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Transition to university Report of the Transkills/LTS event

In June 2009 Transkills and LTS held a well attended event which offered various perspectives on students' transition to university.

Dr Keith Johnstone, Academic Leader of the Transkills project, introduced the event by noting the growing discourse within the sector about how students can best be supported to take advantage of the educational opportunities available to them, regardless of their background, and so fulfil their potential.

The event was divided into three parts: perspectives on transition; supporting students – Transkills resources; and a group activity followed by discussion.

Perspectives on transition featured Mark Shannon from Cambridge Assessment who discussed the past, present and future of the A-level system and the challenges and opportunities presented to the Collegiate University by the recent changes. 2009-10 CUSU President Tom Chigbo then gave a student's perspective on common transition problems and suggested measures to enhance the student experience. Marco Angelini concluded the session by discussing the lessons learnt from UCL's transition programme and its benefits to staff and students.

Dr Johnstone began the second session '**supporting students – Transkills resources**' by discussing the aims of the Transkills project and the online skills portal. Anny King, Director of the Language Centre, demonstrated the new Cambridge Online Study Skills (COSS) resources, which are designed to support first year undergraduates in developing core study skills. Dr Corinne Boz of CPPD discussed workshops developed for and with supervisors in the Biological Sciences to

enhance the teaching of academic writing, while Dr Joanna Page from the Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages demonstrated discipline-specific resources designed to introduce students to academic writing styles and skills. Dr Steve Hewson then showcased NRICH, part of the Millennium Mathematics Project, which aims to develop contextualised mathematical skills by exploring the mathematical concepts underlying science, technology and engineering.

During the **group activity** participants mapped when, and by whom, students should be introduced to key transition issues. Opinions varied, but those present agreed that support was necessary and that ideally it should be available at appropriate points during the year, rather than concentrated in the induction period.

Attendees agreed on the importance of understanding changes to secondary education and how they could affect the skills and knowledge of university entrants. Ideas included: talking to current students, acting as parent governors, and getting involved in national debates about the future of the secondary curriculum.

It was agreed that training for supervisors should cover transition issues and how to support students, as they often play a critical role in helping students to manage the transition and take responsibility for their learning. Participants acknowledged that there was some variation in the quality of the student experience across the Collegiate University, although the standard is generally very high, and welcomed initiatives like Transkills which share good practice.

A full report of the session is available in the events section of the LTS website: www.cam.ac.uk/lts

Update on the Transkills project

<http://skills.caret.cam.ac.uk/transkills/>

As part of the Transkills project a set of online resources have been made available to current undergraduates. Feedback will be sought during 2009-10 and, subject to the results of evaluation and consultation, some of the resources may be made available to students in subsequent years prior to their arrival in Cambridge.

For further information about any of the following, contact Dr Keith Johnstone (email: kj10 at cam.ac.uk).

Resources for students

1. Undergraduate Skills Directory

<http://webservices.admin.cam.ac.uk/uskills/>

The Skills Directory is a searchable database of online resources for undergraduates at the University of Cambridge, including those produced by the Transkills Project, to support their academic development. The Directory is intended to be used by students looking for advice, practice, information and support in their work. The resources in the Directory do not supplant the advice and support given by supervisors, Directors of Studies or any staff involved with teaching within the University. Rather students are advised to use the resources to supplement guidance given by teaching staff. The Directory currently contains over 300 online resources, and will continue to grow throughout the academic year.

Dr Keith Johnstone, Academic Leader of the Transkills Project said:

It's been amazing to see the wealth of resources provided by faculties and departments to support student learning. In addition, we have developed a wide range of online resources to aid the transition of students to university study.

Dr Rob Wallach, Secretary to the Senior Tutors' Committee commented:

The Skills Directory brings together, for the first time, a wide range of resources from across the University to support both postgraduates and undergraduates. The new Transkills materials in particular provides excellent support for undergraduates which will facilitate and make more rewarding their first year studies.

The Pro-Vice Chancellor for Education, Professor John Rallison said:

The resources developed by the Transkills Project will help to underpin the University's commitment to support students to enable them to fulfil their full potential at Cambridge.

The Skills Directory can be accessed via CamTools, the University's Skills Portal (www.skills.cam.ac.uk),

and CUSU's website. Faculties, departments and other University institutions are also encouraged to link to the Directory through their own web and CamTools sites. For information about how to add a Skills Directory button to CamTools sites please see:

<http://skills.caret.cam.ac.uk/camtools/>.



The Skills Directory was featured as a University news item on the first day of Term and all Freshers will receive publicity about the Directory early in the Term.

