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The Politics of Integration: The Opportunities, Challenges and Successes of Embedding Academic Skills and Literacies Development into an Interdisciplinary, 'Integrated' Foundation Year Programme

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Abstract

Foundation Years (FY) have proliferated within UK Higher Education in recent years, and their benefits and successes have been well documented (e.g. the enhancement of opportunities for underrepresented students, second-chance education, skills and confidence enhancement, and a pipeline into STEM). However, when managed centrally, their implementation can be a contentious site of interdisciplinary unease and 'mutual suspicion' and as much as a fruitful avenue for innovative collaboration. One of the key issues is the question of how to embed academic skills / literacies development within a meaningful, 'integrated', interdisciplinary context effectively whilst utilising expertise from both academic departments and learning development / skills teams, and thus navigating disparate disciplinary agendas, communities of practice and strategic priorities. This paper reports on how this complex terrain was navigated at Royal Holloway, University of London, to successfully embed academic skills (using Universal Design for Learning pedagogy) into an academically authentic, inclusive, interdisciplinary 'Global Perspectives and Academic Practice' unit that facilitated student integration into academic departments. Whilst we report on how the programme led to higher than sector average attainment, retention and progression (the EE described it as a 'TEF Gold offering'), we critically analyse the challenges of embedding and aligning such provision within the communities of practice of a research-intensive institution. Throughout, we suggest ways forward at both practical and strategic levels to ensure the immense potential of integrated academic literacies development within FYs can be realised.

Practitioner Notes

Our paper explores the following issues and makes recommendations for practitioners to develop their practice as follows:

- Given the growth in Foundation Year provision, successful and 'authentic' skills integration is an increasingly vital part of the emerging HEI landscape
- Integrated academic literacies development, when implemented via a UDL pedagogical framework, can significantly increase student skills, confidence, attainment and progression
- Implementation and integration can be a contentious site of interdisciplinary unease which tap into issues of professional identity and academic legitimacy within the academy
- UDL pedagogies offer a means of facilitating successful academic literacies integration and offer a clear 'route to excellence' (Layer, 2017)
- In embedding academic literacies and skills development, practitioners are encouraged to appeal to 'hearts and minds' via the dissemination of literature on good practice and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, strategic alignment of activities and adopt a data driven approach to demonstrating efficacy.

Keywords

Foundation Years, academic literacies, integration, Universal Design for Learning



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Introduction

Foundation Years (FYs) have grown in popularity in the UK since first mooted as a means of “expanding” access to Higher Education (Willetts, 2010). Between 2010/11 and 2017/18, students registered on FYs in England and Wales proliferated from 9,140 to 30,030 (Nathwani, 2019). Recent data puts that number at over 55,000, with numbers quadrupling from 2018-22 (Nathwani, 2019 & Policy Perspectives Network, 2021). The popularity of these programmes has seen a concomitant 18% fall in the number of students seeking access to HE via Access Diplomas (most commonly offered within the Further Education sector). Irrespective of whether this trend represents what the UK government’s recent Augar Review (2019) termed “value for money” or is in the “best interests” of students, and notwithstanding the claim that it “is hard not to conclude that universities are using foundation years to create four-year degrees” (thereby increasing revenue streams), these programmes are undoubtedly popular and serve a valuable role in providing “a route to success for students who would otherwise not access opportunities” (Augar, 2019, p.103, PPN, 2021).

Royal Holloway, University of London (RHUL), developed its Integrated Foundation Year (IFY) provision in 2019/20 in response to sector-wide lowered entry tariffs and competition from nearby well-established FYs (notably at the University of Surrey and St Mary’s University), as well as a desire to bolster the institution’s Widening Participation agenda. Strategically, the initiative also seemed an ideal fit with the institution’s founding principles: the institution of today was established by the Victorian social reformers, Elizabeth Jesser Reid and Thomas and Jane Holloway, pioneering the ideal of education for all (especially women). The programme consisted of two strands (Humanities and Sciences) with two core Global Perspectives and Academic Practice (GP & AP) modules, compulsory for all students. In the first year of operation, the programme attracted 148 students (Humanities, 62, Sciences, 86), of which 93% progressed into their first years. However, pedagogically and strategically, the design and implementation of the IFY would be challenging.

The launch of the IFY was the first time the College has launched a programme of specifically level three teaching (in the UK, undergraduate study spans levels four to six, with level three normally consisting of A levels, International Baccalaureate or Access qualifications). The launch of the programme also coincided with the UK’s Edexcel maths paper scandal in the summer of 2019, industrial action in February and March 2020, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, following the failure of a previously part-outsourced FY (in a local FE College), the institution was keen not to repeat the same mistakes – hence the emphasis on the IFY being integrated. As a teaching and research-intensive institution, some stakeholders (notably academics) were wary that the IFY would either detract from research or negatively affect their department’s National Student Survey (NSS) scores and Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) metrics (key UK measures of teaching quality and reputation). The centralized but integrated design and delivery (via the Centre for the Development of Academic Skills [CeDAS]), also raised challenges, not least obtaining buy-in across a large and disparate institution. Working across several communities of practice, especially via a centralized professional services department, meant that implementation often became a contentious site of interdisciplinary unease and “mutual suspicion” (Irvine et al, 2002, p.199; Tuck, 2018) as much as a fruitful avenue for innovative collaboration. These challenges recur perennially across the international HE sector wherever academic literacies and transition are embedded into programmes, and as such our discussion and suggestions are intended to have wide applicability.

Using a combination of our “lived experiences” and autoethnography as Programme Director and Programme Leader (2019-20), the literature on foundation years, inclusive pedagogies and transition, and data extracted from our first year of operation, this article reports on the challenges of establishing this programme, and how this complex terrain was navigated to successfully embed

academic skills (using Universal Design for Learning pedagogy) within an authentic, inclusive, interdisciplinary and integrated GP & AP module that facilitated student transition into academic departments. In part, our study aims to refute recent propositions made by Richards and Pilcher (2020) that the efficacy of teaching “study skills” is a “constitutive fantasy” borne of ideologies of neoliberalism and “devoid of pedagogical basis” (p.1). Challenging these arguments, we report on how the programme led to higher than sector-average attainment, retention and progression (the External Examiner described it as a “TEF Gold offering”), whilst acknowledging and analysing the challenges of embedding and aligning such provision across the communities of practice of a research-intensive institution.

