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Active Learning in Higher Education 2002 3: 24
DOI: 10.1177/1469787402003001003

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What is This?
Discipline-based study skills support for first-year undergraduate students

KATHY DURKIN & ANDREW MAIN

ABSTRACT Universities are expected to align their programmes with the new Quality Assurance Agency National Qualifications framework by the start of the academic year 2003–2004 (QAA 01). QAA have identified a number of ‘intellect’ and ‘transferable’ skills in their guidelines, which they regard as essential to develop at all levels of higher education. They define ‘intellect’ skills as including analysis, synthesis, evaluation and problem-solving. Transferable skills include communication (oral and written), teamwork, research skills, etc. This article argues that these skills can be developed through study skills support and considers the potential benefits of different approaches to academic study skills support for undergraduate students.

KEYWORDS: discipline-based, generic, mentoring, study skills

Introduction

In spring 2000, two different types of discipline-based study skills courses were run in parallel for first-year undergraduate students in the School of Design, Engineering and Computing at Bournemouth University. One course took the form of a workshop led by a study skills tutor (K. Durkin). The other took a peer-mentoring approach, in which second-year students first attended weekly workshops, led by the study skills lecturer, the aim of which was to fine tune the mentors’ own study skills. Later on in the same week, each of these mentors met up with three first-year students and led their own workshops.

The main aim of the project was to examine the effectiveness of both
approaches and to compare them with the generic study skills workshops already available through the university Learner Support Unit. The project concluded that the discipline-based peer mentoring and workshop approaches had distinctive benefits to offer and that they were in greater student demand than the generic study skills course. Attendance rates of 80 and 87 per cent for the two discipline-based approaches, compared with nil attendance for the generic study skills course, indicate a high level of student motivation for discipline-related support. The findings also show that the project had a measured positive impact on both assignment and examination marks of both mentees and mentors.

The article first considers the need for study skills training in the School of Design, Engineering and Computing, as perceived by A. Main, Head of Computing and Course Tutor for the BSc (Hons) Business Information Technology (BBIT) degree course. The rationale for discipline-based and peer-mentoring study skills courses is then examined, followed by a description of the project, its main findings and some recommendations for future development.

**Background to the project**

Lecturers on the BBIT course in the School of Design, Engineering and Computing at Bournemouth University have recognized for some time that many students entering the degree course do not have the necessary study skills to achieve good marks in written assignments and examinations. Students often have difficulty in differentiating clearly between essay and report formats, they lack confidence and knowledge of how to structure assignments and some appear to have had little practice in writing critical evaluations. This lack in study skills masks their subject capability and/or level of cognitive skill and it often results in failure, which can lead to high drop out rates.

In autumn 1998, the course tutor for BBIT initiated a review of reasons for low student performance in the first year in written assessments. Although low attendance was one factor, it was evident that a lack of study skills was the main reason for a substantial number of students performing poorly. Sixty per cent of students, for example, used no references in their first essay, despite the assignment brief and the marking scheme clearly stating the necessity for citations. The students did not understand referencing, and hoped it was not important. Note-taking was also identified as being underdeveloped. One lecturer had experimented with copying overhead projector slides of lectures to the World Wide Web before each lecture, but had found this had encouraged students to stop taking any notes at all during lectures, or even to stop attending classes altogether.

The university Learner Support Unit provides generic study skills workshops but these had had a history of very low attendance by students in
Design, Engineering and Computing. From conversations with students it appeared that most of them were unaware that they had weaknesses in this area, or that such weaknesses might have serious consequences for them. They were reluctant to try the generic study skills workshops, which they saw as lacking relevance to their course.

As a result of this review, the course tutor initiated two actions. The first was to put in place a mechanism for improving study skills using a discipline-based, rather than a generic approach. The second was to put in place some 'before and after' measurement, in order to gain more precise data about the effectiveness of study skills training. A successful bid to the Bournemouth University Learning and Teaching Fund allowed the school to employ an expert study skills tutor to run a discipline-based study skills course for first-year undergraduates and to evaluate its effectiveness in terms of student perceptions of it, and any improvements in assignment and examination marks. It was decided that two very different approaches be piloted in the department - workshops led by the specialist study skills tutor, and a peer-mentoring scheme. In this latter scheme second-year students would be trained by the study skills tutor and then be given the responsibility of mentoring first-year students in study skills. Hence, one of the aims of the project was to investigate and to compare the effectiveness of the two approaches.

