CETL Briefing Papers – Developing Student Writing in the First Year

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Aims of the Initiative

This initiative aims to provide skills in academic writing to ensure students have the skills and knowledge base to make progression. The initiative impacts on the retention of students in their first year and the progression of first year undergraduates to the second year of study.

Description of the Initiative

Retention is important for a variety of reasons. From an institutional perspective, student retention is essential for financial stability and to sustaining academic programmes. Public policy makers advocating accountability consider student retention leading to graduation or transfer as a strong measuring stick. Additionally, recent revisions to the HEFCE funding structure places greater emphasis on student retention and graduation rates may be used as a measure of institutional effectiveness. Most importantly, though, we want our students to have a positive university experience, to achieve their academic goals and to eventually enter the professional workforce.

Numerous studies confirm that the majority of those who drop-out from or fail higher education (HE) courses do so in their first year (Bourner et al 1991; MacDonald 1992; Woodley et al 1992; Benn 1995) and as a result, the first year has been referred to as a 'make or break' year. One aspect of academic scholarship that proves particularly difficult for students is that of academic written discourse. Evidence[i] suggests that failing assessments is one of the most common reasons students do not proceed to the next year.

FD1000 Writing for Academic Success (WAS) was originally designed to provide the type of writing support necessary to ensure students could succeed in their university studies. It was identified in the original CIEL bid as an example of good practice that would contribute to 'a measurable impact on retention, progression and achievement statistics' and increase levels of student satisfaction and achievement by improving academic writing skills and building writing self-confidence, thus enabling first year students to become more successful and independent learners.

Evaluation and impact of the Initiative

To determine student retention, progression and achievement, a longitudinal study tracking the three-year performance of FD1000 students enrolled in the first year of the CIEL through to their expected date of completion was conducted. This study collated and analysed data from the University's SITs system, module leader reports and individual student transcripts.

Tracking data shows that 92.2% of students enrolled in FD1000 in the first year of the CETL progressed to level 2, which surpassed the original bid's 90% target for the first year pass rate. Additionally, 88% of students who passed the first semester of the module also passed their other three modules. However, a comparison of the module's initial registrations with individual student transcripts shows that only 76% percent of the 2005-06 FD1000 cohort graduated within the expected three years.

To better determine the module's impact on achievement, the FD1000 cohort's three-year performance was compared with all the other HLSS students in the same year's cohort. Similar to the FD1000 students, the HLSS cohort had been "culled" of withdrawals, transfers and dormant transcripts[1]. While the percentages of first and upper second class degrees conferred on both groups mirror each other, differences begin to emerge in the conferral of lower-class degrees. Students in the FD1000 cohort received 9% more lower second class degrees and more than double the number of thirds than their counterparts. Of greater interest, however, is the difference between the two groups in the non-conferral of degrees due to failing grades or incomplete programmes in their final year: data suggests that 15% more FD1000 students graduated in the expected three years.
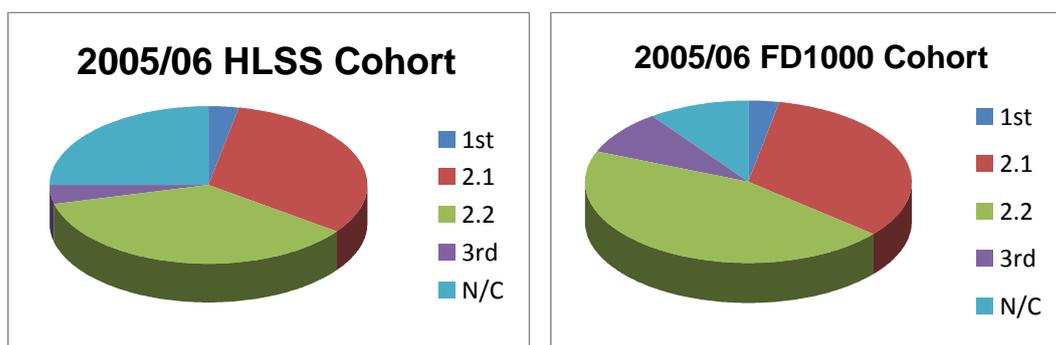

In general, then, this comparison seems to suggest that taking FD1000 does not appear to impact significantly on students' overall grade performances, but it does seem to enhance their ability to successfully finish their programmes of study.

