What Barriers Prevent Foundation Year Students from Attending Academic Support Sessions and How Might These be Overcome?

SAMUEL DOUGHERTY
Sheffield Hallam University

Engaging students at all levels of Higher Education (HE) study with the different aspects of university life is vital to ensure they can get the most out of their time at university. One crucial area that underpins success at university is mastery of academic skills, such as assignment planning and critical thinking, and engaging students with this throughout their time at university must be considered a priority. This study puts into context engagement from Foundation Year (FY) students with taught skills sessions, and draws upon the views of both FY students and staff in order to make pragmatic suggestions for ways that practice may be improved to become more inclusive and promote student engagement with academic skills sessions and resources. Online questionnaires were sent to all FY students and teaching staff at the university in order to gather both quantitative and qualitative data in relation to student engagement with academic skills support. Results highlighted the need for greater visibility of the Skills Centre for students to be more aware of the sessions and resources on offer. The research contributes to the wider understanding about how to further engage FY students and makes recommendations about how engagement may be improved.

Introduction

The United Kingdom's Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have experienced dramatic changes over recent years. In the wake of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, staff and students are experiencing different pressures than before, such as rapid shifts to online delivery or adapting to becoming part of a student community that now exists both physically and virtually. Add to this an increased cost of living and political upheaval both at home and abroad and it is clear that there are many demands upon students that must be considered when engaging in any research or discussion regarding approaches to study.

There is much to be said for the benefits of HE, in terms of wellbeing, job prospects and potential earnings (McCoy *et al.*, 2010; Sanders, Daly and Fitzgerald, 2016). In addition, there are less tangible benefits that many students enjoy while studying, such as involvement in extra-curricular activities and exposure to diverse points of view that help to broaden horizons (Cunningham and Pitman, 2020). Increasingly, student engagement relies upon links between what

is being taught and how students perceive this will be of benefit to them – where active teaching can inspire students through participating in the application of skills (Andres, 2017). The HEI featured in this research project has a focus of applying knowledge and this should be apparent in all aspects of university life, including academic skills support (SHU, 2021); as such, ensuring engagement with academic skills sessions, which will help equip students with skills they can apply to both university life and their careers beyond, is crucial.

This article reviews the wider literature on what is known about some of the potential barriers to students engaging with academic support, where possible with specific focus on Foundation Year (FY) students. It then briefly maps out the thought process behind the primary research conducted for this project, before discussing findings and recommendations in relation to existing literature.

Literature review

FYs have long been a feature of HE in the United Kingdom, introduced to enable students without the usual subject specific knowledge to access a university course through standard pathways, such as A Levels. Over time, and with an increase in subjects utilising FYs, their function has adapted to suit needs within the HE sector. As tuition fees rose in 2010, the UK Government sought to attract more young people to university, and one approach was to promote FYs, in part, to attract "young people with high potential but lower grades" (Hansard, 3 November 2010, col 924). Within the last 25 years, a move to encourage more young people into HE has taken place, as begun by the Labour Party's aims in 2001 to ensure 50% of 18-30 year olds were in HE by 2010 (Whitty, 2015). This has continued and recent figures show that 53% of 17-30 year olds went onto HEIs in 2020-21 (DfES, 2021).

FYs are under scrutiny following the release of the Augar Review (2019) which assessed their value for money, suggesting that funding be removed from universities for FYs and that alternatives be offered, such as Access Courses run by Further Education providers. Given this pressure, it is vital that FYs provide students with engaging courses that offer opportunities to be a part of the wider university community, and to thrive both academically and in the world of work.

The diverse nature of FY students means that their journeys to HE are varied. As a rule, students apply for a place on a FY course through UCAS and questions have been raised about the inclusivity of this application process, indicating that it disadvantages those from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Dunn and Faulkner, 2020). One of the key groups that make up FY cohorts are students who did not achieve the necessary grades to immediately access their chosen course, so complete a foundation year in order to gain the skills and knowledge needed to succeed at undergraduate level (Sanders, Daly and Fitzgerald, 2016). The way in which FY delivery has changed has meant that through the clearing process, many students who did not achieve their target grades to gain a place on a course are automatically transferred onto a FY course which will give them access to their preferred course a year later (O'Sullivan *et al*., 2019). Some students may agree to this when offered the option at clearing as they are pleased to accept a place at university, without really knowing what they have agreed to. This may then impact upon their engagement with their course and, in turn, study skills sessions due to feelings of uncertainty about the FY course they are on.

There is a lack of research in this area, although O'Sullivan *et al*. (2019) conducted an empirical study of two selective establishments in England and Ireland. Findings suggested that at the HEIs in England and Ireland, admissions staff were aware of the diverse, and often disadvantaged, backgrounds of applicants to their FY course. However, the extent to which this

affects offers of university places requires further research. It must also be noted that the application process at the English establishment studied by O'Sullivan *et al.* (2019) requires students to reapply through the UCAS admission system to progress to the degree course of their choice upon completion of the FY, whereas at the HEI where this research is based, students automatically progress upon passing their FY.

The make-up of students on FY courses may also influence their likelihood of accessing academic skills support or not. FY courses represent students from different age ranges, many of whom are classed as mature students. Dunn, Rakes and Rakes (2014) suggest that younger students are more likely to engage with support online when compared to mature students – a trait that may have been exacerbated with an increased reliance upon online materials, either due to a proactive move to use new technology or in response to changes necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This requires consideration when looking at engagement with academic skills sessions as the majority of academic skills sessions at this HEI are online, which could cause a lack of engagement from older students. The individual experiences of students are important because talking generally of student cohorts risks homogenising all students, and this could be particularly true when considering students' backgrounds and the multiple identities they exhibit (Reay *et al.*, 2010; O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2019).

The Sutton Trust (2021) believes that HE plays a major role in enhancing social mobility. The role that FYs can play in enhancing those from disadvantaged backgrounds is also advocated in Day, Husbands and Kerslake's recent report investigating ways that HE can help create a fairer society in Britain (2020). Social mobility is a complex topic in HE, with consecutive governments promising to ensure greater access to education and potential opportunities for fulfilling and financially rewarding jobs for all. Reay (2013) discusses many of these complexities, highlighting, for example, inequalities within the rates of social mobility between men and women.

