Developing a responsive system to enable students to develop realistic expectations of higher education

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TAG – The Alternative Guide to UCLan aims to be a dynamic, interactive, web based platform of support, which enables potential students to develop realistic expectations of HE. The information provided by UK universities to potential students is designed to highlight the positive aspects of the university to entice students into applying. However, as the UK Government seeks to widen participation at universities (HEFCE 2009), the literature shows many students are coming from backgrounds where they have no peers or family members with experience of HE to draw on (Thomson and Quinn (2007)) and the students' expectations of university do not match the reality. Students who go to university with misguided expectations are likely to withdraw or struggle with the course. TAG aims to help potential students understand what to expect from HE and help them develop ownership of their own learning.

TAG: The alternative guide to UCLan

The TAG project is a Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) funded project, which seeks to address the issue of students' expectations of university and provide relevant information and support to enable students to prepare for and develop realistic expectations of HE. It aims to achieve this by making current students' experiences of the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) available for potential students to access through an open access web site. The experiences shared by the students include not only positive experiences, but also the issues they faced at university and how they dealt with them. The guide will address both social and academic aspects of university to address the issues, which can lead to withdrawal, as identified in the report by Comptroller and Auditor General (2007) discussed below. TAG aims to foster and believe among new students that at university they are expected to become independent learners and that the responsibility and ownership of their learning lies with them. Cassidy (2006) cites Cotton, 2001) who argues that there is a need for students to be come independent learners so that they can adapt and cope with changes to the curriculum. Cotton also suggests that this is an employability skill, which will enable the students to meet the expectation of their employers to think independently.

Bacon (1993) conducted research into school children's perceptions of who had responsibility or ownership of their learning and noted that the children felt they were held responsible but did not have responsibility. The impact of this attitude when the students arrive at HE is explained by Wingate (2007) who suggests that if students still have the same attitudes towards ownership of learning as they did when they were "spoon fed at school" they will potentially be ill prepared to learn in an HE environment. It is suggested in Lord and Robinsons' (2005) work that even by the third year of university, this issue may still not be resolved and some students still believe that the responsibility and ownership of learning lies with the academics and course teams delivering their course. Which supports comments from academics that sometimes they get the impression students feel that they will have their degree "handed to them on a plate"?

The reasons for withdrawal and retention at UCLan

The Comptroller and Auditor General released a report in 2007, which looked at retention in HE. The report showed, based on the work of several researchers in the field, reasons for withdrawal included; personal reasons, wrong choice of course, lack of integration, dissatisfaction with course/institution, lack of preparedness, financial reasons and to take up a more attractive opportunity. The report reflects the work by Yorke (1999) and Yorke and Longden (2004) on student withdrawal. Thomson and Quinn

(2007) provide an insight as to why the transition into HE can be problematic for student, suggesting it could be that the students might not have peers or family experiences to draw on. They also state that students may be unaware of support available or they think they are not the type of person the service is intended for. Cook et al (2006) suggest that for each student who leaves, there must be more who are having difficulties, yet are just managing to remain at university. It is suggested that these students are likely not be reaching their maximum potential. Over the past ten years, researchers appear to be finding consistent results as to why students withdraw from HE and lack of preparation and unrealistic expectations seem to be the main focus. Yet, arguably, the information prospective students receive from universities tends to be marketing material with the purpose of encouraging the recipient to apply to the university by highlighting all the positive points about an institution and does not address these issues. There are some exceptions to this rule, for example Ulster University has developed the STAR project (Student Transition and Retention), which looks at supporting students during the transition in to HE. The project concluded that was that these factors could be alleviated by better management of student expectations and information before entry (Cook, et al (2006)). It is apparent that this is an area UCLan needs to address as for the 2006/07 academic year UCLan, as a whole, had an attrition rate of 22%. Although the attrition rate is a lot lower for students on the full time undergraduate courses, there is a clear need to address the issue of student expectations.

Developing TAG

As discussed above the review of the literature shows that a lot of research as been conducted into the reasons students leave and the issues that need to be addressed in order to improve retention. It was felt that as the research seemed to be producing the same findings over a number of years, for example Yorke (1999), Yorke and Longdon (2004) and Comptroller and Auditor General (2007) all discuss similar reasons for withdrawal over a nice year period, suggesting that these issues have not been addressed and that arguably some kind of intervention needs to occur in order to enable students to develop realistic expectations of university. The TAG project was developed as an action research project. The definition of TAG as an action research project is concluded based on the description of Action research as discussed Mc Niff (1996). The TAG project team consists of those who work as teachers and support staff in the institutions and therefore is research undertaken by the practitioner and as the team are trying out ideas in practice to improve the student experience and to improve out knowledge, as per the definition provided by Kemmis and McTaggart (1982) cited by McNiff (1996).

