

CHERIL Final Report (2014-2015)

“Maximising academic potential by optimising support for students returning to university following industrial placement and interruption”

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One of the 2020 strategic visions is for Manchester to be known for the quality and employability of graduates. The University of Manchester therefore encourages students to seek opportunities in the workplace to develop both their knowledge and generic skills. An important opportunity is the yearlong placement scheme between years 2 and 3 as part of the ‘with industrial experience/modern language’ programmes offered by many Faculties. Returning to university and academic study after completing a placement is not without its challenges for these students, *e.g.* difficulty making new friendship groups when most of their peers have graduated the previous summer. This in itself can impact upon any group work activities if students feel isolated from other group members and their student cohort generally. These concerns can also be of significance to students returning from a period of interruption for health or financial reasons. For students returning from interruption the re-adjustment to good study practices can be an even greater trial where the period of absence was unstructured. Of key concern to staff is that these obstacles could potentially prevent some returning students from reaching their full academic potential and ultimately impact upon their degree attainment.

Limited pedagogical research has been conducted on this area, especially in relation to the challenges students face whilst they are away / returned from a period of unplanned interruption. The aim of this study was to provide an understanding of the challenges individual students face upon returning to university following a period of absence, either through a planned absence as part of a placement programme or through interruption.

Placement students were invited to complete a tailored online questionnaire exploring some of the practical difficulties and anxieties they experienced during their time away from the university and upon their return. The Faculty Student Support Office invited students to take part in the study to prevent any perceived coercion by the students from the researchers. Students currently on interruption were also asked to complete a similar online questionnaire. Those students who had returned from interruption were invited to attend an interview with the researchers to explore these areas in more depth.

Over 80% of students currently on placement expressed apprehension about their return to university. The key concerns included resumption of study skills developed prior to placement, loss of peers and friendship groups who have already graduated and recommencement of academic schedule, including returning to lectures and tutorials. Returned placement students expressed similar concerns about their experiences of returning to university and found adapting to the change of schedule and returning to lectures and tutorials the most significant challenges. The main trepidations amongst students currently on interruption and those who had returned also included loss of contact with previously established peer groups, return to lectures and tutorials after a period of absence and that study skills may be inadequate to manage the return to study.

Based on the relevant literature, using qualitative questionnaires is the most frequently used approach to gathering and evaluating student opinions. We had a very good return rate from those students who were either on placement or had returned from placement. However, the return rate from those students on interruption was lower. This was not unexpected because these students are not registered during their period of interruption and are therefore less likely to maintain contact with the Faculty. The Faculty has recently employed a member of staff as an intern to examine the reasons why students decide to interrupt their studies. In our extension of this study we aim to work closely with this member of staff to increase the data we can gather from this cohort of students. This is particularly important to ensure that clear strategies are in place to provide personalized support for learning and well-being for this group of students.

The robustness of our approach to gathering and evaluating the data was wholly appropriate within the limited timescale of the project. Whilst evaluating the data received from the student questionnaires, we realized that there was scope for the inclusion of some additional questions to further advance our understanding. As a result, we will use the data collected to inform a continuation of the study into the current academic year. We will take the opportunity to modify the questionnaires accordingly and invite the four student cohorts in this

academic year to participate in the study. The benefit of this approach is particularly useful for our placement students. Firstly, we can compare the responses of those students who were away on placement last year and have now returned to their studies: did the concerns they expressed whilst on placement actually materialize upon their return? Secondly, the timing in the academic year of asking these questions is also more appropriate. We asked those students who had returned from placement to answer questions about their return to study between 8-9 months into their final year of studies. In the study extension, these students will be questioned during the first semester, prior to undertaking their January exams.

To summarise these points, we plan to continue the study this current academic year with the following modifications:

- (i) Include additional questions in the questionnaires based on our preliminary findings
- (ii) Work with members of the Student Support Office to garner additional data from those students who are on / returned from interruption. Where possible, this information will be gathered by interviews with the study researchers. This is based on the valuable additional information gained from the interviews we were able to hold.

We anticipate that by Easter 2016 we will have gathered sufficient data to generate detailed support and personalised strategies for students whilst they are away from the university and upon their return. These strategies will be presented at the Faculty Education Management Team meeting and subsequently presented to the wider Faculty Education Board for approval and integration into support policies for September 2016.

The findings from this study will be presented as an oral communication at the 8th International Conference of Education, Research and Innovation in Seville in November. A copy of the paper is included as an Appendix. The budget for this project was used to finance attendance of both researchers at this conference.

