

Prepare for Success: A pre-arrival learning resource for students preparing for study in a different academic culture

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1. Background

Increasing student mobility across continent and across the globe for educational purposes has led to recognition by receiving institutions of the need to better prepare international students for the challenge of study in a different academic culture. Delaying cultural induction until students have arrived can mean that students feel overloaded during their first few weeks and this can impact on the time needed to make a successful academic transition. Technology-enhanced learning now provides the means for helping students prepare for the transition before they leave their home country and, in a way that goes far beyond pre-arrival email contact or downloadable 'welcome packs' from university websites.

1.2. The Prepare for Success project

In 2008, a development project aimed at international students preparing to study at universities in the UK created *Prepare for Success*, supported by UKCISA (UK Council for International Student Affairs) and funded through the Prime Minister's Initiative for International Education. *Prepare for Success* (www.prepareforsuccess.org.uk) is an open, web-based, interactive learning resource which prepares international students for academic culture and the academic skills needed for effective study in Higher Education in the UK. It is designed flexibly to enable independent use by pre-departure students, who are often still in their home countries; and for use by receiving (or sending) institutions alongside their own resources and/or to tutor as part of a customised course for their own students embarking on study in the UK. The interactive learning content, focuses on topics such as 'Ways of being taught on your course'; 'Academic writing at university'; 'Your relationship with your tutors'; 'Adapting to a new life'; 'Taking part in seminars'. These are designed as interactive 'learning objects' and include audio and video clips of international students and UK tutors talking about issues connected with changing cultures and the linguistic and academic challenges involved, and associated comprehension tasks to help students develop their own language skills as they learn and reflect on their own approaching transition.

1.3. Conclusions

Since its launch in July 2008 students and institutions from around the world have found and used the *Prepare for Success* website. Reflected in the website usage statistics, feedback from users gathered from questionnaire links on the website, has been very positive especially in how useful they have found this pre-arrival resource when preparing for study in the UK. Given this level of encouragement, a second phase of website development is now underway to enhance the existing interactive learning content, providing personalized pathways through the learning objects and an interactive FAQs page developed with a Web 2.0 style interface.

2. INTRODUCTION

It is widely recognised that international students embarking on courses at universities in the UK and elsewhere would benefit from being better prepared for the challenges that study within a different academic culture can present. Besides the linguistic challenge, students often need to adjust to many other aspects of study in a new academic culture. Different styles of teaching and modes of assessment are just two of the challenges that the international student may encounter when they leave their home country to study overseas. The process of acculturation need not wait until students arrive at their destination, embark on their course of studies and meet all of the challenges head-on. Institutions now have it within their power to do a considerable amount to prepare prospective international students before they arrive, aided by the internet and technology-enhanced learning.

This paper will present and demonstrate Prepare for Success, a pre-arrival interactive resource, which has been developed for international students preparing to study in the UK; for receiving institutions in the Further and Higher Education sectors as well as for institutions in various countries sending students to the UK. It will explain the design of Prepare for Success and the pedagogic approach in which it is based; explore usage so far and assess how this versatile web-based learning resource has been received since its launch in the summer of 2008. It will also outline the continuing expansion and enhancement of the website which is taking place in the current year.

3. LEARNING OBJECTS: THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF PREPARE FOR SUCCESS

Prepare for Success has its pedagogic basis in a pre-arrival online course developed and delivered to international students in their home countries by the University of Southampton since the summer of 2005. (eLanguages 2009a) Both Prepare for Success and the University of Southampton tutored online course have learning objects (LOs) at their core. LOs offer a versatile technology and have provided the building blocks for a number of resource set (toolkit) developments at the University of Southampton (eLanguages, 2009b) as well as for online courses.

In 2000, Wiley defined a learning object as 'any digital resource that can be reused to support learning' (Wiley, 2000:7). Before and after that time, those engaged in the development of learning objects have experimented with their form and size (granularity), and considerable variation in format and design is acknowledged (Polsani, 2003). Nevertheless, certain attributes are generally agreed to be desirable. These include adherence to recognised technical standards facilitating their storage and retrieval, and interoperability (e.g. tagging with metadata, SCORM compliance), and design features enabling their reusability or scope for repurposing to offset the time and cost involved in their development (Wiley 2000, South and Monsoon 2000, Koper et al 2004).

Elanguages, an e-Learning research and development group within Modern Languages at the University of Southampton, have evolved a model for LO development which combines multi-media assets with an activity-based approach to learning and which facilitates LO re-use and repurposing. The key features of the pedagogic design of these LOs are that they:

- contain activities which encourage 'learning by doing';
- aim to engage the student actively in reflection;
- the activities allow for practice and production, and build on each other;
- activities are also personalised (learner-centred) where possible;

- they are enhanced with significant amounts of feedback (help, answers with explanations, review sections) which helps to support and drive students' learning.

