ACCESS TO STUDY SKILLS

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KEYWORDS:

The project aimed to provide some web-based and multiple format study skills resources for dyslexic students on distance learning courses. Research has shown that students with specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia prefer information to be presented in a multi-sensory way (Mortimore, 2003), and this project aimed to transfer text-based study skills leaflets into a series of Adobe Presenter presentations and podcasts that would be available on Blackboard and the University intranet. The presentations draw on colour, animation and voice to present the study skills information in a way that will appeal to a range of learning styles.

It is hoped that these resources will be of particular benefit to dyslexic students who are studying at a distance and who might therefore struggle to attend one-to-one study skills sessions in the AccessAbility Centre. The resources may have a wider appeal to other groups of students who find it difficult to attend face-to-face meetings due to work or childcare commitments.

1. BACKGROUND

The project addresses two different educational issues. First, drawing on Mortimore (2003), the project recognises the variety of learning styles that exist amongst the student population and seeks to present information in a multi-sensory way. Second, by developing a web-based and multiple-format resource, the project supports the learning experience of students who cannot easily come to the campus and who may wish to access information outside of office hours and from a distance. This issue is pertinent to the University of Leicester due to the large numbers of distance learners. The Government's widening participation agenda is likely to mean that an increasing number of

students will be combining study with work, childcare, and a range of other commitments. Trends suggest that there will also be increasing numbers of students with specific learning difficulties. This project therefore aims to provide study skills information in an accessible format that is available to suit the student's own timetable. Existing provision, whilst of high quality, is not consistently provided in multiple formats, and this is likely to disadvantage some students. The adobe presentations and podcasts therefore strive to provide parity in study skills support across the learning community. The project will support the University's commitment to diversity as set out in the Teaching and Learning Strategy: 'The University welcomes and celebrates the diversity of its staff and student body and will ensure that for all programmes of study, both campus based and distance learning, the curricula, teaching, learning and assessment methods take account of the diverse learning needs of the student body'. (University of Leicester Teaching and Learning Strategy, 2006-09)

2. PROJECT AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The aim was to produce eight Adobe Presenter presentations (to sit alongside 2 existing presentations) that would provide advice on different study skills (eg. time management and organisation, writing an essay, exam skills). The student Dyslexia Group suggested ideas about which study skills topics to cover. The project directors also identified the 'most requested' advice from students working with a Study Adviser in the AccessAbility Centre. The number and subject matter of the presentations were therefore selected based on an analysis of this feedback and information.

Objectives:

> Design and publish 8 study guides using Adobe Presenter
> Publish these presentations as Podcasts
> Embed the study guides into the 'Dyslexia Group' Blackboard site as well as within the AccessAbility Centre webpages.
> Evaluate the study guides
> Publicise the resources via course handbooks of distance learning courses and through email lists of dyslexic students held in the AccessAbility Centre.

3. PROJECT OUTCOMES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

> Objective 1) Design and publish 8 study guides using Adobe Presenter

Ten study guides have been produced and these can be found by students via the AccessAbility Centre website:

http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ssds/accessability/study-skills/study-guides

A web page describing the Access to Study Skills project can be found at:

http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ssds/projects/aac-skills

The presentations are:

Active Reading	http://connect.le.ac.uk/reading
Writing an Essay	http://connect.le.ac.uk/essaywriting
Time Management/Organisation	http://connect.le.ac.uk/organisation
Improving Concentration	http://connect.le.ac.uk/concentration
Exam Skills	http://connect.le.ac.uk/examskills
Spelling Strategies	http://connect.le.ac.uk/spelling
Writing a Dissertation	http://connect.le.ac.uk/dissertation
Improving Memory	http://connect.le.ac.uk/memory
Note-Taking in Lectures	http://connect.le.ac.uk/takingnotes
Making Notes from a Text	http://connect.le.ac.uk/makingnotes

Objective 2) Publish these presentations as Podcasts

Feedback from the focus groups, although very positive about the adobe presentations, indicated that the students were not interested in podcasts of the information. They liked the audio element of the presentations, but the majority said they would not find it useful without the visual content and the interaction of web-based resources. We had created one podcast (on Essay Writing – the most downloaded of the adobe presentations), but based on the feedback, we didn't pursue the creation of 9 further podcasts to meet the end of project deadline. In the longer term, the resources will be made into podcasts to be delivered via i-tunes, but it is likely that, in consultation with the Student Development Service, we will make the content more general so that they appeal to a wider group of students.   Once these resources are available, we will also embed them into the AccessAbility Centre website and within the Dyslexia Group pages on Blackboard.

Objective 3) Embed the study guides into the 'Dyslexia Group' Blackboard site as well as on the AccessAbility Centre webpages.

The guides are linked from the front page of the AccessAbility Centre website, as well as being embedded with other content into the Dyslexia Group Blackboard site.

Objective 4) Evaluate the study guides

A number of mechanisms were put in place to gather qualitative feedback about the presentations. Each presentation contains a feedback page, where students can click to be taken to an on-line evaluation form. Students with dyslexia (both campus-based and distance learners) were contacted both to highlight the existence of the resources and to encourage comments. Brief, informal feedback was gathered by Study Advisers in one-to-one meetings with students. Detailed feedback

was gathered via 2 focus groups and a detailed written response from a distance learner. Quantitative data was gathered via the Connect website, which allowed us to count the number of times each presentation had been downloaded.

>Objective 5) Publicise the resources via course handbooks of distance learning courses and through email lists of dyslexic students held in the AccessAbility Centre.

