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Conley Readiness Index

INTO Newcastle University

Add value, strengthen skills, build positivity and support students moving forwards in their learning journey



About the resource

The Conley Readiness Index (CRI) is a 30-minute online analysis tool that assesses students' strengths and weaknesses and **identifies gaps** between their aspirations and skills. It generates outputs that **actively encourage students** to adopt behaviours or seek out resources to remediate skills gaps. It can provide guidance to students both at the start of their university journey and, when the diagnostic is repeated, throughout their studies and into their career.

The CRI shows students how they **think, act, learn** and **transition** into university. The Conley Model is based on 42 'actionable' skills and competencies that students and educators can focus on in order to **improve readiness** for higher education and career success. These skills and competencies are organised into 4 broad areas called the Four Keys: **Cognitive Strategies, Content Knowledge, Learning Skills & Techniques** and **Transition Knowledge & Skills**

Overview

Supporting students with academic and pastoral challenges, including welfare issues, is a priority for INTO Newcastle University. The university team wanted to evaluate whether CRI could act as a diagnostic tool in a variety of student support and wellbeing scenarios. Ideally, the resource would uncover issues of concern earlier on and therefore provide the opportunity for targeted intervention sooner. Timing a trial for the summer, it was decided to implement CRI on the Pre-Sessional English programme and evaluate its effectiveness ahead of any widespread adoption.

Additionally, INTO were keen to add value to their student experience plus maintain engagement and David Broadbent intriguingly reflected that “...that was the initial impetus, but I think we've learned that there are other things that have come out of this, that add a different type of value.”

David Broadbent is the Deputy Programme Manager on the Pre-sessional English Programme and the VLE/Digital Lead at INTO Newcastle University. He has worked closely to implement CRI into the programme and assess its impact with both teachers and students. This study below reflects his thoughts and experiences of implementing CRI.



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Summary

INTO provides gateway courses into university study, preparing its students for transition into their selected university degrees. INTO Newcastle University chose to implement CRI on a 10-week English course for international students which provides pre-sessional academic skills, culminating in exams in week 9.

They hoped that it would boost engagement in the final week of the course, post-examinations.

To ensure their first use of the resource was not biased by language ability, INTO Newcastle chose to supply it to a cohort with a good level of English (IELTS 6.5 on average). This level of English meant students were fully functional in the language, but with some room for improvement in an academic setting. In a typical year around 95% of those students are Chinese.

This was run as a 'trial' class, to ensure the resource provided the desired added value and enhanced the student experience enough to warrant scaled adoption onto other courses both on INTO and in other years at the university. The class, of around 16, were all going on to media studies degrees at the university.

The Conley Readiness Index is designed to be taken as a test and then the results are reflected upon and discussed. To allow time for this, they structured use in the following way:

- the cohort took their CRI test on Wednesday of their final week 10
- the Thursday was left free of any reference to the test to allow for personal reflections
- on Friday the teacher facilitated an 'exit' tutorial with each student. Students could attend alone or in groups of up to 3. In this tutorial, the students discussed the test findings and the teacher offered relevant pathways where skill or knowledge gaps were identified.

Other classes (with lower IELTS scores) did not use the test. This (accidentally but fortuitously) created 'control' groups which allowed INTO Newcastle University to reflect on differences in student experience and on student preparedness. Those findings are summarised below.



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Findings

The teaching and learning team at INTO Newcastle University were clear that The Conley Readiness Index enhanced student experience. And more.

It provided opportunities to support learners both pastorally and academically during their university transition.

Positivity

“...the students who did CRI...were looking forward to university study”

– David Broadbent, INTO Newcastle University

Overall, students who used CRI in their pre-sessional course reported being optimistic and enthused by the prospect of beginning university. David reported that this was:

“...one of the best, one of the strongest positives to come out of the process – the fact that the perception from the students was they were leaving on a high...they really enjoyed the test and they felt as though they left the programme on a very positive note.”

David continued to explain that it was:

“...significantly due to CRI because we only had one class doing it so we had a kind of control, a test group...the students who did CRI had forgotten about their exams and were now looking forward to university study.”

He noted that the other classes tended to remain in a ‘post-exam phase’ with their focus still being more on test results and the course they had completed. Compared to the CRI group, there was a tendency for them to have not yet developed the same level of excitement and positivity about starting university.

He said that being able to focus student attention on things other than the results of recently completed tests, assessments or obstacles **“was a nice little gear shift, and we'd recommend doing it purely for that reason alone.”**

Interestingly, the teachers who tried CRI for themselves before agreeing to implement it also found it enjoyable. David considered that:



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“...if our teachers like doing it, I'm 100% sure that the university's domestic students would enjoy doing it too. And I think that's an interesting point to make – participants enjoy it, **they actually enjoy doing this.**”

David felt that native speakers and undergraduates would benefit from CRI. He noted that undergraduates “tend to eventually develop the skills but only by the second or third year of study” and they would benefit raising their own awareness of what is needed much earlier.

Added value

The CRI test added value, and this materialised in ways which the teaching team could not have anticipated and which David called “accidental benefits”.

