

University Collaborative Awards for Outstanding Contributions to Teaching & Learning - Example application from 2017-18: Launch of Study Smart

Please outline your case for an award: Study Smart is an online course aimed at supporting new UoR undergraduates in their transition to university, launched in August 2017. It consists of three weeks of interactive content, including video, discussions, articles, and exercises. The subject matter covers approaches to university study, including critical thinking, communication, and more. The course was collaboratively developed by the Study Advice and Open Online Course (OOC) teams, with strategic support from the Directors of Widening Participation and Student Access, and of Open Online Courses. Incoming undergraduate entrants were encouraged to enrol on the course before entry, with continued access to revisit materials as they become contextualised in their subjects. 2694 students enrolled (64% of the eligible total) with very high engagement rates (e.g. 50.5% > 50% completion), suggesting that this collaborative initiative has made a very significant impact on student transition to university study.

Rationale for collaboration

The course was motivated by discussions between the Director of Widening Participation and the Study Advice team on difficulties in the transition to university academic study. (Thomas et al., 2015) While the original focus was on entrants from diverse and non-traditional demographics, we recognised that the most effective interventions are those which do not single out individual groups (implying an expectation of failure) but are offered to all students. A pre-entry, whole cohort intervention also offered the opportunity of building a sense of community with the University, even before students had arrived on campus. (Yorke and Thomas, 2003.) As the scope of the project expanded, and following discussion with the Director of Open Online Courses, it became clear that the format developed for OOCs would be most suited to deliver this ambitious initiative, reaching all students before entry with engaging online course material for flexible study.

Collaborative working: benefits and practices

Close collaboration between the Study Advice and OOC teams was essential. The Study Advice team had expertise in delivering effective teaching and learning interventions to support students' transition to university. The online pedagogy expertise of the OOC team proved essential in enabling the development and delivery of content to a large online audience. At the same time, the audience for this course (internal, defined, single-purpose) was quite different from those for previous OOCs the team had worked on (external, open to all educational backgrounds and experience, multi-purpose, self-motivated). The Study Advice team were able to share their extensive experience of working with this cohort. This collaborative understanding will continue to inform future internal-facing online courses, now underway.

The teams held regular meetings, plus email and phone consultations. These included whole-team meetings for bigger issues, and smaller regular strategic catch-ups. The project also involved technical consultation across the university with ITS, Student Engagement, me@reading, and FutureLearn to integrate course announcements into the communications sequence for incoming students, and to ensure useful data-capture points. There were team-training sessions on topics including OOC content formats, and discussion board moderation. OOC and Study Advice staff worked together to deliver training for student moderators, to respond to queries from academic staff about the forthcoming course, and to publicise the initiative across the university.

The result is a pioneering course, positioning Reading as a UK leader in transitions to HE, and highly relevant to our overall student experience and to the TEF.

Student involvement

As an initiative aimed at new undergraduates, student involvement was key to understanding needs and ensuring effective engagement. Research was undertaken with 2nd year undergraduates to discover student expectations and experiences around the transition to university. Focus groups discussed questions like 'What do you wish you'd known when you started?' There were surprises here despite our experience (e.g. student uncertainty over how to address tutors in emails), and this research had a significant impact in shaping the course.

Students were also involved in the development of content. Videos feature current students discussing their first impressions of university, things they wish they had known, and their approaches to study including key study experiences like using the Library and managing time independently. Typography students created three short animated videos in consultation with both teams as part of the Real Jobs initiative.

Post-delivery, we employed six student moderators to reply to comments (alongside Study Advisers), offering participants authentic access to current student experience. These moderators were exceptional, sharing their own experiences, reassuring the anxious and providing a friendly welcome to the UoR community.

Impact and future plans

The course launched in August 2017, and we received our first student comment shortly after it opened: "...huge thanks to those who made Study Smart possible! This is awesome!" In total the course attracted 4445 comments by 1010 unique authors, indicating very high levels of engagement.

85% of responses to our post-course survey would recommend the course to fellow students.

Unprompted positive comments emphasised how helpful it had been in making students feel more prepared:

"Thank you for setting up this course. I have a much clearer idea of what university is going to be like and I don't feel like I'm being thrown in the deep end."

Anecdotal feedback from students using Study Advice and from tutors also indicates that the course was helpful in preparing students for the transition to university.

We are conscious that improvements can be made. The teams are currently involved in collaborative working on revisions, including abridging steps to improve accessibility, and making the benefits for particular groups of students more explicit. We have also looked at how materials could be extended to other students (e.g. those studying at UoRM or at partner institutions) and developed guidelines for tutors of those student groups. We hope to continue with our collaborative working on future projects, with each team bringing their particular expertise to create lasting benefits for our students.

References

Thomas, L., Hockings, C., Ottaway, J. & Jones, R. (2015). Independent learning: student perspectives and experiences.

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Yorke, M. & Thomas, L. (2003). Improving the retention of students from lower socio-economic groups. *Journal of Higher*

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