7%
Politics	35	2.9%
Psychology	34	2.8%
Sociology	7	0.6%
Speech Science	9	0.7%
Town Planning	21	1.7%
Total	**1222**	**100.0%**

No responses were received from Molecular Biology and Pharmacology students and consequently they have been removed from the list and are not included in any subsequent analysis, alongside any subject areas which received a response of 10 or less.

Table 4: Number and percentage of students by gender

		Count	Table Valid N %
Gender	Female	687	56.2%
	Male	535	43.8%
	Total	**1222**	**100.0%**

Over half the sample was female.

Table 5: Number and percentage of students by age

		Count	Table Valid N %
Age	40 and older	6	0.5%
	26-39	34	3.1%
	23-25	46	4.2%
	21-22	93	8.4%
	19-20	661	59.8%
	17-18	265	24.0%
	Total	**1105**	**100.0%**

As you might expect, most students fell into the age range 17-20 with smaller number of students in the remaining categories.

Table 6: Number and percentage of students by normal place of residence

		Count	Table Valid N %
Is your normal place of residence registered as:	UK	921	83.6%
	Other EU	93	8.4%
	Non EU	88	8.0%
	Total	**1102**	**100.0%**

Over three-quarters of the students indicated that their normal place of residence was the UK.

Table 7: Number and percentage of students by type of term time accommodation

		Count	Table Valid N %
Where do you normally live orstay during term time?	University accommodation	700	63.7%
	Parents-Guardians home	211	19.2%
	Private shared accommodation i.e. with other students	92	8.4%
	Own home-flat	89	8.1%
	With relatives	7	0.6%
	Total	**1099**	**100.0%**

Just under two-thirds of students in the sample live in university accommodation (64%) but it is worth noting that quite a large number of students in the sample (just under 20%) live with their parents/guardians. A NatWest Student Money Matters survey (2006) found that 22%, of university students now live at home during their studies and that this is a steadily rising trend. Whittaker (2008, p. 20) notes that:

> *Students who are home-based rather than campus-based can experience greater difficulty in establishing friendship networks at university and integrating into campus life since they are likely to be less involved in university-based social or extracurricular activities.*

Table 8: Number and percentage of students studying at foundation level

		Count	Table Valid N %
Are you a foundation level student?	No	1017	93.1%
	Yes	75	6.9%
	Total	**1092**	**100.0%**

Data in the following sections follows the layout of the survey. Whilst the first section focuses on the overall views of students about their first year at Newcastle University, the focus of the remaining sections is on any significant differences between students on the basis of subject area, age, gender, accommodation, normal place of residence and studying at foundation level.

Overall views of students' first year at university

The first section of the survey was designed to collect students' overall views of their first year at Newcastle University and responses are presented here in tabular form. The positive categories in each scale question e.g. 'Strongly agree/agree' and 'Excellent' and 'Good', etc, have been collapsed to give an overall percentage of students who presented positive assessments of their first year experiences. The breakdown of all responses can be found in appendix one of this report. Valid percentages are used throughout.

Students were asked, using a multiple response question, to indicate the reasons why they chose to study at Newcastle University.

Table 9: Why did you choose to study at Newcastle University?

		Responses	Percent of Cases
		N	N
Why did you choose to study at Newcastle(a)	The overall reputation of the University	882	76.4%
	It is the only university offering this programme	668	57.9%
	Delivery of the programme is flexible enough to fit around my life	362	31.4%
	It was recommended to me	326	28.2%
	The location of the University relative to my home	96	8.3%
	The University's reputation in my chosen area	83	7.2%
	Graduates from this University have good career and employment prospects	62	5.4%
Total		**2479**	

a Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1.

The top five reasons for choosing to study at Newcastle University were: the overall reputation of the University (76.4%); it is the only university offering the programme (57.9%); Delivery of the programme is flexible enough to fit around my life (31.4%) and it was recommended to me (28.2%). While reputation received the greatest number of responses, it is clear from comments made in both the survey and focus groups that the city, the social life and the cost of living combined with the University's reputation all play an important part in students' decisions to choose Newcastle University. Students also mentioned the 'compactness' of the university within the city of Newcastle itself.

Survey responses suggest the importance of the city in students' decisions to study at Newcastle University: Responses in the survey itself help to clarify some of the reasons:

> *The city.*

13

I love the city

The city's reputation also.

I like the city. I like the fact that the NE is cheaper.

Students also highlighted academic/course related reasons for choosing Newcastle University including:

I'm an Erasmus student, Newcastle university and Brighton university were the only choices for me in the UK

The course is what I want to take.

Good placement opportunities

Students identified sports related reasons for coming to Newcastle:

Has good sporting opportunities and beaches

And it's right next to St James' (serious inspiration!)

Finally, a number of students provided a variety of reasons for choosing Newcastle University including:

I picked it at random and was persuaded at the Open Day.

My brother studied in the same university.

Comments from the focus groups are richer in detail than brief comments and highlight the links between the top five reasons shown in table 8 above and the complex mix of reasons suggested by students. As one female student told us:

I didn't look at the course at all, and did a gap year, but I knew it had a good reputation for languages and it's a good city and only 2 hours from home. I was only bothered about living in the city than the course. Mine was last minute. It's a compact city.

A male (International), student said:

Newcastle was not my first choice, but I heard from family and friends who recommended Newcastle as a good place to study, so I came here instead. I wanted to go to a University to mix with lots of local students, not lots from my country.

The cost of a university education is not lost on students and this clearly plays a part in their decision making. The NatWest Student Living Index (2009) ranked Newcastle University 16th in its list of the most cost friendly university cities to live in.

Table 10: Students' overall ratings of their first year experience

Statement	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent	Percentage rating aspects of first year experience as good or excellent
Overall first year experience at Newcastle University.	1.0%	8.9%	45.8%	44.4%	90.2% N=1219
Social life at Newcastle.	1.1%	8.8%	29.1%	61.0%	90.1% N=1216
Teaching and learning.	0.7%	9.9%	59.3%	30.1%	89.4% N=1218
Sense of community among students.	3.4%	19.0%	51.0%	26.6%	77.6% N=1218
Contact with Course staff.	5.0%	22.4%	48.8%	23.8%	72.6% N=1216

Table 10 above shows the breakdown of responses for various aspects of students' first year experience. Teaching and learning were rated very highly by students with almost 90% rating it as good or excellent. Social life at Newcastle was rated very highly by the students (90%) as was their overall first year experience. Contact with course staff and sense of community among students received high ratings too but lower than the other aspects of the first year experience.

Table 11: Students' agreement on their first year experiences so far

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Strongly agree	Percentage Agreeing or Strongly agreeing
I am glad that I chose Newcastle University.	0.4%	1.4%	6.0%	31.9%	60.3%	92.2% N=1220
Staff on my degree programme are helpful.	0.5%	2.0%	8.4%	60.4%	28.8%	89.2% N=1219
If I have an academic problem, help is available	0.2%	2.7%	12.3%	55.9%	28.9%	84.8% N=1221
It is easy to meet other students and make friends.	1.0%	6.1%	10.7%	51.4%	30.8%	82.2% N=1219
School administrative staff are helpful.	0.9%	2.9%	14.7%	55.4%	26.1%	81.5% N=1218
There are good clubs and extracurricular activities.	0.0%	1.8%	17.1%	47.5%	33.6%	81.1% N=1219
My Personal Tutor is approachable.	2.5%	6.2%	16.0%	38.0%	37.3%	75.3% N=1217
If I have a non-academic problem, help is available.	0.6%	2.1%	36.6%	46.0%	14.8%	60.8% N=1216

In table 11 above, students expressed high levels of agreement with the statements suggesting that they are satisfied with most aspects of their first year experience. However, there were lower levels of agreement in regard to the statements, 'My personal tutor is approachable (75.3%) and 'If I have a non-academic problem, help is available' (60.8%).

Table 12: To what extent has your first year fulfilled your expectations?

Statement	Fell below my expectations	Met my expectations	Exceeded my expectations	Percentage of students whose first year met or exceeded their expectations
To what extent has your first year at Newcastle University fulfilled your expectations?	9.0%	58.3%	32.8%	91.1% N=1217

Over 90% of students felt that their first year at Newcastle University had either met or exceeded their expectations. Only 9% of students felt it had fallen below their expectations.

Just under 60% of students felt their first year at Newcastle University had met their expectations and one-third indicated that it had exceeded their expectations. A small number felt that their first year had fallen below their expectations. Clearly, the first year experience has been for most students a positive one and consequently the focus of this section is on those students who clearly have not had the same experience. It should be emphasised that students did not always provide details of single issue difficulties or problems. However, the issues highlighted appear to contain the essential reasons

for dissatisfaction with their first year at University, and these issues were very much borne out in our focus group discussions.

