

I994 group >

Established to promote excellence
in university research and teaching

innovative practice report
student experience

how are universities enhancing the student experience?

1994 Group universities share a commitment to maximising the student experience. The Groups members are small- to medium-sized research based institutions that operate on a human and personal scale. This allows them to respond rapidly and flexibly to student needs and maximise student-staff contact whilst having sufficient size to make a substantial contribution to high-quality research and offer students a research-rich environment in which to learn.

1994 Group universities are consistently rated very highly by students, and provide excellent employment and earning prospects. In the latest National Student Survey seven of the top ten universities rated on overall student satisfaction are 1994 Group members and some 88% of students at the Group's 19 member universities say they are satisfied with the overall student experience compared to a sector average of 81%.

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Universities have launched ambitious investment plans designed to meet the increased expectations of students. Most universities understand that they must prioritise the student experience and some have accordingly developed ambitious investment plans, but in these straightened times for the HE sector and UK economy it is important to recognise that there are many ways to enhance the experience that students get, from low to high cost.

So what can be done to enhance the student experience? This report gives a selection of innovative examples of how 1994 Group universities are enhancing the student experience. The examples include programmes to enhance graduate employability, creating supportive learning environments, innovative communication and feedback mechanisms, and university wide approaches.



connected student support

case study > Birkbeck College

Birkbeck boasts a wide and diverse student body with members from varied social and religious backgrounds.

So catering for this diversity is a driving force behind improving the student experience, making it one of the strands of the strategic review currently underway at Birkbeck.

Phase one of the student experience project is a new set of My Birkbeck student support services that launched in August 2009. The project provides a seamless student journey from first enquiry to graduation for all students at all levels. The services include:

- > a new interactive website that will be the starting point for most students' enquiries. Experienced Birkbeck students, who are often juggling study with work and childcare, will be able to resolve issues from home or the office.
- > a 'one stop shop' helpdesk will be open when students need it, including evenings and weekends and will provide access to all the advice and information students need face to face, over the phone and by email.
- > a new student communication plan that sends timely and targeted information and support, especially in term one. Over the next few months Birkbeck will trial using the new communication channels to connect its prospective and current students with its enthusiastic alumni for mentoring, buddying and careers support.
- > a new set of induction activities and a new handbook that will ensure that all new students get the best start possible and help with the transition back to study.
- > a student support forum that connects the My Birkbeck services with all student support services across the college. This will allow a dynamic relationship between the support students are looking for and the services that can help them.
- > a student voice forum that ensures that the service is meeting the needs of students

case study > Bath University

The Bath Award recognises achievement in co-curricular activities, together with modules relating to employment. Students must produce a portfolio based on their experiences, complete 100 hours of activity and meet standards in the key skill areas of communication, teamwork, leadership, commercial awareness and problem solving.

The university works with the students' union and business to offer activities outside the curriculum that give their students the opportunity to broaden their university experience and enhance their employability. Employers greatly value the knowledge and skills that graduates develop whilst studying at university, along with the skills and experience they gain from undertaking activities beyond the curriculum.

The most employable graduates are those which not only possess such skills, but are able to reflect and articulate how they have developed their skills and why they are important.

Significant funding, guaranteed over three years, has been secured from Abbey Santander's Universities Global Division in order to help develop The Bath Award. Santander also participates in the assessment moderation process and in its second year volunteer industrial mentors will be involved in the assessments themselves.



recognising achievement
and boosting employability



post graduate enhancement

case study > University of East Anglia

The Personal and Professional Development Programme for Post Graduate Researchers is embedded within the university's Centre for Staff and Educational Development. The programme operates university-wide to support all early career researchers to smoothly embed into the rich, interdisciplinary research community at UEA and in the timely completion of high quality research, as well as to develop the personal and professional skills so valuable in their future careers.

