



Building Academic and Social Success: Abertay Discovery Tool

Jack Hogan, j.hogan@abertay.ac.uk, Abertay University

Luke Millard, l.millard@abertay.ac.uk, Abertay University

Purpose

In September 2020, Abertay University launched a suite of microcredentials aimed at preparing students academically and socially for success (See appendix 1). All first-year students completed a credit bearing, core microcredential upon enrolment to the university. This microcredential was called ABE101 Being Successful at Abertay and had embedded within it a diagnostic test (Abertay Discovery Tool). The University had taken the strategic decision to implement this approach to supporting student transition and success as these new students were entering the University with an interrupted, pandemic influenced, education. ABE101 had the core purpose of setting expectations, signalling successful student behaviours and informing microcredential choices as the institution sought to build successful academic and social foundations with our students.

Description

The Abertay Discovery tool has 5 sections for students to complete. By undertaking the self-reflective questions (See Appendix 2), students receive feedback to help them identify strengths and areas for development. These tailored reports focus upon defining key terms, recommended actions for students to complete within their first 3 months of study and recommendations for which optional microcredentials to choose (See appendix 3). The 5 sections of the Abertay Discovery tool are:

- **Studying at University** (10 questions covering study habits, expectations of university, independent learning etc).
- **Academic Skills** (19 questions covering writing, reading, referencing and basic numeracy skills).
- **Digital Skills** (5 questions covering Digital Collaboration, teamwork, and applications).
- **Careers & Employability** (5 questions covering career registration and previous work experiences).
- **Wellbeing** (5 questions covering building relationships, mindfulness and seeking support).

As well as students receiving a personalised report, Programme leaders received a cohort level insight report by week 4 of term 1 (See Appendix 4). These reports identified cohort strengths and areas for development. Where an area for development was identified the solution focused report offered key actions, resources or support available to implement within the students' modules and programme of study.

Outcomes of activity

Two key outcomes can be identified from the implementation of the Abertay Discovery tool. Firstly, Student reports informed subsequent optional microcredential choices, provided signposting to development services and recommended actions to complete during their first 3 months of study. Students have provided feedback in multiple ways as to how these helped shape their decisions.



Secondly, Programme level reports provided valuable insights which informed design decisions. When these were sent to programme leaders and heads of divisions many commented on the usefulness of the insight provided and how they would use this as a basis for programme level team discussions reflecting on the insight provided.

Impact on Students

The Abertay Discovery Tool was a core formative feature of ABE101 Being Successful at Abertay. Students were able to attempt the sections as many times as they liked as they reflected on the questions. Interestingly, quite a number of the students on the module went back in again to redo the formative test as they reflected. There were 758 completed attempts from the 676 students.

Amongst the 676 students who were enrolled onto this module:

- 618 Students (91.4%) completed all sections of the Abertay Discovery tool
- 34 Students (5%) completed some sections of the Abertay Discovery tool
- 24 Students (3.6%) did not engage with the Abertay Discovery tool

Students provided initial feedback linking the usefulness of the Abertay Discovery tool to identifying strengths and areas for development and being able to consider solutions.

"It helped me identify my strongest skills and qualities and also where I can improve in order to become the best version of myself in my university life." **BA (Hons) Criminology Student**

"It allowed me to identify areas that I struggle with such as procrastination - and provided me with possible solutions to manage this. It also allowed me to identify areas of support from other sources for when it is required." **BSc (Hons) Psychology & Counselling Student**

Institutional Impact

Reports to students provided suggestions of further microcredentials to engage with (based on identified areas of development) and there is evidence that this signposting led to increased take-up in some areas. For example, the responses from across the cohort for the Careers & Employability section were lower than other sections. This could be explained by the lack of work experience opportunities students were able to access during the pandemic. This saw a significant student uptake of the careers microcredential as 67% of first year students chose to undertake this option.

The purpose of the Abertay Discovery tool is to guide students into making informed choices that reflect upon their strengths and identifies areas for development at university. These objectives were met, and it will be interesting to see if there are longer term impacts on these students as they progress through their university career. Over the student's degree we will be tracking engagement, attainment, and longer-term graduate outcomes to assess the impact of the Abertay Discovery tool and wider microcredentials programme.

