STARS
“Surrey’s Top Achievers Recognised and Supported”

Inaugural Report and Operational Guide
July 2011-Sept 2012

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Executive Summary

This report serves as a summary of the inaugural year's activity and impact, whilst also acting as an operational guide for subsequent years.

STARS is a unique differentiated development pilot that aimed to identify the needs of, and offer support to, high achieving level 2 students at the University of Surrey. No comparable schemes in the UK and European literature could be identified. The STARS scheme targeted students entering level 2 who had achieved an average of over 70% in level 1 (n=502). Over 82% of the eligible students invited became affiliated with the scheme.

Their needs were identified through a process of heuristic research. The data show that high achieving students have discernibly different needs. Subsequently, the multidisciplinary STARS team delivered bespoke developmental activities (covering perfectionism, resilience, team work and advanced communication skills) in response to this data.

All of the students who participated in the evaluation process wanted STARS to continue in 2013 and 98% of students thought it was important that the University continues to recognise and support its high-achievers.

Students reported improvements in motivation, development in academic and non-academic competencies and increased academic self-efficacy from participating in STARS. In addition to the short-term reported impact, the scheme may also affect longer term aspirations. In November 2011, at the beginning of the scheme, 25% of the students reported they were considering PGT study; by the end of the academic session, this had risen to 69%. The scheme therefore represents a potentially potent set of simple interventions which may have the effect of increasing both aspiration and also possibly loyalty to the institution which has recognised them individually and invested in them personally. Further research would of course be valuable to examine the extent of correlation and any possible causative relationship; as well as whether the intentions translated into actions in the students’ futures, and the proportion of those who remained with their UG institution.

There are clear advantages to the institution to be gained by continuing to support this high achieving population throughout their level 2 and 3 experience.

Mary Dickinson
July 2012
Rationale

STARS, a differentiated development initiative, originated from a commitment to improve inclusivity of provision; ensuring that the University offers quality support for all students. Developing exceptional students is in every institution’s interest, as “the attitudes and accomplishments of the most talented students help to improve an institution’s academic atmosphere and differentiate a university from its peer institutions” (Rinn and Plucker, 2004: p.54). Historically in terms of ‘additional’ (co-curricular) academic provision there has been a tendency to concentrate on students who are under-performing. However, a differentiated learning pilot argued that bright students “should have equal entitlement to be developed to his or her full potential” (Assinder, 2007, p4). Therefore, STARS was an attempt to address these needs, and thereby contribute to the University’s drive to increase the proportion of ‘good’ degrees.

The University believes its focus on “personal development and professional attitude” (University of Surrey, 2012, p. 20) is one core reason for its excellent graduate employability. In addition to the professional training year that many undergraduate students complete, skills development is embedded within the academic programmes. Professional and personal development planning is featured across the curriculum and the University has provided specific skills development opportunities for all students since 2007 in SPLASH: the “Student Personal Learning and Study Hub”. The University Strategy 2007-2017 identifies, as a key strategic challenge for the institution the need to: ‘Improve the student experience in both the quality of learning and teaching and the non-academic student experience’.

Level 2 students were selected for two reasons. Firstly, the UK first year and final year experience have been well researched in recent years (e.g. Yorke and Longdon, 2007 and Webb, 2011 respectively), so the relative anonymity of the level 2 population presents a genuine opportunity to contribute to understanding and improving the whole student experience. Secondly, data from the University of Surrey suggests that a ‘critical failure’ of those missing a first class degree can often be traced to their level 2 performance (David, 2011).

The hypothesis of this project was that high-achieving students will respond positively to improvements in the affective aspect of their learning experience (Beard et al, 2007). Local evidence supports US research suggesting that highly capable students are less likely to seek development support or be referred to support by their academic tutors (Hebert and McBee, 2007; Dickinson, 2011). Concerns about perceptions of SPLASH as a remedial service (amongst those who had not used it) were borne out by evidence from the data audit at the start of the STARS programme; of the 143 respondents who completed the heuristic exercise, only one student had initiated any previous contact with the learning support services in the preceding academic year (Dickinson 2011).
Method

STARS targeted students entering level 2 who had achieved an average of over 70% at level 1 (n=502). A virtual tutorial outlining the STARS objectives was distributed to all eligible students, along with joining instructions. To join the scheme students needed to register with the STARS virtual community, hosted on the social networking platform Ning1.