Course related problems:

Not the course I was expecting

The staff on my course, [Course name], are quite unhelpful and very difficult to get hold of, even in a crisis.

The course I have taken is not for me, and I don't feel that university is either. I think for those that are on a course they enjoy the university is very good.

Accommodation related problems:

I did not like my particular halls and flat

Not happy with my accommodation, (Location).

Unable to attain university accommodation as a 'local student' even though my family home is to far away to commute every day.

Social/interpersonal reasons:

Many students not approachable

Hard to socialise with people if not interested in competitive sports or involve nights out.

Student experience is not what I expected, far too much reliance on drinking and socialising and not enough commitment and enthusiasm to chosen studies on part of students. I find it very disappointing and frustrating

Haven't enjoyed it at all.

The student focus on getting pissed as quickly and as cheaply as possible undermines what could be a very vibrant and entertaining city.

Fresher's week was not good.

Table 13: Student satisfaction with university facilities and services

Service/Facility	Very dissatisfied	Fairly dissatisfied	Not Sure	Fairly satisfied	Very satisfied	Percentage fairly satisfied and very satisfied
Library	0.2%	1.7%	2.5%	46.4%	49.3%	96% N=1197
Lecture, seminar and tutorial rooms	0.3%	2.4%	4.0%	57.9%	35.4%	93% N=1215
Computer clusters	1.2%	7.9%	4.7%	52.3%	33.8%	86% N=1209
Student Union	2.6%	9.4%	14.2%	54.9%	18.9%	74% N=1174
University Accommodation	4.6%	15.2%	13.3%	47.0%	19.9%	67% N=992
Personal tutoring	1.6%	7.5%	24.1%	41.6%	25.2%	67% N=1092
Careers Service	0.8%	2.7%	37.4%	38.1%	21.0%	59% N=851
Common rooms	4.5%	15.3%	21.5%	45.1%	13.6%	59% N=956
Catering	3.7%	10.7%	28.7%	45.0%	11.9%	57% N=749
Student Wellbeing Services	1.7%	2.5%	43.4%	37.3%	15.2%	53% N=724
Financial advice	1.6%	6.8%	46.4%	32.9%	12.2%	45% N=745

The original question had a 'Not Applicable' category and these data, including no response, have been excluded from the analysis in order to show only those students who used a particular facility or service. Clearly, those students who used the educational facilities such as the library, computer clusters, lecture, seminar and tutorial rooms, were fairly satisfied or very satisfied with those facilities. It is interesting to note that only 67% of students were fairly satisfied or very satisfied with personal tutoring. Lower levels of satisfaction with tutor related matters is a recurring theme, and again this was borne out in our focus groups.

Table 14: Foundation students' views about personal tutoring

Are you a foundation level student?		Personal tutoring	My personal tutor is approachable
Yes	Mean	4.03	4.19
	N	68	74
	Std. Deviation	.863	.902
No	Mean	3.79	4.00
	N	907	1016
	Std. Deviation	.967	1.013
Total	Mean	3.81	4.02
	N	975	1090
	Std. Deviation	.962	1.006

However, it seems that foundation students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: 'My personal tutor is approachable' and were fairly satisfied or very satisfied with personal tutoring compared with their non-foundation peers as indicated in table 14. In order to determine whether the mean differences between the groups were significant, t tests were run. While there was no statistically significant difference between foundation and non-foundation students on the statement: 'My personal tutor is approachable', there was a significant difference (p=.033) between foundation and non-foundation students in regard to their satisfaction with personal tutoring. This indicates that foundation students were more satisfied with their personal tutoring than non-foundation students. The results of the tests are shown in table 15 below.

Table 15: Results of t tests for foundation and non-foundation students

Variable	Mean	SD	t	df	p
My personal tutor is approachable			1.538	1088	.124
Foundation student	4.19	.902			
Not a foundation student	4.00	1.013			
Personal tutoring			2.171*	80.150*	.033
Foundation student	4.03	.863			
Not a foundation student	3.79	.967			

*The t and df were adjusted due to variances not being equal.

Pre-arrival

Research suggests that students with a lack of knowledge about a university they are planning to attend or the programme of study they are planning to undertake may be at greater risk of withdrawing from their studies than students who have familiarised themselves with the university and programme they intend to study (Whittaker, 2008, p. 18; Yorke & Longden, 2008, p. 46). The latter of these authors, for example, write:

> *The making of a good choice is primarily the responsibility of the intending student, implying a significant level of personal research (including institutional visits) prior to application.*

Clearly, most first year students at Newcastle University accepted the responsibility of finding out about Newcastle University through participation in pre-arrival activities of one sort or another as indicated in table 15 below.

Table 16: Pre-arrival activities engaged in and information received by first year students

|		Responses	Percent of cases
		N	N
Pre-arrival activities (a)	Open days	825	81.2%
	Lectures	409	40.3%
	Pre-university Summer school	255	25.1%
	Additional information about your course	108	10.6%
	The Partners Programme	84	8.3%
	Student shadowing	37	3.6%
	Contact with other new students	34	3.3%
	Residential week	31	3.1%
	Seminars	25	2.5%
	Total	**1808**	

a Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1.

Open days (81.2%), lectures (40.3%), pre-university summer school (25.1%) and receiving additional course information (10.6%) appear to be the most popular forms of pre-arrival activities engaged in by students. It should be noted, however, that the survey focused more on 'activities' students had participated in than on information they had received from the University or accessed themselves via the Internet. As can be seen in table 16 above, there was only one choice regarding 'information' and that referred only to course information. Research in secondary schools and FE colleges (Briggs, et al., 2009) suggests that while they all offer a range of activities to prepare their students for university life, both academic and social, there is no standard model on which all of these preparatory courses are based making the experiences of students from different schools and colleges quite variable. One of the conclusions from that report was (Briggs, et al., 2009, p. 61):

> *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.*

It is not clear that all students take full advantage of the opportunities offered by their schools or colleges and consequently they may end up with a patchy pre-arrival experience. The PARTNERS Programme is advantaged in this respect since it specifically offers a coherent programme of activities to prospective students.

Chart 1 below shows the number of pre-arrival activities that students indicated they had taken part in before formally arriving at Newcastle University. Most (500) students took part in one activity with decreasing numbers of students taking part in between 2 and 7 activities. The modal average is 1.

Chart 1: Number of pre-arrival activities engaged in by first year students
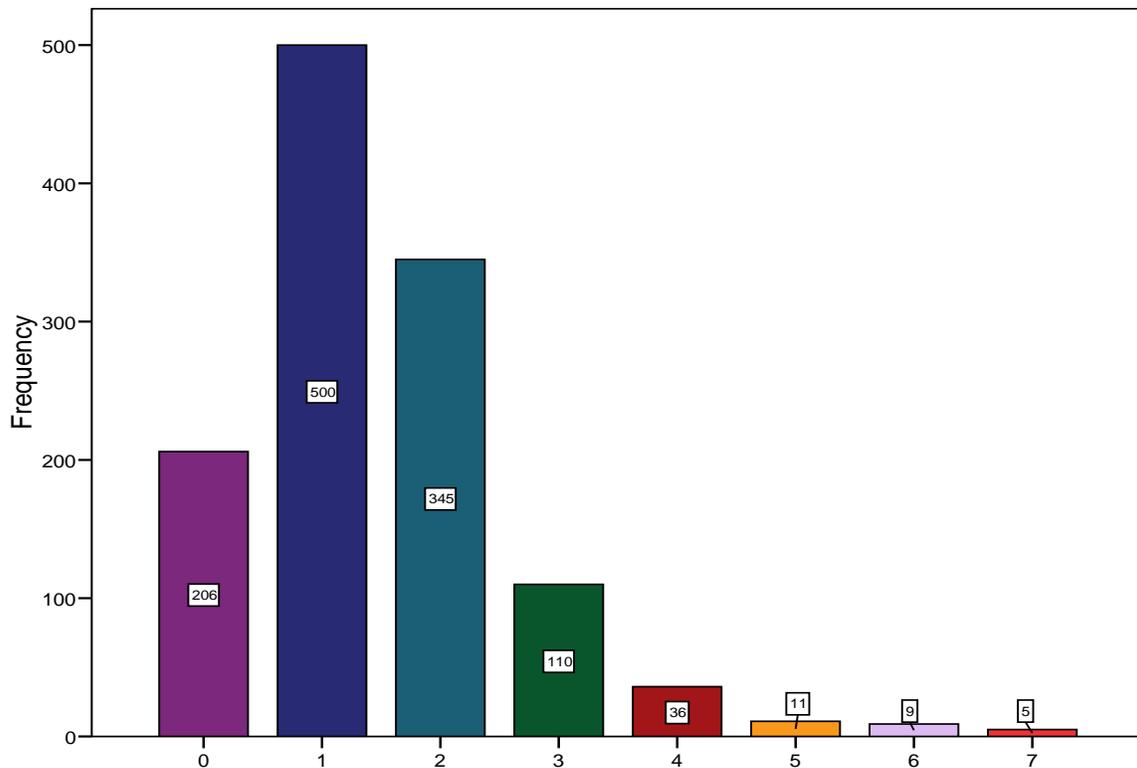
206 students reported that they did not participate in any pre-arrival activities (or ignored this question). It should be noted at this stage that students were not asked in any great depth, about 'information' they had received or gathered themselves, from the University or other sources. The characteristics of the students who did not take part in any pre-arrival activities are as follows: They are mainly female (109), fall into the age range 17-20 (101), live, predominantly in university accommodation (83) although 22 students live with parents/guardians, are predominantly UK residents (100) and are based predominantly in HaSS (106). Twenty-three of the 206 who did not participate in pre-arrival activities indicated that they had considered withdrawing from their courses. It is important to note, however, that the term 'pre-arrival activities' may not have been clear to

