

CASE STUDY

General information
Name of institution: University of Plymouth
Primary contact/s: Dr Rebecca Turner (rebecca.turner@plymouth.ac.uk)
Location: Educational Development, Library & Academic Development
Type of institution: Publicly funded teaching-focused university in Southwest England
Level of study: First year undergraduate
The first module of the undergraduate curriculum was designed to be immersive, with new first year undergraduates engaging in all module-related teaching and assessment activities within their first four weeks at university.

Issue: Developing realistic expectations of university level study through immersive scheduling
<p>Immersive Scheduling represents an approach to curriculum design whereby students are taught a single topic or module in a concentrated burst. It was the term used at the University of Plymouth to convey to academic staff the idea of new students becoming immersed in their programme of study. In contrast to many of the traditional applications of block scheduling, whereby this model of delivery is used across the whole curriculum, here it was only used for one module at the beginning of each of the two semesters of the first year.</p> <p>Implementing immersive scheduling within the first year sought to provide a supportive learning environment in which students could 'learn how to learn' in higher education. Studying only one module for the first four weeks would give students the chance to adapt to the expectations of university-level study. Additionally, it would also create conditions for extended exposure to course peers / staff, allowing first years to form closer friendships with peers and get to know the academic and support staff that would support their learning throughout their undergraduate studies.</p>
Goals In addition to the ambitions outlined above the immersive modules adhered to the following guiding principles:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The immersive module would introduce students to university-level study and involve the use of active pedagogies that would encourage student-led learning• Taught sessions would be a minimum of two-hours in length to support pedagogic innovation, allowing students to engage in activities that could foster peer networking• All assessments would be designed to be inclusive, and exams would not be used. An emphasis placed on opportunities for students to receive formative feedback, and prompt return of summative feedback. This would allow students to gain accurate insights into their progress, acknowledging the fact that early successes can boost students' confidence and

motivation, as well as giving academic staff to address any concerns and misconceptions students may hold.

In this case study we present an innovative approach to present students with a 'scaffolded timetable' introduced by one programme lead when they reflected on the guiding principles with reference to the demographic profile of their student body.

Challenges

The University of Plymouth has a diverse student demographic. At the time immersive scheduling was introduced it had a higher-than-average number of students from widening participation backgrounds. For example, 93.9% of the student body come from state schools, with 29.7% of first years originating from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Plymouth University 2013-14). 12.6% of the total full-time undergraduate population have a declared disability – this was against a sector benchmark at this time of 5.8%.

Student prior learning, expectations of, and preparation for higher education, has a major impact on their retention and success. Mismatching expectations, or a poor sense of preparedness, can lead to early withdrawal, especially for students from widening participation backgrounds. This can potentially be mitigated by providing a supportive and extended induction into higher education, which can ease students transition to higher-level study. The introduction and framing of the first semester immersive module at Plymouth sought to ease this transition by focusing on study skills and fostering students' sense of connection and belonging with peers, teaching staff and academic discipline.

Solution

Academic staff realised the immersive module provided an ideal opportunity to demonstrate *what* one module of university level study represented. They recognised that often students struggled to manage their time, often questioning how much time they should spend on activities such as group work, reading, independent study, or even what some of these activities actually represent, and how they support their learning. This was highlighted by Sarah, a Lecturer on a first year Health programme:

I think the concept of them doing self-directed, group work, they just haven't got their heads around yet and they don't realise that if we send them off, we're not expecting them to go shopping: we're expecting them to go to the library and do some reading.

Focusing students' attention on one module helped foster effective study habits and time management skills, which gave students a good foundation on which to base their emerging academic practice. This was summed up nicely by John, a Lecturer in Education:

We took in printouts of their timetable over a week, the lecture and seminar times were blocked in on their timetable, and we went through with them, "What else have you got to fit in here, what else do you need to do in a week? You've got time you need to set aside for reading before each lecture, you need time for meeting in your study groups, you need time after the lectures to identify additional reading."

Staff realised through the careful introduction of fundamental study skills students, as well as exposure to core disciplinary concepts, the immersive modules provided the ideal opportunity to manage students' expectations, and through the supportive environment of the immersive module, renegotiated these expectations. At the beginning of the first semester immersive staff dedicated time to discussing *how* to effectively study, explore *what* would be expected of students over the four weeks the module would run for, as well as support that would be provided. These discussions were supported by input from support staff such as Learning Developers and Information Specialists, to support students develop for example, information searching skills. These skills would then be quickly applied in taught sessions / independent study activities. Attention was also paid to how they would study (through group work, experiential learning, independent study). The provision of formative assessment opportunities, and quick return of summative feedback, allowed students to realise success and achievement within their early days at university, recognising they possessed the skills and knowledge to succeed.

