#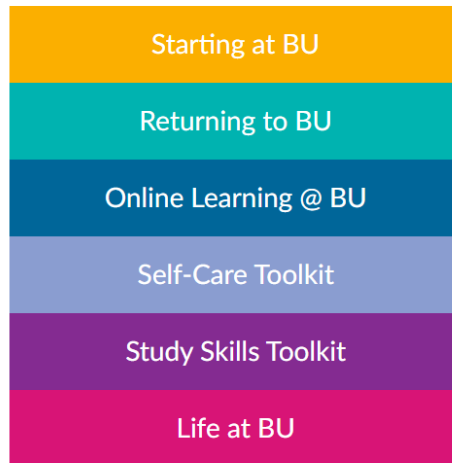 The development and evaluation of ME@BU, a self-accessing online tool to support students' transitions to, and through, university.

ME@BU

Starting at BU
Returning to BU
Online Learning @ BU
Self-Care Toolkit
Study Skills Toolkit
Life at BU

A report developed by Dr Camila Devis-Rozental* and Professor Debbie Holley

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Executive Summary

Supporting positive mental health during, and post pandemic needs to be a key priority for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Heitz et al. (2020) identify issues with access and equity in the shift to remote learning, starting with the immediate logistical challenges of ensuring that students have access to the basic technologies wherever they are studying and regardless of their socio-economic status. They also identify a range of social, emotional, and human needs that need to be addressed in order for students to study online effectively. As new ways of working impact on both students and staff, adjustments to the virtual work patterns and a redefinition of the time and space will be needed, and appropriate resources developed.

This report presents an online resource named ME@BU, developed to assist students' (in particular those in underrepresented groups) during their transitions through the university journey.

ME@BU

Starting at BU

Returning to BU

Online Learning @ BU

Self-Care Toolkit

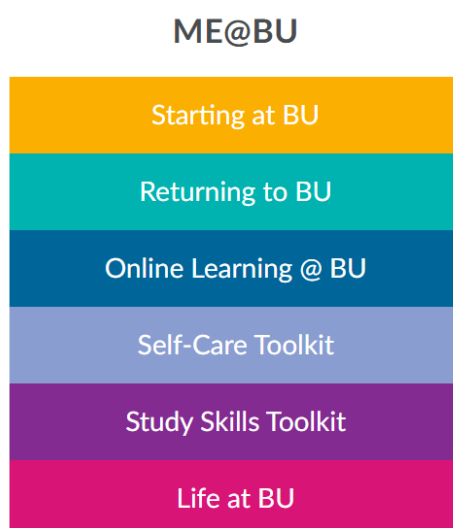Study Skills Toolkit

Life at BU

Figure 1. Image of the resource

Figure 1.0 is a representation of the image that appears on each study unit on our University Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), on our pre-arrivals page and on programme pages.

Each colour section leads to a carefully designed, accessible and scaffolded set of learner resources and activities. Drawing upon contemporary research on the student experience, the Online Learning @BU had been significantly redesigned to support our learners during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Self-Care Toolkit is a new standalone set of resources, that promote and enhance the links between academic advisor with our student support services with regards to student health and wellbeing.

Originally designed to narrow the gap between school/ college to university, the tool has been redeveloped and customised drawing upon student, staff and professional services feedback. The tool focuses on developing students' academic skills, increasing their wellbeing as they prepare for university, and practical skills to supporting them to flourish in Higher Education. It is based upon an

internally funded 'Mind the Gap' research project, which identified the key areas of significance to students as they transition (Devis-Rozental and Barron 2020), and annual qualitative and quantitative data over a two-year period.

The latest version of the main tool (L3-L7) includes the following sections:

Starting at BU

Includes general information for students unfamiliar to BU (accommodation, campus, explanation of acronyms etc.) as well as COVID19 information

- o Pre arrival activities
- o Arrival activities
- o 10 days of learning (study skills workshops)

Returning to BU

Includes information useful for those already used to our terminology (tips for returning students, COVID19 updates, academic skills refresher sessions)
- o Information and tips
- o Campus experience
- o 10 days of learning (as above)

Online learning @BU

Includes tips for learning online, explanation of different online tools etc.
- o Technology
- o Online learning
- o Our wellbeing online
- o Library resources
- o Online collaboration

Self-care toolkit

Looks at wellbeing from a holistic point of view and it is divided in the following areas:
- o Maslow's hierarchy of needs
- o Physical wellbeing
- o Mental wellbeing (Socio-emotional intelligence)
- o Practical skills
- o Student services