APPENDIX

MAXIMISING ACADEMIC POTENTIAL BY OPTIMISING SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS RETURNING TO UNIVERSITY FOLLOWING INDUSTRIAL PLACEMENT AND INTERRUPTION

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Abstract

The Faculty of Life Sciences at The University of Manchester encourages students to seek opportunities in the workplace to develop both their knowledge and generic skills to enhance their employability. An important opportunity is the yearlong placement scheme between years 2 and 3 as part of the 'with industrial experience/modern language' programmes offered by many Faculties in the university. Returning to university and academic study after completing a placement is not without its challenges for these students, e.g. difficulty making new friendship groups when most of their peers have graduated the previous summer. This in itself can impact upon any group work activities if students feel isolated from other group members and their student cohort generally. These concerns can also be of significance to students returning from a period of interruption for health or financial reasons. For students returning from interruption the re-adjustment to good study practices can be an even greater trial where the period of absence was unstructured. Of key concern to staff is that these obstacles could potentially prevent some returning students from reaching their full academic potential and ultimately impact upon their degree attainment.

This study aims to provide a thorough understanding of the challenges individual students face upon returning to university following a period of absence, either through a planned absence as part of a placement programme or through interruption.

Placement students were invited to complete a tailored online questionnaire exploring some of the practical difficulties and anxieties they experienced during their time away from the university and upon their return. Students currently on interruption were also asked to complete a similar online questionnaire. Those students who had returned from interruption were invited to attend an interview with the researchers to explore these areas in more depth.

Over 80% of students currently on placement expressed apprehension about their return to university. The key concerns included resumption of study skills developed prior to placement, loss of peers and friendship groups who have already graduated and recommencement of academic schedule, including returning to lectures and tutorials. Returned placement students expressed similar concerns about their experiences of returning to university and found adapting to the change of schedule and returning to lectures and tutorials the most significant challenges. The main trepidations amongst students currently on interruption and those who had returned also included loss of contact with previously established peer groups, return to lectures and tutorials after a period of absence and that study skills may be inadequate to manage the return to study.

It is clear that similar issues affect both placement and interrupting students. Having fully explored individual students' experiences, the researchers are now in a position to generate recommendations and a support package for both students and staff to assist students in re-orientation to the demands of academic study. This could include study skills workshops for returning students and provision of small group activities to encourage and support the establishment of new peer networks.

Keywords: student support, study skills, academic support.

1 INTRODUCTION

The government-sponsored Dearing Report, 'Higher Education in the Learning Society' published in 1997, provided recommendations as to how higher education institutes (HEIs) should develop to meet the needs of the United Kingdom [1]. One of the key recommendations of the report was to increase the opportunity for undergraduate students to gain work experience and thus prepare them for the world of work [1]. This has led to increasing numbers of HEIs embedding work placement opportunities within their programmes to enhance the employability skills of their graduate students. For many years the University of Manchester has offered 4-year undergraduate degrees where students complete work-based projects in either academia or industry between the penultimate year and final year of studies. In the Faculty of Life Sciences where this study was conducted, placement options include traditional laboratory-based and field research placements and education, enterprise and science communication placements. Students registered for a 4-year 'with modern language' degree spend their placement year conducting research in a research institute or university in a country where the language they are studying is spoken.

It is to be expected that completing a placement year will enhance the transferable skills set of these students and thus improve the likelihood of securing employment upon graduation. These students may also approach their final year studies in a different manner, with more confidence, self-belief and maturity [2-4]. However, not all students experience a smooth transition to the resumption of their studies. Bullock et al. [3] reported that over 50% of the bioscience placement students they questioned found the move back from the work place to university problematic. Not all placement students return to their studies in a motivated frame of mind with one student commenting *"...when I first came back I found it, I don't know, difficult to get motivated sometimes. I mean I'd sit down to do some work and I just...couldn't be bothered to read it....I was quite motivated (before) but I think coming back here it just, it took me a while to get back into it again, justinto the student life and going to lectures and then,when they're finished and you come home, having to start work again on an evening, which I never used to have to do at work"* [2]. Returning placement students also find the transition difficult when those members of their original peer group who chose not to go on placement have graduated the preceding year and are no longer there to provide support [2]. One placement student reported *"I know this drawback seems a bit silly but I didn't graduate with half of my friends. When I came back...I found it very difficult mixing again, making new friends"* [2].