Research suggests that when students feel they have shared experiences that social networking can be valuable.

Social networking services may also benefit learners by allowing them to enter new networks of collaborative learning, often based on interests and affinities not catered for in their immediate educational environment...students will invest time and energy in building relationships around shared interests and knowledge communities (Selwyn, 2008, p.20).

The forum created a virtual “place” where STARS students could feel a sense of “belonging” (Salmon, 2002, p.26) to the new group.

The forum allowed collaboration and interaction which was encouraged using activities and prompt questions by the moderators. It also acted as a point of provision for learning development materials and self-help study guides, as well as acting as a conduit to all the generic study skills materials currently offered. Clarke confirms that such e-content creates opportunities for formal and informal learning via peer support (Clarke, 2004 pp.6-17), highlighting the engagement that occurs between staff, as well as between peers and resources.

Ning has a very intuitive interface, and as it is similar to Facebook it was easily used by most students. It also links well with other common resources/formats (YouTube, Flickr etc). It allows good moderator control, but allows students space for creativity. Essentially, Ning had all of the functionality needed for the STARS programme: blogs, forums, groups, email, and event management. Over 400 students of the 502 who were eligible chose to sign up to Ning.

The STARS Team

A review of the literature (summarised in Dickinson and Dickinson, 2012) demonstrated that there are specific challenges that high achievers in UK society face and these challenges were congruent with data gathered on high achieving honours students in the US. Data from the US suggests that average performing students are less likely to report experiencing challenges regarding: leadership, burn-out, perfectionism and multi-potentiality. Some challenges, such as time management and maintaining concentration, are common to all students, regardless of performance.

In anticipation of multi-disciplinary input being required (as per US data) the core team comprised of learning development specialists from SPLASH, working in an integrated way with experienced counselling staff (from Student Services). In addition to the initial team, the following were also consulted and were involved in design and delivery:

- Student Services (inc. Mentoring, Counselling, Strategic input)
- Graduate Employers
- Recent graduates who achieved a first
- Current Y2 students achieving over 70%
- Current Postgraduates
- Faculty representatives

1 http://splashinteractive.ning.com
The first face to face contact was scheduled halfway through Semester 1. At this event the STARS team conducted a heuristic research exercise to ascertain the students’ self-identified needs (Figure 1). Subsequently bespoke developmental activities were designed and delivered in response to this data (See Table 1).

Figure 1: Students’ self reported needs at the start of the STARS programme
The multi-disciplinary team developed and delivered activities below (Table 1). These activities were offered in addition to the general SPLASH workshops and 1:1 coaching provision.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specific Event</th>
<th>Intended Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Virtual Tutorial September/October 2011</td>
<td>The difference between level 1 and level 2 and how STARS can help maintain excellence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networking Event November 2011*</td>
<td>Reflection of strengths and challenges Managing being a high achiever Understanding of various perspectives on excellence (e.g. Academics/Employers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual Support November/ December 2011</td>
<td>Revision and Exams Guidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Presentation Masterclasses February 2012</td>
<td>Communication Using Evidence Arguing/defending a point under pressure Teamwork Time management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resilience Event March 2012*</td>
<td>Living with perfectionism Managing stress Time management/Goal setting/ Concentration Work/Life Balance/Happiness Advanced Group work/Leadership Self-awareness, being teachable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:1 s offered on presentations (including PTY applications): March-May 2012</td>
<td>Communication skills Using evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual Support: March-May 2012</td>
<td>Revision and Exams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awards Event June 2012*</td>
<td>Reflection Articulating development clearly Arguing a case soundly Self awareness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: STARS Development activities throughout the 2011-2012 year²

²Activities with the suffix (*) denotes significant staffing required
Summary of resources expended

Staffing needs were met from existing staff’s allocation but this proved to be inadequate and regularly resulted in additional hours. This disparity between expected and actual staff input may be due to the pioneering nature of the year and lack of suitable infrastructure. It is therefore reasonable to assume the project lead commitment will be less in subsequent years.