2.2 Student Beneficiary Targets & Retention

In accordance with the CETL's student beneficiary target, the module was promoted across HLSS. Module enrolments thus increased by over 250% in the first semester and more than doubled for the academic year. This increase in FD1000 enrolments seems to reinforce research on the correlation between class size and attrition rates[2]: pass rates for the module decreased from 90% to 73%. The following table depicts impact of increased module enrolments over 4 years of the CETL:

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[1] It needs to be pointed out that students who transferred from other institutions in their final year were also excluded from the statistical analysis since all were international students "topping-up" their degree programmes with UK credits and thus there was neither a way of determining previous years' performance nor were they afforded the opportunity to take FD1000.

[2] see, for example, Brophy 1986; Jansen 1995; Becker 2001; Hattie 2006
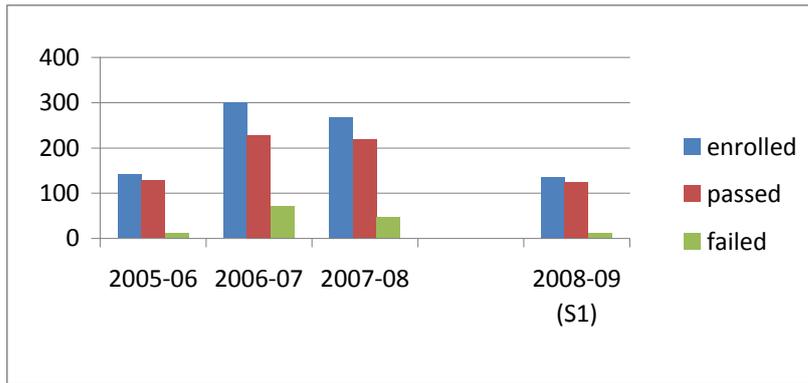
Further analysis of the data shows that the primary reason for failing the module was non-submission: of the 27% who failed the module, 16% failed to submit a portfolio for assessment. The majority of FD1000 students who failed to submit (75%) also failed to submit in their other modules. This seems to confirm previous findings about the predictive nature of the module: students' performance in FD1000 is frequently echoed across other level 1 modules.

To increase pass rates in an over-subscribed module, FD1000 initiated the use of e-tutors as part of its move to become a blended learning module in the third year (which was in line with the CETL bid's aim to "Enhance current excellence and widen its impact through the use of technology-supported learning"). Initial interpretation of the CETL's year 3 data suggests that e-tutoring had a positive—although limited—effect on assignment non-submissions: 12% of non-submissions were "captured"[3] via electronic feedback exchanges between students and e-tutors. The use of e-tutors was extended to the 2008-09 academic year and the electronic tutoring system tweaked to promote its effectiveness. Submitting drafts to e-tutors for feedback was required this year, and e-tutors were more motivated to follow up when students didn't submit by the deadlines because providing feedback was part of their assessed teaching practicum experiences in CW3003 (Teaching & Tutoring Writing). The use of e-tutors in 2008-09 suggests a positive impact on improving students' pass/ submission rates in the module, although further analysis of data is required to confirm this.

Policy Implications

Study skills support modules like FD1000 are valued by students[ii] and perceived as beneficial in helping students persist into their second year and towards a timely graduation. Such modules, however, must be linked to subjects and should not be thought of, or taught, as "dumping grounds" for remedial intervention.

There are questions about transferability of this module (i.e. that "without JP teaching it, FD1000 wouldn't work"). Some of this reticence to adopt the module could be caused by a lack of self-confidence and experience in teaching writing; it may also be attributed to the (real and perceived) need for subjects to focus on subject content rather than skills development; and it may be (rightly) motivated by pedagogical

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[3] Students are not required to submit all the portfolio's elements to pass the module, which encourages students to assume more responsibility for the final mark. Therefore, drafts and writing activities exchanged with e-tutors for formative feedback were accepted as partial submission of portfolio elements—a kind of "safety net" for students unfamiliar with portfolio assessment and/or those experiencing transitional difficulties.

understanding that academic writing skills are best embedded and taught within subjects (e.g., SED).

