

Improving Lesson Preparation Among Foundation Year Students

SIMON LEPPINGTON

School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

This article presents an initiative to improve lesson preparation among foundation year students through the implementation of targeted pre-seminar readings and online quizzes, making lesson preparation part of the summative assessment mark. It details the design of lesson-specific, targeted pre-seminar reading and online quizzes and discusses the use of tools to address logistical issues. It considers how seminars which were refined through evidence-based insights from submission answers resulted in a remarkable improvement in student engagement with the module readings and with the subsequent seminar activities, with a substantial majority of students demonstrating consistent completion of readings and quizzes. Finally, an analysis of student responses is presented alongside a reflection on modifications following the initial implementation of the initiative.

Introduction

The School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London ('the School') introduced a foundation year programme in the academic year 2019-20. The programme was motivated by a desire to widen participation to higher education to students who had not gained the required grades at A Level or equivalent for direct entry to the School's undergraduate programmes (SOAS, 2025a), or who had not studied the subjects previously. As has been widely described elsewhere (see for example the work by the Department of Education, 2023), a main purpose of a foundation year is to prepare students for undergraduate study.

Initially anticipating a cohort of around thirty students in its first year, the programme has proven to be hugely successful, regularly enrolling over 300 learners every academic year. The SOAS Foundation Year programme contains two streams: a Business, Management, Economics and Law programme, and the Social Science, Arts and Humanities stream. Students on both streams study some of the same modules; the Numbers and Quantitative Reasoning module, to which this paper pertains, is compulsory for all students on the foundation year.

Subsequent tracking of student outcomes at SOAS has shown that students who complete the foundation year record rates of progression to subsequent years of study on a par with

their direct-entry peers (Brys & Perez de Vera, 2023). Such success has been measured elsewhere, for example in Spicer-Cain's (2025) study tracking Health School students at City St. Georges. Such outcomes are contrary to the conclusions of the Augar Review (Department for Education, 2019) which suggested that foundation year programmes represent poor value for money for students.

Seminar preparation

Modules on the SOAS Foundation Year typically use a 'flipped learning' approach (see for example Baig and Yadegaridehkordi, 2023), where concepts are introduced to students ahead of the class via pre-class self-study materials, allowing more time in seminars for peer discussion and problem solving. The focus is on students becoming 'active participants' (Fry et al., 2015) in lessons rather than passively receiving information. A study of the implementation of, influence on attainment of, and student preference for, flipped classroom initiatives concluded that overall, major benefits were seen in student engagement, participation, and academic achievement (Zainuddin et al., 2024). For these reasons, this teaching approach has gained momentum in recent years, accelerated by the ease of access to and use of technology. A systematic literature review of thirty studies of flipped classroom approaches in HE (Baig and Yadegaridehkordi, 2023) noted that much of the pre-lesson introductory material in these settings makes use of readings as well as videos, alongside other technology tools such as learning management systems.

Like most institutions SOAS (2025b) and many educational agencies such as UCAS (2025) provide study skills resources, underscoring the need for good planning and time management, and emphasising the requirement to dedicate time outside of the classroom for study. Most students will be familiar with completing homework or other tasks to supplement class time throughout education. However, higher education institutions make clear that university study demands a step change in students taking responsibility for their own learning (for example the guide provided by the University of Portsmouth (2025)). Seminars, lectures, and other contact will often require an investment of time in advance, typically in the form of preparatory reading. SOAS (2025d) provides many study skills resources, and alongside identifying reading and independent research as crucial, provides students with assistance for reading strategies.

On the assumption that seminar preparation has been completed, SOAS Foundation Year seminars are typically planned to include group activities based in part on preparatory reading. This means that the limited face-to-face seminar time can be focussed on learning strategies such as group discussion and idea exchange, and tutor-led challenges of learners' understanding of the concepts contained in the texts. As a foundation year should prepare students for undergraduate study, habituating good study habits such as reading around the subject in preparation for lessons and assignments is vital. It is widely agreed (see for

example Carrera (2025)) that such skills are crucial to success in undergraduate study. However, it has been shown that new students need to be *guided* as to their preparation (Fry et al., 2015); it is a habit that needs to be instilled, not presumed.

As noted in Ng and Lo (2022), the flipped classroom's success relies on the cohort completing this preparation. However, the author and colleagues agreed that often, it was clear that many students simply had not completed the reading that had been set for them. As a result, students in class were skim-reading to undertake class activities which were based on the articles, with consequently no time for reflection. Colleagues observed feelings of resentment amongst students who had prepared in advance.