Next Steps

The initial institutional objectives have been met. A full evaluation of the first-year implementation of the Abertay Discovery tool is underway to help further understand the student experience. This evaluation

PARC: Personalised Approaches to Resilience and Community

<https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/resilient-learning-communities/flexible-and-accessible-learning/personalised-approaches-to-resilience-and-community>



includes a review of the questions, feedback students receive and analysis of feedback received relating to the experience of using the Abertay Discovery tool. Full analysis of academic progression data will be completed through the autumn of 2022.

Moving forward, a similar tool will be designed and implemented for a 2nd year direct entrant microcredential, tailored to support these students during their transition from college to university.

Further Resources

- [Appendix 1 – Microcredentials overview at Abertay University \(Video\)](#)
 - Appendix 2 – Abertay Discovery tool: Sample Questions
 - Appendix 3 – Example Student Report
 - Appendix 4 – Example Staff Report
-



Appendix 2 - Abertay Discovery Tool: Sample Questions

This document provides a sample of questions from the five sections of the Abertay Discovery tool.

Section 1: Studying at University

During your time at university, you are expected to become an independent learner. What do you think this might mean?

Select all that apply

(Positive feedback – C, E, F, H)

- A. I need to do all my work on my own, without asking for help
- B. I don't need to attend my classes as long as I hand in my assignments
- C. I need to identify areas that I find challenging and seek out support in those areas
- D. I'm not allowed to talk to my lecturer about my assignments
- E. I need to read and think about feedback from my assignment, so I can improve
- F. I'm responsible for my own development and progress at university
- G. I'm not allowed to sit with my friends while I'm studying
- H. I need to take responsibility for planning how I use my time

You will receive feedback in a variety of ways at University. Some will be written or verbal after an assignment has been marked, some will be given as you are working in class and some might be given at other points in the semester. What do you think the main purpose of feedback is?

Select 1 answer

(Positive feedback – 1 for E, 0.5 for D)

- A. To explain why I got that mark
- B. To tell me where I went wrong
- C. To tell me what I'm doing well
- D. To help me improve for my next assignment
- E. To help me develop my skills generally so I can improve in all areas

How do you approach writing an assignment?

Select those that apply

(Positive feedback – A, B, C, F, G)

- A. I search for relevant books and journal articles
- B. I find out which texts would be useful from my teacher
- C. I look at the assignment brief (the instructions) and make sure I understand what I am being asked to do
- D. I just start working on it and let the work evolve
- E. I panic and put it off for as long as I can
- F. I plan my time so that I can regularly do some work on it
- G. I put aside a day or two to work intensively on it



**How many hours, in total, do you expect to study independently each week on top of your class contact hours?
(Contact hours include online and face to face)**

Select 1 answer

(Positive feedback – 0 for A and B, 1 for C, 0.5 for D)

- A. 1-10 Hours
- B. 11-20 Hours
- C. 21-30 Hours
- D. 30+ Hours

Section 2: Academic Skills

How do you feel about writing at university?

Select the statement that best describes your feeling

(Positive feedback – 1 for A or B, 0.5 for C, 0.25 for D or E, 0 for F)

- A. I've done lots of writing, so I feel quite confident about it
- B. I'm quite good but I'd still like to improve
- C. I've done some but I'm not sure whether it's the right level for university
- D. I don't feel confident about my academic writing
- E. Writing isn't my strongest point - I would like some support
- F. I don't think I need to do writing in my subject

Which of the following types of written coursework use formal language?

Select all that apply

(Positive feedback – 1 for A, B, C)

- A. Report
- B. Essay
- C. Dissertation
- D. Blog
- E. Magazine Article
- F. Forum Post

In academic writing we use referencing to show which books or other sources we have got ideas and information from. Why do you think this is so important to universities?

Select all that apply

(Positive feedback – 1 for A, B, C, G)

PARC: Personalised Approaches to Resilience and Community

<https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/resilient-learning-communities/flexible-and-accessible-learning/personalised-approaches-to-resilience-and-community>



- A. To make sure the right people get the credit for their research or ideas
- B. To show the reader where they can look up the original information
- C. To show students can select and use information from quality sources
- D. To make essays and reports look impressive
- E. Authors of books and articles get paid for every reference to their work
- F. To help lecturers find out more information about the subject
- G. To support an argument with evidence

Read the passage below. What is the main point that the author is making?