Pedagogical approach

The IFY at RHUL is specifically marketed to students who do not have the required grades needed for direct entry into undergraduate programmes, the right combination of subjects, or who are coming back to education after a long break. The programme was thus designed to provide scaffolded, integrated avenues into the students’ intended disciplines via two core strands (Humanities and Sciences), which became progressively more integrated as the course progressed via the use of departmental tutorials. Both strands studied the two core GP & AP modules (spanning two terms), alongside four subject content modules (humanities students studied interdisciplinary modules covering literature, visual and digital cultures, and sciences students studied modules on mathematics, programming, and physics). In the third term, the students became fully embedded into their intended departments via two subject-specific modules / projects.

When we considered the available literature on foundation years, the known prevalence of “imposter syndrome” within such cohorts, (Chapman, 2017), the anticipated student diversity (Hale, 2018), and research conducted into FY provision at other Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), our pedagogical strategy was built around the assumption that the cohort was likely to:

- Have lower grades than our traditional direct-entry students
- Be commuter, Widening Participation (WP), first-generation or Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students
- Consist of a high percentage of students with disabilities / Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, ADHD etc.)
- Consist of a high percentage of students with mental illnesses
- Consist of students with low academic self-esteem
- Consist of students who have found the pedagogies encountered at school / college to have been uninspiring, alienating, or unsuitable to their learning styles and /or abilities
- Consist of a combination of students who are either academically weak or have not realised their full potential
- Be hard to retain and progress (FYs have notoriously low rates of progression. The Office for Students (OFS) report an average of 79% progression and some studies have shown this to be as low as 67% (Chivers, 2019, p.70)
- Lack key academic skills and literacies

We were also keen to heed the concerns voiced in the UK government’s Augar Review (2019), notably that: ‘low prior attainment, measured by A level and BTEC grades, is associated with dropping out from university ... From the 2016/17 cohort, as many as 12.8 percent of students

with...D and E [grades] at A-level...and 11.6 per cent of students with BTECs at any level, did not progress past their first year of a degree.’ (p.78 & 85).

To anticipate and address these issues, we wanted to build two core principles into the design and delivery of the programme. Firstly, we wanted the curriculum and assessment to be as inclusive as possible and to draw upon the literature on transition pedagogies (Kift & Nelson, 2005, van Ameijde, Weller & Cross, 2015 and McIntosh & Barden, 2019). This entailed ensuring that the curriculum reflected the diversity of the cohort. For instance, the traditional narrative of the Industrial Revolution as white, masculine and Eurocentric was challenged by incorporating the perspectives of women and children, whilst also exploring how areas of the Middle East were industrialised before the British Industrial Revolution. To facilitate student transition, we scrutinised A level syllabi and first-year undergraduate syllabuses from across relevant disciplines to effectively pitch content between levels three and four, and in a way that supported learning both forwards *and* backwards. This meant that as much learning as possible was “scaffolded” within the “zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky, 1978), and was carefully sequenced to enable transition and meaning-making (Kift & Nelson, 2005).

The curriculum conformed as much as practicable to the principles laid out in Weller, van Ameijde and Cross’s (2018) ICEBERG model for facilitating transition and ensuring retention (the curriculum and its delivery were driven by the principles of integration, collaboration, engagement and balance whilst being economical, reflective and gradual). Aligned with these principles and models, we wanted the delivery of the decolonised, transition-orientated curriculum to be pedagogically inclusive. This entailed delivery via a multidimensional Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework. UDL was chosen owing to its proven validity (US Congress, 2008 and Draffan, James & Martin, 2017), its inherent suitability and flexibility as a means of adapting to and catering for learner variability and multiple intelligences (Norman & Newham, 2018, Barrington, 2004), and its suitability for building in some degree of anticipatory pedagogies in response to the expected challenges associated with the diversity of the cohort. We saw UDL as a “route to excellence” (Layer, 2017), particularly in respect of improved teaching and learning, improved retention, better staff and student satisfaction, improved quality, and cost / time efficiencies. An inclusive, anticipatory pedagogical approach, it was hoped, may go some way to reducing the need for more bespoke (reactive) provision and resource, whilst also embedding and anticipating diversity and neurodiversity more holistically.

An essential component of our approach was to emphasise visual pedagogies whilst scaffolding learning and transition via a “what”, “why” and “how” framework (CAST, 2018). Visual pedagogies for the teaching of academic literacies were largely borrowed from the strategies devised by Wallbank (2018) for students with dyslexia and drew upon inclusive learning strategies recommended by SCIPS for teaching to diversity (2003). Visual pedagogies were also deployed owing to Roberts’s (2018, 2019) compelling work on the efficacy of visual images (e.g. illustrative or metaphorical); his extensive testing has shown that 90% of students prefer visual learning, and that visual pedagogies translated into a 60% increase in the number of firsts in written coursework (2018, pp.977-983). In Roberts’s work, the success of visual pedagogies was even starker when utilised with students with dyslexia, with nearly 90% confirming that the materials “encouraged me to think”, helped them “remember the message of the lecture”, and made the lectures more “enjoyable” (Roberts, 2019). Given the successes of such methods, it seemed prudent to adopt them, but given the diversity of the cohort and the expected higher-than-average number of students with a diagnosed disability / SpLD, it seemed even more pertinent to utilise visual pedagogies within our

UDL approach. In essence, not only did visual / UDL pedagogies seem effective, but we concurred with the view of Healey (2010), Graves (2011) and Bhagat and O'Neill (2011) that dyslexia is the largest category of SpLDs in HE. Given that dyslexia is not necessarily a disability but a “difference” situated on a spectrum of diversity, we anticipated that “adapting our strategies to suit dyslexic students would help *all* students” Bhagat and O'Neill, 2011, p.209, our emphasis).

