Disseminating and Evaluating a Study Skills Support Package

Keywords
Study skills; student support; e-learning (all social sciences disciplines – including politics, sociology, criminology)

Summary
The aim of the project was to provide level one undergraduate students with a comprehensive web-based study skills package which was particularly tailored to the needs of the Faculty of Social Sciences and used examples which cover the main subjects taught within the Faculty, to include particularly, politics, government, criminology, communications and sociology and social work. The aim of the C-SAP funded aspect of the project was to successfully disseminate and evaluate the package with the 2008-09 intake of undergraduate students. The evaluation highlighted three key issues: a need for further publicity of the package; a need for further enhancement of the relevance of the content to programme/subject specific issues; and concerns about the degree of student overconfidence and the need for study skills support.

Activities
The Faculty Study Skills Support Package went ‘live’ in the 2008-09 academic year in week one of semester one, as a pilot, and students were given information about the package and its benefits during students inductions, through meetings with Studies Advisors and via student email. In addition, students were offered the opportunity to comment on the perceived benefits of the package and the possible ways that the Faculty could improve it further through an online student evaluation. They were reminded of the opportunity to comment again towards the end of the first semester. By May 2009, the Faculty had recorded more than 4,400 hits on the package and student feedback on its usefulness has both positive and constructive.

In setting this pilot project in a broader context, it is clear that the ever changing conditions in higher education has meant that the more traditional study skills advice processes (such as the services of a personal tutor or studies advisor) are becoming increasingly irrelevant and in need of systematic review. The recently published Ramsden Report (2009), Teaching and the Student Experience, suggested that in an attempt to better prepare students for higher education: ‘We should also provide better mechanisms for helping students to adapt to higher education: more attention is needed to academic, attitudinal and social preparation for new students, throughout the first year of study.’ (Ramsden, 2009: 12). In a sense then, three interrelated issues need to be addressed: firstly, the students’ preparedness for higher education; secondly, the students’ support in higher education; and thirdly, the overall performance and attrition rates of students. These issues illustrate the need for a holistic approach to be taken to addressing the need of the 21st century student in higher education and the reality that support offered to students should extend from the welfare to the academic support (Jacklin & Robinson, 2007).

One constituent part of this holistic approach is in relation to the study skills support offered to new students in their first year at university. Patterns of core and generic study skills support, however, vary widely across institutions (Bennett et al, 1999). In some HEI’s pre-entry classes are offered to students to ensure that they are ‘up to speed’ with the challenges of learning in higher education (Watson, 2005). In others,
study skills support is offered to new students as a ‘bolt-on’ or an additional workshop to existing course curricula. In others still, study skills sessions are either built into the degree programme as fully embedded skills development and finally, it can also be offered through the Personal Development Planning (PDP) systems. Whatever method is used, it is assumed that this will positive contribute to a decline in attrition rates and an increase in student retention. This is important because the current figures on retention in UK higher education can make for sobering reading with the worst offending institutions losing one in four or one in five students by the end of the first year (see HESA, 2008). A recent exploration of the various factors related to why students who had considered leaving their course in the first year and yet ultimately chose to stay, by Glogowska et al. (2007), highlighted that: ‘The issue of how prepared the students were to meet the demands of academic work was raised both by students who stayed, and students who left’ (2007: 67).

The National Audit Office (NAO) report, ‘Staying the course: the retention of students in higher education’, published in 2007, have suggested a number of actions to improve retention which are cognisant of Glogowska et al’s (2007) findings. One notable action ‘support through academic provision’ refers particularly to benefits of properly resourced tutoring systems which ‘help individual students to identify the extra support and facilities they can use to improve their chances of success’ (2007:11). The report notes that although institutions often offer pre-entry courses and learning support opportunities as identified above, ‘many institutions find it difficult to get students to take up services that would help them to stay the course and succeed. This can be because students and academic staff may regard the services as being there to fill a deficit in a students ability, but institutions can increase take-up by promoting these services as positive options to take to improve the prospects of a good degree’ (2007: 11).

Convincing students that study skills support should be seen as a positive intervention as opposed to remedial work is critically important to counter the growing trend of ‘overconfidence’ as identified by Goldfinch & Hughes (2007) coupled with a failure to recognise that existing study skills used at secondary level education might not be sufficient to be able to progress in a university setting (Lowe & Cooke, 2003). Goldfinch & Hughes concluded in their research that: ‘Students who arrived at university feeling very confident in all the study skills did not do as well as those who recognized the need to improve in some areas, particularly in written skills. Very early formative assessment of students’ written skills, with good feedback, might allow them a more realistic perception of their actual standard in this area before any damage is done by over-confidence’ (2007: 271).