students completing the survey and they may not remember or describe their participation in such activities in the same way. During our focus groups we were able to probe further what we meant by the term, and students were able to 'remember' taking part in activities once other students had mentioned something. It is also worth noting that students in our focus groups reported engaging in 'informal' activities prior to their arrival. Several reported visiting family or friends who were wlready studying at Newcastle and others reported taking part in online discussion groups and forums to learn more about student life at Newcastle.

Table 17: Students views about pre-arrival activities

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Strongly agree	Percentage Agreeing and Strongly agreeing
I felt well prepared for independent living	0.9%	5.6%	11.2%	47.0%	35.3%	82% N=1029
I felt well prepared for university level study	1.7%	10.2%	14.5%	53.3%	20.3%	74% N=1128
Pre-arrival activities I took part in were helpful	1.9%	5.4%	25.9%	54.1%	12.6%	67% N=848
Pre-arrival activities helped me to integrate well into university life	3.5%	15.0%	33.9%	37.5%	10.2%	48% N=865
Pre-arrival activities prepared me for university level study	2.9%	18.2%	32.9%	37.4%	8.6%	46% N= 859

A mixed picture emerges in regard to students' perceptions of the impact of pre-arrival activities on their levels of preparedness for university life. Most students felt well prepared for university level study (74%) and yet when asked to indicate to what extent pre-arrival activities may have helped prepare them for university level study only 46% agreed or agreed strongly with this statement. It may be that pre-arrival activities, given their brief and perhaps superficial nature, can only ever give a 'taste' or 'flavour' of university life rather than an in depth insight. We do not, unfortunately, have any details about the duration and quality of the pre-arrival activities students participated in and while 84 students clearly participated in the PARTNERS Programme we can only speculate as to which activities they participated in within that programme. In response to the statement: Pre-arrival activities helped me to integrate well into university life, only 48% agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Again, it may be asking a lot of pre-arrival activities (and the definitions that we subscribe to) to assist students in any great depth to integrate into university life. Most students felt well prepared for independent living (82%). When asked to indicate whether pre-arrival activities had been helpful, 67% agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Many students chose the 'Not sure' category in items 2, 3 and 5 in the table above, highlighting the difficulties of teasing out the impact of pre-arrival activities on their actual experiences. Students gave some indication of what was effective in preparing them for their first year at Newcastle University with additional comments.

The PARTNERS Programme:

> *PARTNERS was helpful in understanding the layout of campus and the library! Not so good for understanding work level and load though.*

Partners programme helped me to see how university works and the way in which the learning material is presented.

Open Days:

Visiting the university on an open day gave me a great insight into what it would be like to study here.

Access to course information, university information etc was helpful:

Online registration was really effective, because I did it in my country. Also, when I arrived to Newcastle late, the staff were really helpful to finish my registration and preparation for study.

Information received in the post regarding reading lists etc.

Speaking to people:

Honest advice from upper year students

Meeting degree programme director beforehand

Previous educational institution:

A Levels, community within sixth form.

Architecture foundation course in Cambridge College.

Gap years, travelling, freshers and induction week:

Having a gap year and a foundation art course

Going travelling beforehand made me more independent and used to organising myself

Students were asked if any of the pre-arrival activities they took part in stood out as helpful in preparing them for university life. Most students responded 'No'. The remaining student comments, suggest the open days stand out as being particularly helpful:

The open day gave me an idea of the course and what the university looks like etc. Having been to boarding school I was used to being away from home so it was not too much of a problem.

The open days were pretty well organised and this was helpful. For example the talks given to us about things like student finance etc were useful.

Virtually all the Schools within Newcastle University foster relationships with schools and colleges in the North-East laying the foundations for students to progress to Newcastle University (Briggs, et al., 2009). Many schools in the North-East offer a range of activities to prepare students for university life so there is no shortage or lack of choice. In some respects it may be as Yorke & Longden (2008)

suggest, up to the student to do his/her personal research about the University and the programme being considered.

Comments from students who participated in the focus groups indicate the type of pre-arrival activities students participated in and seem to suggest that while there are a range of activities on offer, 'Word of mouth' and personal recommendation is very powerful.

> **Female***: I came on an open day, I felt bombarded with leaflets and stuff. The only downside was the accommodation tour, because there was a massive queue and because you're only there for a day, I felt there was other things to see, so I didn't get to see the halls and ended up just going for pot luck and what sounded the best. Word of mouth is very powerful.*

> **Female***: I got a lot of my information from friends who've been here, and I looked at the Guardian tables and all the ratings as well.*

> **Male***: You can't really tell by just looking in a booklet, but when you go to the open days they are so repetitive and boring, they give you the same spiel. Its best to talk with students when they take you round, ask their opinion on it really.*

Comparison of averages for those students who participated in the PARTNERS programme and those who did not suggest that PARTNERS students felt better prepared than their non-participating peers.

Table 18: Pre-arrival experiences of students who did and did not participate in PARTNERS)

Participated in the PARTNERS Programme		I felt well prepared for university level study	Pre-arrival activities prepared me for university level study	Pre-arrival activities helped me to integrate well into university life	I felt well prepared for independent living	Pre-arrival activities I took part in were helpful	I would have liked different pre-arrival events or information to be provided
Didn't participate	Mean	3.80	3.24	3.31	4.11	3.67	3.28
	N	1051	778	784	970	768	887
	Std. Deviation	.935	.935	.955	.873	.816	.905
Participated	Mean	3.88	3.91	3.79	4.05	3.96	2.99
	N	77	81	81	59	80	80
	Std. Deviation	.903	1.002	1.021	.839	.892	1.097
Total	Mean	3.80	3.31	3.36	4.10	3.70	3.26
	N	1128	859	865	1029	848	967
	Std. Deviation	.933	.961	.971	.871	.827	.926

NB The Scale used for the statements in table 18 above was: 1-Strongly disagree; 2-Disagree; 3-Not sure; 4-Agree, 5-Strongly agree

Students who participated in the PARTNERS programme agree more than their non-participating peers that pre-arrival activities prepared them for university level study, helped them to integrate well into university life and were generally helpful. Those students who did not participate in the PARTNERS Programme apparently felt better prepared for independent living than those students who did participate in the PARTNERS Programme. In order to determine whether there were any

statistically significant differences between the two groups, t tests were run. While there were no statistically significant differences for the statements: 'I felt well prepared for university level study' and 'I felt well prepared for independent living', there were statistically significant differences for the statements: 'Pre-arrival activities prepared me for university level study', Pre-arrival activities helped me to integrate well into university life', 'Pre-arrival activities I took part in were helpful', 'I would have liked different pre-arrival events or information to be provided'. The results indicate that those students who participated in the PARTNERS Programme found the pre-arrival activities they took part in more helpful than those who didn't participate in PARTNERS.