These LOs are also developed to be reusable or offer scope for easy repurposing. Aspects of their design which enable this are that:

- they are self-contained and separable from individual contexts of use (scaffolding for 'course' or similar context of use can be added at the level of the VLE, for example)
- they are simple content packages - including embedded Flash tasks and linked dependent text resources which can be printed out - within a 'front end' html web page
- they offer interoperability
- they are consistently styled and sized and can therefore operate as 'building blocks' for course or resource set design

LOs with these attributes can offer a high level of versatility. This design makes them suitable for use as the core learning materials of a pre-arrival online learning resource for international students, for example. Moreover, the LOs can function both in a stand-alone resource set for students learning independently and/or be incorporated into a customized, tutored course (see section 4.1 below).

4. DESIGNING PREPARE FOR SUCCESS

Prepare for Success, a pre-arrival learning resource to prepare international students specifically for study in the academic culture of the UK, was designed and created using the approach described above. The process began in 2007 with a feasibility study, commissioned by the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) to explore whether or not any similar types of interactive pre-arrival online tools were already in use or envisaged by receiving institutions across the UK and if so, what their key features were (Watson, 2007). The study sought the views of UK Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) concerning the specific pre-arrival needs of international students coming to their institutions and aimed to identify an appropriate format and delivery mechanism for a generic online pre-arrival resource that could be developed for the sector.

The study confirmed a clear need expressed by UK HE for the means to better prepare international students before their arrival, particularly in terms of increasing their awareness of important characteristics of British academic culture and of the academic skills required for effective study. As one respondent put it, their desire was for an interactive tool or resource that "*covered generic issues common to UK HE, but also to have an individual induction tool hosted by our institution*". In other words, institutions wanted to be helped to deliver pre-arrival preparation to their own prospective international students by the addition of generic learning content which could be delivered alongside any existing institutional preparation programme in a 'customised' format. Moreover, feedback suggested that the any new generic resource should not only prepare international students for what to expect during their studies in the UK but also provide some scope for language development for international students whose first language was not English. *Prepare for Success* was therefore developed with the aim of helping students learn about key aspects of academic study in the UK and offering opportunities for improving language skills at the same time. It was, therefore, developed primarily for international students whose first language is not English, and who have achieved an IELTS level of between 5.5 and 7.0 or equivalent, thereby reflecting the English language entry level generally required of international students by HEIs in the UK.

The initiative for the development of the Prepare for Success resource came from UKCISA and was funded by the Prime Minister's Initiative for International Education (PMI) (UKCISA, 2009). As a first step in its development, a set of working titles for 20 activity-based learning objects and an outline of their content were drafted to encompass a topic range including both general and specific features of British academic life (e.g. Academic writing at university; Ways of being taught on your course) and wider acculturation issues (e.g. Adapting to a new life; The language challenge).

Feedback from international students embarking on pre-sessional courses had indicated the kinds of topic information and support that the students would have liked prior to their arrival. The feasibility study had also asked institutional respondents (teaching staff and international officers) to rank types of student need (i.e. academic, linguistic, cultural, social) in order of perceived importance. These views determined the choice of topic for the 20 LOs, and the LO design sought to combine learning about study skills and academic culture with opportunities to improve language skills at the same time.

At the beginning of 2008 the technical development began on Prepare for Success, using an LO authoring tool, the LOC (Learning Object Creation) Tool, which had been developed in-house (Watson et al. 2008). The LOC Tool supports the creation of self-contained LOs in the form of html webpages which can then be further enhanced with Flash activities. All LOC Tool outputs also reflect the pedagogic approach described above in section 3 above. Each LO aimed to provide approximately 30 to 40 minutes of learning delivered in a sequence of two activities with a review section incorporating a summary of the key points and links to useful websites related to the topic. LO content was developed to be activity-led and in a media-rich format, offering audio and repurposed video recordings as a basis for the LO activities.

