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Addressing the awarding gap, fostering belonging: developing enhanced academic skills support for our Birmingham Scholars

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Abstract

In the academic year 2020-21, the University of Birmingham launched the 'Birmingham Scholar' programme as part of its Access and Participation Plan (University of Birmingham, 2019). This is a university-wide programme supporting undergraduate students from under-represented backgrounds in achieving their full academic potential.

This presentation explored the central role of our Academic Skills Centre team in supporting the Birmingham Scholar programme since its initiation. Alongside the support we provide to all of our taught students, our team also run a centralised, enhanced programme of academic skills and peer support for all Birmingham Scholar students.

Currently, this includes tailored workshops and online guidance, enhanced opportunities for personalised one-to-one support, and a dedicated, cross-discipline Peer-Assisted Study Scheme to aid with first-year transition and belonging at university. Through this enhanced programme, we aim to improve student success for our Birmingham Scholars by increasing their academic confidence, fostering a sense of belonging, and developing future skills along the way.

Attendees at the session discovered:

- The development and delivery of our enhanced academic skills support offer so far, including evaluation of its successes and challenges.

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- Preliminary quantitative evidence which suggests the Scholar programme may help to reduce awarding gaps by improving degree outcomes for Scholars who engage with the programme.

- Our future aims for the programme. These include goals to increase engagement with college academic Access and Participation leads to further embed and target our academic skills offer, provide a more holistic range of support by collaborating more widely with colleagues in areas such as our Careers Network, and foster further opportunities for peer-to-peer support.

Keywords: academic skills; student success; enhanced support; awarding gap.

Community response

The Birmingham Scholar programme was recognised as a brilliant scheme, and members of the community drew attention to its approach as set out in the presentation:

> While many institutions offer programmes to support their Access and Participation Plans, it was fantastic to see a scheme with a tangible offer for students from under-represented backgrounds. I appreciated how the deficit narrative (Valencia, 2010) was avoided - to instead focus on value and community (Thomas et al.,2017). I think the signature of the Birmingham Scholar is the dedicated support on offer, including a dedicated Canvas course, a pre-welcome week, enhanced academic skills support, a laptop loan scheme, enhanced careers support, priority access to international mobility opportunities, and an annual Scholar forum.

> It was great to see a PASS Scheme focused on this cohort too, using higher-year scholars to run small, peer-led, cross-discipline support sessions for 1st-year Scholars. It was really interesting to see this applied across disciplines, with a focus on transition, belonging and study skills. Otherwise, the scheme mirrored a more traditional PASS Scheme with leaders trained in facilitation skills; supported through weekly contact and feedback.

As important as novelty is impact. This was recognised in community responses, drawing on data shared within the presentation (and further drawn upon in the editorial comment):

> The scholar approach to creating a community identity (Thomas et al.,2017) looks to have been really effective at Birmingham with 3,400 undergraduate students part

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of the programme. It is positive that the University has recognised the need to put in place more tailored support for students, with an emphasis on belonging and community. The enhanced offer is really considered and the impact the initiative has had on students is clear; student feedback is great to read and shows what a difference the programme is making to those involved.

The statistics in the evaluation of the programme were encouraging, showing a link between engagement as a Scholar and good honours rates. Building on the success of the programme to include more peer-to-peer support is a good future goal. I wonder if there are any coaching or mentorship opportunities existing scholars can provide to those joining the programme to help further embed community for new joiners? There is a good opportunity here for excellent advocacy from those students who have found the offer to be beneficial to their own academic journey.

It's clear the speakers have had a great impact with this programme at their University and great to see the practice shared so that others might look to include similar at their Universities to aid access, success and progression.

Editorial comment

This article felt incomplete without acknowledging the feedback from students within the 'Birmingham Scholar' programme. The slides demonstrated the impact well:

- 232 Scholars had an Academic Skills Centre one-to-one appointment (18% of total appointments).
- 169 Scholars attended an Academic Skills Centre workshop, with average satisfaction rating of 4.7/5.
- 143 first-year Scholars attended PASS, led by 11 higher-year Scholars.
- 100% of attendees and leaders said they would recommend PASS to others.

Including great feedback from those involved:

I am a first generation person from my family going to university and I had so many questions answered and anxiety alleviated.

[…] destroys that barrier and allows students from under-represented backgrounds to succeed.

Hopefully, this scheme will continue to grow from strength to strength.

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Authors' reflections

It was very encouraging to see such widespread interest from colleagues in this area, particularly in our provision of a dedicated service offer to our under-represented students. We were thrilled to see such a high turnout for our presentation; the room was at capacity, which created a lively atmosphere and led to some energetic and productive discussions during our Q&A session. We also had several really enjoyable and fruitful conversations outside of our presentation with both attendees and colleagues who had heard about our talk from attendees, which reiterated the positive feedback our presentation received.

It is really positive to see tentative correlations between Scholars' engagement with the Academic Skills Centre and positive student outcomes, and we look forward to updating these results with 2022-23 degree outcomes for our first cohort of students who have been part of the Scholar programme since the beginning of their degree. However, quantitative outcomes are not the only focus of our efforts of course. The student feedback, particularly our 'Scholar tree' where Scholars overwhelmingly stated being part of the scheme makes them feel 'valued', 'motivated', 'supported' and 'inspired', as well as 'confident', 'resilient' and 'special', shows the considerable impact creating and promoting an inclusive learning community can have.

Future plans and priorities include finding innovative ways to bolster engagement, developing a new programme of targeted communications, and establishing Birmingham Scholar Student Ambassador roles. This will enable existing Scholars to 'give back' to the scheme, as highlighted in the community response above. We also look to grow our peer support scheme and involve former Scholar PASS leaders to help co-ordinate that scheme, to create further connections and develop their professional skills. In the coming academic year, our Scholar offer will also be expanded to include support for transferrable skills in Maths and Statistics, delivered by our newly revamped Maths Support Centre.

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Acknowledgements

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Author details

Polly Harper works as an Academic Transition Officer at the University of Birmingham. Based within the Academic and Digital Skills Centre, Polly focuses on supporting student transition to university, through academic skills and peer support and particularly supporting the university's most under-represented students through the Birmingham Scholar enhanced academic skills programme.

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Leanne B.M. Campbell is Head of Learning Enhancement (Student Success) within the Academic and Digital Skills Centre in Library Services at the University of Birmingham. She has a background in Widening Participation research and evaluation, and also worked in HE Strategic Planning at the university for over a decade before moving to Student Services to establish and co-ordinate the Birmingham Scholar programme. She manages an expert team of academic skills advisors within the university library and is responsible for student success support for under-represented groups, focusing on target groups identified in Birmingham's Access and Participation Plan.

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