**Pre-entry self-assessment and mapping to relevant services as a means of developing learner autonomy in undergraduates.**

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**Abstract**

**A pre entry self-assessment protocol was developed by academics and professional services staff, with input from students, at London South Bank University (LSBU). It was trialled with a cohort of undergraduate students in The Division of Education. The purpose was to help the students to identify the practical and academic skills they would need to develop in order to succeed and to understand what sort of support would be available to help them to do so. By completing the exercise pre entry students were able to generate a personal profile and access advice on how to go about developing their skills. The profile formed the basis of a useful conversation with their academic advisor in the early stages of the course. Self-assessment was repeated during the first semester enabling students to consider their changing requirements. Students reported finding the exercise helpful and empowering in that they were able to take control of their own help seeking. They were surprised by the support available. Staff reported an uptake in accessing services. Principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) underpinned the project. London South Bank is a Widening Participation University. Providing the sort of infrastructure which enables students to access support easily and not assuming that they will know what sort of skills they need to develop and where to find help proved to be a useful and positive starting point which was of benefit to all students. DSA reforms are prompting the sector to think more coherently in terms of embedding UDL and inclusive practices. This initiative represents a practical response to the task with the potential to be useful beyond LSBU.**

**Introduction**

Members of the Education and Social Justice (ESJ) research group at London South Bank University (LSBU) are interested in research which benefits students. Many LSBU students come from Widening Participation (WP) backgrounds. They do not necessarily enter their courses with high tariff points and their prior educational experience may not necessarily have equipped them with the skills they require in order to succeed academically. The institution, having offered places, has a moral responsibility to support students and the project was conceived with this idea in mind. This concern prompted a small-scale piece of research designed to consider ways in which students could be helped to access the support they might need as easily as possible.

Experience with previous cohorts indicated that students, as well as not being sure where to go for help, did not necessarily understand what sort of skills they would be required to develop. Working together, academic and professional services staff therefore developed a self-assessment protocol linked to appropriate sources of support. This was trialled with an undergraduate group and the results are reported here. The activity was timely as it coincided with Layer’s (2017) review of The Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) which recommended further embedding of inclusive practice and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to benefit all students.

**Aims of the Research**

* To consider why we need to support undergraduate students through the transition stage into Higher Education.
* To examine the implementation of a pilot self-assessment tool with undergraduate students pre- and post-enrolment.
* To reflect on the impact of both the self-assessment tool and the collaborative project as a whole.

**Context**

The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) metrics include 'Learning Environment’, and ESJ colleagues welcomed the opportunity to consider aspects of the learning environment which impacted on student success, including the development of learner autonomy and agency. The project group included staff from professional services as well as academics. Initial discussions revealed that a comprehensive joined-up map of all services which students could access in order to support their learning was something participants thought would be useful. Further desktop research indicated that very few universities seem to have an easy to locate map of all the services a student might need to access on their website. Having identified this gap at LSBU, the group therefore worked together to create a coherent picture of the services available to students before developing a self-assessment pre-entry questionnaire designed to help the students to think about the support they might need. The self-assessment included links to services.

An ethos of co-operation between staff in different roles, inclusion and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) laid the foundations of this project. UDL and inclusion are related terms which apply not only to all students but also to other stakeholders at university including staff (Al-Azawei et al., 2016; Bracken and Novak, 2019; Everett, 2017; Hockings, 2010; Lawrie et al, 2017; Martin, 2017; LaRocco and Wilken, 2013). Respect for diversity extends to planning for diversity within an approach informed by UDL and inclusive principles.

Inclusive learning and teaching recognise all students’ entitlement to a learning and experience that respects diversity, enables participation, removes barriers and anticipates and considers a variety of learning needs and preferences without directly or indirectly excluding anyone. (Layer, 2017, p.12)

The philosophy underpinning UDL and inclusion mirrors that of The UK Professional Standards Framework for teaching and supporting learning in higher education (Advance HE, 2019b). Planning, design, delivery and evaluation of curricula (goals, assessments, methods and materials) all come under the UDL umbrella operationally as well as strategically (National Center on Universal Design for Learning, 2011; US Congress, 2008).

