

Embedding Academic Skills: Case Study in Business Management

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(1) Introduction

This paper outlines and evaluates the embedded role of Academic Skills Centre (ASC) tutors in the University of Dundee's Business Management degree programme. ASC tutors deliver bespoke modules in first and second year of the degree programme – focussing on core skills development such as essay writing, group work, academic posters and presentations. Working in collaboration with the School of Business, Careers and Enterprise teams, these modules aim to equip students with the skills, confidence and experience to succeed in their degree and subsequent employment. In addition, ASC staff provide support for student dissertations, and one-to-one skills meetings, in years 3 and 4. This paper draws on focus groups, one-to-one meetings, end of course evaluations and other data to assess the impact of the embedded approach on the student experience.

(2) The Challenge of Teaching Academic Skills

With increasingly diverse student bodies – both socially and culturally – Universities and course administrators are increasingly aware of the impact that good academic skills advice can have on student performance, retention and progression. The resultant increased demand for such support can place pressure on academic staff and skills support staff alike, and raises many issues as regards how best, and most efficiently, academic skills support can be provided.

One key issue in terms of providing such support is timeliness. Too often, academic skills or essay writing workshops are timetabled as part of a Programme's induction activities, usually delivered in the first week of term. This is a potentially stressful time for students who are trying to find their feet and make the transition from school, college or work, whilst simultaneously being bombarded with all sorts of new information (Johnston & Kochanowska, 2009). As such, and given that students may not yet have begun engaging seriously with their academic work, there is a danger that key academic skills advice is missed, ignored, or written off as just another induction talk.

It is increasingly recognised therefore that students benefit most from such advice if it is delivered at a relevant point in the academic journey. Often this leads to Academic Skills tutors being asked to deliver a 'bolted-on' class that was not originally part of the timetable. For example, the tutor may be asked to come in and deliver a class on essay writing around a week or two before the submission deadline. Whilst this timeliness should make the class more beneficial to students, such requests do also sometimes reveal a perception on the part of course tutors that skills deficits are someone else's problem to solve (Gunn et al., 2011). Not only does such an approach fail to recognise the benefits of students learning and developing these skills in the context of their degree subjects, it also creates further challenges to those who do deliver the classes. For example, disengagement on the part of course tutors can create the perception amongst students that these classes are unimportant, and that they are remedial in nature (Goldingay et al., 2014) rather than being an integral part of the subject being studied. This can often

result in poor attendance at such classes, as well as creating a certain degree of stigma about students seeking academic skills guidance outwith the confines of their course (Goldingay et al., 2014).

A far more impactful way of delivering academic skills support is to embed it within the timetable and content of a course or programme. In such a model, academic skills workshops become a fixed part of the timetable, rather than an added extra. The classes are discussed, planned and delivered as a joint effort by the academic skills specialist and a course tutor. The presence of the latter adds credibility to the content – no longer is it perceived as ‘remedial’, but rather as an integral element of doing well on the course. As a result, students take much more away from such classes and are in some cases more likely to then seek additional support outwith class (De Maio & Desierto, 2016).

Such an approach is clearly more fruitful than the ‘bolt-on’ model. However, the academic skills content remains discrete, rather than truly being embedded within the course content. Studies suggest there is considerable value to be reaped from embedding academic skills content in such a way as it becomes part of the content and substance of a course, rather than a separate element (Rae & Hunn, 2015). This might be considered academic skills by design and default, which can only be achieved through the close collaboration of academic skills specialists and course tutors (De Maio & Desierto, 2016; Goldingay et al., 2014). It is just such a collaboration between the ASC and the School of Business at University of Dundee that has led to the success of the STEP-UP and Enterprise modules.

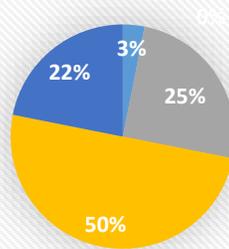
(3) STEP-UP to Business

STEP-UP (Student Transition Enhancement Programme for University Progress) is a 20-credit, 1st Year module. It is designed to enable students to make successful transitions from High School or College into the University teaching and learning environment. STEP UP to Business builds on, and learns from, the successful work undertaken at Dundee and across the sector during the previous enhancement theme (Cunningham 2015, QAA 2017a, QAA 2017b). It is an Academic Skills module, co-ordinated and delivered by tutors from ASC, focusing on the core skills of academic research and writing, group work and presentations. Activities are underpinned by the principles of ‘Becoming, Being and Belonging’ (Thomas, 2012) a University of Dundee student, by fostering connections to the University, to the course, and with fellow students. Traditional lectures are complemented by group discussions, self-directed learning, and the use of a reflective online journal.