Following a pilot phase in the spring of 2008 to test usability with a comparable group of 50 international students on a preparatory course (on successful completion they progress to a pre-sessional course for students with the equivalent of 5.5 /6.0 IELTS), several improvements were made to the presentational design and two further LOs were developed and added to the resource set. A walk-through demonstration of the interactive features was also recorded with voice and text, to support students in using the resources for learning purposes. An LO (About Prepare for Success) was created to provide an optional starting point - an overview of the resource set in the form of questions and answers about key features and how the LOs can be used for independent study. Another provided a mechanism by which students could feed back their views and comments to us after using the LOs. The menu of core LOs comprises:

- Differences in university study
- The language challenge
- Ways of being taught on your course
- Preparing for online study
- Adapting to a new life
- Studying independently
- Academic writing at university
- Critical thinking
- Understanding course assignments
- Using what you read in your academic writing
- Your relationship with your tutor
- Using study time effectively
- Managing your course work
- Taking part in seminars
- Listening to lectures
- Reading for your course
- Skills for presenting in seminars
- Working with others
- Preparing for course work and exams
- Settling down to study

Prepare for Success is hosted from an independent website at www.prepareforsuccess.org.uk, where its menu of LOs can be directly accessed by students (see Figure 1).

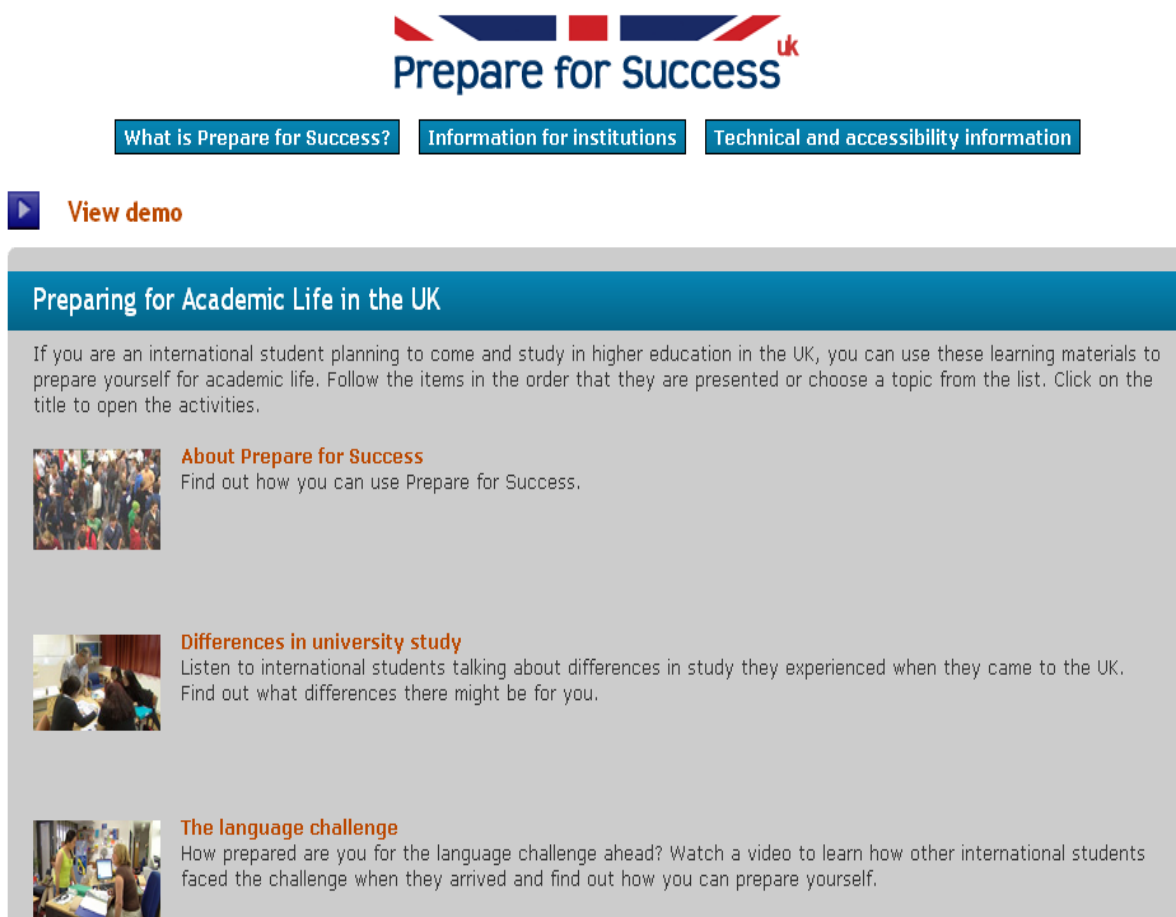


Figure 1: Self-access menu of LOs on Prepare for Success website

4.1 Modes of use

The Prepare for Success resource set aims to provide 15+ hours of self access learning for international students and at the same time, offer versatility in delivery to meet the preferences expressed by HE institutions who responded to the feasibility study. Institutions can simply link to the website from their own webpage for prospective international students. However, a more embedded approach can be achieved by 'incorporating' Prepare for Success from its web location into an institution's own tutored or moderated courses for students. This is possible because the LOs are self-contained and separable from each other. This is a requirement for RLOs (reusable learning objects) to facilitate ease of reuse/repurposing but this characteristic also permits LOs in an open web-based set such as Prepare for Success to be individually selected and linked to. Links to the webpages of discrete LOs can be made from within a VLE-based course or support package for use with pre- or even post-arrival students. The LOs can, therefore, be 'reordered' within the VLE as required and intermixed with an institution's own resources. Used like this, the LOs can take on a customised role as part of a tutored or untutored pre-arrival course or resource set delivered by an institution to its international students.

4.2 Design features facilitating student use and access

As well as the pedagogic features described above in section 2, the LOs in Prepare for Success are enhanced with some additional features to enable students using them independently to make the best use of them. These features include:

- Optional student-activated help areas which contain support for activity engagement both technical and pedagogic - for example, a transcript can be made available at this point to aid students with weaker listening skills (see Figure 2) or definitions of key terminology might be offered.
- The use of Macromedia Flash to create many of the activities, including self checking mechanisms. Further feedback is added to focus on activity content and this allows for a complete answer, comment and explanation. Scoring is also available with activities where it serves a useful purpose.
- Video and audio transcripts with highlighted relevant parts reflecting answers to an activity. These are offered post-activity permitting closer study and repetition of activity by students wishing to focus on listening practice.