One lecturer running a business programme presented students with what they described as a 'scaffolded' timetable. This emerged from initial planning the lecturer engaged with in the redesign of the module as they adopted immersive scheduling. Once they had determined their module learning outcomes, they began to map out the teaching, learning and assessment activities required. As part of this mapping, they included independent study, group work and course socials (Figure 1). They also included programme specific social events; this created further opportunities for peer networking, and importantly allowed students who may / may not be living in residential university accommodation to interact outside of the classroom.

In creating this timetable, the lecturer questioned whether they were expecting too much of their students, and reflected on how best to convey to students *how* they could successfully engage with module. This resulted in the lecturer developing a week-by-week timetable for the module which included classroom based, lecturer-led sessions and out-of-class study tasks (both group / individual). It also detailed how much time should be spent on reading literature, assessment activities and listed formative / summative deadlines. This was included in the module handbook, and regularly referred to throughout the modules. This lecturer felt this helped to keep the students on track and allowed them to monitor progress and manage their time.

This lecturer's approach to developing a module specific timetable became integrated into university guidance to support the effective implementation of immersive scheduling, see [7 Steps to Delivering an Effective Immersive Module](#).

Results and Reflections

The implementation of immersive scheduling was supported by a cross-institutional evaluation which captured data on students experience of this model of delivery. Initially immersive scheduling was piloted in 19 'early adopted modules,' facilitating comparisons with the experience of first year students studying in the 'traditional' long thin format, whereby they study multiple first year modules at the same time.

At the end of the first 6 weeks at university all first years were invited to responded to the 'first impressions survey'. This included questions on workload and academic expectations. As the data below indicate, those respondents drawn from the 'early adopter modules' felt they possessed more realistic expectations of university level study, of university level study, than peers on traditional format modules:

Expectations of workload at university:

Group	Combined More	As expected	Combined Less
Early Adopter	31.8%	50.8%	17.4%
Standard Model	50.3%	41.2%	8.4%

Expectations of academic demands of university

Group	Combined Harder	As expected	Combined Easier
Early Adopters	34.6%	50.0%	15.4%
Standard Model	44.8%	48.4%	8.4%

Full details of this evaluation are reported in: Rebecca Turner, David Morrison, Debby Cotton, Samantha Child, Sebastian Stevens, Patricia Nash & Pauline Kneale (2017) Easing the transition of first year undergraduates through an immersive induction module, Teaching in Higher Education, 22:7, 805-821, DOI: 10.1080/13562517.2017.1301906

Images

	Monday 29th	Tuesday 30th	Wednesday 1st	Thursday 2nd	Friday 3rd	
9.00-9.30		Read Chapter 11 Marketing Planning and complete other reading for the next session (see moodle)	Meet group and work on assignment	Read Chapters 2 on the Marketing Environment, 5 on Marketing Strategy and 3 on Consumer Buying Behaviour and complete other reading for the next session (see moodle)	IDM Award	Tasks this week: Attend all workshops Sign up for IDM award and complete 2 hours Read chapters 1, 11, 2, 5 and 3 of Gbadamosi Read assigned papers and resources before each session (on moodle/reading list) Work on, complete and submit your Strategic Marketing Idea Work on individual reflection assignment Enjoy the Marketing all year party
9.30-10.00						
10.00-10.30	City Marketing Task (2 hours) Meet in Roland Levinsky Lobby at 10am		Set up IDM Award and work on it for 1 hour	Meet group and work on assignment		
10.30-11.00						
11.00-11.30		Workshop 2 (2 hours)				
11.30-12.00		An introduction to the Marketing Planning Process. Introduction to Babcock and Q&A.	Sports/ clubs			
12.00-12.30						
12.30-13.00						
13.00-13.30	Workshop 1 (2 hours)				Workshop 3 (2 hours)	
13.30-14.00	Introduction to module. Create groups. Outline activities for the 4 weeks. Overview to Marketing				Situation Analysis	
14.00-14.30		Meet with your group and work on assignment	Sports/ clubs		2pm SECTION 1 of your Marketing Plan by here	
14.30-15.00						Read Gronroos Paper and complete other reading for the next session (see moodle)
15.00-15.30	Meet with your group and plan roles/approach					
15.30-16.00					Workshop 4 (2 hours)	
16.00-16.30	Read chapter 1 on the Purpose of Marketing and complete other reading for the next session (see moodle)	Take personal notes and reflect on the day - assignment 2.			Strategy and objective setting	Take personal notes and reflect on the past days - assignment 2.
16.30-17.00						
17.00-17.30						
17.30-18.00						
18.00-18.30						
18.30-19.00				Marketing evening do 6 until late		
19.00-19.30						
19.30-20.00						

Figure 1: an example of the scaffolded timetable presented in the module handbook