‘Thank You for Taking the Time to Understand’: A Critical Reflection on Peer-led Interventions in Early Experiences of Higher Education

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ABSTRACT
Supporting students through their transition into Higher Education is a vital function of any successful university business. An interconnected series of interventions have been tested at Birmingham City University, UK, as part of a national project, based on peer-led models of student support piloted in the Built Environment school. We reflect in particular upon our pre-arrival mentoring program, our work to reach out to disengaged students, and our broader efforts to build connected student communities, and show that challenges in both academic and social spheres can be tackled through well designed interventions. In part this work has been enabled through a new staff post, that of Graduate Student Success Advisors. Survey work with the pilot cohort has indicated steadily rising and above sector average levels of engagement and self-confidence, and the interventions described are now part of an embedded approach to supporting students through the early stages of their studies, across all subject areas in our department.

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Introduction: The problem and purpose

In this article we reflect upon 6 years of activity, covering a series of interrelated projects that highlight the critical importance of supporting the early experiences students have in Higher Education (HE). At the heart of our research, therefore, is the problem of identifying the most effective approaches to managing transition into HE, based upon the hypothesis that these formative periods have a direct impact upon overall student experience and performance. In response, we have developed and tested a number of initiatives designed to promote positive, peer-led interventions in the learning journey of our students and, through investment in those initiatives, to increase engagement and success.

In particular, we draw upon a case study of our involvement in the What Works? Retention and Success project, funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation through the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and Action on Access. Birmingham City University (BCU) was one of 13 UK universities to participate in the second phase of this program, following initial What Works? research which suggested that, while 8% of students leave HE during their first year of study, up to 42% contemplate doing so (Thomas, 2012). The same report concluded that fostering a sense
of ‘belonging’ is critical in delivering student success, and that an effective means of doing so was the provision of greater opportunities for active and early engagement within the curriculum.

The second stage of *What Works?* focused on implementation, so our response was conceived not as a research project, but as a series of practical interventions. We were one of only two Built Environment departments in the UK to be involved in this pioneering work.

In this article, we will reflect upon the lessons learned from participating in these activities in the hope of providing inspiration and encouragement to others wrestling with the hugely significant task of supporting transition into HE and, by association, improving outcomes. Our primary focus will be on the first-year student experience, but we contend that delivering better student outcomes relies upon a holistic approach from outset to conclusion; in other words, from reaching out pre-arrival to encouraging progression and success.

For the purposes of this article, we will use the term ‘faculty’ in the UK sense that is in reference to our broader academic department of Computing, Engineering and the Built Environment.

**Research context and methodology**

The successful retention of students is a challenge for many higher education institutions. Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects seem to have a particular difficulty. Whilst the number of full time UK and EU undergraduates entering STEM subjects has steadily grown since 2012 (HEFCE, 2015), the percentage who do not continue their course is concerning. In architecture, building and planning (which includes construction), some 11.4% of students did not progress from the 2013-14 academic year (HESA, 2015). This problem is not restricted to the UK; Braxton et al (2011) and Wilson et al (2012) reported that in the United States, less than half of undergraduate students on STEM programs actually graduate.

Varied methods of tackling this problem have been proposed across the HE sector. Our study is particularly concerned with peer-led initiatives and their ability to enhance early experiences. In so doing, we aim to build upon previous research conducted in this and the related area of the role of peer mentoring, which has identified a variety of possible impacts. For example, Thomas (2012) reported that peer mentoring was particularly useful in helping new students cope with adjusting to the university environment, and thus of clear benefit in easing transition. Additionally, Heckman and Rubinstein (2001) advocated the use of mentoring programs to encourage the early development of non-cognitive traits, including motivation and self-discipline. Other examples of previous initiatives include a large, funded intervention at Northwestern University aimed at improving the performance and retention of science students, in which undergraduates served as teachers (peer facilitators) in a workshop program (Streitwieser and Light, 2010), and an integrated series of mentoring and academic interventions at Howard Hughes Medical Institute (Wilson et al, 2012). Both projects noted significant benefits for the students involved; from boosting self-esteem and academic success (Wilson et al, 2012), to greater insight into learning and teaching approaches (Streitwieser & Light, 2010). This finding aligns with the work of Glasser (1998) and Dale (1946, 1953) who found that students retain, understand and apply far more knowledge through active learning, the highest level of which is the activity of teaching others.

