

Gateway to higher education

A supportive induction for mature students returning to study



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Southampton Solent University (SSU) prides itself on its commitment to social justice and widening participation, and with good reason. In the academic year 2013–14 (the last for which full data were available), SSU's student population comprised 18% BME students, 12% disclosed a disability, and just under 29% were aged over 21 years.

When I began at Southampton Solent University in September 2010, I inherited the Gateway course from my predecessor. Specifically focused on introducing mature students to the demands and expectations of academic practice, the course was originally configured, some 15 years ago, as an exhaustive two-week induction programme covering an array of learning skills, including numeracy, in depth.

By the time I encountered it, Gateway, under the auspices of Steve Rose as Head of Library and Learning Services, had evolved into an intensive two-day course, repeated twice during the week before the freshers' welcome week, and timed to coincide with the opening of the halls of residence. Its stated aims were to provide students with an introduction to SSU and the campus facilities; to enable mature students to get to know each other; to provide experience of working in groups; to meet mature students who are currently studying at SSU; and to introduce mature students to some of the core skills that will be required whilst studying at SSU, including giving presentations. Generally the feedback at the end of the course was positive and participants found it valuable.

It has since changed again, as will be outlined further below, but the principles behind it remain the same. Our policy is to invite everyone who is eligible, and allow for self-selection. Originally the invitation to participate was extended to all those who had received an unconditional offer from SSU and who were 25 years old on entry. This was later modified to those aged 21 years and over and who had been out of full-time education for at least three years, to give more people the opportunity to attend. Prospective participants were asked to complete an application form including a short personal statement, since we needed to limit the course to 25 participants per session. Where possible, we tried to group together any attendees preparing to study on the same course.

Research indicates (Buckley 2010) that becoming part of a social group associated with higher education is the first step in adopting the practices, outlook and identity of a learner within higher education, and can be a crucial process in overcoming the anxieties inherent in such a change. Thus, the whole of the Gateway programme was geared towards feeling a part of the university and getting to know the other participants.

The course began with a fun and informal icebreaker activity to stimulate interaction and discussion, followed by a welcome address from one of the two deputy vice-chancellors, to signal the important and valued contribution that mature students make to SSU. All the participants were then taken on a campus tour, guided by student ambassadors. As Gateway was timed to take place before the start of term, the campus at this time is relatively quiet so the participants could see it without being overwhelmed by the 18-year-olds who form the majority of the student population.

The first morning had previously closed with an activity based around imagining the ideal university, the university of the future, but following feedback from students we took the opportunity to more explicitly address some of the concerns mature students may have. We developed a reflective activity, to be completed in groups, whereby each group in turn added to four flipchart sheets headed 'Hopes', 'Ambitions', 'Questions' and 'Concerns'.

This activity was useful in that it let everyone see that there were common concerns as well as individual motivations, without it feeling confrontational

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or too exposing. Aside from the perennial question about car parking, many participants were worried about balancing work and family with study, making friends, coping with the assignments, and generally leaving their comfort zones. In the ensuing discussion the participants were able to reassure each other around their concerns by realising that these feelings were just part and parcel of the return to education. Sharing hopes and ambitions helped to open up the possibilities that higher education can afford and was another means by which the course participants could find common ground.

Although we could address many of the questions raised immediately, we invited colleagues from student services and the library to join us over lunch as an informal drop-in clinic-type format to answer questions that were beyond our expertise. Lunch – which we provided – also involved the opportunity to chat to current mature students who had attended the Gateway programme the previous year, and hear directly from them about their experiences of their first year's study.

The afternoon continued with an introduction to Succeed@Solent (Solent Online Learning 2016), our online and open access learning skills guide housed in the VLE, followed by an introduction to the task to be completed the following day. We split the cohort up into four equal groups with each given a question concerned with an aspect of learning skills, such as 'What are the most important things to consider when writing a good essay?' Their goal was, by 15:00 the following day, to produce a ten-minute presentation answering their question, which they would then deliver to the other participants. They were encouraged to use Succeed as a resource, or anything else as they saw fit.

While every year there are some participants who are experienced in delivering presentations in their workplaces, there are as many who have never done anything like it before and who are terrified at the prospect. Group work and presentations are features of the majority of courses taught at SSU, so to be able to face what is a big challenge for some in a relatively safe environment is extremely valuable. To help this process, the last two activities of the day were problem-based tasks around communication and critical thinking, which were carried out in their new presentation groups so they could begin to work together. It was not unusual for the day to end with the swapping of phone numbers.

After an introduction to giving effective presentations, the majority of day two was dedicated to researching, compiling and practising the presentations. I circulated amongst the four groups, offering advice or encouragement as required, calling them for lunch and making sure they took a break, but otherwise letting them work independently. The presentations, to complete the course, were always moments of intense nerves followed by a sense of triumph and satisfaction, and even if they weren't always the best pieces of academic work ever, going through the process demystified academia and made the process seem much more manageable. Moreover, in a number of cases the friends made on Gateway lasted throughout the whole degree.

So why change it, if it is running so well? The overriding reason was one of resourcing. With only one person remaining to run the course, it is an intensive four days with a long administrative run-up. Pragmatics aside, there was also a danger of setting up unrealistic expectations for the students, of a way of teaching or being supported that would not necessarily be carried through once they were on their course. SSU as a whole is moving towards the principle of 'Blended learning by default' and so it seemed timely that the Gateway programme should also move in this direction.

During the summer before the start of the 2015–16 academic year, the university successfully piloted an online interactive course called 'Get Ready for Solent', targeted specifically at international students due to arrive. This

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was structured around getting to know the town, the university and what study in the UK involved, and paced over four weeks. Interspersed through the information and activities were live chats with staff from different areas of the university, so prospective students could ask questions. An actively moderated discussion board also ensured that the students could get to know each other prior to arrival too.

This is the model that has been adopted and adapted for the Gateway course, for summer 2017 onwards. We shall provide information on the town and the university, as for the international students, but place much more emphasis on all the learning skills materials that mature students value, in an active, problem-based format. We shall give them a virtual tour of the campus and encourage them, in a structured, moderated way, to share their concerns and ambitions as before, so they can start to develop the shared sense of purpose that is a feature of an effective learning community. We shall also, and possibly most crucially, invite them onto campus for a special lunch where they can meet each other in person, before the start of term, thereby retaining most of the principles of Gateway that have proved so popular.

This solution is not by any means perfect. The opportunity to work together on a brief and face the challenge of delivering an academic-based presentation will not be easy to replicate in an online environment, if at all. However, it does open up the course to many more people than we could see in person, so more will potentially benefit from an online Gateway than a face-to-face one. We can still run live sessions where expert members of staff can answer questions, and we can pre-empt many of those questions too, from previous experience. And having a separate induction course for mature students still sends the message that they are valued and that we understand the issues they may have with returning to study.

Overall, moving Gateway onto the VLE is another step towards embracing the diversity and inclusivity that makes SSU a dynamic place to learn, and if this proves as successful as the Get Ready course for international students, it may prove to be just the next of several possible future iterations targeted at supporting and valuing our student community.

References

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