The administrator staffing commitment will remain the same, if the programme is conducted in a similar way. Due to the nature of project activity, additional staffing is needed at specific times in the project life-cycle and these are highlighted by an asterisk in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personnel</th>
<th>Nominal allocation</th>
<th>Actual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project Lead</td>
<td>4 hours per week</td>
<td>8 hours per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Administrator</td>
<td>3 hours per week</td>
<td>4 hours per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other contributors from SPLASH and CWB</td>
<td>2 days per year</td>
<td>4 days per year per person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External contributors</td>
<td>5 hours per year</td>
<td>5 hours per year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Human resources

The scheme did not request any additional funding and all costs as stated in Table 3 below, were met from existing budgets. The spend per student was £00.85 (excluding staff costs).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Expenditure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Design and printing certificates</td>
<td>£15.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networking events hospitality</td>
<td>£300.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External expenses</td>
<td>£30.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>£345</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Non-staffing expenditure
Evaluation outcomes

The outcomes of the project have been identified as affecting primarily one of three areas:

- Increased engagement with support/opportunities
- Improvements in the affective domain (sense of belonging and recognition)
- Improvements in transferable skills

**Increased engagement with support/opportunities**

Of the students eligible (n=502,) over 80% chose to affiliate with the pilot scheme in year 1. This represents significant increases in engagement. Many students openly admitted that they would not have sought development from the team had it not been for the differentiated development initiative. Figure 2 shows how many of the eligible students chose to affiliate with the scheme by Faculty. Although STARS achieved the lowest percentage of engagement from students in FEPS, the engagement rate was still over 70% of all eligible students. Engagement analysis by department can be found in Appendix A.

“It’s nice to feel appreciated for your efforts, to have the opportunity to meet other excellent students and to have the chance to develop your skills and learn how to maintain the same level of achievement” (BSc Tourism Management)
Figure 2: Percentage of Engagement by Faculty

At the beginning of the STARS initiative 25% of participants were considering PGT study, by the end of the year this had risen to 69%. Eighteen students attended 1:1 coaching session over the year compared to one the previous year. SPLASH and the Centre for Wellbeing were seen by some STARS students as a ‘safety net’ which they found reassuring. Others recognised the potential to engage with learning support and counselling proactively (i.e. rather than reactively, to remedy an issue).

“STARS has been great at providing me with a way to develop skills. It is good, as in my experience, high-achievers are given less support than other students (BSc Applied Biomedical Science)

Even ‘perfect’ excellent students, high achievers struggle and therefore need this little support from someone (BSc Computer Science)

It fills a niche which just isn’t solved for second year students” (BSc Computer Science)

It helps you keep going. It’s good to know the support is there and that someone cares” (BSc Sociology)

“It motivates undergraduates to work harder as there is an achievement other than a degree that can be achieved (BSc Business Management)
Affective Domain: belonging and recognition

The difference (and unique strength) achieved by formalising differentiated development in this way, is that it creates, de facto, a peer group community of similarly able and similarly motivated students. In a US study, Hebert and McBee argue that “a strong sense of worth evolved from being a member of a group noted for accomplishment” (2007; p.149). This combination of: sense of belonging, recognition of success and feeling of uniqueness might well also have a direct relationship to improving intrinsic motivation and academic success (See Hammond et al, 2007; Hebert, 2006). In addition to these affective benefits, research suggests that a relationship exists between working with students of equally high ability and the development of critical thinking (Tsui, 1999). To further facilitate this sense of belonging, a virtual community was established online. Four hundred students signed up to this community.

The evaluation demonstrated that for 69% of participants, being recognised as a member of a group known for high achievement was the most significant aspect of the scheme.

This is congruent with other data suggesting that 72% of students belonging to STARS said that belonging has influenced their identity as high-achieving students. Of the 143 students who responded, 100% thought that STARS should continue. Of these, 98% of students thought it was important that the University recognises and supports its high-achievers.

“It feels good to be recognised and confidence [sic]. It was a really good experience and helped me to develop my self-awareness skills more” (Biomedical Science)
Transferable skills development

The intended skills/learning outcomes (see Table 4) were developed by the multi-disciplinary team and content was delivered via online blogs, virtual interactive tutorials, face to face workshops, networking events and one-to-one coaching sessions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Develop leadership;</th>
<th>Communicate clearly</th>
<th>Argue soundly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work autonomously</td>
<td>Reflect and learn from their own performance</td>
<td>Be confident yet teachable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop resilience</td>
<td>Manage pressure effectively</td>
<td>Deliver effective presentations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work well in a team</td>
<td>Bring out potential in others</td>
<td>Manage time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Learning outcomes from differentiated development STARS pilot

The final stage of the evaluation enabled the STARS students to reflect on these skills to articulate how they felt they had developed in each area during level 2. This was not limited to events directly linked to the STARS delivery, but included more traditional PDP opportunities (academic tasks set, paid work, mentoring volunteering etc.).