We have also situated our work in the context of previous authors writing on the concept of ‘interventions’. It is clear that interventions can take many different forms;
small projects or large funded entities (Yeager & Walton, 2011; Streitwieser & Light, 2010), proactive or reactive (Dumbrigue et al., 2013), strategic (Wilson, 2012), mentor based (Johnson, 2015; Thomas, 2012), peer-led (Streitwieser & Light, 2010), early or late, short or long term (Thomas, 2011; Gale et al., 2010; Heckman & Rubinstein, 2001). Interventions can also be targeted at specific thematic areas (see Kahu’s [2013] framework which considered culture, power, policy and economics in designing student engagement activities to achieve improved participation, interaction, belonging, learning etc.). The community of learning created in a university is where these various domains collide (Tinto, 1997 & 2000). The function of a peer or mentor in such an intervention can be varied, ranging from formal to informal roles, focusing on the social or the academic, and be operational or transformational in nature, but Johnson (2015) believed that the exact role is less important than the quality of the relationship and the need to be caring, competent, and effective.

In this study, we use ‘interventions’ as a general term to describe our efforts to identify and direct enhancements in the student learning experience. This reflects the work of Alloway and colleagues (2004, p.218), who defined interventions as organized and strategic outreach programs “purposely designed to manoeuvre a population in particular directions,” while we have always been mindful of the need to embody positive attributes in so doing. For example, Thomas (2012, p.20) stated that “all interventions should aim to nurture a culture of belonging through supportive peer relations, meaningful interaction between staff and students, developing students’ knowledge, confidence and identity as successful HE learners and an HE experience that is relevant to interests and future goals.” We also concur with the views of Gale and colleagues (2010) and Heckman and Rubinstein (2001), both of whom found that the most effective intervention programs were long term. Certainly, in many cases, student departures can be seen as the outcome of a longitudinal process (Tinto’s Interactionalist theory, 1975). Individual choice is also influenced by a range of other factors, including academic and social understanding and interactions (Tinto, 1975), internal personal factors (e.g., thoughts and beliefs) (van Dinther et al., 2011) and environmental events (Bandura, 1986; Bandura, 1997; also cited in Dinther et al., 2011).

It is essential that interventions are designed to be inclusive and take account of student diversity, and BCU is a highly diverse institution. In 2013–14, the national HE student population (UK domiciled, full-time undergraduates) was 78% white and 22% Black and Minority Ethnic (BME); the corresponding figures at our university are approximately 55% and 45% (Birmingham City University, 2015). Previous studies have shown positive results across a varied student profile. For example, Kuh and colleagues (2008) found that for 6,000 students across 18 institutions, engagement activities had measurable impacts on progression across different ethnic backgrounds. However, a potentially complicating factor is that a high percentage of our students can be described as ‘commuter students,’ whose home and term-time addresses are the same. In 2014–15, 71% were in this category (Birmingham City University, 2016), and it has been noted that such students can experience higher levels of conflict between their family, work and university commitments (Tinto, 1993). We are conscious too of Braxton and colleagues’ (2011) findings that commuter and residential students may have different needs, with academic reasons more likely to be given for departure by the former and the social dimension being more important for the latter; and the Higher Education Policy Institute have suggested a “high propensity to live at home, and associated lack of [peer] support, may explain lower satisfaction among some BME groups” (Birmingham City University, 2016). Exploring
these factors through embedded and individualized support can be especially helpful in enabling students to succeed, and Johnson (2015) defined excellent mentoring as that which is tailored to the individual by means of demographics, context, and experience, as well as thoughtfully and competently delivered. Furthermore, a student-centered approach, with collaboration at its heart, has been found to be especially useful in achieving successful outcomes in diverse student populations (Archer & Richards, 2011; Thomas, 2012).

