Enhancing engagement of local 'commuter' students at induction to support transition and promote student retention and success

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ABSTRACT: Local 'commuting' students are considered less likely to engage with the social sphere of University life, which may contribute to them becoming disengaged and more likely to withdraw. However, demand and enthusiasm for Local Student Orientation events at the University of Glasgow belied this thinking and suggested these 'at risk' students could be more readily encouraged to engage early in the transition to higher education.

These events were the culmination of research conducted with first year students who live outwith institution-maintained accommodation. Barriers to participation in induction and orientation, and engagement with academic and student life were investigated; with particular focus on 'non-traditional' students, to identify the further support needed.

We examine the concerns of new local commuting students and provide details and evaluation of our successful early induction events. We use continuation as an initial measure to show a positive impact on student retention, as well as reported impact on a successful transition to first year study.

1 Background

The project, supported by the University of Glasgow (UoG) Learning and Teaching Development Fund (LTDF) in 2012, aimed to investigate barriers and use insight from current students, to develop ideas for promoting engagement with the University before the start of teaching, such as the provision of additional induction activities to ease the transition from prior study into the University's learning environment. The UoG draws a relatively high proportion of students from its local area (approximately 40% of undergraduates). It is thought that local 'commuting' students often miss out on orientation and induction activities in Freshers' Week and can be less engaged with extra-curricular activities throughout the year as they are not based on campus. That lack of engagement with the social sphere of university life can contribute to their becoming disengaged with learning and more likely to withdraw from studies early, a key facet described in Vincent Tinto's seminal student retention theory (described in Yorke, 2004).

Tinto's model of student retention has been revisited and revised by many researchers and practitioners, who have emphasised different parts of the model (e.g. Braxton, 2000), but it remains in essence the enduring theory of retention/attrition. Key points include the importance of both academic and social 'integration' or 'fit' with the University and community. Tinto (1997) worked with American community colleges with low retention rates, but correspondingly high levels of commuting students.

Research conducted by the UoG Retention Working Group similarly identified commuting students, the undergraduate cohort living within 30 miles of Glasgow and not in University accommodation, as a group at higher risk of first year non-continuation and progression. This was the cohort targeted by the LTDF project. This 'commuting' group also incorporates students with other 'risk' factors: mature students (21 or over on entry); those from widening participation (WP) target schools with low progression to higher education; and those from areas of socio-economic disadvantage (Walker, 2007). Socio-economic disadvantage is our key primary indicator of WP; it is currently used by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and measured by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). This combines seven measures to rank postcode area by relative disadvantage (Scottish Government, 2012). How effective UoG is at widening participation is primarily judged by the number of students we recruit from the postcodes under the two most relatively disadvantaged quintiles, or 40% (termed MD40), of the Scottish postcode areas (weighted by population density).

In our considerable efforts to widen participation to the University, we work largely with what could be termed 'non-traditional' students. A 'traditional' student would typically enter the university straight from school, achieving the appropriate tariff by sitting the requisite exams in S5 (year 5 of secondary school) and being made an offer on this basis. These students will typically attend a school with a high progression rate, i.e. many school leavers going on to higher education (HE). Non-traditional students encompass a wide range of applicant groups, but there are certain criteria a typical WP student will meet. These factors often coincide with the disadvantaged postcode areas identified by the SIMD. If a pupil lives in a disadvantaged postcode, they will often attend a school with a low progression rate to higher education, their family will have limited or no background in HE and they may receive an Education Maintenance Allowance. Other important WP criteria include adult learners returning to education and anyone who has spent time in care.

The UoG, a research-intensive Russell Group and Scottish ancient institution, has a successful record in widening participation. The SFC 'Learning for All: Measures of Success' report (SFC, 2015, page 47) shows 27% of the Scottish domiciled students studying at UoG are from MD40 postcodes. In this report, the SFC highlight students from the 40% most disadvantaged data zones in the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation and also mature students as target groups for retention activities. Retention rates of Scottish undergraduate entrants by protected characteristic or disadvantaged postcode are provided (SFC, 2015, page 36); in 2011/12, 87% of MD40 and 87% of students over 21 were retained compared to 90% of the total cohort. A gap, therefore, remains.