The author analysed class attendance records (which evidenced 'fair' levels of engagement) and compared them to the submission rates of summative assessments (high). Alongside the anecdotal evidence concerning students' rates of engagement with the pre-seminar reading (low) this gave clear indication that lesson preparation was a major concern, but that students engaged with tasks such as portfolio preparation when marks were at stake. The initiative described in this work was an attempt to improve levels of pre-lesson engagement.

The new initiative

An original approach was implemented on the SOAS Foundation Year programme's compulsory Numbers and Quantitative Reasoning module that involved setting pre-seminar readings that were paired with online quizzes, with summative marks being assigned for completion of the quizzes.

Following review of pre-seminar reading material, it was concluded that texts assigned in previous years could suffer from being lengthy, unfocussed and in some cases not directly applicable to many of the subsequent lesson activities. For students, this could be said to contribute to the assumption that these were not a crucial part of the curriculum and were not helpful in encouraging engagement. There is much evidence of this in the literature; a meta-study on student engagement (Barua et al., 2018) found that of seven key factors, material relevance, selection, and usefulness contributed three. To encompass these crucial attributes within the pre-reading, it was decided to either originate, or if using others' work, heavily edit down and transpose pertinent examples, to connect the preparation more directly with the seminar, as advocated by Askew et al. (1997).

Existing secondary articles were edited, or new material was created, to be focussed and relevant for students. Previous materials could often appear verbose or had little discernible *direct* connection to the content of the seminar. Heavy editing, paraphrasing, re-imagining of examples to be relevant to the student cohort, and in some cases origination from scratch were required. For example, whereas previously the introductory week reading set a statistics book chapter, this year the students were introduced to the results of a study showing that almost half of all assessments across all degree subjects involved some form of

quantitative reasoning. Another condensed a work on central tendencies from twenty pages to four by focusing solely on the real-life illustrative examples in the text. This focussed, directly applicable and succinct approach was designed to engage students and to reinforce the relevance and importance of the readings, and that advance reading was time well spent.

After reading the material, and in advance of the seminar, students were required to complete a short online quiz. These quizzes were designed so that the answers could be found in or deliberated from the reading, making it straightforward for students who completed the reading to score well. This was intended to furnish students with a sense of achievement and confidence in advance of the seminar.

When a student submitted quiz answers, a unique, anonymised 'reading receipt' was automatically generated and emailed to them. This receipt, acknowledging the completion of the task, was designed to encourage participation and demonstrate that seminar preparation is important. Each receipt was unique to the quiz answered and to the response of the student. An example email is shown in Figure 1 below to illustrate this.

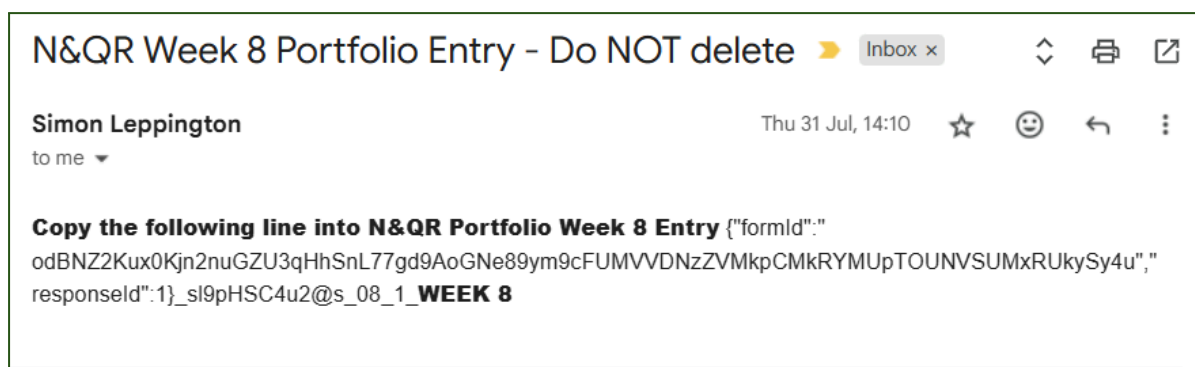


Figure 1. A reading receipt email containing a quiz- and response- unique code

The reading and quiz were made available a week in advance of the lesson week. In a cohort of around 350 students, the same lesson is repeated across the week to groups of around thirty students. Thus, the deadline for each week's quiz submission was set to Monday at noon, before the first group's lesson in the afternoon. An automatic email reminder was sent before the deadline to those students who had yet to submit quiz answers.

Assessment

The quizzes were incorporated into the final grade, with 20% of the final mark assigned to this activity. Students were required to submit their unique email receipts to each of the ten quizzes as proof of completion as part of their summative portfolio. The receipts' unique codes contained information for the marker to discern if they were on time or late (full or half marks respectively) without breaching the student's anonymity and thus preserving the integrity of the eventual marking procedures.

