From hiding in the toilets to Enid Blyton adventures -
Supporting the transition of first year students with autism; an evaluation.

Education with the personal touch

Introduction

2009 was the first year that we saw a significant number of students with Autism enrolling at Derby. We quickly realised that the models we used for other students with support needs, weren't working.

We found it difficult to engage students with support and saw a high rate of withdrawal in the first year. Staff perspectives at this point suggested, that by the time many of these students had acclimatised to university, it was too late

The response was to create a programme of support, focussed on transition, to better prepare students prior to their arrival, support them through the process of entry and through their academic journey

In design, we recognised that students do not have discrete experiences in departmental shaped boxes. Each aspect of their life impacts on the others

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Bio-psycho-socio-academic view of academic performance
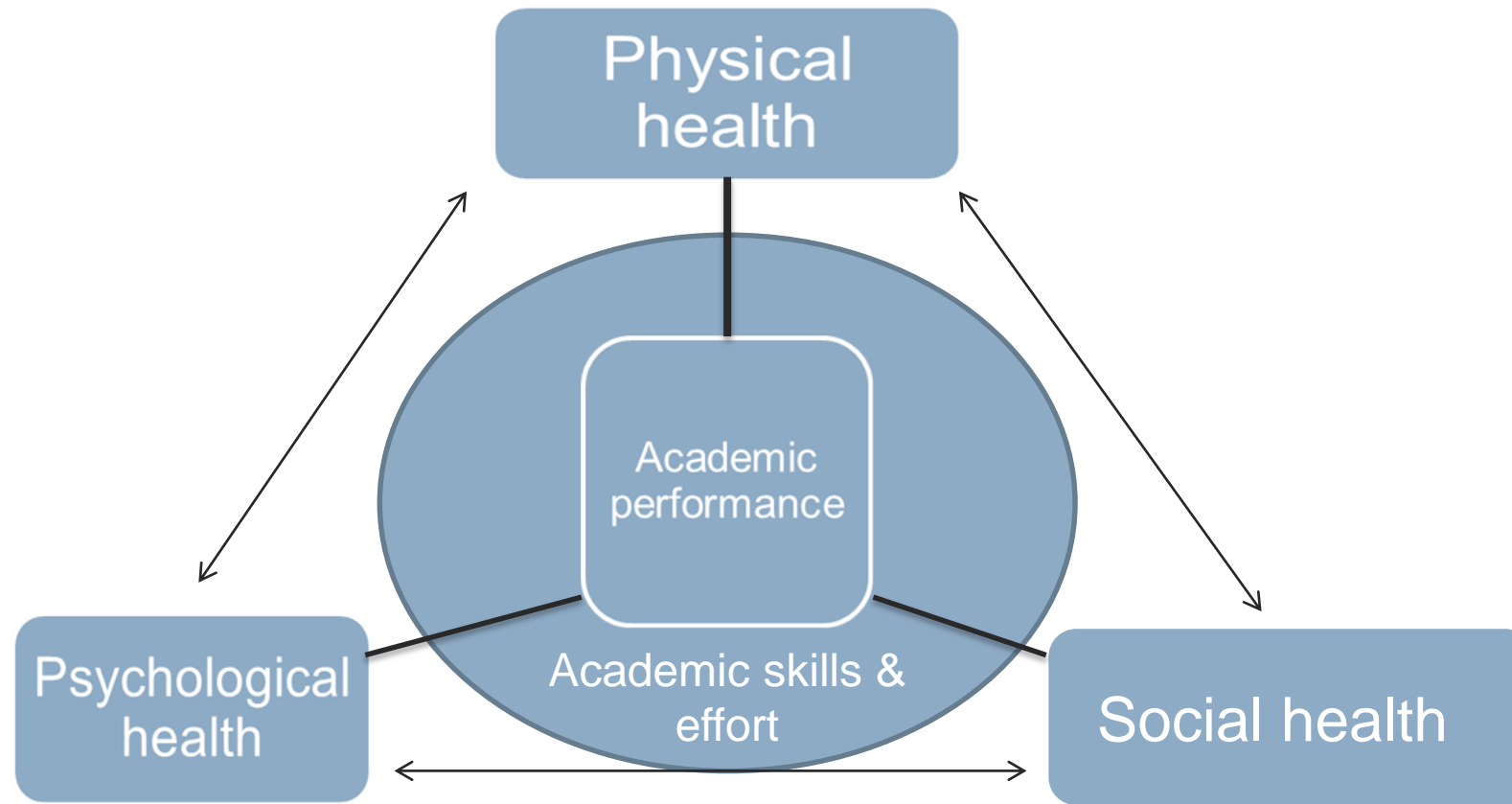
The research – to evaluate the intervention and improve our understanding of student experiences