2. Cambridge Online Study Skills (COSS)

<http://skills.caret.cam.ac.uk/coss/>

COSS was developed in collaboration with the University's Language Centre to provide generic resources for key study skills, including: academic writing, effective listening, effective reading, making the most of supervisions, time management, and exam preparation. Each topic can be accessed independently and features: an explanation, one or more practice activities, a summary of the key points, and a set of resources for further study.

COSS can be accessed via the Skills Directory, and University institutions may also wish to link to COSS through their own websites. COSS has been designed so that in subsequent years the resources could be made available online or distributed as a DVD.

3. Academic writing

In addition to COSS, the Transkills project is committed to developing discipline-specific resources to support students' academic development. Academic writing packages have been developed for students in Biological and Biomedical Sciences (covering: academic writing, using feedback, referencing and plagiarism, and exam

writing) and Modern and Medieval Languages (in collaboration with Dr Joanna Page), which will also be of value to other science and arts first year students respectively. These packages complement the resources for supervisors described below. Additional packages will be developed during the academic year.

4. Maths skills

stemNRICH has been developed in collaboration with NRICH (and specifically with Dr Steve Hewson) to help explore the richness of the vital mathematical ideas underlying science, technology and engineering in physical, relevant and engaging contexts.

The application nodes bioNRICH, chemNRICH, physNRICH and engNRICH are discipline-specific, whereas the two mathematical sections 'core scientific mathematics' and 'advanced scientific mathematics' explore the mathematics which is crucial to any scientist's toolkit. These resources are targeted at A-level students and first year undergraduates to facilitate their development of contextualised mathematical skills. They may also be used as part of induction activities.

Preparatory problem sets have also been developed for Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Engineering and Applied Mathematics. Finally, online MathTutor and StatTutor resources have been made available to students for

general maths support.

Students can access both the academic writing and maths resources via the Skills Directory.

Resources for supervisors

1. Workshops

The Transkills project, in collaboration with the Centre for Personal and Professional Development (CPPD), has established an ongoing series of academic writing workshops for supervisors of first year Biology and Biomedical Science students.

The project team is willing to consider developing additional workshops to help train teaching staff and students in a wide range academic practice areas. Expressions of interest should be sent to: transkills@admin.cam.ac.uk.

2. Online resources

Supervisor packages have been developed for academic writing in Biological and Biomedical Sciences as well as Modern and Medieval Languages (in collaboration with Dr Joanna Page). Access to the resources is via the Graduate Skills Directory and departmental and course websites.

Dr Keith Johnstone, Academic Leader

Update on the CourseTools project

What would be of greatest help to you in creating and running your courses? If you could wave a magic wand, what would you change? These were the questions that numerous academic and administrative staff were asked over the summer in a series of interviews and less formal meetings and design workshops run by the CourseTools project. CourseTools has 3.5 years of JISC funding to develop software to support the process of creating, revising and administering courses, and is currently working with the University to agree specific goals. So far, five areas have emerged as potential focuses for the project:

First, and most popular with staff involved in discussions so far, is the suggestion that existing information could be used to create an **online version of the Reporter's Lecture List**. This would produce a searchable, browseable list of all lectures taking place across the University, making it easier for students and graduate supervisors to find out about relevant lectures in other faculties. Everyone has agreed that any software created should be easy-to-use and flexible, as this type of specific tool is often used very infrequently and people have little time to familiarise themselves with complex interfaces.

Many of those with recent experience of the **process of creating or making significant changes to courses** felt that there were opportunities for software to cut down some of the more routine administrative tasks associated with it, freeing up more time to develop the teaching itself. Some suggested that if tools were sufficiently flexible, they might also be helpful for people preparing for QAA Audit, or other reviews. A number of staff, particularly those in new roles at the University, also felt that a few very **simple tools for supporting routine course administration** would be helpful, and might make a surprising difference.

Timetabling issues were mentioned repeatedly, both those relating to the process of designing timetables and booking rooms and the ways in which timetables are made available. Finally, some staff had recently experienced outdated course information 'going rogue' and appearing in unexpected places, and felt that information would be easier to maintain consistently if it only had to be maintained in one authoritative **course information repository**.

Further information about these areas is available on <http://coursetools.caret.cam.ac.uk/project-reports>. We'd be delighted to find out what you think, so please give us a ring on (7)65357 or send an email to the project manager, Dr Amyas Phillips (amyas.phillips@caret.cam.ac.uk).

