

Designing a flexible support system in dialogue with students to meet their needs

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Abstract

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A more stringent financial climate, alongside technological and lifestyle changes, have diversified student needs and promoted the use of inclusive learning and support strategies. This paper reports on the development and evaluation of academic skills centres at an English Higher Education Institution and considers ways in which the service is able to benefit users and providers, it goes on to argue that, by fostering a dialogue with students and using a range of delivery models, the provision has been made flexible, diversified and student centred and thereby addresses issues of current significance within the institution and sector more broadly.

Presentation

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This paper reports on the development and implementation of an intervention at an English Higher Education Institution (HEI) that was designed to maximise the academic and employability skills of students within an environment that facilitates mutual collaboration between those using and delivering the service. The initiative was developed as part of the institution's learning, teaching and assessment strategy which was designed to improve the student experience and provide opportunities for students to develop transferrable skills alongside the acquisition of disciplinary expertise in line with recommendations of Browne (2010) and Leitch (2006).

The massification of Higher Education in the UK has inevitably led to changes in student expectations and engagement with HEI supports systems. Within this renewed system, individuals from under-represented social groups would be able to participate and subsequently "make a contribution to future economic growth through the provision of knowledge, skills and creativity..." (Pegg et al 2012: 7). An outcome of these policy dictates is that concepts such as widening participation, massification, and internationalisation, have become entrenched within the discourse, aims, and objectives of education providers which has impacted on pedagogy, and has particular relevance for those implementing skills development initiatives in response to arguably the prime current student need for employability and a societal need for students to develop transferable skills alongside the acquisition of disciplinary expertise. It should be noted however, that low skilled occupations, as defined by the Labour Force Survey (ONS 2012), are achievable through compulsory education and might include cleaners, postal workers and so on, whereas suitable occupations for the highly skilled, such as graduates or those with appropriate work experience, might include managers, scientists, engineers and so on who could contribute to the economy through development of new knowledge, skills and creativity. However recent graduates are now more likely to work in low skilled, low paid jobs than they were a decade ago (ONS 2012), therefore the utopian ideals embedded in the discourse of a knowledge economy are far from being realised. Indeed, as graduate unemployment continues to increase (BBC news Jan 2011), and growing numbers of graduates are taking up employment in roles unrelated to their discipline (Woods 2010) the need to maximise the employability potential of graduates is becoming more urgent (Langlands 2010: BIS 2012).

A study by Clegg et al (2006) to identify which resources students use to support themselves, gain insights into why students fail to make use of existing resources, and explore how students cope with the demands of university in relation to their social lives, interviewed students from a range of courses and diverse social backgrounds. Through an exploration of student experiences and examination of the construction of learner narratives they found that they drew on a range of resources, both formal and informal, including family, friends and institutionally organised pastoral

and academic support. Three key themes emerged from the data: self-esteem, the personal project and identity.

The challenge that Higher Education providers face is how to enable students to gain the kind of skills that will serve to make them employable in the kinds of occupations that they may have aimed for when progressing beyond the compulsory sector to gain a 'higher' education. Indeed employability is the current concern within the sector as illustrated by the recent development of a framework for employability by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills. With this in mind a growing emphasis on encouraging student awareness of how to seek and gain work after graduation has become an imperative. Moreover, as the skills most valued by employers are effective communication and team working (Stuart et al 2011), engaging students in the self-development of these transferrable skills is more than ever considered necessary. This poses questions about the role of HE in relation to student expectations and experiences, but when coupled with the recent fees increase payable by English university students it raises questions of both what skills students might consider important and what constitutes, or rather, is perceived as 'knowledge', (Allibone and Gray 2011); particularly by employers who are increasingly informing the education sector about which skills they require from graduates (Woods 2010). Allibone and Gray suggest that the so called 'soft' or 'transferrable' skills, which have long been viewed as less important than discipline specific theory or methods, are rapidly gaining credence within the UK higher education system. This is evident in the refocused HE landscape whereby provision of mechanisms which facilitate the development of appropriate skills for an increasingly diverse body of students to succeed upon graduation, whether native or international, is becoming normalised.

