

An exceptional transition to higher education: induction of new and returning students during the 'new normal' year

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Contents

1.	Introduction	3
2.	The Pre-arrival, Arrival, and Induction stages	4
2.1	Pre-arrival	4
2.2	Arrival and orientation, and reorientation	4
2.3	Induction and reinduction	5
2.4	Avoid making assumptions	5
3.	The five key areas during pre-arrival, arrival and orientation, reorientation, induction and reinduction	6
3.1	Setting and managing expectations	6
3.2	Institutional awareness of applicant learning concerns	8
3.3	Bridging the student learning digital gaps and access	8
3.4	Self-awareness and wellbeing	9
3.5	Supporting the normal study pressure points and those caused by Covid-19	10
4.	References	14

1. Introduction

After the confirmation period, the reality of the challenges and concerns about starting university for new undergraduate and postgraduate taught students really comes to the fore. These can include worries about being capable of studying at university, financial concerns over fee and living costs, apprehensions about finding the time to balance all the work, and anxieties about making friends. These usual concerns are likely to be exacerbated this year because of the impact of Covid-19 and universities planning to start the academic year fully online or through a blended approach. As a result, effectively supporting the transition into university is going to be even more important than ever. As Brown and Parkin observe in their recent *Creating Socially Distanced Campuses and Education Project - Leadership Intelligence Report - Induction*:

Induction is a key juncture in the student lifecycle, bridging the transition from school/further education to higher education (HE), or from undergraduate to postgraduate study, and provides students with the knowledge to navigate the academic landscape and journey from arrival to graduation at their institution of choice

(Brown and Parkin, 2020, p6).

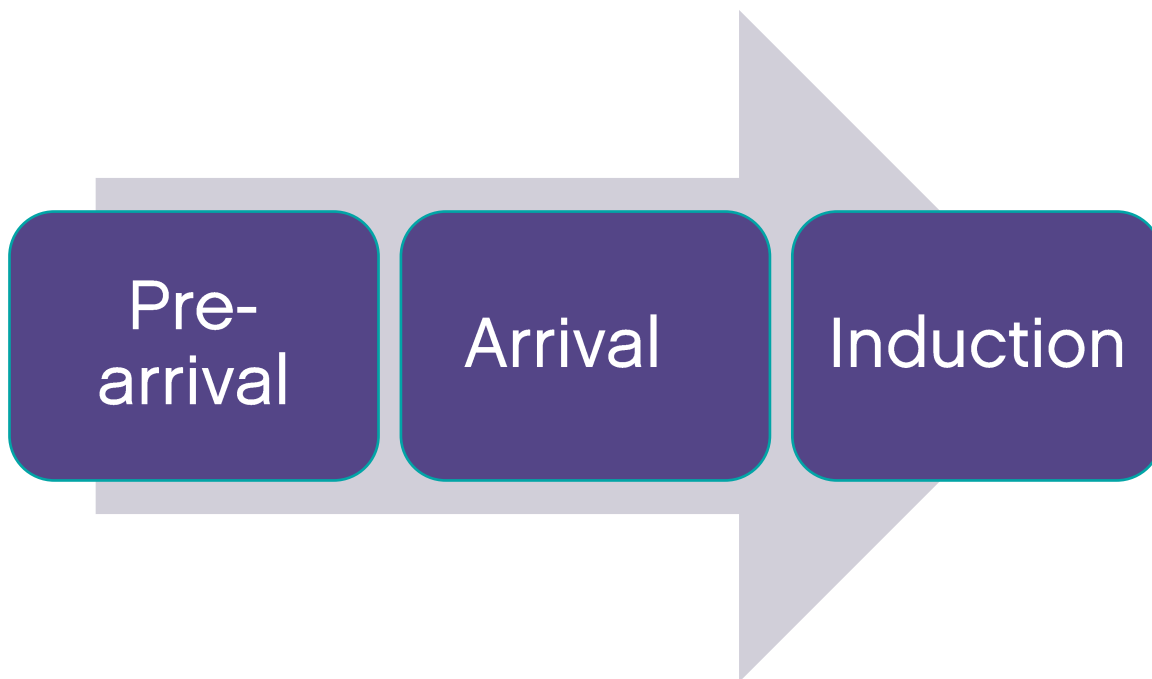
Planning the start of the academic year around 'unknown' situations such as a second wave occurring is essential especially if a local or regional lockdown occurs, which will affect universities. However, by providing clear information and guidance from confirmation and clearing through to the pre-arrival and induction and transition phases, the worries and concerns of students can be managed. This guide is a short summary of the key points to address for successful induction and a reminder of the common pressure points and concerns that students will experience throughout their journey to, through and on from higher education (HE).