- A final review section offering a summary of the main learning point(s) and useful web links, where students can find additional practice and/or reference material online relating to the topic.
- All LOs include images and are also designed where possible to meet accessibility guidelines.
- Accessible versions of activities are available for those which require the use of a mouse, by means of an embedded link at the top of the standard version webpage. These alternative versions enable user interaction through the use of a computer keyboard in place of e.g. drag and drop exercises.

Instruction

Listen to Ayako comparing university exams in her home country with exams in the UK. Move each of the points she mentions into the appropriate box, answer the three questions that follow and then check all your answers. You can listen to the interview as many times as you need to.

Ayako

Hide help

To listen to the audio, click the play button once. You can move between parts of the audio by dragging the slider left or right.

You can move items from the list into a box by clicking on them and dragging them into a box with your mouse. If you change your mind, you can still move the items from one box to another.

Answer the three questions that follow by typing your answers in the text area.

There is a transcript for you to look at if you need help:
[Audio transcript](#) (pdf, 79kb).

Exams in Ayako's home country

- Prepare opinions as well as revising facts
- Need to memorise key words and facts
- Expect to write more using an

Figure 2: Optional help provides technical and learning support for activities

5. PREPARE FOR SUCCESS WEBSITE USAGE

5.1 Student use and feedback

Since the launch of Prepare for Success in July 2008, usage statistics for the website have been gathered on a monthly basis and these show that international students from 97 different countries/domains have found Prepare for Success from a combination of both their own independent searches and through links from UK universities, NGOs (e.g. UKCISA, UCAS, The British Council, Education UK) teacher blogs, Facebook etc. The wide range of access from different countries is reflected in the statistics (see Table 1):

July 2008	Aug 2008	Sept 2008	Oct 2008	Nov 2008	Dec 2008	Jan 2009	Feb 2009	Mar 2009
UK	UK	UK	UK	UK	UK	UK	UK	UK
Romania	India	India	France	France	Italy	Italy	Japan	Chile
Switz	Germany	Malaysia	Italy	Italy	India	Japan	Spain	Japan
India	Russ Fed	Greece	Russ.Fed	Poland	Japan	India	Italy	India
Japan	Italy	France	India	India	Germany	Germany	USA	Belgium

Brazil	Switz.	Switz.	China	Greece	Russ Fed	Russ. Fed	France	Greece
Germany	France	Germany	Germany	Russ Fed	Sing'pore	France	Portugal	Spain
Australia	Japan	Japan	Chile	Malaysia	France	Poland	Russ Fed	Germany
Poland	Malaysia	Italy	Greece	Germany	Poland	Australia	Thailand	France
China	Greece	China	Japan	Indonesia	USA	Greece	India	Italy

Table 1: Top ten countries from which students accessed (July 08 –March 09)

The monthly evaluations of website usage statistics have enabled us to build a picture of use during the first 10 months since the launch of the website. In addition, 40 students have submitted the website feedback form. They have provided a profile of themselves and sent us their views and feedback on the learning resources. These students have indicated that they are based in Europe (27%), Asia (18%), Africa (18%), UK or Ireland (15%), USA or Canada (8%), Central or South America (8%), Middle East (5%). The range of disciplines for their future studies varies greatly and the related qualification too. As well as under- and post-graduate qualifications, students studying for secondary school examinations (and indicating their first language to be English) have also accessed Prepare for Success. The majority of the students responding know the UK institution at which they will be studying but up to a fifth of them are 'still choosing'. The feedback from students has been very positive with nearly all responding that Prepare for Success was easy to use and perceived to have 'helped them get ready for study in the UK'. Additional student comments reflect the high level of satisfaction with the resource as this sample shows:

Prepare for Success is a brilliant source for international students who want to study in UK.