Our chosen method reflects these notions of the importance of a broad and inclusive perspective. In offering a case study of interventions at BCU, as shaped by the What Works? project, we sit firmly in the tradition of case study based research (Yin, 2009 & 2011), but with the specific purpose of constructing a reflective evaluation (Sherwood and Horton-Deutsch, 2012) drawing upon student-facing data and feedback collected over a number of years. It is important to note for the authenticity of our study that our evaluation sets out to collate this otherwise disparate information, both quantitative and qualitative in nature, in order to construct a richer picture of the overall effectiveness of the interventions made. In particular, we found the ‘What? So What? Now What? What Now?’ approach proposed by Driscoll (1994; 2007) as a model of reflection to be useful in structuring our thoughts, and especially in drawing lessons from a series of interconnected projects through which knowledge has incrementally developed. Our research questions in framing this work were as follows:

1. What opportunities exist for better supporting transition into HE?
2. Where are these interventions particularly effective, in terms of timing and nature?
3. What evidence is there that they can be embedded into long-term policy and practice?
4. What key advice can we offer colleagues facing similar challenges in transition?

**Project background and data sources**

Our response to What Works? was itself informed by the authors’ own prior research on the experience of developing partnership working with Built Environment students. The period subsequent to the economic crash of 2008/9 (Rhodes, 2015) proved to be a particularly challenging time for students embarking on Built Environment careers. We therefore felt it was imperative for business, as well as educational reasons, that the students who enrolled were supported to achieve successful outcomes.

In 2012, as part of a precursor BCU project entitled It’s Everyone’s School: The Students’ View of the Student Experience (Vincent and Morton, 2012), we conducted a survey of 120 Built Environment undergraduates, supplemented by interviews and focus groups. This in turn led to an external report, commissioned by the HEA (Morton et al., 2014), drawing together experiences across the HE sector. At the heart of this work lay a desire to capture the student voice and provide an authentic insight from their perspective (Subramanian et al., 2013), with a conscious decision to use qualitative material as an effective performance indicator in the enhancement of the student experience (Grebennikov & Shah, 2013). The results suggested that the principle of partnership is a particularly effective tool in promoting successful outcomes; that is, to co-produce the learning experience through a mutual endeavour between staff and students. In recent years the concept of partnership
working has become well-established in HE (see, for example, Bovill & Felton, 2016; Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2014; Nygard et al., 2013), and by grounding that principle in our experiences we identified four key drivers (derived from Morton et al., 2014, p. 26.) that individually and collectively facilitate success:

(1) **Engagement** – the active learning partnership between students and staff (both academic and administrative), as well as the multi-faceted relationships between students (at an individual level, and between different years, courses, and learning preferences);

(2) **Governance** – the methods by which students can be integrated into decision-making;

(3) **Communication** – how students, academics, administration staff, and support services communicate with each other, and the means which enable this best to happen;

(4) **Community** – a sense of identity and belonging to subject, school, faculty, and university, and the role activities related to the curriculum play in shaping this.

Our research findings identified initial difficulties in creating a sense of community and belonging within the school, in part because of the need to challenge existing ways of working; however, as the project matured, discipline initiatives became school initiatives, and school ones became inter-departmental. Interestingly, Wilson and colleagues (2012) found that interventions that integrated STEM students into the wider community had positive outcomes for all undergraduates, including personal growth and enhanced identity.

Subsequently, and turning to the key themes to be addressed by this article, the Built Environment school has been at the forefront of a series of novel interventions based on this work. It was one of three subject areas chosen to participate in What Works? for BCU, and had an ambitious target; to positively influence change across our entire suite of undergraduate programs. As such, it was also broadly positioned; it embraced the themes of induction and transition, mentoring and tutoring, and the development of a more active curriculum. In particular, we sought to enhance student identity through engendering a greater sense of engagement and community. This intention can be aligned with Glasser’s (1997) choice theory, which identified the four components required for improving internal motivation as belongingness, power, freedom, and fun.

As our recent data have been collected through the national What Works? project, we have the advantage of using formats consistent across all participating institutions. This includes quantitative data in the form of surveys of the Built Environment cohort carried out between November 2013 and May 2016, which track their experiences in relation to key characteristics such as belonging and identity. Finally, and separate to What Works?, focus groups were conducted with 35 students to gather views on the most recent faculty-wide transition program (September 2015).

**Supporting transition: Key principles and interventions**

Our holistic response to the What Works? initiative in particular sought to address the barriers encountered in building an initial sense of student belonging; most obviously, in cases where a converse sense of disengagement arises, whether caused by academic...
concerns or social issues such as feelings of isolation or doubt. Crucial to our ability and capacity to respond to these circumstances has been the employment of faculty alumni as full-time Graduate Student Success Advisors (GSSAs). In their first year of operation, these posts were part-funded by the university’s Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT), which supports collaborative staff-student projects. They were deliberately appointed from the most recent graduating cohorts in order to retain proximity to the student experience, and chosen on the basis of an interview process exploring their commitment to, and ideas for, innovation in supporting student achievement. We currently have four such GSSAs in place, aligned to the major subject areas in the faculty, and supporting between them our 3500-strong student population.