In addition to the valuable key principles relating to induction that emerged from the discussions and interactions during Advance HE's project (Brown and Parkin, 2020 p25), below are five specific areas that can assist in the delivery of a safe and high quality HE experience. These are discussed later in this short document.

- + setting and managing expectations
- + institutional awareness of applicant and student concerns
- + bridging the learning digital gaps and access
- + self-awareness and wellbeing
- + supporting the normal study pressure points and those caused by Covid-19.

2. The Pre-arrival, Arrival, and Induction stages

Effective linking of the pre-arrival, arrival and induction stages can help students gain confidence and settle into their studies. Each stage has a purpose.



2.1 Pre-arrival

The pre-arrival stage is where institutions prepare their new students for arrival at university. It is important that incoming students start to feel part of the university, their home unit where their studies will be based and their learning community. Creating a sense of belonging and engagement (Thomas, 2012; Kift, 2015) at the start here will help the student in their journey.

2.2 Arrival and orientation, and reorientation

Arrival and orientation refers to students finding their way around an institution and settling into university life within the first two to three weeks. It is a short stage in the student lifecycle. An unsatisfactory arrival and orientation experience can result in withdrawal from university within the first few weeks (Morgan, 2012).

Reorientation for returners should be about a week in duration. This is where returning students are given information on what is academically expected of them and asked to reflect on the skills they need to build on and develop in the coming year in order to succeed. For the institution, it is an opportunity to announce any changes that have occurred on campus, within the curriculum and general services as well as managing the students'

An exceptional transition to higher education: induction of new and returning students during the 'new normal' year

Michelle Morgan

expectations and experience across all areas of university life for their coming level of study. In 2020/21, this is likely to be extensive (Morgan, 2012;2013).

Try to avoid overloading all students, but especially new ones, with information. With most learning being online or blended, and students adjusting to the Covid-19 university environment, accessing and absorbing information is likely to take much longer.

2.3 Induction and reinduction

The Induction (to study) stage is critical in helping students lay the foundations for successful study at all levels in their course by equipping them with the relevant study and research skills. For a student to be inducted into study requires them to go through at least one academic cycle (eg submitting coursework, receiving feedback and sitting an examination for a module). This could take place over a semester or a full academic year depending on the length and structure of a course (Morgan, 2012;2013: York, 2015).

Reinduction for continuing students (as with induction to study for new students), should take place over a longer period and the duration will vary depending on the length of the course. This activity introduces returning students to new skills to help them actively engage in the learning and assessment processes in their new level of study. This is an important activity for all students, but it can be critical for students who struggle to settle in quickly or have learning or specific support requirements. For direct entry or transfer students this stage needs to run alongside their induction to study activity, so it is important that the two are interlinked in a coherent manner.

2.4 Avoid making assumptions

As each level of study has different rules of engagement, it is important not to assume that a returning student will know what to expect in their forthcoming level of study, or that study or personal pressures will be less than those of new students. We know that as a student progresses, the academic and personal pressures are more likely to increase. On the academic side, the workload tends to go up, the importance and weighting of assessments undertaken is higher, and the expectations regarding the standard of work increases. On the personal side, each level of study is likely to increase the debt levels for the majority of students and increase the need to effectively balance academic and personal pressures. For students who are returning after an interruption or gap in their studies, making the transition back into study can be a particularly stressful time. Covid-19 is likely to exacerbate all of these concerns.