Select one answer

Writing can be used for many different purposes, and the writing style will change according to what is being written. For example, the style used when writing a quick postcard to a friend will be very different from the style used when writing an article for a magazine. As each style has its own conventions, the university student needs to understand those that apply to academic writing.

(Positive feedback – 1 for B)

- A. Different writing styles are used for different situations
- B. It's important to know which genre is needed for your work
- C. Writing academically is like writing an article for a magazine
- D. Students need to be able to write in lots of different genres

Section 3: Digital Skills

Which of these activities have you done in the past year?

Select all that apply

(Positive feedback – 1 point for each selected)

- A. Made sure I have antivirus protection installed
- B. Turned off my device to make sure I have the latest software updates installed
- C. Been aware when time online is causing me stress or tiredness
- D. Reported negative messages or behaviour in online networks
- E. Adjusted my desk and chair to support good health and posture
- F. Deliberately reduced my screen time

You are likely to be working in groups or teams throughout your modules including some assignments. To facilitate this which of the following skills do you currently have?

Select all that apply

(Positive feedback – 1 point for each selected)

- A. Send calendar meeting requests to other people
- B. Share digital content I have created online

PARC: Personalised Approaches to Resilience and Community

<https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/resilient-learning-communities/flexible-and-accessible-learning/personalised-approaches-to-resilience-and-community>



- C. Used online meeting software e.g. MS Teams, Zoom etc
- D. Adding comments to document and tracking changes
- E. Collaborating on a live online document in real-time

Section 4: Careers & Employability

What stage are you at with your career planning?

Please choose the response which most closely matches your current position

(Positive feedback – 0.25 for D, 0.5 for E and F, 1 for G, 0 for A, B, C, H, I, J)

- A. I am not ready to start thinking about my career yet
- B. I have no career ideas yet but want to start thinking
- C. I have some ideas about my career, and I am ready to find out more
- D. I know what I want to do but am not sure how to get there
- E. I have a career in mind and intend to gain relevant work experience
- F. I am ready/ have already started applying for graduate level jobs and professional opportunities
- G. I am ready to apply for further study
- H. I have been applying for opportunities and so far, I have not been successful
- I. I have a job, further study or my own business plan confirmed
- J. My studies are not related to my career ambitions

What work experience have you undertaken in the past 12 months?

Please tick all that apply

(Positive feedback – All but A)

- A. I have not had a job or any work experience
- B. Placement
- C. Holiday job
- D. Part-time job alongside studies
- E. Internship
- F. Self-employed/running own business
- G. Full time work prior to studies

Section 5: Wellbeing

I know how to build strong social relationships with a range of people within Abertay and within the local community

Select 1 answer

(Positive feedback – 0 for A and B, 0.5 for C, 1 for D)

- A. Disagree Strongly
- B. Disagree a Little

PARC: Personalised Approaches to Resilience and Community

<https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/resilient-learning-communities/flexible-and-accessible-learning/personalised-approaches-to-resilience-and-community>



- C. Agree a Little
- D. Agree Strongly

I partake in regular physical activity

Select 1 answer

(Positive feedback – 0 for A and B, 0.5 for C, 1 for D)

- A. Disagree Strongly
- B. Disagree a Little
- C. Agree a Little
- D. Agree Strongly



Appendix 3 – Example Student Report

Academic Writing

As you move through your university career you may encounter unfamiliar writing styles or requirements. These could be in the form of essays, reports, or reflective writing to name a few. It's important that you understand the differences and can apply them in practice within your assessments. Abertay provides a wide range of resources for you to access when you need them. Find out what's available at [Writing \(abertay.ac.uk\)](https://www.abertay.ac.uk/writing).

Searching and Evaluating Sources

In your modules you will need to use different searching techniques to find sources for you to critically analyse as part of your assignments. There are several models and resources available when considering searching and evaluating. Find out more about [Searching \(abertay.ac.uk\)](https://www.abertay.ac.uk/searching) and [Evaluating \(abertay.ac.uk\)](https://www.abertay.ac.uk/evaluating) your sources.

Academic Reading

You will be expected to become a critical thinker. This includes reading and writing critically and is a key skill for university and your future career. Critical thinking, or critical analysis, is the evaluation of information or ideas on a topic. We recommend that you find more out about Academic [Reading \(abertay.ac.uk\)](https://www.abertay.ac.uk/academic-reading).