They are taking a lead role in the transformation of our student support system, and the resource investment in this new role has been vital in enabling our initiatives to develop. GSSA involvement begins with pre-arrival but their responsibilities then extend to mirror the student life-cycle, including:

- Leading our induction program, including recruiting and coordinating mentors;
- Investigating issues of non-attendance;
- Offering bespoke advice to struggling students;
- Individually contacting students to prepare them for resits;
- Leading a final year student celebration program.

The GSSA team also have a data collection and analysis role, reporting to the Faculty on aspects of management information such as attendance and progression rates. Selecting and acting on appropriate interventions requires a broad understanding of the circumstances and influences impacting upon students. As recent graduates themselves, the GSSAs are frequently able to offer added insight in unpacking and addressing such issues.

We now turn to a detailed reflective evaluation of three particular areas in which we identified significant opportunities for positive intervention; investment in a peer-led transition program, the targeting of support to re-engage those who need it most, and the creation of an engaged student community.

**The ‘Level Up’ transition program**

First, we introduced an early focus on peer mentoring and personal tutoring, integrating transition activities with the curriculum of the school (based on the various benefits identified by Andrews et al., 2013; Sanders & Higham, 2012). There is much to recommend early interventions, including supporting pre-entry decision making, discussing and clarifying expectations about HE, and assisting with academic preparation (Thomas, 2011). Indeed, Bovill and Bulley (2011) argued that if participative activities are not offered early in the university experience, the likelihood of students developing a sense of ownership of the content and processes of their learning experiences in later stages is also reduced. They cited Delpish and colleagues (2010), who saw co-creation of knowledge as powerful, but only if the timing is right. McCaffery (2010) also noted that the timing of interventions is especially important.

We began with a pilot activity for the new 2012 and 2013 Built Environment cohorts, led by a small team of academic staff working with student partners. Once this activity was
established within the school, we extended these core principles to the whole faculty. Through subsequent iterations, and reflecting on the previous year’s experience, we have developed a genuinely peer-led, faculty-wide program of welcome activities, incorporating resources created through student-led projects. As an indicator of scale, in preparation for the 2015/16 intake, 47 peer mentors undertook training led by the GSSAs, and 455 incoming students were reached through a variety of activities.

The program commences shortly after students confirm their place at the university, and continues through the 5 weeks prior to them physically joining us, through the first week at university (‘Welcome Week’), and into the academic year. The purpose of this early intervention is to proactively disseminate key information, in particular through the following core elements:

- An online, interactive program designed to introduce new starters to HE study, updated weekly, and with peer mentors assigned to offer support;
- Pre-arrival tasks, encouraging students to reflect upon and share their inspiration for choosing their intended career, and to think about their transition into HE;
- Support and interaction from the mentors and GSSAs throughout Welcome Week, aimed at maintaining engagement alongside course induction activities;
- An initial group meeting with personal tutors in Welcome Week, based upon the pre-arrival tasks, and developed in subsequent individual meetings.

Initially, we integrated the pre-arrival work into an early summative assessment designed to embed students’ prior experiences and personal motivations in a social and professional cohort context, in particular to highlight any academic issues needing to be addressed. As this first assessment point is a key moment of vulnerability (Cramp, 2011), rapid feedback was provided at a one-to-one ‘health check’ meeting with personal tutors to facilitate continued interaction, engagement and support. However, we recognized that this created additional pressure for some students and, whilst maintaining the purpose, have repositioned this as a formative task. ‘Level Up’ offers multiple opportunities for new starters to draw upon the experiences of established students, as well as seek support, guidance, and answers to questions that may otherwise impact on their transitional experience. A welcome by-product of keeping these resources online has been the establishment of a knowledge portal, enabling students to find key information at their own convenience without having to navigate the full set of regulations available centrally. We acknowledge, however, that not all students choose to directly participate in the pre-arrival element in particular; the 2015/16 program, for example, reached 71% of Built Environment joiners. All new students in the faculty, regardless of their involvement, were invited to complete a survey reviewing the impact of the project, and the activities provided within it. A total of 145 students responded, of whom 107 had engaged prior to their arrival with some or all of the material (Table 1).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, those students who had partaken more fully in the program felt they had gained most benefit overall, although we were pleased to note that a significant majority were positive about their overall experience regardless. For students who did not fully engage, the most frequently cited reason was that the information did not seem relevant to them, or that they didn’t feel the need to access it, whilst still being comforted that it was there should they have required it.

