The Virtual Path to Academic Transition: Enabling International Students to Begin Their Transition to University Study Before They Arrive

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Institutions receiving international students for postgraduate study are now committing time and energy to the development of online transition resources to enable students to prepare for the demands of a different academic culture before they arrive. Important questions underlying such initiatives are identifying what kind of digital resources will both engage international students and be of most use to them in preparing for this transition, and how to effectively reach students. Current institutional initiatives are taking several forms. A popular model is to offer browsable advice/tips or FAQs about life and study at a particular institution together with, for example, video clips of other international students describing their experiences there. These may be open and web-hosted or accessible through a password protected area on an institutional website or VLE. Less commonly found are video and other media embedded in learning resources developed in the form of 'learning objects' which have been designed to offer key information through structured interactive learning activities supported with answers and feedback. Importantly, these also offer opportunities for language improvement at the same time since they are supported by help, feedback and transcripts.

This case study focuses on a project to develop and deliver a pre-arrival online course of interactive learning resources for all incoming international students to one UK institution. Building on five years of experience in delivering pre-arrival, tutored online courses to pre-sessional course international students, the project team developed institution-specific learning objects and incorporated open resources from the website, 'Prepare for Success', developed by the same institution. The project seeks to deliver a self-access online course with three strands to it to address students' concerns and needs. These are to prepare international students for the location in which they will be living and studying (the city of Southampton - its key features and amenities); to introduce them to practical aspects of British life and culture (e.g. setting up a bank account, shopping in a UK supermarket) and to familiarise them with key study skills and other aspects of UK academic culture which may present challenges for them (e.g. academic writing conventions; dealing with course reading lists).

This paper will be of value to institutions embarking on similar ventures. It will describe the rationale for the online course; refer to the pedagogic approach taken; showcase course content, and report on the first phase of its delivery which begins in late spring 2011.

Key words /phrases: international students; transition; pre-arrival elearning; online course design; learning objects

1.Introduction

A key finding of a recent benchmarking survey into the state of international student services in UK colleges and universities conducted by the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) is that the delivery of pre-departure information to students has changed from hard copy to electronic in the majority of cases (UKCISA 2011). UK institutions have also realised the benefit of preparing their incoming international students for life and study at their specific destination before they arrive by using the affordances of the Internet. As any search of UK institutional websites will show, institutions are increasingly turning to the development of online transition resources in order to do this. Moreover, using online multi-media resources to provide an insight into everyday student life at a particular institution and highlight aspects of academic life can also serve the secondary purpose of promoting that institution and possibly converting undecided applicants into real students in the future.

In regard to the primary aim of better preparing international students for the challenges that lie ahead, an important question for institutions is to identify the type of digital resources that can both engage the interest of students and help them start on the transition process, particularly in terms of recognising the demands of studying within a different academic culture. This paper presents a case

study of a project at one UK university to develop and offer an online transition course for international students during the period before their departure for the UK. It will explain the rationale for the use of an online course, outlining the pedagogic approach taken and the development process, and referring to the choice of course content. It will also report briefly on the first phase of delivery.

2. Approaches to facilitating international student transition

Together with the use of institutional websites as the currently preferred means of providing international students with pre-departure information in UK Further and Higher Education Institutions (92%) (UKCISA 2011), there also appears to be an increasing interest among providers in moving beyond text-based linear information and exploiting the affordances of different digital media, particularly audio-visual resources and scope for social networking. A survey of institutional websites and their content directed at international students reveals increasing use of self-access audio-visual resources, which take the form of video clips or podcasts and images of current international students describing their experiences at an institution, and short FAQs or observations about life and study. These offer scope in terms of both browsability and choice for the student.

Social networking is also gaining in popularity as a means of providing pre-departure information and of putting prospective students in touch with current students or alumni. Recently, it has replaced email and online forums as the preferred method of enabling contact between new international students and their peers (UKCISA 2011). It is evident that new ways of informing and preparing incoming international students are being sought by receiving institutions, utilising digital innovations and changes in the ways we are choosing to interact thought the Internet.