3. The five key areas during pre-arrival, arrival and orientation, reorientation, induction and reinduction

3.1 Setting and managing expectations

A major challenge for new students, who have had their expectations of starting university shaped by institutional marketing strategies, is whether they are prepared to have a quite different experience to the one they thought they would have. This year, as well as the usual concerns, new students (after confirmation) will have to consider whether they want to start their university study 'online' or 'blended', whether they are prepared to have a non-traditional student experience initially, and whether to pay for potentially unused accommodation.

Returning students may also have a number of Covid-19 related learning concerns, including thinking of deferring because they have:

- + struggled with lockdown and want or need a break from study
- + additional learning needs and online learning may not be part of their learning support assessment
- + to commute to university and they have, or family members have, an underlying health need so need to be extremely cautious about a 'blended' approach
- + limited resources (e.g. accessible equipment for online learning and 24/7 internet access) and they may not have quiet space in their home to study.

(Dickinson, 2020)

International students may have additional worries including:

- + wanting the pandemic to abate before returning
- + being worried about quarantining arrangements
- + not being able to afford the cost of flights
- + studying online and time differences in terms of synchronous and asynchronous learning
- + how will they interact with fellow students and make friends?

(Dickinson, 2020)

Providing clear guidance on how learning and other activities will happen this coming academic year by mid to late August will be essential in order to create confidence among new and returning students. As the Department for Education issues further guidance to

An exceptional transition to higher education: induction of new and returning students during the 'new normal' year

Michelle Morgan

higher education institutions (HEIs), universities will continue to issue guidance to incoming students well into September. This can be done via email communications, information on the university website or via a simple virtual learning environment. Remember to keep it simple and accessible, and provide the opportunity for students to receive information by hard copy. This will be essential if they have additional learning requirements.

All students need information, options, and choices. By providing this, and through offering the chance to talk through any worries and concerns they may have, HEIs help to instill confidence. Things to think about include:

How will learning happen?

- + what constitutes face to face? (eg in-person, webinar)
- + what contact hours can be expected?
- + how will learning gaps between school/college and inter-university years be bridged?
- + how will lack of online resources, access and space be supported?
- + how will the lack of exam experience across all levels be supported?
- + how will student attendance be recorded and engagement be measured?
- + how will delayed starts (due to illness, local lockdown, flight cost etc) be dealt with; what will the process be?

Safety on campus

- + what social distancing measures will be put in place in learning and social spaces?
- + will masks and hand sanitiser be provided?
- + will spaces be regularly cleaned?
- + will there be Covid-19 antibody testing available?
- + how can we identify the difference between freshers' flu and Covid-19?
- + are there quarantine plans for EU and international students?

Accommodation

- + will there be accommodation and study bubbles?
- + what is the illness protocol within university and private student accommodation?

Social activities

- + will sports and volunteering activities take place?
- + will student union/university bars be open?

(Morgan, 2020a)

3.2 Institutional awareness of applicant learning concerns

Understanding the worries of applicants is essential because to improve the learning experience of students in, through and on from the student study journey, we need to understand their prior learning experiences, their study expectations for university and the concerns they have on coming to university on entry (Morgan, 2020b). The learning jump and life responsibilities between school/college and higher education can be quite wide especially for applicants with different entry qualifications and other demographic characteristics. Covid-19 is likely to exacerbate these prior experiences and concerns.

So, think about undertaking a pre-arrival questionnaire between confirmation and arrival that asks them key questions about their:

- + previous study experience
- + motivations and challenges of undergraduate study
- + undergraduate study expectations
- + current learning expectations and concerns.

Send the basic findings to course/programme leaders and support colleagues to help them shape the type of support that is needed for the Covid-19 intake. Also, give the students the headline findings within a few weeks as they will show students that they have similar concerns and worries.

3.3 Bridging the student learning digital gaps and access

3.3.1 Pre-arrival into the Induction to study period

When schools and colleges shut to most students in late March, not every institution was able to move to online study provision, and hard-copy study was common place. As reported, digital poverty was and continues to be a problem. Understanding the digital issues of incoming students will be critical before they arrive.