Those undergraduate students who have chosen to interrupt (sometimes referred to as 'stopouts' in the literature) their studies for health or financial reasons could also be expected to experience similar difficulties in the transition back to university. There is evidence to demonstrate that increasing numbers of young people suffer from anxiety, depression and other behavioural problems compared with 30 years ago [5] and this can impact upon those who have gone to university [6, 7]. For some students, this may mean they have to take time away from their university studies. In addition, the increasing financial cost of studying has led to additional pressure on students, including making the right career choices and choice of degree programme. These stressors can have a negative impact upon a student's academic outcome, including the possibility that a student may not complete their degree [8].

It is clear that there is potential for both groups of students to face challenges when they resume their studies and this could impact upon their academic potential. The aim of this study was to establish the key concerns facing students who have taken time away from their undergraduate studies, either as part of a planned work placement or because of a necessary interruption. Both anticipated concerns prior to, and concrete concerns upon the students return will be investigated. This information will be subsequently used to develop a support package to enhance the student experience and maximise the success of all students.

2 METHODOLOGY

The main aim of this research was to develop an understanding of the challenges individual students face upon returning to university after a period of absence. These absences were either through a planned industrial placement as part of a 4-year degree programme or through interruption.

Four cohorts of students in the academic year 2014-2015 were contacted in this study: (i) students who were currently on placement; (ii) students who had returned from their placement year and had

re-entered their final year of studies, (iii) students on interruption; and (iv) students who had returned from interruption to resume their studies.

In the academic year 2014-2015, 131 students undertook a placement year, 11 of these students completed a 'with modern language' degree. Whilst 25.6% of the student cohort in that year group left Manchester to undertake their placement at the end of their second year, the remaining students in that year group continued into their final year, graduating a year ahead of their placement colleagues. Thirty nine students on placement (30%) completed the online questionnaire. In the same year, 121 students, 24.3% of the total final year student cohort, had returned from their placement and resumed the final year of their studies on campus.

During the 2014-2015 academic year, 43 students from across all years chose to interrupt their studies and 19 students returned from interruption to resume their studies. The respondent rates were 7% and 5% for students on interruption and returned from interruption respectively. Due to these low respondent rates, where appropriate these results have been grouped together. One student who had returned attended for a face-to-face interview. Interview responses were transcribed verbatim and the recoding was destroyed

The key research questions addressed in this study were: (1) what concerns do placement students have regarding their return to university? (2) how was the transition back to university life? and (3) what support did the students receive from the university during time on placement?

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from all groups of students. Structured online questionnaires were designed for the different groups, one for placement students and one for interruption students. These questionnaires were made available to the students via SurveyNet, software used in the design and delivery of online questionnaires. All questions included opportunity for free text comments so the respondents could expand upon specific points and to include information that had not been included elsewhere. Students returned from interruption were invited to attend a face-to-face interview. The questionnaire for students on interruption formed the basis of these interviews. The survey questions were approved by The University of Manchester Research Ethics Committee.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Undergraduate students on placement schemes

In the Faculty of Life Sciences, approximately 25% of the undergraduate students undertake a yearlong placement between the second and final year of their degree each academic year. As described in the introduction, although there are many advantages to a work-based placement [2], there is potential for difficulties in the transition back to a university study environment. Two cohorts of students in the academic year 2014-2015 were contacted in this study: (i) students who were currently on placement and (ii) students who had returned from their placement year and had re-entered their final year of studies.

3.1.1 Student concerns during the placement year

The vast majority (87%) of placement students expressed that they had concerns about returning to Manchester. As seen in Fig. 1, students expressed concerns in a number of areas. The key concerns related to study skills and establishing new peer groups. Specifically, 69% of respondents indicated that they were concerned about resuming the study skills they had developed prior to commencing their placement year, e.g. in relation to exam preparation. One student remarked they were apprehensive about *"getting back into the mind set of lecture writing, essay writing, revision, etc."* Linked to this, 41% of respondents were concerned about the return to attending lectures and tutorials. There was also concern amongst students that the subject knowledge gained during the first two years may be lacking. One student commented *"trying to remember everything I learned before a year away. I feel like I've forgotten a lot of module content"*. Another said *"[I am] worried that the gap will mean I've forgotten lots from the first two years"*.