Durkin and Main’s (2002) suggestion that many of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education’s (QAA) intellectual and transferable skills which are to be aligned with all taught programmes, could be developed through study skills support, was another influencing factor in the promotion of the revision of the study skills support offered at Higher Education Institutions (HEI) across the UK and the emphasis on intellectual and transferable skills is one way of highlighted the progressive and positive as opposed to remedial nature of the study skills support offered. Moreover, both a recent HEFCE (2009) report on the enhancement of learning and teaching through the use of technology and a JISC InfoNet (2008) report on an exploration of the benefits of elearning, are indicative of the strong sentiment that elearning and
technology have contributed to significant improvements in learning, teaching and assessment, with the additional benefits relating to student satisfaction, retention and achievement. Coupled with the Mayes (2009) report for the QAA which has emphasised the importance of the enhancement of year one particularly, it seems clear that the Faculty’s progressive approach to provide revised study skills support through the utilisation of technology and elearning with a particular focus on year one students is in keeping with current thinking in higher education practice. That said, the Faculty’s idea of an online studies skills support package, nonetheless, is not a wholly untested initiative. The evaluation of Bermingham & Mahdi’s (2007) introduction of a similar package suggested that the package was well received and it ‘was generally acknowledged that the system was intuitive, the content well structured and delivered and the look and feel of the application aesthetically pleasing’. With one academic year of the Faculty’s pilot project almost over, an evaluation of our own initiative is both timely and of relevant to current discourse.

The initial pilot of the Online Study Skills Support Package was conducted with all full-time first year undergraduate students in the 2008-09 academic year which totalled 1742 students. Students were introduced to the Package through the induction events organised by the various Schools within the Faculty. Staff involved in the development of the package gave an overview of its contents to all new students in a short presentation during organised induction events, and all students were provided with an A4 flyer in the induction packs. Additional flyers highlighting the package were posted on all subject/programme notice boards within the Faculty. Given the size of the cohort, it was decided that the most efficient and effective way to collect information about the package was, at least in the first instance, to simply conduct an online survey.

To assess their views, the students were asked to complete a short, anonymous questionnaire once they had reviewed and used the material. A permanent message on the home page of the package said: ‘We would really like to hear from you, especially if you have thoughts and suggestions on how to make this better again for next year. When you have finished working through the module we hope you’ll complete the module survey and tell us what you think’. A reminder was sent to all students in October 2008 and again in December 2008 to remind them to complete the survey via the announcement tool on WebCT. An additional email reminder was sent to all students in December, to capture the thoughts of those students who might not have accessed the package often. All academic staff in the Faculty were also emailed in December 2008 to encourage those who were currently teaching semester 1 first year undergraduate to highlight the package to the students again, to emphasize the availability of information on preparing for exams and revision which they would find useful in the run up to the examination period and to encourage them to complete the online evaluation.

In total, however, the survey only managed to attain a 1.4% response rate. It is certainly the case that one of the main disadvantages of a self-administered survey is the possibility that respondents are more likely to stop participating mid-way through the survey (drop-offs) and it is clear that this online survey suffered significantly as a consequence of this. While attention had been paid to the almost all of the factors identified by Moss & Henry (2002) as cited above, no ‘reward’ system had been put
in place to encourage responses from students and this may have been one reason for non-completion.

To address this serious deficiency in response rates, an additional hard copy survey was circulated in week 12 of semester 2 in a sample of first year classes in the School of Policy Studies. The number of fulltime first year undergraduates in the School of Policy Studies is 263 and 150 of these students completed the hard copy survey which was a response rate of 57%. Both evaluations (online and hard copy) included a series of open-ended questions which the group could use to add comments regarding their opinions of the study skills support package. In relation to the online survey, it should be stated that although their responses were analysed, the sample size was simply too small and as such, it can be difficult to generalise from such a small group. As a result, the evaluation does not attempt to provide a ‘single standard of truth’ (Hodge and Anderson, 2007, p.274) but rather presents the findings as a reflection of the views of the different students, to allow the reader to compare the findings of the study with their own experiences and to imagine their own uses and application of a study skills support package in their own environment.

Outcomes

In the absence of complete data, it is always difficult to present findings as representative of the broader group. A response rate to the survey of 1.4% of all registered users of the study skills package is so low that it is almost null and void. A response rate of 57% of the paper based survey conducted in the School of Policy Studies, though a much healthier figure, still represents less than two thirds of the class cohort and raises questions about the 43% of students who did not complete the survey. Were these 43% the very students that we needed to gauge responses from? If they had not attended revision classes in week 12 (where the paper surveys had been distributed) could the same be said of their non-usage of the online study skills package? Therefore, it should be stressed that the analysis presented here is very much in the absence of complete data. Three key issues sum up the responses given by students by way of an evaluative response to the online study skills package: need for further publicity around the availability of the package; some dissatisfaction around the relevance of the content to programme/subject specific issues; and a degree of overconfidence about their need for study skills support.