3. Building on a tutored, course-specific transition course

Between 2005 and 2010, the University of Southampton offered a short online pre-arrival course every summer for international students who, a few weeks later, arrived at the University to undertake a five or ten week Pre-sessional Course in English for Academic Purposes before starting their main course of study in the autumn term. Although the design of this course-specific transition tool evolved over time and included experimentation with additional emerging technologies, a number of core features persisted. These were that the course:

- was limited to 5 weeks in length
- focussed on practical aspects of living in the UK
- offered acculturation and preparation for students coming to study on the Pre-sessional Course at the University of Southampton
- used a customised VLE for delivery (Moodle)
- included activities designed in the form of Learning Objects, podcasts and vidcasts as core content
- was e-tutored through Discussion Forum and Chat Room

During the final summer of its delivery (2010) over 200 students responded to their invitation to join the course, representing c. 40% of those contacted by email. While feedback from those students who had taken the course was very positive, a number of issues became apparent:

- The 5 week window for doing the course did not suit all students (e.g. those still struggling to get visas arranged; those working to pay for their forthcoming studies)
- E-tutoring mostly entailed responding to a number of recurrent questions through the forum or chat room; interestingly, students were less interested in discussion
- A significant number of their questions related to study expectations
- Many students, particularly those who had come through agents, reported on arrival that they had not known about the online course

At the same time, certain aspects of the pre-arrival course were regularly receiving praise from the students in their post-course evaluations:

> *This course made me familiar with the (pre-sessional) course, the people and the School which I have chosen. I appreciate this course.*

The main benefits are to know someone else before coming to UK and it's very good for making friends. It was really beneficial to me. By means of (the course) I learned many things about British culture, cost of living, studying in the UK, and many, many useful other things.

When I arrived in Southampton everything was familiar to me and I didn't feel alone. I could find much information about the University and Southampton through this and it was so fun.

Significantly, most of the informative content of the course was delivered in the form of activity-based Learning Objects, and data tracking through the VLE showed that these self-contained learning resources, together with weekly podcasts and vidcasts, were the most consistently used parts of the course overall, with students continuing to access them after the course had officially finished (when the tutor had signed off), during the following week leading up to their arrival in the UK.

4. A national transition tool for international students entering UK institutions

Concurrent with this, in 2008, a UKCISA-commissioned project funded through the Prime Minister's Initiative (PMI) for International Education was awarded to the same development team at Southampton. The brief was to create a tool to help prepare all UK-bound international students for the challenges of study within any UK Further or Higher Education institution, and at the same time, to deliver a tool that would allow individual UK institutions to make use of it with their own students. The outcome was the development of the web-based transition tool for international students and their UK receiving institutions, Prepare for Success (PfS) (www.prepareforsuccess.org.uk). The key features of the PfS website include:

- A main menu of 23 multimedia learning resources designed as Learning Objects, introducing aspects of academic life, study skills, and teaching and learning styles in the UK
- Study Pathways: a choice of routes through the learning resources by skill or by topic
- FAQs: an interactive wordle for browsing a bank of simple questions and answers about academic study in the UK
- FAQs for Further Education (FE): an interactive spinning globe for browsing a bank of specific questions and answers about FE
- Webpage for teachers and institutions: downloadable resources and guidance about modes of use
- Integrated social networking sites: Facebook and Twitter

Lessons learned from the experience of delivering the tutored pre-arrival course informed the development of PfS, particularly in terms of the need for learning resources that students could use independently and at their own pace to inform themselves, and the desirability of including podcasts and vidcasts especially of their peers/other international students already embarked on study in the UK. The focus of PfS is on introducing generic aspects of UK academic life: the different teaching and learning styles that students would encounter and the study skills needed, rather than practical aspects of living in the UK or the specific cultural context of study at a single institution.

Since its launch in July 2008, the PfS website has received over 350,000 visits from student users in 211 countries. In addition, c. 90 UK institutions (HEIs 80%; FECs 20%) have so far made use of it with their own international students in a variety of ways, as well as a number of UK secondary schools and sixth form colleges, and institutions overseas. Pre-arrival links to the homepage are the most popular method of incorporating the resource into an institution's own provision but increasingly, integrations with pre- or post-arrival student induction programmes are occurring (Watson 2011). Inclusion in the pre- or post-arrival induction programme of a specific institution is possible by linking to selected learning resources in the PfS main menu from an institutional VLE- or web-hosted course or resource such as a wiki or blog. The learning objects are designed as separable html pages and can function as course 'building blocks' to link to alongside an institution's own transition resources for its international students. This feature has been of particular benefit to the current project.