Gender is a factor of interest when considering student engagement in the wider context of HE and more specifically when considering FY students. Studies from the United States and Germany have highlighted the disparity in achievement between male and female students in HE (Kessels and Steinmayr, 2013; Marrs, Sigler, and Brammer, 2012; Stoet, 2015; Wimer and Levant, 2011) and subsequently higher rates of 'dropping out' seen in male students. Male and female engagement with academic support is also shown to differ and the motivating factors behind this should be given consideration. Following a recent study of students at UK universities, Brown, Barry and Todd (2021) suggest that it is not simply gender that must be considered when investigating student engagement, but adherence of individuals to 'gendered behaviours' (p. 413). Although challenging, it may therefore be advisable for HE institutions to establish the behaviours of all students and make tailored suggestions, based upon students' own attitudes to learning and gender. Research involving all students will allow for guidance to be produced that individual students can engage with, based on how they identify and what they feel is most relevant.

Many FY students may have financial concerns that draw them away from giving total focus to their studies or mean they do not have time to access additional support sessions due to work commitments (Hale, 2020). Reid, Jessop and Miles (2019) have highlighted the importance of acknowledging finances as a stress factor among students. Thompson, Bosman and Sharp (2020) also suggest that students may be more anxious now due to recent increases in tuition fees – a factor that staff must take into consideration when determining how to effectively engage students. With this in mind, it needs to be made clear that attending academic skills sessions is likely to have a positive impact upon student outcomes on their courses and also develop skills that will be beneficial in their careers.

The move to university represents a challenge to students, regardless of their prior experience and age. A sense of belonging in order to feel part of a community must be fostered at university to maximise students' chances of success (Yorke, 2016; Pedler, Willis and Nieuwoudt,

2022). In their qualitative study of students transitioning to their first year of university, Gregersen, Holmegaard and Ulrikson (2021) stress the importance of ensuring students have a sense of belonging at university as early as possible. This sense of belonging is often particularly difficult for FY students who may be insecure in their abilities (Sanders, Daly and Fitzgerald, 2016). Hale (2020) highlights the important role that FYs can play in supporting transition to university, particularly for students from working class backgrounds. With this in mind, it is vital that FY students are aware of support that is on offer as part of their course induction.

Young, Thompson, Sharp and Bosman (2019) emphasise the link between successful transition to university and wellbeing and this is perhaps even more important when considering FY students, whose experiences outside of education may set them at a disadvantage. This must also be considered in relation to the added pressures upon students' mental health as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Chen and Lucock, 2022). Staff have a responsibility to ensure that students are supported and acknowledge the challenges faced by students in an uncertain climate.

Ensuring FY students remain on course for the duration is of great importance to the host establishment and especially to the individual. Based on their qualitative study of FY students, measuring expectations and achievement, Sanders, Daly and Fitzgerald (2016) point out that FY students may be more vulnerable to self-doubt and therefore considering removing themselves from their course. Conversely, in their comparative longitudinal study of universities in the UK and Ireland, O'Sullivan *et al*. (2019) found that students on FY courses gained confidence in their academic abilities as the year progressed. It is, therefore, in everyone's interests to ensure that students feel confident in their abilities and know where to seek additional support should it be required.

An underpinning aim of Higher Education must be to ensure that students are equipped and inspired to continue learning once they have graduated; Anderson and Normand (2017) discuss the need to equip students with skills that will enable them to return to learning in the future and have the confidence to use whatever new technologies may be in use at that time. This is increasingly important with the rapid shift towards hybrid modes of teaching in recent years. Engaging students with a desire to look beyond their current stage of study must underpin thoughts of how to engage students, at FY or beyond.

A combination of students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivators will affect individuals differently and HEIs must ensure that they cater for the needs of different students (Mohammed, Gheith and Papaluca, 2021, p. 501). Based on this, the means of delivery must be carefully considered. In a rapidly changing world, technology must be embraced as a means of ensuring students can access support. There have been numerous studies with various mediums such as WhatsApp and Padlet (Jones, 2021; Coleman and O'Connor, 2019). Utilising resources with which many students are familiar could be a means of helping to increase engagement.

However, considering the complex make up of FY student cohorts, and bearing in mind students' financial situations, access to technology must not be taken for granted. La Velle *et al.* (2020) highlight the inequity of digital access among students; given the high proportion of FY students from disadvantaged backgrounds, it cannot be assumed that all students have access at home to the resources being used to deliver academic support sessions and this could be a contributing factor for low engagement. Indeed, overreliance upon virtual, internet-based delivery may lead students to a point where they feel unable to switch off from work, thus leading to further disengagement (Kresjler, 2007).

At the HEI where the research was conducted, FY students accounted for 5% of enrolments in the 2021-22 academic year. Across the University, there are 97 FY courses and 93 of these are integrated into degree courses. 41% of FY students are from non-professional backgrounds (SHU, 2021) and 17% are from disadvantaged backgrounds, categorised as IMD Decile 1 (SHU, 2021). In addition, 62% of FY students at the University are male. This is an interesting

consideration when investigating engagement as male students have also been highlighted within the department as a group which does not engage well with support sessions. In the 2020-21 academic year, 71% of FY students progressed onto their first degree course, 8% progressed elsewhere, 8% repeated the year and 13% withdrew.

53% of students are from POLAR 4 groups. This is also significant as, drawing upon Bourdieu's theory of habitus and capital (1986), Reay (2009) suggests that universities are primarily designed to accommodate those from middle to higher socio-economic backgrounds. This causes a problem for students from less affluent backgrounds as not only are they having to transition to a new learning environment, but they are also having to adapt to ways of learning that have not been developed with them in mind. The Office for Students (OfS) classifies students based on the number of individuals participating in HE in a local area (POLAR) and there are a high number of students on FY courses from POLAR Quintile 1 backgrounds. The university in which the research has been conducted is located in an area where 10 of 14 constituencies have low or very low social mobility (Sutton Trust/SHU, 2021). The University has a commitment to widening participation, as demonstrated by the entrance figures of 2017-18 where 21% of students were from POLAR 1. This has large implications when considering how students engage with their courses.

From September 2020-November 2021, of 2892 individual students voluntarily attending academic skills webinars, only 7 were FY students, representing just 0.24% of attendees in comparison to making up 5% of enrolments in 2020-21 (SHU, 2021). The Skills Centre also offers one-to-one appointments and the figures here are similarly eye-opening, with only one session attended by an FY student out of 710 total sessions held. More needs to be done to engage FY students with the services on offer, and greater understanding is required about why these students do not attend.

