Skills for Lifelong Learning: A Progress Report

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The success of widening participation strategies relies on academic courses and support systems that help to retain students once they arrive at university. “Skills for Lifelong Learning” is a unit developed by with the aid of a European Social Fund (ESF) grant by the Department of Sociology at MMU as a compulsory core unit on the University’s Foundation Year. Its teaching strategy employs parallel face-to-face and online provision.

Brief details of the Skills for Lifelong Learning (SfLL) project were provided in an earlier edition of Learning and Teaching in Action;1 this article sets out to describe the objectives and content of the course in more detail, and to outline its plans for further development for the academic year 2003/4.

SfLL and the Foundation Year: Background and Rationale

SfLL is a 20-credit unit on the Foundation Year. It is one of three compulsory core courses taken by all students, the others being ‘Application of Number’ and ‘Information Technology’ (both carrying 10 credits). The remaining 80 credits in the 120-credit Foundation Year programme consist of ‘prerequisite’ units to prepare students for their chosen degree programme, and optional units taken from a wide range of subjects. Its link with the Foundation Year ensures that SfLL has a role to play in the university’s developing widening participation strategy. If the key elements of such a strategy can be defined as attracting, supporting and retaining students from diverse social backgrounds, then the Foundation Year team has already made significant progress towards the first of these by recruiting a significant proportion of its intake from lower socio-economic groups and from under-represented ethnic minorities.2 The
success of widening participation strategies, however, also requires the establishment of academic courses and support systems that help to retain students once they arrive at university. Such features are of particular importance for Foundation Year students, many of whom have already experienced a confidence-sapping failure to achieve their anticipated A-level results. It is in these fields that ‘Skills for Lifelong Learning’ plays a part.

According to a recent study, the major factors contributing to student retention and success in the HE sector can be summarised under four headings: academic practices, social integration, student funding arrangements and personal support. The academic practices category includes a number of elements, with the following prominent among them:  

- Curriculum development with a strong focus on learning skills
- Provision of employment and careers information and education
- Induction into the structures and expectations of higher education extending beyond the traditional one-week period
- Staff pedagogical training to meet the needs of greater student diversity.

Awareness of these key elements underpinned the development of the SfLL course. Produced with the aid of a European Social Fund (ESF) grant, its primary objectives were to enhance learning skills and improve employment opportunities for Foundation Year students. At an early stage it was decided that the course content would also include a section designed to familiarise students with the structures and requirements of HE, whilst pedagogical training for tutors would be a central element in the package of materials. At the same time, moreover, the SfLL team aimed to improve the student experience under the other key headings – by promoting the social integration of students through group work, and by providing additional personal support for students in the shape of weekly one-to-one contacts with tutors.

**Course Content and Structure 2002/3**

During the SfLL development process under project leader Bernard Leach, the team faced three particular challenges:

- to produce a ‘generic’ skills course applicable to students linked to 120 different degrees across the university: from Science to Law, from Tourism and Hospitality to Sociology, from History and Languages to Information Technology
- to persuade the students that such a course of this kind can be interesting, relevant to their linked degree (not simply a re-hash of their school skills work) and helpful when they begin the search for a career
- to provide course materials and detailed guidance for a variety of tutors, some of whom would have no experience of delivering skills courses or of teaching at Foundation level

The team aimed to meet these challenge by producing a flexible and interactive unit that would make use of both face-to-face contact and web-based technologies. It was developed by tutors with experience in FE as well as HE, and by database experts and specialists in Internet and educational software. In an earlier issue of LTiA, Rachel Forsyth summarised the key features of the new course as:

- a set of materials, exercises and assessments for students that focus on enhancing their study and communication skills
  - tutor guidance notes and a resource pack to accompany the delivery of materials
  - integrated online and offline components of the course
  - an online platform through which the materials are available to students and tutors

Bill Johnston, SfLL Unit Leader in 2002/3, emphasises that SfLL is ‘not an online course but a course that is also online’. It differs from wholly online ‘virtual’ courses such as those provided by the ‘University of the Arctic’, whose students may never meet their tutors – or each other.