Rationale for discipline-based study skills workshops

Discipline-based study skills workshops have been offered to international MA students in certain departments at Bournemouth University over recent years. These workshops have proved to be very successful in familiarizing students with the academic expectations of lecturers. The key factor in determining their effectiveness is that they are discipline-based rather than generic. They are therefore fully embedded in the degree course and all the materials used are directly relevant to the students' degree and the assessments. Kuo (1993) and Swales (1990) argue that generic materials are unable to cater for the precise needs of students following a particular course within a particular institution. Ladd (1999) and Angelova and Riazantseva (1999) also claim that study skills support needs to be directly related to the students' immediate and specific needs:

Findings from research seem to suggest that there is not a single academic discourse community with unified standards and expectations but rather that every specific discipline has its own conventions, values and practices. (Angelova and Riazantseva, 1999: 93)
A study skills programme tailored to the specific requirements of a degree course can only be achieved through substantial liaison with the teaching staff. This is seen to be essential (Keech, 1994), together with scrutiny of assignment tasks and assessment criteria. Very high attendance rates on the discipline-based study skills workshops are evidence that students do not see them as additional to, but as an integral part of their degree course.

**Rationale for peer mentoring in study skills**

There are many obvious benefits gained from using second- or third-year student mentors. They are experienced in how the university system and the department operate and they have the advantage of being far more familiar with the requirements and content of the degree course than the first years.

Mentors, however, need to be selected carefully. To be an effective mentor one first of all has to be an effective student. Their knowledge of the subject needs to be complemented by good study skills; a good academic record does not guarantee good mentoring skills. To be an effective mentor one needs to be able to listen to others attentively and actively. They need to take on a supportive, nurturing role, but also be prepared to challenge when necessary (Daloz, 1986). They therefore need to be reflective learners themselves if they are to encourage critical thinking in the mentees.

Many first-year students arrive at university having some deep-rooted images of learning and written assignments that need challenging. Some mentees may prefer mentor support to be completely nonthreatening and noncritical, especially as peer mentors may be only one year ahead of them. Others may welcome constructive criticism. The mentor's job is to build up a sense of mutual trust and, if possible, mutual vulnerability. They will also need to evaluate skills and identify the strengths and weaknesses of their mentees' study skills. Thus we can see that mentors, as well as having good personal academic skills, also need to have a mature attitude, good interpersonal skills and sensitivity.

In addition to all this, however, they need to be able to articulate their knowledge. This obviously will come with practice, but the need for mentor training is crucial if they are to unlock their potential. The mark of an expert, according to Berliner (1994) is that they do things intuitively, and mentors may lack confidence and ability at first to express themselves and explain concepts clearly (Jaques, 1995). This is certainly an area in which the mentors' skills of communication can be developed. Indeed some of the mentors in this project were aware of this at the start and were particularly keen to join the project for this very reason.

It is significant that all the mentors, bar one, commented on how much
they had enjoyed the role of mentor. The five who were very enthusiastic about how much fun it had been were also conscious that they were all outgoing people, with a natural ease and confidence when speaking with others. The one mentee who found it difficult to build relationships was very honest about her shyness and how this had hindered the easy development of rapport within her group. The question here is whether there was a gender issue involved as this female mentor, in a predominantly male cohort of students, had three male students in her group.

Two of the mentors felt very strongly that when recruiting mentors it is essential to consider their personality and people skills: ‘There has to be that ability to present themselves and to communicate on a one-to-one level. I wouldn’t look for the cleverest ten people in the year – personality must be taken into account’.

The project, spring 2000

Three groups were formed: a peer mentored group, a workshop group taught by the study skills specialist, and a control group which was asked to attend the university generic course in study skills run by the Learner Support Unit. There were approximately fifteen students per group.

Selection of first-year mentees and second-year mentors

Recruitment to the project was on a voluntary basis. The autumn term assignment marks were used as a benchmark for allocating first-year volunteers to the three groups, so as to give even spreads of academic abilities across all the groups. Six students from the second year volunteered to be mentors and each of these was teamed up with three mentees.