It is evident that there are a number of diverse, intersecting factors that may affect students' engagement with their studies yet it is unclear if any of these are directly responsible for low engagement from FY students with academic skills sessions. It is therefore important that further research into this is conducted in order to address the needs of FY students and provide a service that allows them to succeed on their FY course and develop the skills needed to thrive on the courses to which they progress.

Methodology

This study drew on the University's demographic data and tracked attendance at skills sessions in order to build an accurate picture of the number of FY students attending skills sessions. The needs of FY students were evaluated with the aim of developing more appropriate sessions for them, resulting in the following research question and aims being decided upon:

> Question: What barriers prevent FY students from attending academic support sessions and how might these be overcome?
> Aims:
> - Establish why FY engagement with skills sessions is low.
> - Develop an understanding of specific FY needs in relation to academic skills sessions.
> - Draw on information gathered to develop new academic skills sessions appropriate for FY students.

It was important to consider the practical significance of the research being conducted (Check and Schutt, 2012) and whether the outcomes would have a tangible benefit for those participating (Mfutso-Bengo, Masiye and Muula, 2008). Decisions about what research methods to employ were taken after careful consideration and discussion with teaching staff; methods were chosen that would interfere least with students but would also do most to ensure positive engagement with, and outcomes from, the research. This ties into an action research approach, and research was undertaken with a view to looking into a problem within my place of work, seeking to enhance my own practice and that of others (Griffiths and Davies, 1995; Carr and Kemmis, 2005).

Recent studies seeking to understand students and learn from student experience have successfully employed qualitative methods (Thompson, Pawson and Evans, 2021). As the focus of the study was to develop an understanding of barriers to learning from students, a qualitative element was included in the research approach (Hammarberg, Kirkman and de Lacey 2016). This was in addition to questions that sought to gather quantitative data on the number and type of skills resources students had engaged with and staff had used with students (see Appendix A).

Ethics

Consideration of the wellbeing of research participants and mitigating any risk of harm to them was central to the research approach (Sikes, 2010; British Education Research Association, 2018). Students, and staff, have undergone a huge upheaval over the last two years and interference with study has been unavoidable. I have therefore been mindful to minimise interference with any teaching and avoid putting additional pressure on students. The research was approved by the University's ethics committee and participants were provided with an information sheet explaining the aims of the research. It was made clear that participants could withdraw their input in the study up to a given date. All participant data has been anonymised.

Questionnaires were selected as the means of initial data collection. While effective, there is still an intrusive element to questionnaires, as participants are being asked to reveal information about themselves (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). The questions included were carefully considered in order to focus on only what was relevant for the aims of this project. A shortcoming of some questionnaires is they often do not allow for more developed answers which express more complex thoughts (Burton, 2005). Therefore, open-ended questions were also included in the questionnaire to enable the collection of richer data.

Consideration was given to participant population size and, in order to maximise engagement, all FY students were contacted via FY teaching staff and the consent forms and link to the questionnaire were shared. It was decided that an online questionnaire would be accessible for students and would provide more immediate data than a paper-based questionnaire. Similarly, all FY teaching staff were contacted via email, having been told about the research project in an operations group meeting.

Analysis

Thematic analysis was undertaken to make links between the responses from students and staff, and to tie this back to the literature. Braun and Clarke (2022) advocate thematic analysis as an accessible approach for less experienced researchers. Furthermore, the opportunity to discern links and draw out themes between the quantitative and qualitative data was also an advantage of using this approach. The main themes identified were around awareness of academic skills provision, and factors affecting attendance.

Limitations

It must be acknowledged that the initial plan for this particular research had to be adapted and limitations exist within the process and results achieved. A much smaller group of students and staff completed the questionnaire than planned (five FY students and two members of FY teaching staff) and it had been raised in meetings with FY teaching staff that students already felt 'over surveyed'. The results of the research are still valid, although they may be less transferrable than if a larger sample size had been achieved and more in-depth qualitative data captured for analysis. Results will still be used to inform practice and serve as a foundation for further research, particularly as the low level of engagement with the research reflects the low engagement with skill provisions overall.

Results

The following results display quantitative data gathered.

Student responses

Have you voluntarily accessed any resources/sessions from the Skills Centre? (Select all that apply)
5 responses

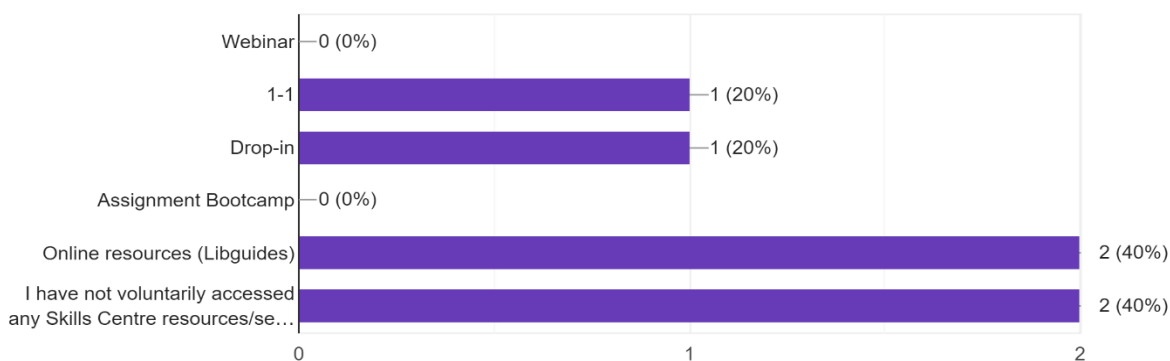|	
Webinar	0 (0%)
1-1	1 (20%)
Drop-in	1 (20%)
Assignment Bootcamp	0 (0%)
Online resources (Libguides)	2 (40%)
I have not voluntarily accessed any Skills Centre resources/se…	2 (40%)

Figure 1: Responses to a multiple choice question. Results show student engagement with academic skills resources and taught sessions.