Referencing

Referencing may be something you didn't need to think about before. It is vital to writing academically, so make use of the facilities and resources available to you and develop your referencing skills. Referencing appropriately will help you avoid plagiarism. There are lots of resources for you - [Referencing \(abertay.ac.uk\)](https://www.abertay.ac.uk/referencing). At Abertay we use several different referencing styles dependent on your programme of study. Make sure you are familiar with the referencing style you will use:

- [Harvard \(All programmes expect Psychology and Law\)](#)
- [APA \(Psychology Programmes\)](#)
- [OSCOLA \(Law Programmes\)](#)

Mathematics

Throughout your degree you will use different mathematical skills in different ways. Often this will depend on the module you are studying. Your programme and module team will provide you with resources and support in the areas needed. Don't hesitate to contact your programme leader to seek support.

Actions

Based on your feedback and to support you in developing your academic skills, we would recommend you undertake the following actions in your first 3 months at university:

1. When you are undertaking your first written assignment, Book an appointment with the Learner Development team. To book an appointment with an advisor please go to [Abertay Connect](#).
 - Appointments are available Monday to Friday, including during vacation weeks (except during Christmas vacation when the university is closed to staff and students). If you'd like more information about our service,

PARC: Personalised Approaches to Resilience and Community

<https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/resilient-learning-communities/flexible-and-accessible-learning/personalised-approaches-to-resilience-and-community>



or coursework feedback via email, please use the [Abertay Connect](#) query section to attach your coursework draft and a copy of the assignment brief.

2. Check out the relevant referencing guide for your course of study

- [Harvard \(All programmes except Psychology and Law\)](#)
- [APA \(Psychology Programmes\)](#)
- [OSCOLA \(Law Programmes\)](#)

3. Ensure you understand the different academic writing styles

- [Essay Writing](#)
- [Writing Reports](#)
- [Reflective Writing](#)

Considering your Options

As you consider choosing your optional modules. Based upon your feedback, we would **strongly advise** that you consider taking at least two of the following:

- ABE102 – Successful Writing at Abertay
- ABE105 – Research and enquiry skills for the digital age
- ABE106 – How to sell an idea



Appendix 4 – Example Staff Report

Strengths

Overall, students on this programme showed a good level of knowledge and approaches of independent learning.

Students had a good level of understanding of the role that feedback plays at university. Students recognised that the role of feedback is to help them develop their subject knowledge and transferable skills.

Students showed a good level of confidence in their academic writing abilities. Some students described previous experience of academic writing although not at university.

Students showed a good understanding of the role and purpose of referencing in academia.

Most students indicated good knowledge of using key computer software packages for academic work. This included Microsoft office, the use of PDFs etc.

Areas for development

Students didn't identify many suitable ways to prepare for a lecture and some students didn't identify the need to do the recommended reading or pre-work as a key preparation tool. It is recommended that students are regularly reminded of what is required of them on a week-to-week basis. It is recommended that the following [information on notetaking](#) developed by the Learner development team is shared with students.

Overall students described they had a lack of confidence in their current basic mathematical abilities. Some students indicated that they didn't think they needed to do mathematics or statistics as part of their programme. It is recommended to clearly specify the level of mathematics required on the programme of study and the support available from the programme team. Students can also be referred to the [Learner Development service](#).

Students indicated limited knowledge of using **online communication tools**. This included the use of Microsoft teams and emails. It is strongly recommended to encourage students to access the support on the intranet for using [emails and calendars](#).

Most students were unsure on what career path they wished to take. They select answers ranging from 'I am not ready to start thinking about my career yet' to 'I know what I want to do but am not sure how to get there'. It is recommended that where possible alumni are invited back to inspire and showcase their journeys to new students. It is also encouraged that students are provided with the link and regular resources from the [employability skills portal](#) available to all staff and students.

Most students have not had the opportunity to engage in previous employment, placements, internships, or volunteering. It is encouraged to provide students with the following links to support that is available in gaining work experience:

- [Booking a careers appointment](#)
- [Attending careers and employer events](#)
- [Searching internships, placements, and part time work](#)



Some students indicated that they struggle to build and maintain relationships and gain a sense of belonging. It is recommended to signpost students to [joining a society](#) or [sports team](#). It is also recommended that students [request a mentor at the university](#).

It is recommended that students are encouraged to download the [MyWellbeing App](#) and implement the 5 ways to wellbeing (Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Keep Learning and Give to Others).