The value of learning through social interactions, whether or not in an academic context, should not be underestimated, as clearly both academic and social reasons can
cause students to leave university (Tinto, 1975; Braxton et al., 2011). For many, as the following student commented, a favorite aspect of Welcome Week was meeting students with similar passions and interests to them, and forming new friendship groups in a non-intimidating setting:

“Genuinely the best part of freshers week was realising that the world isn’t such a scary place and I’ve met some amazing people that I’ll know and keep in touch with for the rest of my life.”

(First-year student, 2015/16)

This intervention has shown us that a well-planned pre-arrival program, coupled with a warm and engaging welcome, can have substantive benefits, although there is a need to enthuse all students in order to be fully successful. Our survey results show that student perception of preparedness to study increases with the level of pre-arrival engagement, and this clearly has implications for both short and long-term retention and student experience issues.

### Re-engagement through targeted interventions

Even for students who enjoy a seamless transition into their first experiences of university life, it is quite possible for unexpected circumstances to present a major obstacle to their success. Our second set of interventions attempt to re-engage students in their studies in the event that they slip into a pattern of non-attendance, or present other academic or personal difficulties.

For reasons of proximity to the student experience, these tasks are mainly conducted by our GSSAs, supported by peer mentors and administrative staff. On average, the team contacted 130 students per week, focusing especially upon those showing poor attendance. Of course, simply contacting students may not change behavior or outcomes. The true value of this exercise is the conversations that follow, either through email, by phone or face to face. Typically, this is the first opportunity for a struggling student to engage in such a conversation, and may allow barriers to success to be explored, or for signposting or support where a student has bona-fide reasons for not being able to attend. Whilst some student responses are predictable, such as a minor illness, or other events clashing with taught sessions, there have been some very difficult circumstances reported. These have ranged from severe financial issues and homelessness, to mental and physical health concerns including suicidal thoughts and domestic abuse. Our GSSAs are not support workers or counselors, and, recognizing the need to ensure data protection, whilst simultaneously needing to get the right outcome first time, we have provided specialized training to enable them to signpost professional help and deal with difficult situations with confidence. The result can be genuinely transformative of a student’s experience:

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**Table 1. Student satisfaction with the 2015/16 transition program.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extent of Pre-arrival Activity</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>Satisfaction</th>
<th>Preparedness to Study*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No engagement before ‘Welcome Week’</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>72.0%</td>
<td>65.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some engagement</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>82.5%</td>
<td>88.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full engagement</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
<td>95.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OVERALL</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>82.8%</td>
<td>86.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. This question asked students whether they felt they had all the information they needed to commence studies.
Just to let you know, I’ve been able to get the help I need to get back on my feet a bit more. The Student Services department have got me some counseling sorted, and I’ve been able to register to work on some schemes which will really help with money. Thank you for taking the time to understand my situation. I was worried that I would be fobbed off or told to just get on with it … but the fact you took the time to help point me in the right direction has been a huge help in sorting out this mess. (First-year student, 2014/15)

A less helpful response in such circumstances would almost certainly lead to continued student disengagement, a feeling of isolation, and ultimately withdrawal.

Our work has shown that these exchanges can be of critical importance and, over time, we have increasingly seen self-referrals from students seeking help. However, at the same time we have observed a tendency for some academic staff to take lesser direct involvement, in effect seeing student support as now being the sole responsibility of GSSAs. Whilst we see the empowerment of a peer, or near-peer, community as overwhelmingly positive, this indicates the importance of all parties committing to connected ways of working, and understanding how their own role can help. For example, we have sought to support academics as effective personal tutors too, providing pro forma and handbooks to help guide initial conversations, and additional training resources through CELT.

