

Postgrad Pick 'n' Mix: a flexible approach to developing academic skills using ABL

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1. The issue

The Faculty of Business and Law (FBL) postgraduate student cohort is relatively large and includes many distance learners and international students. They possess a wide range of previous academic experiences and cultural differences (Coates and Dickinson, 2012). A need was identified for a standardised skills programme to support all students near the start of their studies to familiarise them with the expectations and assessment methods used at the University of Northampton (UoN), which may be very different from those they had previously experienced.

2. The process

Learning Development (LD) tutors discussed the programme with the subject tutors and Head of PG programmes to identify the core issues. From this discussion, overall priorities were identified to provide a focus for content, which was to be delivered during taught sessions in Week 4 of the first term.

Building on previous iterations, the programme was designed to give more flexibility to tutors around timing of delivery and content, with Active Blended Learning (ABL) as the default method of delivery. As there are more students in every intake than can be supported via face-to-face workshops by the LD team, this method enabled a fair and consistent offering for our learners.

3. The approach

It was important to decide how the material was to be presented and delivered early on. Student engagement was crucial, and this would be influenced by whether the content was embedded into the curriculum or taught separately: Wingate (2018) argues that support for academic literacy should be embedded and taught by subject specialists. Cairns *et al.* (2018) develop this idea by comparing a bolt-on strategy - where LD tutors provide generic support on academic skills - to a built-in one, where everything is done by subject tutors. Their recommendation of working in partnership to deliver a blend of the two strategies is evident in our approach.

We chose a blended approach whereby the LD team created a range of support materials for staff and students, and the subject tutors chose which elements were relevant for their students. The content was then delivered in the most appropriate format: a pick 'n' mix for study skills teaching. A 'Developing Academic Skills' section was added to the FBL Postgraduate Enrichment site on the University's Virtual Learning Environment NILE as a repository for the content which would be available for the duration of the programme.

"My lecturers told me everything I need to know to pass exams"

"I am used to exams; I've never done groupwork"

"I respect authors and lecturers and I feel uncomfortable challenging their ideas"

Student diversity



Block 1:
Developing yourself as a postgraduate student

Block 2:
Literature review

Block 3:
Forms of assessment

4. The content

The core focus of the content was to address the particular needs of the students, focussing on:

- Expectations about academic practice, such as referencing, critical thinking and working in groups
- Familiarisation with assessment processes
- Specific assignment guidance

The content was split into three 'blocks', each containing a range of materials to support the main theme of the block. Resources on the Skills Hub and LD teaching materials already addressed some of the needs, so these were collated and supplemented by additional bespoke materials and lesson outlines. Support was offered by LD tutors and the Academic Librarian for FBL through drop-in sessions, and a Collaborate session for students at the end of the academic skills teaching week.

5. The blended solution

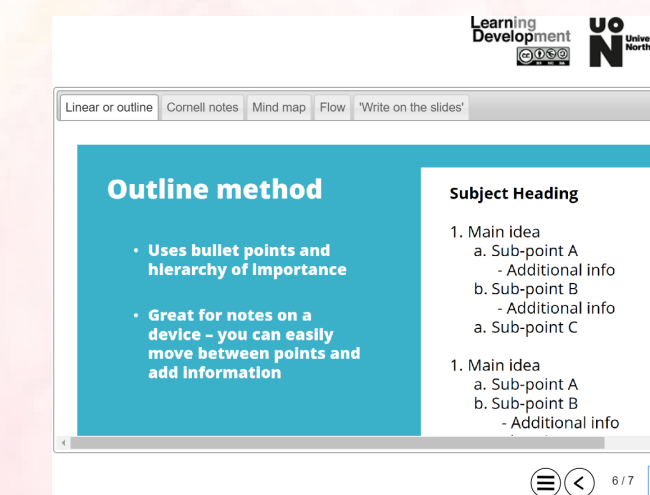
The variety of resources provided by LD staff to tutors included lesson plans alongside bespoke and more generic activities to support learning. These included slide decks, online information guides, and activities in a range of formats including Xerte and Genial.ly. Tutors could then tailor the mix of workshops and learning activities to support their students as appropriate, using an ABL approach throughout.

6. Conclusion

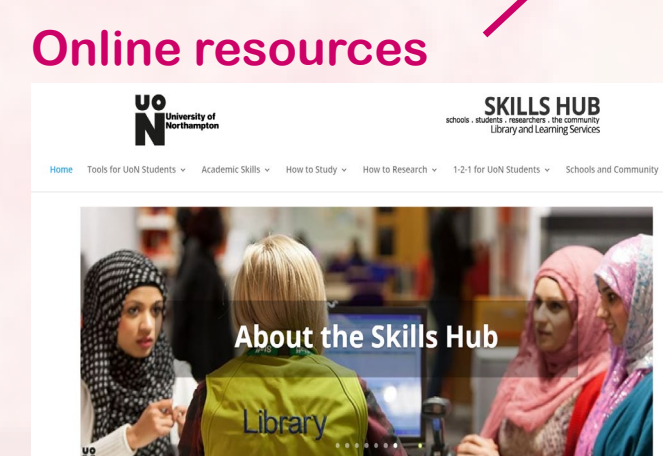
Our new intervention afforded tutors the flexibility to pick and choose the most relevant aspects for their students, tailoring content for their discipline. The Learning Development team has enabled ABL through a successful liaison with key tutor. We are reviewing what we have done and are currently undertaking research to evaluate its effectiveness from a staff perspective.



Genially quizzes



Xerte online activities



Online resources



Slide decks

examples of
Pick 'n' Mix
resources

References

- Coates, N., and Dickinson, J. (2012) Meeting international postgraduate student needs: a programme-based model for learning and teaching support. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 49(3), pp.295–308.
- Cairns, J., Herve, T. and Johnson, O. (2018) Neither 'bolt-on' nor 'built-in': benefits and challenges of developing an integrated skills curriculum through a partnership model. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education* [online]. 13. Available from: <http://journal.aladinhe.ac.uk/index.php/jldhe/article/view/435/pdf> [Accessed 10 June 2019].
- Wingate, U. (2018) Academic literacy across the curriculum: towards a collaborative instructional approach. *Language Teaching*. 51(3), pp. 349-364.

Contact us:

For support with all academic and mathematical skills, please get in touch, we're happy to chat! Learningdevelopment@northampton.ac.uk
Access our online resources: <http://skillshub.northampton.ac.uk>