How confident do you feel in your academic skills? (1 Very low confidence - 5 Very high confidence)
5 responses

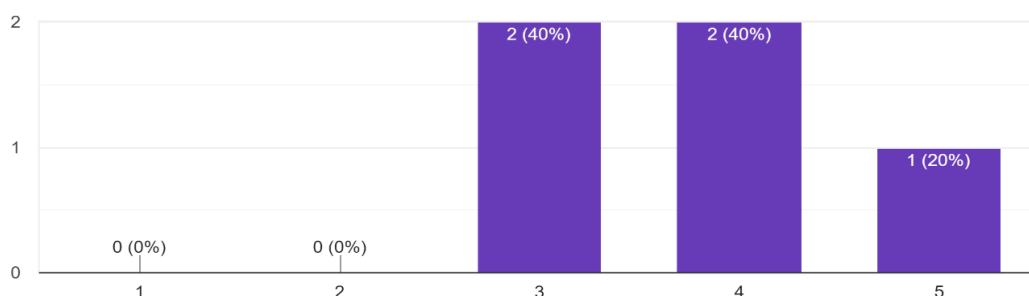| 1	2	3	4	5
0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (40%)	2 (40%)	1 (20%)

Figure 2: Student responses to a Likert scale question. Responses show how students rate their own confidence in relation to their academic skills.

Do you feel a sense of belonging with the Sheffield Hallam University community? (1 I do not feel part of the university community - 5 I feel part of the university community)
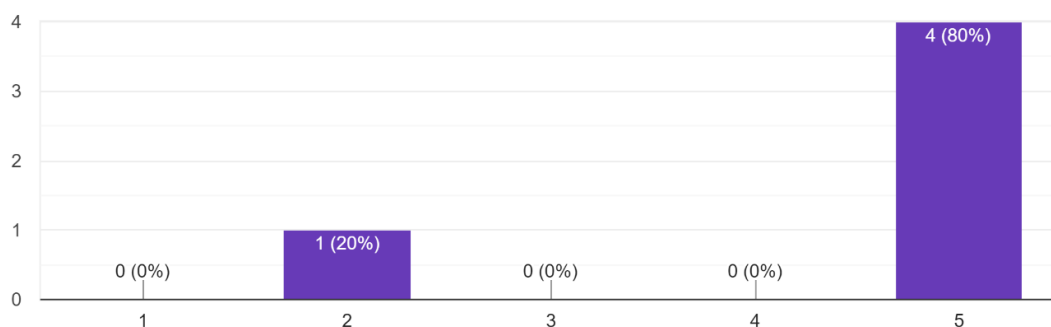
5 responses

Figure 3: Student responses to a Likert scale question. Results show the level of belonging that students feel about a sense of belonging with the University community.

Do you feel welcome in the library? (1 I do not feel welcome- 5 I feel very welcome)
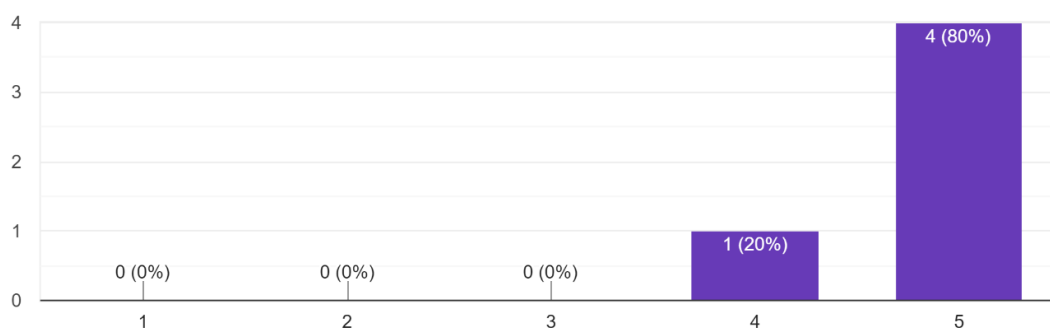
5 responses

Figure 4: Student responses to a Likert scale question. Results show how students rate how welcome they feel in the University library. (The Skills Centre is based within the library hence this question being asked).

Staff responses

Which Skills Centre resources have you used? (Select all that apply)
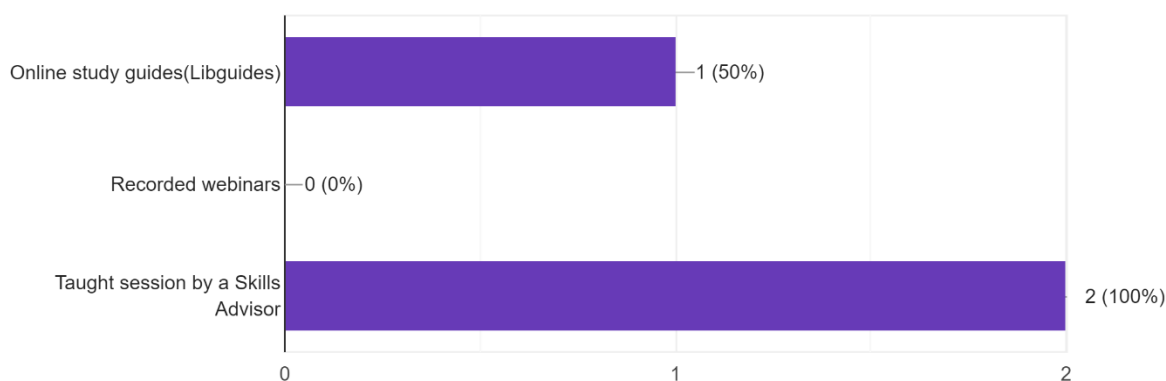
2 responses

Figure 5: Staff responses to a multiple choice question about which academic skills resources and sessions they may have used with their students.

In addition to the quantitative data displayed above, the following themes were identified from the qualitative data that was also gathered through the questionnaire. While responses were brief, the main themes identified were:

- Lack of awareness of academic skills provision/resources
- Difficulty attending sessions due to other commitments
- Academic Skills sessions embedded within courses (suggested by staff)
- Poor attendance to taught sessions (highlighted by staff)

Discussion

The research uncovered a number of interesting insights from both FY students and teaching staff. It was interesting from a researcher's point of view that low engagement with the research reflects low level FY student engagement with skills resources. Despite the small numbers involved in the study, the insights have provided an interesting platform from which to consider how FY students engage with academic skills provision.