For undergraduates thinking of going onto postgraduate studies, remember that they will have been out of the university study environment for seven months so identifying and bridging any knowledge and experience gaps when they enter their level seven course will

An exceptional transition to higher education: induction of new and returning students during the 'new normal' year

Michelle Morgan

be essential. For all new students, re-engaging them in the learning environment both academically and socially will be critical and may take longer than usual.

Additionally, it's important to remember that just because new students (especially undergraduate) may be 'social' digital natives, they are not necessarily 'learning' digital natives. So, think about the digital competency of your students when developing an induction programme to support online or blended learning at university so it includes a digital induction. This activity needs to be one of the first that happens during the arrival and induction stages so students understand and know how to access learning, how to interact in lectures and seminars, and how to use it to socially connect with fellow students. Things to think about include:

- + recommendations for type of equipment needed for the course
- + the provision of any university funding for students experiencing hardship who are unable to obtain the required access
- + explaining what minimum wifi connection is required to access all the university systems
- + explaining what browser settings are required
- + getting webcams or built in laptop cameras working
- + providing and helping with the installation of free software
- + short podcasts on how to navigate the universities IT systems such as the university's virtual learning environment and beyond.

Try to avoid too much written information and long recorded webinars as it is important to keep new and returning students' attention. This stage should be completed before discipline-based teaching starts. Any digital discipline specifics can be embedded into the course but allow plenty of development time for this to occur.

3.4 Self-awareness and wellbeing

In 2020/21, universities need to be aware of, and prepared for, health and wellbeing issues. We have no idea how and when any issues relating to lockdown and the concerns about Covid-19 will present themselves amongst students and staff. Also, as the normal structures that usually support students with health and wellbeing and build cohort identity will disappear (eg sports, clubs and societies, social and course activities), so alternative mechanisms need to be put in place. Online learning and its associated issues (eg poor IT resources and inappropriate work spaces such as using the kitchen table as a desk) could create health and wellbeing problems and impact on assessments. Due to safety reasons, usual opportunities to move accommodation (for example, if a student doesn't get on with their flatmates), may not be permitted thus leading to wellbeing issues. As a result, planning for the following will be critical.

3.4.1 Mental health, lockdown fallout, and wellbeing and isolation

Adoption of the University Mental Health Charter (Hughes and Spanner, 2019) is a good framework on which to develop health and wellbeing support and advice. The creation of an online learning etiquette along with advice on how to re-engage safely with communal learning, whether in a lecture theatre or studying in a library, will help students. Extenuating circumstance policies need updating to consider the changes in study environment. Enabling students to help themselves by providing health and wellbeing sessions, and information on where they can obtain support (including national support lines) is advisable. Providing Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) for staff to support students across the different spheres of university life (especially residential life teams), and training first aiders and course teams to be aware of mental health issues, will help reduce critical incidences.

3.4.2 Managing invincibility

With all the media coverage reporting that Covid-19 does not affect youth as greatly as older generations, it is unsurprising that there is a sense of invincibility amongst *some* young people. However, Covid-19 has affected students with individuals having contracted Covid-19 and suffering bereavements, but it is a hidden story (Hulme, 2020). Most universities are likely to have seen an increase in Covid-19 related mitigating circumstances at their exam boards this summer.

In managing attitudes of invincibility, a communal understanding of the impact of Covid-19 on all university members is essential. Students have a responsibility to their university to abide by safe practice. University leadership teams have a responsibility to students and staff to provide a safe environment. The University community has a responsibility to the towns and cities in which they reside to act sensibly, and town/city leaders and government have a responsibility to all residents and visitors to put in place safety measures. University and town/city community leaders could work together to develop clear guidelines and protocols of expected behaviour and engagement on and off campus.

3.5 Supporting the normal study pressure points and those caused by Covid-19

Throughout the study journey, there are typical pressure points which can cause stress and anxiety but is perfectly normal for short periods of time. Making students aware of these and how they can manage them is critical as is explaining that if the period of stress and anxiety goes on for too long, they need to seek support and help.