Ultimately, a further aim of both PfS and the earlier course-specific transition tool which gave rise to it, has been to achieve an institutional transition tool for international students which combines preparation for generic challenges (academic culture and study skills in the UK) by re-using the educational resources available through PfS, with preparation for the more specific context of study (that of the destination institution and its location) using an institution's own resources. As our

experience with the course-specific transition tool showed, students appreciated a focus on future study skills as well as content relating to their specific destination institution and more practical matters.

The findings of an earlier feasibility study (Watson 2007) undertaken before the development of Prepare for Success, also confirmed this to be the view of other institutions. Moreover, the responding institutions in that study expressed the desire for a transition tool which, '*covered generic issues common to UK HE, but also (*allowed for*) an individual induction tool hosted by our institution'*. The separable learning objects in PfS are designed to meet this need, allowing institutions to incorporate them into their own institutionally-hosted induction tool by selective linking. This approach was adopted at the University of Southampton in order to create the institution-specific transition tool for this project, providing content on aspects of general and practical cultural issues and concerning the institution itself, and incorporating PfS resources to broaden the study skills and academic culture dimension. The project has resulted in the development of 'Get Ready for Southampton', an online transition course offered to all international students coming to the University of Southampton.

5. Developing an institution-specific transition tool

The rationale for migrating from a tutored online pre-arrival course to one which is untutored and allows automated self-access is partly explained above in terms of optimal timing and use of tutoring. Other factors also played a role. Due to the blending of three strands: synchronous (chat sessions), semi-synchronous (discussion activities working within accepted time frames) and asynchronous (the self-access learning content) on the tutored course, the management of a large number of students by one tutor was possible (e.g. c.115 students per tutor in 2011). However, a new aim was to extend the provision of the transition course beyond the Pre-sessional course students to encompass all potential direct entry international students as well. Some of these students would hold confirmed offers and some would still be in the process of applying through their faculty admissions office. Since this would involve potentially a very large cohort of students, the preferred option was to deliver wholly self-access content. The features required of the course design for 'Get Ready for Southampton' (GRfS), then, were that it:

• allows study pace and length of use to be decided by the individual student;
• provides a broader focus: practical aspects of living in Britain + preparation for study at the University + UK academic culture and study skills;
• delivers automated course invitation, sign up process and account creation through a single entry point (see Figure 1);
• offers self-access content (activity-based learning objects – see section 5.1);
• offers an optional community-building dimension through the use of a social wall.

The outcome is an institution-specific transition tool that delivers a compromise between a fully tutored and time-restricted online course and a collection of open and readily accessible multi-media resources, structured loosely or unstructured. At the current time this latter option appears to be the approach being favoured by many receiving institutions. However, our aim has been to package informational content in such a way as to maximise its potential for learning by the student. The pedagogic approach to doing this is explained in the next section.
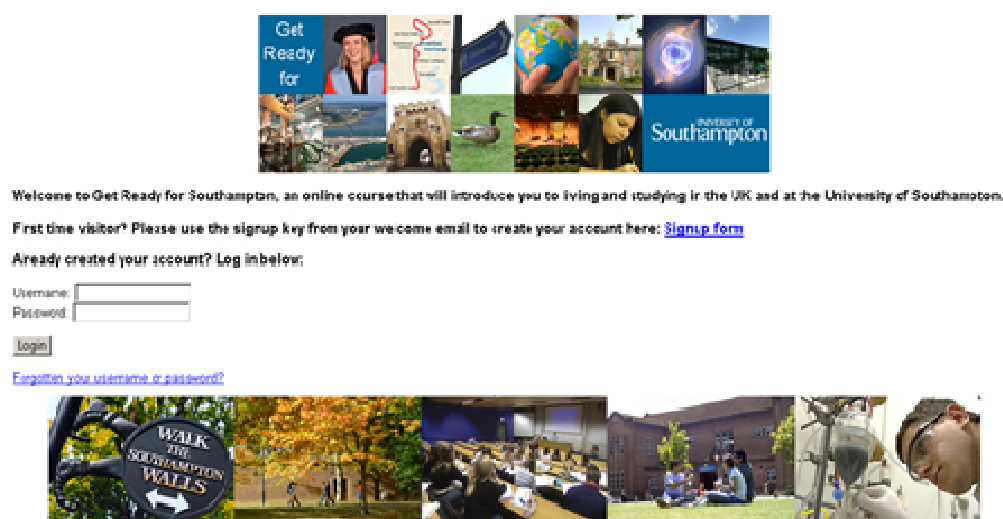
Figure 1: Entry point to the self-access transition tool 'Get Ready for Southampton'