The quizzes were available until after the module marking was completed and the submission deadline (plus any extension period for mitigating circumstances) had expired. This enabled students who engaged late in the module to catch up on missed quizzes.

An example screenshot of part of a student summative assignment submission is shown in Figure 2 below. Students were required to copy and paste each week’s reading receipt into the appropriate section of the assignment worksheet.

Part 1: Reading Quizzes (20 marks)

Week number	Your unique email response
1	{"formId":"odBNZ2Kux0Kjn2nuGZU3qHhSnL77gd9AoGNe89ym9cFUNDhDRzZXUDVBTJZNSTE0T0pJWldMOVA5SS4u","responseId":822}_01_2.0_822_01_2.0_ WEEK 1
2	{"formId":"odBNZ2Kux0Kjn2nuGZU3qHhSnL77gd9AoGNe89ym9cFUMFNBU9RNzRBSjVCUTNWMU81MjnMMUZZRy4u","responseId":793}_02_2.0_793_02_2.0_ WEEK 2
3	{"formId":"odBNZ2Kux0Kjn2nuGZU3qHhSnL77gd9AoGNe89ym9cFUQkxYTzJZU0JLM112VEpVNFhXU0dLRk9ERS4u","responseId":827}_03_2.0_827_03_2.0_ WEEK 3
4	{"formId":"odBNZ2Kux0Kjn2nuGZU3qHhSnL77gd9AoGNe89ym9cFUME8wSDEyRThKQk4zRIU5STISSFRUS0NPMC4u","responseId":747}_04_2.0_747_04_2.0_ WEEK 4
5	{"formId":"odBNZ2Kux0Kjn2nuGZU3qHhSnL77gd9AoGNe89ym9cFUNe80UEdLRIBBWkpPOFdHMK1YOUNaRDA0WC4u","responseId":825}_05_2.0_825_05_2.0_ WEEK 5
Reading week	{"formId":"odBNZ2Kux0Kjn2nuGZU3qHhSnL77gd9AoGNe89ym9cFURUJLQzY5WFpaVk5aVkiTWVZXRPkEVDIYSS4u","responseId":349}_RW_2.0_349_RW_2.0_ READING WEEK

Figure 2. An example of a student summative worksheet. Weekly reading receipts have been copied into the appropriate section by the student

Details of the success rate of students completing the readings is given in the Outcomes section below. With almost four-fifths of students successfully completing the reading and quizzes in advance of their lesson, the seminars could confidently contain activities based on concepts covered in the reading and quizzes. Additionally, the use of Microsoft Forms enabled analysis of submitted answers. From this, it was straightforward to assess any questions the students found challenging, and to incorporate these into seminar delivery for further consideration, and pace lessons accordingly. Example screenshots of a quiz question response breakdown, and that question’s incorporation into the subsequent seminar’s materials are given in the Appendix.

Adding further short ‘scaffolding’ paragraphs of reading in the quiz itself worked well. According to Baume and Scanlon (2018) learning is most effective when scaffolding ‘surrounds, supports and informs learning.’ Referring to quiz questions in the seminar to reinforce concept points and provide extension to the examples also proved useful as micro-revision.

Outcomes

In the academic year 2024-25, this approach was implemented with a cohort of 343 students over a ten-week module. The results demonstrated a significant increase in student engagement with the preparatory material compared to previous years. It should be noted however that this observation is just that; the completion of pre-seminar reading is not

normally measured, so this remark is based on the author's and colleagues' observations of classes in previous years or on other modules. In addition, an observed improvement in engagement with activities in the seminars was tangible. There was no need to divert time for students to skim read materials; a large majority of (if not all) attendees had completed the reading and quiz.

Out of a possible 3,430 unique responses across the ten-week module, 2,661 were recorded, which equates to a 77.6% response rate. Figure 3 below shows the response rate across the 10-week module (rounded to nearest percentage). Note that although many submissions were 'late,' many students submitted after the noon deadline but in advance of their own seminar which was typically days after the deadline. Thus, they had completed seminar preparation.