It could be suggested that TAG is not in the first stage of the transitional spiral of an action research project, as illustrated by Zuber-Skerritt (1992) where a plan has been formed, an action have been taken, the impact observed and reflected upon. TAG is in the next phase of the spiral where the plan is revised and the cycle is restarted. TAG was an emergent project through the Application to Assessment (A2A) project developed through UCLan's Learning Development Unit, which can be placed in the first stage of the cycle. The A2A project looked at the issues of transition into HE and developed four themes that encapsulated the areas where students needed support during their period of transition on to HE (Hodgeson 2008). The four themes are;

- Manage Life – All aspects of managing finances, home life, work, family, emotions, etc
- Making Friends – How to meet like minded people and make friends in HE
- Learn to Learn – Developing the basic academics skill required to enable students to learn in HE
- Find the Way – Knowing how to get around the city, the campus the administration of the course and starting a career path.

The A2A project funded small projects at a course level that would address the issues identified within the four themes. However, the A2A project team felt that these themes should be addressed across the institution and in 2006/07 the UCLan Student Liaison Officer (SLO) team (recent graduates whose role is to offer advice and guidance to students) were tasked with reviewing university websites to assess if the information provided addressed the issues that lead to withdrawal. Their anecdotal evidence was that the websites, including UCLan's, provided very little information to enable students to develop realistic expectations of HE, yet the results of the UCLan Prospect and Decline Survey 2008 (those who have applied for a place and either declined, have been declined or accepted the place) showed that the institutions website was the most popular medium potential students sought information. The SLOs noted that there were some areas of good practice where universities had attempted to share students' experiences but they tended to be only positive experiences and were focused at "typical students". A recent review in 2009 by the project team of information provided by institutions on their website suggests that there has been a shift toward focusing the student experience and providing the "students point of view". Some universities such as Manchester Metropolitan, Newcastle, Bristol, etc are starting to

provide information about the student experience; however the information still appears to be biased towards promoting the university and is housed within the universities web suggesting it is developed under the control of the university. It is not suggested that the information is inaccurate; simply that it does not address the issues that lead to withdrawal, as discussed in the literature. Another aspect that made the team sceptical was that the information tended to sit on the institutions web pages. The feeling of the project team was that if TAG were to sit within the university's web pages, the viewers of the site may believe the tool was a marketing tool. Therefore, although the site is hosted by the institutions content management system, the site has a separate design and domain name.

An additional benefit TAG will offer is that by encouraging students to take ownership of their learning and take advantage of the opportunities available to them at university such as support services, employability services and extra curricular activities the students are more likely to be engaged with their course. Hu et al (2007) cites Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) who demonstrate that students' engagement in research and creative activities have positive impacts on students' learning and personal development. Burnett (2006) also champions student engagement, suggesting that research shows that the more engaged the students the more likely they are to succeed. Handelsman et al (2005) also support this stating that they found a general agreement in the literature that engaged student we good learners. If TAG achieves the goal of enabling students to develop realistic expectation of university it is anticipated that they will then wish to take some action to prepare themselves. TAG will provide opportunities for potential students to develop the basic academic skills to prepare them for HE, such as academic writing, referencing, researching, etc. By encouraging the students to become engaged with the university prior to arrival and to instil norm behaviour of seeking support whist they are here, it is anticipated that TAG will a positive impact on the students learning experience.

The navigation of the site presented further challenges, support service staff often state that they feel students do not access information available on the website because they do not know where to look or do not wish to access support sites such as counselling. The team felt that if they developed the navigation using the terms students would search for rather than names of a service, the students would find the information easier and would hopefully reduce the impact of the barriers to accessing information stigma towards services appears to have caused. The navigation and content of TAG is based around the four themes developed in the A2A project. The list of content to be included has been developed through student focus groups, volunteers to produce content and the project's working group. The working group consist of staff who work in student facing roles in services relevant to the project such as Flying Start, a service providing students to opportunity to spend a few days on campus undertaking activities to prepare them for HE, Fresh Start, a service that contact students who withdraw to find out why they left and supports them to return to HE and the SLOs. Although the project manager of TAG is a recent graduate from the institution and therefore is arguably qualified to produce a lot of the generic content that informs the users about the site, the team require students to produce the content discussing the students' experiences in order to ensure the diverse range of students who study at UCLan will be represented and the current issues of the time are covered.

The generation of content for the site presents the TAG team with two challenges. The first is to engage staff with the project and the second is to engage the students. The TAG Team have noted that within UCLan it can be difficult to engage staff with new projects. The reasons for this are unclear but arguably is it potentially because unless the staff see a direct benefit to themselves or their students they are unlikely to be interested in a project and will be unwilling to give time to a project with no benefits to themselves. Although the predominant aim of TAG is to aid transition in to HE by enabling students to develop realistic expectations of HE, an emergent benefit has now become a secondary aim. The project team noted the main benefit to the students who contributed to TAG would be that they had an additional activity to include on their CV. The team considered other employability options TAG may present and the requirements to sustain TAG following the end of the funding period. The team identified that the TAG project will provide an opportunity for staff to use TAG as a live project which students will work on through their assessments in many project areas. Staff at UCLan work with local organisations to develop live projects for students and are always looking for new opportunities. As TAG is located within the university it eases liaison between staff, students and the TAG Team. It also increases the reliability of the project for students as external clients have been know to pull out of projects. By encouraging staff to utilise TAG as a live project the students will be able to undertake a lot of the work required to sustain TAG.

