388 Diagnostics to support student success: A case study

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

This case study describes an intervention at the University of the Highlands and Islands to support student retention and success at a widening access institution.

A diagnostic tool was used to gauge student ability and confidence in a range of areas such as maths, wellbeing and digital literacy.

The case study describes the local an institutional impact of this intervention, and the further developments that have arisen as a result.

Full paper

Context

The University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) is a widening access institution and historically non-continuation rates have been high. Staff perception is that some students are not prepared for higher level study. In particular, because of UHI's tertiary nature and the delivery of NC and HN as well as UG and PG degree level study, the transition can be challenging for students. Whilst retention is an institutional priority, there has historically been a focus on why students leave rather than on understanding the challenges that students face when they start at UHI. The use of a diagnostic tool was proposed a solution to this issue and would potentially yield data that would help to target support for student transition and persistence.

Description

The tool was trialled in the HNC in Applied Sciences where students struggled to make the transition into higher level study, often with maths and academic writing as their main challenges. Existing practice includes a fortnightly 'skills session' with students to address any areas in which students feel uncertain and the results from the tool would be used to inform the content of these sessions.

The tool was delivered online towards the end of semester 1 in 2021-22, using a question set created by Birmingham City University. This included sections on:

- Studying at University
- Academic writing
- Numeracy
- Digital literacy
- Wellbeing

Students were asked to complete the tool and could opt to receive individual feedback. Eight students completed the diagnostic out of 22, and six of those requested individual feedback. This was in the form of a short report which identified three areas of strength and development for each student. A cohort report was compiled for the programme leader summarising responses and highlighting areas of common strength and challenge.

Reflections on the activity

- All students achieved 100% for the 'numeracy' correctly suggesting the need for different levels of questions depending on the subject area (students in the pilot were studying sciences)
- Whilst the use of JISC Online Surveys made delivery of the tool very straightforward, the analysis of responses had to be undertaken outside of the surveys tool, and much of this was manual. This was manageable for the small numbers included in the pilot, but further rollout would present an unsustainable workload. An automated tool is required for this- and the expertise to build and maintain it.
- Feedback from both the staff and students involved in the pilot has been difficult to obtain. In future, this will be built into the delivery of the tool and accompanying individual and programme reports.
- Questions about mental health were included in the tool. All of the individual responses demonstrated a level of need for mental health support that was really unexpected. Although sources of support were included in students' individual reports, I did reflect whether this was sufficient- that students may not proactively seek out this support. More careful consideration will be given to this area of the tool, and the mechanisms for offering support to students depending on their responses in this section.

Local impact

The programme leader used the results to inform the weekly skills sessions and address the areas of challenge identified. Student attendance at these optional sessions was higher than in previous years. The tool has been utilised with future student cohorts.

Student feedback on the use of the tool and reports was limited. However, we anticipate that students will read and reflect on the feedback given to them in their individual reports and use these to seek out opportunities to improve their skills in areas identified as challenging. As indicated above, the gathering of evaluation data will be built into the next iteration of the tool.

Institutional impact

This pilot has demonstrated that the approach is deliverable and has raised the profile of diagnostic testing. It has provided a useful focus for members of staff interested in the applications of the tool such as pre-entry guidance, additional support for returners to learning, bespoke support for postgraduate students.

As a result of this, the institution has developed a piece of software that automates the delivery of the self-evaluation aspects of the tool to enable it to be used by a larger student cohort. A wide variety of applications has already been identified for this tool including for pre-application support and guidance for applicants to online postgraduate programmes and to inform targeted professional development for academic staff.

References

N/A