Our second principle was to interpret the labelling of the programme as an “integrated” foundation year as literally as possible. The original steer from senior management was for the programme to be integrated in so far as it was aligned with the academic departments into which the students intended to progress. This entailed integrating fortnightly, departmental tutorials to orientate students into their intended departments, and ultimately, facilitate transition into fully embedded, department-specific modules in the third term. However, we wanted to interpret the epithet “integrated” far more deeply and purposefully; as such, we proposed that an embedded / integrated “academic literacies” model of skills development was the key to unlocking success and transition. As such, our approach was not predicated on the “deficit” approach to academic / study skills development and FY provision (Lea & Street, 2006, Wingate, 2006, Reynolds, 2019, Dampier et al, 2019), but was built upon the inclusive, integrated “academic literacies” / “academic socialisation” models advocated by Lea and Street (2006), Hyland (2002), Ivanic (2004), Wingate (2006, 2015) and Ingle (2016) in which academic skills development aligns with contextualised “experiential learning theories” (Wingate, 2006, p.458 and Kolb & Fry, 1975).

Controversially, this model has recently been contested. For Richards and Pilcher (2020), claims that “study skills” are a “valuable for every subject”, “can be embedded”, and help students “succeed in their subjects” are a “constitutive fantasy” of neoliberal universality, marketisation and expansionism (pp.1, 8-9) that, ideally, should “cease to exist” (p.13). A particular issue they identify, which is of relevance here, is their dismissal of the “embedded” model we deployed on the IFY. Richards and Pilcher claim that any espousal of an “embedded” model is “misplaced”, because rather than “study skills” being developed, “instead, students are being taught the subject” (p.7). We would not disagree that the “subject is being taught”. In our model (and any embedded model we are aware of), the subject is indeed taught, but the subject-specialist knowledge is scaffolded through, and integrated within, the development of academic literacies. This renders the necessarily advanced nature of the topic more accessible and learnable within a framework of academic socialisation.

Many of the studies Richards and Pilcher cite as evidence that embedded “study skills” are both “ineffective” and not actually embedded in the first place prove the opposite – that “students value a highly discipline-specific approach to language and academic skills support” (Baik & Greig, 2009, p.401) and embeddedness is “the key factor in determining their effectiveness” (Durkin & Main, 2002, p.26). Richards and Pilcher fail to appreciate that, in Bloom’s taxonomy (1956), “subject *mastery*” (our emphasis) is inseparable from higher order skills such as application, analysis, and synthesis, precisely the skills often taught in academic writing, academic literacies, and critical thinking workshops. Knowledge alone, however masterful, is merely facts (a lower-order skill in Bloom’s schema). Furthermore, research has shown that academic literacies development is a key to success, and various studies have revealed that attendance at academic writing workshops translates into increases in performance of between 10-12% (Yeats et al, 2010, Thonus, 2001 & 2002, and Nzekwe-Excel, 2014).

Rather than being a “constitutive fantasy” analogous to a belief in fairies (Richards & Pilcher, 2020, p.2), our approach was built upon research with students reflecting on key academic “challenges” they had encountered during their transition into HE. This research was derived from three projects conducted within CeDAS. The first was a survey of 451 undergraduates in 2014 who ranked

academic reading and writing, exam skills and critical thinking as their top “challenges” in transitioning from school / college to university. The second study, conducted by these authors, was a survey of 115 first-year students in 2019, which revealed academic writing, referencing, and transition as their top skills challenges. The third study, again conducted by these authors, was a detailed analysis of 15 failures of a core Moodle-based Academic Writing module, which revealed the core areas of referencing, avoiding plagiarism and academic writing as the main challenges students faced in their transition from school / college to university. Many of these findings confirmed the challenges associated with independent learning identified by Thomas et al (2015). Based on this research, we saw academic literacy skills and socialisation as akin to a key within a lock – a key that unlocks not only progression and transition, but the inherent complexities of learning and knowledge construction (Hyland, 2002, Ingle, 2016).

The programme was built around a model whereby all academic literacies teaching was embedded, scaffolded and integrated into *both* the intended discipline (with its associated academic discourses and communities of practice), *and* aligned / integrated into the topic under consideration. This avoided the “bolt-on”, “decontextualised” or remedial / deficit approach (Bennett et al, 2000 and Dampier et al, 2019, p.42) we have been encouraged to abandon in the last few decades (Wingate, 2006). The main vehicle for this approach was the core GP & AP modules. These modules are “intended to provide a broad, interdisciplinary, yet academically authentic introduction to global history and globalisation which caters for a broad range of interests that are appealing to students wanting to progress into both humanities and science subjects”. Crucially, the modules were intended to “provide a bridge to undergraduate study... develop the academic skills / literacies of students in order to gain academic knowledge, understanding and confidence, and the critical thinking skills that will enable them to progress and engage fully with university studies in the UK”. Whilst one of the core Learning Outcomes was the ability to “demonstrate and apply an understanding of the key events in world history from the Industrial Revolution to the present within the context of the issues related to globalisation from a variety of social science, humanities and scientific perspectives”, the remaining four Learning Outcomes related to the deployment of a range of reading, investigative, critical thinking, writing and communication skills, so as to enable students to “purposefully locate, access, analyse, synthesise and critically evaluate a range of authentic academic sources, in a manner which prepares them for effective participation at level 4 and beyond” (RHUL Course Module Specification, 2019). It is the integration, impact, implementation and efficacy of these core modules which form the basis of this study.

Evaluation of the programme and student success

Methodology

We measured and evaluated the students through the four lenses of the Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick model (2006, 2016), whilst also utilising elements of the University of Bolton’s Learning Excellence Achievement Pathway (LEAP) framework (McIntosh & Barden, 2019) and the Conley Readiness Index. We conducted a mixed methods survey to assess four parameters: student engagement, learning, behaviour and results. Ethical clearance was certified via the College’s Research Ethics Review Process.

