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Enhancing attainment and belonging at the London College of Fashion: a proactive, personalised approach to address limitations of the academic support provision

Emma Shackleton
UAL London College of Fashion, UK

Jo Peel
UAL London College of Fashion, UK

Presentation abstract

This paper shared a proactive approach, developed by the Academic Support department in London College of Fashion (LCF), designed to enhance equity of take up of the department's tutorials and contribute to reducing awarding differences. The paper uses the term Black, Asian and minority ethnic students because University of the Arts London (UAL) uses it as one of the categories for students as part of its collection, analysis and reporting of institutional data. We recognise and acknowledge the terminology is overly broad and contested. Since the paper used UAL's institutional data, it was working with UAL's definitions, terminology and categorisations.

In late 2019, examination of university data indicated lower bookings by Year 3 Home Black, Asian and minority ethnic students (Malik et al., 2021) and International students, and lower enhancement for degree awards, compared to Home White students. LCF has an open-to-all offer of tutorials and dedicated final-year workshops. However, research identifies systemic obstacles encountered by some students within and outside universities (Snoussi and Mompelat, 2019; UUK, 2019). While the department's offer appeared popular, it required self-initiation by students, which could be a barrier for students experiencing a limited sense of belonging within the College.

Drawing on compassionate and solutions-focused approaches, the generic offer was adapted to enable a lecturer-team to offer personalised support to students identified as having the greatest opportunity to benefit from tutorials. Now in its third year, the Proactive Approach has led to greater equity of take up of the department's provision and higher

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outcomes for students taking it up. The intervention is being evaluated for the UAL Access and Participation Plan, and data to date suggests it can contribute to enhancing a sense of belonging and unit grades.

This learning development offer was tailored to be flexible for delivery within restricted time frames and the existing resource of the Academic Support department. Our hopes when sharing it with delegates included giving space to consider its benefits, limitations and potential opportunities to use institutional data to stimulate a redesign of a learning development offer to contribute to universities' work for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion.

Keywords: proactive; personalised; equity; awarding differentials; learning conversations.

Community response

The community welcomed the apparent indicators of success of the UAL project in increasing both equity of the take-up of learning development, and improvement to outcomes. The responses raised opportune questions, including about how similar projects might scale in universities facing staff resourcing constraints:

> Such an interesting presentation and clearly a successful project. I wondered (but didn't have time to ask) how this affected workload within the team. It's obviously fantastic that you had more students engaging and particularly those who might not do so normally but I think it would be difficult to achieve here because of limited staffing resource. We do, in a similar vein, reach out to certain student groups to join our peer mentoring scheme so perhaps this is one way around the issue.

The issue drawn out is thus how to reach the students who might benefit the most, within the constraints of staff availability. A respondent reported that their University, Mount Royal in Canada, had tried an approach with similarities to UAL's 'Proactive Approach':

> Thank you for sharing! At my institution (Mount Royal), we have been trying out a new form of support for a different group of students – those who are in poor

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academic standing – to support them in improving their grades to ensure they can remain at the university. We were asked (by leadership) to pre-book online appointments for every student on a list in order to reduce barriers to their access (rather than having them book appts themselves). The uptake (show rate) was quite low (about 33%), and some student feedback revealed that students may have felt pressure to attend these appointments – even though they weren't mandatory – or that they didn't understand how/if we could help them. We were debating the idea of having individual LDers contact the students to invite them to book, in order to create that bridge to our services through a personal contact (real life human being!) rather than our generic department email address. Your approach is inspiring and I will definitely bring this back to my team.

Editorial comment

The findings at UAL explored in the presentation corroborated two insights that the LD community would generally relate to but find challenging to prove. The first is that when a student faces indicators of disadvantage in HE – be these related to ethnicity, class or a host of other variables – that those students do clearly benefit from improved grades once they engage with LD provision. The second is that such students often require that extra nudge to get through the door, as evidenced by the following student comment in Shackleton and Peel's slides: 'I'm very grateful for her [learning developer's] original email or I wouldn't have booked . . . right before the time slot that we had booked, I got extremely nervous to go into our talk'. How best to identify the students who most need us and then work to surpass psychological barriers with them remains among the most complex of talking points for learning developers. As the Mount Royal example illustrates, mandating provision from above the level of the LDer can lead to lower take-up and sometimes a lack of student understanding about what they stand to gain. The proactivity and personal touch on the part of the tutors, discussed both by the presenters and the respondents, seems to have great potential for solidifying the bridge into the LD world for those who are unsure how to walk over it. It is fantastic to see research happening in these areas and being disseminated at the ALDinHE conference.

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Authors' reflection

We are pleased the proactive approach struck a chord with attendees and appreciate the comments and questions.

In terms of workload, within our design, the proactive approach (PA) requires different processes of the lecturers involved and our department administrator for the time span of each proactive offer to students: December to mid-February and March to mid-May for final year undergraduate major assignments. The additional processes are due to the bespoke nature of the PA, with the lecturers involved writing to individual students to offer, book and confirm sessions. The administrator then enters the confirmed appointments manually. In contrast, the system for booking and recording standard tutorial and group sessions is automated.

With reference to the experience of Mount Royal, our evaluation of the PA suggests that the personalised emails are a significant influence on students choosing to respond to us. As a result, we have factored the additional processes involved into workload allocations by setting aside other responsibilities for the time the PA is operating. To make this reallocation of work possible, we redesigned elements of our offer, including reducing the number of 45-minute sessions available to increase the 30-minute offer. This enabled us to maintain a consistent number of one-to-one tutorials. We were surprised that one of our findings is that we increased the number of tutorials taken up within the Academic Support department.

We agree that peer mentoring is another valuable proactive approach. As we mentioned in the presentation, while the PA has had positive results we find it is limited in its focus on final-year undergraduates, who may have experienced a number of challenges earlier within their studies. This leads us to conceive of the PA as one of a number of activities we might trial to enhance students' experiences and outcomes. For example, we're currently examining other social learning development initiatives that we might offer alongside, from the first year of students' studies, facilitated by lecturers and alumni. In particular, we are influenced by the Nuffield Foundation (2020) research on students who are first in family at university.

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Author details

Emma Shackleton is joint Head of Academic Support at London College of Fashion (LCF), University of the Arts. Her PhD research, at the Institute of Education, University College

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London, focuses on self-regulated learning within in-person and online educational contexts in art and design, with a particular focus on how learning environments can foster self-regulation for students' success in their studies. This focus underpins her action research at LCF to explore how proactive approaches may enhance students' learning experiences and outcomes. She is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

Jo Peel is joint Head of Academic Support at London College of Fashion, University of the Arts. Her current research focus is on identifying how learning development in art and design higher education can bridge attainment gaps through working proactively to bring about positive impact for students. She has a particular interest in applying intersectional pedagogy and frameworks to address inequality of attainment at UAL. She is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

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