

# Getting off to a Flying Start in HE: an overview of UCLan's summer school programme to aid student transition and retention

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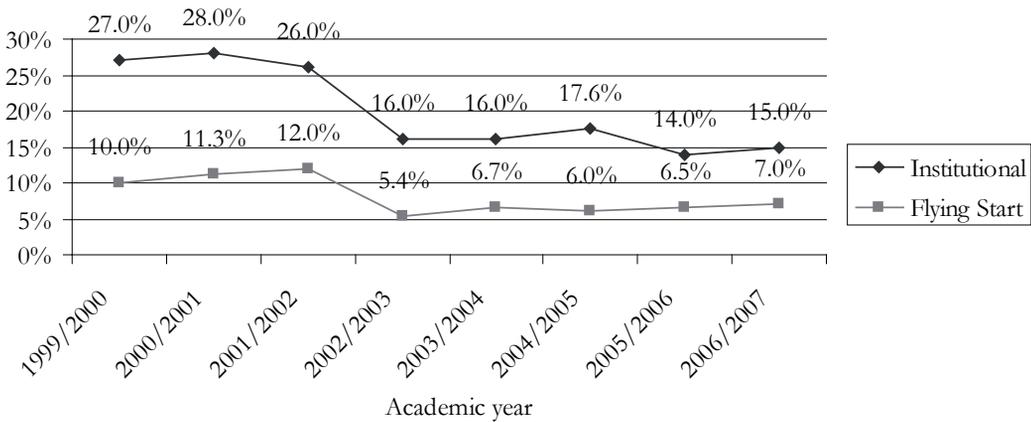
## Introduction

This article offers a brief overview of the Flying Start Bridging Project and the way in which it operates within the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan), ten years on from its conception. Flying Start aims to prepare students for living and studying in Preston and at UCLan, as well as providing them with additional support networks of academic and pastoral care. The project has two main strands: firstly, as an early intervention strategy that invites prospective UCLan students to attend a free pre-enrolment residential or non-residential 'event'; the second, begun in 2008, encourages the 'embedding' of key elements of the Flying Start events across UCLan within induction and beyond. The project is specifically designed to support retention and reduce levels of attrition amongst students at UCLan.

Flying Start began as a pilot study in 1999 and for the first three years focused solely on Advanced GNVQ students, as these students had been identified as being particularly vulnerable to 'dropping out'. It was so successful that in 2002-3 it was opened up to all students with a confirmed offer of a place, regardless of entry qualification, who have made UCLan their first choice as place of study. Invitations are sent out in conjunction with the university's admissions process, and since 2009 prospective students have been able to self-refer via an online application form on the university website; tutors are also able to refer new students directly to the project. The institution's overall non-completion rate for year one has decreased significantly over recent years. However, the attrition rate for Flying Start students continues consistently to average around half that of UCLan students as a whole (Figure 1).

UCLan is at the forefront with regard to widening participation, and research into the background of Flying Start students shows that on average at least 80 percent each year are 'first-generation', having no family experience in higher education (HE) to draw on. However, attracting 'non-traditional' students to HE is one thing, but enabling them to succeed is another. Indeed, as Engstrom and Tinto (2008: 50) rightly point out, 'access without support is not opportunity'. UCLan's ongoing investment in the Flying Start Project shows a commitment to offering innovative ways of supporting students from non-traditional backgrounds and giving them the chance to achieve their goals.

Figure 1: Non-completion rates of Flying Start students compared to institutional rates 1999/2000-2006/2007 (Stage One)



## The summer school programme

Events are held during the summer before prospective UCLan students enrol, and until 2007 were run solely as four-day ‘residential’ summer schools. Although the residential events are extremely popular and always over-subscribed, research showed that they tended to appeal largely to school leavers. Therefore, in 2007 it was decided to add the option of a ‘non-residential’ event, as it was felt that although it is not compulsory, the residential aspect may be off-putting for under-represented categories such as mature students, working students and students with families. Surprisingly, the uptake for the non-residential events was slow at first. However, the wording of the literature inviting students to Flying Start was changed in 2009, to target under-represented groups more specifically, and there has been a corresponding increase in demand. In 2009 the project offered 700 residential places and 100 non-residential places.