UoG runs a suite of WP pre-entry programmes, individually and in partnership, to engage with these various WP groups. Through this provision, we can offer an access route to every subject area within the University, for both school leavers and adult returners alike. More details can be found in the paper by the same authors in this compendium: 'Pre-entry Widening Participation Programmes at the University of Glasgow: preparing applicants for successful transitions to degree study' (Croll & Browitt, 2015).

2 Research to identify barriers/enablers to engagement and inform student transition support

2.1 Pilot support event

In Freshers' Week 2012, a student support event was piloted; a 'drop in café' targeted mainly at the WP cohort of entrants to the University. This was an opportunity to meet staff and students and get information over a free hot drink. There was little uptake by new students, but it was immediately apparent that mature students displayed more interest than any other cohort. This pilot also provided an opportunity to get feedback from staff and

student helpers on what other provision could be more appealing and effective. The opinions of the new students were gathered during qualitative research carried out in session 2012/13.

2.2 Qualitative research design

We conducted a series of focus groups and surveys with students who had predominantly completed a pre-entry programme or attended a school with low progression to HE. None of the students were staying in Halls of Residence, meaning they were all considered as very likely to face issues around engagement. In an attempt to understand the barriers to engagement for commuting students, the research covered: experiences of transition to first year study compared to expectations; preparation provided by pre-entry course (where appropriate); and experience of Freshers' Week and induction activities.

51 students participated across 5 focus groups. We spoke separately to adult returners who had participated in an access course, to follow up on the specific requirements for the mature group who had been over-represented at the pilot event. 84 responses to an online survey were also gathered from those who could not attend a focus group. The Students' Representative Council (SRC) shared their Freshers' Week survey results, allowing cross-referencing and corroboration of our research findings.

2.3 Research findings

Barriers to engagement

Reasons given by new students for non-attendance at Freshers'/orientation week included: still working in summer employment; other commitments; what was on offer did not appeal to them. Travelling home late was a barrier to engagement. Some students travel for two hours each way and one student in a focus group reported that he had to set off at 8.30pm to make his last connections home. Some did attend night events during Freshers' Week and accepted the expense of the taxi home, but commented it would be easier to manage if they knew people with whom to share a taxi. Another barrier was students not wanting to be out every night: 'getting in at 4am on a Tuesday when your Dad's getting up for his work isn't great'. The difficulties in participating in the social side of student life, during Freshers' Week and throughout the year, for those students who were still under 18 for much of their first year, was also discussed.

The mature students we spoke to perceived Freshers' Week as just being for younger students; aimed at school leavers who were only interested in the nights out. We discussed what it meant to be a 'mature' student, as their ages ranged from 21 (the Higher Education Statistics Agency, HESA, definition of a mature student) up to 60. The consensus was that it was about being at a different stage in life and having a different attitude towards study; more focused overall. The younger local commuting students we spoke to perceived Freshers' Week as mainly being for students in Halls, who did not know Glasgow. There were comments about some introductory lectures focussing on aspects of living away from home for the first time that were not relevant to them.

Enablers

An academic focus is essential. These students were more likely to go to activities perceived as relevant to their studies. For example, during induction week they wanted to find out more specifics about starting their courses. The importance of an academic focus and activities in the 'academic sphere' was highlighted in the findings of the Higher Education Academy 'What Works?' project. In the project report, Thomas (2012, page 10)

summarises:

> 'Particularly effective interventions… [for retention and success]… start pre-entry, and have an overt academic purpose. Such interventions often develop peer networks and friendships, create links with academic members of staff, provide key information, shape realistic expectations, improve academic skills, develop students' confidence, demonstrate future relevance, and nurture belonging.'

With this being a project led by a university service, we could not focus on the academic perspective as much as is advised and we did not intend to duplicate information that is already provided in Freshers' Week or during College/School/class inductions.

Freshers' Week was described as a 'reconnaissance mission' by one (mature) student and another said they did not realise until later that induction week was also about learning what was available in terms of support services and extra-curricular activities, such as clubs and societies. Students were more likely to go to Freshers' Week/ induction if they had friends who were attending. They felt that living at home delayed the need to make friends and become a 'full-time student' and reported feeling they were different to the students living in Halls. Some reported a negative impact; they felt left out of groups and activities because they did not live on or near campus, although the benefit of being at home was also noted, for example, when it came to the pressure of exam time.