The TAG Team have also had to identify further benefits to the staff to encourage them to engage with the project. They are highlighting the impact the project will potentially have on their new students and the opportunities it will provide for their current students to boost their CVs. In the current climate the

employment rates for graduate are low which can have an impact on a universities marking advantage. The promotion of the benefits of retention and employability have been a key message for the TAG team as the university is currently focusing on employability due to the current economic climate and developing a new retention strategy. The current climate has provided an opportunity for the TAG team to encourage staff to engage with TAG and the team have had some positive early feedback.

The next challenge is to engage the students. Student contribution is a vital element of the project as the team require the majority of the content to be produced by students. The team are taking advantage of the time of year the launch of TAG is occurring as many students on creative courses are building their portfolios and are looking for extra work to include. As well as a promotional campaign, highlighting the benefits of contributing to TAG with regards to employability skills, the TAG team have sought support from working group are who key advisors on student engagement and have strong contacts with students who have had experience that would be suitable for the TAG site. Through working with academic staff and support services the team have been relatively successful in engaging students. It is hoped that in the 2009 / 10 academic year, TAG will be part of the students' course and they will more aware of it and more willing to contribute. It is also hoped that TAG will install a realisation that they need to develop their employability skills and that contributing to TAG is a way of doing so.

As identified in the report by Comptroller and Auditor General (2007), students do not always access support services at university and as mentioned previously Thomson and Quinn (2007) suggest this is because they do not think they are the type of person the service is intended for or are even aware of the service. TAG will cover services in all areas of the university from academic departments to finance offices and all student support services. Not only will TAG help the students become familiar with the geographical locations of these offices or services, but they can inform the students of their usage, the targeted proactive services they can to students and importantly advice from students about how to make the most out of the service areas. The TAG team aims to create a norm among new arrival that the support services at UCLan are part of the university experience and should be considered by the students as "all part of getting their degree" rather than the stigma that only people with problems access services. To achieve this each service within the university has been asked to identify three students – one who used the service before their issues escalated, one who used the service after the issues escalated and one who chose not to access the service. The students are asked to share why they used the services, the impact it has and to reflect on the timing of their decision to access the service. The purpose of generating information about the service in this was is to enable students to read a students perception of the service rather than the institutions, to enable potential students to understand the issues they may face while at university and how to deal with them and also to show that in hindsight many students regretted their decision to not access the service sooner or even at all. As well as the services, TAG will feature students' experiences of all aspects of university life such as preparation for arrival, the first day, assessment, social life, locations of amenities in Preston, etc.

TAG will also help students select the right course. They will achieve this by working with Fresh Start, the service that helps student make correct course decisions when they return after a withdrawal and developing tools to help students identify the key skills and attributes required for particular courses. These tools will consist of interviews with students currently studying on courses at UCLan, discussing what the course is like, what to expect from it and what the students thinks a potential student should consider if they are thinking of applying for that course. Although this information will not be in depth, and due to the number of courses some will be grouped together, it is hoped that it will start potential students to think about why they wish to undertake a course and if the course they are considering will be suitable to their needs and if they are suitable for the course.

Evaluation of TAG

As TAG is an action research project, the validation and reliability of the findings could be questionable, therefore the team will use triangulation methods as discussed by Greenwood (1999) Sagor (1993) to help prevent this. By using several evaluation methods and cross referencing the results the team hope to produce some valid findings. TAG will be launched in April 2009, the general usage and traffic to and from the site will be monitor using Google Analytics. This tool will inform the team of the where the traffic is coming from i.e. search engines, the bounce rates (one page visit only), visitor trends, number of pages visited, geographical location of visitor, time spent on the site and more. This will enable the team to establish which pages are the most popular and which potentially need reviewing. The TAG site will have a page for visitors to register. This is to enable the team to contact users of the site to assess whether they found the site useful and if it helped to prepare them for HE. The team hope to build up relationships with the users of TAG so once the semester starts the team can continue to work with the users to

establish the usability and suitability of TAG. As it is anticipated that potential students may be difficult to contact, the team will also seek to work with current students to evaluate the navigation of the site for usability and ease of understanding and to review the content included and the way in which it is presented. The team also hope to interview staff to see if they have noticed a difference in the students' attitudes towards HE and if they appear to be more prepared when they arrive in the 2009/10 academic year. The project team are anticipating that TAG will have a positive impact on students' attitudes towards HE, continuation and retention.

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