Each event is designed to provide students with: campus and city orientation; knowledge of commonly used university ‘jargon’; academic skills (e.g. critical thinking and referencing); help developing the life skills needed when living and studying away from home (e.g. budgeting and time management); information about where to go for help and support; and, above all, a social network before they embark upon their course of study. Accommodation and food are provided free of charge by the university for the residential events, and there is a programme of free social activities in the evenings. A free lunch is provided each day on the non-residential events and students are encouraged to meet up together after the day’s sessions.

The programme is delivered using a lecture/seminar format. The lectures and presentations are given in a large lecture theatre to the whole student cohort by academics and support

staff from across the university. These are designed to be relevant and interactive in order to ensure maximum engagement with the students. Flying Start employs second and third year UCLan students as 'mentors', whose role is to deliver the seminar sessions and offer informal, friendly advice from their own experience. Mentors work in pairs for the seminars, taking groups of between 20 and 30 students who are grouped dependant on age, course or area for each different session. Changing the students' groups in this way enables them to mix with as many different people as possible, thereby offering the maximum opportunity for the formation of social networks. A great deal of emphasis is placed on seminar sessions being highly interactive, and mentors use activities that are designed to break the ice in order to facilitate this 'social-bonding' process.

Feedback from Flying Start students is always overwhelmingly positive, and it is clear that the project has a long-term positive impact on the quality of the student experience. The following quote is typical of the type of feedback received:

I really enjoyed Flying Start. I made some new friends and had a great time. The best thing about it was that I kept in contact with my new friends over the rest of the summer and when it came to starting uni and moving in, I already knew people! It was great because I didn't feel nervous or alone at all! Through my Flying Start friends I met more people – their flatmates and people from their course, etc. I am now reaching the end of my second year and am still friends with all of them! Flying Start was great because it gave me a head-start at uni, and made me feel so much more comfortable in my first couple of weeks! (Sally Emms, Third Year Deaf Studies and Education student)

What is more, although it is difficult to quantify for research purposes, Flying Start has a much wider impact across the entire student cohort. Students who attend a Flying Start event naturally share the knowledge and experience they have gained from the programme with the non-Flying Start students that they live and work with. One student who did not attend Flying Start, but later became a Flying Start Mentor, commented that:

I came to university as a reluctant student who had decided before even moving to university that I was going to give up before the Christmas holidays. However, my plans soon changed after moving to Preston and meeting my fantastic flatmates. I was fortunate enough to have four people in my flat that had all been on the Flying Start summer schools. Because of their experiences of the university and the knowledge they had acquired about the university and Preston as a city, they were better prepared for the start of their university lives than I was and were able to help me in so many different ways.

If it were not for my flatmates and the things they did on Flying Start I would not have settled into university and would have moved back home to my nine to five job,

never stopping to think about returning to education. Because of the impact Flying Start had on my flatmates, and indirectly on me, I applied as a volunteer M and M [Peer] Mentor at the beginning of my second year and have just completed my first summer as a Flying Start Mentor. I think I am an example of how Flying Start can have a positive impact on someone's life even if they haven't been through the scheme themselves.

This student's experience of indirectly benefitting from the Flying Start Project is very typical, and demonstrates the far-reaching effect of the programme. It is safe to say that this 'viral spreading' of information and experience is one of the key factors in the success of Flying Start, and this is aided by the use of current students as peer mentors.