The content of the study skills course

The actual teaching took place over eight weeks in the spring of 2000 and was followed by in-depth interviewing of the students by the study skills lecturer and the course tutor. The length of the course was determined by the funding available for the project. In the weeks prior to the project a great deal of liaison with the teaching staff was necessary in order to establish the requirements and expectations of lecturers for the spring term assignments and the summer examinations. The information and lecturers’ perspectives gained from this liaison period were subsequently incorporated into the structure and content of the study skills course. Because it was only an eight-week course, decisions had to be made as to which skills should be focused on. We could, like Nottingham Polytechnic (Button et al., 1990; Metcalfe, 1992), focus on oral interpersonal communication skills. Instead we focused on academic writing skills for this particular project, as both lecturers and students were expressing most.
concern about the assignments and examinations. It was agreed that oral communication skills, including teamworking, time management and presentation skills would be covered in subsequent courses outside the scope of the project. Thus, the study skills course covered the following topics:

- analysing assignment and examination questions – identifying key words, key issues and the underlying debate;
- essay writing techniques – planning and structuring the essay; brainstorming main headings and subheadings; writing introductions and conclusions, using headings and structuring the answer;
- report writing techniques – writing the summary, conclusions and recommendations; structuring the body of a report;
- referencing and bibliographies (Harvard system);
- examination techniques – analysing questions, mapping key points, skim reading of case study texts, note taking, etc.

Throughout the course sample answers and assignment/examination questions from the BBIT course were used to illustrate the teaching.

Methodology
The data collected and analysed in the project were primarily qualitative, consisting of in-depth interviews with the six mentors, discussions with mentees. A small amount of quantitative data was also collected: pre- and post-project questionnaires for all participants, and assignment and examination marks for the academic year 1999/2000. Examination marks, however, pose some potential problems, e.g. to what extent do examinations, written under time constraints and pressure, actually reflect one’s ability to compose a coherent and cohesive discursive answer? Also some of the examinations focus on technical knowledge rather than on discursive description and explanation. How useful or applicable study skills prove to be in examinations is uncertain, as demonstrated by the following quotes from the students:

> It’s very difficult under exam conditions to think about structuring essays. Exam question analysis – yes, you can use that in exams. But I do find my essay structuring, to a certain extent, goes out the window when I know I’ve only got three quarters of an hour to answer a question.

> In an exam it’s quite difficult to write an essay under time pressure.

Weekly attendance
Both the mentoring and workshop sessions were very well attended. The attendance rate at the workshop was 87 per cent and at the mentoring sessions, 80 per cent. However, the attendance of the students in the control group at the learning support study skills sessions was nil. This
was unfortunate as it meant that there was no data from the generic approach to compare with the two discipline-based approaches.

**Findings: qualitative data analysis**

**The development of study skills**

All the first-year students who were involved in the project claimed to be more confident with their study skills by the end of the project: ‘The course was definitely worth doing. I am now more confident when writing my essays, and because of this I don’t leave them until the last minute now’.

In general, the first-year mentees found the eight-week study skills course too short. All but one mentee requested more sessions on reading skills, and all but two mentees requested further study skills support in the second year. In addition to the topics included in this year’s course, they requested that presentation skills and research retrieval skills be added to subsequent courses. Two students also asked if typing lessons could be offered (a very valuable skill for any undergraduate!). If subsequent courses are extended over one or two semesters then more sessions could also be included on critical analysis, contrasting and evaluating. These complex skills need to be revisited on a cyclical basis as they take longer to develop.

Similarly, all the second-year mentors felt that they had improved their skills, particularly in skim reading, essay and report writing and in their ability to analyse assignment and examination questions. With regard to skim reading, this comment sums up their response:

> I’ve always started at the beginning (of the text) and slugged through it all, and just got bogged down by it. Skim reading is something I’ll certainly put into practice in exams, if we have a case study, because I see the benefits of that type of reading.

The mentors found that their knowledge and understanding of the material was consolidated through having to teach it to others: ‘The course impacts on us (the mentors) a lot more. We do everything twice . . . not only am I being taught it, I then have to understand it so that I can pass it on to somebody else. So I’d advocate, if you get a chance of being a mentor, do it.’

**Developing mentoring skills**

Because of the time limitations of the project did not specifically focus on mentoring skills such as prompting and eliciting responses, interpersonal and team leadership skills, etc. Although they were discussed in the mentor workshops from time to time, they would need to be given adequate consideration in any future development of a peer-mentoring programme. The mentors recognized the need for these skills and were very aware of the
dangers and temptations of patronizing or ‘telling them (the first years) the information’, rather than facilitating the learning of their mentees by eliciting the mentees’ own knowledge and understanding of the subject matter.

To facilitate the acquisition of these skills, the study skills specialist modelled a teaching approach which depends heavily on the skills of eliciting and facilitating discussion and debate, rather than on didactic methods of transmission teaching. However, there is a very real tension here as there is inevitably, and necessarily, a substantial body of knowledge about academic writing which cannot initially be elicited from the mentees, because it is, by and large, as yet unknown to them.