The GSSA team led a further large scale intervention for students who need to resit an assessment at the end of the academic year in order to progress. There are profound implications for students who are not fully aware of their obligations, both for the individual concerned and, on a cohort scale, retention and progression. Thus we instituted a formal process to ensure the key messages were being understood. Initial contact is made by letter, alerting students to their requirements, followed by telephone contact to offer more detail and context, and finally reinforced through a targeted follow-up email, tailored to individual circumstances, reflecting the advice of Dumbrigue and colleagues (2013) that proactive approaches work best when considering the needs of the individual student.

This exercise was first completed in June 2015, where 155 students from Built Environment courses were contacted, with a telephone response rate of 33%. One of the conclusions of this initial exercise was the need to make students aware of their resit obligations earlier, to be better placed to offer remedial support. With this in mind, the exercise was conducted again shortly after the publication of 2015/16 semester 1 marks. This time 99 students were contacted with a response rate of 51% by telephone. Over 80% of students who responded knew that they were required to resit work, and over 90% were aware of the current academic regulations, yet there was still tremendous additional value to the work done. Twelve students were referred to Student Services for support on Extenuating Circumstances claims, and another five were signposted to other university departments for specialist support.

In being able to positively re-engage these students, we expect to find that our academic progression figures improve; certainly, increasing student awareness of the range of factors within their own control may enhance engagement and success (Kahu, 2013). Establishing these critical lines of communication through the GSSAs also allows for a more targeted and systematic approach to interventions across the faculty and, in turn, furthers our desire to instil a greater sense of community and identity.
Building engaged student communities

The third and final part of our multi-faceted model of peer-led interventions is the ongoing effort to create a vibrant, self-sustaining student community. We have sought to change the learning culture by enabling students to move from being passive consumers of their course to becoming proactively engaged in the wider student community as they progress.

The interventions discussed in this article have often provided the catalyst for ongoing involvement, initially by better informing students about ways in which they can help shape their study environment. For example, Facebook groups originally set up for incoming students are still used for peer to peer support, as well as the promotion of events and activities, and we have a central Student Engagement group, also managed via Facebook, numbering in excess of 100 students across the faculty. Social media is a valuable tool in helping to capture and engage with large numbers of students, allowing for multi-layered communication and discussion in a more informal and open setting (Ivala & Gachago, 2012).

We found that in some cases students involved in delivering interventions needed to be ‘coaxed’ into participating, whether through a free lunch, voucher, or, for key roles, paid employment hours. Especially in the first year of initiatives, students were sometimes unwilling to simply volunteer, or give opinion, but once incentives were offered, uptake improved. However, the benefits of involvement are ultimately far more than financial, and students have cited improved communication, employability, interpersonal and leadership skills, as well as the enjoying the opportunity to meet and interact with new groups of people:

Whilst most of the projects I’ve been involved in had offered payments in one way or another, the main reason for engaging was for experience and also to help me to become more confident when talking to people … As a shy person, getting involved in such projects have meant that I often have to talk to strangers, and often to small groups of people, which I have always found difficult to do, but being involved has helped me develop better communication skills (Student Academic Mentor Partner, 2015/6)

Benefits to student mentors are a common outcome of such interventions (Thomas, 2012). As part of our commitment to increase the student voice in matters of strategy and governance, many of these same students are now being deployed at the heart of pivotal decision-making processes such as staff recruitment; in this way, students directly influence appointments from junior lecturers to professors and Heads of School.

Finally, through this focus on students as partners in a community, we have developed a student-led approach to Applicant Visit Days. Current students on Built Environment courses take a leadership role in welcoming and guiding prospective students to the school, sharing their experiences both alongside and separately from staff. Many of these ambassadors also act as Welcome Week mentors, providing a sense of continuity and community for arriving students. The emphasis on peer support and guidance at the admissions stage has elicited positive feedback from ambassadors and applicants alike:

[I value] the opportunity to interact with a wide variety of people especially the applicants that come in looking lost and leave with this really big smile on their faces. They often say it feels nice to know there’s someone closer to their level to talk to. (Student Ambassador, 2015/16)

Thank you for the personal email with the feedback from the interview! I enjoyed the chat with the second year students and found the interview very useful … very helpful in reaffirming my decision to apply to the built environment, thank you again! (Applicant for Architectural Technology, 2015/16)
As with any community, these relationships need nurturing in a positive environment in order to thrive. We believe that the momentum built through embedding our interventions in multiple areas of practice will ensure this continues to be the case into the long-term.