## **Flying Start Mentors**

Recent research shows that offering peer mentoring is a particularly successful way of helping students to make the transition to HE (Draper, 2008 cited in Swain, 2008). Flying Start Mentors, however, are involved in more than simply mentoring, as they are also explicitly engaged in facilitating the students' learning in certain areas. Peer assisted learning (PAL) in HE has become a topic of debate amongst academics, with several universities implementing pilot programmes within first-year academic courses. Flying Start utilises both peer mentoring and PAL successfully to engage students and develop their understanding of the differing expectations of HE to that of their previous educational experience. Longfellow et al. (2008: 95) rightly point out that successful students are 'experts' at being students and are, therefore, best placed 'to lead novice students towards becoming expert students'. Experience on the Flying Start Project confirms the truth of this argument, and feedback from students is consistently positive with regard to working with peer mentors. The following are a small sample of the type of comments students make about the mentors' contribution to their experience of taking part in Flying Start:

Flying Start Mentors made the trip. The way they interacted in a professional manner during the day, and then socialised with the students of an evening was fantastic. The experience really made me feel like UCLan is the place I want to spend the next three years of my life.

All the mentors were ace. Not scared any more!

I feel much better equipped to start uni as a mature student. Mentors are all very knowledgeable and helpful.

Thank you to all the mentors for being really friendly and nice, and also for being there to help no matter what the problem was. Flying Start has been amazing!

The basic outline of the summer school is very thorough and positive, but what really enhances it is the work of the mentors who are really good at [complementing] the summer school and making you feel comfortable.

As this feedback shows, students respond well to the Flying Start Mentors and feel confident in asking their help and support in learning about life at university. Longfellow et al. (2008: 101) argue that 'the importance of feeling confident to ask for help and clarification cannot be understated' because students who are afraid to ask are much 'less able to learn'. The types of skills and knowledge that students are required to learn on Flying Start are clearly very suitable for a PAL approach. However, as Capstick and Fleming (2004) point out, the PAL approach requires careful implementation, and it is vital that the mentors are well equipped to deal with students' questions and point them in the right direction for support where necessary.

In order to ensure a high-calibre of 'expert' students to act as Flying Start PAL Mentors, there is a rigorous recruitment procedure that utilises the university's standard HR processes. Applicants must fill out the full university staff application form and, if shortlisted, undertake an interview process that involves giving a presentation, one-to-one questions with the interview panel, and a further group assessment of team-working and facilitation skills. Mentors are also selected with a view to representing as many schools as possible from across the university, as well as being representative of the student body in terms of diversity, including age, gender and ethnicity. Each year, the Flying Start Mentor Team consists of around two-thirds of the previous year's 'experienced' mentors, and around a third of 'new' mentors. These student mentors are all trained together for four days in all aspects of the delivery and facilitation of the group sessions, and are given full training and up-to-date information regarding the support available at UCLan.

It is important to train both experienced and new mentors together, as this approach mirrors the peer mentoring used by the project itself and exemplifies the way in which PAL works for the students and mentors. Experienced mentors are encouraged to take part in facilitating the sessions for the new mentors, and there is intensive use of 'team-building' techniques, in order to form a strong bond amongst the group for that year. Cat Race who is an ex-Flying Start Mentor and a graduate in Web and Multimedia says that:

Flying Start is probably the most beneficial thing I participated in as a student... Being a Flying Start Mentor taught me that everyone is an individual, has their own problems and insecurities and we are all here to support each other, acting as a positive influence. The nature of Flying Start, introducing new students to uni life and helping them to face and overcome the potential problems in their path, initiates a sense of understanding and united team ethos within the group of mentors; all with the same goal of passing on our experiences. As a dyslexic and hard of hearing student myself, I found being in the company of such understanding people uplifting, giving me the

confidence to continue being proactive within the university without allowing my disabilities to prohibit me from being involved. I can say with assurance I am a much more confident person now and I believe Flying Start was the catalyst for this.

Mentors are given all the materials necessary to deliver the seminars, and are trained in exactly how they should facilitate each session. Sessions are specifically designed to stimulate discussion and raise awareness of available support, thus encouraging the students to develop skills, knowledge and understanding through cooperation (Capstick and Fleming, 2001). Mentors are not expected to be experts in, for example, student finance; however, as students they are themselves aware of the need to budget their money and can, therefore, raise the awareness of prospective students around this subject and explain where to go for help and support if it is needed.