5.1 Pedagogic design

Both the generic resources in Prepare for Success (which were selectively linked to) and the institution-specific content in GRfS employ video and other media embedded in learning resources developed in the form of 'learning objects', and are designed according to a shared pedagogy (see Watson 2010). The aim here is to offer informational content about the destination institution, the city, aspects of UK academic culture and life as a student through structured interactive learning activities supported with answers and feedback. These offer flexibility in terms of how the individual student chooses to use them but importantly, content is scaffolded so as to provide opportunities for language improvement at the same time. Design features which facilitate this include help and feedback sections, and additional resources such as transcripts. Figure 2 below shows some highlighted design features (1. Instruction; 2. Activity; 3. Feedback). Figure 3 shows additional design features (1. Help; 2. Transcript; 3. Video resource for the Flash activity which follows). With structured learning activities at their centre and these extra layers of support, the learning objects offer more scope for interaction and reflection, and consequently, greater potential for learning than less rich, pure media resources.
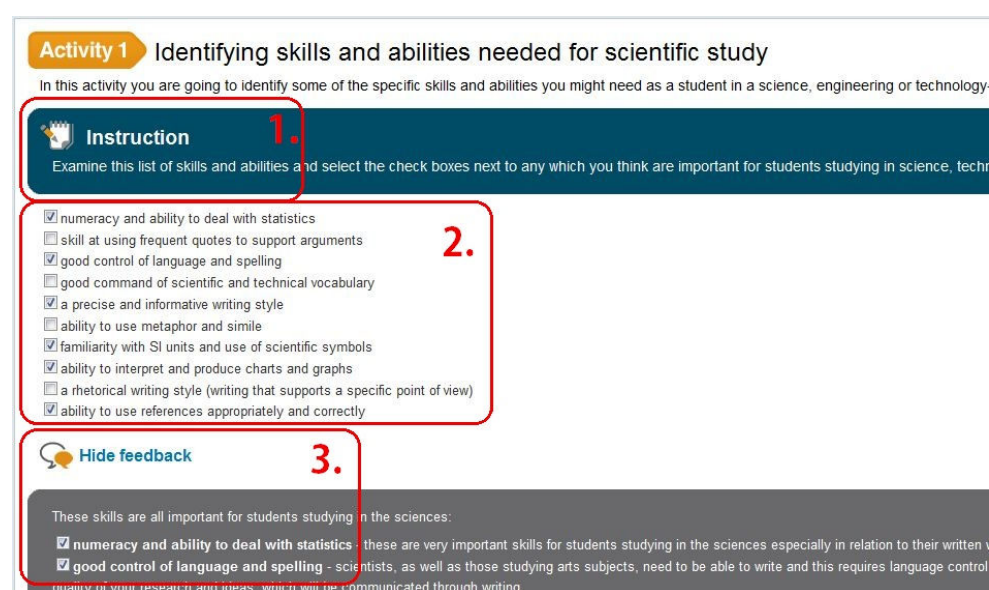