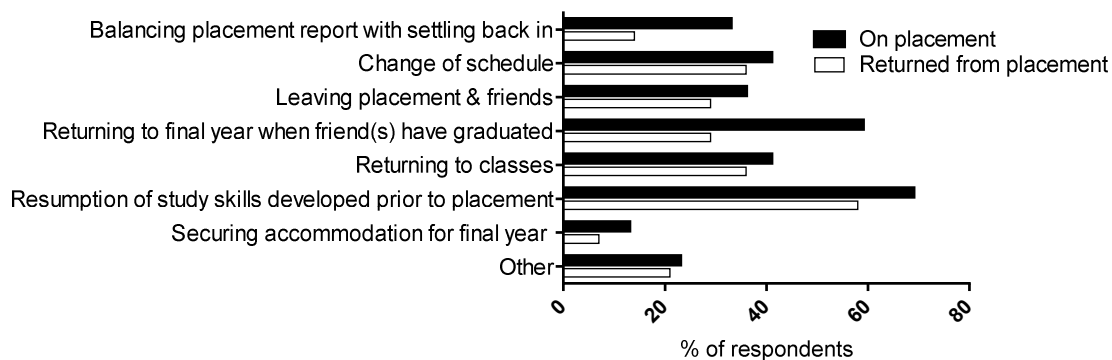


Figure 1: Concerns raised by students on placement schemes. Students both on placement (■) and returned (□) from their placement year were asked what their key concerns were prior to their return to the final year of their studies in Manchester. Data expressed as a percentage of respondents. Sample sizes: currently on placement = 39 students (29.7% of students on placement); returned from placement = 14 students (11.6% of students returned from placement).

Nearly half (41%) of all respondents were concerned about the transfer from an environment where they were able to independently dictate their daily schedule to one where the university determined the schedule of events and timetable. One student said: “I’m now active in the research field, presenting at conferences, etc., so will be strange coming back to uni to be a ‘student!’” Others commented upon the challenge of changing from a working environment to a self-motivated study environment with one student concerned that they “would not utilise their free time” having lost the structure of the working week.

The importance of established peer groups to these students was also clear with 59% of respondents expressing apprehension about returning to the final year of their studies when the majority of their friends had already graduated the preceding year.

Only 32% of students who expressed concerns prior to their return actually discussed these concerns with a member of university staff. When the other students were asked why they had not spoken to anyone, the main reason was because the students thought many of these concerns were of a trivial nature and that “they would have to deal with this in their own time”. Instead, students preferred to discuss their fears with friends, including other placement students.

3.1.2 Student concerns upon return to university from placement year

The same questions were asked of the returning placement students. Half of the respondents (7 students out of a total of 14) stated that they had some concerns prior to their return to Manchester. As shown in Fig. 1, a similar pattern was observed with this cohort of students where the main concern related to the resumption of study skills. 58% of students indicated that resuming the study skills developed prior to the placement was their major concern (Fig. 1). One student specifically commented that they were most concerned with being “out of practice for revision techniques” and another stated that “being out of academia and exams for a year made the January exams a concern”. Adjusting back to a university determined schedule was also a concern for over a third of students (36%), including returning to lectures and tutorials (36%).

In comparison to the students who were currently on placement, the majority of students (5 out of 7) who expressed concerns did discuss these with a member of academic staff, either their personal advisor or programme director. A number of students also thought that their concerns were too trivial to discuss with a member of staff and therefore chose to confide in friends and family instead.

This cohort of students was also asked how smooth the transition back to university life had actually been. As shown in Fig. 2, returning to an environment where the timetable is more structured was a challenge to the students with 36% of respondents stating this. Returning to lectures and tutorials had also been a challenge to 28% of the respondents. Students also expressed that they felt under

prepared for the exam period with one student commenting *“I believe placement students [and students that have taken interruptions] should be given more support around exam period. Taking a concerted time off from exams makes it very difficult to come back and perform to potential”*. This was echoed by another student who stated *“useful to go over revision techniques in a returning placement session as I know many of us felt under prepared for January exams”*. The importance of the peer group in this transition period was evident with 50% of respondents discussing their ability to adapt back to the demands of their degree programme with other students who had returned from the placement year.