Dr Amyas Phillips and Harriet Truscott, CARET

Asperger Syndrome service development project

In August 2009 the Disability Resource Centre (DRC) started a research project to review and develop the support services for students with Asperger Syndrome (AS) across the University.

Asperger Syndrome is an autism spectrum condition, first described by Hans Asperger in 1944. Asperger Syndrome is characterised by the presence of three major functional impairments, in the absence of general learning difficulties. These impairments occur in:

- social interaction and social relationships;
- verbal and non-verbal communication;
- imagination, behaviour and flexibility of thought.

Students with Asperger Syndrome can benefit from the following provision:

- pastoral support;
- a dedicated support worker;
- awareness training for staff;
- specialist tuition support (e.g. language skills and structuring work);
- materials in literal language;
- extra time immediately after group sessions to check that they have been understood;
- alternatives to group working as a way of completing team work;
- having the same information conveyed in more than one way (e.g. verbally and in writing);
- time to get accustomed to the campus or site.



The number of students with Asperger Syndrome disclosing to the University is on a rising trend with applications increasing from 21 in 2008-9 to 34 in 2009-10. Furthermore, a number of students are diagnosed after starting their courses. Currently the DRC has 43 students with AS on its database, and it is likely that there are a significant number of non-disclosed or undiagnosed students in addition to this figure.

In November 2008, joint-funding was identified to enable the DRC to develop a proposal for the Asperger Project Officer post in conjunction with Professor Simon Baron-Cohen from the Autism Research Centre (ARC). The aim of the project is to develop a best practice model in line with other national initiatives, and the student voice will be central to this.

Joanna Hastwell has joined the DRC to coordinate the project and will be working closely with the Autism Research Centre, the Cambridge branch of the National Autistic Society and the Autism Centre at Sheffield Hallam University.

The project is funded via a grant from the Baily Thomas Charitable Fund and will run primarily until August 2010.

For further information, or to discuss the project, please contact Joanna on (7)46508 or via email: jlh89@admin.cam.ac.uk.

Your input would be greatly appreciated and will be invaluable to the success of the project.

John Harding, Head of the DRC

2009 National Student Survey (NSS) results

We are pleased to announce that the University of Cambridge had the highest overall student satisfaction score among Russell Group universities at 91%, with some Triposes scoring 100%! Participation in the survey increased from 53% in 2008 to 55% in 2009, and we hope that participation will be even greater in 2010.

Results for individual Triposes have been sent to Faculty Boards for consideration, and the publically available results of the survey can be accessed via the Unistats website: www.unistats.com

The NSS is a survey of final year students and is increasingly used to inform national league tables. For further information please see: www.thestudentsurvey.com

Disability Resource Centre user surveys

In 2009 the DRC completed a monitoring and evaluation project as an element of its revised quality assurance process.

One key aspect of this project was the completion of user surveys for students who use the DRC's services and for staff who support these students. The aim for the DRC was to establish baseline data against which future performance could be measured and to identify operational and strategic themes and development opportunities both within and without the DRC.

The survey findings will be presented to the General Board's Education Committee and the Senior Tutors' Committee for information. In brief, the learning and teaching-related themes and findings included:

- Disability training has had a positive impact, with those attending having made significant changes to working practices.
- There is a need to continue to raise disability awareness across the Collegiate University via training that is accessible to all, not just new, staff.
- There are concerns about anticipatory duty compliance¹ (specifically regarding the provision of course notes and materials in accessible formats and in advance of lectures).

- Intra-University communication (e.g. between: the DRC and Colleges; admissions and Colleges; Colleges and departments).
- Continued development of inclusive and accessible teaching and learning practices.
- Continued development of post-diagnostic support for students.
- The admissions process, disclosure and disabled applicants.

The DRC is committed to continuing to work with the University and Colleges to develop good practice in inclusive learning and teaching, assist with effective communication, and enable the Collegiate University to meet its obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA).

If you would like a copy of the surveys please contact, the DRC Manager, John Harding (jah214@cam.ac.uk).

John Harding, DRC Manager

¹ The anticipatory duty within DDA legislation relates to the requirement to make, as far as possible, 'reasonable adjustments' to ensure that working or learning environments are inclusive and that those who have a disability are not treated as a separate category.

HEFCE report on teaching, quality and the student experience

In response to much public and media debate in 2008 about standards across the higher education sector, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) commissioned a report by a group, chaired by the Vice-Chancellor of Essex, on a range of issues relating to teaching, quality and the student experience. The report makes recommendations across a wide range of issues which, if implemented, would have a major impact on the University.