A great deal of emphasis is placed on reflective practice during training and throughout the events. It is a requirement of the job description that mentors submit a personal reflective evaluation of their experience at the end of training and at the end of the events. They are also asked to evaluate the seminar materials that they use, and are encouraged to take part in peer observations and to give each other constructive feedback on their performance. Finally, after the events each mentor is invited to a one-to-one 'appraisal' style review session with the Project Officers to discuss their performance and look at areas for personal development. This year, the mentors' evaluations and reviews have been submitted as part of the new Futures Award at UCLan, thus raising the profile of the employability skills gained by being a Flying Start Mentor. It is also important to note that Flying Start Mentors seem to be more likely than other students to take on other roles within the university. For example, many of them become Student Ambassadors and several work within the 'T' – the central support service for students at UCLan. The project is often asked to provide references for graduates who have been Flying Start Mentors, and these students generally go on to have excellent careers. Matt Broderick, a UCLan graduate, who is now a science teacher and currently continuing with an MSc in Education, wrote recently to say:

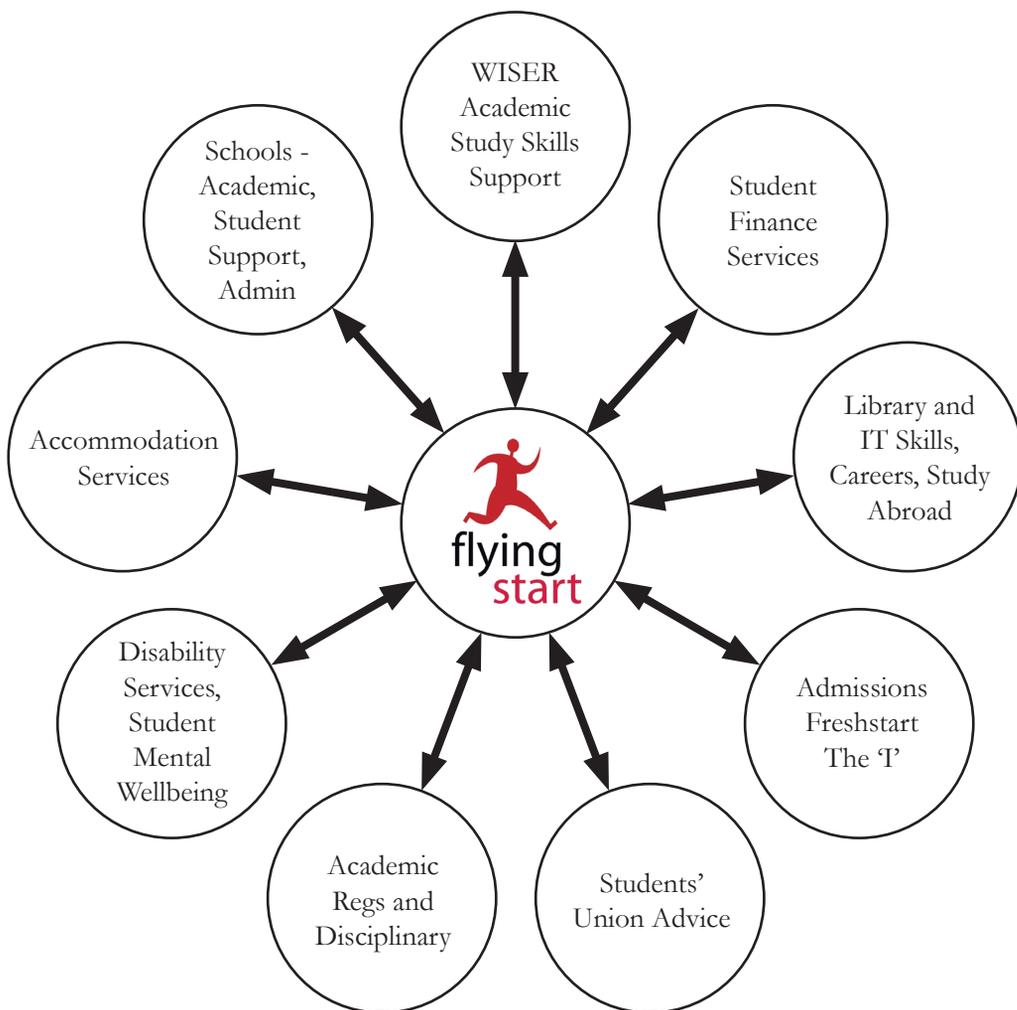
I just wanted to thank you for the opportunity to be a Flying Start Mentor, and for helping to shape me into the person that I am now! I could not have done it without Flying Start.

