G11.3 Denbigh 2 Thursday 6 December 9.00 - 11.00

Closing attainment gaps through personal tutoring: Putting learning gain data to use (0360)

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Abstract

Learning gain metrics are rapidly developing in UK higher education. Data points link student inputs, progress and attainment outcomes, providing opportunities for strategic decision making, pedagogical enhancement and student engagement. However, evaluation of learning gain metrics highlights the complexity of the learning process, and metrics used to judge attainment, indicating there is no 'silver bullet' metric or activity that captures student success. While learning gain data can provide useful insights at national and institutional levels, it needs to be embedded locally within a student's course—through engagement with the curriculum and personal engagement with their teachers—to impact on students' learning. This paper explores using learning gain data to support evidence-enhanced personal tutoring, drawing on interviews and focus groups with personal tutors and students. Findings include there are serious ethical issues to consider around how data is used and presented but also possibilities for meaningful engagement.

Introduction

The drive for transparency, accountability and value for money in higher education is occurring internationally. Initiatives exploring the development of metrics provide context for evaluating higher education systems, institutions and individual students. The government in England has declared measuring learning gain "high priority work" (Johnson, 2017) , with support and funding for improving indicators. As part of this drive, there is a shift from interest primarily in access to a greater focus on student outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged students.

Widening participation and social mobility agendas feature in debates on measuring learning gain. Social inequalities are perpetuated through quality judgements based on institutional reputation (Hazelkorn, 2015), a key sorting and selection criteria for many employers. Concerns about a lack of diversity in the workforce has led to a desire for more information to differentiate the quality of graduates beyond measures highly correlated with prior high socio-economic status. In response many employers now design in-house recruitment mechanisms (Williams et al 2015). These are often methodologically flawed and burdensome tests, which creates high inefficiencies for employers and graduates. This situation has led to a desire for metrics which allow for discriminating students, courses and institutions that demonstrates the knowledge, skills and attributes that employers are looking for and the economy needs.

Learning gain data can be used across a variety of levels, from personalised student data dashboards and course-level learning analytics to benchmarking across institutions. Whilst many discuss collecting data for ranking and quality assessment purposes, for the data to lead to individual change it needs to support student learning. To tackle social inequalities and attainment gaps, the data needs to support diverse learners through their course. A major theme emerging from research on learning gain metrics is that at the local level, students need support, advice and guidance to make sense of data about their learning (Kandiko Howson 2017).

The Raising Aspirations, Raising Attainment Project

As part of a government-funded (formerly Higher Education Funding Council for England, now Office for Students) project to reduce inequalities in student attainment, the Raising Aspirations, Raising Attainment (RARA) project is committed to addressing barriers to student success through access to high quality academic support. The overall aim of the project is to develop an approach to improving the quality of personal tutoring, with a particular view to narrowing attainment and success gaps for students from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups and from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Methodology

The project runs across three departments at three different institutions, and as part of the project baseline interviews and focus groups were conducted with students and staff to gauge their understanding of, engagement with, and experiences of personal tutoring. This paper explores the use of learning gain data in one selected department.

The baseline data consisted of focus groups with 20 students from one department, ranging across all undergraduate year groups. There were also three interviews conducted with personal tutors from the same department. The focus groups and interviews lasted from 30 minutes to one hour and focused on understandings of the role of and experiences with/as personal tutors. Research ethical approval was sought with a focus on anonymity of participants, which was particularly important given the sensitive nature of some of the discussion.

Findings and discussion

Generally, students had no particular expectations of personal tutoring. They highlighted the challenges of the practicalities of scheduling meetings but focused on difficulties establishing baseline rapport with personal tutors. Many students were unsure of the role and purpose of personal tutors, and spoke of awkwardness of conversations with them if they did not have a specific problem. However, students liked having a personal tutor as a ‘safety net’ and were keen on more purposeful meetings.

A majority of positive examples of engaging with personal tutors emerged from personal tutors being proactive in seeking out students. In this department, students who failed set exams or whose performance dropped had to follow-up with meetings with their personal tutor. Interestingly, students spoke very highly of these meetings, as they felt the staff were being proactive in their support and the performance data provided a concrete topic to discuss in the meetings.

Students from widening participation backgrounds spoke of how personal tutors helped them navigate “the system” and understand what their assessment scores meant and what they needed to do to improve. The use of learning analytics for progress interventions helped to target support where it was needed. Evidence-informed tutoring was also welcomed by staff, who found having something concrete and personal to talk about with students helpful.

One staff member, from a minority ethnic background, was very positive about having concrete data to work through with students as they progressed through their course, rather than waiting until end-of-year progress reports. The tutor felt this allowed for intervention with students before it was

too late for them to catch up with their peers. She felt that as an ethnic minority she was able to help students understand the “hidden curriculum” that may be impacting upon their performance.

There was concern by some students from disadvantaged backgrounds that staff (outside of those who assessed them) knowing they had underperformed could cause the staff to think less of them and grade them lower or not write as favourable recommendation letters. One student spoke of how a meeting was triggered when she performed poorly on an exam when she was facing a number of personal challenges. This highlights ethical challenges and the importance of sensitive and contextualised use of learning gain data in tutoring contexts, particularly in the context of disadvantaged students.

There was interest in greater development of learning analytics as part of the “web of support” that students receive, but students highlighted the need to be able to have a conversation with someone about their learning progression to have the data be meaningful, and for them to understand how they could improve.

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