Table 19: t tests for students who did and did not take part in the PARTNERS Programme

	Participated in the PARTNERS Programme	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	p
I felt well prepared for university level study	Participated	3.88	.903	.779	1126	.436
	Didn't participate	3.80	.935			
Pre-arrival activities prepared me for university level study	Participated	3.91	1.002	6.102	857	.000
	Didn't participate	3.24	.935			
Pre-arrival activities helped me to integrate well into university life	Participated	3.79	1.021	4.244	863	.000
	Didn't participate	3.31	.955			
I felt well prepared for independent living	Participated	4.05	.839	-.465	1027	.642
	Didn't participate	4.11	.873			
Pre-arrival activities I took part in were helpful	Participated	3.96	.892	2.978	846	.003
	Didn't participate	3.67	.816			
I would have liked different pre-arrival events or information to be provided	Participated	2.99	1.097	-2.754	965	.006
	Didn't participate	3.28	.905			

In conclusion,those students who participated in pre-arrival activities found them useful but we cannot say for certain whether they helped to enhance their first year experience or not. Students who participated in the PARTNERS programme agreed more than their non-participating peers that pre-arrival activities were helpful in preparing them for university life. This is not surprising due to the fact that they will have participated in a systematic and coherent programme of pre-arrival activities.

Induction

Induction, like pre-arrival activities, is an important factor in determining whether or not students stay at university and complete their studies and yet the process of transition, including pre-arrival and induction activities, has become increasingly more complicated in recent years. As Whittaker (2008, p. 2) explains it:

> *The increasing diversity of higher education (HE) presents increasing challenges and opportunities in the area of transition. This diversity relates to:*
>
> - *Learner profile*
> - *Context of prior learning - school, college, workplace, community, education outside the United Kingdom (UK)*
> - *HE provision:*
>
>   - *Learning, teaching and assessment strategies underpinning different programmes and discipline areas.*
>   - *Flexibility of programmes in terms of place, pace, content and mode of learning.*

And yet as Westlake (2008:??) suggests in her review of the literature:

> *The critical time for student withdrawal is the early stages of their first year of study, and a key time during this period is induction, therefore, it is important that this process is right. This is a period when many students will be expecting staff to be around and supportive. Therefore, there could be a case for using the most student focused member of staff as much as possible during this period.*

.Induction, therefore, is like the welcome at the front door and if it is not done effectively it may leave students floundering as suggested by the authors of the STAR Programme, based at Ulster University:

> *When student concerns and expectations are not aligned with an induction programme, students can feel frustrated, disappointed and unsuccessful about the entry into higher education. If students progress without any assistance early on, then the student might opt to leave early. Students new to the university setting can become easily overwhelmed and, if help is not easy to find, are more likely to drop out.*

Authors of the STAR programme (Cook, Rushton, McCormick, & Southall, 2005, p. 8) view induction as:

> *A sequence of managed outcomes that should occur throughout year 1 and beyond. Some of these will be achieved during events that are independent of the teaching system and others will be embedded in the curriculum. The achievement of the outcomes is the key issue, not when or where they are achieved or who facilitates them.*

Whittaker's report (2008, pp. 5-6) summarises the key factors that lead to successful student transition into the first year at university:

- Coordinated institutional strategic approach
- Pre-entry support - informed choice, preparation, expectations

- Longitudinal approach to induction, including timely provision of information to
- Avoid information overload, and orientation that focuses on social integration
- Focus on social integration - peer support networks
- Progressive skills development and personal development planning (PDP)
- through programme modules and support services
- Embedding transition support in learning, teaching and assessment strategies
- Proactive student support - developing a sense of belonging
- Student control and choice.

It is clear from our earlier research (Briggs, et al., 2009) that Schools in Newcastle University do offer induction programmes. However, our research found that these vary from programme to programme and course to course in terms of content and duration. The consensus in the literature is that induction should be a longitudinal process rather than a discrete one week event at the start of the first year (Campbell, 2006; Whittaker, 2008, p. 34) and it appears that the various Schools within Newcastle University have taken this idea on board to varying degrees.

Table 20: Students' Perceptions of programme induction activities

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Strongly agree	Percentage Agreeing and Strongly agreeing
It was easy getting my Smartcard:	0.5 %	2.5 %	2.5 %	51.9 %	42.5 %	94% N=1148
I got my e-mail login details without any trouble:	1.4 %	6.0 %	3.1 %	51.4 %	38.2 %	90% N=1147
The registration process was easy:	1.0 %	4.2 %	6.2 %	56.2 %	32.4 %	89% N=1149
Induction activities helped me to settle into University life:	0.9 %	10.1 %	18.1 %	56.6 %	14.3 %	71% N=1144
Overall, I found induction activities helpful:	1.0 %	9.4 %	18.5 %	58.1 %	12.9 %	71% N=1143
I had sufficient opportunities to take part in Fresher's Week activities:	5.7 %	13.8 %	12.9 %	43.9 %	23.6 %	68% N=1143
I felt overloaded with information during induction week:	3.1 %	41.7 %	19.5 %	27.7 %	8.1 %	36% N=1145

Table 20 above indicates that most students appear satisfied with their induction experiences. Clearly, a small number of students felt overloaded during induction but most reported that they were not. Practical activities, such as the registration process, collecting smartcards and login details all received around the 90% agreement mark among the sample of students.

Students highlighted a number of memorable induction week activities. In many cases students conflate their induction Week and Fresher's Week experiences which is perhaps not surprising since the two events take place at the same time. Most comments suggest the importance of both Fresher Week and Induction Week activities as opportunities to meet other students.

The organised nights out and meeting new friendly people.

In some cases students reported feeling isolated, lonely and alienated during Fresher's Week and Induction Week.

I was not impressed by induction week. It should have been free for everyone. As someone who didn't know anyone I felt alienated.

Understandably, not all students view alcohol related activities as central to their university experiences and some complained about this aspect of university life.

I felt a bit like an outsider during freshers week. A lot of the freshers activities seemed to be alcohol-related and I can't remember being able to find any evening activities that didn't involve a night out. I felt that I hadn't got my value for money out of the £50 that I spent on my freshers wristband.

A mature student noted:

I did not take part in induction activities as I didn't see anything which appealed to mature students like myself.

Some students mentioned attending introductory lectures or other induction related activities:

Arrival at accommodation and the helpfulness of the fresher's crew. Helpful induction session for course- helpful timetable information until the point where we had to use the online system to find other seminars/lectures. - good day time events- I personally went to the cocktail training which was fun and allowed me to feel involved.

Students were asked if anything was missing from induction week that they might have found useful. Students suggested a number of things that should have been present during Fresher's Week and Induction Week but apparently were not. While Fresher's Week is clearly a more informal opportunity to meet up with students across the university, some students felt that it would have been helpful to have course ice breakers too:

More contact/activities with students from my course

Some sort of course ice breaker!

Some students clearly wanted more formal activities relating to course requirements:

Tutoring on university style learning, self directed learning and academic writing lessons.

Better info regarding the combined studies set up. I didn't know I would lack the opportunity to do some courses when clashes occurred.

Box file should have been handed out in induction week and there should have been better explanations of the expectations with regards to coursework.

One student wrote:

I felt that it was all too intense in induction week and then we were left alone very quickly after it was finished.

And another complained:

> *I was unable to attend fresher's week activities due to timetable clashes. Should be separate fresher's and induction weeks*

Student comments from the focus groups reveal a mixed picture concerning induction with some students who clearly found the induction week useful and in some cases fun while others found it confusing.

> **Female***: We did this thing in the Hancock museum, it was like High School all over again we were given these lists and had to like name the animal, I was in a group with people from all over the country, I didn't know them, and it actually turned out to be such a fun day because we were messing around trying to find the names of these animals. But little things like that I really enjoyed. Then there was a play about time management, but it was fun, not a sit down talk. It's the relaxed environments like that that I made friends and learnt lots of information.*

Others found it clashed with Freshers' Week activities and were not so happy about it.

> **Female***: I found it a bit annoying because some of the induction activities clashed with the Freshers' week activities. It didn't seem very well-structured or very well planned, or very well thought out, there were clashes.*

> **Female***: I found induction week traumatising because I wanted to change courses. I realised after 3 hours that I didn't want to do the course and just didn't know where to go from there, I felt so lost, and I went to the careers service who didn't really help me, I didn't know what portal to use.*

Some students didn't attend or couldn't attend induction activities:

> **Female***:. I was moving house, so I didn't take part in much.*

> **Male**: *During Freshers' week everything was going on, and also on my course too, it was quite packed, so I thought I was going to miss out on a load of stuff. There was like this bus trip round Newcastle and it was 6 hours, but I was really hungover so didn't go on it, and half the course didn't go on it either. That would have been good to do the week after Freshers week, a bit better organised.*

> **Male**: *I didn't go to most of the lectures in induction week. I met up with a couple of people on my course and from that point on I got my information from them. I went to a couple of them, like the one from the Head of School, but it was so boring that we got out of there.*

> **Female***: We had a set timetable, plus some social activities which helped balance them about a bit. Some past students came in to talk about what they were doing now, there was a good balance between the academic and social.*

In conclusion, students appear satisfied with their induction experiences although comments made during focus groups appear to suggest that there may be problems relating to Freshers' Week and Induction Week taking place at the same time. Some students suggested that separating Freshers' Week and Induction week may be a good idea since this would allow students to focus on the important aspects that each offers i.e. in terms of the former, the social aspects of university life specifically making friends, and in terms of the latter, focusing on the 'nuts and bolts' of the academic side of university life. Induction, the welcome at the other end of the bridge, is vitally important for

students (National Audit Office, 2007; Westlake, 2008; Yorke & Longden, 2008) and will shape their resulting experience.