The programme encourages postgraduates to take a holistic approach to the development process by combining training course attendance with experiential learning to develop skills through real experience. A prime example of this is the 'Showcase of Postgraduate research'. This annual exhibition and evening of oral presentations, held in the Forum, situated in the heart of Norwich's bustling city centre, aims to raise awareness among the general public and employers of the breadth and high quality of research carried out by UEA PhD students. In the weeks leading up to the event, the postgraduates are offered training in the skills they would need to present their research effectively, to produce an attractive and informative poster and to engage the public and employers in stimulating dialogue. This challenging public event is a successful vehicle for training that combines relevance, effectiveness and popularity – being a resounding hit with the researchers, their supervisors and the public audience.

case study > Goldsmiths College

For any higher education institution it is vital to create a strong ethos of reciprocal communication between itself and its student body. The use of student support mechanisms relies heavily on the strong publicity and accessibility of those services.

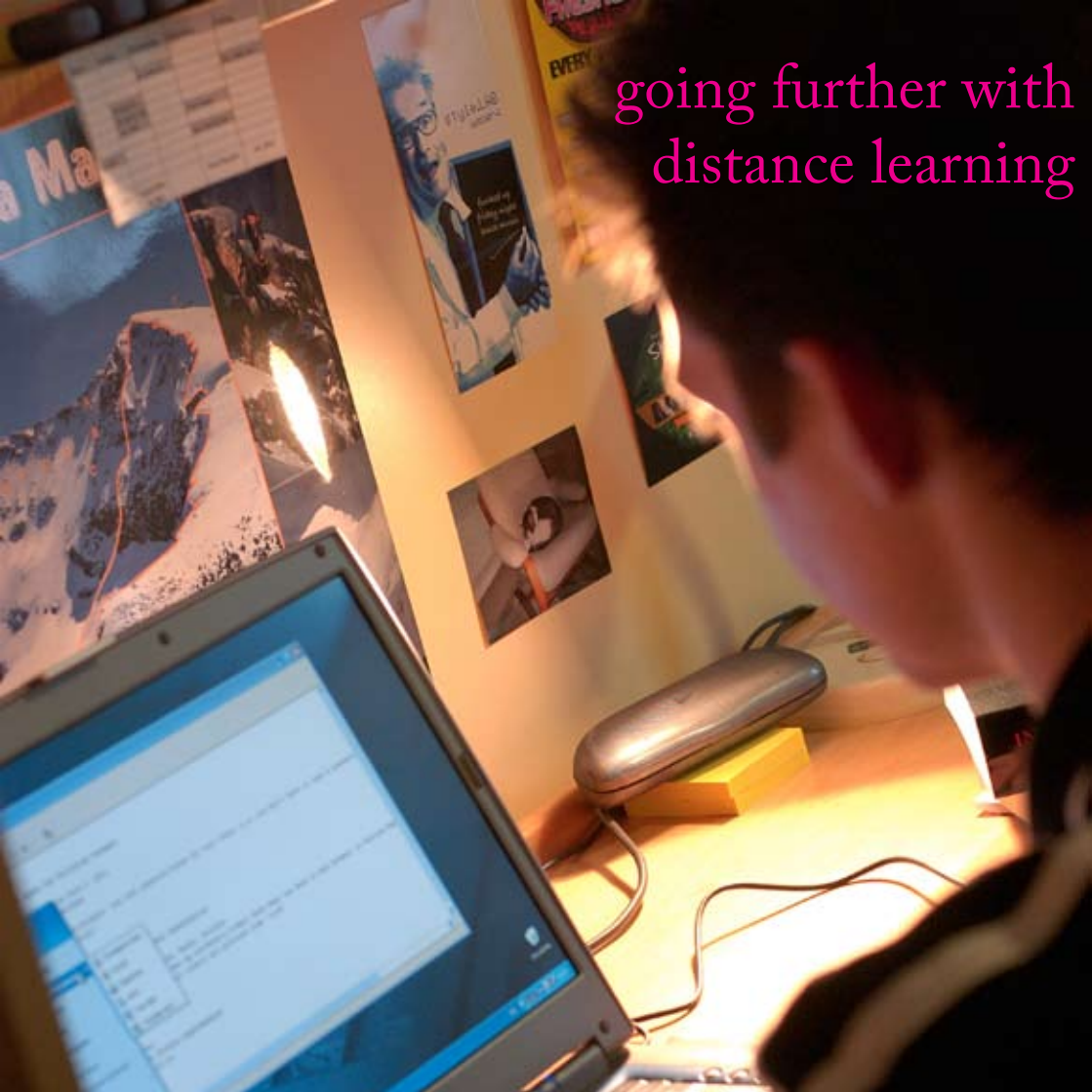
To solve this, Goldsmiths has maintained an initiative that is specifically tailored to welcoming new students. Their website <http://www.gold.ac.uk/student/welcome/> contains an archive of easily accessible resources to its services - from providing advice on careers and skills development, to the promotion of co-curricular activities and campus facilities.