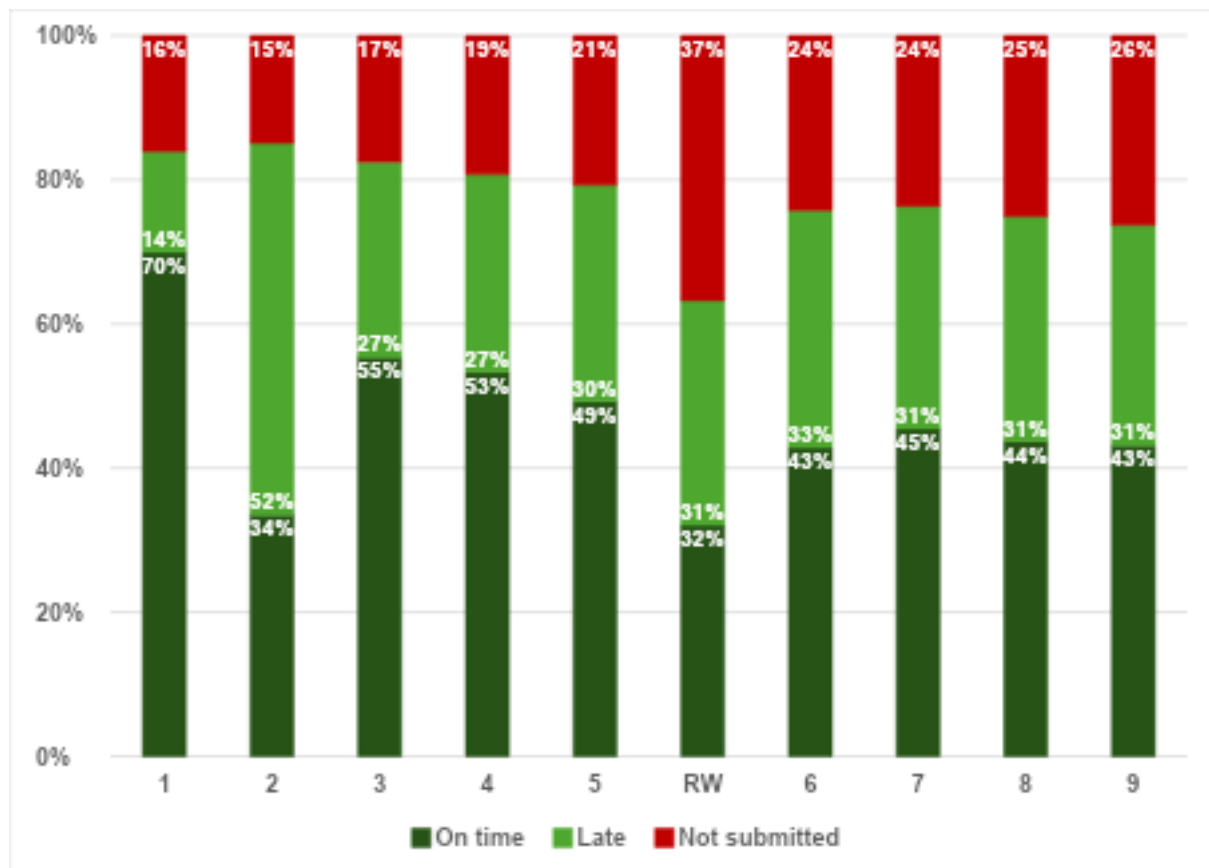


Figure 3. Response rate (nearest percentage for each category) of quiz submissions to readings across the 10-week module, including a text in reading week

In the first week, time was set aside for the reading and submitting answers to the quiz, to demonstrate the method and expectations for subsequent weeks. This explains the high 'on time' response rate in this week. In week two, students were required to submit *in advance* for the first time and a subsequent high percentage of late submissions is apparent. Having no seminar in reading week to prepare for, the reading and quiz were focussed on preparing students to submit a formative assignment due that week. Nevertheless, and despite the

usual Monday morning reminder email for non-submitters, a drop in engagement can be seen for that week.

Figure 4 below shows a typical cumulative response profile, in this case for week 4. As can be seen, sending a reminder email on the morning of the deadline (noon, Monday 27th Jan) resulted in a notable surge of quiz submissions, bringing the total for week 4 to 183 (53.4% of enrolled students) on time. A further 18 (5.2%) were received before the start of the first seminar of the week. In fact, of the 93 (27.1%) remaining submissions that were received late, most of those students had submitted their responses before their weekly seminar.