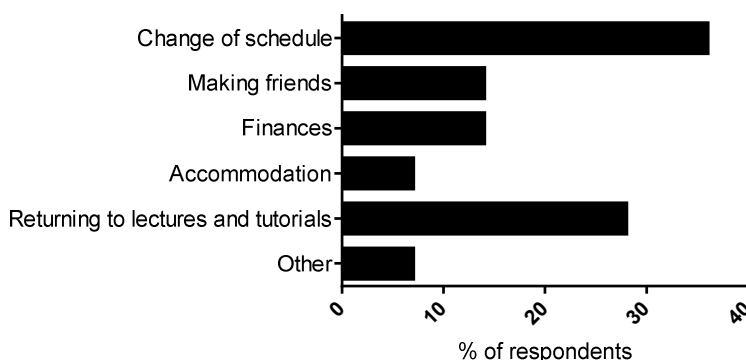


Figure 2: Key challenges faced by students returning from a placement year. Students who had returned from their placement year were questioned on the difficulties they faced upon their return to the final year of their studies in Manchester. Data expressed as a percentage of respondents. Sample size: 14 students (11.6% of students returned from placement).

3.2 Students taking an interruption from their studies

In comparison to the placement students, the number of responding students either on interruption or returned from interruption was considerably lower. The respondent rates were 7% and 5% for students on interruption and returned from interruption respectively. These low numbers may reflect the sensitive nature of their reason(s) to interrupt and the student's subsequent decision not to share these views.

When these two cohorts of students were grouped together, health issues were given as the reason for interruption in 3 out of 4 of the respondents. The other student chose to interrupt for personal or family issues. All 4 respondents undertook paid work during their absence in addition to seeking medical support to improve their health and wellbeing. During this period of absence, 3 out of 4 students remained in contact with staff and events at the university, although this contact was limited to reading emails from the university rather than making use of support staff and services available at the university. The fourth student stated there *“has been no great need to [contact the Faculty], and also no one has got in contact with me regarding anything”*. All respondents commented that email was the preferred communication method for maintaining contact with the Faculty.

All respondents confirmed that they did have concerns prior to their return. As shown in Table 1, these students expressed some concerns in relation to study skills, especially in relation to exam preparation. One student currently on interruption indicated that they were concerned about *“being adequately prepared for exams. Being able to access help with course content before exams”*. This was confirmed during interview with the student who had returned from interruption: *“I wasn't sure how I was going to react back at uni(versity) again. I'd managed to be OK to work a full-time job for 3 months so I knew I was OK but it was a bit different. There was no pressure of deadlines. I wasn't sure how I would get into it and it did take a lot longer than I thought. I still struggled studying for my exams, getting into the swing of things. It has been a year and a half, so it's quite a big shock to come and do exams, essay plans without having done any for a while”*. This student went on to say *“the attendance at lectures wasn't a problem coming back, it wasn't an issue coming into lectures, tutorials, it was just really the actual academic content. The shock of having to do so much and I wasn't really doing anything before”*.

There was also anxiety about the possibility that the reason for interrupting may still be an issue for these students and possible recurrence of underlying health or personal issues (Table 1). As observed with the students on placement, the importance of peer groups was also highlighted here with the majority of students indicating that the movement of their peers into higher years or graduating from the programme caused apprehension.

Table 1: Concerns raised by students interrupting their studies. *Students currently on interruption from their studies were asked what their key concerns were prior to resumption of their studies in Manchester. Data expressed as a percentage of respondents. Sample size: 3 students (7% of students on interruption).*

Concerns prior to return	% of respondents
Reasons for interruption are still a concern	67
Reasons for interruption may recur	33
Unclear about what you need to do before your return	0
Securing accommodation for your return	67
Returning to studies when friend(s) may have proceeded to the next year	67
Returning to lectures and tutorials after a period of absence	33
Study skills may be inadequate to manage with the return to studying	33

Upon questioning, none of the respondents had discussed these concerns with a member of academic staff prior to their return. The reasons given for this were that the students either didn't feel comfortable talking to anyone about their concerns (67% of respondents) or they simply had not got round to contacting someone (33% of respondents).

4 CONCLUSIONS

It is clear from our study that similar issues affect both placement and interrupting students. Both groups expressed apprehension about their return to university. Key concerns included resumption of study skills developed prior to placements, loss of friendship groups and recommencement of an academic schedule. The main concerns of returned placement students related to adapting to change of schedule and returning to lectures and tutorials. The vast majority of current placement students also expressed similar concerns about returning to Manchester for their final year at university. Key issues related to resumption of study skills, e.g. attending lectures, tutorials, forgetting module content covered in the first two years and exam preparation. Students currently on interruption also worried that their study skills may be inadequate to manage the return to study. There was also a general concern amongst all students about adequate preparation for exams.