Self-reported benefits of the scheme to students

Of 55 students who responded to this evaluation, 100% thought that STARS should continue. Of these, 98% of students thought it was important that the University recognises and supports its high-achievers. Students were then asked to identify what top 3 benefits they had experienced as a result of participating in STARS (See Figure 3). These data also illustrate the importance of; (a) increased engagement with support (b) recognition and belonging and (c) skills development. It is interesting to note the prominence of “career prospects” given by the students; this finding suggests input from the University’s Careers Service might be advantageous in 2013.
Conclusion

STARS offers a unique way to engage our high-achieving students in development activities. The scheme is low cost but high impact. The project will inform future provision not only for similar L2 cohorts but for all UG and PGT students, in terms of what motivates our students and their engagement preferences. All of the students who participated in the evaluation process wanted STARS to continue in 2013 and 98% of students thought it was important that the University continues to recognise and support its high-achievers.

Students reported improvements in motivation, development in academic and non-academic competencies and increased academic self-efficacy from participating in STARS. In addition to the short-term reported impact, the scheme may also affect longer term aspirations. In November 2011, at the beginning of the STARS pilot, 25% of the students were considering PGT study; by June 2012, this had risen to 69%.

There are clear advantages to the institution to be gained by continuing to support this population.

Plans for 2012/13

Over half of our students take a year between end of level 2 and commencing their final year to do a Professional Training Year (PTY). Anecdotal evidence has shown that these students have worries about returning to university study after a year away. STARS wanted to create a discussion forum and blog by which (a) students can share their worries with each other and (b) members of staff can begin a process of easing their transition back into study.

The current STARS are now separated into two cohorts (Y3 and PTY) and will receive ongoing support from Dr. Dickinson. Those who missed the 70% mark in level 2 will also receive additional support. Those entering level 3 attaining 70 or over for the first time will also be invited to join.

The new level 2 students identified as achieving 70 or over will be managed by Dr. Morey. Those who narrowly missed 70% at level 2 will be supported by Dr. Yakovchuk, with a view to them joining STARS in level 3.
**References**


University of Surrey (2012) Undergraduate prospectus University of Surrey, Guildford.


Appendix A

Engagement by Department

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Department</th>
<th>Engagement achieved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arts</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCEE</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic Engineering</td>
<td>77.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music and Sound Recording</td>
<td>78.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>78.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computing</td>
<td>81.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MMAE</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>83.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biochemistry and Physiology</td>
<td>86.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>88.23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>92.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>92.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physics</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English and Languages</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix B

Fantastic way of recognising and motivating us to go beyond the boundaries and achieve our potential (BSc Business Management)

I think it is motivating to be recognised as a high achieving student and the programme has also provided guidance as to how to do even better (BSc Politics)

Feels good to be recognised in terms of your study performance (BSc Chemical Engineering)

It gives a good push to the students to maintain excellence (BSc Aerospace engineering)

Stimulated motivation in us high-achievers (BSc Biomedical science)

Provides useful information and motivation and recognises achievement. Motivation to aim higher still! (LLB)

It makes high achievers feel good to be recognised and this makes us work even better (MMath)

I feel high achievers at the University of Surrey are now getting the credit they deserve, thanks for your help and support (BSc Electronic Engineering)

I have more belief in myself (BSc Business Management)

It is helping students to maintain motivation when the workload changes drastically (BSc Civil Engineering)

It’s really useful to motivate students to keep exceptional performance and deal with stress (BSc Accounting and Finance)

Very grateful for the recognition (MMaths)

It helps to be recognised, but also meeting employers and knowing what they look for has helped a lot (BSc Accounting and Finance)

It fills a niche which just isn’t solved for second year students” (BSc Computer Science)

It is a very beneficial experience (BSc Biomedical Science)

The response from my family has been the best thing, they are so proud that I am a STAR! (BSc Electronic Engineering)