The underlying principle operating in this project was more Vygotskian (1962), in terms of a specialist ‘expert’ facilitating or ‘scaffolding’ an apprentice into the ‘zone of proximal understanding’. This would apply both to the relationship between the specialist and the mentors and to a lesser extent, between the mentors and their mentees. Two of the mentors, however, admitted that they felt uneasy with this role at times, wondering if they were ‘giving the right answers’ when their mentees asked specific questions about certain study skills. The following quote illustrates this unease:

The knowledge and experience of the mentor is a key issue. If they asked me a question, I would answer to the best of my ability, but there was a little bit of self doubt sometimes: ‘Will I give them the right answer?’ ... sometimes they ask a question and I’m not sure. I’m only a student and how can I know for sure?

The mentees, however, were very positive about the expertise and knowledge of their mentors, although the following quotes do indicate a degree of confusion, and perhaps a lack of confidence in the mentor at times:

Maybe the mentor could have had more training on topics so that our sessions were more informed.

Some exercises were a little confusing to understand initially. It was sometimes not clear what was expected.

These quotes may reflect a lack of confidence on the part of some mentors in their ability to pass on their skills to other students, and this may well be an issue for mentor training. A key question that needs to be asked, therefore, is whether the peer mentoring approach offers the best model. Is it perhaps putting too much responsibility on the second-year students? Should the formal teaching of study skills be left to workshops led by the specialist tutor? Should second-year students act purely as facilitators, focusing more on course content, as in the peer-assisted learning model (Donelan and MacBean, 1998). In contrast, would second-year students, in
their role as facilitators, have just as much difficulty dealing with questions about course content as they do about study skills? How reasonable or practical is it to expect them not to teach anything? All these questions need further consideration.

Evaluating mentees’ assignments

One of the key tasks of a specialist study skills tutor is to evaluate and give feedback to students on the quality of their assignments’ structure and cohesiveness. This often requires the delicate skill of being able to divorce the content from the structure and presentation of the assignment. Student mentors, however, have not been trained in these high-level analytical skills and it would be inappropriate and extremely difficult for them to engage in this kind of feedback. Without it, however, the mentees will not receive the individual support that they need if they are to identify their own errors and learn to correct them. A recurring request from the mentees was for more feedback on their individual problems with assignments. The following quotes from the mentors bears out their reluctance and sense of inadequacy in this area:

I could guide them (the mentees) and I could give them pointers but I would have to say clearly to them that that was not the final authority. But I would feel confident in going through an essay and saying ‘well just think about the structure of that paragraph, I don’t think it flows well’. There’s a certain skill in reading an assignment and giving a view on its structure without becoming involved with the content. If you are reading something and you can see that the content is wrong, the temptation would be to say ‘that’s wrong’. But that’s not our job. Many of the exam questions we have looked at have been subjective. If answers are objective, either right or wrong, it’s OK to point that out, if you are confident that you are right. But when it’s more ambiguous you have to be careful that you are not just presenting your own personal view. You have to let them develop their own ideas . . .

If they give you an essay and say ‘Can you have a look at it?’, your intention is not to give them the answer, but when you are there and you are looking at it, it is very difficult not to give them the answer and say ‘it should be written like this’. I don’t know how much they would necessarily learn from that. Ultimately, if you are there, they will want you to half do it for them I think . . . so we should teach the principles to them. They can then go away and apply those techniques themselves.

I’d definitely feel nervous about it, because I’d be making a judgement on it with the limited knowledge and experience I have had.

We are the students, not the lecturers and we don’t know everything to do with the course or the subject.
It can be seen from these quotes that the mentors did not feel confident or indeed happy with the role of ‘expert’ and were much more confident with that of facilitator. Indeed, during the interviews, some of the mentors confessed that their memory retention of some of the subject knowledge covered in the first year was not very good; they were not sure of the content themselves. This would strongly support the argument that a facilitating role for mentors is more appropriate with regard to the degree course content.

**Practicalities of the pilot project**

**Timing of the course**  All the mentees and mentors who were interviewed thought that any further courses should be run near the start of the academic year. The mentees wanted it to start at the beginning of the degree course, or even in induction week. However, the mentors thought students would only be motivated to attend and appreciate the value of the course if it commenced after at least one assignment had been handed in and marked. That way the students would be more aware of the gaps in their knowledge, or at least be motivated to achieve higher marks. A suggestion was made that the first term, and possibly the second term, would be ideal with some sessions on examination techniques nearer the summer examinations.