The support offered by institutions therefore needs to be flexible enough to address these issues. Pegg et al (2012) argue that in terms of graduate outcomes, employability refers to both "skilful practices in context" (p 5) and an approach to personal development and career planning which necessitates a strategic approach by institutions for the development of future graduates who can transfer the skills gained in higher education to other contexts. The notion of a student who can simply devote all their time and energy to education is no longer the norm, which is closer to one of juggling childcare, work or other lifestyle requirements; this is another factor that has an important impact on delivery of appropriate skills support. However, the advancement of technological means for the delivery of distance support has the potential to help in the design of interventions with respect to policy, students' experiences, expectations and lifestyles.

Another resource is the students themselves. It is a positive outcome from the objectives of increasing diversity by widening, massifying and internationalising UK HE that those students who are currently within the sector possess a wide and varied range of rich skills that can be drawn upon by education providers. It is important then to recognise that learning and teaching is a two way process and that by putting students at the heart of the system we can learn a lot (Browne 2010).

Some of the pedagogical literature suggests that students can be empowered to become autonomous and critical learners and thinkers through active participation with respect to learning and teaching (Ramsden 1992; Biggs 2006). One mechanism is through accessing peer support, which was perceived to be less formalised than other types. More significantly, it was considered to increase confidence, enable students to negotiate their own learning, and allow them to develop a renewed sense of self-identity based on a "determination to succeed" (Clegg et al 2006: 108), in spite of other demands. The informality of peer support overcame potential problems with embarrassment that was inherent in 'formal' relationships as they thought lecturers might have knowledge of what grades had been achieved and the types of attendance patterns they had developed (Clegg et al 2006: 108). Against this backdrop, the student voice is considered highly important and must be heard if a service that listens to the actual demands and needs of students is to be developed. The ASCs have been developed on the basis that education providers should adopt the same approach through mutual collaboration with students so that a transformative co-produced education can be enabled. The intervention is informed by the questions of how to effectively engage

students in their own learning; what mechanisms can educational developers use to do so; and should students inform the design and delivery of the intervention?

Academic Skills Centres

The aim of the ASCs is to meet the needs of a range of learners with diverse learning styles so that they move from being passive and highly dependent to being more autonomous in the process (Ramsden 1992; Biggs 2006). Therefore, a range of flexible approaches and techniques including online resources, face to face discussions, workshops and faculty tailored skills sessions are utilised to maximise the chance of this happening. Moreover, some of the online resources and hard copy materials have been developed by students and the workshops are mainly delivered by postgraduates. Thus students inform, develop and deliver aspects of the provision in consultation with faculty and the ASCs Director, who oversees embedding of academic skills across the institution and provides training for all staff.

Uptake of the provision requires a proactive approach whereby students voluntarily attend for support and actively seek out formative feedback on assessments prior to submission. In doing so they are able to develop their skills in partnership with academic advisors, many of whom are students. Attendance data is routinely recorded to provide information about which course students are taking, what they have attended for, and what advice they have been given. Students are also given a copy of the advice they receive which they can then discuss with their course tutors. This mechanism completes the feedback loop between faculty and ASCs and fulfils the requirement to facilitate effective approaches to learning, teaching and feedback, both within the curriculum and through extra-curricular support.

The following sections summarise the results of the attendance and activity monitoring and provide an outline of the development process of one ASC and a qualitative evaluation of the experiences of its staff and students.

Attendance and activities

The attendance data from 853 students was gathered including recording student identification numbers to enable information to be extracted from centrally held student records. The majority of attendees were studying full time and in their first year. Approximately two thirds of attendees were female and 62% self identified as of non-white ethnicity, both categories were higher than the university average figures. Visits lasted between 5 and 60 minutes with a mean of 25 minutes which mirrors findings from previous evaluations at the institution. Attendance peaked midway through the first semester as students prepared for summative end point, assessments. The major categories of assessment for which advice was sought were essays (55%), reports (20%) and dissertations (14%). The skills advisor data indicated that advice on academic structure/grammar (42%) and referencing and academic writing (23%) were commonplace. The retention, progression and attainment of ASC attendees was measured against other students studying the same courses. Findings clearly indicate that ASC attendees are more likely to progress to the next level and to outperform their peers in end of semester assessments, which supports findings from evaluations of the impact of peer support (Longfellow et al 2008).

Staff and student experiences with the Engineering Academic Skills Centre

In 2010, the ASCs Director and a colleague who directs the Engineering Academic Skills Centre (EnASC), in the School of Surveying and Construction conducted research to gain insights into the perceptions of students using the centre. The EnASC provides daily drop-in sessions for all Engineering students to receive advice and support with numeracy, writing and study skills from other trained students and staff. Students are invited to bring an assignment to receive formative guidance prior to its submission. This enables them to improve the work and increases potential for

enhancing grades. Staff involvement is mainly to oversee operational duties and to support the student mentors, but the majority of interaction with attendees is provided by trained peer mentors thereby facilitating access to support in a less formal environment.