**Delivering engagement: Initial findings**

Our approaches to supporting the student journey, particularly transition into HE, have been wide-ranging. All contribute to outcomes in different ways and have been implemented against the backdrop of many externally-driven changes in faculty structure and university management. It is impossible to fully disentangle the effects of individual projects on student experience, but it is important to recognize them as part of the changing context and culture of HE.

Likewise, the success of interventions that could be seen as supplemental to the core curriculum is not always easy to directly measure. Whilst student attainment, progression and satisfaction can all be seen as indicators of success, our interventions are generally pieces of a much larger puzzle. Although it would be unrealistic to suggest that all Built Environment students are now truly engaged, this project has clearly seen a new, committed group of students emerge who not only want to help enhance their own student experience, but also those of their peers. This has allowed the most important messages of our exercises to be felt where they are most needed; within the classroom, among students actively dealing with the pressures of transition.

The outcomes of the *What Works?* project, which measured three central themes of belongingness, engagement and self-confidence, are generally very positive. The table below collects the results of *What Works?* surveys with the Built Environment cohort that commenced in September 2013, numbering just over 100 students. They were surveyed shortly into their first (2013) and second (2014) years of study, and again at the end of their final year (2016), and scored on a 5-point scale (with 5.00 being the most positive, including those where the phrasing of the question was inverted as shown). It can be seen that in all but two of the individual categories, the scores have increased between the initial and final surveys, although it is disappointing that the two questions showing a decreasing score are in the belongingness category. Nevertheless, the overall rating on this measure has never dipped below 4.00.

Social cognitive theory suggests that people learn by watching others and their interactions, and van Dinther and colleagues (2011) found that interventions based on this principle were the most successful in enhancing students’ belief in their ability to succeed. Importantly, and in parallel with the introduction and formalisation of our interventions, our engagement score has consistently grown, from 3.84 in November 2013, to 4.05 most recently, surpassing not only the results of other disciplines in the university, but also early reports of the average scores of other partner institutions involved in the project. We suggest that the embedding of support throughout this cohort’s journey, where our interventions have led to changing practice on a wider scale, is at least part of the reason. The success of this personal approach to interventions with peer mentoring at its heart certainly fits with the findings of Thomas (2012) (Table 2).

In terms of statistical evidence of academic results, it is still relatively early to draw definitive or longitudinal conclusions, but generally high levels of engagement are corroborated by other university data sources, indicating positive trends for subsequent years too. Our first year students participate annually in the nationally-benchmarked Student
Table 2. Responses to the *What Works?* survey of Belongingness (B), Engagement (E) and Self-confidence (S) from the 2013 Built Environment cohort.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Nov-2013 Year 1</th>
<th>Nov-2014 Year 2</th>
<th>May-2016 Year 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (E) I am motivated towards my studies</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>4.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (B) I feel at home in this university</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>4.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (S) I expect to do well on my programme</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>4.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (B) Being at this university is an enriching experience</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>3.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (E) I try to make connections between what I learn from different parts of my programme</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>4.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 (E) I try to do a bit more on the programme than it asks me to</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>3.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 (B) I wish I’d gone to a different university</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>3.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 (E) I seek out academic staff in order to discuss topics relevant to my programme</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>3.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 (S) I worry about the difficulty of my programme</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>3.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 (E) I put a lot of effort into the work I do</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>4.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 (B) I have found this department to be welcoming</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>4.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 (E) I use feedback on my work to help me improve what I do</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>4.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 (S) I doubt my ability to study at university level</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>3.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 (B) I am shown respect by members of staff in this department</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 (B) Sometimes I feel I don’t belong in this university</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>4.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 (S) I’m confident of completing my programme successfully</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Belongingness scale 4.06 4.02 4.02
Engagement scale 3.84 3.82 4.05
Self-confidence scale 3.49 3.77 3.91

Note: shaded cells highlight areas where the score has increased between the earliest and most recent surveys.
Engagement Survey, and the results for the 2015/16 cohort show Built Environment students 19% above the sector average in ‘feeling connected to their university community,’ and 10% above the average in ‘working effectively with others.’