A key challenge is to make the module applicable and relevant for Business Management students, rather than simply a generic skills module (Goldingay et al., 2014). To meet this challenge the STEP UP module is underpinned by a specific topic: The impact of the new V&A Museum of Design (V&A, 2018) on Dundee. Staff from the V&A visited classes and led creative workshops, assessments were designed around the so-called ‘Bilbao effect’ (Plaza 2000, Plaza 2007) and its applicability to Dundee, and the final group assessment was a poster presentation at a Business-style conference with invited guests from local businesses and the V&A Dundee.

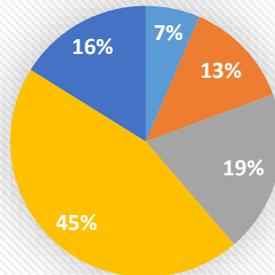
Data from the first running of the module (September 2017) was collected by means of student evaluations, focus groups, and overall module results. Some of the data collected from student evaluations is represented in Figures 1 to 3.

Figure 1:
The course content was well planned and structured



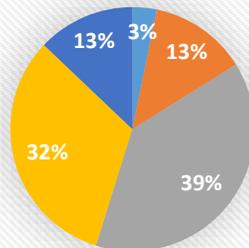
■ Strongly Disagree ■ Disagree ■ Neutral ■ Agree ■ Strongly Agree

Figure 2:
I enjoyed the course



■ Strongly Disagree ■ Disagree ■ Neutral ■ Agree ■ Strongly Agree

Figure 3:
The course motivated me to work at the subject



■ Strongly Disagree ■ Disagree ■ Neutral ■ Agree ■ Strongly Agree

Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate student perceptions of the module content, planning and delivery. 72% of students agreed that the module was well planned and structured. 61% of students enjoyed the module. Students were less positive (Figure 3) about the impact this module had on their motivation to work at their subject area, with 39% neutral on this question.

Feedback from focus groups was positive about the nature and relevance of the academic skills training provided in STEP-UP. The focus on writing skills and writing for University was praised by students: "*STEP UP is like polish, polishing off the rough edges. There is a way that academic work is supposed to be done.*" Specific tips and advice that make differences to the student experience were mentioned: "*It's working for me so well [note-taking technique]. I would never have known about that if it wasn't taught to me in STEP UP. I feel like now my revision is so much more effective because of that way of notetaking.*" Students welcomed the more open and self-directed approach to teaching in STEP-UP, as opposed to the traditional diet of lectures and seminars: "*[The tutors] gave you a lot more independence, it's almost like they see you as adults and they taught you that way.*"

(4) Enterprise

The Enterprise Module is a 20-credit, 2nd Year module. It was originally developed by ASC and the Enterprise Gym (now Centre of Entrepreneurship) and is still run and delivered collaboratively between these two Centres. Although not directly involved, the School of Business have had informal input into the module from those earliest days, and the module has been compulsory for their second year Business Management students from its first outing in 2015-16.

The module aims to provide a background in Enterprise Theory as well as practical experience, along with more general attribute development in areas such as writing, effective group work, and presentation skills. Early iterations of the module were successful and well-received but, in retrospect, a little clunky. In those early days, one two hour class each week was given over to Enterprise content, and the other two hour class to academic skills. Whilst we did attempt to make the latter as relevant as possible to the enterprise content, there was not a sense that the skills content was effectively embedded within the module. In later years, the module has evolved to the extent that now more or less all of the content is related to enterprise and entrepreneurship, with the academic skills elements successfully integrated into this subject specific material.

One good example is in our approach to group work. The students are placed in groups in the first week and work with that group for the remainder of the module to come up with an entrepreneurial idea and to develop it into a business plan and pitch. Rather than explicitly discussing effective group work in a single class, as was previously the case, we now embed exercises which mean the students are developing group working skills in every class. The students recognise this in the end of semester evaluations. Over the past two years, there have been 55 positive comments volunteered in that feedback with regard to the group work, as opposed to just 5 negative comments. Several have noted an increased confidence in working in groups and one stated explicitly that they had learned how to co-operate in a group as a result of taking the module. Developing such skills is likely to have a significant impact on these students in terms of their remaining studies and into employment. It is highly unlikely that a single, 'bolt-on' class on group work theory or practice could achieve similar results.