For students who require fast responses to queries, they are actively encouraged to use the myGoldsmiths Twitter account especially developed for those students who require immediate assistance from on hand student support officers.

With a goal to providing readily accessible student information, Goldsmiths has developed a strong initiative designed to act an access point for information to help students to integrate in higher education and become part of their specific academic community.



using social media to
support new students

A person is seen from behind, sitting at a desk and working on a laptop. The desk is illuminated by a warm, yellow light. On the wall behind the person is a bulletin board with several items pinned to it, including a calendar, a photograph of a man, and a small framed picture. The person's hand is visible, resting on the desk near the laptop.

going further with distance learning

case study > University of Leicester

Ensuring that courses are delivered to a high standard and cater to the individual requirements of all its students, regardless of location, is part of a strong development process currently operating at the University of Leicester.

As a University that strives to be accessible to people from all backgrounds, Leicester is always looking at ways to innovate in the delivery of courses. Making distance learning a realistic option for increasing numbers of people is a key facet to its mission as a higher education institute.

Leicester is one of Britain's largest providers of distance learning. But despite its large scale they are able to deliver a bespoke and personalised service that values the different backgrounds and experiences of their diverse student body. Studying by distance learning requires and investment of commitment and courage. All related departments in the University of Leicester are working with long distance students to ensure this investment pays off. And the high quality materials developed for distance learning are now utilised by departments to enrich campus-based teaching.

case study > University of St. Andrews

St. Andrews' Student Experience Office was created in 2007 to identify what areas the 'student experience' covered and to highlight the meaning of the term to all stakeholders in the organisation: Academic, Governors, Managers, Students, Alumni.

The creation of a "Student Experience Week" enabled a comprehensive student satisfaction survey to be carried out followed by 44 focus discussion groups. As a result of these initiatives the university has developed a heightened awareness of what constitutes a high quality student experience which has defined the focus within the University of St. Andrews' Institutional Strategic Plan.

Departments, Schools and Units now consciously consider how their activity contributes to the development and maintenance of that Student Experience.

The Student Experience Office has now embedded its three key functions: to "Monitor, Fix and Highlight" in its mission. By combining and balancing all three, it coordinates pan-institutional surveys to check the experience is still satisfactory, receives the necessary feedback to improve, and joins with the student groups to celebrate student achievements in regular public events.



putting student experience
at the heart of the university



an award winning student experience

“When I was a student it was not apparent that all my teachers cared about my learning experience – their research progress seemed to be more important than my wellbeing as a student. This is certainly not the way it is in the 1994 Group of universities.”
Prof Shirley Pearce, VC Loughborough University.

case study > Loughborough University

Loughborough is regularly ranked among the best universities in the UK in terms of its student experience. The emphasis Loughborough places on student experience was awarded with the Sunday Times University of the year 2008-2009.