Likewise, a double-digit improvement in satisfaction for Built Environment courses was recorded in the 2014/15 National Student Survey (NSS), including one program at 100% and another at 96%, along with a modest increase in overall student retention. Perhaps most significantly, in terms of our stated intention of supporting transition into the early stages of HE, there have now been four years of continual improvement in the faculty’s figures for progression from the first year of study, from 69.6% of students progressing after resit in 2012/13, to 74.9% in 2015/16. We contend that the combination of approaches adopted through our projects is a major factor in securing improvements both in this crucial first period of study, and indeed throughout the student life cycle.

**Future areas of work**

Our ‘What? So What? Now What? What Now?’ research model challenges us to seek continual improvement. Robust systems and processes (for example, capturing and maintaining accurate records of student attendance) are critical in making the most effective interventions (both by type and timing) with students in most need of support. Data systems are beyond the scope of this article, but our need for high-quality information is galvanizing an institutional push for more dynamic indicators of student progress, especially through leaner analytics and live datasets of academic performance, and we believe this will be crucial in future developments.

Meanwhile, we plan to further extend the transition principle, completing the journey through enhanced ‘reinduction’ to the second and third year of study; and to use a current curriculum transformation programme to build more ‘memorable experiences’ into an active and engaging weekly timetable and annual calendar. At the time of writing, we have just begun monitoring assessment submissions through a process similar to that for attendance. We are also examining methods of benefitting the longer-term experience, especially in the area of ‘belongingness’ where the data shows we have particular room for improvement. With this in mind, we have already launched the ‘Class of . . .’ campaign, marking the start of our students’ final year of study and preparing them for the next stage of their professional lives. More broadly, our reflection has led us to consider how to further develop institution-wide interventions that straddle the disciplines. McCaffery (2010) highlighted how such interventions could generate transformative change, although we remain mindful of Tinto’s (1993) warning of the danger of a simplistic sector-wide view of student behaviour.

A further area for consideration is the potential for active student participation in more strategic interventions. For example, Arnstein’s (1969) ladder of citizen participation, adapted by Bovill and Bulley (2011) into a model to explore different levels of student involvement in curriculum design, offers a useful tool for exploring practice (Healey et al., 2014). Bovill (2013, p.464) noted that “co-creation is not about giving students complete control, nor is it about staff maintaining complete control over curriculum design decisions,” and the role of the GSSA could be important in bridging that gap. This would require elements of negotiation and a delegation of authority and responsibility, perhaps considered on a case-by-case basis (Bovill, 2013). The further development of student leadership in the curriculum is certainly a fascinating area for future consideration, not least in the context of the forthcoming introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework by the U.K. government (BIS, 2016).
**Final reflections**

In framing our research in the early part of this article, we posed a question regarding the long-term sustainability of these initiatives. In the case of BCU, there is every reason to believe that this is assured given the extent of activity now firmly established.

In part, and undoubtedly of importance in truly embedding these ideas, their formal adoption has led to and been facilitated by the career progression of some of the staff involved, including the four authors of this article. The *What Works?* Built Environment Discipline Lead is now Associate Dean for Student Learning Experience, and one of the early student advisors to the project is now GSSA Team Leader. Another member of the original discipline team remains in the department but now recognized as Academic Lead for Personal & Professional Development, partly because of the successes of our project, and a second is now employed centrally in a CELT staff development role. There is a university-wide network of GSSAs, achieving an effective momentum of its own by exerting influence on numerous other policies and procedures, and several members of our highly-motivated mentor group are already keenly interested in forming the next generation. Peer relationships, networking, and the presence of consistent roles across the university have proven vital factors in embedding and extending success.

At the outset of the *What Works?* project, we could not have anticipated the cumulative value of what we have been able to achieve. Finally, in reflecting upon this practice and experience, we offer several key lessons, which we advocate as essential steps for all those concerned with enhancing transition into HE:

- **Institutionally commit to strategic investment in student support.** The investment in, and indeed recognition and reward of, academic leadership in these areas has been crucial in extending the scale and speed of adoption of our initiatives;
- **Identify the means.** Creating the GSSA post, with proximity to the student experience, has added greater credibility to those interactions;
- **Be bold in moving from staff-designed to peer-led interventions.** The impetus from staff was essential in early implementation, but we will continue to empower our GSSA and student teams in order for our ideas to truly resonate with their core audience.

**References**


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HESA (2015). UKPIs: Non-continuation rates (including projected outcomes) table SN3 Retrieved March 2016 from https://www.hesa.ac.uk/component/content/article?id=2064