Although SfLL could easily be adapted to run as a ‘virtual’ course for distance learners, its mode of delivery within the Foundation Year combines face-to-face teaching with online study. A typical week consists of two consecutive teaching hours: the first is classroom-based and involves both whole-group and small-group work led by the tutor, whilst the second takes place in a computer lab and allows students to complete their online assignments and to discuss issues and problems one-to-one with their tutor. These
personal contacts between tutors and students, combined with regular assignments, help tutors to identify student difficulties at an early stage and to intervene where necessary.

Each week, the students’ online screen contains notes of the week’s session, copies of the handouts that have been used in class, a link to the Portfolio with its online tasks to be completed in the second hour, and a section of links and references to guide students to appropriate websites, books and articles. The fact that the entire course is online enables students to work at their own pace and to revisit the material later – for example, to check guidelines on referencing and plagiarism when completing their assignments for other units. The tutor screen includes all the material seen by the students, plus an additional section of detailed tutor notes.

In 2002/3 the content and structure of SfLL was as follows:

**Block 1 – Communications:** 7 weeks devoted to interviewing skills, learning styles, verbal and non-verbal communication, language and language variety and presentation skills.

**Assignment:** a short individual presentation that does not contribute to the overall mark

**Block 2 – Academic Skills:** 7 weeks on problem-solving, critical thinking, persuasive argument, essay- and report-writing, referencing skills, plagiarism.

**Assignment:** a short essay or report worth 20% of the total mark

**Block 3 – Working in Group:** 6 weeks devoted to a team project, with sessions on group dynamics, planning and practising a presentation (with opportunities for the use of overheads and PowerPoint).

**Assignment:** A group presentation accompanied by a weekly log, plus group and individual reviews of the project – worth 40% of the total mark

**Block 4 - The Future:** 4 weeks, beginning with the structure of HE in general and of MMU in particular, followed by careers work including psychometric testing, skills profiling and skills enhancement, careers research.

**Assignment:** Careers research, worth 20% of the total mark

The completed Portfolio, submitted at the end of the year, is worth 20% of the total mark.

SfLL tries to answer the basic but vital questions that all students will need to ask, whatever their linked degree: How do I construct an oral presentation? Why do I need to do group work, and how can I work effectively in a group? What’s the difference between an essay and a report? How do I go about finding relevant information for my assignments? How do I shape this material into a good piece of written work? How do I do footnotes? How do I compile a bibliography? What is a bibliography, and why is it necessary? What on earth is plagiarism, and how do I avoid it? How will I ever understand university procedures and structures? How do I go about finding a career that would suit me? When I find one, how do I identify the skills I’ll need to get it? Which of these skills do I have already, and how can I acquire the rest?

**Evaluation and Modifications: Course Content and Structure 2003/4**

SfLL is a work in progress rather than the finished article. Throughout the current academic year, the course team has continually reviewed its impact with a view to modifying both the content and the online ‘look and feel’ of the course. Tutors and technical specialists have been regularly canvassed for their opinion through group sessions as well as by e-mail and SmartGroups. Even more important, the key beneficiaries – the students themselves – have helped to shape the content, partly by their response to the piloting of key course components and partly through formal evaluations. This consultative approach is also embedded in the structure of the course through the group presentation, which takes the form of an evaluation and constructive critique of all elements of the Foundation Year. These student presentations, made to unit tutors and senior Foundation Year staff, have significantly influenced the revisions now underway. These are outlined below.

**Course Title**

In the academic year 2003/4 the unit will be known on the Foundation Year as ‘Academic Methods’. The new title better reflects the unit objective of preparing students for university study, as well as avoiding the negative response
that ‘skills’ courses frequently arouse in students who have been inundated with them at school.

**Online Features**
The original online course already included a number of features such as staff biographies and a course guide containing assignment deadlines and handing-in details. Our technical specialist, Guy Lancaster, has now added further features with a number of aims. Some, such as the site map and search engine, make the course easier to navigate and information easier to find. Others, such as scaleable text and text alternatives for graphic images, make the course more accessible to students with disabilities. Yet another, the glossary of academic terms, attempts to demystify HE by explaining the language that old lags within the university system use automatically but that students may never have encountered. A final new feature – Student News and Tutor News – enables the SfLL course team and the Foundation Year staff to send online reminders of deadlines and other important information.

