



A (micro)pilot at UHI

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Purpose

The University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) is a widening access institution and historically non-continuation rates have been higher than other HEIs in Scotland. Academic staff perception is that some students are not prepared for higher level study and struggle to keep up. In particular, because of UHI's tertiary nature and the delivery of NC and HN as well as UG and PG degree level study, the transition between these different levels can be challenging for students. Whilst institutional effort has always been put into understanding the reasons behind non-continuation, there has historically been less of a focus on understanding the challenges that individual students face when they *start* their programmes with UHI. The use of a diagnostic tool looked to be a solution to this issue and would potentially yield data that would help to channel resources into those areas that would really support student transition and persistence.

Description

There was appetite to try out a diagnostic tool from the Subject Network Leader for Science, Technology and Engineering who reported that students in these programmes struggled to make the transition into higher level study, often with maths and academic writing as their main challenges. The HNC in Applied Sciences programme was chosen to participate in a small pilot to trial the diagnostic tool. Existing practice in this programme includes a fortnightly 'skills session' with students to address any areas in which students feel uncertain and it was felt that the results from the tool could further inform the content of these sessions.

The tool was delivered online towards the end of semester 1 in 2021-22, using a question set created by Birmingham City University and later adapted by Abertay University. This included sections on:

- Studying at University
- Academic writing
- Numeracy
- Digital literacy
- Wellbeing

Some of these

Students from one class on the programme were asked to complete the tool by the programme leader and could opt to receive individual feedback on their results. Eight students completed the diagnostic out of a class of 22 students, and six of those requested individual feedback. This was in the form of a short report which identified three areas of strength and three areas for development for each student. A cohort report was also compiled for the programme leader which summarised the responses and highlighted areas of common strength and challenge for that student cohort.

The tool was delivered using JISC Online Surveys, a technology for which UHI has an institutional license. Whilst this was an effective mechanism for delivering the diagnostic tool to students, it does not have a

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>



'scoring' or reporting function that allows for easy grading of individual or cohort responses. Because of this, most of the content of individual and cohort reports was generated manually.

Reflections on the activity

- All students achieved 100% for the 'numeracy' correctly suggesting the need for different levels of questions depending on the subject area (students in the pilot were studying sciences)
 - Whilst the use of JISC Online Surveys made delivery of the tool very straightforward, the analysis of responses had to be undertaken outside of the surveys tool, and much of this was manual. This was manageable for the small numbers included in the pilot, but further rollout would present an unsustainable workload. An automated tool is required for this- and the expertise to build and maintain it.
 - Feedback from both the staff and students involved in the pilot has been difficult to obtain. In future, this will be built into the delivery of the tool and accompanying individual and programme reports.
 - Questions about mental health were included in the tool. All of the individual responses demonstrated a level of need for mental health support that was really unexpected. Although sources of support were included in students' individual reports, I did reflect whether this was sufficient- that students may not proactively seek out this support. More careful consideration will be given to this area of the tool, and the mechanisms for offering support to students depending on their responses in this section.
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Impact on Students

As a very small pilot, unfortunately, no students came forward to offer their feedback on the use of the tool, or the usefulness of the individual reports. However, we anticipate that students will read and reflect on the feedback given to them in their individual reports and use these to seek out opportunities to improve their skills in areas identified as challenging. As indicated above, the gathering of evaluation data will be built into the next iteration of the tool.

Institutional Impact

Immediate impact on the programme is that the Programme Leader plans to utilise the diagnostic for next academic year with a new cohort of students.

Further institutional uptake is currently limited as UHI is a small institution with limited resource to support additional workstreams. However, this pilot and involvement in the PARC cluster has demonstrated that the approach is deliverable and has kept the conversation around the use of diagnostic testing going at UHI. It has also provided a useful focus for members of staff interested in various aspects of student support that could be enhanced through use of a diagnostic tool such as pre-entry guidance for students, additional support for returners to learning, bespoke support for postgraduate students.

Next Steps

The institution is developing a piece of software that will automate the delivery of the self-evaluation aspects of the tool and enable it to be used by a larger student cohort. This will be rolled out in 2022-23 with a sharpened focus on gathering evaluation data from both staff and student users to effectively gauge impact.