It is through the rigorous process of training and continuous reflection and evaluation that the project maintains the high standard of its Student PAL Mentors and, consequently, the consistently high impact on student retention.

### **Embedding 'best practice' across the university**

The project operates within UCLan using a 'hub and spoke' model (see Figure 2), and maintains strong reciprocal links with key areas across the university. This model ensures that project staff, mentors and students are made aware of the most up-to-date information and

Figure 2: Flying Start 'hub and spoke' model



that, in turn, UCLan services are supported and informed by the experience and feedback gained through the Flying Start programme.

It was felt that Flying Start's unique position as a centralised hub for information, with a highly-trained workforce of student mentors, placed it in an ideal situation to offer this expertise more widely within the institution. In the light of the university's new retention strategy in 2008, Flying Start began looking to develop its work with regard to embedding elements of the Flying Start programme across the university, within induction and beyond. It was decided to launch the Flying Start Induction Packs, with a view to offering tutors some of the resources and information used on Flying Start.

The pack is very glossy, colourful and ‘user-friendly’ and is divided into four sections: Make Friends, Learn to Learn, Manage Life and Find the Way. Each pack contains sets of cards that offer ideas, activities and resources, designed for tutors to use in induction and throughout the academic year, in order to help support their students. The pack also contains other information regarding the wide range of student support that is available, such as a ‘Useful Contacts’ card, which provides a convenient list of numbers for the various UCLan support services. The pack is distributed to all Course Leaders and is given to all tutors taking part in the university’s ‘Teaching Toolkit’ programme. Feedback has been extremely positive about the packs. For example, the project heard from some students whose tutor used the ‘Ice-Breakers’ and ‘Campus Scavenger Hunt’ from the pack to great effect during induction; the students enjoyed the activities immensely and felt that they enabled them to make friends with their peers, when they would not otherwise have done so. A number of tutors have been in touch with the project to request a pack, as they have heard about them from colleagues, and many have commented on how useful they have found it.

The introduction to the pack raises awareness of the availability of Flying Start Project staff for advice and guidance regarding induction programmes and training student mentors. It also offers the possibility of using Flying Start’s own trained PAL Mentors to help with First Year Experience talks and facilitate a variety of sessions including Ice-Breakers, Team-Building, Time and Budget Management, Critical Analysis, and Using Feedback. This opportunity to engage with Flying Start has already been taken up by some schools and subjects, and pilot schemes have taken place within areas such as Languages and Sports. A recent report from the School of Languages and International Studies states the following:

A special mention should be made of the Flying Start Mentors. It is the first time that they have been used on the pre-sessional [event] and they delivered an excellent service in support of the teaching staff. Their assistance on testing days was invaluable and they were also heavily involved on the staff induction days conducting campus tours. As previously indicated, they also assisted staff with the library inductions. The pre-sessional coordinators are indebted to Dr Vikki Cook and the Flying Start Team for their support and it is hoped that this will continue on future programmes.

Clearly, this was a very successful initiative and the feedback from the international students who took part in this pre-sessional event showed an increase in satisfaction within the event overall from that of previous years.

