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LIBRARY AND STUDENT SERVICES

TEACHING EXCELLENCE PROJECT REPORT

JUNE 2023

Developing transition and in-course support for international students

Executive Summary

This report summarises the outcomes of a University-wide Teaching Excellence Project investigating the academic skills support needs of international students. It highlights key findings, resultant new in-curriculum support options and general best practice.

Action Requested

Colleagues are invited to:

- Review the new support options and best practice recommendations, disseminating to colleagues as appropriate.
- Direct any queries about new support options to your School's [Academic Librarian team or Academic Skills Tutors](#).
- Contact Laurence Morris, Academic Skills Development Manager, if you wish to have your students represented in this research project as it continues into 2023-24.

Authors

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Helen Howard, Head of Library Academic Support

Date: June 2023

Approval Route

June 2023

Jo Norry, Director of Library and Student Services

Teaching Excellence Project Report:

Developing transition and in-course support for international students

1 Introduction

This report summarises the outcomes of a University-wide Teaching Excellence Project investigating the academic skills support needs of international students. It highlights key findings, resultant new in-curriculum support options and general best practice.

2 Project context

2.1 Rationale

The LBU Library Academic Support Team currently offer academic skills support on the following basis:

- [Customised in-curriculum academic skills sessions](#), scaffolded by online content.
- [Online academic skills development modules](#) to support transition and assist with key priorities such as Academic Integrity and international student induction.
- [Skills for Learning open workshops](#).
- Online resources: [Skills for Learning website](#), [Library subject support pages](#), MyBeckett resources.
- [Bookable 1-2-1 appointments](#).

This project aimed to use the Library Academic Support Team's role as the central service for in-curriculum academic skills support at LBU to learn more about the academic support needs of international students across the University. Given the wealth in experience in international study and support across LBU, the Centre for Learning and Teaching's networks were also used to ensure a diverse variety of cohorts and colleagues had the opportunity to contribute to the project.

2.2 Specific project aims

Specific project aims:

- To garner the direct input of international students into how we might, as an institution, improve their academic skills support.
- To learn more about contemporary international students' perceptions of their academic skills support needs.
- To highlight existing academic skills support to students.
- To deliver enhanced support options for 2023-24, primarily relating to transition.
- To stimulate debate on the international student experience and related pedagogy at LBU.

3 Project methodology

The project followed a mixed methods approach, primarily based upon:

- 14 international student focus groups, conducted December 2022 to May 2023:
 - Across a representative range of Schools, levels and courses.
 - In regular timetabled classes, and via open activities such as the Skills for Learning workshop programme, Global Engagement Officer networking and the Graduate School's Research Training Programme.

- In a variety of formats, from 5-10 participants to class discussions of c.50 students, using open and structured questions.
- Incorporating approximately 130 student participants in total.
- Surveying of over 1700 participants in the International Students' Academic Introduction module, as well as the University's other online academic skills modules.
 - 286 responses were received from the international module, with other modules raising the number of replies to over 1000.
- Surveying of colleagues who booked in-curriculum classes for their students from the Library Academic Support Team.
- Interviews with academic and professional services colleagues who kindly contributed their expertise to the project.

4 Key findings

4.1 Context

As with all students, the diversity of international students should be noted, along with the need to avoid homogenous generalisations based on a single identifying characteristic which will relate to multiple other forms of identity, such as class, race, sexuality or gender. Nonetheless, the points below emerged separately in a significant number of focus groups or survey replies:

4.2 In-class support

- Students requested more in-curriculum academic skills support, in addition to 'open' options such as LBU's academic skills modules and the Skills for Learning workshop programme and website.
- Provision of additional opportunities to test understanding through formative feedback was another recurring theme.
- Additional support would be most welcomed around assignment writing, critical thinking, finding information, independent learning and group work.
- A significant number of students requested additional in-class signposting to available academic skills support, particularly to assist late starters.
- An initial impact assessment survey of in-class support was conducted with 42 students from the School of Built Environment, Engineering and Computing.
 - Respondents ranked their confidence with academic skills at an average of 3.1/5 after the instruction compared to 2.9/5 beforehand.
 - However, there was a 14.3% rise in students ranking their confidence at 4 or more, and a fall of 5.4% in students ranking their confidence at 2 or less.

4.3 International Students' Academic Introduction (ISAI) module

- Students who completed the University-wide ISAI noted it was an effective resource, significantly easing their transition into the University.
- Of the 1,739 students to engage with the module by March 2023, the 286 who responded to a survey rated the ISAI at an average of 4.8 out of 5 for usefulness.
- In particular, students reported benefitting from the context provided on learning and teaching in the UK, for example around assessment types, marking differences, citation practices, class formats, etc.
- Further guidance on assessment types and critical thinking was requested.

- Further opportunities to engage with the sort of contextual information provided by the module would be seen as useful by students, whether in-curriculum or on an elective basis.
- There is significant variation in awareness of the ISAI module in different Schools, with a subsequent correlation with engagement.

4.4 Postgraduate students

- Taught postgraduate students praised the clear structure of the Skills for Learning website and workshop offer. They also noted that for shorter courses, the capacity to check concise guidance on key skills in a UK context quickly is invaluable.
- A number of research students requested that access to the ISAI be extended to them as well.
- Taught and research postgraduate students who had previously studied in the UK as undergraduates highlighted critical thinking and independent study as the two areas where they felt, retrospectively, that they would have benefitted from more guidance.