In thinking about support, we looked back to the STAR project resources (Cook, 2005) and the guidelines for induction:

The STAR Project Induction Guidelines
1. Activities should familiarise students with the local area, campus & support services.
2. Activities should highlight students' academic obligations and obligations of staff.
3. Activities should support development of independent study habits for HE.
4. Events should provide the foundations for social interactions between students and the development of communities of practice.
5. Activities should promote good communication between staff and students.
6. Induction is required to manage transitions between elements of courses.

3 Local Student Orientation events

Informed by consultations with students and the literature, activities were developed and launched for the start of the 2013/14 academic session and subsequently developed further for 2014/15 by the Widening Participation team at the University of Glasgow. Students identified as 'local', based on their Scottish domicile region and postcode at application, were invited via email to an event in the week before Freshers' Week. The invite indicated that the event was aimed at those who would not be living in University accommodation.

The Local Student Orientation (LSO) event in 2013 was over-subscribed, with over 400 pre-registrations and around 320 new students participating. This clearly showed a need and an enthusiasm for this support existed among the group of 'commuter' students who were traditionally thought to be less likely to engage in student life. In 2014, we were able to plan for larger numbers, but once again had to close pre-registration with around 650 expressing interest.

3.1 Event participants

Each year approximately 1,600 new students were invited to participate. Figure 1 shows the proportion of students in potential retention risk groups in the invited and participating populations for the Local Student Orientation events held in 2013 and 2014.

In 2013, all target WP groups were over-represented within the overall student cohort who participated in the events, compared to the proportions of WP groups in the invited population, as shown in Figure 1. In 2014, there were slightly fewer mature students but those from low progression schools were over-represented and made up over a third of the attendees, showing we were attracting and supporting those most at risk in terms of successful transition to University.

In 2014, 495 students attended the Local Student Orientation event. This is equivalent to around 20% of new Scottish undergraduate entrants to the University of Glasgow. 36% of those participating in the event came from MD40 postcode areas, which is also close to 20% of the total MD40 new entrants to the University in 2014/15.
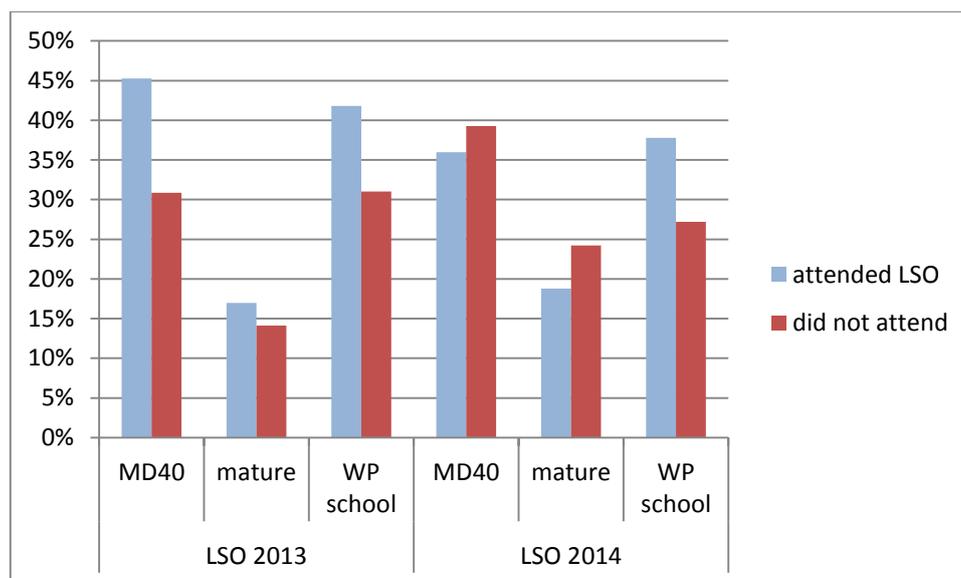

Figure 1: proportion of students in potential retention risk groups in invite and participant populations for Local Student Orientation events. Note these categories are not mutually exclusive.