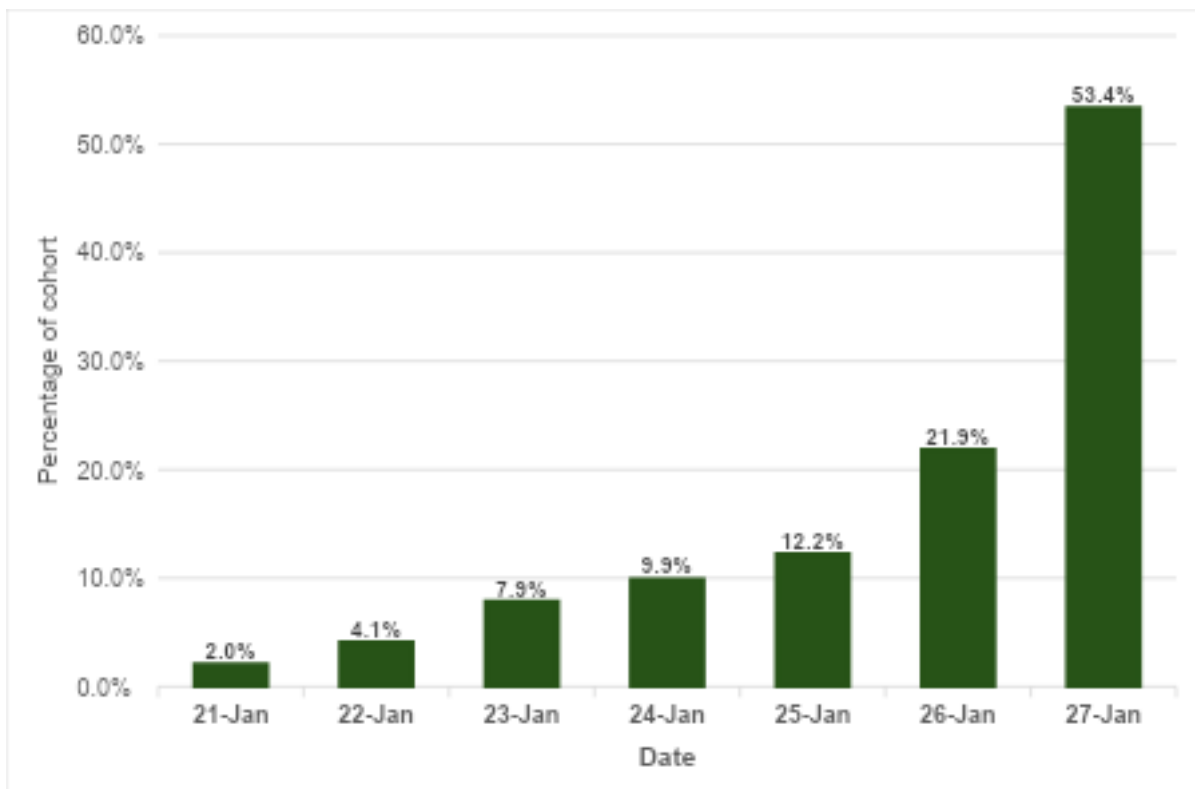


Figure 4. Week 4's student submissions to deadline of noon, 27th Jan.

Quiz set-up

Potential issues, such as students attempting to 'play the system', were identified and mitigated against. For instance, to prevent students from going straight to the quiz without reading, the quiz link was only provided at the end of the reading material and was not available elsewhere. Figure 5 shows an example reading with quiz link.

There are two broad types of samples, with several different techniques clustered below those. **Probability sampling** is associated with **surveys**, and **non-probability** sampling is often used when conducting interviews. We'll look at these in detail in the seminar.

The type of sampling you'll encounter will be based on the type of research that you are reading about. There's no sample that's right or wrong, they can just be more or less appropriate for the question that's trying to be answered. **If a less appropriate sampling strategy has been used, the answer is going to be less accurate.**

Please now complete the short quiz at <https://forms.office.com/r/iNXyYxhk3w>

Figure 5. Screenshot of example reading with embedded quiz link

Questions were also designed to be straightforward to answer if the reading was completed. On submission of their answers, students could check their answers and read feedback embedded in the quiz (see Figure 6). This was provided so that students were furnished with this knowledge before the seminar. Again, the emphasis was on the reading and preparation for the forthcoming lesson, not the quiz marks.

The screenshot shows a quiz interface with four questions, each with a checkmark indicating it has been answered. The first question is '150-200 words' with a feedback box stating: 'In fact, there are over 230 words, however this the word count is guidance here. This is a very good reflection. The correct answers are Using the learning in future studies, One or more concepts to illustrate answer, and Citing a source.' The second question is 'Using the learning in future studies' with a checkmark and feedback: 'The student described how they would use the learning in the future.' The third question is 'One or more of the concepts to illustrate answer' with a checkmark and feedback: 'The concepts considered were misleading graphs / tables, and that of being sure what the data is and is not measuring (in this case "UK students" was misleading.)' The fourth question is 'Citing a source' with a checkmark and a green checkmark next to it.

Figure 6. Example of answer feedback available to students after submission

Future modification

In 2024-25, the submission of answers to the quiz was enough to garner the marks; the exercise was designed to encourage engagement with the reading, and not as an assessment per se. For the following academic year (2025-26) this will be modified; students will only be allowed to submit answers once, and a 50% or above 'pass mark' will be required to receive

the marks for that week's quiz. This modification was deemed necessary as with the ability to submit a second attempt, it became clear on analysis of submission times that some students were simply rushing the first attempt (and with perhaps little attention to the reading) and using the feedback answers to inform their second attempt.