Study skills toolkit

- o Academic expectations
- o Marking guidelines
- o Learning styles
- o Reading and research
- o References and citations
- o Language support
- o Additional learning needs

Life at BU

- o Supporting you (study and wellbeing support)

- o Developing yourself (careers, languages, sports, groups and societies)
- o Making a difference (sustainability at BU, volunteering)

Data collection protocol

We have gathered data from the following sources to inform the project:

Year	Data collected
2018	• Prearrival student survey (1,056 students) (quantitative and qualitative) • Student symposium (9 Students) (qualitative)
2019	• Prearrival student survey (999 students) (quantitative and qualitative information) • Student focus groups (9 Students) (qualitative) • Online analytics on engagement (monthly) (quantitative)
2020	• Pre arrival student survey (712 students) (quantitative and qualitative information) • Student focus groups (9 students) (qualitative) • Online analytics on engagement (Monthly) (quantitative)

Table 1. Data collection

Tool development phases

As a university, we had already started the journey to technological transformation through the 'Vision for Learning project" (Holley et al. 2018), a university-wide consultation resulting in drawing together a central learning technology team with academic leadership. The ongoing impact of this culture has been evident through the building of staff confidence with the shift to fully online, so we were well positioned to create this new tool. We then began exploring the possibility to develop an online tool to reach as many commencing students as possible to support them in their transition to university (Pre- and post-graduate).

The project stemmed from a previous project entitled Mind the gap: Supporting students to have a successful transition from school to university: Current practice and future possibilities, funded by the Fair access and participation internal fund. It explored the findings from a symposium where students presented shared their lived experiences of starting university. Findings from the event were that students wanted better signposting to the support and resources available and a friendlier and more personalised online presence with key information for pre arrival students.

We created and evaluated a prototype interactive online induction resource to assist with students' (in particular those in underrepresented groups) transition to university. This included a focus on developing their academic skills and increasing their wellbeing in preparation for and in the early months of university, so that they thrive based on a previous project entitled Mind the gap which found that these areas were the most important to students as they go through this transition (Devis-Rozental and Barron 2020). The aim was to support students holistically before during and after their transition and ultimately increase student satisfaction and improve succession and achievement. To inform our online tool we carried out a symposium where 9 students shared their experiences of starting at university.

We also evaluated data gathered in the arrivals survey 17-18 which found that students wanted a simpler way to get information as there were too many tools and areas and this could be confusing. In the survey it was also found a need to increase the focus on web and digital media communications.

Action

Following feedback from the focus groups and student survey Devis-Rozental developed the online tool to support students on their transition to university with the support from one learning technologist and an admin assistant. The tool originally would be available to students before they start university as soon as they registered. The rationale for this was to give them time to get used to our online environment and to gain some knowledge of university life. The online tool was launched in August 2019 in the pre arrival area of the university's online platform. The tool included a range of resources that students could access in their own time, something they identified as useful in the focus group, especially as some may feel embarrassed to ask questions. Students in the focus group mentioned amongst other things:

- There is a need for more specific information there is a lot of general information in different places
- Learning about marking is very important
- General information about the town and university (building names)
- Learning about plagiarism because culturally people may not understand
- Better signposting of study support that is accessible not scary
- Information about managing money
- Learning about learning styles
- Cultural shift
- Information about nutrition

The tool clearly identifies a path for those seeking additional or more specialised support. It considers students' needs within a holistic context. By this we mean that whilst at university students develop their knowledge and understanding alongside their study skills and their socio-emotional intelligence (Devis-Rozental 2018).

Data

Data from our pre arrival survey showed that whilst a significant number of students found the tool very useful or useful, there was scope for further innovation, and clearer signposting.

Pre arrival survey	preference for online pre arrival material	Usefulness of ME@BU (Very useful or useful)
2018	38%	N/A
2019 900 students	46%	37% of respondents claimed not to know about ME@BU. Of those that knew about it and used it, 55% said it was very useful or useful, 37% neutral and 8% not useful
2020 712 students	54.5%	37% of respondents claimed not to know about ME@BU. Of those that knew about it and used it,

		50.2% felt it was very useful or useful, 38.3% neutral and 11% not useful

Table 3. Pre arrival survey data

Revised plan

The toolkit was originally designed as an online tool to support pre-arrivals students (Level 4 and 7) to support them in their transition to university. However, following its success and a firm commitment to support students throughout all of their transitions (between levels, coming back from placement, for example), we were tasked late in the Autumn of 2019 with developing the tool further to support students during their whole university journey so we began planning for this, with an agreement that due to the task at hand we would do it in stages, beginning with students coming back from placement.