A very good tool that gave me the answer to a lot of questions.

It has been really helpful and I think it made me physically and mentally ready for my study in the UK.

I really liked it, especially the videos. It was helpful to have the UK learning style explained, together with the differences between tutorials, seminars etc. For me the cultural notes - like the ways of addressing your tutor - were particularly important.

5.2 Institutional use and feedback

26% of responding students indicated that they were referred/linked to Prepare for Success through a UK institutional website, indicating that many UK universities have, in the first instance, chosen to link to the Prepare for Success webpage in order to make their prospective students aware of the resource. At the current time it is not clear how many receiving UK institutions are planning to embed Prepare for Success into a pre-arrival online course or VLE-based resource in spring/summer 2009 although the website statistics suggested that at least several were already doing this. Embedding the resource in this way would clearly require more planning than simply linking to the resource website from a university homepage but was desirable as the 2007 feasibility study indicated. Although the July launch of the resource in 2008 would have been too late to allow most institutions to utilise it in this way, in 2009 there may be more evidence of this in practice.

There have also been a number of informal enquiries from UK institutions planning to use the resource with their students both pre- and post-arrival. Last year, website statistics reflected the highest rise in usage during the late summer months and at the start of the new academic year (September/ October) quite possibly indicating that UK universities were using Prepare for Success with students post-arrival then. In support of this, 72% of known hits on the website at that time were from the UK. This is a development that will need further investigation in the future. Interestingly, all but one of the feedback questionnaires received from institutions via the website have been from non UK institutions in Chile, Syria, Nigeria and Pakistan. This suggests that sending institutions overseas are also seeking ways to make use of the resource and all respondents from the

institutional feedback questionnaire indicated that they felt the resource to be 'very useful' for their students. Clearly, it would be beneficial to have much more detailed information about how different institutions have been able to utilise the resource either alone or in their own pre-or post-arrival packages for international students. The second phase of development for Prepare for Success (see section 6 below) will include the implementation of more sophisticated data gathering software and further feedback will be sought directly from UK institutions for this purpose.

6. PHASE 2 EXPANSION

A phase 2 of the Prepare for Success project is currently underway. The aim is to expand and enhance the existing website in order to increase its content range and its attractiveness and usability for users. This is being done in a number of ways:

- A professionally developed website with a refreshed, Web 2.0 style 'look and feel' to it.
- Provision of study pathways through the learning resources using a series of predicted student requirements as starting points (e.g. I want to listen to ...a tutor talking, a lecture extract; I want to learn about ... referencing in essays, note-taking in lectures).
- Provision of a complementary type of content support for users of the website: A bank of FAQs relating to academic study in the UK and their answers have been created for an additional webpage with an interface allowing students to search for or randomly browse interactively through the bank of questions to find answers. The emphasis here is on quick and easy information searching, but which is also more interactive and offers different ways of searching/browsing FAQs, to complement the learning resources, which involve a more immersive mode of use.

Phase 2 of the project development will go live in July 2009. A wider and more in-depth evaluation is also being planned, employing sophisticated tracking software and a survey of institutional users. It is hoped that there may also be scope for further development phases for the website.

7. CONCLUSION

The development of Prepare for Success was made possible because of the recognition, by national bodies in the UK such as UKCISA, and by individual institutions and their teaching and support staff, of the need to better prepare international students for the challenges that study in a different academic culture can present. The model that has been used to develop Prepare for Success as a pre-arrival preparation tool for international students coming to the UK could equally be applied in other cultural contexts where international students make up a significant proportion of an institution's student body. Technology-enhanced learning now provides the potential to deliver such pre-arrival preparation much more effectively than in the past. It is therefore important to both harness and realize its potential so that the acculturation process for the international students we invite to study at our institutions can begin before they arrive, enabling them to make as smooth a transition as possible to study within a different academic culture and all that this entails. It is hoped that what has been learned through the development of Prepare for Success can help lead the way in this field.

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