A diagnostic questionnaire, which gauged the students’ perceptions of factors that could impact their learning development and engagement, was opened in term 1. Students rated to what extent they agreed or disagreed with statements covering academic writing skills and academic oral skills. A five-point Likert scale was used, from “completely agree” to “completely disagree”, including a

neutral “neither agree nor disagree” option. They could also write a longer response on their motivations for undertaking a FY. 74 students completed this questionnaire (50% response rate). The second questionnaire opened in week 11 of 12 in term 2. Only 38 students completed the questionnaire (26% response rate); this may have been due to the rapid transition to remote learning during the first lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic. The students could also write longer comments about their positive and negative experiences on the programme. Student success was measured based on a) overall results on the IFY and b) their results for year 1 in comparison with the College’s direct-entry year 1 students. Student engagement was measured via attendance data. All data gathered was anonymous.

Results

Students felt that both academic writing and academic oral skills had improved across the year, notably the ability to construct an argument (Figure 1) and the ability to share views in small groups (Figure 4).

Figure 1:

Academic writing skills (questionnaire 1)

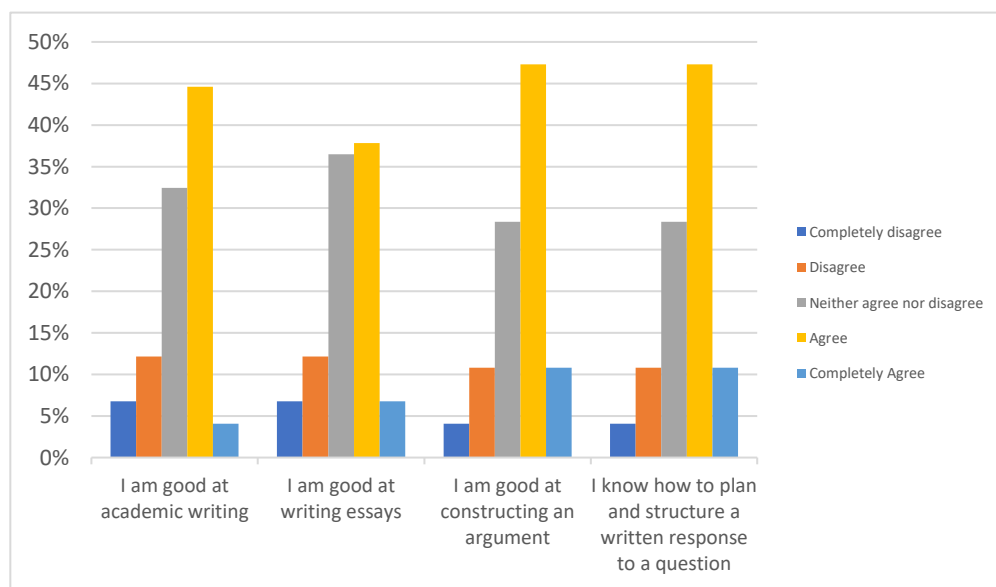


Figure 2:

Academic writing skills (questionnaire 2)

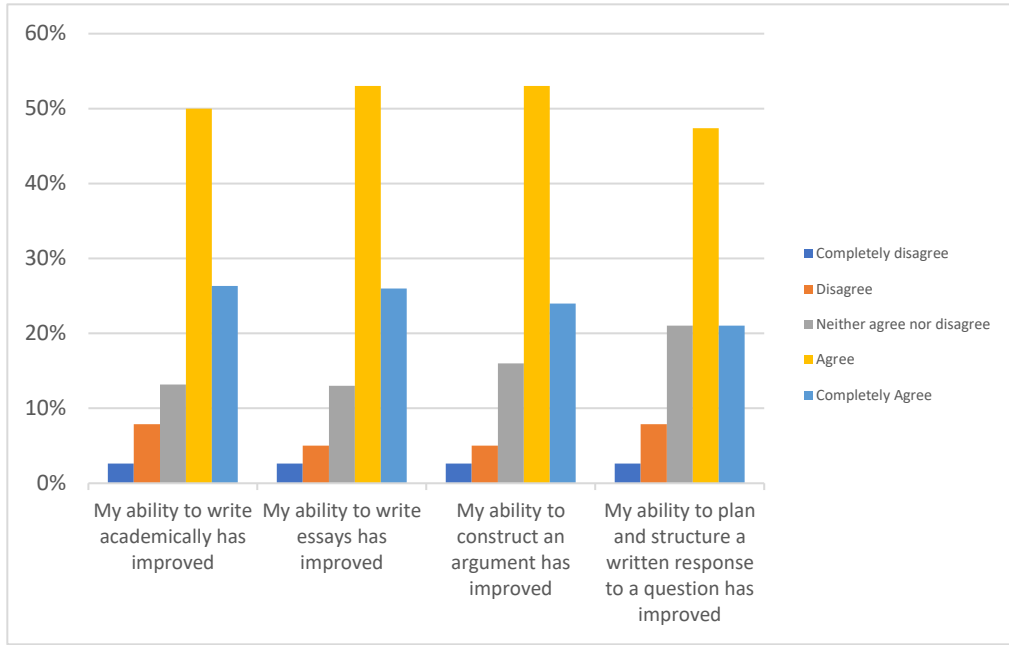
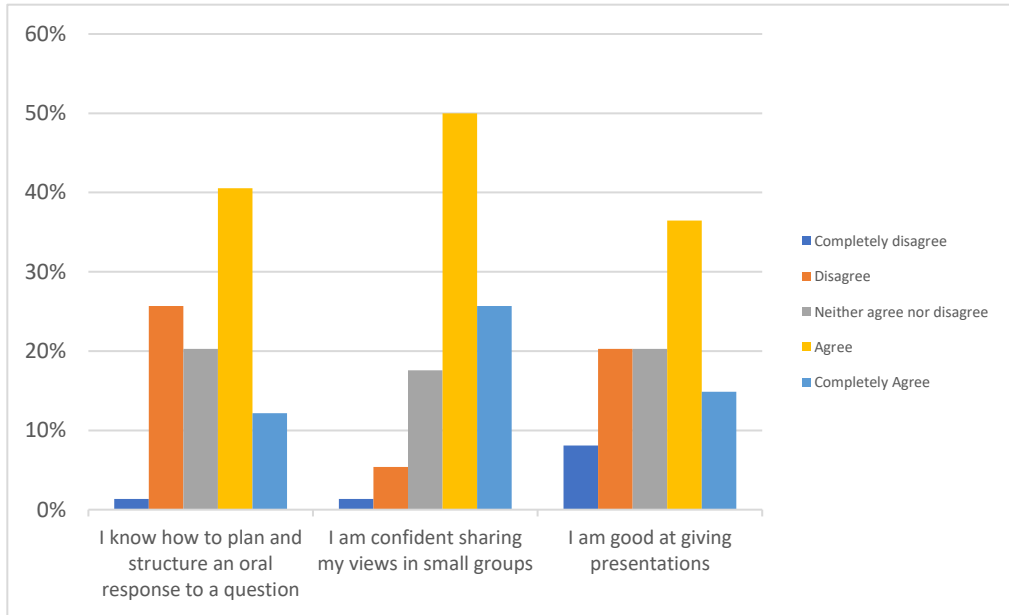


