CDE On-boarding Project: **Final Report**

The Centre for Distance Education (CDE) invited applications for projects contributing to its mission *"To augment the University's reputation as a world-leading education provider through research, development and dissemination on distance and e-learning and to maximize learning for all our distance learners."*

The On-Boarding project team comprised a Principal applicant (Prof. Helen Xanthaki, UCL, Fellow, CDE); and three Investigators (Dr Anastasia Gouseti, Lecturer in Digital Education, UoHull; Dr Alan Parkinson, Deputy Director (Education) and Principal Teaching Fellow, UCL School of Management, CDE Fellow; and Lynsie Chew, Senior Teaching Fellow and Programme Director, MSc in Professional Accountancy, UCL School of Management, CDE Fellow.

The project aimed to create a template for student on-boarding in UG and PG DL programmes administered by University of London Worldwide (UoL Worldwide). More precisely, the project aimed to:
1. investigate what mechanisms are available to DL providers to entice and nurture continuing student participation to DL programmes;
2. identify best practices and lessons learnt from their application so far;
3. prioritise the most appropriate mechanisms of on-boarding for UoLIP, short and longer term; and
4. create and user test a template for the application of these mechanisms within UoL Worldwide.

Research formed part of the project, mainly with reference to the first and second aims. The first research question was, which are the successful mechanisms of student on-boarding in the field of DL education and what lessons have been learnt by their application so far. The second research question was, which of these mechanisms can be prioritised for application at UoL, both as short term gains and as longer term developmental objectives.

The project was directly related fully to the core of the three Fellows' work for UoL programmes. One of the main challenges in DL education is to grasp student attention, to retain it, and to convert it to student enthusiasm. The use of digital technologies has the potential to support learning, thus contributing greatly to progression, and ultimately graduation.

An extensive literature review of the HE sector on on-boarding practices was undertaken and the findings of these can be found in the first project report. Furthermore, it was necessary to look at existing data from UoL's Student Survey to identify students' needs and explore how these can be addressed when designing the new template. The whole team, in consultation with the Student Experience

Team, prioritised on-boarding mechanisms for UoL based on their personal experience as Programme Directors and CDE Fellows as well as on the findings from the literature review. On that basis, Dr. Gouseti formulated a Core Study Skills template for on-boarding activities.

In particular, the team have successfully completed all phases of the project:

1. A literature review in the field of on-boarding in Distance Education has been completed. The report aimed to develop a better understanding of available on-boarding practices across the higher education distance learning sector and use the insights gained to inform the design of an online on-boarding template for students at the UoL Worldwide. In particular, it explored what the process of on-boarding within a distance education context entails; the relevant mechanisms that are available drawing on empirical studies in the field; the challenges of designing and implementing effective on-boarding mechanisms.

2. During the second phase we looked at the practical implementation of on-boarding practices and explored the various themes and practices employed by a range of HEIs in order to facilitate students' transition into their studies. We also investigated the current mechanisms available to UoL Worldwide, established best practices and lessons learnt and identified further support tools and mechanisms that will enhance the student experience. Drawing on these findings we prioritised successful on-boarding activities based on their applicability and feasibility for the UoL Worldwide that would later be used to create the template. The output of this phase is the second report.

3. The third phase involved creating a template for on-boarding activities. This included various topics ranging from 'time management' and 'independent learning' to 'academic writing' and 'plagiarism'. The content was first designed as text-only and was then digitised by the Student Experience team using the tool Articulate. The link to the test environment can be found here: https://rise.articulate.com/share/sxrrOaeK6gx3CsKyGRA3XI6pSScGoKEU

4. The fourth and final phase of the project focused on user-testing the core study skills template. In order to evaluate the template a short survey was included at the end of the Core Study Skills webpage as a separate tab. The aim of the survey was to look at students' experience of the core study skills course in order to be able to identify good practices and gain a better understanding of the students' needs in order to improve the template further. A summary of the survey findings can be found in a separate section below.