Furthermore, based on students' feedback from the three focus groups carried out, we changed some of the wording within the tool. For instance, one student stated:

> "Mostly, I'm not sure, I wasn't sure what 'thriving at BU' really meant. I think there's a lot of diverse stuff in there that's difficult to categorise, so I understand where the challenge comes from but at the same time it's like"

The rest of the students within the focus group agreed. After testing various words to see which was the easier to understand we changed the tab entitled thriving at BU for Life at BU where students could access the array of extracurricular activities within the university (Devis-Rozental and Barron 2020).

In October 2019 we launched a version of the tool for students coming back from placement informed by students' comments and feedback from the placements working group. This version has a tab called returning to BU instead of starting at BU. It also includes resources and information about settling back in after placement and how students can use their placement experience to enrich their final year. Additionally, in December 2019 we launched another version for our Post Graduate Research (PGR) students. This version was developed with additional information from one of our PGR students investigating student wellbeing for PGRs as well as the doctoral college. It links to specific information targeted to this demographic. It was important that each tool was relevant and meaningful to the target students we wanted to support. Consequently, both versions have bespoke information to support them in settling within their specific journeys as well as more generic information regarding the university community which are relevant to all.

Enhancing our provision

As we were well positioned for further enhancement as we moved online 'in a hurry' in April 2020 due to COVID19 based on the work developed by Devis-Rozental over the past two years (Devis-Rozental 2020), the tool was further adapted and made available to all students at all levels with an additional section entitled Online learning at BU (Devis-Rozental and Barron 2020). The rationale for this was to supporting students to develop their digital literacy to enhance their learning (Waight and Holley 2020). Additionally, considering student feedback from the focus groups we worked alongside other teams to streamline and standardise our language. We found that students, especially international students misunderstood some of our terminology. One example of this was the word chaplaincy. Students from other cultures would not access its support as it had a religious connotation. Consequently, this service was renamed faith and reflection.

Updated Findings

Online analytics on engagement have shown that:

- August 2020 the tools were accessed by 4,604 unique visitors
- September 2020 show that they have been accessed by 9,427 unique visitors.

The online learning tab and the study skills tab are the most used.

Conclusion and recommendations

The higher education sector, is using digital technology to engage and support students during COVID19. Moving to this way of working has posed significant challenges for the sector, especially if no strong emphasis has been placed on developing digital content.

Digital technology has provided us with an unprecedented way of continuing to support and engage our students. It has given us the opportunity to further demonstrate its efficacy and the potential it offers to give access to all. Communication, participation and peer learning are all areas that have been enhanced by this way of working. Utilising existing resources and reimagining, curating them and repurpose them based on a cyclical action research process to fully embrace this quick shift has been successful mostly due to the already existing expertise and team to support all staff in this new way of working as well as acting proactively and responsively to student feedback. By working remotely, we have been able to break geographical barriers and our students have been able to access resources to support them in developing holistically. We have also been able to showcase the opportunities to benefit from working in this way from the point of view of sustainability and accessibility.

This case study demonstrates that the online toolkit developed for students has been widely accessed by students and through student feedback we have been able to demonstrate that the tool is useful in supporting students before they start university; and , indeed, once they are here. Throughout the project the tool has evolved, diversified and modified to ensure we can target specific demographics and students can find the information they need quick and efficiently. Further, that they know that the tool is a one stop place where they can seek most information.

Our limited findings suggest:

- Ensure students have access to the technology to enable them to explore the online resources
- Ensure students know how to navigate the online environment
- Create a single space where students can access information easily online
- Ensure the language used is simple and self-explanatory (no assumptions or acronyms)
- Ensure students know how to use the online resources (to record, watch or play)
- Signpost students early to the online resources
- Ensure students feel supported online in every transition before, during and after their university experience.
- Online provision must consider students' holistic wellbeing

Limitations

Limitations are clearly signposting materials to potential and enrolled students and encouraging independent access. Sector research by the National Union of Students (2020) conducted during

the COVID-19 pandemic found that 20% of students struggled with access to online learning, with black, Asian and minority ethnic students, those from poorer backgrounds, care leavers, students with caring responsibilities and students with disabilities particularly impacted. Poor quality internet signal or additional responsibilities students may have had to undertake, ranging from parental responsibilities to caring for sick family members or going back to practice as key workers.

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