The evidence from students themselves seems to show that while they appear happy with their induction experiences there still seems to be some work to do in this area. Induction activities at Newcastle University appear to vary from School to School in terms of content and duration and are apparently still based around the notion of a 'one-off' induction week. In spite of the fact that just under 70% of students in the sample agreed or strongly agreed that they had had enough opportunities to participate in Freshers' Week activities, survey and focus group comments suggest that the close proximity of Freshers' Week and Induction Week does cause some internal conflict for students, where they feel torn between the primary purposes of the one and the other. The predominant view of Freshers' Week is that it is or should be concerned with the social aspects of university life with students getting out and about in order to make friends while the latter is more about the academic aspects of university life. Students do, however, seem to want more opportunities to get to know students on their own courses too.

Teaching and Learning

The literature highlights some key points in regard to teaching and learning at university and some of the problems students have to overcome in order to achieve a successful transition from their former educational institution. Whittaker (2008, p. 19), for instance notes:

Issues surrounding academic transition identified in the literature and through the discussions with practitioners focus on the student's need to adapt to styles of teaching and learning that are different from their prior educational experiences at school, college or community-based learning. A new level of independence is both required and expected of them by academic staff.

The literature (Harvey & Drew, 2006; Whittaker, 2008) suggests that the first year at university requires students to adapt themselves to new ways of learning, that is, moving on from their 'A' level learning styles and adapt to more independent forms of learning. They conclude that tutors and lecturers need to carefully consider whether the teaching and learning styles within their programmes can help students to adapt to 'different' ways of learning.

Table 21: Students' views about teaching and learning at Newcastle University

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Strongly agree	Percentage Agreeing and Strongly agreeing
The course is intellectually stimulating	1.4%	5.3%	9.3%	52.6%	31.3%	84% N=1123
The programme is well organised and is running smoothly	1.0%	6.0%	10.0%	59.3%	23.7%	83% N=1125
Teaching and learning methods are effective for me	0.9%	8.4%	10.6%	62.9%	17.3%	80% N=1124
I am happy with the teaching support I receive	1.3%	6.8%	13.7%	61.0%	17.3%	78% N=1117
I have sufficient contact time to support effective learning	1.7%	8.4%	15.0%	58.8%	16.1%	75% N=1122
What is required of me has been made clear in advance	1.8%	8.9%	16.0%	55.3%	18.0%	73% N=1121
The balance of core modules and options is appropriate	4.5%	11.7%	15.9%	49.4%	18.4%	68% N=972
Feedback on my work has been useful	4.3%	14.0%	18.3%	48.3%	15.2%	64% N=1117

Overall, students seem to be happy with the teaching and learning they receive at Newcastle University. Eighty percent of students agreed or agreed strongly that teaching and learning methods were effective for them. Contact time with tutors/lecturers received a high rating too with 75% agreeing or agreeing strongly with this statement. Teaching support received higher ratings from students suggesting satisfaction with what support is available. There seems to be a little less agreement in regard to what is required of students in their academic work (73%) and it is clear that there may be an issue with the usefulness of feedback they receive from their tutors/lecturers with only 64% agreeing with that statement. Most students agree that their programme is well organised and running smoothly (83%) and 84% agree that their course is intellectually stimulating.

Students were asked to give some indication of the state of communication and relationships between themselves and tutors/lecturers.

Table 22: Students' views about communications and relationships with teaching staff

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Strongly agree	Percentage Agreeing and Strongly agreeing
I find most teaching staff friendly and approachable	0.2%	1.6%	4.6%	54.9%	38.7%	94% N=1123
There are sufficient opportunities to discuss issues with teaching staff	0.8%	9.2%	17.1%	50.6%	22.2%	73% N=1120
I do have discussions with teaching staff	5.6%	28.6%	15.4%	37.8%	12.7%	51% N=1114
I know at least one member of teaching staff well (who is not my personal tutor)	17.4%	33.2%	14.4%	23.0%	11.9%	35% N=1122

Teaching staff are clearly viewed as friendly and approachable (94%) and there are sufficient opportunities to discuss issues with them (73%) yet when it comes to actual discussions with teaching staff the percentage drops to 51%. Likewise, only 35% of students agreed or agreed strongly with the statement, 'I know at least one member of teaching staff well (who is not my personal tutor)'. There seems to be something lacking in terms of communication and relationships between tutors/lecturers and students. It may be difficult on larger programmes to form more than superficial relationships with tutors and lecturers. Students were generally positive about communication between themselves and their tutors/lecturers as the following comments suggest:

> **Male**: *Because there's so few of us on our course, it's different, they know us all by first names, and the personal tutor doesn't work for the Uni, so I have a good relationship with her too.*

> **Male**: *("International/EU student") I know my tutors well and my lecturers are approachable.*

> **Male**: *My lectures only involve 50 or 60 people. We have a tutor session every week and spend an hour with him every week, so I know my tutor really well and in that respect it's really well set up.*

> **Female**: *Personal tutors are good, they try really hard to establish and maintain that relationship.*

However, it seems that not everyone has the same positive experience with their tutors/lecturers as the following comments suggest:

> **Female**: *All the lecturers seem like they want to teach you and that they are there for you. The only downside is that there are over 100 people doing our course so we don't have seminar work, and your personal tutor doesn't know you, and your lecturers don't know who you are unless you go to them and say this is me, this is how I work, this is what I need help with.*

Male: *I didn't expect lecturers to get to know me personally, I am used to smaller groups and knew my teachers, but here lecturers walk past you and don't know you. I was disappointed in my relationship with my tutor, I don't know him at all, only met him once.*
.
Female: *(Student parent). I've never had a meeting with mine, there was a week where he said you can meet and have a chat with your personal tutor. So I emailed him and he just didn't even email me back, so I've never actually met him! I wish I had a more welcoming tutor, you know someone who was aware I'm a mature student with a family, for guidance and help. Because I've been out of education so long it would have been nice to have someone to go to, to say "I'm really struggling with this" or whatever. Just someone who could say, OK, maybe you can do this or whatever.*

Experience seems to vary across the faculties and subject areas. One factor may be the number of students on a course, making it difficult for tutors to develop and maintain that personal touch. Another factor may be the course structure. Comments suggest that where there are seminars there may be more opportunity to get to know tutors and lecturers.

Table 23: Student ratings of teaching quality on their programmes of study

Statement	It is consistently poor	It is variable but generally poor	It is variable but generally good	It is consistently good	Percentage rating teaching quality as good
Overall, how would you rate the teaching quality on your programme	0.2%	3.2%	61.9%	34.8%	97% N=1122

Students seem to have little doubt about the quality of the teaching they are receiving on their programmes of study with 97% of students in the sample rating it as variable but generally good or consistently good.

Table 24: Students' use of ICT resources

Statement	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently	Percentage of students who use ICTS frequently
How often do you use Blackboard?	8.6%	2.2%	6.1%	83.1%	83.1% N=1118
How often do you use web-based resources and information designed for your course?	8.0%	13.4%	33.6%	45.0%	45% N=1119
How often do you use e-mail to contact lecturers - tutors?	6.4%	20.1%	46.7%	26.8%	26.8% N=1125
How often do you use NESS?	46.1%	13.9%	15.0%	25.1%	25.1% N=1109
How often do you use e-mail to contact friends in the course	15.1%	29.7%	35.7%	19.5%	19.5% N=1123
How often do you use other virtual learning environments?	45.9%	25.1%	20.6%	8.3%	8.3% N=1101
How often do you use LSE?	72.5%	13.9%	5.7%	7.9%	7.9% N=1105
How often do you use online discussion groups?	62.0%	24.4%	9.5%	4.2%	4.2% N= 1117

NB: Usage rates for LSE are explained by the fact that it is a resource only accessible to MBBS students rather than a resource widely available and accessible to all students.