5. Last but not least, the work of this project was presented at the RIDE conference in March 2018 and the mini RIDE event in October 2018.

The three CDE Fellows tested the template by applying it to their programme requirements. The Student Staff Liaison Committee of PGLaws participated actively in the response of Prof. Xanthaki to the template.

The project followed the ethical guidelines set out by the British Educational Research Association, with particular attention paid to assuring participants' right to privacy by ensuring confidentiality during the fieldwork and anonymity during the reporting of the data. Ethics approval was sought and received by the Ethics Committee of UCL Laws.

Survey results

The core study skills template was user-tested with students on the following programmes: UG Laws, PG Laws and MSC in Professional Accountancy. The survey was built into the end of the quiz rather than emailed out to students directly. This aimed at providing students a more 'frictionless' way to engage with the study skills course as opposed to emailing a list of students who might have completed/engaged with it. The level of response was rather law with only 17 students completing the survey. One possible explanation for this might be that some students dipped into the bits of the course they needed the most help with rather than followed the content page-by-page to the end. Hence, a lot of them might have missed the survey. Despite the low response rate which does not allow for generalizations, the survey findings offer some useful insights into students' experience of the course and generate some recommendations for the future. The table below summarises the respondents' demographic characteristics.

Table 1. Survey respondents by individual characteristics (n=17)

	N	Per cent
Female	11	64.71%
Male	6	35.29%
UK	2	11.76%
EU	1	5.88%
International	14	82.36%
Age / 25-29	2	11.76%
Age / 30-39	8	47.06%
Age / Over 40	7	41.18%
UG student	2	11.76%
PG student	15	88.24%
UG Laws	0	
PG Laws	15	88.23%*
MSc in Prof. Accountancy	0	
Independent learner	17	100%
Teaching centre based	0	

*Two participants did not respond to this question.

All in all, the survey findings indicate that the core study skills course was perceived positively by the students. In particular, the students reported the following:

a. All participants found that the study skills course was easy to navigate and use (29.41% 'mostly agree' and 70.59% 'definitely agree')
b. The majority either mostly agreed (47.06%) or definitely agreed (41.18%) that the course will be useful for their studies with only a small minority stating this is not true or that they neither agreed or disagreed.
c. Almost all participants found the course design engaging (41.18% 'mostly agree' and 52.94% 'definitely agree').
d. Only four students out of the 17 downloaded the PDF document of the course in order to read it again offline. This might indicate a preference towards online based resources and the students might find it useful in the future if the link to the core study skills course is readily available though their VLE.
e. When asked whether they knew how to access again the course online only 52.94% replied positively. This is something that needs to be further considered by the Programme Directors and the Student Experience Team so that the online course remains easily accessible and searchable for the students.
f. Only 8 out of the 17 participants stated that they will be revising the course online when they need to re-read the study skills material. As 8 of the participants skipped this question it is not possible to reach any conclusion regarding this.
g. The majority mostly agreed (47.06%) or definitely agreed (41.18%) that they were satisfied with the quality of the study skills course with only a small minority stating this is not true or that they neither agreed or disagreed.
h. When requested to evaluate the different elements of the study skills course the sections that students found most helpful were those on 'taking notes', 'proofreading', 'referencing' and 'plagiarism'. More details regarding how students evaluated the different elements can be found in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Q.14 - How useful did you find each of the following elements of the course

CDE study skills course - post-course survey evaluation
How useful did you find each of the following elements of the course

