DMU BaseCamp

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Background

DMU BaseCamp started life as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. With all teaching having to move online, it was felt by the university executive that students needed clear guidance in how to study in an online and blended learning environment. It was also felt that without a campus experience, students needed to be offered a unified sense of belonging online. To that end a 'mini module' was created in the VLE by the digital learning team with input from a range of stakeholders, pooling together important information about teaching and learning, digital skills and student support. This module was mandatory for all students, but actual uptake and completion was limited. When teaching began to return to campus during 2020/21, it was felt that an online space for all students focused on key information would remain beneficial and help foster a sense of belonging, so the work was passed on to the learning development team (Centre for Learning and Study Support, CLaSS) to take forward as an 'induction and transitions' initiative.

Description

The basic premise of an online transitions tool was reviewed and re-visioned based on an adaptation of Gale and Parker's (2014) 'typology of student transition in higher education', combined with long-standing work already being undertaken by the CLaSS team on transitions and 'stepping up', year on year. Thus, DMU BaseCamp is designed according to an understanding of transition as induction (essential institutional information); development (contextual knowledge and understanding grounded in level, academic skills development and programme of study); and becoming (the student's own personal context, understanding and lived experiences).

'BaseCamp' was the working title given to the project, encapsulating its purpose as a place to supply yourself with essential information, but also a place to come back to as needs develop and change, and the name stuck, as it encapsulates the idea of transition as an ongoing journey. Six sections were created in Articulate Rise (course authoring software) and embedded into the VLE, three of which were focused on 'induction' into institutional and HE requirements and knowledge ('Learning and Teaching'; 'Digital Capabilities'; and 'Assessment and Good Academic Practices'), and another three focused more around development and becoming ('Feedback, Reflection and Next Steps'; 'Careers, Placements, and Professional Development'; and 'Support, Communities and Belonging'). The first three sections provided key information in a concise and contextualised way, and links to further information across the institution; the latter sections emphasised personalisation and made use of interactive tools to engage students. BaseCamp is premised on an idea of 'induction and transition' as being something that is ongoing for students rather than a single activity at the start of their studies, hence the strapline 'Reflect, Regroup, Refresh', and the idea is that all students can return to BaseCamp anytime they wish in order to reorientate themselves based on their own needs.

DMU BaseCamp is designed for all DMU students at all levels of study and staff – the whole of the DMU community. It was the first module within the VLE to have all staff and students enrolled on it. This breadth of reach led to some challenges in terms of content – it has to be relevant to all students, but if this content is too generic, it ceases to be relevant and engaging. Consequently, BaseCamp has been designed to encourage personalisation by students (e.g. navigation encourages non-linear access; the ethos is to return to sections as and when needed). It has also been designed so that its content can be contextualised by staff for their own students (e.g. relevant sections reproduced or incorporated into VLE modules); however, our ambitions in this regard have been constrained somewhat by the technologies involved (e.g. deep-linking to content is not possible), so this is a key focus for development.

Impact on Students

Evidence of student impact comes from three sources: 1) Quantitative data on awareness and engagement; 2) Qualitative feedback from students via BaseCamp's feedback form; and 3) anecdotal evidence from uptake of support promoted via BaseCamp.

Quantitative data indicates that approximately 65% of all students currently enrolled on the VLE had accessed the BaseCamp module (23,473 students), indicating a high level of awareness. This average rises to 67% of level 4 students (as high as 74% and 81% in two faculties), and 73% of all taught postgraduate students. This suggests that new students in particular are accessing BaseCamp. Access by level 5 (63%) and level 6 (65%) undergraduates validates the holistic transitions approach, and that DMU BaseCamp is not being seen simply as an induction resource for new starters.

Students providing qualitative feedback indicate a high level of satisfaction (an average satisfaction rating of 4.33 out of 5 from 189 responses). Students generally report liking the content, and a number have indicated that they appreciate the opportunity to go back and re-engage with information at their own pace. As all students and staff are enrolled on the BaseCamp module on the VLE, it can be used to push announcements out to the entire university community. Uptake of writing support and workshop enrolments were seen to noticeably increase when these notifications were made, demonstrating its reach, and used sparingly this will continue to be used to engage with students across the institution.

In spite of these encouraging indications, it is too early to draw too many conclusions about BaseCamp's direct impact on the student experience, but what we have found out so far is encouraging, particularly in terms of awareness and engagement.

Institutional Impact

Although initial awareness and uptake by students was limited, through 2022 and 2023 content was expanded, and buy-in from institutional stakeholders grew, creating a snowball effect. Information produced by the Department of Academic Quality, that was once housed in the generic student handbook, was moved into DMU BaseCamp instead, and handbook templates provided to programmes included a link to BaseCamp. Some staff have likened BaseCamp to a 'lobby' that enables easy access to institutional information, and staff from faculty-based Student Advice Centres and the Library front-of-house report using BaseCamp when working with students. In this way, BaseCamp is gaining a reputation for being a 'single point of truth', as the resource provides easy-to-navigate access to the most current and relevant information across the institution's website, contextualised and focussed on the current DMU student community. Quantitative data shows that although BaseCamp is directed at students, approximately 1/3 of staff have accessed the resource as well. Given this uptake and widely understood value, BaseCamp is playing a role in achieving a range of institutional strategies.

Next Steps

BaseCamp is widely becoming appreciated as a valuable university-wide resource supporting student transitions. It's reach and the level of engagement have led to increased buy-in across the institution, which serves to enhance its value to students and staff alike. New content is being created and the stakeholder base is widening. Care is being taken not to 'overload' the resource and to ensure its relevance. One way this is being developed for the upcoming academic year is the inclusion of more student-led content through work we have been doing with student interns and student learning and teaching consultants, whose insights have led to the creation of a 'Create and Contribute' section which will enable students to have more of a say in the way DMU BaseCamp is developed. Work is also being undertaken on enhancing personalisation and customisation functionality, although there are technological constraints on what can be done with Articulate Rise and the VLE platform.

Further Resources

DMU BaseCamp Student Animation
https://dmureplay.cloud.panopto.eu/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=5ea32b34-ff1d-4f6a-ab08-b08500b59d78

DMU BaseCamp Staff Video
https://dmureplay.cloud.panopto.eu/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=3d9e6ad9-93bc-4740-831a-b0ff016439b8

References

Gale, T., and Parker, S. (2014) 'Navigating change: a typology of student transition in higher education', Studies in Higher Education, 39(5), pp.734-753. doi:10.1080/03075079.2012.721351