Flying Start has also worked with the School of Tourism and Leisure Management to deliver two bespoke, subject-specific, half-day courses for students entering third year from other colleges (2008-9). The first half-day formed part of their initial induction programme and the second was delivered at the end of the first semester. This particular type of student had been identified by their course leader as being ‘at-risk’ in terms of retention with a past record of high rates of attrition and of achieving poor results. Flying Start PAL Mentors

from this school were given an extra half-day of training in the particular subject area, on top of their Flying Start training. During the induction period these PAL Mentors, supervised by project staff and the course leader, then delivered a half-day of workshops and seminars. These were designed to help the new students meet and feel comfortable with each other, in order to build social networks swiftly and support each other. This was particularly important as they were entering their final year and had little time to adapt to the different challenges of life at university from that at college. Sessions also included: examining the students' expectations of university life; looking at students' understanding of critical thinking; and insights into how to make the most of UCLan and its support systems.

Flying Start continued to work with the School of Tourism and Leisure Management to deliver a second bespoke session at the end of semester one, before the students finished for the Christmas break. The course leader identified the need for students to examine how to make better use of feedback received on assignments, so this was used as the focus for the second half-day course. The same Flying Start PAL Mentors were again trained to deliver a workshop focussing on feedback and how it might be used to improve marks and performance. A session was also designed using team-building activities to encourage and strengthen the social networks that had already been formed during the first induction session. The PAL Mentors were encouraged to discuss using the use of support systems available at UCLan, in order to remind the students and build on their prior learning. Finally, the mentors offered to continue mentoring and supporting the students via e-mail.

Following on from this intervention, the final results were encouraging. The course leader commented that, overall 'the number of referrals so far is half that of last year and the mean average result is higher'. One of the modules involved had only two students who dropped out, compared to six the previous year, and one of the students did so due to personal family difficulties rather than because of problems with the university or the course. There were also no students referred for reassessment on that module, whereas there had been six the previous year. The course leader was delighted with the outcome and is very keen to continue working with Flying Start.

## **Conclusions**

This article has briefly outlined the way in which the Flying Start Bridging Project operates within UCLan, although there is, of course, much more to the project than can be examined here. Over the past ten years, Flying Start has worked with thousands of students (on a residential and non-residential basis, and during induction) to ease their transition into HE. It has been, and will continue to be 'an initiative which will benefit students through academic and social empowerment' (Abramson and Jones, 2003: 147). Feedback shows that attendance on a Flying Start event, prior to starting at UCLan, clearly inculcates a sense of 'belonging' to the university. Many of the students join social networking sites such as 'Facebook' and closely identify themselves with the 'UCLan brand' before they commence

their studies. This in turn leads to students becoming more closely involved in university life when they start their degree and encourages a sense of collegiality, which enhances their motivation and commitment and thus has an effect on rates of attrition.

As the project has become more substantially embedded within UCLan, Flying Start students and PAL Mentors have become a key resource, providing motivated and enthusiastic role-models across the university. Many of these students have gone on to become 'Course Representatives' and volunteer mentors on the UCLan M and M Peer Mentoring scheme, thus offering practical support in terms of retention. Flying Start PAL Mentors have gone on to be employed at UCLan as 'Student Ambassadors', 'Student Liaison Officers' and 'Student Interns', and some, having completed their degrees, now work in key areas of Student Services and Support. The expansion of the project into using PAL Mentors to work within induction and the first year is still in its early stages; however, the results so far have been encouraging. PAL within HE remains the topic of much debate and in order for it to be successful, as it is on the Flying Start programme, it is vital that there are apposite expectations, well designed materials, and rigorous training and support for PAL Mentors (Capstick and Fleming, 2004). Flying Start has certainly changed and evolved since it began ten years ago, but at its core its philosophy and function remains the same – to encourage students of every age, ability and background to engage with HE, and to ease their transition to it by offering them appropriate support that enables them to achieve their goals.

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