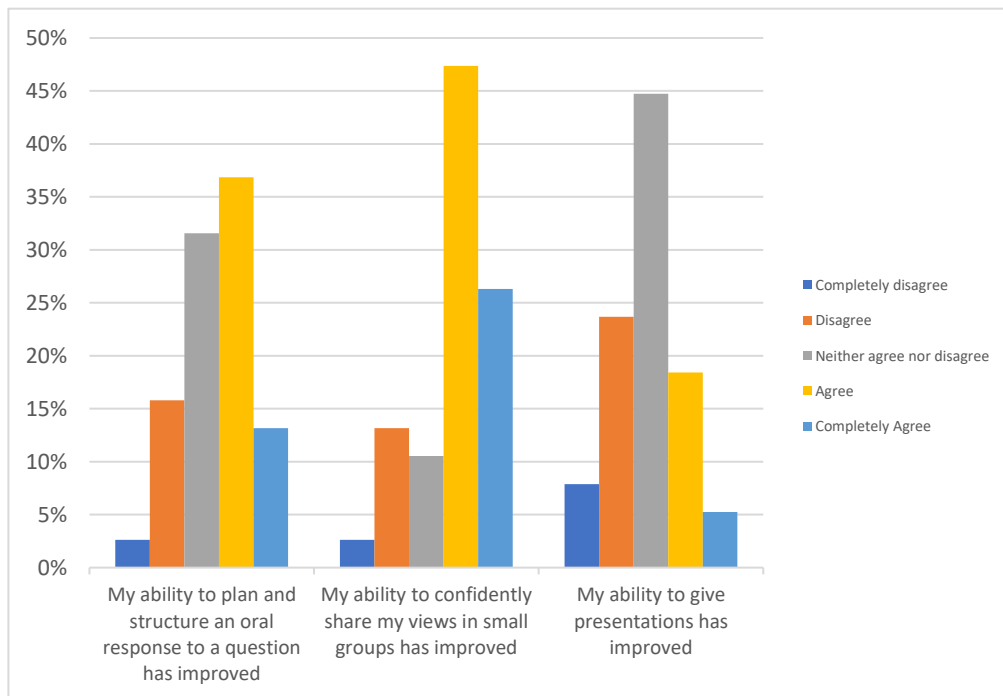
Figure 3:

Academic oral skills (questionnaire 1)

Figure 4:



Academic oral skills (questionnaire 2)



50% felt their ability to plan and structure an oral response to a question had improved, and 73% felt their ability to confidently share views in small groups had improved (Figure 4).

Academic essay writing skills saw significant improvements. 76% agreed or strongly agreed that their ability to write academically had improved and 77% felt their ability to construct an argument had improved (Figure 2).

27 students said there were positive factors that impacted their experience on the IFY, and 26 stated there were negative factors. The positive comments largely centred around their preparedness for university and what to expect in the following year, social aspects such as making friends, the teaching itself, and additional support provided by course lecturers:

“I was given a second chance by being offered the IFY... I now have the courage again to achieve my academic aims.”

“I feel more prepared to enter into the first year of university not only within my academic studies, but socially as well. Thorough teaching has been made towards bibliographies and footnotes which would be applied to next year’s assignments giving me less of a chance of my work being penalised.”

“The foundation year was really instrumental as I could not remember quite a lot or there was certain aspects like referencing that I never learned the proper way... I feel more ready to tackle my degree.”

However, a perceived lack of relevant content on the GP & AP modules was a persistent complaint from Sciences students. Given 27/43 respondents were from the Sciences stream, the number of comments on this in the second survey is unsurprising. However, notably, the students did not comment negatively on the academic practice element of the modules:

“Many of the “science” questions we were given to answer were sociology topics in disguise.”

“Global perspectives was sold as a combination of humanities and science... it was just history.”

“I do believe that as much as learning to write academically is an important skill to master, I feel that the content of the module is unjustly weighted towards humanities students.”

In response, GP & AP 1 was changed in 2020-2021 to include three three-week blocks of study on the Industrial Revolution, climate change, and disease, with different discussion questions for each stream. GP&AP 2 was separated further; each stream studied separate content for six weeks. The final three-week block on ethics was studied by all students. The latter topic was well-received, as the questions discussed were deemed more applicable to current events, including self-driving cars and misuse of apps.

Year 0 results

Table 1 shows the average marks for the GP & AP modules. Table 2 shows average marks and progression results overall. The best 90 credits were used as part of the no-detriment policy brought in because of the pandemic. Table 3 shows the attendance data.