Interestingly, these opinions on resumption of study skills contradict the findings of Hejmadi *et al* (2002) where post-placement students reported increased confidence to study effectively [4]. However, Hejmadi *et al.* conducted their study after the recent return of their placement students, most likely prior to an exam period. In the current study, the returned placement students were questioned in the second semester of the final year after an exam period where it is possible that a low scoring lecture unit or lower than expected exam mark may have impacted on their confidence level. The current study will be continued into the current academic year and returned placement students will be questioned at an earlier stage after their return to compare the results.

A large number (almost half of all respondents) were concerned about the transfer from an environment of independence back to one with a strict schedule of events. These findings are supported by a UK Higher Education Academy case study where the placement student reported that *"by the end of my placement my opinion was not only respected but often, especially with regard to the essay I was researching for my project, actively sought after. I was also trusted with responsibility and to organise my work myself. Returning to university felt like a backwards step as all that respect, trust and independence was effectively taken away"* [9]. The placement student has been described in the literature as *"transient in the workplace, in suspension between two distinctively different worlds with distinctively different values and reward systems"* [10]. The results from the present study resonate with this statement, especially where one placement student remarked *"I'm now active in the research field, presenting at conferences, etc., so will be strange coming back to uni(versity) to be a 'student'!"* The same can be acknowledged for those students who have chosen to interrupt their studies since all those questioned had sought paid work during their absence and adapting to the need to complete additional work outside of lectures and tutorials could be challenging (section 3.2). Motivation to study is also likely to be an issue [2].

The importance of established peer groups was very evident in our results, where over half (59%) of those questioned expressed concerns about returning to Manchester when friends had already graduated. This unease has been highlighted in previous studies [2]. The need for enhanced student support via provision of small group activities to encourage development of new peer groups and networks was highlighted in the current study. These group activities should take place when students return to university and encourage students to reflect upon the study skills generated prior to and during their period of absence. These activities could be supplemented / supported by further group meetings later in the academic year as well as establishing peer networks through social media. It is important that students transfer the experiential learning gained during their absence, regardless as to whether this resulted from a placement year or unplanned interruption, and apply this to their studies to maximise their academic achievements. Many will require assistance with this reflective practice and activities will be generated to assist in this process.

Only one third of students with concerns had discussed these with anyone (academic or support staff) in the Faculty despite many avenues of communication available to them. Many different reasons were cited for this with no one reason taking precedent. When asked why students had not spoken to anyone, many students thought many of these concerns were of a trivial nature and that *"they would have to deal with this in their own time"*, *"it did not occur to me to mention it to staff"*, *"I did not feel the problems were bad enough to talk to a member of staff about"*. Students did, however, report discussing concerns with their peers including other placement students. This again highlights the importance of a strong peer network, both during time away on placement or interruption, and on return to university.

The Faculty maintains contact with placement students in a number of ways. Firstly, a member of staff visits the student at their placement usually in the first half of the year between November and January to discuss the students' progress with the student and their supervisor. The main purpose of this visit is to provide pastoral care. A second 'visit' is conducted in the second half of the year in the form of a virtual visit. In addition to receiving email updates from our Student Support and Placement Offices, the personal advisor is also required to make contact with their students at least four times over the academic year. Therefore there are a number of opportunities for students to discuss their concerns about the placement and/or return to academic studies with a member of staff.

Our study found that in general students on or returned from placement (over 70%) felt they had no issues maintaining contact with the Faculty during their absence. However, findings relating to students on interruption keeping in contact with the university were disappointing and pointed to the need for a formal procedure for maintaining contact with these students. Findings highlighted the need for staff to take a greater lead role in instigating contact with students whilst away from the university to ensure regular contact and to establish that the student is on track to return at the expected time.

Having fully explored individual student experiences, the researchers are now in a position to make recommendations for a support package for both staff and students with the aim of assisting students in the re-orientation to the demands of academic study. Our recommendations include academic support provision through the development and provision of study skills online resources and/or workshops upon the students return. Students will be encouraged to reflect upon the skills set developed during their absence from the university environment and advised as to how they can apply

this skills knowledge to the benefit of their studies. In addition, a proactive approach from academic staff to maintain contact with students, especially those interrupting their studies, will be adopted. This will allow students the opportunity to share those concerns they often regard as trivial but which may impact upon the transition period. Collectively, it is hoped that these strategies will enable students to rapidly reintegrate into the university environment and maximise their academic potential.

5 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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