Design Services produced some postcards to publicise the Study Guides. One was sent, with a covering letter, to every distance learner with dyslexia registered at the university. The postcards were also given to every student with a specific learning difficulty who booked a meeting with a Study Adviser. This system of publicising the presentations remains in place. A number of postcards were also sent to departments running distance learning courses, with the request that the cards be given to relevant students. AccessAbility Tutors were emailed with a request to signpost the resources in course handbooks and web information. Students with splds who were known to the AccessAbility Centre received emails directing them to the resources. The Study Guides were also promoted via the News section of both the SSDS and AccessAbility Centre websites.

4. EVALUATION

been downloaded between 28th September 2009 (when all 10 presentations went 'live') and 31st Jan 2010. The 10 on-line study guides have been widely used, with 1,448 downloads. The most popular presentation is currently 'Writing an Essay' with 275 downloads, followed by Active Reading (211), Exam Skills (173) and Spelling Strategies (148).

The presentations themselves offered students the opportunity to give feedback by clicking a hyperlink at the end of the presentation. As already mentioned, all registered distance learners with dyslexia received a letter publicising the resources, and asking for comments on possible improvements. 40 students were contacted in this way. One student gave detailed feedback; a small number of distance students provided brief comments via the on-line feedback form. We ran two focus groups with 8 campus-based students so that we could investigate the ways in which students were using the resources, and how we could improve the content, layout, accessibility etc. We also carried out one in-depth interview with a student who couldn't attend the focus group due to illness.

Data from the two focus groups and the one to one interview were professionally transcribed before analysis. One distance learner wanted to give feedback by email, and therefore his detailed comments (based on the questions asked in the focus groups) took a written form.

The data was analysed using a colour coding system, focusing on:

>elements of the presentations that students liked,

>points for improvement,

>the way in which students used the presentations,

>evidence of impact on learning.

Feedback has been very positive, with students reporting the usefulness of a resource that they could access in their own time. They liked the multi sensory nature of the study guides and the fact that the presentations were quite short. The findings corroborate research by Edirisingha, Salmon and Nie (2008, p.164) who suggest that '10 minutes seems to be the right maximum length that students are willing to listen to'. The students were particularly positive about the interactive elements of the presentations (the 'Improving Memory' presentation, for example, involves a number of memory games).

Suggestions for improvements centred around navigation of the presentations. Whilst students liked the choice afforded by the pictures, sound, and the text on the right of the slides, they also wanted more control about slowing down slides, skipping back and jumping between sections. This pointed to a clear need for instructions on using the resources, and the need to improve ease of navigation between sections. There was some criticism on the small size of the text that sits alongside the slides. Unfortunately, there is no ability to either change the font or font size using the Adobe Presenter system.

Students also requested more Study Guides. They wanted some of the topics to be made specific to their particular subjects, or at least to cover broad subject areas, such as Science, Social Studies etc.

Students appeared to be using the presentations in a variety of different ways. Some used them as a reminder of techniques and strategies that were discussed during a session with a Study Adviser. Others used them instead of a session with a Study Adviser (when the AccessAbility Centre diary was full or because they lived at a distance). One student commented that she used the presentations to 'cover the basics' so that when she met with a Study Adviser she 'could be pushed further' and 'get down to the important stuff'. Only one student suggested that she would make use of a podcast of the presentations. The majority agreed that they liked to watch, listen and interact with the presentations.

The students could describe a number of ways in which the presentations had impacted on their learning. Some picked out very specific techniques that they had used in their work and which they felt had helped them to improve in that area (how to construct an introduction to an essay, for example). One student said:

'Well, for example the active reading one has got to be the biggest one because I have probably maybe 200 pages that I have to go through a day on reading: just using the techniques I've learnt has saved me quite a lot of time actually… So it did feel like a little bit hard work but actually I've found I have freed up a lot more time for me to focus on topics like my dissertation, which I don't have to do right now but I still need to work on. So it's definitely instantly freed up a lot more time because I'm being more productive and more efficient'.

The same student described a more long term impact: 'even when I graduate I'm still going to be having to do lots of reading and research in any future career that I do, and just using those techniques of paraphrasing, highlighting and bullet-pointing will just make so much difference'.

A number of students had recommended the presentations to both dyslexic and non-dyslexic friends. Feedback from their friends suggested that the presentations might have an appeal to a wider body of students.

One student made an interesting comment about the overall impression such resources gave about the commitment of the University to improving the student experience:

'I think it's good because it sort of makes you feel like if you're stuck, then you know there's somewhere to go; and that the university is putting stuff on to help you so you can get the best grades that you can. It's nice knowing that the university is there to support you and that they want to help you just do the best you can; so you've got that as well as the study advisers'.

5. CONTINUATION OF THE PROJECT

The presentations will be improved in response to student comments and will be annually reviewed in line with the SSDS quality assurance strategy. The Study Guides webpages will be similarly reviewed and updated on an annual basis. The Guides will continue to feature in the SSDS Making Connections leaflet that is sent specifically to distance learners. AccessAbility Tutors will be annually reminded of the existence of the Study Guides and encouraged to provide links to the Guides through course handbooks.

6. DISSEMINATION

An abstract has been submitted to the Association of Disability Practitioners Annual Conference. We are waiting to hear whether the paper has been accepted. We have also submitted an abstract to present at the annual conference of the Association of Dyslexia Specialists in Higher Education. We will submit a paper reporting our findings to The Journal of Inclusive Practice in Further and Higher Education as well as to ALT-J, which is a journal devoted to research and good practice in the use of learning technologies within tertiary education. The findings of the project will also be presented as part of the HEA 'Access and Success For All' Seminar series to take place at the University of Leicester in October 2010.