Table 1:

Average marks and progression results

Stream	Average marks for GP&AP 1 / GP&AP 2	Average marks for all courses	Best 90 credits	Average Progression	Progression (students with SpLD)	Offered resits
Humanities	61% / 58%	54%	60%	71%	87.5%	29%
Sciences	62% / 49%	61%	67%	78.2%	90%	21.8%

Whilst attendance and engagement statistics alone rarely present a complete picture, attendance at GP & AP lectures and seminars was used as a measure of engagement. Comments from the module feedback forms and the second questionnaire were also considered.

Table 2:*Attendance statistics for GP & AP modules*

Stream	Average lecture attendance for GP&AP 1	Average seminar attendance for GP&AP 1	Average lecture attendance for GP&AP 2 (Lecture 1)	Average lecture attendance for GP&AP 2 (Lecture 2)	Average seminar attendance for GP&AP 2
Humanities	73%	92%	78%	44%	57%
Sciences	78%	79%	86%	85%	59%

The lectures in term 2 were divided into two one-hour sessions, one for each stream, but requiring all students to attend both. The data for term 2 is unfortunately incomplete because of interruption caused by the pandemic; the statistics do not consider the final two weeks of disrupted teaching in term 2. Overall, the IFY had a progression rate of 93% - this compares very favourably with 79% average progression for FYs and 62% for students entering HE after an Access Course (OfS, 2020).

Year 1 results

The performance of the IFY students in their first year of undergraduate study was similarly impressive; in terms of average grades, they outperformed the direct-entry students. The 99 progressing students from the IFY (both strands) achieved 62%, which compares well with the average grade of 60% for direct-entry students (3172 students from all disciplines). Notable performances were recorded in History, Media Arts and Politics / International Relations (IFY students outperformed direct entry students by 3%), and in Mathematics and Information Security (IFY students outperformed those with direct entry by 13%). This clearly indicated that the self-reported increases in academic literacies / skills confidence does translate into better performance on their main courses.

We were particularly interested in investigating whether students with a diagnosed specific learning difficulty continued to perform well. We wanted to ascertain this because, whilst the UDL framework we adopted for the IFY is, by definition, inclusive, it has been recommended as specifically useful for the development of students with SpLDs (CAST, 2018, Burgstahler, 2017, Layer, 2017, Norman & Newham, 2018, Wallbank, 2018, and Krčmář, 2019). Whilst we saw that progression for students with a declared disability was superior to those without (see Table 1), the average grade for the 8 students diagnosed with a SpLD in their first year was 65.6% - significantly above the first-year direct entry average and even higher than the IFY average. This attests to the efficacy of utilising an UDL framework to help transition students with diagnosed SpLDs into their studies and reinforces the point that inclusive pedagogies are a “route to excellence” (Layer, 2017).

Even more intriguing, however, is the extent to which the UDL framework we deployed helped students with lower entry grades. This was not a result we necessarily expected, but in terms of progression, we compared those students on the IFY and direct entry in terms of entry grades (A

levels). Of those students entering with grades CCD – EEE and below, 73% who entered via the IFY progressed, as opposed to 65% who were direct entry. The IFY clearly helps not only transition students into their studies but also has a very positive correlation with retention and serves as an ideal vehicle for the College’s commitment to access and reducing attainment gaps (the College’s 2020-21 to 2024-25 Access and Participation Plan). Overall, the IFY Humanities cohort consisted of a high percentage of BAME (35%), WP (30%) and disabled (26%) students, whilst the Sciences strand comprised 61% BAME, 29% WP and 26% disabled students. The programme ideally suits many students who are intellectually very capable but have suffered because of the “assessment objective” driven and restrictive nature of the A level curriculum. The IFY clearly helps the College not only fulfil its commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion (and which has been highlighted as being of significant concern by the Augar Review), but by helping to “level up” students from diverse backgrounds and those with disabilities (via the focus on inclusive pedagogy, transition and the principles of UDL), it helps the College fulfil its statutory, legal obligation under the UK’s Public Sector Equality Duty (2011) in respect of advancing “equality of opportunity”.

Discussion and challenges

The above results are necessarily incomplete as the cohort have not yet completed their degrees, but based on their performance so far, the data adds weight to the argument that FYs are effective, represent value for money, enable student success and transition, and remain an important vehicle for facilitating access to HE. While the difference between the attainment of the IFY cohort in their first years and the direct entry students is less profound than the findings of Yeats et al, 2010, Thonus, 2001 & 2002, and Nzekwe-Excel, 2014, it needs to be remembered that our students started from a much lower base, having not achieved their required entry grades. To be able to not only bring those students up to a level with their direct entry peers, but to outperform them by an average of 2-3% is significant, and bears out the increased confidence of the students in their ability to write essays, engage in academic discussions, and participate in independent learning at university. As such, whilst much of the current research into FY provision has focused on quality of teaching (Simeoni, 2009), the importance of the “demystification” of HE (HEFCW 2016 in Clifford, p.165), value for money (Clifford, 2018), familiarisation (Hale, 2020), building upon “initial value” (Reynolds, 2019) and the potential of an embedded academic literacies approach, this paper attests to the ability of an “integrated” FY to improve student success through the integration of academic literacies via an embedded, academically authentic, and inclusive UDL framework. Whilst we do not claim that the above approach is a “utopian solution” (Reynolds, 2019, p.56), it is hoped that this paper will further enable us to move away from “deficit model” of academic skills development which still seems to be the “dominant staff perspective” (Hopkinson, 2011, in Reynolds, p.55), and which often pervades institutional political structures to the detriment of student success.

Our approach was vindicated not only by the positive student results but by the external examiner reports, which described the programme as “innovative”. As one of the external examiners put it:

I was impressed with the progression of skills, the depth and breadth of understanding and conceptual engagement, and the levels of achievement reached by the best students. Success for the programme as a whole will lie in how many students progress. I hope RHUL will continue its institutional commitment to this “TEF Gold” offering.... The comparatively low dropout rate for this Foundation year in comparison with the sector average is telling evidence of its quality and the efforts of the RHUL team as well as the commitment of your recruits.