3.2 Activities at Local Student Orientation events, 2013 and 2014

The activities provided on Local Student Orientation days commenced with new local students in their College groups. After an icebreaker activity, they were broken into small groups of around 3-4 students to discuss their positive expectations ('what you are most looking forward to about starting University') then moving on to their concerns, by identifying 'the three most important questions you still need answered'. This was an opportunity for the new students to meet each other and also to talk to circulating current undergraduates, postgraduate WP tutors and staff including: Chief Advisers of Study; first year co-ordinators; academics; and the Student Learning Service.

The three questions identified by each group were collated and in the plenary, a panel of staff and students provided answers to the most common questions. The College focus in this session provided some academic input, so the discussions and questions could cover relevant academic information. However, as students have the choice of many combinations of subjects to make up their first year curriculum at UoG, it was not possible to guarantee that course-specific questions could be answered at this point.

Lunch was provided in one of the student unions before the SRC and other student bodies held a session to demystify Freshers' Week, highlighting activities that may be of interest to this group of new students.

In 2013, we held a separate session for mature students, as the research had identified a desire for this group to meet each other and have their particular needs addressed. In 2014, this provision was extended, with more information and guidance, and more current mature students on hand to participate in a 'World Café'-style discussion. At the 2014 event, one of the UoG WP Development Officers also launched a new initiative to provide ongoing support for mature students throughout their first year: the Adult Learners Network.

For the afternoon sessions, students were split up by pre-entry programme: Access/mature; Top-Up; Reach (Access to the High Demand Professions); and University of Glasgow Summer School. This allowed students who had previously met on a pre-entry programme, to meet up again, provided some continuity from pre-entry through the transition to University, and allowed feedback on the effectiveness of the pre-entry programmes to be gathered.

Moodle is the Virtual Learning Environment used by undergraduate courses across the University. Feedback on optional introductory Moodle sessions in 2013 was positive, indicating that this was a useful activity for transition to the learning and teaching environment. In 2014, Moodle was introduced to all students.

Additionally, an optional orientation quiz was inserted at the end of the day that directed participants around many of the key University buildings used for first year teaching, particularly the locations of some of the largest lecture theatres, and finished in the student union building not used for lunch. This replaced the optional guided campus tours in 2013, which had become unfeasible in 2014, owing to the large numbers of participants.

3.3 Evaluation of Local Student Orientation event

The link to an online questionnaire (SurveyMonkey) was sent around one month into the session, inviting students to reflect on whether their attendance at the event impacted on their experiences of the initial transition to University, and gathering feedback on the activities provided.

In 2014, there were 140 responses to the survey (28%). 95% of those respondents agreed the Local Student Orientation event was enjoyable or very enjoyable. Students were asked to record the best thing about the day, what they had gained from participating and why they would recommend the event to future new local students. Responses predominantly referred to meeting fellow students and classmates in similar circumstances to themselves, i.e. not staying in Halls of Residence.

On being asked how the day could be improved, the most popular comments referred to having more time to meet people on the same course. However, we had decided we could not logistically split students into courses as we lacked space, staff and students to cover every degree programme. We also did not want to repeat what students would hear at College/School inductions, in Freshers' Week and class inductions for their subjects. We aimed to signpost these activities for getting more information, but on the basis of the feedback, could perhaps make it more explicit that these opportunities are still to come.

Figure 2 shows the average 'usefulness' of elements of the Local Student Orientation event in 2014, based on responses to the question on a 3-point Likert scale. The most 'useful' were the free gifts in the 'Welcome wallet', followed by the panel of staff & students answering questions, information provided and opportunities to meet staff.

