

Developing Autonomous Learning In Part Time ‘Return To Learn’ Students

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Background

The purpose of this project was to improve the transitional process by embedding tools and confidences at the beginning of the foundation degree to encourage an autonomous approach to learning with a group of part time students.

Key objectives were to:

- develop and embed appropriate and purposeful interventions at the beginning of the foundation degree to ease transition into higher education
- work collaboratively with faculty and central support staff to develop study support to enhance transition and promote autonomy in learning
- create a 'toolbox' of study skills and specialist support materials to nurture and promote autonomous learning
- provide additional study support and guidance tailored to meet the specific needs of students
- evaluate the impact of the project on FdA Early Years confidences, digital fluency and autonomy

Intended benefits and outcomes:

- enhanced part time student experience of transition
- learners able to recognise problems encountered and know how to solve them
- empowerment as an autonomous learner
- access to a range of specially tailored supportive materials
- improved student achievement
- higher retention
- evaluation of an alternative approach with part time foundation degree students to enhance transition and promote autonomy in learning
- insight through multidisciplinary working and mutual understanding of roles across the university
- support part time student experience more cohesively
- focussed commitment to the enhancement of the part time student experience
- sharing of good practice and lessons learnt

Rationale

Workers in the early years sector are poorly qualified; early years foundation degrees are recognised as a key progression route for mature students employed in this area and are well funded as part of the drive to build a more highly trained workforce in the sector.

The team started the project by exploring their previous relevant experience, the work of others in the field and taking into account the indicative content, delivery and assessment structure of the first module, Young Children Playing and Learning. Study skills and competencies were identified that would be most useful to help students gain confidence, start to manage and take responsibility for their learning. These fell into three broad areas: IT skills such as file handling, storage and saving materials, introduction to the conventions of academic writing and library skills including accessing electronic sources of information through the module reading list and avoiding plagiarism.

Assessment

By scaffolding learning and nurturing autonomy the aim was to empower students to take responsibility for their learning, gain confidence and ultimately experience success in module assessment.

The module comprised of three assessed tasks. The first task consisted of two grids; one to reflect on professional development in relation to recognised professional standards within the sector and the other to appraise and set targets for the development of academic study skills.

The second task was a poster presentation of a small piece of quantitative research undertaken in the workplace and presented in the seventh week.

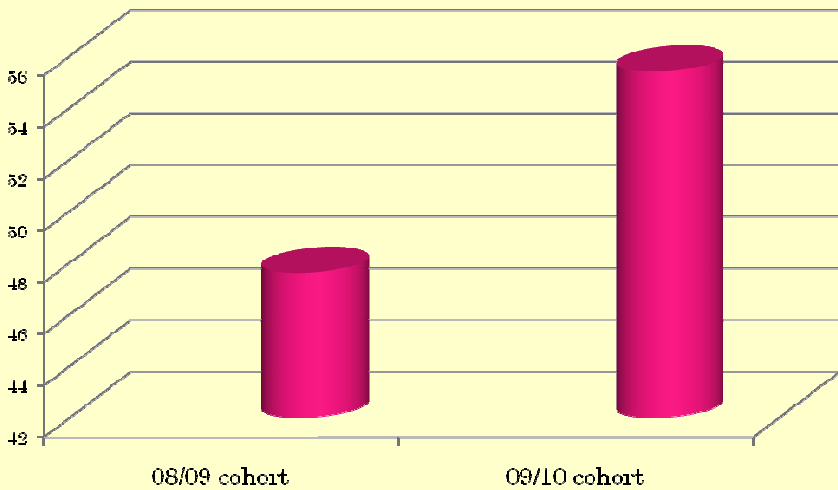
The final task was a written reflective account of a pre-selected aspect of professional practice and supported by sessions introducing academic writing by the Student Study Support Service and the Information Advisory Service on referencing and avoiding plagiarism.



Summary and evaluation

Both quantitative and qualitative data was collected for the project through surveys to measure confidence, levels of digital fluency and through focus groups to gain deeper insight into perceptions of learning in higher education at the beginning, middle and end of the first module of the foundation degree.

ACADEMIC ATTAINMENT COMPARISON BETWEEN 08/09 AND 09/10 COHORTS



Several student said that they were nervous at the beginning of the foundation degree feeling like a 'fish out of water' and 'not capable of being clever enough'. Data collected from the focus group suggests that the raised confidence levels, particularly by the mid point of the module reflected the intensive initial support and development of a supportive learning environment which one student said had 'boosted (her) confidence and self esteem'; both linked to autonomy in learning.

Student Comments

'it has been very positive experience to our learning, helping to develop confidence and experience success. ..they were very tuned in to being a student and identifying support needed'

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