The research corroborated certain key themes that were highlighted in wider academic literature, in particular those of community in HE and student engagement with academic support. While a sense of community with the wider student body was felt by most participants, student C was less positive, rating their sense of belonging within the university community at only 2 out of 5. It was interesting that this participant also ranked their confidence in academic ability lower than others, at 3 out of 5. This ties in with Gregersen, Holmegaard and Ulrikson's (2021) assertion that a lack of a sense of belonging could prove to be a significant barrier to learning. This may also be an example of the student's habitus being misaligned with the University's general feel, based on their experiences to this point, which suggests more work needs to be done to ensure students feel included (Bourdieu, 1986).

Student C also made clear that they had "no idea what the Skills Centre is", a concerning response given that staff respondents had both engaged with Skills Centre resources, and materials had been sent to staff at the beginning of semesters 1 and 2 to encourage students to access academic skills support. In light of this, more attention needs to be paid to the recommendations made by Young, Thompson, Sharp and Bosman (2019), who suggest that induction programmes are crucial to wellbeing and success. Furthermore, staff A suggested that "more engagement is needed at the start of the year in induction", and academic skills "needs to be viewed as part of the university experience and not something extra they can do". Combined, the views of staff and students in relation to the literature suggest that a more prominent presence in FY induction events would be beneficial in terms of supporting students and encourage greater engagement with support sessions and resources.

An important point was raised in one student response in relation to the additional pressures students may experience. Student E commented that "I am a student parent therefore I only access when not doing childcare". This is an example of the large responsibilities that FY students may have and highlights the need for academic skills support to be flexible in order to cater for the needs of students who have busy lives outside of the learning environment.

It was encouraging to discover that four out of five student participants felt that skills resources were relevant to them, and that both staff participants had used resources provided by the Skills Centre. In addition to this, staff A commented that "having staff come into time-tabled sessions has been excellent and really valuable for the students". This provides a firm grounding from which to develop stronger links with both staff and students as the team is not having to 'sell' the idea that developing academic skills is important.

The results raised points that contradict certain elements highlighted in the literature review. Sanders, Daley and Fitzgerald (2016) discuss the prevalence of self-doubt among FY students; however, the results demonstrate a different point of view. Four out of five participants rated their confidence in academic skills at either 4 or 5 out of 5 (with 5 being 'very confident'). This finding corroborates findings from O'Sullivan *et al.* (2019), where confidence in academic ability increased in FY students during the academic year. It would be interesting to expand this particular study by gathering data at the start, middle and end of the year. As data were collected in semester 2, this may have had an impact upon how students see themselves, having grown in confidence through the course of the year. With this in mind, the participants may not feel the need to access academic support sessions, due to feeling comfortable in the skills they already possess. Interestingly, staff A suggested that 'confidence' may be a barrier to learning. This poses the question of why staff and students may feel differently about how students feel about their own abilities in relation to academic skills.

An important consideration is how to sustain student confidence over time. Sanders, Daley and Fitzgerald (2016) suggest that individuals' confidence may be negatively affected if students do not receive the results they are expecting, which, in turn, may lead to decreased engagement or, in extreme cases, withdrawal from the course. It would therefore be advisable for FY students to have more interactions with skills sessions, in order to support success on assignments and also to increase knowledge of what is expected at various marking levels. It would be interesting to investigate this further and future research should give this discourse more serious consideration.

There were unexpected outcomes, some of which highlight encouraging perceptions of belonging amongst FY students. While there is literature to suggest that FY students may feel on the periphery of traditional student communities (Bourdieu, 1986; Reay, 2009), student responses, in the main, contradict this. Four out of five student participants felt 'part of the university community', which is encouraging as this sense of belonging can help to underpin academic success (Yorke, 2016). This positive sense of belonging echoes O'Sullivan *et al.*'s (2019) study of FY students at selective HEIs in the UK and Ireland. Coupled with the outcome that 100% of student participants put themselves at either 4 or 5 out of 5 in terms of feeling 'welcome in the library', it seems that risk of alienation on grounds of being out of place is unfounded. This is a positive outcome and one that can be built upon to engage students with more of the academic support offered.

Another interesting outcome of the research was teaching staff highlighting the issue of engagement in their subject specific sessions. Staff B shared that "There has been poor engagement generally with on-campus activity so this is a general problem." While this may start to explain why FY students have not engaged as much with on campus support, it does not address the causes of low attendance in general, as the majority (80%) of academic skills sessions are delivered online. Additionally, throughout various periods of the study being conducted, all academic skills sessions were delivered online due to lockdown restrictions being in place. It will therefore be important to work more closely with FY course leaders and academics to establish a root cause of low attendance.

The effective use of modern technology is widely held as a practical means of engaging students, in conjunction with other more traditional methods. Jones (2021) and Coleman and O'Connor (2019) advocated using up-to-date technology to ensure engagement and this mirrors the results from student respondents, as those who had engaged with resources had predominantly done so online in the form of drop-ins and online resources such as Lib guides. It would seem, though, that even more could be done here. If we were to take more innovative approaches, such as using social media channels that students use themselves, such as WhatsApp, we may be able to advertise upcoming sessions more effectively, rather than relying upon email announcements that rarely get looked at. A recent scoping review has demonstrated that

WhatsApp can be used as a constructive tool for medical students and adopting this as a means to engage FY students may be an interesting and convenient method to trial in this setting (Coleman and O'Connor, 2019).

While limited in terms of participant numbers and depth of responses given, the data gathered has provided insight into the thoughts of staff and students, and has demonstrated that further steps must be taken in order to further engage FY students and staff with the academic support that is on offer.

Consideration was given to the method of data collection, not least to put minimal stress on students and staff who already have numerous conflicting pressures and have had interrupted academic years; this includes events beyond their control, such as the pandemic and, more recently, industrial action, which may have impacted upon voluntary uptake of involvement. The assertion that "there has been poor engagement generally with on-campus activity" goes some way to explain low engagement with the research, especially when considered in the context of students highlighting in discussions with staff that they feel 'over surveyed'. It is useful to know that student engagement has been a challenge recently in timetabled teaching sessions and suggests that, as staff, we need to work more closely to find out why students are not attending timetabled and voluntary sessions and what more we can do to improve the student experience.

Recommendations

Summary of recommendations:
- Taster sessions during university induction weeks
- Greater embedding of academic skills sessions within courses
- Academic skills resources to be provided in multiple formats
- Accreditation for attending academic skills sessions
- Co-design and creation of resources with students

In response to staff recommendations and student suggestions, greater integration into induction programmes is required. Online skills inductions could be held, and delivered to several courses at once, in order to fit in with staff commitments across other student cohorts. Skills staff could also offer a taster session for students (in response to a suggestion made by staff A) to showcase the support on offer and make it clear that development of academic skills is part of integrating with the wider university community.