- We adopted a pragmatic mixed methods design using qualitative interviews and quantitative data held internally. Ethics approval came from the UoD Education Ethics Committee

- We sought qualitative data from
  - Current students with Autism
  - Staff who provide support to this group
  - 15 students attended semi-structured interviews
  - 6 members of staff attended focus groups and 1 a semi-structured interview.

- This paper will focus mainly on this qualitative feedback

- The session will explore each element of the intervention and reflect on participant accounts of that element in turn

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Before university 1 – student motivations

Students gave two main reasons to explain their desire to come to university -

1. Degree = job narrative

2. A desire for a better social life

   "I wanted, not just a degree but a social life and I wanted to learn independence."

   "Well, all the problems I knew I had… they all went back to social interaction, I wanted to see if I could improve on it."

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Previous socialisation

Students who were motivated by a desire for a social life also described significant difficulties they'd previously had with socialising.

"I never liked going around people. I used to hide in the toilets [at school] during classes 'cos I don't like being around lots of people."

"Unfortunately part of my problem and I kind of feel as though I create it but, I'm not so good with people around me, so I become uncomfortable, so I do veer away from it, from those social environments…"

Indeed almost all of the participants alluded to difficulties in managing social interaction before coming to university and concerns about how this would manifest

This, in effect, appeared as a tension between a desire for more social connections and a fear of social interaction

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Previous support

Families played a key role in supporting students prior to university and in preparing them for the transition. Students who had received this support were able to provide clear examples of how this had helped

"My parents have always encouraged my sister and I to be quite independent people… the washing I did myself, the cleaning I did myself…"

Students suggested that formal support in school or from other services was either non-existent or unsatisfactory

All of which suggests that how well prepared students are, prior to coming to university, is due to luck and how engaged and able their families are to provide that support

The intervention therefore, began at the earliest possible point and sought to involve families

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Pre-entry support

Pro-active and repeated contact with every applicant with Autism who self-identified during application

An offer to work initially with someone the student identified (usually a parent) rather than directly with the student

A change in the use of language – more direct

Support to attend Open Days and \ or to visit campus with a significant other person to aid familiarisation and arrange support – still giving the student the option to let their significant other do most of the talking

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Students were less aware of the support they had received, from the university, during the application period. A number acknowledged that they had left arrangements to their parents.

"My dad did most of the talking…"

Staff were very conscious of the changes they had made to pre-entry support and there had clearly been significant debate about some of these changes – in particular not working directly with the student. These were important changes to professional practice

Staff accounts showed that they believed this shift had been beneficial

"…in terms of whether parental contact is useful, I think most of the time it is, especially in the early stages when the student themselves might not open up completely about some of the difficulties they might have."