Judging by responses to the statements in table 24 above, it seems clear that students are very pragmatic when it comes to ICT use with most (83%) using those resources that are course or programme related such as Blackboard and other web-based resources (45%). Only a quarter of students frequently use e-mail to contact their tutors-lecturers and even fewer use it to contact friends on the same course. Specific resources are never used or used rarely. i.e. LSE and online discussion groups. The fact that 72.5% of students 'never' use this resource should not be read as a resource that is under-utilised but rather as a resource that is only accessible by MBBS students rather than the whole student body. Online technologies are viewed as another important means to engage students in active learning (Nelson, Kift, & Harper, 2005). This may be the case in regard to those technological resources pertaining directly to students' programmes of study but it is unclear, as student responses above seem to suggest, whether students will move beyond non-course specific ICTS unless they can be shown to have direct usefulness and applicability to their programmes of study.

Table 25: Student ratings of workload on their programmes of study

Statement	Much lower than I expected	Lower than I Expected	More or less as I expected	Higher than I expected	Much Higher than I expected	Percentage of students who found the workload higher or much higher than expected
Overall, the workload on the programme is:	2.3	11.3	50.4	27.6	8.4	36% N=1126

Just over half of the students in the sample found the workload more as less as they expected. Thirty-six percent of students in the sample found the workload higher or much higher than expected. Female students (236) found the workload higher or much higher than males (170) in the sample and most of the female students fell into the 17-18 (65) and 19-20 (123) age ranges.

In conclusion, while students agree that teaching quality is high on their programmes of study, it seems that communication and relationships between themselves and their tutors/lecturers may not be as good as they could be.

Engagement

Pre-arrival, induction, teaching and learning can all be thought of as the first three links in a chain designed to retain students. The fourth link in that 'chain of retention' is engagement. Krause (2007), according to Whittaker (2008, p. 30), proposed five strategies in order to enhance student engagement with learning and these include:

> 1 Build a community and a sense of belonging in your institution.
> 2 Develop responsive curricula.
> 3 Use assessment and feedback as tools for engagement.
> 4 Harness the possibilities of online, mobile and wireless technologies.
> 5 Engage students with the opportunities of 'future learning'.

However, according to Whittaker (2008, p. 4), the terms of reference are moving away from the notion of retention and withdrawal to support and empowerment.

George Kuh (Kuh, 2004, p. 1) notes that:

> *Certain institutional practices are known to lead to high levels of student engagement (Astin, 1991; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Kuh, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Perhaps the best known set of engagement indicators is the "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education" (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). These principles include student-faculty contact, cooperation among students, active learning, prompt feedback, time on task, high expectations, and respect for diverse talents and ways of learning. Also important to student learning are institutional environments that are perceived by students as inclusive and affirming and where expectations for performance are clearly communicated and set at reasonably high levels (Education Commission of the States,1995).*

It has been 23 years since Chickering and Gamson (1987) formulated their seven key principles for successful undergraduate education and yet they are still used today to inform the National Survey of Student Engagement (2008) in the United States of America and Canada. They maintain that good practice in undergraduate education:

1. encourages contact between students and faculty,
2. develops reciprocity and cooperation among students,
3. encourages active learning,
4. gives prompt feedback,
5. emphasizes time on task,
6. communicates high expectations, and
7. respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

These principles have become to a certain extent 'norms', standards, criteria applied by universities worldwide in order to improve and maintain the quality of their programmes. They may differ from place to place but they are common principles shared by all universities worldwide. Pre-arrival, induction, teaching and learning and engagement are all links in a chain with the common aim being to provide quality education and through these processes retain students in higher education.

Table 26: Students' levels of engagement with peers, tutors and their academic work

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Strongly agree	Percentage Agreeing and Strongly agreeing
Lecturers-tutors treat all students with respect	0.5%	3.6%	7.9%	60.4%	27.5%	88% N=1107
I have good working relationships with students on my course	1.4%	4.9%	7.9%	56.8%	28.9%	86% N= 1107
Lecturers-tutors care about their students	0.5%	4.3%	21.2%	57.0%	17.1%	74% N=1104
I feel confident getting to know students on my course	2.8%	8.6%	15.5%	52.7%	20.4%	73% N=1107
I feel like I belong to the University community	3.5%	7.9%	17.2%	56.3%	15.1%	71% N=1106
I have good working relationships with lecturers-tutors	1.2%	6.8%	24.8%	55.6%	11.6%	67% N=1101
I take part in extra-curricular activities e.g. societies and sports	8.5%	26.2%	9.0%	35.8%	20.5%	56% N=1105
Lecturers-tutors value my contributions	1.1%	10.6%	41.0%	40.1%	7.3%	47% N=1103
I have the opportunity to influence changes to my course	3.7%	17.9%	36.6%	33.1%	8.7%	42% N=1101
I regularly seek the advice and assistance of the lecturing staff	5.1%	43.7%	22.0%	25.6%	3.5%	29% N=1108
I felt like withdrawing from my course	49.0%	25.2%	9.6%	11.3%	4.9	16% N=1103

NB: Percentages in last column have been rounded up

Taking the principles outlined above into consideration, what do the responses suggest about student engagement at Newcastle University? Certainly, while it might be argued from student responses in regard to teaching and learning that they are clearly engaged in their academic work and are satisfied with the teaching they receive, table 26 does indicate that there may be some issues around communication and relationships between students and their tutors and lecturers. For example, in response to the statement: *I regularly seek the advice and assistance of the lecturing staff*, only 29% agreed or agreed strongly with this statement. Likewise, only 47% of students agreed or agreed strongly with the statement: *Lecturers-tutors value my contributions* and, finally, only 67% of students agreed or agreed strongly with the statement: *I have good working relationships with lecturers-tutors*. When the responses in this table are compared with those for the last two items in table 22, it becomes clear that there are some issues in regard to communication between students and tutors/lecturers that may have an impact on students' engagement levels. More research needs to be done in order to draw out these issues. Difficulties may relate to the fact that students and

tutors/lecturers are still getting to know one another or high student numbers on particular courses might make communications and relationships between students and tutors/lecturers difficult. Time pressures on Tutors and Lecturers may also have something to do with students' low ratings on these items. Returning to table 24 above, 71% of students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: *I feel like I belong to the University community*. The importance of a sense of belonging in student engagement has already been noted (Krause, 2007; Whittaker, 2008).

It is worth noting at this stage that 179 students said they felt like withdrawing from their course and most of these fell in the 17-20 age range. Students who considered withdrawing were mainly female (117), between the ages of 17 and 20 (144), residing in the UK (149), and living in University Accommodation (100). Nineteen students were registered as foundation level students. Forty-nine of the students lived with their parents or guardians.

Students who agreed or strongly agreed (179) that they considered withdrawing from their course were encouraged to expand on the reasons why they considered withdrawing from their programmes of study. One hundred and sixty of the students provided reasons why they considered withdrawing. These include some of the following reasons:

Female 19-20, UK, University Accommodation:

> *"I don't know if I made the right choice in my course, I don't even know if university is for me but I think I will continue as there's nothing else available."*

Female, 17-18, UK, University Accommodation:

> *"I expected more support during the transition between Sixth Form and Higher Education. I have found my year so far difficult and have not known who I should be able to talk to. My personal tutor has been disinterested in my progress. The accommodation services were helpful once I knew how to contact them."*

Female, 17-18, UK, Parents/Guardians Home:

> *"The course is not as I expected."*

Male, 17-18, UK, Private shared accommodation with other students:

> *"I do not feel I was prepared well enough to study the course!!!."*

Other comments from students fall generally into the following categories:

Whether university was "right" for them,

> *University has always been a question mark for me, I was never 100% about going.*

> *There was a period where I did not know, and still do not know, if Newcastle is the place for me. Also I realised that I did not like one of my three subjects on the combined honours course*

Whether they were on the "right" course,

Before I even got to the university I was unsure that I had chosen the right course for me. Being at university I felt sure that I had made the wrong decision straight away pretty much and I'm looking into different courses for next year.

Course wasn't what I expected and not very suited to my interests.

Lack of support from course staff,

I found it difficult to broach somebody with a question or if I wanted guidance -I felt that I did not know who I could ask. It seemed that only certain people were very limited to what they could help me with.

There's barely any contact time with student or staff so I feel completely isolated and generally don't know what's going on

Boredom with their course

The course so far hasn't been academically challenging enough, and overall a little dull.

Not intellectually stimulating, hard to meet people, boredom.

Towards the end of the first semester I was quite bored with the content of the course and looked into changing to history. However I could not unless I reapplied with UCAS and so I decided to stick with the course I was on and when revising for the exams I got a bit more into it and started enjoying it more.

Difficulty making friends.