Embedding academic skills sessions within courses may help to secure higher attendance figures to taught skills sessions. This involvement at a course level may then lead to greater voluntary student engagement with academic skills resources and taught sessions.

Producing relevant support resources in different formats, including videos and audio resources is vital to engage FY students. Further to this, developing stronger ties with academic teaching staff would create opportunities to share up-to-date and innovative resources and raise awareness of skills provision – this could encourage FY students to engage with sessions, such as 1-1 assignment support.

A potential longer-term solution to engaging students could be to set up accreditation for attending skills sessions. This could take several forms, but potential options could be to establish a 'Skills Award', which students could add to their CVs (AGCAS, 2021; Clarke, 2013); incorporate attendance to skills sessions in a university-wide award celebrating dedication to study; or have skills sessions linked with courses, where attendance at sessions would be directly related to a percentage of marks on a given module. The benefit here would be that students

would develop skills during their FY which they could then apply as they progress to their full degree courses, and in their future careers.

Co-designing resources with students would foster a strong working relationship between staff and students, and may lead to the development of more relevant resources for FY students. Furthermore, it would help to address a potential power imbalance between staff and students, providing more agency for learners (Friere, 1970). This approach would allow for the creation of resources for specific student cohorts, which would enhance engagement.

Conclusion

This research was conducted at a time when both staff and students are experiencing a great deal of upheaval as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and other pressures at home and internationally. It is important that the results of (and engagement with) the research are seen in this context, and that recommendations are acted on in a flexible way to accommodate student and staff needs in a rapidly changing social and political environment.

FY student cohorts are diverse, and research conducted with groups who are experiencing conflicting demands, academically and otherwise, needs to be flexible. This research project has emphasised this and, in response, was adapted to minimise interference and intrusion on student and staff time. Recommendations to conduct further research to broaden the scope of data gathered are suggested, mindful of the fact that different approaches need to be employed. Possibilities may include using a wider variety of channels for participants to engage with the research and considering incentivising participation in the research.

A 'one size fits all' approach does not work for students when looking at mitigating barriers to learning, and this is particularly true of the diverse makeup of FY courses. It is vital that we look at individual cohorts and adapt resources to their needs. Greater collaboration with students would be advisable, to produce and deliver content that students are aware of and want to engage with. Embedding skills sessions within courses will also help to broaden the reach of the Skills Centre and support students in developing their skills. This will also have the added benefit of developing closer links between different teams within the University.

In order to meet the needs of students, we need to listen to them carefully to ensure that practice keeps up with rapidly changing needs, while ensuring rigorous approaches are still taken to ensure a firm grasp of academic skills that will support students in an educational context, and importantly, in their lives and careers.

Bibliography

Alison, S., Katie, W., and Christopher, K. (2014). The Pedagogical Implications of Implementing New Technologies to Enhance Student Engagement and Learning Outcomes. Creative education, 5(2), 104-113.
https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2014.52017.

Andres, H. P. (2019). Active teaching to manage course difficulty and learning motivation. Journal of further and higher education, 43(2), 220-235.
https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2017.1357073 .

Aymans, S. C., Kortsch, T., and Kauffeld, S. (2020). Gender and career optimism—The effects of gender-specific perceptions of lecturer support, career barriers and self-efficacy on career optimism. Higher education quarterly, 74(3), 273-289.
https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12238.

Baker, Z. (2020). The vocational/academic divide in widening participation: the higher education decision making of further education students. Journal of further and higher education, 44(6), 766-780.
https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2019.1599328.

British Education Research Association. (2018). Ethical guidelines for Education Research (4th Edition).
https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018-online.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). "The Forms of Capital." Pp. 241-258 in Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education, edited by J. G. Richardson. New York: Greenwood Press.

Bourne, J., and Winstone, N. (2021). Empowering students' voices: the use of activity-oriented focus groups in higher education research. International journal of research and method in education, 44(4), 352-365. https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2020.1777964.

Braun, V., and Clarke, V. (2022). Thematic Analysis: A practical guide. SAGE.

Brown, D., Barry, J. A., and Todd, B. K. (2021). Barriers to academic help-seeking: the relationship with gender-typed attitudes. Journal of further and higher education, 45(3), 401-416.
https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2020.1774049.

Bru, E., Virtanen, T., Kjetilstad, V., and Niemiec, C. P. (2021). Gender Differences in the Strength of Association between Perceived Support from Teachers and Student Engagement. Scandinavian journal of educational research, 65(1), 153-168.
https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2019.1659404.

Brundrett, M., and Rhodes, C. (2013). Researching educational leadership and management: methods and approaches. SAGE.

Burke, P. J. (2012). The right to higher education: beyond widening participation. Routledge.
https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203125571.

Burton, D. (2005). Practitioner research for teachers. Paul Chapman, London

Carr, W., and Kemmis, S. (2005). Staying Critical. Educational action research, 13(3), 347-358.
https://doi.org/10.1080/09650790500200316.

Chapman, A. (2017). Using the assessment process to overcome Imposter Syndrome in mature students. Journal of further and higher education, 41(2), 112-119.
https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2015.1062851.

Check, J. W., and Schutt, R. K. (2012). Research methods in education. Sage Publications.

Clarke, W. (2013). 'During the course of the programme my attention shifted and deepened – I was more interested in developing myself as a person': Evaluating a careers award in higher education. Enhancing the Learner Experience in Higher Education, 5(1).

Cohen, L., Manion, L., and Morrison, K. (2017a). Research methods in education (Eighth edition. ed.). Routledge.

Coleman, E., and O'Connor, E. (2019). The role of WhatsApp® in medical education; a scoping review and instructional design model. BMC medical education, 19(1), 279-279. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-019-1706-8.

Creswell, J. W. (2017). Research design. 14: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches (5th edition (international student edition)). SAGE Publications.

Cunninghame, I., and Pitman, T. (2020). Framing the benefits of higher education participation from the perspective of non-completers. Higher education research and development, 39(5), 926-939. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1705255.

Dampier, G. (2021). Adapt and thrive: student engagement on a Business and Economics Foundation Year programme during Covid-19. Journal of learning development in higher education, (22). https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi22.757.