**Timetabling of the course**  All the mentors thought it would be much better to have the course officially timetabled into their degree course, so that first years would be ‘more likely to take it seriously’. In addition, all the lecturers need to be aware that the course is taking place and that many first years and some second years are involved in it. Likewise there was consensus amongst the mentors that the course should be compulsory for first years, although they recognized that this would cause some difficulties as not all students would be sufficiently motivated to attend the sessions. The comments of two of the mentors regarding this are quite revealing:

> By saying ‘this is optional’... half the people will just say ‘right, I’m not doing that’. For the people who are just trying to scrape through their degree, to make it compulsory would be good. But on the other hand, they have to want to learn.

> Being a second-year student you don’t have the same level of respect as a lecturer, and if you’re telling them to write out things and answer questions then if they’re not involved a hundred per cent, and don’t want to be, they might cause distractions and hinder the others.
Our view on this issue is that making a study skills programme compulsory for all students is not necessary. Some students who are more familiar with academic study may only need a few revision sessions, whereas others will need a more in-depth coverage of the various skills.

Organizing weekly mentee sessions All but one mentor had little or no trouble with this. During their first meeting with their mentees they all looked at their timetables and chose a slot between lectures, when the mentees were already in the university. Finding available rooms posed a problem occasionally, and it was suggested that a timetable of room availability could be given to the mentors at the start of the course. The timetabling of the mentee sessions was greatly eased because mentees had been deliberately grouped according to their normal seminar groups, so that all the mentees in any one group were working to the same timetable.

Mentee/mentor ratio The mentors agreed that three mentees for each mentor was the ideal ratio. Most of them thought four mentees per group would be manageable, but none of them thought it should go above four. This has implications for the number of mentors who would need to be involved in the course.

Findings: quantitative data analysis
The effects of the study skills training on the marks achieved in assignments
The marks for an assignment completed in late spring 2000 were compared with an assignment completed in late autumn 1999, the latter being used as a benchmark. Both assignments were selected because they required an essay style structure with an element of analysis and evaluation, as opposed to an emphasis on technical knowledge.

The mean average improvement for the workshop group was a substantial 8.9 per cent, which clearly suggests that the tutor-led workshop approach was very effective in raising marks. For both the control and the mentored groups, however, there was no clear pattern – some students improved their marks from the autumn to the spring, whereas an almost equal number did not. One possible explanation for this phenomenon is that when students are peer mentored they require more time to process and internalize the information, particularly as it is delivered ‘second hand’ and not directly from the specialist tutor. This would have implications for the length of a peer-mentored study skills course and the need for revisiting topics during the course, i.e. the cyclical nature of study skills tuition.
The effects of the study skills training on the summer examination results

Summer examination results were also analysed for the three groups. As already discussed, a number of factors, quite separate from study skills, can affect examination performance - nerves, writing under pressure, strict time restraints and no opportunity for re-drafting. The results, however, show that both the mentored and workshop groups performed appreciably better in the examinations than those students who did not attend the study skills programme, and that the mentored group performed relatively better than the workshop group. The explanation for this may well lie in the fact that one of the study skills sessions focused explicitly on examination techniques, and the transcripts revealed that mentees asked their mentors a lot of questions about the examinations during this and following sessions. The workshop group, however, did not have the benefit of learning from the personal experience and subject knowledge of a second-year mentor with regard to first-year examinations. It is interesting to note that both the mentored and workshop groups performed appreciably better in the examinations than those students who did not attend the study skills programme. This has been born out by other research projects in this area (e.g. Wallace, 1993, cited in Topping, 1996).

Assessment criteria for assignments

The project highlighted the need for a consistency in assessment criteria for written reports and essays. It also highlighted the need for a consensus among staff about requirements for the format and presentation of assignments. These agreed criteria then need to be communicated to the students so that they are clear about expectations.

If discipline-based study skills programmes are to be successful then the study skills lecturer needs to have full confidence that what s/he is saying is what the departmental lecturers have all agreed, e.g. the accepted format for a report; whether an executive summary is required or not for certain assignments; the referencing format; the acceptability of headings and subheadings for essays; standards of punctuation, grammar and spelling, etc.