Lack of publicity

It is more likely that students did not use the package because they were not sufficiently aware of its availability or its likely usefulness to the students first year of transition. Although students had been informed of the package during induction, informational flyers had been posted on Course notice boards and emails had been sent reminding the students of both the package and the survey to be completed, it is clear that this has not been sufficient. It is true that students are overwhelmed with the amount of information that they are presented with during induction and the early weeks of semester one in their first year, resulting in quote negative early experiences (Glogowska et al, 2007). It is entirely possible that the information on the study skills package simply ‘got lost’ amidst all of the other information provided. Even though the package was located within the students ‘My WebCT’ area of the
University’s VLE, and was clearly visible to students accessing ‘My WebCT’ to download their lecture notes each week for their various modules in their first year, 43% of students did not ever enter the Study Skills Package to explore its contents. As one said: “On WebCT I seen (sic) the package but did not think it was relevant”.

Disconnection from Programme Content

One student commented that he/she would have liked to see more information on referencing and style guides for different courses because ‘every lecturer wants a different referencing methods and different font sizes and formatting’. While this would be impossible for a generic study skills module to do, it is certainly the case that such information should be posted clearly within the various module areas to assist students. Despite this, it is clear that there is much room for improvement in the delivery of the study skills module online. The approach of the generic study skills package introduced during induction and to be used as a self-service tool, can be seen as similar to the bolt-on study skills workshops offered at many higher education institutions across the UK. Research conducted by the University of West Scotland point out many disadvantages to such an approach. Firstly, the skills provided are often dissociated from the actual context of the subject being studied and as the student above illustrated, different lecturers expect to see different things. Not every subject area within the Faculty uses the Harvard referencing system for example. Secondly, it is argued that students are much less likely to value a generic study skills course unless there is some credit-bearing element to it (which is common within the other aspects of programme content) (University of West Scotland, no date).

Overconfidence

Goldfinch & Hughes (2007) have suggested elsewhere that students appear to be somewhat overconfident upon initial entry to university about their generic study skills. Such overconfidence might explain some student’s reluctance to use the study skills package. They, perhaps, feel that they simply do not need it. While students did not necessarily overtly display such overconfidence, the high numbers of students who did not access the package, who chose not to complete the online survey and who gave ‘no response’ answers to the administered paper survey was illuminating. In addition, the number of students claiming to be sufficiently knowledge about referencing (at least in theory) bore little relation to the submission of some assignments in the first year in the School of Policy Studies and evidence of poorly referenced work.

Implications

As a consequence of these findings, a number of recommendations can be made to further refine and improve the study skills package. Firstly, consideration should be given to the integration of a revised study skills package into specific first year modules with contributions from staff teaching on these modules. That said, Lowe and Cooke (2003) say that many academic staff see their teaching responsibilities relating solely to their subject content and not to more generic skills training. This poses a problem which would need to be addressed in order to successful implement such integration. Alternatively, the template of the existing study skills package could be used by existing module coordinators to develop their own study skills package within the specific module areas on WebCT. In other words, instead of one generic
study skills package existing, each module would have a custom made online study skills support package which would be tailored to the specifics of the subject area/degree programme. Recent research by Turney et al (2009) has demonstrated that the use of technology in higher education can significantly help students in instances where the technology has been fully aligned to the aims and learning outcomes of a module and is fully embedded within a module.

Secondly, consideration should be given to an enhancement of the self-assessments available within the package with a view to making these formally assessed as part of a credit-bearing module. Thirdly, consideration should be given to the conduct of a Faculty wide survey with ALL year groups to ascertain the key areas of difficulty in relation to their study skills. Clearly, if a majority of those surveyed for this evaluation still express considerable unease about their ability to properly reference at the end of year 1, then additional support will have to be provided. The revised package, as informed by a survey of the skills gaps that students themselves have identified, will therefore be more student-centred and client-focused.

There are, of course, a number of limitations to this evaluation, which must be borne in mind. In short, it evaluated the impact of an online study skills project for full time undergraduate students in their first year. Obviously this is only one cohort of students and therefore the results are unrepresentative of the part-time students and top-up or advanced entry students (who might entry into second and/or third year of a degree programme). Arguably, these groups of students have specific needs and may require additional institutional support (Barron & D’Annunzio-Green, 2009) and their use of the study skills package might have been more demonstrable than the cohort which took part in this pilot study. Another limiting factor of this research is that it is a single case study, drawn from a single institution in the UK and a single Faculty within that institution. Therefore, it is difficult to make broader generalisations about the results found here. That said, the broadly positive review of the both the idea of and the content of the study skills support package, can give the Faculty something upon which to build further for 2009-10.

Resources
The online study skills package, as a resource, is presented in a format which enables students to work independently and to assess their own performance. It provides an accessible tool for enhancing their personal development. It also provides a resource to which students can be directed by Studies Advisers and other staff where skills gaps have been identified in the students’ work eg feedback to a student might note a particular problem with essay construction and might be accompanied by a suggestion that they undertake the essay-writing exercises within the web-based resource.

References


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