	Extremely unhelpful		Fairly unhelpful		Neither helpful for unhelpful		Fairly helpful		Extremely helpful		N/A		Total	Weighted Average
Independent learning	0.00%	0	11.76%	2	17.65%	3	47.06%	8	23.53%	4	0.00%	0	17	3.82
Taking notes	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	52.94%	9	47.06%	8	0.00%	0	17	4.47
Time management	0.00%	0	6.25%	1	25.00%	4	31.25%	5	37.50%	6	0.00%	0	16	4
Revision and examinations	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	11.76%	2	52.94%	9	35.29%	6	0.00%	0	17	4.24
Learning from feedback	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	29.41%	5	35.29%	6	29.41%	5	5.88%	1	17	4
Academic writing	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	18.75%	3	25.00%	4	56.25%	9	0.00%	0	16	4.38
Being critical	0.00%	0	5.88%	1	0.00%	0	35.29%	6	52.94%	9	5.88%	1	17	4.44
Editing your work	0.00%	0	5.88%	1	23.53%	4	35.29%	6	29.41%	5	5.88%	1	17	3.94
Proofreading	0.00%	0	5.88%	1	17.65%	3	47.06%	8	23.53%	4	5.88%	1	17	3.94
Referencing your work	0.00%	0	5.88%	1	5.88%	1	41.18%	7	47.06%	8	0.00%	0	17	4.29
Plagiarism	0.00%	0	5.88%	1	5.88%	1	41.18%	7	41.18%	7	5.88%	1	17	4.25
													Answered	17
													Skipped	0

The survey finally included two open-ended questions in order to gain more detailed feedback and get more in-depth insights in relation to students' experiences and particular needs. The answers to the first question 'What else would you like to see included in the course' are listed in Table 2 and the responses to the question 'Is there anything that you would like to change in the study skills course' are listed in

Table 3. Due to the low response rate it is possible for all suggestions to be presented here.

Table 2: Q.15 'What else would you like to see included in the course'

Q.15 'What else would you like to see included in the course'
1. Recognising key terms to practice answers in past papers. 2. The importance of handwritten note-taking for independent learners: to improve their handwriting, to time and increase their writing speed, to gauge word count and to see how their words fit on paper.
Maybe more examples of critical writing like the plagiarism section. Also more specific rules on plagiarism based on the examples we can refer to easily
Information more suited to people studying independently without tutors, lectures, seminars etc. Advice on how to get a study group going when you don't know anyone doing the same course as you. I thought the info on note taking and critical analysis could be expanded on further perhaps by giving ideas on approach or exercises. This is an important skill to develop so greater focus would be good especially given the lack of interaction/debate with other students and tutors.
How to write essays in exams.
More examples to further understanding.
Certain guidelines to organize the study materials, as very often subject matters are wide in terms of its scope and degrees of variation in contents. Classification of its contents will make the course more readily applicable for studies. And to include sample papers for students' self-assessment practices, which would include guidelines and techniques to develop their skills in their field of studies. Allow the students to assess themselves in relation to the expected standards of the University, by giving them an assessment evaluation form prior to their application for examination. This is to prepare them intellectually to assess themselves in the process of their course studies.
How to balance different courses.
Info more relevant to exams.

Table 3: Q. 16 'Is there anything that you would like to change in the study skills course'

Q. 16 'Is there anything that you would like to change in the study skills course'
Please add a link to the student discussion forum.
Several hyperlinks were broken
there found several hyperlinks, which do not work, e.g. links to the articles on the student blog.
Provide more detail on independent learning and assistance to independent learners
I would be interested to be having assessment evaluation in my field of discipline, prior to the examination. To check on the degree of development I have achieve in my course studies

Recommendations

The survey findings indicate that overall the students' found the core study skills course useful and engaging, they thought the template was easy to navigate and were satisfied with the quality of the content. Their suggestions and recommendations regarding future improvements highlight their need for more course-specific content and support elements. It was acknowledged from the very start of this project that one of the biggest challenges would be to address the diverse needs, expectations and capabilities of the student body. The core study skills course aimed to provide all students at the UoL Worldwide with an overview to study skills and act as a more generic study guide. This aim has been achieved and it should now be considered whether and how it might be possible in the future to further develop and customise the content of this guide in order to address the needs of particular student populations enrolled on different courses. Last, the survey findings indicate the need for constant monitoring and updating of the core study skills guide in order to ensure that all links and resources are accessible.