Once the criteria have been agreed across the department, then the weighting of the various elements of an assignment can be agreed and communicated to the students, e.g. the number of marks allocated to format and presentation, referencing and bibliography, critical evaluation, etc. If this is done across the whole department then the feedback from lecturers would be more informative for students who could then begin to identify, across the subjects, where their weaknesses lie in terms of these criteria.
This comment from one of the mentors reveals a certain amount of frustration at not being given clear pointers as to how he could improve his grade:

Many of the marking schemes you get back from lecturers don’t necessarily tell you what you should have done - ‘you need to look at this, or at that’. So you never actually learn why your essay and report writing isn’t that good. You just get the odd remark so some people never learn from their first and second years. I know I never would have, if I hadn’t done this course.

Over the last few years, the teaching team in the School of Design, Engineering and Computing have put a lot of effort into defining assessment criteria, and making sure that students are clear about the criteria before they undertake the work. Nonetheless, there is evidence from the study skills programme that there is more to be done in terms of consistency of both definition and interpretation of the criteria by staff, across all units and at each level. Although the members of the teaching team agree that consistency is necessary, when it was assessed independently at the level of detail that was possible in the study skills workshops, it was evident that there were inconsistencies in interpretation.

Although such issues had been discussed and dealt with in previous years, there had been a ‘drift’ away from common understanding. New members of staff joining the team need to be made aware of these issues in their induction. Having a study skills tutor, and a year-on-year programme of study skills training would provide a new feedback loop that (i) enables differences of understanding among staff to be corrected, and (ii) channels that understanding to students. Very importantly, it forms part of on-going staff development.

Conclusions
Below is a summary of the main conclusions to be drawn from this project:

1. The overriding feedback from students involved in this project is that there is a definite demand for discipline-based study skills courses for undergraduates.
2. Both the peer-mentored and workshop approaches were highly valued by the students and attendance rates were significantly higher than for generic study skills courses.
3. The workshop students acquired a firmer grasp of the study skills techniques than the peer-mentored students, perhaps explained by the fact that they received direct instruction from the study skills specialist. The mentored group, however, benefited greatly from their mentors’ first-hand knowledge of the subject and of the
examinations. This double role has similarities with Chan’s (2000) ‘double mentoring concept’.

4. The course needs to be run in the first half of the year to enable a cyclical approach to the acquisition of study skills.

5. There often appears to be a gap between lecturers’ expectations and the assessment criteria, and the students’ awareness and understanding of these.

6. A ‘champion’ of study skills programmes, with allocated time to coordinate the programme and ensure clear communication at all levels, would be an asset to a department or school. In addition, it would be important for a significant proportion of lecturers in a department to see it as part of their role to contribute to their students’ study skills development, so that it was not seen as the sole responsibility of the ‘champion’.

Recommendations

Two main recommendations arise from this project, the first suggesting the most effective approach for teaching study skills, and the second concerned with staff development.

Student support

The project outcomes would strongly suggest that the best approach for a study skills programme is a combination of specialist-led workshops and peer-mentoring sessions, each providing distinctive benefits. As these perform different roles, problems may arise when the two are confused. The benefits of each approach are listed below.

Study skills workshop benefits

• Specialist knowledge and direct input from a study skills tutor;
• Specialist analysis of assignments for strengths, weaknesses and areas for improvement;
• Individual tutorials providing feedback on student essays.

Peer-mentoring benefits

• Mentor knowledge about degree course and expectations;
• Clarification/discussion of degree course content;
• Non-content curriculum support – placements, examination procedures, stress, time-management, availability of resources, etc.

Staff development

One of the many positive outcomes of this project was that the BBIT teaching team were stimulated, challenged and enthused about the benefits of such a programme. The team has continuously been very proactive and
self-analytical for many years, and has introduced a number of innovations each year in a process of continuous improvement. Yet despite their attitude and record, this programme brought new and valued lessons. The teaching team is convinced of the value in having a discipline-based study skills programme as part of the annual course delivery process. For such a programme to succeed, however, there needs to be:

- adequate opportunity for the study skills tutor to liaise with lecturers and discuss their expectations and assessment criteria;
- adequate access to past and current assignment questions, marks and lecturers' written assessment comments;
- staff development sessions which lead to a consensus of academic expectations and suitable assessment criteria across the department.

Involving a study skills tutor in the delivery of the degree programme not only helped the department to identify some of the problems, but stimulated discussions as to possible solutions. However, this does need to be part of an on-going programme addressing the needs of each new cohort of students and inputting to the cyclical staff development programme. There is nothing to indicate that these benefits are peculiar to BBIT; they would appear to be generally applicable.

References


Biographical note

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