The development of presentation skills represents another good example of the benefits of embedding such activity within the module content. Towards the end of the semester, the groups pitch their business ideas to the rest of the class as part of their module assessment. Whereas previously we would deliver one presentation advice class shortly before this assessment, we now embed numerous exercises throughout the semester that allow students to develop these skills without even necessarily realising that they are doing so at the time. Anecdotally, this was noted by one student this year who professed to feeling confident about the forthcoming business pitch because *“you’ve had us doing presentations all semester”*. More formally, several students have noted in feedback that their confidence has increased in terms of presentations and public speaking. We have also seen 100% participation each year in the business pitches, again suggesting that the module prepares the students well for this sort of task.

That level of engagement is seen more broadly across the module. One participant from 2016-17 wrote *“I feel this module boosts people’s confidence and [helps them] engage and turn up in class [more] than usual”*. Another from this year commented *“I enjoyed the challenge of doing something different and out of my comfort zone. It has definitely helped with my public speaking and has enabled me to work better in a group”*. And several have commented that they realise by the end of the module the relevance of the skills they have developed over and above the enterprise content. One noted this year that they received *“[a] lot of constructive feedback which I will carry forward the rest of my university career”*. Comments such as these encourage us to think that the skills we are embedding within the module are having a potentially long-term impact, in a way that a single ‘bolt-on’ class never could.

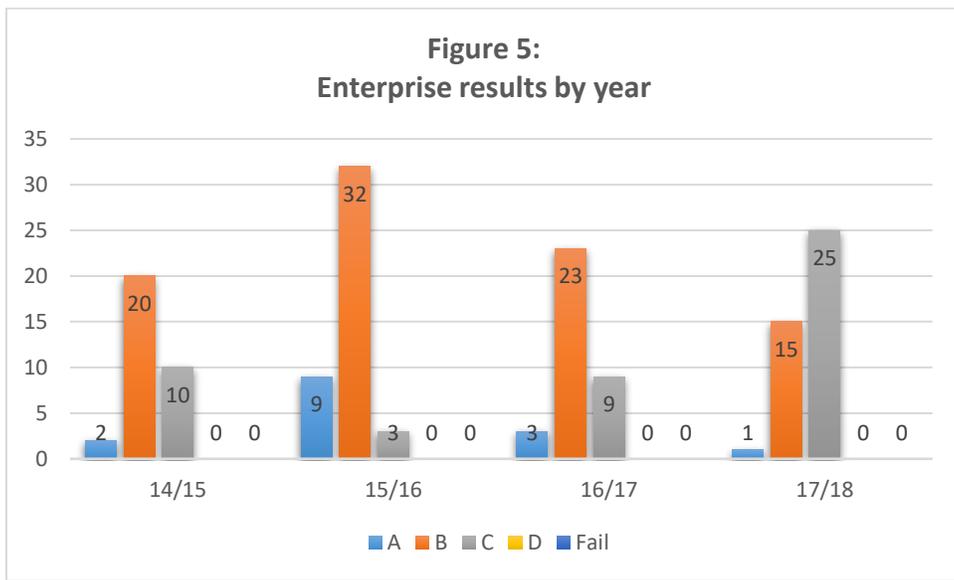
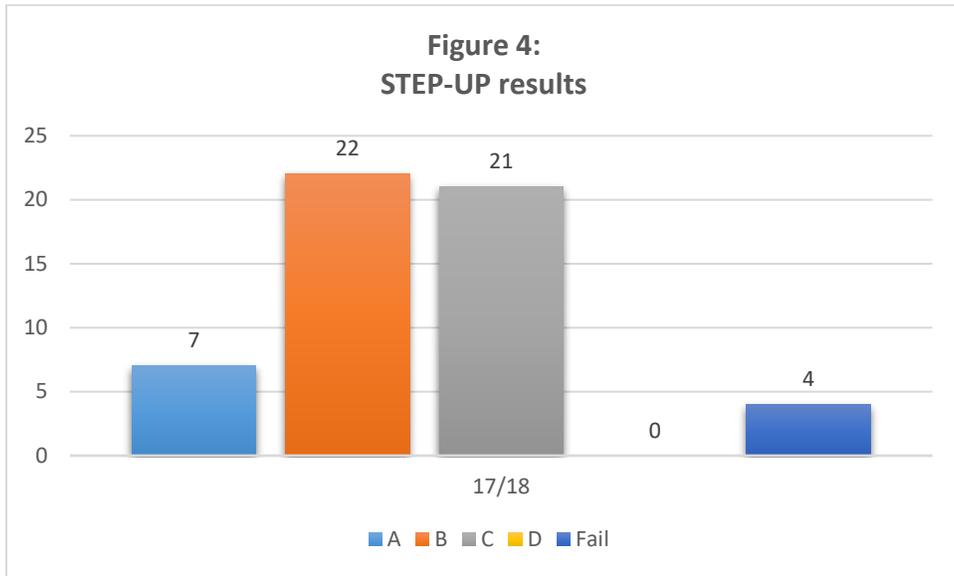
(5) Next Steps