At the time this research was undertaken, services for disabled students were under review (Willetts 2014; Layer 2017; Wilson and Martin, 2017). Layer’s (2017) review recommended Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) reforms which accept that the sector has an ongoing responsibility to disabled students under the Equality Act (2010) and that the DSA will continue to be necessary for some. The review presented a compelling case for developing UDL and further embedding inclusive practice both to reduce the reliance on DSA and to enhance the student experience for all. Layer’s rationale was that both students who may no longer be eligible to access the Disabled Student Allowance (DSA), and those who were not eligible in the first place, but still require support in order to be academically successful, are likely to benefit.

The UK Quality Code is in favour of support that is accessible and inclusive of all students, but not the same for all students (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2018, p.2). Layer (2017) found pockets of good practice across the sector in relation to UDL and inclusion but could not draw any conclusions about the overall picture .Currently there is no sector-wide baseline against which to make comparisons between different universities (Draffan et al 2017; Williams et al., 2017).

**Self-assessment Tool: Methodology & Construction**

Student and staff focus groups worked together at LSBU to develop the self-assessment, which included links to appropriate services to help signpost students early to sources of support. The project team comprised academic staff from the Education Division and professional services colleagues, including library staff, academic developers, digital literacy staff and members of the dyslexia, wellbeing and disability service teams. Following ethical approval, a series of questions was developed by the group with input from students coming up to the end of the first year of their BA Education Studies degree. A digital skills expert turned the questions into an accessible Bristol Online Survey (BOS) which was piloted with students who had been offered places on the course.

The self-assessment was designed to be simple and accessible. It was sent out in August by email to an undergraduate cohort of pre entry Education Studies students by The Course Director and framed in terms of enabling students to take a proactive approach to maximising their chance of academic success. Students did not have to report the results of their self-assessment to anyone but what they learned about themselves formed the basis of a productive early conversation with their academic advisor.

A second protocol was devised for use two months into the course, in November, in order to ascertain the degree to which students had taken the initiative to access services. Staff felt that by helping students to grasp their own academic development early on, the deficit model could be avoided, and that early intervention was essential in order to sidestep a scenario in which a student felt they were failing before seeking help. The second self-assessment was designed to keep up the momentum.

Feedback from students indicated that the exercise made them feel both proactive and reassured. Some were amazed at the sort of services available to them and all were very encouraged by the process of self-assessment and independent help seeking. Professional services staff noticed increased uptake in their provision as well as a more proactive stance in relation to sourcing assistance on the part of the students.

In both self-assessments the questions were fairly generically rather than course specific. The rationale was to create an instrument which could be useful beyond the Education Division and potentially beyond LSBU. Underpinning the approach was the intention to provide easy access to supporting resources and services, therefore links were created within the questionnaires to take students to where they needed to go for help in just one click.

**Pre-Entry Survey**

In order to encourage students who may feel reluctant to share concerns about their own level of academic competence at an early stage, the pre-entry survey was designed to be anonymous. Thirty-five completed the task. They were encouraged to engage proactively and assured that they would certainly identify some areas in which they would need to develop their skills and find appropriate signposts to help them to do so. Opportunities were created for students to access support over the summer, both to reduce potential anxiety and to encourage a positive approach to study.

The survey included only minimal relevant demographic data, focussing on existing qualifications and family HE-study history. Fifteen questions were presented under the following four headings: Wellbeing & Practicalities, Academic Skills, Library Skills, and ICT & Digital Skills. Each section included downloadable signposts to appropriate resources and services. The BOS was set up in order to record responses anonymously for research purposes. ‘Are you confident about academic writing including using appropriate academic vocabulary and language?’ is an example of a question in the ‘Academic Skills’ section.

**Post-Entry Survey**

During a Study Skills session in November, the Post-Entry Survey was completed in class by forty-eight students. It included the same demographics plus information gathered pre-entry in order to provide points of comparison. Nineteen questions were divided into the following five areas: Wellbeing and Practicalities, Academic Skills, Library Skills, ICT and Digital skills, and LSBU-specific Digital skills. Downloadable signposts to resources and services were included as in the pre-entry survey. Responses were recorded again for research purposes.

**Comparing Pre- and Post-Entry**

Student areas of concern changed between the pre- and post-entry phase as they had been able to address some of the things, they were worried about in their first two months at university, or even over the summer before starting, by accessing help from the relevant service. Pre-entry the top five concerns were: critical reading skills, disability support arrangements, referencing, literature search and spreadsheets. Post-entry they were: housing and accommodation, disability support arrangements, time management, literature search and critical reading.