4.5 Broader themes

Students also noted:

- The potential for personal factors, such as visas, family support and accommodation, to impact upon their capacity to engage in learning.
- That peer support and social media are heavily relied upon in addition to more formal LBU support channels.
- That, as the April 2023 Jisc report 'International students' digital experience' notes, students' prior experience of online learning may be very different from UK contexts.
- The evolving but finite cultural competencies of all members of the LBU community, and the need to establish a shared understanding of appropriate ways of learning and teaching.
- Their position as consumers in an international HE market, thus entitled to expect a certain level of support – in this context, many actively appreciated the opportunity to influence the long-term development of LBU international support.

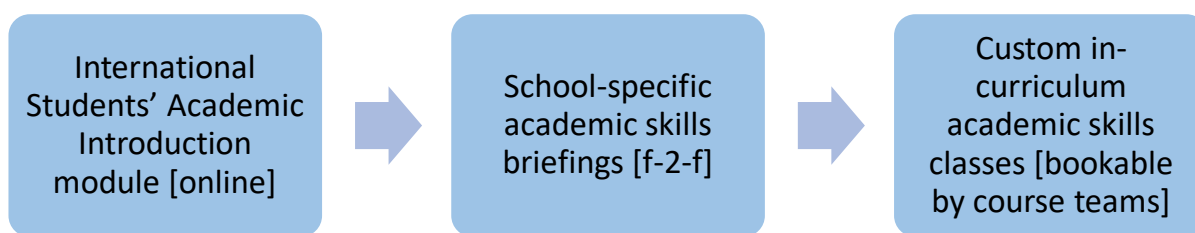
5 New support options and recommendations

5.1 Context

LBU provision of international student academic skills support, as delivered through the Library Academic Support Team, is now structured as follows:

Scheduled instruction for all students

Core support offer:



Elective independent learning options

Highlighted to students through the core support offer and elsewhere:

- Level-specific transition support modules and the LBU Academic Integrity module.
- 'Building on Feedback' guide and other transition support resources.
- Bookable one-to-one academic skills appointments.
- Skills for Learning workshops, recordings and drop-ins.
- Skills for Learning website and Library subject support pages.

5.2 Specific innovations for 2023-24

Headline changes:

- Revamped in-curriculum sessions are now [bookable](#) by all course teams, incorporating:
 - Short suites of sessions themed around key topics such as academic writing and international student support, with core content and activities rewritten to incorporate student needs elicited through this project, and to address emergent technologies such as generative AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Google Bard, etc.).
 - Opportunities for students to test their understanding and self-assess their development needs by submitting short writing samples related to their first assignments through Turnitin for collective formative feedback.
 - Additional School-specific academic writing samples will be deployed.
- Skills for Learning open workshop pathways will be promoted in addition to traditional stand-alone events, with suggested multi-workshop pathways covering topics such as 'your first assignment' and 'dissertation success'.
- Course-specific engagement reports will be available for the ISAI in 2023-24, enhancing local capacity for Schools to monitor and mandate student engagement as required.
- New School-specific face-to-face academic skills briefings will be provided to international students, timetabled alongside standard classes to increase student attendance, incorporating further space to establish shared understanding of learning and teaching in the UK, and of the cultures and identities represented within LBU.

Further changes:

- The ISAI will be amended to reflect the latest student and colleague reporting of international student needs and feedback from 2023-24 participants in the module, also incorporating additional video guidance from current LBU students.

- Workshop and other academic skills resources will be refocused to present students with a more seamless pathway to additional support and independent learning options after completion of the ISAI or other onboarding tasks.
- Greater signposting will also be provided across academic skills resources to any Student Services, for example Wellbeing support, which repeatedly emerged as a related theme in student feedback.

5.3 Further best-practice recommendations

The extent to which many LBU courses already facilitate the following and other forms of best practice is acknowledged; they are simply noted here as recurrent themes of student focus group feedback:

Effective interactions:

- It would be beneficial to assist peer support through appropriate course channels, where this does not already occur.
- Similarly, early provision of appropriate course or module-level discussion space for colleagues and students to establish a shared understanding of the behaviours and responsibilities of all members of the LBU community would support acculturation and facilitate effective learning and teaching.
- Where structural issues inherent to study in the UK are raised, honest discussion of what is and is not within LBU's control was welcomed, whether around language requirements or assignment-scheduling. This is particularly appreciated given students' awareness of their role as consumers in an international HE market.

Compassionate environments:

- In addition to guiding future best practice, the overt soliciting of student opinions through projects such as this was welcomed as an example of LBU's evident respect for the international student body.
- The Centre for Learning and Teaching's work on 'compassionate curricula' directly relates to many of the tangential wellbeing issues raised by students. Further institutional reflection on ways of supporting student capability to engage with learning would be welcomed.

6 Ongoing development

This Teaching Excellence Project will lead into continuing research into the learning and teaching of international students at LBU in 2023-24, again facilitated by the cross-University networks of the Library Academic Support Team and the Centre for Learning and Teaching.

In particular, in addition to continuing to survey and engage international students, new research will be conducted into the actual impact of the innovations noted above.

Colleagues who wish their students to be represented in this ongoing research, or to receive any of the enhanced forms of the support noted above, should contact the authors of this report. Comments and further discussion from colleagues would also be welcomed by the report authors.

7 Acknowledgements

With more than 1000 students and 30 colleagues participating in the focus groups, discussions and surveys leading to this report, it is not feasible to thank all who contributed their time and

experience directly. The authors are, nonetheless, grateful to all, and for the opportunity to bring together this representation of the collective perspectives of the LBU community. They also acknowledge that this report represents an extension of the work of many current and former colleagues and students, from the one-time 'Cross-Cultural Capabilities' agenda to the historic 'Internationalisation of the Library' project.