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2016-17 Pilot project
supporting the international
student experience in the UK

International academic writing
boot-camp
Liverpool Hope University



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Project aims

The four-day boot-camp aimed to help new international postgraduate students to understand the academic expectations and conventions of UK universities. In particular, it aimed to facilitate the development of relationships between students newly arrived in the UK and the academic tutors who are the international coordinators in their academic department, as well as with peer-writing mentors in the university.

Summary of outcomes

An academic boot-camp for new international students took place as part of a wider orientation programme. This enabled students to get to know their peers, departmental international co-ordinators (academic tutors) and writing support colleagues. Student evaluations and feedback suggest that this gave an opportunity for early personal interaction with key people and that this provided a foundation on which strong relationships have been built. Feedback also confirmed that the project enabled students to have a better understanding of academic expectations in the UK. Assessment results for those students who took part were higher than for those who did not.

The key learning point from the project is that it is the structure of such a programme which is key to its success. The gaps between sessions

– the time for informal interaction – is as important as the content of the sessions.

Background context

Liverpool Hope University is in the north-west of England and has a student body of approximately 7,500 students. Given its size, it has a strong emphasis on community and the development of professional relationships among staff and students. It has a long tradition of recruiting international students – however, there is a current shift in international numbers from postgraduate to undergraduate and study abroad.

The University does not have an English language centre on campus; social, cultural and wellbeing support is provided by the International Hub with academic departments providing academic support based on a tutorial system. The Library and Learning Resources include trained peer-writing mentors who can support students in improving their academic writing; this is a general service open to all students and is not international specific.

Like many UK universities, Liverpool Hope continues to be challenged by UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) processes and timelines which leads to the delayed arrival of a number of postgraduate students at the start of the academic year.

The boot-camp

The academic boot-camp was organised by the International Hub with support from academic colleagues who provided sessions in their areas of expertise (see the programme in the appendix below). The project spanned two academic years as the final assessments for postgraduate students, who began their studies in October 2016, will not be completed until November 2017. Accordingly, final conclusions or impact cannot be concluded at this stage.

The boot-camp ran as planned; however, it was not as well attended as had been hoped due to the delayed arrival of some international postgraduate students on visa grounds. Therefore, the activities were also opened up to new international undergraduate students. This raises the question of the timing of such a programme. 25 undergraduate and postgraduate international students participated in the organised activities.

Evaluation point 1

Feedback from students immediately after the session found that the boot-camp was useful and that the way it was structured allowed for good personal relationships to be formed – a key aim of the project. All participants appreciated the timing of the event in orientation week, before beginning their academic studies, because they felt more confident in understanding tutor expectations when they embarked on their classes.



80% of the students suggested a further mini boot-camp would be useful for them later in the year when assessment deadlines approach. Out of the 12 sessions that ran the most popular session was the 'Academic context at Liverpool Hope', followed by 'How to structure academic writing'.

Evaluation point 2

Further evaluation took place at the end of the first semester. Students expressed the importance of having a good personal relationship with their tutors, particularly for feedback on their academic performance, and reported that they were much more likely to seek help and ask questions if they have a good relationship with their tutors. 78% of students said they approached their tutors for help during the semester and the programme had enabled them to initiate and then develop these relationships with staff. This finding is significant as there was not a specific session on how to build good relationships with staff, but, rather, the structure of the programme facilitated interaction during break times and eating lunch together. This suggests that it is not only the content of such a programme that is of importance, but also its structure (which is often given less significance in the planning stages). That is, the

space between the sessions is as important as the sessions themselves.

Evaluation point 3

The third evaluation took place at the end of teaching in semester two and before formal examinations. Students continued to identify the importance of their relationships with their tutors as key to their success and confidence. The approachability of academic staff and the relationships established was a positive element in 67% of the evaluations.

The academics made sure that we understood what was going on in class and offered help whenever we needed it. The course work is set up quite differently than home. There is much more emphasis on large assessment rather than work throughout the semester. This made the adjustment challenging because the essays have much more weight and a focus on critical thinking. All in all, the academic transition, although one of the more difficult things, was at once made easier by the people involved, some of whom we had got to know when we arrived.

(Student from America)

At this point in the year students also looked back and reflected on their relationships with peers and the importance of peer support with 63% participants identifying this as significant to their experience:

Studying different subjects, the grouping opportunity (the boot-camp) I believe brought us together much more than just living in the same accommodation would have.

(Student from Mexico)

Tutors reported that the cohort of international students was fully involved, although no conclusions have been drawn at this point as to the impact of the boot-camp on engagement.

Assessment results have been gathered and analysed for the January and April assessment points. The original intention was to compare the results with last year when the boot-camp had not been available. However, because we had a cohort of students who arrived late on visa grounds, after boot-camp had taken place but before formal teaching started, these students became our comparison group because they had undertaken exactly the same assessments, reducing the variables involved.

The assessment results were looked at as a full set for each student, this included written assessments, such as essays or reports, and oral presentations, both an individual presentation and a group presentation. An average mark was also calculated across their written assessments only. Those students who took part in the boot-camp received an average of 64% for their assessment marks and an average of 64% for their written assessment marks. In comparison, the students who did not attend the boot-camp, received an average of 59% for their assessment marks and an average of 63% for their written assessment marks. While the difference is minimal, those who attended the boot-camp have achieved higher results than those who did not. What is interesting is that the greatest difference was in the overall assessment marks which included the individual and group presentation. One possible reason for this may be that those who attended the boot-camp, with its emphasis on building relationships and getting to know academic staff and peers, felt more confident in making the presentations and working with peers. Of course, other factors could have influenced the results, too.

Evaluation point 4

This has not been reached yet and final assessment/degree results are not yet known.

Project challenges

The delivery of the project had to be slightly modified due to the lower number of international postgraduate students recruited and the involvement of international undergraduate students in the boot-camp. This changed the content of some sessions, which became broader, but not the nature or theme of the sessions. The project ran to budget.

Project sustainability

We aim to repeat the boot-camp this year, but to run it over the first four weeks of teaching, one day a week, so that the start date may be delayed slightly to allow for late arrivals to participate, a key learning point from this year.

A second key learning point, referred to in the summary of outcomes, is the importance of the relationship with peers and key academic staff as recognised by the students. Providing opportunities which facilitate relationship-building is key to both the cultural, social and academic confidence of international students. We will continue to seek further opportunities which support this provision.

Further information

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Appendix

Academic writing boot-camp for international students programme 2016



Month	Session 1	Session 2	Lunch
Tues 4 October Morning	The academic context at Liverpool Hope	How to structure academic writing	Lunch with international co-ordinators and academics
Afternoon	Lessons learnt from an international student	English for academic purposes	
Wed 5 October Morning	What to expect of a UK postgraduate course	Debating sources	
Afternoon	Plagiarism	English for academic purposes	
Thurs 6 October Morning	Introduction to peer writing mentors	A guide to referencing	Lunch with peer writing mentors
Afternoon	Library visit	Library visit	
Fri 7 October Morning	Peer support	English for academic purposes	
Afternoon	IT services (Moodle/Turnitin)	IT services (Moodle/Turnitin)	