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Succeed with Skills: A Diagnostic Programme to Bridge Gaps in Higher Education

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Academic achievement gaps between different groups of students in Higher Education (HE) has become a crucial concern. This paper focuses on an action-research oriented, skills development diagnostic programme designed and delivered in collaboration between subject-specialists and learning development practitioners to level 4 management students. The aim was to bridge the skills gap for students from different backgrounds including entry qualifications, race and socio-economic class. The programme targeted: structure, critical writing, and evidence-based writing. The diagnostic used the Articulate software and the results directed students onto one of two levels of study-skills sessions: Develop or Enhance. Preliminary evaluation results showed students reported an increase in confidence levels ranging from 22% - 25.8%. This type of programme could potentially equip students with the tools and knowledge they need to succeed in their studies regardless of their backgrounds, and thereby help in facilitating student mobility and social justice in HE.

Full paper

Academic award gaps between student groups in UK Higher Education (HE) and globally has become a crucial concern for academics and policymakers. This includes significant award discrepancies between gender (Pennington et al., 2021), race, socio-

economic class (Birkelund, 2020; Jones & Ramchand, 2016), student entry qualifications, and if they are first-generation students. This augments the argument that HE and society are significantly intertwined (McArthur, 2011). This also presents stark evidence of the lack of social justice in HE, and the need to urgently intervene to bridge these gaps, as student achievement at university can fast-track or hinder student mobility and thereby impact social justice in academia and society.

Arguably, the starting point for university success is often study skills. Study skills can be an 'emancipatory practice' (Sinfield et al., 2011:61), helping students engage with learning opportunities beyond subject disciplines (Sheridan, 2020). This can aid skills and knowledge growth, leading to increased student mobility. However, a challenge for learning development practitioners is ascertaining student 'needs and lacks' (Macalister & Nation, 2011), to design learning which has maximum positive impact and expose the entire cohort to targeted learning development opportunities (Minogue et al., 2018). To avoid a disjointed bolt-on approach subject lecturers and learning developers need to collaborate in designing study-skills materials (Cottrell, 2001; Wingate et al., 2011), where students can see their usefulness (Wingate, 2006). This can prevent student disengagement and encourage access to additional learning opportunities.

Therefore, we discuss a pilot project employing an action-research style of intervention; designed and implemented to identify and address the skills gap for first-year management students in an inclusive way; and develop a level playing field encouraging student mobility irrespective of their backgrounds.

Aims

The overarching aim is to design and deliver a sustainable and scalable Diagnostic Skills Development Programme to facilitate student mobility with the following objectives: (1) Develop an online tool to diagnose student pre-understanding of study skills. (2) Design and deliver a series of study skills sessions targeted at different levels of student proficiency. (3) Evaluate student self-assessment pre and post programme participation.

Project Design/Methods

In this action-research oriented pilot programme, we designed an online Skills Diagnostic Assessment, to identify the needs and lacks of level 4 management students pertaining to academic writing skills. The results signpost students to sessions delivered as a conference, to build their proficiency to the required level. The programme was designed in collaboration between the department Education Lead (discipline specialist), Learning Development (study skills) practitioners and an E-Learning Developer who set up the diagnostic tool on the software Articulate (see figure 1).

The below sentences are from an essay introduction. Match them with the function they perform.

In recent years, numerous businesses have reduced working hours and shortened the working week, reporting extensive positive results.

This essay will argue that a reduced working week and shorter hours provide valuable benefits to society, businesses and the employee.

As business practices, economies and cultural influences vary worldwide, this study will primarily focus on businesses in the UK over the last ten years.

The term 'value' often denotes economic worth; however, it is important to address the social value of reduced working hours to both the individual and society.

Belmont (2017:42) maintains that 'the false image of the "ideal worker" and oppressive time demands in the workplace are slowly driving away a generation of workers'



Thesis statement

Submit

Figure 1: example diagnostic question from Articulate

The Diagnostic and Study Skills Sessions targeted: structure, critical writing, and evidence-based writing. The diagnostic results directed students onto one of two levels for each session: Develop or Enhance. Develop was for students who achieved lower scores and built on the diagnostic questions to foster engagement (Sheridan, 2011) and facilitate student understanding of the topics' relevance to their learning. Students with higher scores on the diagnostic participated in the Enhance sessions to deepen their knowledge. For example, the Develop session on critical writing addressed

paragraph structure, and the Enhance session addressed forms of critical writing within those paragraphs, such as analysis and evaluation.

Finally, the programme was evaluated to identify success areas for student mobility and future directions. The programme evaluation adopted a process/product approach (Long, 1984) seeking anonymous student feedback on confidence levels before and after the sessions. A 10-point Likert scale was used ranging from 'not at all confident' to 'extremely confident' (see figure 2).

2. BEFORE the sessions, how confident were you **structuring your assignment**? *



3. BEFORE the sessions, how confident were you **critical writing**? *



4. AFTER the sessions, how confident were you **using evidence**? *



5. AFTER the sessions, how confident were you **structuring your assignment**? *



6. AFTER the sessions, how confident were you **critical writing**? *



2. BEFORE the sessions, how confident were you **structuring your assignment**? *



3. BEFORE the sessions, how confident were you **critical writing**? *



4. AFTER the sessions, how confident were you **using evidence**? *



5. AFTER the sessions, how confident were you **structuring your assignment**? *



6. AFTER the sessions, how confident were you **critical writing**? *



Figure 2: student feedback format

Preliminary Findings & Future Directions

The pilot received 24 student evaluations representing approximately 50% of the participants. Preliminary results showed on average students reported a 22.5% improvement in confidence levels in using evidence, a 22% confidence level increase in structuring assignments and a 25.8% confidence increase in critical writing skills. Qualitative feedback received was highly favourable for all sessions. Hence, we see the impact of this work is potentially significant.

This programme will be broadened to level 5 students initially and subsequently offered to other departments. The notion that students' awareness of their study skills needs could increase through a diagnostic is important. This type of programme could potentially equip students with the tools and knowledge they need to succeed in their studies regardless of their backgrounds and thereby help in facilitating student mobility and social justice in HE.

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