**Feedback on taking the Self-Assessments and Accessing Support**

Thirteen students participated in a focus group and provided feedback. As well as finding the self-assessment exercise useful and confidence boosting, students reported that the surveys themselves were: ‘Easy to understand’, ‘Straightforward and Easy’, ‘They didn’t take long’ and they were ‘Helpful to new students’. A more onerous task would probably have yielded poorer results. In the post-enrolment survey the students were a bit of a captive audience as the task was undertaken as part of a study skills session. The team feel strongly that embedding this sort of activity into curriculum did much to increase its efficacy and have taken this approach forward.

Post-entry the top five services students accessed were: student life centre help desk, library help desk, learning resources centre (digital skills) help desk, student union and skills for learning (academic writing). Professional services colleagues are also timetabled to come into classes for specific purposes such as to teach about Harvard referencing. Student feedback about this approach is positive.

**Impact**

The self-assessment was part of a story in which the opportunity to find out about and access pre entry skills development workshops and electronic resources were vital components. Momentum was maintained because of the good working relationship between academic and professional services staff. Messages introduced pre entry were reinforced in induction and in sessions in which professional services staff came into class to help with skills development. Mapping services benefitted staff as well as students as signposting was made easier by having access to a complete picture of available help. UDL is somewhat dependant on joined up thinking and this research was certainly an exercise in joined up thinking and professional co-operation between teams. Student input into the research was valuable and congruent with the principle of ‘nothing about us without us.

Students were asked to evaluate the support they received. Typically they reported developing feelings of confidence and belonging as a result of taking control of navigating support services effectively. They talked about being comforted and reassured that they were not all alone but could access help based on their own self-assessed requirements which they could talk through in productive conversations with academic advisors.

Academic advisors discussed student agency in respect of taking control of their own learning and proactively and independently seeking help with academic development. Professional services staff noted an increase in take-up of the services they offer.

The following comments are illustrative of learners’ reactions to the initiative.

‘You think oh am I really ready for uni, am I going to be able to finish it? But then when you know there are things out there that can help you it gives you that confidence to take the step to better yourself but know that there is always help just in case you do have difficulties.’

‘Because it asks you about how you cope and then it says this could help you rather than saying this is here to help you. It’s going from yourself to the help that’s available rather than from the help to yourself.’

**Reflection on Research Questions**

Consideration of why participating staff felt it necessary to support undergraduate students through the transition stage into Higher Education coalesced around the idea that students do not start university with all their academic ducks in a row. Furthermore students who lack higher education experience do not necessarily know what it is that they don’t know. Even if they are aware to an extent of skills they might need to develop, students are unlikely to know how to go about getting the help they require. For these reasons staff felt that the self-assessment tools described here, along with a coherent map of services with useful links, would be effective. Feedback indicates that the exercise was helpful for students and it is something which will be repeated in subsequent years.

Implementation of a pilot self-assessment tool with undergraduate students pre- and post-enrolment was examined and the initial findings revealed that it proved to be a helpful and practical approach. It is possible to follow participating students throughout their course to gather their perspectives on the extent to which being involved has resulted in long-term benefits. Certainly, in the medium term the project was greeted with enthusiasm by staff and students.

Spin-off benefits included providing opportunities for academics and professional services colleagues to work together to assist students. In addition, aspects of the Education Studies induction and curriculum were tweaked in order to embed information about sources of support more fully. This is working well.

Reflecting on the impact of both the self-assessment tool and the collaborative project as a whole has led the team to conclude that its value could well extend beyond the originally participating cohort. Initial planning took into account the sense of thinking bigger and making the protocols broad-brush enough to be useful beyond Education Studies at LSBU. In the spirit of social justice in education and promoting inclusive practice, the team are happy to share this work in order for it to be of benefit to others.

**Sharing the Resource**

At the end of this brief paper is a working link to the survey. Creating a joined-up map of professional services which students can access is part of the process which will have to be undertaken at an institutional level. In practical term users will need to: set up a BOS account, identify a cohort with whom to share the survey, provide students with a suitably encouraging email, collate and analyse results and use the information to support future planning. Future joint cross-institutional research is of interest to the authors.



**Links to LSBU Student Support Assessment Tools**

[Pre-Entry Survey 2016 Student View](https://libguides.lsbu.ac.uk/ld.php?content_id=32243635)

[Post-Entry Survey 2016 Student View](https://libguides.lsbu.ac.uk/ld.php?content_id=32243637)

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