These ‘benefits’ would otherwise have been covered later in transition, induction or further into their degree studies.

For example, tutors were able to direct students to welfare and wellbeing solutions earlier on, when a need was identified from test responses.

Adding value - the Conley Readiness Index at INTO Newcastle University:

- facilitated teachers in their ability to direct students to individual support
- highlighted mental health and mental wellbeing needs, allowing for “earlier intervention” in David’s words.
- connected students to welfare officers “who were able to intervene earlier because certain things came out of the interpretation of the test”
- led to awareness of the university careers services including CV development
- enabled tutors to suggest how students might access internship opportunities
- enabled tutors to direct students to further academic and employability skills support at the university
- enabled tutors to guide students to the Language Resource Centre
- enabled tutors to suggest and pinpoint relevant teams for discussions about scholarship applications
- INTO students were able to jump a yet-to-form queue for additional support



Over the last decade, research has clearly shown how a student's sense of belonging is critical to success and persistence at university (What Works? Student retention and success change programme, 2017)ⁱ.

Research conducted by Pearson and Wonkheⁱⁱ in 2021/2 shows a clear association between a student's confidence in their academic skills and this sense of belonging.

Where students reported feeling that they belong at university, **72%** of students agreed they were confident in their academic skills (such as academic English, for example). Conversely, among students who do not feel they belong, just **34%** report confidence in their academic skills. And so, by investing in academic skills and confidence, the university are also investing in long term student success and progression.

Supporting connections between personal tutors and students

The Conley Readiness Index positions students as observers, able to be objective about their results rather than subjective. David Broadbent noted the benefits that this unconsciously delivered because it...

“...allowed students to talk about something in a way that was more objective than subjective which brought more things out in the tutorial...it's a psychological thing, but the outcome is very, very practical.

It means that if a student is struggling with certain things, it might even be things like dyslexia that they weren't even aware of... it forces you to take a more objective view of what you're going through at that particular stage in your learner journey.”

Using the test, asking direct questions around whether students feel prepared, why they might not feel prepared and what it is they are really struggling with delivers the clarity



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required to identify skills gaps and enables meaningful conversations between students and their personal tutors. Students may think begin the CRI test thinking they lack one skill, for example, but end up realising that they are concerned about something else which underpins their overall confidence. Earlier identification allowed tutors to facilitate earlier conversations or interventions.

INTO Newcastle observed that CRI supported tutors in their obligations to tutees. The structure provided a “standardizing” effect in which tutors could identify challenges and direct students to the best source of academic or pastoral support. Personal tutors naturally have a duty of care to their students. However, at most if not all institutions, there are disparities of both experience and of empathy or ability between tutors. CRI supports everyone in delivering effective skills remediation, and more.

Future plans

CRI is “infinitely scalable...the integrity of the tool was very impressive”

David Broadbent, INTO Newcastle University

David believes that CRI is “infinitely scalable” at INTO Newcastle University because it does not increase workloads for personal tutors and provides a structure which standardizes the tutor support which takes place regardless.

David reported that the lead academic, charged with delivering CRI to students, was very clear that the “**academic integrity of the tool was very impressive**” and “**very, very well put together.**” This makes it a reliable, trustworthy source for personal tutors and students.

Factors which would further support a scaled implementation at INTO Newcastle University in the future include:

- **Internal structures** which support the implementation of The Conley Readiness Index. With 16 students in the pre-sessional class, that class teacher also doubled up as the personal tutor. The tutor delivers two or three individual tutorials with those students during the programme.

- **No additional workload for personal tutors.** An additional tutorial or altering the content of existing appointments did not increase the personal tutor’s workload when the tests results were discussed. David made the point that this would be expected to be the case with any personal tutor. In fact, David felt it was “**actually giving more structure to what we want the teachers to do.**”
- **An ‘off the peg’ tool which supports good decision-making.** Teachers often have to use their judgment and provide “their own kind of diagnostic” in order to support students academically and pastorally. David felt that “**the CRI is a kind of off the peg tool that makes many of those decisions for them, which is probably better than 90% of the choices they could have made themselves.**”

In fact, CRI was implemented on a second course within 6 months. The course in question is ‘Education for Life’, a supplementary course that students can volunteer to do while they’re studying on their other programmes. The purpose of that course is to teach a variety of life skills such as social responsibility and orientate students into academic study.

In the future, when implementing with lower scoring IELTS students, the teachers would like to add a preparatory session in before taking the test. In all likelihood, this would consist of language input to prepare students for the language in CRI.

They are also keen to know how it works with a broader range of students, such as engineers or business students, because students on the pre-sessional courses plan to enter a range of degree programmes at Newcastle University.

ⁱ What Works? Student Retention and Success, AdvanceHE 2012. <https://www.phf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/What-Works-Summary-report.pdf> [Accessed April 2022]

ⁱⁱ Belonging, inclusion and mental health are all connected, Pearson/Wonkhe 2022. <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/belonging-inclusion-and-mental-health-are-all-connected/> [Accessed April 2022]