Promoting retention across the School of Medical Sciences by providing flexible support strategies



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Background

- Retention figures over last few years suggest a number of students "dropping out" in level 3 (as high as 11%)
- Anecdotal reports suggests a major factor is "stress-related" illness
- CLSM retention and progression committee agreed that provision of support across level 3 might help reduce this loss
- Appointed "Level 3 Retention Coordinator" in 2010 -Dr Steve Tucker
- Role expanded to include level 3 and 4 in 2011

Reasons for elevated student stress in level 3

- Change in examination format from MCQ-style to essay-style
- Grades now count towards entry into level 4 (Honours) and also for Honours project ranking
- Greater work load and increasing emphasis on mechanistic understanding
- Material being taught at a faster pace and more advanced level
- An increased expectation on students for selfdirected learning

Support strategy aims

- Promote awareness of the challenges at level 3
- Provide a point of contact for troubled students
- Offer advice and guidance with level 3 issues
- Establish links to other staff members & support services
- Advertise level 3 and 4 opportunities
- Create a sense that level 3 is a surmountable challenge

Support Strategy 1 – The Welcome Meeting

- For all SMS level 3 students
- Friday of Advising week
- Introduces:
 - role of Retention Coordinator
 - challenges/expectations at level 3
 - related staff
 - welcoming and friendly atmosphere
- Sets student minds at ease and begins year in a reassuring way

Support strategy 2 – The drop-in session

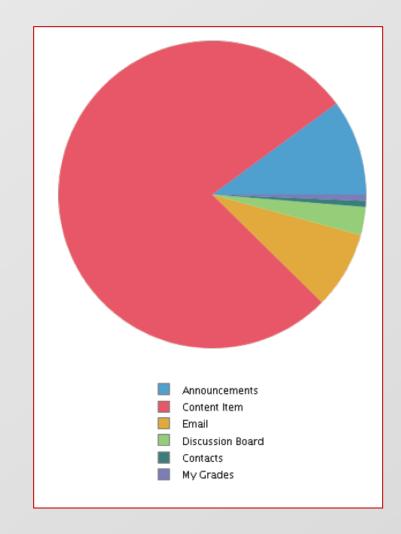
- Every Wednesday afternoon (accessible for students)
- Allocated room where co-ordinator is present to advise and provide help/guidance face to face
- No appointment necessary
- ~300 students attended in first year
- Spectrum of problems
 (academic difficulties → serious personal issues)

Support strategy 3 – MyAberdeen sites

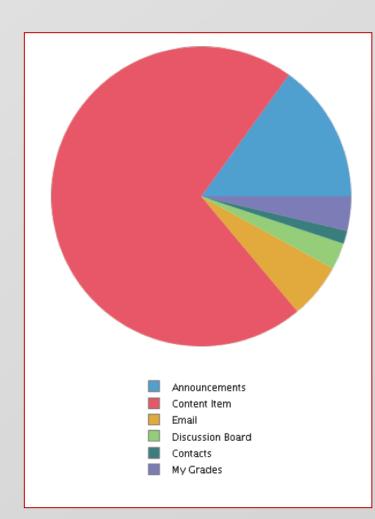
Provide specific advice/guidance for level 3 and 4

Customise Page

- Access to specific resources/support services
- Advertises key opportunities
- **Discussion forum**
- Level 3 The key to level 3
- Level 4 How to score at level 4



The Key to level 3
~ 1000 hits in term 1



How to score at level 4
~ 600 hits in term 1

- Most commonly accessed on these sites:
 - the resources folders (red)
 - the announcement area (blue)
 - circulated emails (orange)

Support strategy 4 – The Staff Questionnaire

Honours Year - Key Challenges and Strategies to Cope The purpose of this short questionnaire is to identify the main challenges

The purpose of this short questionnaire is to identify the main challenges and difficulties that students are faced with as they enter their Honours year. There are obvious changes in exam format, expectations, time management, teaching approaches and of course the project. As academics, we have all successfully projected these challenges and so are valuable recoveres for our students in advising

I would appreciate if course co-ordinators and teaching staff could fill in the questionnaire and return to me so I can compile an "Hons year challenges and how the deal with them" article for circulation to the students. Not only will this give student a taste of what is expected of them, it will also be a worthwhile source of guidance for problems they encounter. Additionally, it should also strengthen understanding between staff and students, which is of course mutually beneficial. Incidentally, a

What are the main challenges/expectations awaiting students in level 4 and

*Independent thought.

Having to be self-motivated to study and to get project underway and com

*There is much more emphasis on reading research papers, rather than r

textbooks. Much of the information discussed in lectures will be up-to-date and from recent publications.

Students will have to manage their time differently in Honours year. They must be able to create a balance between the various activities that are expected during the year.

Important: Students should consider whether they can work (paid employment similar hours as in previous years and still obtain the degree that they deserve. We have seen students achieve lower degree classes than might have been expected for them possibly due to their work hour commitments.

Research tutorials may also occur during experiments — this will require good t management and might also require some team-working with other lab members.

Time-planning ie meeting essay deadlines, in project learning to manage time

- Circulated to teaching staff
- Real advice on Hons year
- Tried and tested methods
- Fascinating results
- Posted on MyAberdeen site
- Same done with level 3
- Real life resource

Summary

- Flexible and informal methods are designed to lessen the stress associated with level 3 and 4 and provide support, advice and guidance where required
- Holistic approach designed to provide face-to-face, remote and written/resource-based help at a key time in the UG degree.