Staff feedback, from Deans of Learning and Teaching to the post-graduate tutors involved, was unanimously positive in terms of the need for such an event, the appropriate level of support provided and the interactive atmosphere on the day and in the sessions.
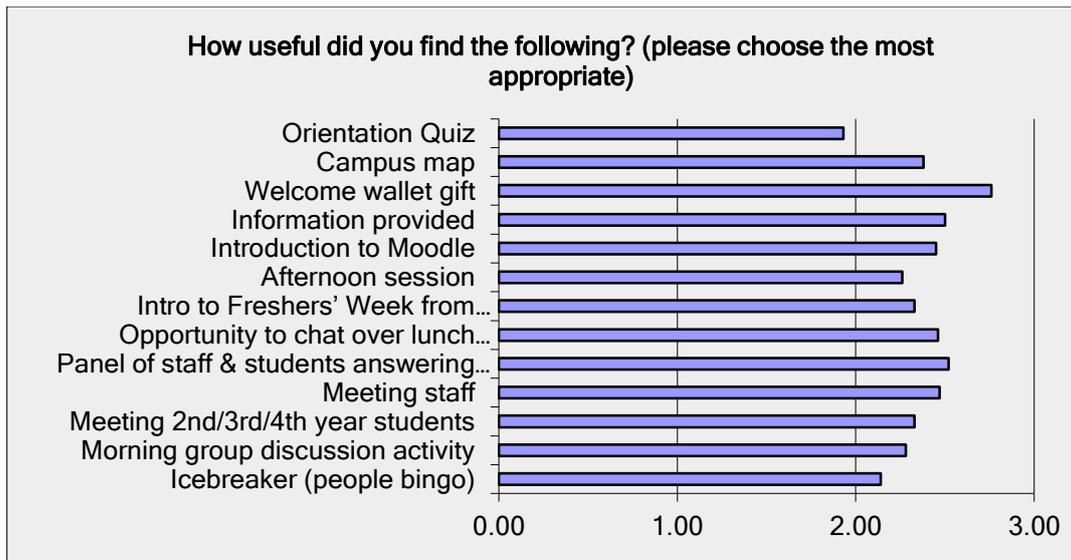
Figure 2: Feedback on activities at Local Student Orientation day 2014

4 Concerns of local commuting students

The most common concerns raised by students, and subsequently answered by our panel of staff and students from the Colleges have been collated as an FAQ resource, as these concerns are unlikely to be confined to commuting or WP students.

In 2013 and 2014, the most common student questions, by some way, were regarding reading lists and buying books. Concerns also existed over finding your way around campus and not getting lost, social facilities for student life (e.g. where to get cheap food or drink) and what to do if late for or absent from class. However, the majority of the most common questions were around academic matters, i.e. what is a lecture, timetables and term dates, structure of the average day, laboratory classes and groups, the library, what to bring on the first day and if you can change a course. This correlates with our research findings where we noted that local commuting and WP students put a heavy focus on the academic relevance of student activities.

The most common travel-related question asked by commuting students was about parking on campus. This was somewhat surprising, but we surmise local students already know their bus and train routes and options for getting around. Other commonly asked questions were around social facilities, making friends and campus orientation, sports facilities / joining sports teams and practicalities like when are student ID cards available.

5 Impact on student transition

5.1 Impact on the student experience

In response to the request for feedback on the Local Student Orientation events, participants said they gained confidence and reassurance, lots of information and that they made friends. A large social impact was reported, relating to meeting people. Circa 90% of survey respondents recorded that they still saw those they had first met at the event and some said they had made their closest student friends there. In recent focus groups with WP students, those who attended the Local Student Orientation event agreed it was useful to meet people before the start of term.

32% said their participation in the Local Student Orientation event affected their experience

in a positive way; they attended more Freshers' Week activities because they had already met people to go with or see there. However, the largest impact reported was regarding the academic side of student life.

50% said their participation in the event affected their experience of starting classes in Week 1 because: having had concerns addressed, they felt more prepared; they had met people they would see in their classes; and they felt confident they knew their way around campus. Over 60% of respondents knew where to find student support should they need it; both academic support and other services.

5.2 Impact on student retention and success

Regarding impact on student retention, continuation after year 1 is the main measure used at UoG, mirroring the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) performance indicator of non-continuation. We continue to monitor academic success of the cohorts as they progress through their degree programme.

Continuation of 2013 participants after year 1 was 92.5%, over 5% higher than those invited who did not attend. This cohort continued their studies at the average rate for the University (continuation at the same institution in HESA, 2015). For the 2014 cohort, the same pattern was observed in the initial data available: 5% more of those invitees who did not attend the LSO withdrew from their studies by the end of Semester 2, compared to those students who attended.

Although we found these correlations to be statistically significant, they cannot be wholly attributed to attendance at one event as there will be other factors involved. For example, those who self-selected to attend the event may have been more likely to continue and succeed as this in itself shows a certain degree of initial motivation and confidence. These factors are thought to influence persistence at University (Walker, 2007).