For my major, I don't have many opportunity to have the group work with others, is very hard to find a friend, so I feel withdrawing from my course.

Hard to make friends when living at home, all students are already in social groups who live together and friends from home have all moved away for uni.

Table 27: How often do students engage with peers, tutors/lecturers on their courses?

Statement	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently	Percentage of students engaging frequently in activities
Informal conversations with students on your course.	1.4%	6.2%	22.2%	52.7%	70.2% N=1098
Working with other students on projects during class.	7.3%	17.7%	45.5%	29.5%	29.5% N=1104
Working with classmates outside of class on group assignments.	8.2%	16.7%	46.6%	28.5 %	28.5% N=1107
Borrowing course notes and materials from friends in the same subjects/units.	13.9%	29.6%	40.8%	15.7%	15.7% N= 1106
Discussions with tutors/lecturers other than in lectures.	30.6%	42.1%	21.5%	5.7%	5.7% N=1101
Giving feedback through my course representative	47.7%	30.3%	17.3%	4.7%	4.7% N=1095

Students are clearly engaging with their peers in and out of the lecture hall and seminar room. However, this seems to be occasional rather than frequent engagement. Chickering and Gamson (1987) note the importance of *reciprocity and cooperation among students* in terms of engagement. Discussions with tutors/lecturers seems to occur rarely and in many cases never. The majority of students in this sample either never give feedback through their course representative or if they do it is very rarely. Students do, however, engage frequently in informal conversations with students on their courses. It may be the case that lower ratings on these items could be related to the 'first year experience' with students and tutor/lecturers still getting to know one another. There may be other course based reasons why students only engage occasionally with their peers. Is there a difference between the natural and social sciences in terms of groupwork and/or collaboration? Responses to the item: '*Discussions with tutors/lecturers other than in lectures*', indicates that students rarely or never engage in discussions with their tutors/lecturers outside lectures. Again this may have something to do with the nature of the lecture as more of a presentation than an opportunity for discussion since tutors/lecturers may have to move onto other activities after the lecture leaving discussion to take place in seminars, study groups or tutorial groups.

Table 28: How often have students felt specific emotions or feelings during their first year?

Statement	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	Percentage of students who often or always feel specific emotions and feelings
Happy	0.2%	1.4%	10.1%	66.6%	21.6%	88.% N=1106
Settled	0.9%	5.4%	17.5%	47.7%	28.5%	76% N=1101
Part of a group	1.6%	5.8%	20.8%	43.5%	28.2%	72% N=1105
A sense of belonging	3.4%	8.1%	24.2%	44.8%	19.5%	64% N=1104
Anxious or nervous	7.8%	32.7%	40.8%	16.4%	2.3%	19% N= 1101
Concerned about meeting new people	16.9%	30.8%	33.7%	14.3%	4.3%	19% N=1103
Overwhelmed	14.0%	30.9%	38.4%	14.7%	2.1%	17% N=1095
Sad or depressed	10.4%	37.1%	36.9%	14.4%	1.2%	16% N=1104
Lonely	25.8%	34.5%	26.2%	10.9%	2.5%	13% N=1103
Homesick	34.6%	30.2%	24.6%	8.1%	2.5%	11% N=1101

Students in the sample tended to experience the more positive emotions such as 'happiness', 'being part of a group', 'settled' and 'a sense of belonging' often or always. Clearly smaller percentages of students experienced some of the more negative emotions such as 'sadness and depression', 'anxiety or nervousness', 'concerned about meeting new people', 'homesickness', 'loneliness' and a sense of being 'overwhelmed' sometimes.

How have students dealt with negative feelings

Students seem to have a number of formal and informal strategies for dealing with negative feelings including:

Talking with friends/family,

> *Talking to friends and my girlfriend*

> *Talking over with friends and family.*

> *Talking to people*

Putting up with it,

> *Ignored them*

> *By hoping they'll eventually pass*

Ignored/repressed them.

Just got on with it!

Worked more.

Seeking professional help/counselling,

Visiting the Student Advice Centre

Been to counselling... again

Been to see the Student Wellbeing Service who were not particularly helpful. Also, been to see my GP and NHS practitioners. Have also spoken to my tutor about my problems.

Talked to my CPN, Psychiatrist and Neuropartners staff.

Talking to staff,

Spoke to a pastoral tutor

Contacted relevant lecturer.

I'm on anti-depressants and have told personal tutor.

Best aspect of university experience so far?

Students identified some of the best aspects of their university experience so far. The most overwhelming response seems to be the social aspects of university life. Comments fall into a number of categories:

Meeting new people/social aspects

Meeting new people and going out!

Meeting great new friends

The social side, including societies.

Independence

Independent living

Living independently for the first time

Living on my own and being independent. I believe it has helped me develop.

Academic factors

Passing January exams as I had expected to fail

The course.

Sport

New sports and making new friends.

Sports

Social life, meeting new people and joining clubs, (NUSSC and Badminton).

Worst aspect of university experience so far?

Students identified a wide range of factors that they considered to be the worst aspect of their university experience so far. These revolve around a number of key areas including:

Academic problems/concerns

Stressing over assignments

Getting stressed over annoying/boring lecturers

Exams!

Workload

Workload

Getting overwhelmed with work at times.

Homesickness

Being so far away from home.

Being so far away from loved ones.

Missing family and home

Loneliness

Loneliness

Having nobody to talk to.

Financial issues

Finances

Managing finances!

Accommodation

Living in the self-catered part of Castle Leazes, 12 people to a tiny kitchen is too many!

Noisy students in the halls. peers are using loads of alcohol at any time during the week, and lack of a quiet atmosphere at students hall.

Finding a house/housemates

One significant change to university experience?

Student suggestions are quite varied and difficult to group. However, it seems that students saw this question as a 'reflection' type question and took the opportunity to highlight things they would do differently. Suggestions included, changing eating habits, getting to know other students, changing accommodation, joining more clubs and societies.

In conclusion, students are engaging with their peers and tutors/lecturers but perhaps not as frequently as they should or could do. Students appear to be on the whole happy and settled apart.

Conclusions

Generally, most students in the sample have had positive transition experiences. Students in the sample are happy and satisfied with their first year experiences so far. It is not clear how far Newcastle University has gone in terms of applying the criteria highlighted by many authors as contributing to successful transition experiences for students. However, it is clear that students are engaging in pre-arrival activities, and those engaging with the PARTNERS Programme in particular are in some respects happier and more satisfied with many aspects of their first year experiences than their peers.. Schools within the University offer induction programmes to their students and judging by responses from students these are working, although some students did highlight difficult choices that had to be made between attending Freshers' activities and course induction programmes. Students are very positive about the teaching and learning experiences they are having at Newcastle University and students are clearly engaging with their peers, tutors and lecturers and their academic work.

A caveat to the findings is that the sample contains a greater number of UK based students compared with Other EU and Non-EU students who completed the survey. This is a legitimate concern since the literature highlights the increasing diversity of students moving into higher education and the necessity for universities to consider innovative ways of adapting the system to meet the needs of these new groups. As Whittaker (2008, p. 16) notes:

> *The increasing heterogeneity of the student population - including within different learner groups, in terms of prior educational experience, personal and work circumstances, attitudes to learning and motivation levels - requires a range of approaches and a flexible system of support. The question of what is an effective solution to problems associated with transition depends on the nature of a particular student group, in a particular programme, in a particular institution.*

Pre-arrival - Newcastle University cannot possibly control all aspects of pre-arrival activities that are arranged by institutions external to the University, the PARTNERS Programme being the obvious exception to this statement. The University should, however, be able to control those aspects of pre-arrival activities managed at its end. Open days are the most popular form of pre-arrival activity, but mention also must be made of the power of 'word of mouth' and previous students who have been 'satisfied customers'.