**Course Content and Structure**
Student and tutor feedback on course content and structure, though largely positive, has led to several important changes. Students requested an expansion of the Academic Skills section to include sessions on effective note-taking (in lectures as well as from books and articles) and reading skills. Many recommended that this material should be placed earlier in the unit – enabling students to study referencing, plagiarism, note-taking and writing skills before their first assignments on other units. Tutors were also strongly in favour of this change, and proposed combining it with an early handwritten assignment that could be used for diagnostic purposes. Further re-organisation of the material would also allow the group presentation to be completed at the end of the course, enabling students to comment on the entire year rather than part of it.

Some students complained that SfLL material was insufficiently related to their linked degree – the old problem of ‘relevance’ faced by all generic skills courses. Though well aware of the difficulties of providing material suitable for all Foundation students, they asked for greater flexibility in the course material to allow some assignments and sessions (on essay- and report-writing, for example) to include alternatives suitable for scientists, social scientists, economists and students of the humanities. Tutors were generally sympathetic to this request and were reasonably confident that it could be satisfied, since individual SfLL groups are composed of students from the same Faculty who are usually linked to similar degrees.

The Portfolio entries were thought by some students to be too prescriptive and even patronising, particularly when they gave instructions to ‘write one sentence about’ various topics. Students and tutors alike recommended less detailed instructions, thereby enabling able and interested students to write at length whilst also allowing tutors to spend time with students who require assistance. Both groups also proposed more variety in the Portfolio tasks, such as the inclusion of occasional quizzes to test knowledge.

One of the pleasing aspects of the consultation and evaluation process was the degree of agreement between tutors and students on the way forward. One example of this was the proposal for scheduled ‘surgery’ sessions in which tutors can provide detailed comments on student assignments and students can request individual assistance with specific problems. The discussions culminated in the acceptance of a revised course that, under its new title of Academic Methods, will run from September 2003. The new structure will be as follows:

**Block 1 - Learning Styles:** shorter 2-week block containing ice-breaker session, introduction to online materials, material on learning styles.

Assignment: an in-class handwritten statement worth 10% of the overall mark.

**Block 2 – Academic Skills:** 9 weeks, to include the original material on problem-solving, critical thinking, persuasive argument, essay- and report-writing, referencing skills, plagiarism - now supplemented by sessions on reading, note-taking, and constructing an oral presentation. This material will be adjusted where possible to take account of the linked degrees of group members.

Assignment: a short essay or report on a subject associated with students’ linked degrees (20%)
Block 3 - University and After: 5 weeks, including a detailed introduction to the HE structure and that of MMU in particular, followed by careers research and planning, interview techniques, introduction to personal skills profile, sessions on identifying and remediying skills deficits.

Assignment: individual careers research project (20%)

Block 4 – Working in Groups: 5 weeks working towards a group presentation, including work on group dynamics, the distribution of tasks, keeping a log, setting agendas, practising presentations.

Assignment: a group presentation accompanied by a weekly log, plus group and individual reviews of the project (30%)

The completed Portfolio, submitted at the end of the year, will continue to carry 20% of the marks.

Future Developments

The course team will monitor the new course closely. ‘Academic Methods’, to give the course its new title, will thus continue to be a work in progress. In this process, the co-operation and input of its students and tutors, including those working in the FE colleges associated with the Foundation Year, will play a vital role. Over the next academic year this collaborative aspect is due to be extended: colleagues from the School of Social Science at Liverpool John Moores University will be using a version of the course as the ‘spine’ of their own pilot Foundation Year. Their suggestions have already played a constructive role in our own discussion of amendments to the course, and the course team looks forward to continuing this collaboration over the next twelve months.

References

2. According to the Director of the MMU Foundation Year, Karen Moore, 22% of Foundation Year students in 2002 came from the lowest socio-economic groups, whilst Asian women and Afro-Caribbean men – significantly under-represented in HE – comprised 18% of entrants.

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