The support is generally generic with the overall aim of assisting students to address the assignment brief and communicate this clearly and in a meaningful way through dialogue with others. Details of the advice offered to each student are recorded to enable evaluation of the service for enhancement purposes and to provide students with a means of assessing their personal progress and development needs. The most frequent comments from Engineers related to a lack of maths support, funding then was sought and agreed to develop an additional related project, Maths Café, which was set up just prior to the exam and revision period. Recurrent comments from staff involved in the project have been captured here:

“I think we are giving the students just what they want; one final year student said how useful it had been - particularly in the timing just before the exams”

“Students said to me that they found the informal approach to getting advice less stressful than going to lecturers in office hours”

“I think this is a great way to deliver support and have enjoyed being involved. Students found it really easy to attend because they were in here getting lunch anyway so it might have removed the stigma associated with seeking support”

Staff comments also commonly related to location, informality and the value of the service, in relation to providing extra support in a less formalised settings than tutorials or seminars. This was reiterated in students' commentaries, however they also pointed to the value of the scheme in relation to feedback, and opportunities to extend learning and also the setting as a means for overcoming the stigma associated with seeking support (see Clegg et al 2006):

“The staff were so knowledgeable, it helped me to understand things I had not learnt properly in class but was too afraid to ask”

“I used the feedback given to me by the tutor; it really helped me to work through the questions with him there”

“This is the first time I have used support since arriving! I found it good because people didn't know why I was there”

Following the success of Maths Café, it was considered necessary to develop the mathematical support provided in EnASC. A graduate student was employed to develop a range of online mathematical resources addressing a number of mathematical problems identified in the Maths Cafe evaluations. These include addressing mathematical topics such as differentiation, integration, matrices and partial fractions through videos of approximately five minutes in length with explain a particular theory by working through the method followed by an example. They enable students to watch and listen to instructions as the method unfolds on the screen, as if a lecturer was explaining it to them on the whiteboard. Demonstrations of the videos have received positive reviews from staff and students.

Usage has been monitored and they have proven to be one of the most frequently accessed resources on the skills website. To date over 100 videos are currently available covering most of the engineering mathematical topics. The service will be updated accordingly following any further input from students. More generally, users reported that the advice they were given was as they had expected and in some cases far more effective than anticipated. The overall consensus was that they had time to ask questions when they did not understand a concept and that working on their own

with an adviser close by, enabled them to ask questions while they developed their draft assignments. All users said they felt more confident going into the exams and that they would recommend it to a friend, however, only if that friend mentioned that they were struggling with their work. A number of the students who had only attended Maths Cafe, have since indicated a wish to also use the EnASC for English and writing skills.

Discussion and Conclusion

This work is relevant to others trying to enhance academic support mechanisms, including through involvement of students as facilitators, as a model that has demonstrably benefited students. Sitting alongside other successful initiatives including peer assisted learning, (Smith et al. 2007), virtual learning environment mentoring (Heaton-Shrestha et al 2009) and dedicated maths support (Atkins et al. 2005; Allibone and Ibsen 2010) it provides an addition to the range of learning enhancement instruments necessary to maximise student success. The study shows that students are essential for informing developments that meet their needs and hence the importance of building and maintaining a dialogue with them.

Whilst in an ideal world, students from differentiated educational backgrounds and contexts might be able to enhance their skills and develop greater autonomy in the learning process by making use of supportive services such as ASCs, they may also be less likely to attend than other student cohorts and may need greater encouragement than others to become self-reliant and take ownership of problems. A further dimension for consideration then is how to promote and engender a mindset whereby attending ASCs is viewed as developmental rather than for being for those with a 'skills deficit'. In light of all of these concerns, it is considered fundamentally important to undertake further research into the changing needs, expectations and perceptions of students using the service, and also necessary to evaluate the provision if it is to meet its aims and objectives.

In a climate of scarce resources and increased publication of performance metrics, the need to justify support through evaluation is paramount. This study illustrates that adopting flexible approaches to the design and delivery of support can have real benefits for addressing the diverse needs of students, which in turn, is likely to enhance the standing of institutions.

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