In terms of the impact of pre-arrival activities on students' experiences, a mixed picture emerges. While the majority of students participated in at least one activity and others a range of activities, student views suggest that they are uncertain as to what extent these pre-arrival activities impacted positively or not on their first year experiences. Students came from a range of diverse educational settings and engaged in diverse pre-arrival activities arranged by and within these settings. Research suggests that pre-arrival activities vary from institution to institution and are dependent to a certain degree upon particular individuals in those institutions (Briggs, et al., 2009).There are no external standards upon which educational institutions can base and organise their pre-arrival activities. Standards appear to be set by the institutions and individuals within them. Standards and quality of provision and experience vary in other words and this will impact on students' experiences. A student, for instance, who engages in a range of pre-arrival activities may benefit in terms of gaining a wider knowledge and experience of university life than say a student who participated in one activity. There is no compulsion in schools and colleges to participate in pre-arrival activities. In one college, for instance, activities such as student shadowing or open day visits were advertised on a notice board and students could decide whether to take up these opportunities or not. In the end it is, as Yorke and

Longden (Yorke & Longden, 2008) suggest, down to the students to show some initiative and responsibility – and indeed independence - in preparing themselves for university life. There may, however, be an issue here that relates back to the school milieu. The secondary education system may – in the drive for standards and outcomes - create students who lack autonomy and independence. Consequently when making that transition from a somewhat regimented environment such as regular schooling, to one where greater autonomy is required in FE colleges and ultimately university life, students may feel disadvantaged. Enhanced links between schools and colleges and university, where the supportive scaffolding built up during earlier educational experiences can be maintained to allow students to move smoothly from a state of dependence to one of independence, can only enhance the university experience of students and increase the likelihood that they will stay and persist in their programmes of study. A number of pre-arrival/induction/transition programmes are offered by other institutions in the UK to prospective university candidates (Whittaker, 2008). The programmes offer a systematic and coherent approach to making students aware of university life. Newcastle University offers a similar programme know as the PARTNERS Programme but its focus is on the widening participation agenda. Evidence from students who participated in the programme seems to show positive impacts. It may be that a more standardised approach to delivery of pre-arrival activities may pay dividends in terms of positive student experiences.

Induction - is vitally important (National Audit Office, 2007; Westlake, 2008; Yorke & Longden, 2008) and will determine whether students stay at university or go. The evidence from students themselves show that while they report being happy with their induction experiences, there still seems to be some work to do in this area. The majority of Induction activities at Newcastle University are based around the notion of a 'one-off' induction week. With Freshers' Week and Induction Week in such close proximity in time and space students report that they are torn between the primary purposes of the one and the other. The predominant view of Freshers' Week is that it is concerned with the social aspects of university life and students need to get out and about and make friends while induction week is more about the academic aspects of university life. There is something unusual about this separation of the social from the academic, but ultimately, the students agreed that both were important and desirable. Students for instance clearly value Freshers' Week as a time to meet new people and have new experiences and yet students also decry the lack of events during the academic side of life that could effectively bring students and tutors/lecturers together on a course related basis.

Teaching and Learning - Almost all students in the survey rated the teaching quality on their programmes of study as good. Students also rated highly other aspects of their teaching and learning experiences. The teaching and learning methods used at Newcastle University received a positive rating suggesting that overall students are satisfied. There will inevitably, however, be differences between different programmes of study. One issue that received a lower rating was feedback on coursework. This received the lowest rating from students in the sample. It is difficult to determine how tutors and lecturers feel about 64% of students agreeing or strongly agreeing that feedback on their course was helpful. Is that an acceptable percentage or does it imply, in comparison with the much higher levels of agreement for other aspects of teaching and learning, that something may be lacking somewhere? It has already been noted that feedback (Krause, 2007; Whittaker, 2008) is an important factor in keeping students engaged in their studies and perhaps this is something that needs to be looked at. Certainly, a finer grained analysis may be helpful in this respect. Another issue that emerged from the teaching and learning section of the survey was the low percentages for the statements: '*I do have discussions with teaching staff*' (51%) and '*I know at least one member of teaching staff well (who is not my personal tutor)* (35%).' This might have something to do with student numbers on different courses making interaction between students and tutors/lecturers difficult. Contact between staff and students is also an important factor in maintaining student

engagement (Chickering & Gamson, 1987) and these low levels of agreement may be a cause for concern. It appears that students are very instrumental in their use of technology preferring to use those ICTS that have bearing on their particular studies more frequently while other forms of ICTS e.g. e-mail, are used more occasionally. Most students find the workload more or less as they expected but the students who didn't appear to be predominantly female and in the age groups 17-18 and 19-20.

Engagement – While students are engaging with their peers, tutors/lecturers and their academic work to a certain degree, the levels of engagement, especially in regard to communication and feedback between students and their tutors/lecturers is of interest. Students, for instance, indicate lower levels of agreement on the statement: '*I regularly seek the advice and assistance of the lecturing staff*' (29%), *'Lecturers/tutors value my contributions* (47%) and *'I have good working relationships with lecturers/tutors'* (67%). These percentages indicate that there is some significant dissatisfaction concerning student and tutor/lecturer communication. Is there an issue here around tutor/lecturer and student ratios in the first year? Are there too many students per tutor/lecturer? The issue re-emerges when students are asked how often they engage in discussions with tutors/lecturers other than in lectures. The answer seems to be 'rarely' (42.1%) or 'never' (30.6%).

A smaller number of younger students indicated that they had considered withdrawing from their courses. Whittaker (2008, p. 20) highlights the difficulties that younger students have to deal with:

> *Younger students are also dealing with the emotional challenge of making the transition from adolescence to adulthood, and of taking responsibility for their academic and personal life. Feelings of isolation may be generated by the lack of familiar support networks.*

Students inevitably experience emotional 'ups' and 'downs' in their first year and this is only to be expected given the changes and transitions they are going through. Most, though, report that they are often or always 'happy' (88%); often or always 'felt settled' (76%) and often or always 'felt part of a group' (72%). Only 64% of students often or always 'feel a sense of belonging'. While this is over half of the sample, one is left wondering if this percentage should be or could be higher. A sense of belonging, as has been noted previously, is a key factor in enhancing and maintaining student engagement (Krause, 2007; Whittaker, 2008) and therefore student satisfaction.

Recommendations

Pre-arrival – The majority of first year students took part in at least one pre-arrival activity and some took part in more than one. However, 206 students reported that they did not take part in any pre-arrival activities and this may be a cause for concern because lack of knowledge and awareness of the University and the programme of study chosen by students may raise the likelihood of student withdrawal at some point in the first year. There is a lack of detail about the type and quality of pre-arrival activities on offer for students, clearly some of it arranged by secondary and FE colleges as well as the University. Perhaps those students who are unable to participate in or do not qualify for the PARTNERS Programme should be expected to engage in a compulsory pre-arrival activity - that is subject-specific wherever possible - in order to familiarise themselves with Newcastle University and their planned programme of study.

Induction - Given student comments about the disruptive effects of Fresher's week and induction week being in close proximity, it may be worth considering separating these events in order to allow students to focus on the primary purposes of both activities. The former may be predominantly about social networking while the latter may be more about the practicalities of university life such as finding lecture and seminar rooms, ICT labs, the library and meeting up with other students on their programmes of study. Induction should be viewed as an on-going process rather than something that is completed in one week. Focus group interviews reveal that while induction activities were considered useful, they may be more useful at a later date when they are linked to actual course related activities. Perhaps a time release approach might be encouraged where activities such as computing, library visits etc can be introduced at the point where they might be considered most useful and appropriate rather than as a fixed element in an induction week that may be quickly forgotten or simply missed.

Teaching and Learning – Students are on the whole are clearly satisfied with the quality of teaching and learning they receive at Newcastle University. It was noted in the data, however, that the usefulness of feedback received a lower rating than other aspects of teaching and learning and perhaps the reasons for this could be explored in further research. Another issue, which may be related to feedback, but of a more direct and verbal kind, is students seeming to be uncertain about whether their tutors valued their contributions. Communication between students and their tutors/lecturers needs to be looked at a little more closely. Students highlighted the fact that most of their first year course requirements did not contribute to their final degree grade or mark. While students on some courses clearly like the more relaxed approach in the first year, it seemed to 'switch' off some students and have a detrimental effect on their levels of engagement and motivation. Clearly some courses require a great deal more from their students throughout their entire course e.g. Medicine, Law and Engineering, while other courses appear to require less. International students, in many cases, satisfy the criteria laid down by their sponsors and do not seem to have the 'luxury' of a relaxed first year. There may be, however, valid arguments against interfering in first year curricular and assessment structures on some courses and these may relate to widening participation and allowing students to settle and perhaps adapt their learning styles in preparation for the second year.

Engagement – Students are engaging with their peers, tutors/lecturers and programmes of study to a certain degree but student responses suggest that levels of engagement could be better. Students have identified issues with communication and relationships between themselves and their tutors and these need to be explored through further research. While most students are happy with their first year experiences so far, a number indicated they considered withdrawing from their courses. It is

interesting to note that most of these were UK students, female, and in the age groups 17-18 and 19-20. While these are small numbers of students, it is not surprising that some younger students find adapting to university life more difficult than older students and perhaps making students aware of support structures, people they can go to in order to discuss their problems, even advertising support services such as Student Wellbeing, may be efficacious in this respect. Again, communication and relationships between tutors/lecturers and students need some attention since it has been shown in the literature that poor communication and relationships can lead to student disengagement.

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