Conclusion

In addition to improved reading and preparation for seminars, and tutors' observations that students showed improved engagement with group lesson activities, students welcomed the initiative. In the Student Evaluation of Modules survey (SOAS, 2025c), students were positive about the quizzes. Many welcomed the discipline instilled by the initiative. It was surprising that there were no negative comments and no students complained of regular tests.

One of the purposes of the foundation year is to habituate students in lesson preparation, and this initiative does this very successfully. In fact, students commented that the structured approach, with manageable readings and a clear rationale for doing them, made the tasks achievable and completion gave them a sense of accomplishment. Many have commented that the regularity has made their study planning easier. From anecdotal student feedback, and from experience teaching on other modules, this is preferred to the 'stop, start' nature found on other modules where some weeks there is little or no preparation required, whilst other lessons require many hours of work. Comments from the student survey mentioned 'focus' and that it kept progress 'on track.' It is also hoped that the design, feedback and presentation of the initiative reiterating the purpose was lesson preparation, not examination reassured students and encouraged participation.

In terms of quantitative measurements, in addition to the compelling quiz completion data, further evidence can be found from the module assignment submission rates and marks. Submissions increased from 67.4% (2023-24) to 76.7% (2024-25) of the enrolled cohort (not including summer resits), an improvement of 14% year on year. In addition, although overall pass rates of *submissions* remained consistent (a slight downturn from 91.2% to 90.8%), there was an improvement in the pass rate of the enrolled cohort from 67.2% to 72.1% (due to increased submission rates).

There was also a noticeable shift to higher marks, as can be seen in Figure 7. In particular, the increase in the number of first-class marks from 10% to 14.5% represents a nearly 50% improvement on the previous year.

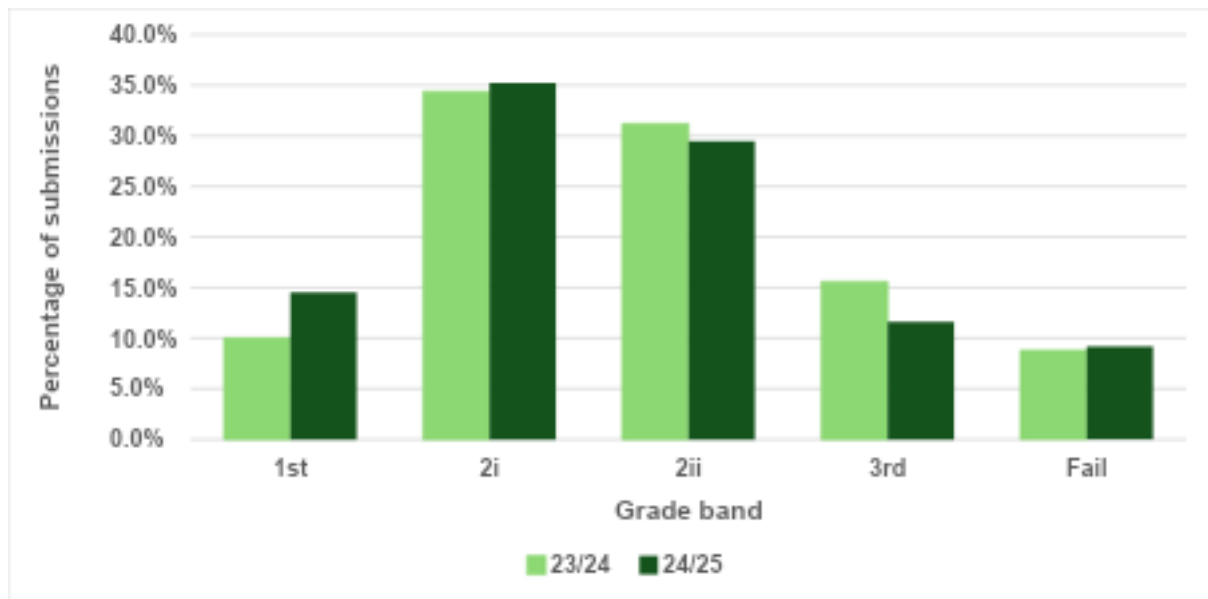


Figure 7. Grade band comparison with previous academic year

Proving a causal link between the introduction of this reading and quiz initiative, and improvement in submission rates, pass rates and grade scores, is not possible. The comparisons are between two different cohorts. However, this does evidence better outcomes in the cohort where the new initiative was used. It could be argued that the positive effect on submission rates is likely to be in some part, at least, due to increased engagement with the module.

Finally, there were three areas concerning foundation year students that this initiative sought to address: preparatory reading, engagement in class, and lesson attendance. The successful impact on the first two have been covered in this work. It was hoped that increased levels of engagement would result in increased attendance, owing to an investment in the lesson already being made. Unfortunately, no discernible improvement was detected. This suggests that there is further work to be done to habituate this into learning for foundation year students in this context.

