

# Chapter IX

## Enhancing Students' Transition to University through Online Preinduction Courses

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter proposes online preinduction courses as an innovative method for preparing students for learning in higher education. It is argued that such courses would be most effective as components of a comprehensive learning support framework. One specific online preinduction course, which was created for undergraduate students of management, is presented. The design principles as well as the rationale and content of its five modules are discussed. The design of the course is based on constructivist, experiential, and situated learning theories, which determined the choice of subject-specific materials and authentic activities. The second part of the chapter focuses on the pilot study in which students were observed and asked to think aloud while working on the course's materials and tasks. Findings from the pilot study show that the instructional design principles were successful in helping students to achieve the various learning objectives.*

### INTRODUCTION

Online preinduction courses (OPICs) represent an e-teaching and e-learning approach that can considerably enhance individual and institutional learning. The courses give students the opportunity to reflect on epistemological issues, consider

effective learning strategies, and gain insight into academic writing practices before their arrival at university. Thus, they provide necessary preparation for studying in higher education, a preparation that students entering university are commonly lacking.

In the United Kingdom, as elsewhere, widening participation has led to a diverse student population with different levels of preparation, different abilities, and different learning experiences. For most students, regardless of their background, the transition to university is challenging as new demands are placed on them as learners: They are expected to learn independently, to adapt to new epistemological understandings, to develop analytical and critical approaches, and to express their voice in presentations and writing. To cope with these requirements, students need careful induction and support at the beginning of the university course. However, high withdrawal levels are a persistent problem for departments (Edward, 2003; Hughes, 2007), which indicate that universities have not implemented adequate support schemes that cater to the diverse needs of students from different backgrounds. Instead, the remedial system that was aimed at the few problematic students in the previous selective system still prevails. To support all students, universities need to develop “learning to learn” frameworks that are both inclusive, that is, by reaching all students through embedding support in the curriculum, and comprehensive, by developing student learning with various complementary methods over time.

Online preinduction courses could be part of such a framework. They prepare students for studying at university before the start of their first term. This is done by using Web-based materials and tasks that provide information and develop learning skills. Students are given access to the OPIC upon admission, about 4 weeks before registration, and will have the opportunity to use the course throughout their first year.

In the next section, the learning needs of students entering higher education and current provision of learning support at UK universities are considered. This is followed by a brief discussion of a framework for learning support in which OPICs are the initial component. Then, the benefits of e-learning are considered in the context of

OPICs. In the main part of the chapter, a specific OPIC that was developed for an undergraduate management programme is described in terms of its teaching and learning strategies. Finally, the results of piloting this OPIC are presented, and the impact of OPIC’s instructional design on student learning is analysed.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Students’ Learning Needs and the Provision of Support**

Unlike other countries, the United Kingdom’s higher education system remained highly selective until the 1990s, and there was little demand for student preparation and learning support. The rapid expansion of the sector led to a far more diverse student population in which many students are not as prepared for the challenges of university study as their predecessors in the elite system (Ivanic & Lea, 2006). Research into the first-year experience reveals that there are currently insufficient support mechanisms for students’ transition to university (Lillis, 2001, 2006). Yorke (2001) reported that about two thirds of withdrawals in UK universities happen during or at the end of the first year. The foremost factor for failure is the lack of preparation for learning in higher education (Drew, 2001; Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998). The National Audit Office (2002) found that due to changes in the secondary system, most students from the traditional A-level route, having been “spoon-fed” at school, are not adequately prepared for the independent learning required at university. Based on their learning experience at school, they tend to regard knowledge as an “external, objective body of facts” (Gamache, 2002, p. 277) that they have to absorb. However, in most disciplines, students have to develop from dependent receivers of knowledge into active, independent learners who critically approach and contest knowledge in order to study

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