The second external examiner concurred, stating that:

I was very impressed with the programme that has been put together. In particular, I like the coherence of the programme. It is evident that the courses were not developed in isolation, but by the course teams working together.

In other words, notwithstanding the challenges outlined below, a fully “integrated” offering through which academic literacies can be delivered in an academically authentic, relevant, and aligned manner *is* achievable and delivers positive student results. Furthermore, contrary to the claims made by Richards and Pilcher, our findings are consistent with the broader body of research illustrating the efficacy of embedded academic literacies development (e.g. Price & Rust, 1995, Rust, Price and O’Donovan, 2003, Yeats et al, 2010, Thonus, 2001 & 2002, Nzekwe-Excel, 2014, and Faragher, 2021). As such, the success of the model also speaks to its applicability in a range of academic literacies contexts internationally. In essence, embedded, integrated academic literacies work is not of course confined to UK FYs, but applies to a range of HE settings where skills development is facilitated via centralised but embedded provision (e.g. EU, South African and North American Writing Centre and writing in the disciplines models to name but a few).

Key challenges associated with implementation

Despite the excellent results highlighted above, whilst developing and implementing this programme we encountered several challenges, two of the most significant of which pivoted around issues of perception. Essentially, through course evaluation surveys / processes, autoethnographic research and “lived experiences”, we found that for many of our colleagues, particularly in senior management, the “bolt-on” approach to skills development persists. In accordance with Drummond et al (1999) and Wingate (2006), we did indeed find both “organisational and managerial challenges in coordinating progressive skills development” and “reluctance” to work with us in “doing away with study skills” (p.459) so as to reconceptualise academic literacies development as an integral, embedded, integrated part of academic socialisation. These challenges manifested themselves through, and were complicated by, our position within the institutional hierarchy.

Middle management

The first main challenge we encountered in setting up and running the IFY was our own positionality within the institution as academic middle managers (Programme Director – Senior Teaching Fellow, and Programme Leader – Teaching Fellow) and the inherent contradictions within our position vis-à-vis expected levels of responsibility and our positions as non-academic, professional services staff. Rudhumbu (2015) has identified academic middle managers as somewhat problematically sandwiched between senior management and academics, and although instrumental in pedagogical change, they are often seen as “transmitters of top management views to the lower echelons of the organisation” (p.106). This could not be truer of our own position. However, problematically, as Teaching Fellows on non-academic contracts, we had little “political” authority and academic legitimacy / credos when engaging with faculty and heads of department to drive forward change and implement a new programme (and at an entirely different academic level to what most colleagues were accustomed to). In other words, as well as undertaking the dimensions of bridge, translation, liaison, and facilitation (Rudhumbu, 2015, pp.112-113), our role as “broker” between senior management and faculty was hindered by our positionality and contracts. Furthermore, given the time pressures (the entire programme was developed from scratch within only 8 months), our role was primarily seen as “deliverers” rather than influencers, and as such our capacity for brokering, facilitating, liaising, translating and bridging was curtailed and added an additional layer of contradictions within our role. These inherent positional ambiguities and paradoxes created both

“role conflict” and “role strain” (Rudhumbu, 2015, p.107) from the outset, but these issues were compounded by our second challenge.

Departmental positionality

Our second main challenge intersected with the first. The IFY was developed, managed, and run out of CeDAS, a centralised professional services department borne out of a language centre. The Centre offers both centralised and embedded academic writing and skills development through a blend of lectures, workshops, one-to-ones and drop-ins. The IFY was placed under the jurisdiction of CeDAS since a) CeDAS had previously set up a FY for international students, and b) it seemed a logical place to locate it, given that academic literacies development was seen as key to “upskilling” the IFY students and equipping them with the skills needed to succeed in their studies within departments. This was a pragmatic decision, and a path well-trodden by other institutions, notwithstanding the arguments about the need for academic skills to be embedded in an “inclusive” way (Wingate, 2015). However, this centralised position of the IFY programme raised challenges.

The programme was to be “integrated”, yet centralised, thus immediately raising an inherent contradiction. Additionally, the programme was to “integrate” students into their academic departments whereby, in term 3, they were fully immersed into their intended departments. This necessarily required year-round cross-disciplinary cooperation, bridging, liaison, facilitation and translation. This is an inherently complex endeavour that entails working not only within an interdisciplinary framework / terrain, but across disciplinary “communities of practice” (Lave and Wenger, 1991). As Irvine et al (2002, p.199) have noted, unfortunately “interprofessional relationships continue to be characterised by conflict rather than co-operation and are frequently distorted by mutual suspicion, hostility and disparities between the way that a particular profession views itself and how it is viewed by other occupations”. It has been widely acknowledged that there are often profound “difficulties involved in implementing the embedded approach” - “difficulties” that are often exacerbated by a “reluctance of many academic staff to concern themselves with student learning” and skills development (Drummond et al, 1999, Biggs, 1996, McInnis, 2003, Wingate, 2006, and McVitty & Andrews, 2021), and even inclusion (Waywell, 2017).

Moreover, as Ashmore (2021) has contended, within the “power struggles” manifested in HEIs, “academic support services are positioned within this unstable cycle of power and cognitive dissonance”. They sit uneasily between departments and administrative powers, and between the conflicting values entrenched within narratives of education and value for money. (p.6). This often means that such services “seem not to be welcomed” and “remain at the periphery” (Desierto & De Maio, 2021, p.12). Despite the potential for interdisciplinary collaboration and inclusive academic literacies pedagogies, we encountered a range of responses, from enthusiasm and joint materials delivery to precisely the “conflict” and “hostility” defined above. In particular, the integration of the sciences content into the core GP & AP modules was problematic and often deemed to be “impossible”, despite the obvious opportunities for discussing scientific developments vis-à-vis core topics such as the industrial revolution and Society 4.0. The IFY Leadership Group, meanwhile, consisted of senior departmental academics and representatives from the College’s Senior Management Team rather than anyone teaching on the programme (including the programme director / leader), who remained very much “on the periphery”, despite being positioned as academic middle managers.