Day, N., Husbands, C., Kerslake, N. (2020). Making Universities Matter: How higher education can help to heal a divided Britain, HEPI Number 125. https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/02/27/making-universities-matter-how-higher-education-can-help-to-heal-a-divided-britain/.

DeMatthews, D., Knight, D., Reyes, P., Benedict, A., and Callahan, R. (2020). From the Field: Education Research During a Pandemic. Educational researcher, 49(6), 398-402. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X20938761.

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. (2011). Government response to consultations on: Students at the heart of the system; A new fit for purpose regulatory framework for higher education. https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/higher-education-white-paper-students-at-the-heart-of-the-system.

Department for Education. (2019). Post-18 review of education and funding: independent panel report. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-18-review-of-education-and-funding-independentpanel-report.

Diane, R., Gill, C., and John, C. (2010). 'Fitting in' or 'standing out': working-class students in UK higher education. British educational research journal, 36(1), 107-124. https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920902878925.

Diniz, A. M., Alfonso, S., Araújo, A. M., Deaño, M., Costa, A. R., Conde, Â., and Almeida, L. S. (2018). Gender differences in first-year college students' academic expectations. Studies in higher education (Dorchester-on-Thames), 43(4), 689-701. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2016.1196350.

Dunn, K. E., Rakes, G. C., and Rakes, T. A. (2014). Influence of academic self-regulation, critical thinking, and age on online graduate students' academic help-seeking. Distance education, 35(1), 75-89. https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2014.891426.

Freire, P. (2000). Pedagogy of the oppressed (30th anniversary ed.). Continuum.

Garnham, W. A., and Betts, T. (2018). The Padlet Project: Transforming student engagement in Foundation Year seminars. Compass (Eltham), 11(2). https://doi.org/10.21100/compass.v11i2.714.

Griffiths, M., and Davies, C. (1993). Learning to Learn: action research from an equal opportunities perspective in a junior school. British educational research journal, 19(1), 43-58. https://doi.org/10.1080/0141192930190104.

Hale, S (2020). The Class Politics of Foundation Years, Journal of the Foundation Year Network, Volume 3, pp.91-100.

Hammarberg, K., Kirkman, M., & de Lacey, S. (2016). Qualitative research methods: when to use them and how to judge them. Hum Reprod, 31(3), 498-501. https://doi.org/10.1093/humrep/dev334.

Harland, T., and Wald, N. (2018). Curriculum, teaching and powerful knowledge. Higher education, 76(4), 615-628. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-017-0228-8.

Heath, M., Ellen, A. S., and Robyn, D. B. (2012). Gender, Masculinity, Femininity, and Help Seeking in College. Masculinidades y cambio social, 1(3), 267. https://doi.org/10.4471/mcs.2012.16.

Johnson, R. B., Onwuegbuzie, A. J., and Turner, L. A. (2016). Toward a Definition of Mixed Methods Research. Journal of mixed methods research, 1(2), 112-133. https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689806298224.

Jones, K. (2021). 'We had a good laugh together': using Teams for collaborative learning. Journal of learning development in higher education, (21). https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi21.810.

The Journal of Further and Higher Education (2022). https://www-tandfonline-com.hallam.idm.oclc.org/action/journalInformation?show=aimsScope&journalCode=cjfh20.

Joyce, B. R. (1991). The doors to school improvement. Educational leadership, 48(8), 59.

Julal, F. S. (2016a). Predictors of undergraduate students' university support service use during the first year of university. British journal of guidance & counselling, 44(4), 371-381. https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2015.1119232.

Kane, M. (1999). The good research guide for small-scale social research projects. Family practice, 16(2), 207-207. https://doi.org/10.1093/fampra/16.2.207-a.

Kessels, U., and Steinmayr, R. (2013). Macho-man in School: Toward the Role of Gender Role Self- Concepts and Help Seeking in School Performance. Learning and Individual Differences, 23: 234–240. doi:10.1016/j.lindif.2012.09.013.

Kettley, N., and Murphy, C. (2021). Augmenting excellence, promoting diversity? Preliminary design of a foundation year for the University of Cambridge. British journal of sociology of education, 42(3), 419-434. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2021.1886050.

Marrs, H., E. A. Sigler, and Brammer, R. D. (2012). Gender, Masculinity, Femininity and Help Seeking in College. Masculinities and Social Change 1(3), 267–292.

Mansfield, S. (2020). Changing the face of academic skills workshops. Journal of learning development in higher education, (17). https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi17.508.

McCoy, S. and Smyth, E. (2010). Higher education expansion and differentiation in the Republic of Ireland. Higher Education. 61. 243-260. 10.1007/s10734-010-9375-x.

Mercer, J. (2007). The challenges of insider research in educational institutions: Wielding a double-edged sword and resolving delicate dilemmas. Oxford review of education, 33(1), 1-17. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054980601094651.

Mfutso-Bengo J., Masiye F., and Muula A. (2008). Ethical challenges in conducting research in humanitarian crisis situations. Malawi Med J., Jun;20(2), 46-9. doi: 10.4314/mmj.v20i2.10956. PMID: 19537432; PMCID: PMC3345669.

Munro, L. (2011). 'Go boldly, dream large!' : the challenges confronting non-traditional students at university. The Australian journal of education, 55(2), 115-131. https://doi.org/10.1177/000494411105500203.

Nathalie, S. (2020). A two-step model for creative teaching in higher education. Journal of learning development in higher education, 18. https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi18.574.

Nel, N. M., Romm, N. R. A., and Tlale, L. D. N. (2014). Reflections on focus group sessions regarding inclusive education: reconsidering focus group research possibilities. Australian educational researcher, 42(1), 35-53. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-014-0150-3.

Office for Students, Access and Participation data (2019). Full-time study only, POLAR1 https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/ access-and-participation-plan-data/.

O'Sullivan, K., Bird, N., Robson, J., and Winters, N. (2019). Academic identity, confidence and belonging: The role of contextualised admissions and foundation years in higher education. British educational research journal, 45(3), 554-575. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3513.

O'Sullivan, K., Byrne, D., Robson, J., and Winters, N. (2019). Who Goes to College via Access Routes? A Comparative Study of Widening Participation Admission in Selective Universities in Ireland and England. Social inclusion, 7(1), 38-51. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v7i1.1647.