The new 20-credit framework has the scope for introducing first year modules that help students adjust to the demands of the university environment and develop long-term academic skills. It would be timely, then, for senior managers to consider a model that incorporates strategies of supplemental instruction in combination with pairing the study skills module—or "freshman seminar"—and introductory subject-specific core module.

Ways of supporting students through blended learning are already being used (e.g., Sharpen Up Your Skills), but more opportunities to seek advice and feedback on learning through e-tutoring needs to be afforded to our first year students.

Systems for one to one e-tutoring was used in FD1000 and was piloted, adopted and now embedded in the LSSC Student Support Centre.

Although initially time-consuming and resource-hungry, the use of on-line peer mentors (recruited from the disciplines) would eventually defray on-going expenses and help ensure sustainability.

Business Case

The number of students directly benefiting from the module is currently at 908, and data from the University's Sharpen Up Your Skills website confirms that over the past 18 months there have been 79,692 hits by students accessing FD1000-related materials and advice, thus demonstrating the more "global" and "self-directed" impact of the module on students across the university. The School of Education has adopted elements of FD1000 (e.g., double-entry journals) and two subjects within the School of Health have made the module a core option. There has also been a good example of transferring the module to a discipline, when Social Care/Social Policy used FD1000 as a model for their new Study Skills for Higher Education module (XS1000). There is a further version of FD1000 currently being run in the School for students who are basic writers. This is FD1003 'getting the most out of your academic…', which, like FD1000, runs in both semesters but is not directly linked to subject specific modules.

The new School of Law, Social Sciences and communications intends to retain FD1000 as part of its year-long study skills elective modules in the new 20-credit framework, and e-tutoring will continue to be supported internally through the Creative & Professional Writing subject's Teaching & Tutoring Writing module.

Because of students' overwhelming satisfaction with the use of on-line tutoring (end-of module questionnaires showed that 97% of respondents valued e-tutor's feedback and 92% claimed they would use e-tutoring in the future), it has now been adopted by the HLSS Student Support Centre. In addition, elements of FD1000 have been embedded in numerous level 1 modules as part of the University's/School's move toward blended learning.

Four Learning and Teaching Professional Development training sessions have also contributed to disseminating the module's "good practice": Brewing the Perfect Blend: A Beginner's Guide to Blended Learning in the Classroom; Teaching Large Groups; Embedding Writing in the Disciplines; and Helping Students to Assess Themselves. More recently, a National Student Workshop was conducted which involved students from seven of the University's academic schools as well as other HE institutions.

Workshop based on FD1000 use of self assessment and self regulated learning was delivered to the members of the University of Wolverhampton's Educational Partnerships Networks, who are now developing staff development training in this area for local school teachers.

Expert Contacts and Links

Please provide information of contact and links you are relevant to this programme and work in this area.

Publications
Burke, D. & Pieterick, J. *Giving Effective Written Feedback to Students*. (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2010).

Pieterick, J. & Miller, C. "Online Workshops and Discussion Forums in the Creative Writing Classroom." In R. Miles, B. Colbert and F. Wilson (eds.) *A Guide to Good Practice in the Use of VLE Discussion Forums in English Studies* (HEA English Subject Centre Report Series, 2010).

Bailey, C. & Pieterick, J. "Finding a new voice: challenges facing international (and home!) students writing university assignments in the UK." In J. Pieterick and M. Lawton (eds.) *Hearing Student Voices: European First Year Experience Conference Proceedings* (Wolverhampton: University of Wolverhampton, 2009)

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[i] See, for example, recent HEA research conducted by Coventry University, Roehampton University and the University of Central Lancashire, as well as the June 2009 HESA audit on drop-out rates.

[ii] Data gleaned from MEQs for FD1000 over the past 10 years shows students overwhelming agree they have had a useful and positive learning experience (although one needs to take hyperbolic comments like, "I used to fail my assignments but after taking FD1000, I am now a genius" with a very large grain of salt).