However, staff and students also acknowledged that there was a risk in delaying the shift in responsibility from family to the student

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Summer School

- A free 3 day (2 night) residential event
- Focus on social activities designed to support building social relationships – group work, participating in sports activities, work with Student Union to identify societies to join etc.
- Specific workshops for family members to help them prepare their student (and prepare themselves)
- Skills building – cooking together in halls
- Familiarisation with campus and learning spaces
- Sample lectures
- Support for students and families \ carers to exchanges social media contacts to maintain networks throughout the summer and into the academic year
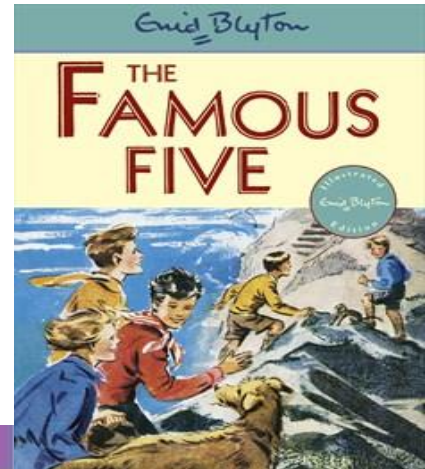
Accounts of summer school

The accounts of students who attended the summer school are overwhelmingly positive

> "Loved every part of it, even the parts where we just stayed up 'til 2 in the morning playing pool. That was still helpful."

> "I enjoyed the summer school… It was like one of those Enid Blyton adventures."

When discussing university as a whole, the accounts of Summer School attendees, are also very positive

> "Sometimes I wish it could go slower to be honest, I'm enjoying this so much really, school and college felt like eternity but this feels like weeks not months and there are so many parts of it I've really enjoyed."

Summer school 2

Two clear elements of summer school emerged from student accounts as being most helpful from their perspective
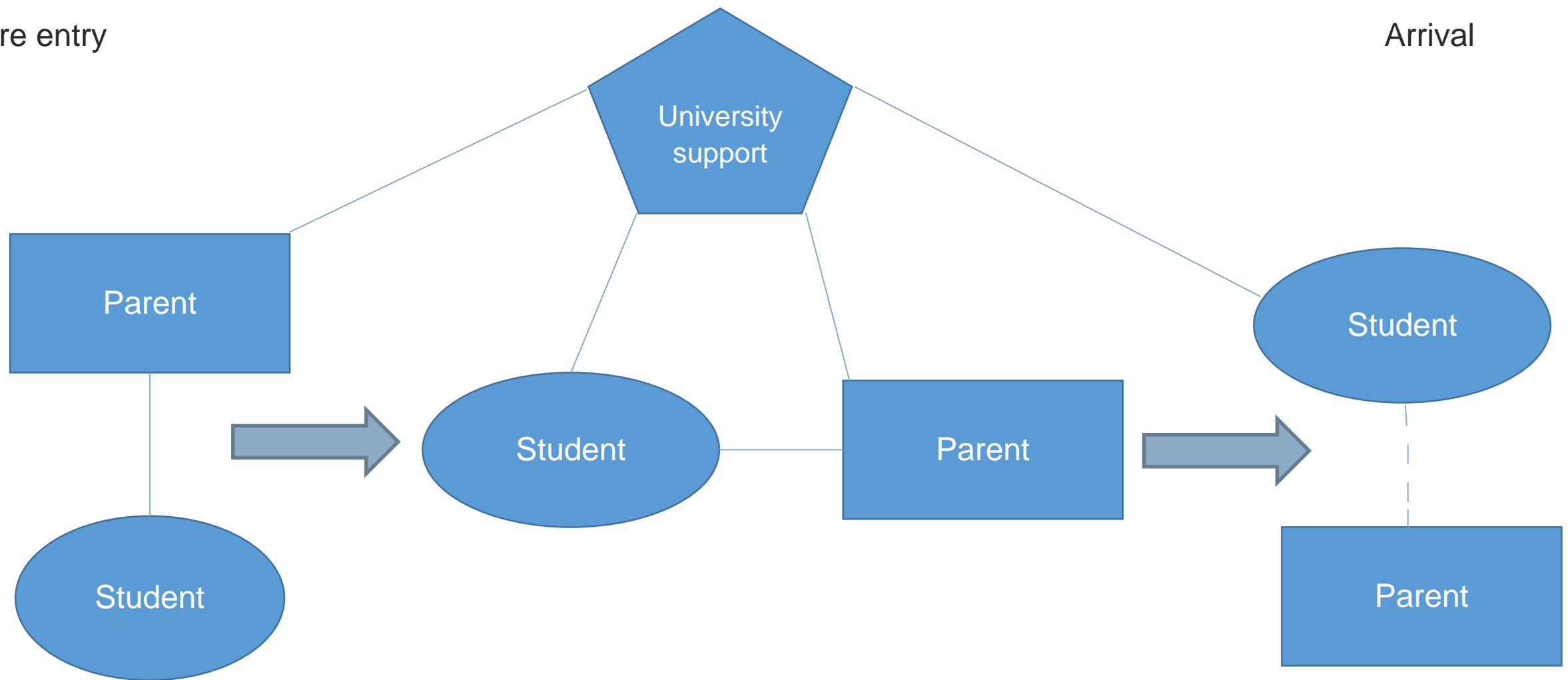
1. Socialisation - "For me summer school was all about the socialising."
2. Familiarisation with the environment – "I got to have a walk round and I got to stay in halls for the first time."

