

# Boosting prospects: Remote work experience with post-16 students

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*This short report will outline a remote work experience scheme that has successfully been running for three years in the psychology group within the Leeds School of Social Sciences. It is designed to aid transition to university for pre-tertiary students by introducing them to undergraduate literacy skills and making their expectations of university level study more realistic. Students act as remote research assistants by working on a brief provided by an academic within the psychology group. The brief summarises a research topic and asks for students to source relevant research and produce a reflective report of their thoughts on the area. The lead academic then provides a brief reference on the work received to the student and their school or college. The scheme is still growing and being refined year on year. This paper describes the scheme in its current form and discusses its effectiveness and potential future directions.*

**Keywords:** Transition; Post-16, Higher Education, Skills.

## Supporting students' transition to university: Must we wait until they get there?

THE ISSUE of attrition rates from degree programmes affects all subjects, and in terms of social sciences the dropout figure from 2015 is just below six per cent of all entrants. This is attributed to many factors, but preparedness for and expectations of undergraduate study is an influence (Maunder et al., 2013). Postareff et al. (2016) highlighted the vulnerability of first-year undergraduates to negative emotions in terms of their study experiences and progress. In addition, the adaptability of a first-year student, in terms of adjustment to the new environment, was also demonstrated as a key factor in predicting engagement and later academic success (Holliman et al., 2018). These unrealistic expectations and adjustment issues can make students vulnerable and dropping out of a degree programme more likely.

In terms of expectations, a disparity between school or college study and university study was highlighted by Winstone and Bretton (2013). Following their research, they concluded that an adjustment of the expectations of university life is needed, but the researchers acknowledged that this mainly occurs upon initial experience in the

first year. Anything that helps shift these expectations prior to arrival and eases the transition will help.

Furthermore, Baker (2018) identifies the shift in undergraduate literacies as qualitatively different from previously experienced in pre-tertiary education, making transition more difficult. More specifically, of those literacies, Blair (2017) found that the top three skills that students found most difficult or challenging were understanding demands of assignments, receiving less direction from tutors, and learning academic conventions (e.g. plagiarism, referencing). This work experience scheme, as it is remote, means that students must get used to being self-directed and independent, meaning their expectation of the level of direction received by academics is adjusted. It also helps them in terms of learning academic conventions.

The scheme outlined in this paper is one step that can be taken by institutions to bridge the gap between pre-tertiary and university education.

## The demand for work experience

A second reason for this scheme is to provide work experience in a difficult to access field. We know that the application levels

for undergraduate psychology degrees is growing, and now that psychology is one of the most popular A level subjects, coming fourth in terms of entries in 2018 after English, Mathematics and Biology (Ofqual, 2018), this is not likely to change. Students gain a taste and enthusiasm for the subject and see it is a viable university degree option.

In a report from the BPS Psychology Education Board (BPS, 2013) almost a third of A level students want to continue studying the subject and 15 per cent say they want to pursue a psychology-based career. The UCAS process is covered well within schools and colleges, and students are helped from the summer before applications are submitted, up to submission day and beyond. However, evidencing understanding of the subject in practical terms is not easy. As many psychologists work with a clinical population, it is difficult to get experience *in situ*. One alternative is to spend time working within a psychology department alongside lecturers to gain research experience.

However, the number of available places within higher education is exceeded by the number of potential candidates for such experience. The requests for work experience *in situ* that our department receives means they cannot all be accommodated. This work experience scheme facilitates such experience without the need to be on site and can be completed over a longer stretch of time. It is a low cost and low time intensive option for the university department and has the potential to reach, and be useful to, many students, whilst being useful to lecturers too. This is in addition to the key advantages of helping adjusting expectations and increasing undergraduate literacy skills.

### **The remote work experience scheme for pre-tertiary students**

Initial contact at Leeds Beckett University has come via schools, colleges, psychology teachers network and through general enquiries. Within our department, local students' requests are first offered to staff to check if on site work experience is

a possibility. If that is not possible then the opportunity for remote work experience is offered. This is also the case for students living further away. Remote work experience has run now for three years, and the uptake has increased significantly year on year.