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Appendix

Reading receipts

Reading receipt codes (see the example in Figure 1) emailed to students were unique, both in terms of the quiz and the student submission. This uniqueness meant that plagiarism in student assignments submitted to Turnitin would be flagged by the similarity detection.

Part of the code contained a flag to submission markers whether the submission was on time or late, garnering full or half marks respectively.

The codes also maintained the students' anonymity.

Summative assignment worksheet

To ensure correct submission of reading receipts, students were required to complete a table in a module portfolio worksheet (see Figure 2 above). Part 1 of the worksheet was a table highlighting where the reading receipts should be copied.

N&QR Portfolio Worksheet
Instructions for what is expected in each task are given in the Assignment Brief.

Part 1: Reading Quizzes (20 marks)

Week number	Your unique email response
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	
Reading week	
6	
7	
8	
9	

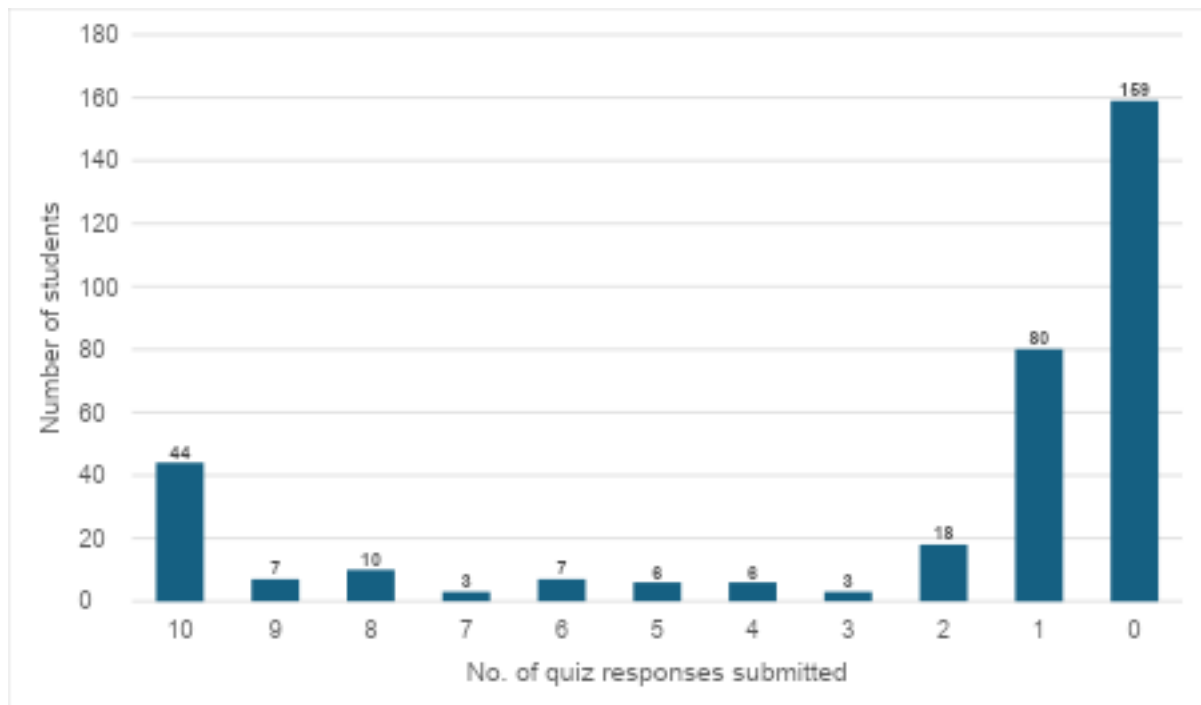
Appendix, Figure 1. Screenshot of summative portfolio worksheet

Response analysis

It is worth noting some further detail regarding the pattern of student submissions.

As can be seen in Appendix, Figure 2 below, of the 343 students enrolled, almost half (159) submitted responses to all ten readings, and three-quarters (257) submitted eight or more. Forty-four students submitted no quiz responses, and this coincides with the number of students who did not submit a final module assignment portfolio. That should not be taken as all forty-four being the same students: it is possible that some students submitted a