Staff accounts added two additional elements

1. The importance of the input of previous students and student stories
2. Working with parents to help them prepare their students and to let go of their responsibilities

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Pre entry

Arrival

University support

Parent

Student

Student

Parent

Student

Parent

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Get Ahead

Get Ahead is a 2 day event for disabled students that takes place immediately prior to the beginning of term. It aims to reduce anxiety and increase confidence, arrange support, begin building social networks and support familiarisation. Students with Autism are supported to attend

2 elements emerged from student accounts as being most helpful

1. Familiarisation – "… you could get your bearings, like, a bit before everyone was there."
2. Setting up support and dealing with practical arrangements - …"getting everything done and out of the way without all the crowds and noise and people."

Students who had attended summer school seem to receive increased benefit from Get Ahead, particularly in terms of socialisation and spoke about it in more positive terms

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Socialisation

There are some discernible differences in the narrative accounts of students, dependent upon whether they attended Summer School and \ or Get Ahead

Pre-entry events and opportunities to establish relationships prior to the beginning of term appear to have had a significant impact. Students who attended summer school, in particular reported transformative experiences

> "I have no friends at home… what I've enjoyed the most, this is going to be social life all over again isn't it. I've enjoyed that… it's the friends I've made from all over the world, to be honest, that's what I've loved… it's just been nice to be part of a social circle really."

> "I suppose coming here, I have been able to have a social life that I'd never experienced before in my life. You know, I know those on my course, the Debating Society, I know my flatmates. Since coming here I've made more friends than I ever have in my entire life."

Socialisation staff accounts: coaching and psycho-social support

The intervention provides an individual support worker for each student

These staff identified specific interventions they use to improve student socialisation

1. Help students to understand the social interactions they are experiencing

2. Help students plan strategies and actions for social integration in detail

3. Using role play and rehearsal to help students manage social situations

"…to maintain face conversation, not just to initiate and that's what most parents actually mentioned about their children on the spectrum. That this is one of the biggest difficulties and if that's something that you can do in a role-play, I think that can be really helpful in itself."

Staff also discussed the importance of working with students to help them build structure and routine and to adapt to ongoing changes

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When students discussed the role of the support worker they focussed more on the psychological support that it provided

They saw their support worker as someone who they could discuss problems with and who helped them relieve stress and "get things off their chest"

Some also referenced practical help their support worker had provided – including intervening as an intermediary with academic staff if necessary