5.3 Impact on retention risk groups

The cohorts were analysed by the retention risk factors described earlier (MD40 postcode area, mature student and low progression school attendance) to determine the comparative impact of attendance at the event on student retention of those groups shown to have lower continuation rates (SFC, 2015).

Figure 3 displays differences in continuation, relative to a baseline of the total cohort of local 'commuting' students who did not attend a Local Student Orientation event in 2013 or 2014. Initial data shows attendees at the Local Student Orientation event in 2013, from all risk groups, were more likely to continue their studies after Year 1 compared to those invited who did not attend (comparing blue and red bars in the chart in Figure 3).

When compared to the baseline, average continuation of attending cohorts was higher in all cases, except mature students in 2013 which was equal to the baseline. Mature students may have benefited most from participation in the events as the largest differences are apparent between mature students who did or did not attend.

Of the risk groups, only students who did not attend, and had progressed from low progression schools, are above the total local baseline. These are target schools for our WP schools programmes and most entrants to UoG will have participated in one of our pre-entry programmes. Our research has shown participation is good preparation for the transition to University and has a positive impact on continuation and progression (Croll & Browitt, 2015).

In 2014, event participants were less likely to withdraw by the end of Semester 2, **particularly** if from a risk group (i.e. all risk groups have higher average continuation rate than the total local commuting cohort who attended the event in 2014).
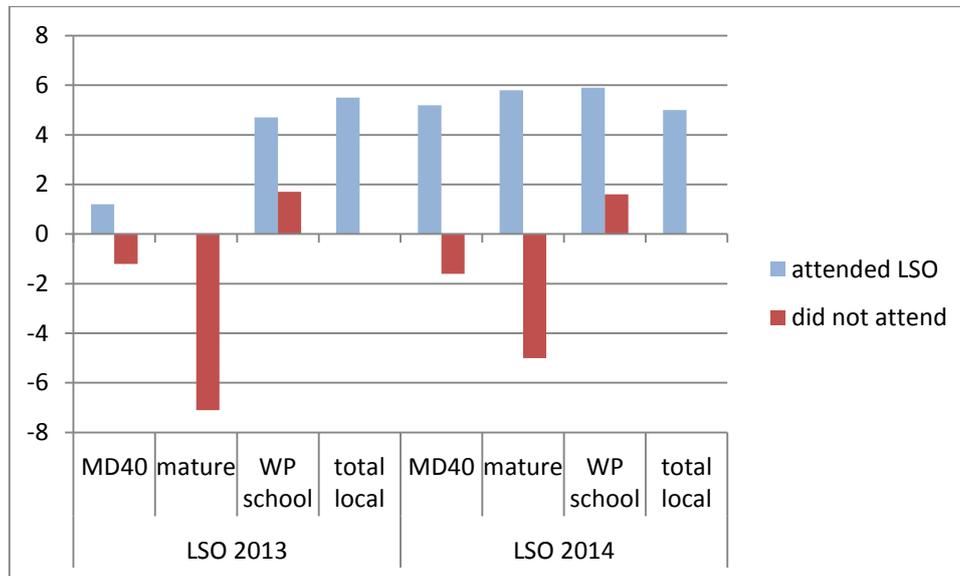

Figure 3: Difference in average continuation of cohorts of students who did or did not attend a Local Student Orientation event. Continuation of potential retention risk groups are shown relative to all local students who did not participate in an event.

6 Conclusions

A need was identified for additional support for students making the transition to University. After researching the issues and piloting activities as described, we developed a support event for local 'commuting' students. This is now embedded within the induction processes of the University of Glasgow. There are three primary conclusions:

- Students need to have the opportunity to meet each other, primarily, but also staff and more senior students, and feel they belong to the broader University community;
- Academic relevance is particularly of interest to this diverse and growing group of 'non-traditional' students, who have a strong focus on study and are not so heavily invested in 'student life';
- Good induction/orientation to the social and academic aspects of university life can positively impact on transition to university for those groups most 'at risk' in terms of engagement, retention and success.

With this being a centrally-coordinated activity, we could not focus as much on the academic perspective as is advised (Thomas, 2012). However, we hope findings from our work can inform academic inductions. Point 6 from the STAR guidelines (Cook, 2015) highlights that induction is a longitudinal process and should not be regarded as being limited to the day, week or month at the start of University, Therefore, students may need continued support to succeed to their full potential.

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