Working relationships are crucial, and none are more important to Loughborough than its partnership with its Students' Union. The 'buddy' system that is run enhances individual relationships with activism programmes encouraging strong participation in governance from undergraduate, postgraduate, home/EU and international students. Loughborough SU can also boast the biggest student fundraising organisation in the UK and hundreds of students taking part in Community Action projects.

Academic departments actively listen to student views and are willing to embrace suggestions which include the recent development of departmental student committees which are supported by the Students Union and work alongside Staff Student Liaison Committees. But these can only work if the physical and recreational resources are of an extremely high standard to meet the rightly high requirements of the students.

Loughborough is proud to have developed excellent learning resources (including library, teaching rooms, access to IT etc.) that were ranked 2nd in the last national student survey on top of a sports for all scheme that enhances the strong campus community ethos – a key facet to the annual success of Loughborough's Student Satisfaction assessment. All this results in employers being invariably impressed by the energy, enthusiasm and competitiveness Loughborough students demonstrate both in and outside of lectures.

case study > University of Lancaster

Students at Lancaster University are benefiting from a new 24-hour learning zone which has opened in the heart of the University campus. The design has incorporated the suggestions that were fed through by a student survey which asked 2nd year students and postgraduates about their future needs, and is intended to cater for different styles of and patterns of work and foster communication and interaction.

The open-plan 848sqm space is open to students 24 hours a day, seven days a week, providing a spacious, relaxed atmosphere for study and discussion.

The Learning Zone provides study booths for individual learning and areas for interactive group work as well as flexible social space and up- to-date technology including WiFi coverage for students to connect their own laptops to the campus network.

The zone is part of Lancaster's ongoing development of its campus. Since 2003 over £300m has been invested in new college residential and social facilities, teaching spaces and research facilities.

The University is committed to using innovative design which meet the highest environmental standards.



24 hour
learning zone



working with the local community

case study > Royal Holloway College

A programme at Royal Holloway, University of London is benefitting the local community whilst enhancing student's university experience and employability prospects. Students have been working together with the local residents to give something back to the local area in which they work and live

There are currently nearly 900 registered Community Action volunteer students who support 105 existing volunteering projects in partnership with 86 registered organisations including Age Concern; the local Volunteering Centres. The projects range from school visits to gardening to dramatic performances and resident engagement programmes.

The most recent project by Royal Holloway volunteers is perhaps its most ambitious yet: the campus Community Garden. Managed by student volunteers and local residents it hopes to encourage a healthy lifestyle, recreational rapport and natural food-growing to be used by both the local community and the college.

Helping in the local community has fostered strong working relationships with the inhabitants around the university. Not only does it encourage a strong community spirit but it also enriches the student co-curricular activities to support their CV's for when they leave university to go out into the working world.

The Mayor of Runnymede, Councillor Paul Tuley, said, "It is wonderful to see so many students keen to work with a wide range of charities across the Borough, and help out in their local communities."

case study > University of Exeter

The University of Exeter has developed an innovative and exciting student-led action research project which brings students and staff together as partners in improving experiences of higher education. The Students as Change Agents project is a collaborative endeavour involving Education Enhancement and the Guild of Students, with student representatives from Staff-Student Liaison Committees (SSLCs) taking responsibility for promoting evidence-based change.

Students from ten subject areas across the University were engaged in a pilot project (2008-09) with the purpose of improving learning and teaching in their Schools. Student-selected research topics include assessment and feedback, the quality of seminar provision, shared learning spaces, peer mentoring for language teaching, inter-campus teaching and employability. Data were collected via focus groups, informal interviews of staff and students, and questionnaire surveys, all designed by students with support from Education Enhancement.

Findings were presented in original ways via presentations at a student-led conference in June 2009, with an audience from across the institution and beyond, including senior managers and future SSLC representatives. SSLCs and programme managers are expected to take responsibility for embedding recommendations for change into strategic planning and action. Hence the project is about more than 'students as researchers' or about 'listening to the student voice', but about enabling students to engage formally with the processes of change.