With STEP-UP to Business and the Enterprise Module, the Academic Skills Centre and the School of Business have started down a path towards successfully embedding academic skills development and support within the Business management degree. Initial results seem positive, with students enjoying the modules, but also crucially developing and enhancing their skills in a way that simply does not happen when academic skills support is seen as an adjunct to subject content rather than embedded within it. However, much more remains to be done.

Academic year 2018-19 will be the first in which the bulk of the participants in the Enterprise Module will have taken the STEP-UP to Business module in their first year. We anticipate numerous benefits. For one, having taken the STEP-UP module, participants should be more accustomed to the participatory style of learning that we promote across both modules, meaning less of an adjustment period (typical comments from the students in the past, as well as our own observations, have suggested it can take participants two or three weeks to adjust to the way in which the Enterprise Module is taught). Likewise, the fact that some of the key academic skills were embedded in first year means that we can seek to work at a more advanced level in second year, developing and building on the work the students have done the previous year (Gunn et al., 2011).

Whilst feedback and anecdotal evidence make clear that the embedded style is impactful, we have yet to establish any clear evidence that this approach has a beneficial effect on student grades. This mirrors the findings in other institutions (De Maio & Desierto 2014). Figure 4 shows the grades for the first running of the STEP-UP module. Fails were all due to student’s dropping out due to personal reasons, the range of assessments makes a D grade unlikely if students complete all the component parts. Figure 5 shows the

grades across the four years that the Enterprise module has run. The results suggest that despite positive feedback from students, and although the module has evolved and the embedding of academic skills has become more sophisticated, module results have not improved accordingly. More widely, longer term longitudinal research is required to attempt to establish a positive correlation between the embedded approach and improving student grades. The impact that STEP-UP and Enterprise have on student attainment in other modules and overall degree classifications is also an area we would like to explore.



Part of that process of improving student grades in the long run, and ensuring that they are supported throughout their time at university, is to extend the embedded approach across all four years of the degree programme. As Gunn et al. (2011, p.1) observe, '[t]he ideal way to produce fully capable graduates

is to embed academic skills in the first year curriculum, then continue their application, reinforcement and further development throughout the degree programme.’ STEP-UP and Enterprise ensure that we embed and develop academic skills through the first two years of the degree programme in Business Management, but if much of that good work is not to be undone then work remains to extend that level of support into years three and four of the programme.

Despite being at only the very early stages of the process, efforts to embed academic skills development within the fabric of the Business Management degree in years 1 and 2 already appear to be having a positive impact. Reaching this stage has required a lot of hard work, an open-minded approach, and a great deal of collaboration and co-operation between the Academic Skills Centre and the School of Business. And yet, this is one programme within one university. Should the embedding of academic skills continue to be demonstrably impactful, a case may be made that such an approach would bear fruit across many different disciplines. This would require institutional buy-in (Goldingay et al., 2014) and a culture of collaboration. Despite a small but growing body of research pointing towards the benefits of such a process, the embedding of academic skills fully within a discipline programme remains very much the exception rather than the rule. As such, the current collaboration between the Academic Skills Centre and the School of Business at the University of Dundee perhaps points to a more creative and impactful way of reimagining the place of academic skills development within a degree programme.

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