

Chapter 2

A Practical Guide to Inductions for Improvement of Resilience in Large Cohorts

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ABSTRACT

The department of Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering at the University of Strathclyde has year one student intake in excess of 230. These numbers make it challenging to ensure that all students engage and develop social capital autonomously. The return to full on-campus teaching post COVID-19 provided an opportunity to reinvent the induction process to address this. Significant focus was placed on ensuring engaging, interactive sessions to support the building of relationships, consistency in delivery across all groups, and promoting self-help and resilience in students, considered of particular importance, given the large cohort size challenges constant 1-2-1 support. This chapter aims to present a practical guide to developing a similar induction experience for students, applicable to a number of discipline areas. Drivers and benefits will be presented alongside lessons learned to allow the wider field to gain from the work done at the University of Strathclyde.

INTRODUCTION AND MOTIVATION

The relatively recent evolution of the smartphone has allowed for unprecedented interaction and engagement with like-minded individuals from across the globe. While these have, unarguably, empowered individuals and developed globally diverse connections, these connections are often restricted in subject area and consensus is still to be reached as to whether these connections support the development of more general social capital (Cho, 2015; Office for National Statistics, 2020; Shema & Garcia-Murillo, 2020). Social capital was initially defined by Bourdieu (1986) as ‘the aggregate of the actual or potential

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resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition’ and discussed extensively in the higher education context more recently by Mishra (2020). It is further recognized that society’s interaction with smartphones is hindering our ability to engage in spontaneous and meaningful conversation with others ‘in the room’ (Turkle, 2016). In a local, higher education context, students are no longer ‘chatting’ at the start of learning events, rather burying their heads in their phones and seeking interaction from the screen. In doing so, a valuable opportunity to develop a sense of local belonging and community within the student cohort is disappearing with potentially considerable implications on engagement and ultimately academic success (Brady et al., 2020; Thomas, 2012). Whether attributed to the recent pandemic, or to the explosive invasion of smartphones into all areas of our lives, students are losing the competence, or perhaps interest, to develop their own local, in person, social capital and resilience; a capability which desperately needs addressed as discussed by Brewer et al (2019).

The Department of Mechanical & Aerospace Engineering (MAE) at the University of Strathclyde is one of the largest of its kind in the UK, with year one intake numbers in excess of 230 students, a total undergraduate (UG) population of approximately 1,000 students, and a thriving postgraduate taught (PGT) population of over 170. The department has a longstanding reputation for providing excellence in learning and teaching, and outstanding student experience. Consistently large student intakes, combined with a high student: staff ratio, presents a particular challenge for staff to ensure that students are able to independently engage and build community from day one. While there is an expectation for students to display self-efficacy and autonomous development of friendships and support networks, it is recognized, particularly in this post-lockdown era, that constructed opportunities to foster these relationships, and thus, this in person social capital as discussed above, are necessary. In 2022, a culmination of work through the covid era, resulted in the development and delivery of a fully immersive induction experience to promote the development of social capital within the department, and hence improve academic success.

This work aims to present the process that the department undertook to develop the induction experience with a focus on supporting readers who wish to develop a similar immersive experience in their own institutions, applicable to both UG and PGT programs in a variety of discipline areas. Throughout the text, the authors have highlighted a series of Practical Pointers, for implementation in readers’ own practice. These have been derived from evidence based, practical, and anecdotal experience and feedback. We hope they will aid the efficacy and success of your own induction events.

PREVIOUS INDUCTION PROCESS

For the past two decades, the department has run a welcome ‘Friday fun’ day for its incoming undergraduate year 1 students. This placed students into small groups and posed a series of challenges based in the room, around campus, and in the surrounding areas of Glasgow. As a discipline, engineering programs boast a significant amount of practical work during the academic year and so these groups are typically constructed as a pre-cursor to those utilized during the academic year for laboratories, tutorials, and personal development sessions. These groups will be referred to as the students’ Personal Development Advisor (PDA) groups throughout this chapter. During this session, students were also gifted branded departmental hoodies, evidenced to support development of a sense of belonging at the university (Hausmann et al., 2009). The focus of the ‘Friday fun’ day was primarily to begin building community amongst students helping the transition from school into the higher education setting.

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