Following on from the successful pilot, students from subject areas that did not participate last year are engaging in a new set of School-based projects, and we will be trying out new ways of working on cross-institutional projects, including across Exeter's 3 campuses.



student experience

:the conclusion

There is no single notion of what constitutes a great student experience, all institutions are different, and all universities provide different kinds of student support to improve the learning environment for their students.

However, the innovative approaches highlighted in this report demonstrate number of identifiable factors that contribute towards delivering an excellent student experience.

High quality teaching and learning programmes. High quality teaching at 1994 Group universities means learning in a research intensive environment. The people you are taught by are at the cutting edge of their field. This creates a vibrant learning environment. Teaching and research should be integrated; there is a need to ensure that the enthusiasm of staff for their research is balanced by a real commitment to excellent teaching and student learning. High quality teaching boosts both graduate employability and

student experience. This should also include thoroughly tested quality assurance procedures to ensure the quality of students' degrees.

➤ **A strong relationship between students and staff.** A good relationship between students and staff built up over many years based on mutual respect is central to delivering an excellent student experience. This should include an excellent partnership between the University and Students' Union and strong student participation in governance at all levels and across the student body – undergraduate, postgraduate, part-time and international. All members of staff must care about the student experience and must play a part in creating a high quality learning environment. Overall, the student experience should be viewed as a partnership, particularly between the Students' union executive and the College executive. There must be a strong ethos of having the two executives working closely together.

➤ **Student feedback.** There is little point investing in fantastic facilities if you don't listen to students about how they want to use it. Feedback going both ways is really important. Both academic departments must listen to student views and show a willingness to embrace suggestions. Support services must be responsive with the ability to adapt to meet students changing needs.

➤ **High quality resources.** Both excellent physical resources for learning (for example library, teaching rooms, access to IT) and high quality recreational resources (sports and arts) are important.

➤ **Graduate employability.** A high quality student experience means universities making every effort to prepare their students for the world of work. In a recession it is even more important that universities and their graduates have a strong reputation amongst employers. A wide range of opportunities for students to be involved in co-curricular activities are a key part of this. For example fundraising, volunteering, student union societies, paid work, sports clubs.

➤ **Information for current and prospective students.**

There is a need across the sector for a wider availability of data and information to better inform the decisions of applicants at all levels, and to help HEIs identify problem areas and work to enhance aspects of the student experience. Information must be made available to students and prospective students in an accessible format and communicated regularly and clearly.

Students should be partners in their learning, but they are investing in their futures, and are right to expect a very high quality academic experience. Universities must put students' experience – each student's experience – at the centre of their mission and deliver on this.

Across the 1994 Group, we are committed to continuing to enhancing the student experience and working with student representatives, the wider higher education sector and government to achieve this.

1994 group ➤

Established to promote excellence in university research and teaching

The 1994 Group is established to promote excellence in university research and teaching. It represents 19 of the UK's leading research-intensive, student focused universities. Around half of the top 20 universities in UK national league tables are members of the group.

➤ Each member institution delivers an extremely high standard of education, demonstrating excellence in research, teaching and academic support, and provide learning in a research-rich community.

➤ 1994 Group Universities achieved outstanding results in the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) 2008. 1994 Group members are UK leaders in seventeen major subject areas, achieving 1st place in their field. 57% of the 1994 Group's research is rated 4* world-leading or 3* internationally excellent.

➤ The 1994 Group represents:

University of Bath
Birkbeck, University of London
Durham University
University of East Anglia
University of Essex
University of Exeter
Goldsmiths, University of London
Institute of Education, University of London
Royal Holloway, University of London
Lancaster University

University of Leicester
Loughborough University
Queen Mary, University of London
University of Reading
University of St Andrews
School of Oriental and African Studies
University of Surrey
University of Sussex
University of York

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