One of the most significant examples of how the above challenges manifested themselves was in regard to our choice of academic literacies topics. For the Sciences strand (incorporating students studying Maths, Physics, Computer Science and Electronic Engineering), our topics were: 1) getting the most out of lectures and notetaking, 2) independent learning and time management, 3) academic

reading, 4) academic honesty and avoiding plagiarism, 5) five essay writing sessions (including scientific writing and genres), 6) revision and exam skills, 7) critical thinking, 8) grammar, 9) editing and proofreading, 10) presentation skills, 11) getting the most out of feedback, 12) academic posters, 13) writing for different audiences, 14) academic communication for blogs and vlogs. These topics were chosen to address the core academic “challenges” identified by students in the three research projects outlined above, but were also informed by the content of numerous study skills textbooks for science students, notably *Study Skills for Science, Engineering and Technology Students*, by Maier, Barney & Price (2009). These topics were “integrated”, aligned and embedded into the core topics of the week, which ranged from science and the Industrial Revolution to energy, globalisation and climate change. However, these topics were deemed by colleagues in the relevant science departments to be entirely unsuitable and only relevant to humanities. Furthermore, during the course of our “lived experience” of running the programme, evaluation activities and our subsequent autoethnographic research, we frequently encountered feedback such as “it is close to impossible to link the topics”, that “the gulf in topics is enormous” and “the job of selling this course is...impossible”. For example, the initial topic of the Industrial Revolution on the GP & AP 1 module was deemed problematic as science academics could not align the content of departmental-specific tutorials. This was despite the provision of a crib sheet for tutors which mapped the content across the programme and suggested teaching the Faraday Principle (physics) or the algorithms of Ada Lovelace (maths and computer science).

In response to the above challenges, we reached out to all the main science departmental stakeholders on the IFY halfway through the 2019-20 academic year via a survey, asking them what topics they would prefer to see. The survey elicited no responses. In 2020-2021, we sought the opinions of two new, subject-specialist science academics who had been recruited into CeDAS to teach on the IFY. In May 2021, they approached the same stakeholders, using the same survey, but the response was vastly different. On our behalf, they elicited the following preferred list of academic practice topics from 2 senior lecturers, 2 heads of departments and 1 professor: 1) report writing, 2) academic writing style, 3) referencing, 4) revision and exam skills, 5) academic reading, 6) grammar and essay writing structure, 7) critical thinking, 8) scientific writing conventions, 9) source use. This list closely aligns with the topics we had originally devised (and were being taught), despite having been perceived as unsuitable and only applicable for the humanities.

The above situation was as curious, and the most plausible explanation for this “gulf” is not a “gulf in topics”, but a “gulf” in terms of our positionality, as middle managers, as learning developers, and as part of a non-academic professional services department (and thus lacking the “academic power and intellectual prestige” associated with the academy [see Wacquant, 1990, p.680, Bourdieu, 1988, and Ashmore, 2021]). In other words, within the power dynamics of the institution, we were not “viewed as experts with knowledge desired by academic and administrative powers, and therefore did not hold equal power to influence”. Our approach was consistently at political odds with the institutional hierarchy and “power struggles” which sought to position academic literacies as “remediation outside the curriculum via siloed, inequitable, and decontextualised support” (Kift, 2021, p.10).

Conclusion and recommendations

Contrary to the recent assertions made by Richards and Pilcher (2020), our research contributes to the body of evidence that attests to the validity and efficacy of embedded academic literacies, but from the unique, dual perspectives of an IFY mediated via an inclusive, UDL pedagogical framework. Whilst we acknowledge, as others have done before us, that delivering “comprehensive” institutional “change at scale, that cuts across culture, structures, processes and governance, is no easy task” (Kift, 2021, p.13), it is hoped that the above results add weight to calls for there to be a

sea change in the way academic literacies are still often perceived within the academy and for there to be a fundamental realisation that integrated, embedded academic literacies support and socialisation are pivotal in our age of massified, diversified HE for enabling student transition, success and retention. Notwithstanding the significant hierarchical and perceptual challenges associated with implementing an IFY based on an embedded academic literacies / UDL framework from within a centralised unit, UDL and transition pedagogies offer a clear “route to excellence” (Layer, 2017) that ought to be grasped.

Based on our experiences, we would recommend the following strategies for obtaining the buy in of academics and embedding such approaches within the hierarchy and communities of practice of an institution:

- Appeal to hearts and minds via dissemination of literature on good practice and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.
- Align all aspects of work with institution strategy and make explicit links to delivering upon strategic goals.
- Be data-driven. Present a compelling, but succinct case for the efficacy of an embedded academic literacies approach and the potential implications in terms of attrition / retention if it is not adopted.
- Appeal to wider strategic aims (e.g. government policy) but also legal frameworks (e.g. in the UK, an institution’s statutory obligation under the Public Sector Equality Duty [2011] to provide equality of opportunity).
- Adopt a “what”, “why” and “how” framework when making, proposing or justifying decisions. If change makers and senior management are able to appreciate concrete implications: *what* is being proposed, *why* it is important / needed, and *how* it can be delivered, they are more likely to back change.

As our experiences and the recent intervention by Richards and Pilcher have shown, it may still be a “quantum leap from deficit thinking to positive policy and action”, but our evidence points to its potential and ongoing efficacy. It is not only the most likely candidate for being a “route to excellence” (Layer, 2017), but is likely to be sustainable if “enmeshed perennially in core curriculum development and delivery” (Kift, 2021, p.11) and is of particular relevance given that academic literacies as a vehicle for facilitating transition remains a contested yet highly effective topic / challenge across the international HE sector.

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