> "It was my support worker… who would just help me to sort out finances and then figure out times to meet, to then just talk about any anxiety or anything that is worrying me, stuff like that, which was really supportive because that was the reason I decided to stay."
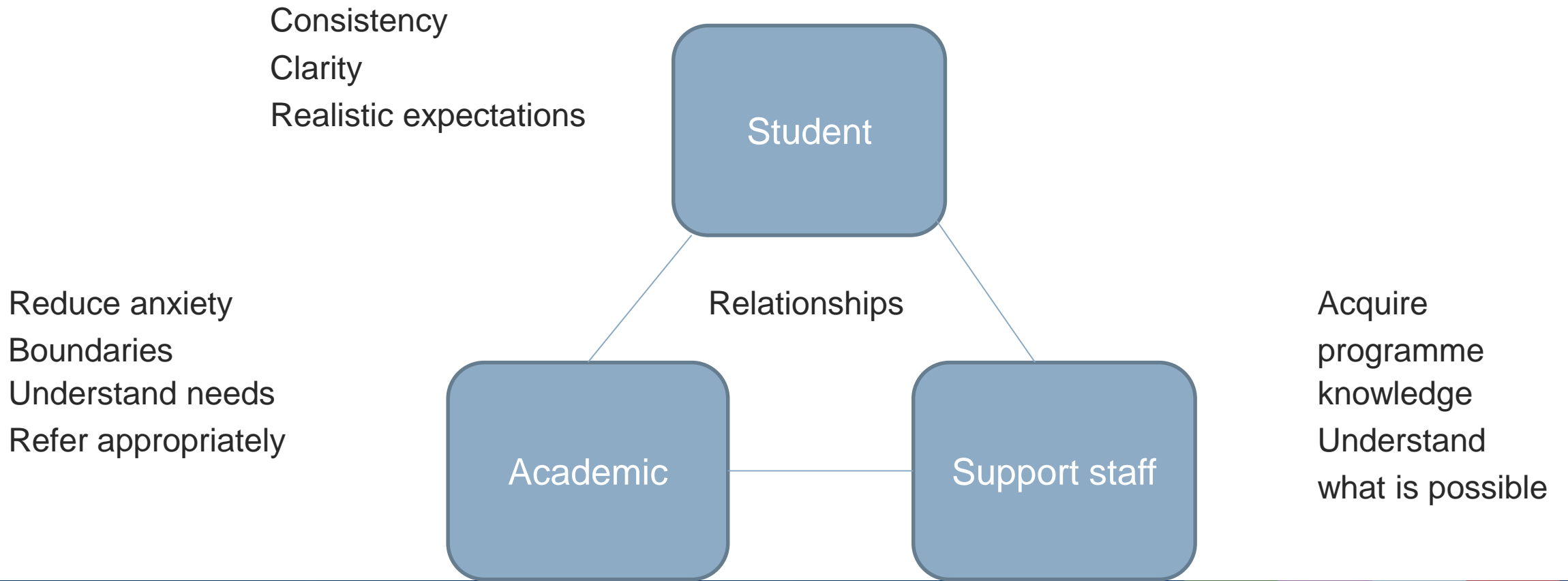
Supporting academic staff to support students

The accounts of staff and students reflected a broad spectrum of responses from academics

There were some suggestions from students that all academic staff should receive mandatory training

Training is now offered to academic staff and those who have received it have been positive about its impact. However, staff participants in the research indicated that there may be limits to the impact providing training can achieve

They highlighted the benefits of bringing academics, students and support staff together

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Preparatory 3 way meeting

Consistency
Clarity
Realistic expectations

Student

Reduce anxiety
Boundaries
Understand needs
Refer appropriately

Relationships

Academic

Support staff

Acquire
programme
knowledge
Understand
what is possible

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Recent developments

Advance directives

Contact with previous school or college

Scaffolded support during transition

Personal contact from hall manager and as many opportunities to familiarise to their living environment as needed

'Quiet hour' at Fresher's Fayre

Availability of mediation if things go wrong in halls

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Success is possible

"I remember, there was one student… his mother was more involved in the assessment process than he was and I can really remember questioning how this person was going to make the transition to university. He seemed to be one of those people, I would highlight, wouldn't be staying with us although quite academically capable…

He then had really good support [from a support worker] and came to Summer School and to the social group. He then came back to Summer School [the following year] and did a student story. It was amazing for me to see that development and I also saw him at Graduation… and his ability to navigate himself through Graduation, to sort out all his paperwork and to do the whole thing independently was enormous. That kind of growth over the years was incredible."

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Impact on retention

% withdrawal in the first year