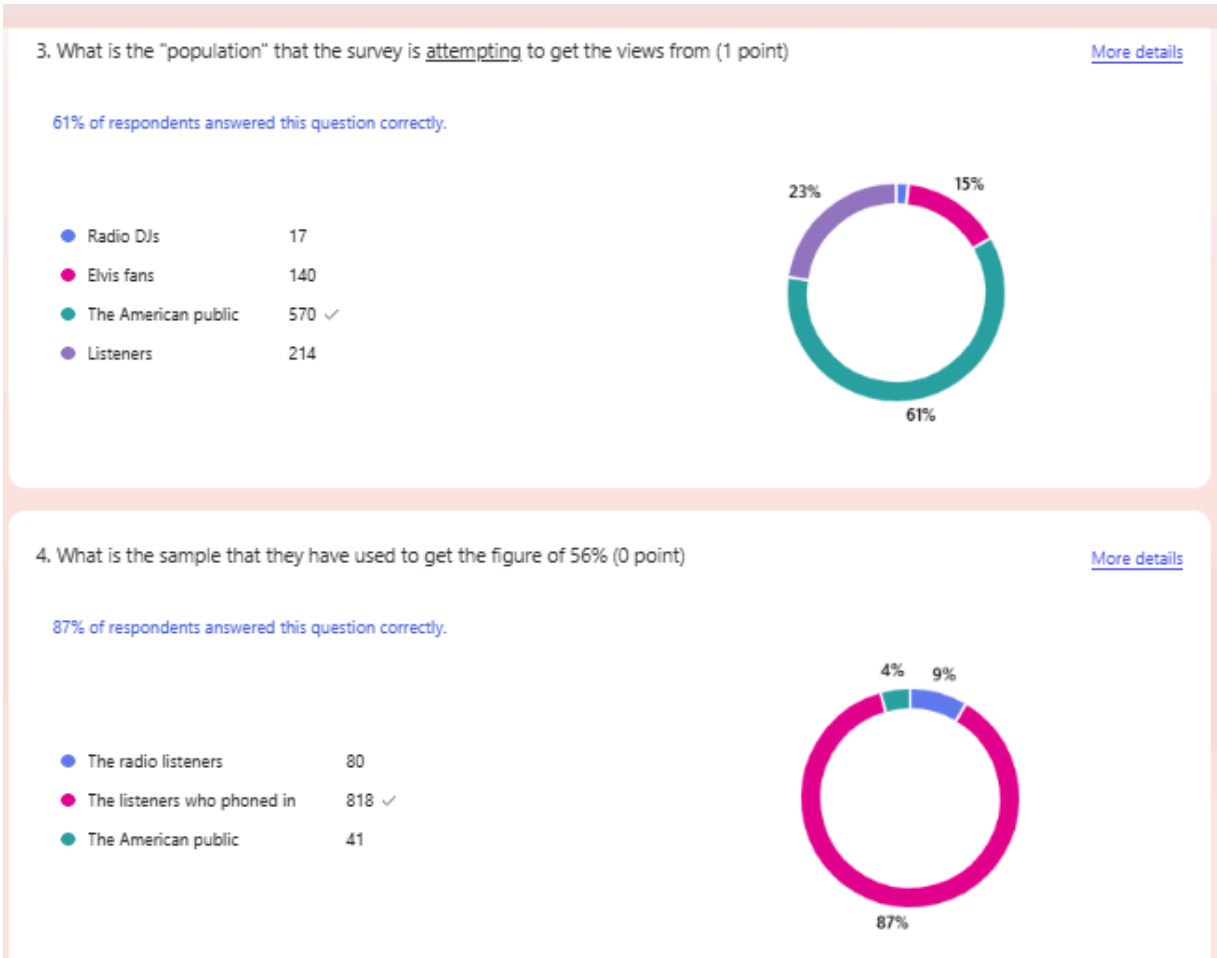
portfolio with no quiz receipts, and that some students received quiz receipts but did not end up submitting a portfolio with those receipts therein. Some of that number will have withdrawn from the foundation year before the end of the course.



Appendix, Figure 2. Counts of number of students submitting responses

Question response breakdown and incorporation into seminar materials

The use of Microsoft Forms for the online quizzes afforded many benefits, including the automated generation of analysis of responses. This allowed the author to monitor responses before the seminar, and where appropriate include answer clarification or opportunities for further discussion in the lesson. Appendix Figures 3 and 4 below show answers to two questions in the analysis, and those answers' incorporation into seminar materials, respectively.



Appendix, Figure 3. MS forms response breakdown

Reading Quiz

The Elvis phone-in was a voluntary sample – those who chose to phone in. The “target” population was the American public.

What is the “population” that the survey is attempting to get the views from

More Details Insights

- Radio DJs
- Elvis fans
- The American public ✓
- Listeners

What is the sample that they have used to get the figure of 56%

More Details

- The radio listeners
- The listeners who phoned in ✓
- The American public

Because it was self-selected, the poll suffers from **Selection Bias / Volunteer Bias** i.e. those with strong opinions

Appendix, Figure 4. Elaboration to quiz responses in seminar presentation