The supervision is provided by one key lecturer. A brief which centres around the lecturer's research interests is sent to the student via email. The work used so far at our institution has been at the earliest stage (i.e. initial plans and information gathering). Each brief has included the following information:

- i. A brief introduction to the research area and the reason for looking at the research area (i.e. potential applications). This is important so that students can see why the research, and their contribution towards it, is important. It also helps them contextualise the research and to start to think about the research area. In terms of A level skills, application needs to be demonstrated in exam responses and this helps them see how research is applied in the real world.
- ii. A description of the tasks being set. Briefs in the past have requested that the students complete two tasks. These are outlined below:

#### **Task 1**

This is a research task. As the students do not have access to databases from university libraries (generally) the task asks them to use Google Scholar. This highlights the need to look at sources of information carefully and to only select appropriate literature. There is also instruction around compiling results into a table and referencing using APA style.

Our department has always tried to offer topics which are of interest to that age. For example, communication using social media, experiences of students within schools and how that relates to their personality, and mathematics anxiety. The task encourages them to think about what the researcher needs to know to design research work. They

are also encouraged to think about key words that may facilitate the research.

This task is designed to familiarise them with the initial part of the research and help them develop skills for their transition to HE; searching for literature and referencing.

### **Task 2**

This task asks for a reflective piece of writing asking students to think about the research area and to offer any input they feel might be useful to the researcher. The first project used was on the topic of emoticon use and, for the researcher, the input in these sections from the students gave good insight into the way emoticons were used within that age group. Some students showed real initiative with the information they gave in this section. There were screenshots of frequency of use for each emoticon and also applications of theory that they had learnt at A-Level to the topic area. They clearly gave the area a lot of thought.

It also offers the chance for the student to have some extra input, and in some ways, replaces discussion that may occur in a face to face situation.

### **Information about submission**

At the end of the brief, the submission protocol and deadline is made clear. There is also a request for email details of the person writing the school UCAS reference so that the supervising lecturer can write a short reference for the student to be added to the school reference. Supervising lecturers also sometimes offer to help with feedback on the UCAS personal statement. This is an offer that is sometimes taken up by the student, but very often the support within school is sufficient and feedback is not needed by the student.

### **Evaluation and recommendations**

#### ***Student uptake***

In total there have been 35 students who have benefitted from the scheme so far (submitted work as at 31 December 2018). The numbers have increased gradually over the three years the department has been

running the scheme and the reach has been national, with students from locations in the Midlands, Norwich, Northumberland, Gloucestershire and Yorkshire. There have already been institutions in touch to be included for summer 2019. The opportunity has not been advertised in any way other than informally, and so far, the students have accessed the opportunity via a local psychology teachers group, staff members via their connections outside of the geographical area, and in response to queries about on-site work experience.

#### ***Student opinion***

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the students find the experience to be valuable. Students usually thank the supervising lecturer for the opportunity and talk about how it is being helpful to them in their submission email. It is difficult to ascertain the extent to which it helps them secure a place at university, but, anecdotally at least, students feel it is worthwhile.

#### ***Work quality***

Most students who enquire about the opportunity complete the work on time. Some do not respond after receiving the brief, but the same brief is used with several students, so this does not mean that extra time is wasted at all.

There is a range of quality within the work submitted, which is to be expected. Some reports are exemplary, others mediocre. However, all have contributed something in terms of helping the research process for the lecturer. From the students' perspective they have also all had an equivalent opportunity to gain undergraduate literacy skills.

#### ***Future directions***

Aside from focusing on increasing numbers and the reach of the scheme, a more formal evaluation of the effectiveness is needed to ascertain how much this is of benefit to students and institutions. This will be possible as numbers grow. It is a difficult area to assess in terms of easing transition in quantitative terms, especially given the numbers who

have been involved to date. However, an initial qualitative analysis of remote interview responses would be possible. Indeed, this would also extend the skill set of the student interviewees as they would experience participation in research.

It is also possible, with ethical approval, that the reflective report written by the students could be used as part of the research conducted by the researcher. A content or thematic analysis could be conducted on the content of the reflective reports submitted were ethical approval and consent from the student to be given. As yet, our institution has not used this opportunity, but it is a potential area for using the reflective report to not only inform thinking, but also to provide exploratory data.

## Conclusion

Overall, the two tasks are designed to help students acquire new skills. These tasks lay the foundations for not only a successful application to higher education but also further transition as a graduate. Looking at the 13 skills demonstrated by psychology

graduates outlined by Hayes (1996), six skills are all touched upon by this opportunity: literacy, computer literacy, research skills, information finding, environmental awareness, and interpersonal awareness. This all occurs prior to arrival at university. This scheme therefore provides an important link between pre-tertiary education and university study. It is in its infancy but, as word spreads, so does interest. This opportunity can only be good to students, facilitators and institutions alike.

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