Figure 2: Screenshot of Learning Object showing key elements of an activity
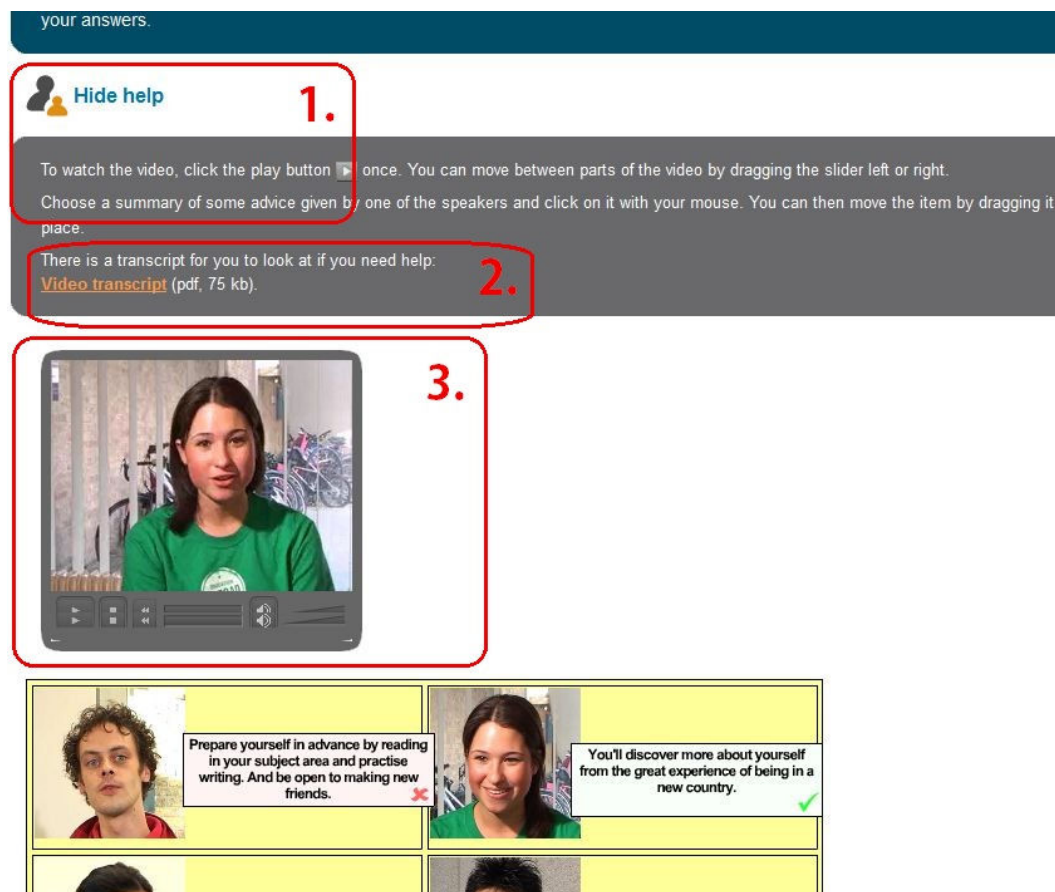
Figure 3: Screenshot of other design features of our learning objects

A further benefit of this approach is that learning objects from different sources can be pulled together to form a new course offering. Older in-house resources can be given a facelift and repurposed to suit new contexts of use. Any new content that is required can be developed. Where content can be disaggregated and re-aggregated in this way, online course creation is achieved in a much shorter time span. In Figure 4 the juxtaposition of selected and linked learning object resources from PfS (particularly under topic 2) with learning objects initially created for the tutored, course–specific transition tool and then repurposed as necessary for GRfS (several learning objects under topic 1) can be seen. This use of separable reusable 'building blocks' in online course design proves both practical and economical. As an important aspect of instructional design, learning object reusability has also long been recognised as desirable although the debate continues about how best to achieve it (Wiley 2000, Harvey 2005, Sicilia and Garcia 2003).
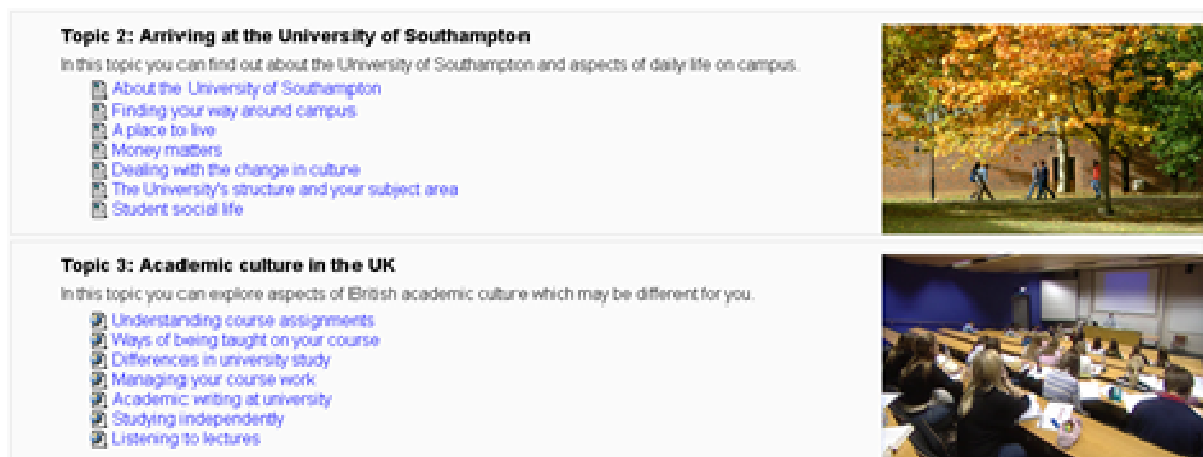
Figure 4: Two topic menus within GRfS showing a blend of learning object resources

