



Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

The International Journal of Management Education

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijme



Assessment for confidence: Exploring the impact that low-stakes assessment design has on student retention



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 October 2012

Received in revised form 7 October 2013

Accepted 24 January 2014

Keywords:

Student retention

Assessment

Confidence

Communities of practice

Higher education

Low stakes

ABSTRACT

This article explores student achievement and confidence in a university Business School. The research is centred on creating innovative assessments during the key transition year focussing on creating **Assessment for Confidence**. This aims to eliminate barriers to success, improve student engagement with their Community Of Practice and therefore increase student retention.

This study consisted of longitudinal practitioner action research over four years within the University of Cumbria Business School identifying students' perceptions of their barriers to learning. The research identified study skills, academic language, socialisation and traditional formal assessment as the main barriers to student achievement. Key conclusions were that early low-stakes assessment designed for improving confidence was an excellent vehicle for increasing student engagement and retention.

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1. Introduction

Current academic thinking such as [Yorke and Longden \(2008\)](#) highlights that one of the most important areas for academics, researchers and policy makers, within the first-year student experience arena, is to successfully manage the transition to higher education. This is especially crucial when dealing with the increasing widening-participation nature of the student body, and addresses the vital issues of retention and student engagement. Studies have indicated that student retention rates show huge disparities across UK universities, especially in those with a large intake of non-traditional entrants ([Bennet & Kane, 2010](#)). These students are encouraged to apply to and enter higher education within the UK; however they encounter a mixed response from institutions in terms of available support and willingness to engage with transitional activities ([Chapman, Parmar, & Trotter, 2007](#)).

Research ([Tinto, 1993](#); [Yorke, 2001](#)) has shown that the critical point in the academic year for student attrition is when the first formal assessment is due for submission. Creating a context where this assessment anxiety is lessened, and students form tighter bonds with their course and peers, can help to overcome this main barrier to continued engagement.

This article reports on a longitudinal action-research based study completed at the University of Cumbria Business School. The research focuses on how assessment practices can be redesigned to develop academic confidence. It outlines the interventions within business and management students' core first module assessment, and the analysis of the impact this had on student retention, self-efficacy and academic confidence ([Bandura, 1995](#)).

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We argue that the new concept of **Assessment for Confidence** can offer an alternative assessment strategy to the formative and summative models that are traditionally used.

2. Methodology

This research was carried out over four years using an action-research based methodology. This approach was chosen because we wanted to explore why students are not engaging effectively with their learning, and what we as practitioners can do to alter this phenomenon rather than describing what has happened. Thus the research required a less rigid and more contextual basis from which to work that enabled changes to the focus or direction of the research whilst still undertaking it.

Action research is described by McKernan as: *'a form of professional development for the reflective practitioner'* (1996: vi). However, action research is more than just a continuous development tool for practitioners and has been an important part of business and management research and consulting since the 1940s.

The research took a spiral process rather than an iterative one as it was felt that there were many potential areas to improve and that each one would benefit greatly and scaffold from the previous intervention results as proposed by McNiff (2005). The Reid and Barrington Continuous Development Spiral (1999: 73) was used as a basis for the interventions. It argues that students start at the point where there is a need for new knowledge and skills. They are apprehensive at first but the successful achievement of their learning goals leads to greater confidence and the ability to work at a higher level. Each successful achievement of a learning goal decreases the apprehension until there is no apprehension, only enthusiasm for learning. See Fig. 1.

This model provides a useful platform of competencies with the focus being on gaining confidence. Self-efficacy and independence are achieved as the learner moves up the spiral. Students would traditionally move up the spiral throughout their studies, as they learn and develop from each assessment, but this is not always easy and there are potential barriers to overcome before some students can develop. Non-traditional students may face more of these barriers before they can achieve success in their learning goals.

Exploring what these barriers are from a student perspective formed the initial phase of our research. During routine first semester personal tutoring meetings, students were asked to discuss any problems or barriers they had experienced in completing their first assessments. Amongst their comments were:

Sometimes I've no idea what the lecturers mean. They have their own language.

I haven't written an essay for years, I don't know where to start

I'm not living on campus so don't really know anyone yet, it's all a bit daunting at the moment.

The main potential barriers to student development identified by the students can be grouped into four main categories: study skills, socialisation, academic language and formal academic assessment. A critical analysis of the literature within management education and pedagogy informed our research, and was subsequently utilised to create the new assessment design.

3. Literature review

3.1. Study skills

Many university teaching and learning strategies are based upon a deficit/gap analysis approach to student needs (Meer & Hurford, 2007). This identifies a student who looks to develop their academic skills as being somehow less than they should be. However, the preparedness for academic learning naturally relies on prior education levels. A better understanding of the legacy left by this prior educational experience may help with transition (Dooley, 2004). In addition, research by Fee, Greenan, and Wall (2010) concluded that a prevailing attitude of lecturers is that skills deficiencies are a student's problem and not theirs.

For many new university students the size of first-year classes may be a surprise as would the speed of content and delivery. Much of the research on skills development has focused on individual subject areas (Booth, 2001; Holman, 1995; Pitts, 2005) although similarities exist across the subject areas, with aspects of the first year a challenge to all students (Cottrell, 2001).

3.2. Socialisation

Yorke (1999) researched students who left higher education early and found that their integration into the institution was dependent on both their academic experiences and their social experience. Students need to feel a sense of belonging to an institution and feel that they fit in both academically and socially. For non-traditional students this process of socialisation may be more problematic. To accept these students into higher education without any tailored support would be a travesty of both the social justice of higher education, and more importantly, the self-confidence and belief of the student themselves. Many of the support mechanisms adopted by institutions to help attract and retain non-traditional students also help the traditional students who themselves are often ill equipped to cope with university education (Rhodes & Nevill, 2004).

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