The most significant recommendations include:

- the need for clearer, uniform and publicly understandable information about our courses (including details of student contact hours);
- more transparent information about marking and classing criteria;
- more feedback to students on examination performance;
- a national description of the role of External Examiners (and possibly the provision of an independent authority to which an External can turn when routes for raising concerns within a university have been exhausted);
- a likely shift in the QAA's audit methodology towards scrutiny of primary evidence (e.g. seeking the views of External Examiners as part of the audit process);
- a uniform sector-wide approach to quality and standards.

The University will, through whatever means possible, argue vigorously for diversity (as the Vice-Chancellor did in her speech in the Regent House on 1 October 2009) and against artificial means to impose an unrealistic uniformity across the sector.

A summary of the report can be found at: www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_40/09_40.pdf

The Vice-Chancellor's speech is available online at: www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/v-c/speeches/20091001.html

Duncan McCallum, Deputy Academic Secretary

LTS website: www.cam.ac.uk/lts

HOW TO... Mental health awareness workshops

Mental health issues among students, both graduate and undergraduate, are reportedly on the rise at Cambridge. These difficulties are due to a variety of reasons – expectations (real or perceived), work pressure and medical issues being but a few of them.

The Colleges are often at the frontline when dealing with the challenges and ramifications of mental health difficulties. A wide range of people (from Senior Tutors to Tutors, Director of Studies, College Lecturers, Chaplains, Nurses, etc.) are there to offer support and are typically the first port of call for students in distress. It is important that anyone who is likely to encounter students in distress should be provided with information that enables them to recognise and respond effectively and in a timely manner to early signs of distress. It is also crucial that they should be aware of the sources of support available to themselves and that they should be able to benefit from some form of professional development and support.

This is the background that has led to a fruitful collaboration between Kirsty Wayland (Disability Development Consultant, DRC), Lisa Halpern (Senior Counsellor, Student Counselling Service) and Anna Gannon (Academic Development Consultant, CPPD), which has resulted in the setting up of 'HOW TO...', an innovative series of professional development workshops on mental health issues. Two lunchtime workshops were run during the last academic year. The first, which introduced some of the issues behind the need for mental health awareness, was held in Michaelmas Term with a presentation by Gareth Cronin, a mental health social worker and adult careers guidance practitioner, followed by a question and answer session. The second workshop, which took place in Lent Term, was entitled 'How to respond to

students in distress' and was led by Lisa Halpern, who introduced a short presentation and, with Kirsty Wayland, led the subsequent discussion.

Both workshops were extremely well attended (with an average of 45 participants), and very well received. Comments include 'it was well organised, succinct and ran to time. The content more than met my expectations'. The workshops also provided valuable networking opportunities for people across the Collegiate University who share an interest in student support but whose wide range of responsibilities mean that their 'day jobs' do not generally bring them together.

The new series of 'HOW TO...' offered for this academic year has been shaped by feedback from participants at last year's events. Workshops will be run on 10 November 2009 and 2 March 2010 (both 1-2pm), hosted by St Edmund's College:

- **How to best approach helping people** will be based on discussion of three case studies and will take place on 10 November.
- **How to understand 'labels' (bipolar disorder and other diagnoses)** will take place on 2 March 2010.

Both workshops will be highly interactive, with a good balance between factual information and opportunities for discussion. The timing (an hour over lunchtime) takes into consideration busy people's schedules.

Please note: these are 'brown bag events', so bring your own lunch; coffee and tea will be provided.

If you are interested in attending either or both of the workshops, please contact Dr Anna Gannon: (ag335@cam.ac.uk).

Dr Anna Gannon, CPPD

LTS event programme for 2009-10

We are pleased to announce that the following sessions will take place in 2009-10:

- **Student appeals** [Thursday 3 December, 2009]
- **BGS' Code of Practice and supporting graduate students** [Thursday 25 February, 2010]
- **New technologies for learning and teaching** [Wednesday 27 January, 2010]
- **Effective mentoring** [Thursday 22 April, 2010]

The events will be held over lunch (normally from 1-2pm with lunch available from 12.30).

Detailed invitations to each event will be circulated nearer the time, and we hope to add a couple of other sessions to the programme later in the year.

The topics have been chosen in response to feedback from last year's LTS attendees. If you have ideas for a future event, either that you would be interested in attending or that you would like to lead or contribute to, please contact Jacqui Brocker (jb682@admin.cam.ac.uk).

We are happy to include adverts for, or articles about, LTS-related activities (e.g. conferences, workshops or projects) in LTS News. If you would like to contribute an article or notice, please contact Jacqui for details of the next deadline.