A number of studies report on the use of peer or alumni contact at different institutions either before or after arrival (e.g. Lai et al. 2008; Quintrell and Westwood 1994). As UKCISA report, putting students in direct contact with their peers or alumni using social networking tools, email or even simply through online forums is a method increasingly being favoured by UK institutions (UKCISA 2011). Due to its large scale, our project precluded direct contact with students already studying at the University. Our own previous experience had suggested that students enjoyed introducing themselves and making initial contact with one another through a discussion forum but that most of their postings had concerned specific questions arising from visa delays; uncertainty about what kind of accommodation to find etc. In other words, at this stage they had not sought extended contact with each other. For this reason, it was decided to take an experimental approach during the first year and replace the discussion forum with a 'Southampton social wall' using freely available social software, wallwisher (www.wallwisher.com), which was linked to from within GRfS.

Wallwisher is an internet application which does not require user registration. A GRfS social wall has been created and short student posts comprising text (max.160 characters), image and/or video can be easily added from within the course simply by clicking on the wall. The use of tweet-size messages reflects the typical size of the posts made by students on our course-specific transition course and, unlike a discussion forum, the wall allows the content of all messages to be immediately seen. In GRfS students are invited to post a short message at the end of the GRfS course and look among the other messages for future friends at the University. It is hoped that this will also help provide a sense of community. The use of this software will be reviewed at the start of the coming academic year and user opinion sought at the student evaluation stage.

6. First phase

Following a brief pilot phase, the GRfS site was launched in May 2011. The use of a customised Moodle site and automated generation of unique usernames and passwords allows tracking and useful data gathering to take place. Although still in the very early stages in this respect, some initial data has been collected from the first seven days since the launch (see Table 1).

Aspect of GRfS use investigated	Summary of data
No. of students registering and accessing GRfS in the first 7 days	142
No. of those students who will join the summer Pre-sessional Course	92
No. of those students who will be direct entry in Sept. 2011	50
No. of countries students accessed GRfS from	35
No. of student posts to social wall	5
No. of viewings of individual items of course content	Min. 8; Max. 134
Total no. of item viewings and average no. of views per item	1015; av. 30

Table 1: Data gathered 7 days after launch of GRfS

The number of international students who responded to their email invitation and registered for the online course within the first seven days of its launch represented 14% of those contacted in the first emailing, but it should be noted that this action will continue throughout the summer and only a small proportion have as yet been sent the email so the eventual number of GRfS users is expected to be much higher. The first emailing also contained a disproportionate number of international students who will be studying at the University on a 5 or 10 week Pre-sessional Course between July and September. Further mailings are likely to focus on direct entry students to other faculties and those coming to study at the University under the Erasmus scheme. Nevertheless, these early figures are felt to be very encouraging.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this project has been to put into place a practical method of facilitating international student transition on a much wider scale than has been hitherto possible. It is too early to tell yet how effective this can be, or even what the eventual level of take-up will be, although the very first data suggest that a promising start has already been made. Student feedback being gathered on the course, will be reviewed in the autumn together with the data from tracking, It is our intention to keep this transition gateway open year round for all incoming international students, including those who are in the initial stages of course enquiry. Through the various mechanisms in place, we hope to harvest some rich data which will help us to continue to improve our pre-arrival support and preparation of international students.

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