Oliver, P. (2010). The student's guide to research ethics (2nd ed.). Open University Press.

Pedler, M. L., Willis, R., and Nieuwoudt, J. E. (2022). A sense of belonging at university: student retention, motivation and enjoyment. Journal of further and higher education, 46(3), 397-408. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1955844.

Pigden, L., and Moore, A. G. (2019). Educational advantage and employability of UK university graduates. Higher education, skills and work-based learning, 9(4), 603-619. https://doi.org/10.1108/HESWBL-10-2018-0101.

Reay, D., Crozier, G., and Clayton, J. (2009). 'Strangers in Paradise'?: Working-class Students in Elite Universities. Sociology, 43(6), 1103–1121. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038509345700.

Reay, D., Crozier, G. and Clayton, J. (2010). Fitting in or 'Standing Out': Working-Class Students in UK Higher Education. British Educational Research Journal. 36. 107-124. 10.1080/01411920902878925.

Reay, D. (2013). Social mobility, a panacea for austere times: tales of emperors, frogs, and tadpoles. British journal of sociology of education, 34(5-6), 660-677. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2013.816035.

Richardson, J. G. (1985). Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education. Green-wood Press.

Richardson, J. T. E. (2004). Methodological Issues in Questionnaire-Based Research on Student Learning in Higher Education. Educational psychology review, 16(4), 347-358. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-004-0004-z.

Sanders, L. D., Daly, A. P., and Fitzgerald, K. (2016). Predicting Retention, Understanding Attrition: A Prospective Study of Foundation Year Students. Widening participation and lifelong learning, 18(2), 50-83. https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.18.2.50.

Sheffield Hallam University (2020). Access and participation plan 2020-21 to 2024-25. https://blogs.shu.ac.uk/academicadvising/2021/02/05/spotlight-on-access-and-participation-an-overview-of-hallams-5-year-plan-to-address-student-inequalities-and-where-to-find-data-and-insight-about-your-course/.

Sheffield Hallam University (2022). Skills Centre Attendance Statistics, www.tableau.shu.ac.uk.

Sikes, P. (2010). Ethical Issues and Questions, Doing educational research: a guide to first-time researchers. London, England: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Simm, D., Marvell, A., Winlow, H., and Schaaf, R. (2011). Student experiences of foundation degrees in further and higher education. Planet (Plymouth), 24(1), 2-9. https://doi.org/10.11120/plan.2011.00240002.

Stoet, G. (2019). "The Challenges for Boys and Men in Twenty-First-Century Education." In The Palgrave Handbook of Male Psychology and Mental Health, edited by J. A. Barry, R. Kingerlee, M. J. Seager and L. Sullivan, 25–45. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

The Sutton Trust (2021). A Levels and University Access, 2021. https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/a-levels-and-university-access-2021/.

The Sutton Trust (2021). Universities and Social Mobility.
  https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/universities-and-social-mobility/.

Tani, M., Gheith, M. H., and Papaluca, O. (2021). Drivers of student engagement in higher educa-
  tion: a behavioral reasoning theory perspective. Higher education, 82(3), 499-518.
  https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00647-7.

Thompson, M., Pawson C., and Evans, B. (2021). Navigating entry into higher education: the
  transition to independent learning and living. Journal of Further and Higher Educa-
  tion, 45:10, 1398-1410, doi: 10.1080/0309877X.2021.1933400.

Tianhua, C., and Mike, L. (2022). The mental health of university students during the COVID-19
  pandemic: An online survey in the UK. PloS one, 17(1).

Vardy, A. (2021). Early years foundation degrees: improving social mobility and promoting child-
  ren's outcomes through the professionalism of the workforce or a tokenistic substitute
  for proper education. Journal of further and higher education, 1-14.
  https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1965557.

Webster-Deakin, T. (2021). Exploring the fluidity of relationships and methodology as an 'insider'
  action researcher. Educational action research, 29(5), 722-737.
  https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2020.1748677.

Whitty, G., Hayton, A., and Tang, S. (2015). Who you know, what you know and knowing the
  ropes: a review of evidence about access to higher education institutions in England.
  Review of education (Oxford), 3(1), 27-67. https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3038.

Wimer, D. J., and Levant, R. F. (2011). The Relation of Masculinity and Help-Seeking Style with
  the Academic Help-Seeking Behavior of College Men. The Journal of men's studies, 19(3),
  256-274. https://doi.org/10.3149/jms.1903.256.

Yorke, M. (2016). The development and initial use of a survey of student 'belongingness',
  engagement and self-confidence in UK higher education. Assessment and evaluation in
  higher education, 41(1), 154-166. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2014.990415.

Zull, J. E. (2011). The Art of Changing the Brain : Enriching the Practice of Teaching by Exploring
  the Biology of Learning. Herndon Stylus Publishing.

Appendix A:

Questions asked to students:
- What course are you studying?
- How did you hear about the Skills Centre?
- What services and support do you feel would be more relevant to you?
- What prevents you from accessing Skills Centre sessions or resources?
- If you have any suggestions for ways the Skills Centre could support your academic skills development, please share them here.
- Have you voluntarily accessed any resources/sessions from the Skills Centre?
- How confident do you feel in your academic skills?
- Do you feel a sense of belonging with the University community?
- Do you feel welcome in the library?

Questions asked to staff:
- Title of Foundation Year course taught
- Which Skills Centre resources have you used?

- When and how have you told foundation year students about skills centre resources/taught sessions? (e.g. Induction sessions, as part of assignment feedback, academic advisor meetings)
- Which academic skills do you think foundation year students need to develop most? (e.g. critical thinking, planning assignments, etc.)
- Considering your previous answer, what support or resources do you think would best help students to develop the academic skills you mentioned?
- What barriers, if any, do you think prevent foundation year students from accessing academic support sessions and resources?
- Please explain what you think the Skills Centre could do to increase engagement from Foundation Year students with its offer.
- If you have any thoughts, reflections or ideas you would like to share in relation to the Skills Centre and its engagement with Foundation Year students, please share them here.

About the Author

Sam Dougherty is an Academic Skills Advisor. Having completed a PGCE in 2011, he has pursued a career in education, working in various establishments including secondary schools, an apprentice training centre and HEIs. He is interested in exploring approaches to ensuring inclusivity within learning development and understanding how to improve engagement and outcomes at university for underrepresented groups.

Contact: sam.dougherty@shu.ac.uk