The follow sections list - as a reminder, checklist, or a prompt to action - the common pressure points for students throughout the undergraduate and the postgraduate student lifecycle. Concerns relating to Covid-19 have been included (Morgan and Nutt, 2020). Be honest and up front with them. Get existing students to record in short videos their

An exceptional transition to higher education: induction of new and returning students during the 'new normal' year

Michelle Morgan

experiences and how they overcome their challenges. Remember students need 'real' models not just 'role' models.

3.5.1 Key pressure points for new and returning undergraduate students

Although undergraduate and postgraduate students will experience similar pressure points, some of their concerns will be quite different so when developing support and guidance, try to avoid lifting and copying information between types of study and make sure information, advice and guidance is bespoke for undergraduate and postgraduate students

Pre-arrival

- + unsure what to expect
- + knowing what questions to ask
- + worrying about not fitting in
- + finding accommodation and cost issues due to Covid-19
- + sorting out financial issues such as loans and fee
- + undertaking pre-enrolment
- + will applicants want to come into a Covid-19 world?
- + will they want to defer?
- + will they want to take national exams in the autumn or university pre-entry exams?

Arrival

- + learning how to study in HE
- + learning how to live with strangers
- + coping with independence
- + transition issues such as personal, finance and balancing workloads
- + 'wobble week'; when students start to question whether university is right for them (three to six).

The first year

- + first formal feedback
 - + placement activity for courses in the first year
 - + coming back after the Michaelmas/Xmas break
-

- + exams and results
- + sorting out accommodation for year two
- + dealing with illness or family illness bereavement (non or Covid-19 related)
- + managing technology and social relationships online.

Returning years

- + reduction in structured learning and scaffolding
- + increase in independent learning and group assessment
- + mid-term blues especially for level five as it is a long year
- + end of year exhaustion
- + coping with workload and assessment that 'counts'
- + university life being different to expectations
- + timing of activities disrupted
- + relationships with fellow students and staff challenged by blended learning
- + anxiety about alternative assessments and the impact on marks
- + impact on placement availability
- + Feeling of the course being poor value for money.

Preparing to leave- final years or withdrawal students

- + worried about results
 - + worried about sense of failure if didn't get the result expected or withdrew early
 - + sense of loss
 - + not sure if an in-person graduation will take place
 - + issues of moving from a structured, safe place to the unknown
 - + loss of direction
 - + challenges with the employment market
 - + family expectations that a university degree will lead to improved chances
 - + uncertainty about how employers will view a Covid-19 degree?
-

An exceptional transition to higher education: induction of new and returning students during the 'new normal' year

Michelle Morgan

- + concern that that teaching wasn't able to cover everything need.

3.5.2 Key pressure points for new postgraduate taught students

Pre-arrival

- + unsure what to expect
- + knowing what questions to ask
- + obtaining funding
- + consideration of value versus cost
- + finding appropriate/affordable accommodation.

Arrival and Semester 1

- + learning how to study at postgraduate taught level
- + transitions issues: personal, finance, balancing workloads
- + first assessment at postgraduate taught level
- + identifying skill ability and gaps
- + expectations not being met
- + realisation of choosing wrong course
- + dealing with illness or family illness bereavement
- + managing technology and social relationships online.

Semester 2

- + group assessment frustrations
- + transitions issues: personal, finance, balancing workloads
- + PGT study being different to expectations
- + timing of activities disrupted
- + relationships with fellow students and staff challenged by blended learning
- + anxiety about alternative assessments and the impact on marks.

Preparing to leave

- + worried about results
- + concern about employment
- + will a PG qualification really make a difference?
- + not sure if an in-person graduation will take place
- + issues of moving from a structured, safe place to the unknown
- + loss of direction
- + challenges with the employment market.

(Morgan and Nutt, 2020)

3.5.3 Engagement will be different

The traditional mechanisms used for seeing how 'engaged' students are which include use of the VLE, the library, attendance at lectures, seminars, workshops, submission of work on time, and involvement in university activities will need to be adapted to take account of the current circumstances. New or updated policies need to be brought to the attention of students and staff where required and documentation circulated.

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An exceptional transition to higher education: induction of new and returning students during the 'new normal' year

Michelle Morgan

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