An ‘Individual Learning Profile’ (ILP)

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Background and rationale

A short diagnostic learning support questionnaire was designed and issued to ascertain individual and generic levels of key skills of all incoming level 1 students in the School of Art and Design (SAD). This was completed at induction with the intention of providing an indication of an ‘Individual Learning Profile’ (ILP) for each student. It was anticipated that the ILP would assist both staff and students in their understanding of their strengths and weaknesses and how best they might achieve their potential. It would also indicate at the earliest opportunity the need to implement support for study.

Recent emphasis upon widening access into Higher Education (HE) has highlighted variations in student profiles. The very terms non-standard entry, mature, returner, disadvantaged, precede the notion of concealed social and educational inequality. Primary concerns centre upon lack of IT skills and the number of students with dyslexic difficulties in the School. Early identification of students requiring and/or requesting help, and those ‘at risk’, is expected to be ‘cost-effective’ for all concerned. The ILP is intended to underpin the goal of achieving true equal opportunity for learning, in addition to maximising student retention and achievement across the School.

Initial research into the development of the Individual Learning Profiles (ILP’s) centred upon the need for a brief overview from each student rather that detailed information, which, if necessary, could be extended later during individual counselling. Reference to previous models of good practice included the work undertaken in other UK HE Institutions, in particular that of De Montfort University (DMU) who were contacted (June 2000) in relation to their HEFCE funded work on a national Key Skills survey of entrants.

The innovation

A draft SAD ‘Individual Learning Profile’ (ILP), broadly based on the DMU model, was developed. It was decided to concentrate on generic skills and aptitudes (including IT) and not subject-specific skills. It followed that, in addition to the skills content, there were a number of factors to be considered in the design of the questionnaire. Clarity of layout, font/print size, and paper colour was essential with reference to the significant number of students with visual problems associated with dyslexia. Brevity was also paramount, in order that rapid completion and return by students was possible, and speedy collation of information by staff was achieved.

Advice was sought at the draft stage from DMU Learning Support Unit and University of Wolverhampton Centre for Learning and Teaching colleagues, after which the definitive text was agreed (July). The ILP document was formatted and sent to print services for reproduction (August). The project, detailing the way academic tutors might use the ILP, was introduced to subject staff at the September 2000 SAD staff conference.

The questionnaire was sectioned as follows:

(Front)  Student/subject(s) details
        (contact points established pre formal module registration)
(page 1) introduction, explanation and instructions
        (emphasis was placed upon the fact that the document was confidential, it was not a test and it was intended to facilitate student understanding of their individual learning style)
(page 2)  1. Speaking, listening and confidence
          2. Reading and researching
(page 3)  3. Writing
          4. Time management
5. IT skills (generic and SAD specific)
(Sections 1–5 as above students were asked to assess their abilities using a numerical
scoring between 1–4, 6 questions in each section, add the scores and transfer them to
the final page.)

Special requirements
(registered disabled, E2L/EFL)
Action (support contacts)

Action requested and scores
Hand written paragraph description of additional skills/life experiences

The Individual Learning Profiles were distributed to SAD Level 1 students on collection of enrolment
details (am) Monday October 2nd 2000. Explanation of contents/rationale, details of support available
in the School and University were highlighted, and members of learning support team were introduced
at induction (the afternoon of the same day). Student welcome packs included leaflets supplying details
of all School and University learning support information.

The profiles were collected and data processing commenced. The two final summary sheets from each
profile were photocopied for a central SAD data base and initial analysis was undertaken.

Maximum scores for sections 1–4 = 24
A score of 15 or less in any section = re check whole profile

The profiles were coded as follows:

2 sections of 15 or less = medium risk
3 sections of 15 or less = medium to high risk
4 sections of 15 or less = high risk
failure to complete written paragraph = (double check profile) potential high risk
poor quality of written paragraph = high risk

The ILPs and photocopies were colour coded (as discreetly as possible in the top right hand corner)
collated into subjects, and checked against subject lists. Colour coding indicated:

Green no apparent risk of underachievement
Yellow medium risk
Pink high risk
Blue dyslexia identified, or disability identified, or written statement omitted
Blue star English as a foreign or second language
Pink star assistance requested

Learning Support Staff contacted those students who requested immediate assistance (October 2000).

At the School Teaching and Learning Committee (October 2000) coded profiles were returned to
Subject Leaders for distribution to Level 1 tutors. Briefing included an explanation of coding,
highlighting of support available at three levels (School, University and Student’s Union), and the need
to regard the information as confidential. Tutorial staff were encouraged to use the ILPs as a basis for a
more comprehensive picture of the individual student and/or tutorial discussion point. Staff were
requested to note the coding process, with specific reference to the students identified as possibly high
risk of underachievement or failure.

Group and individual Learning Skills support (including IT) sessions were provided by the School
throughout the academic year. School and CeLT Information regarding Learning Skills support was
circulated via notice boards, leaflets and memos to students and academic staff.

Level 1 Semester 1 results were cross-referenced with the students who had been identified as
potentially medium to high risk of underachievement. Results for Semester 2 for these students are
currently being cross referenced and additionally compared with Semester 1 to obtain an overall picture
for the year. Identified students will be further checked for any correlation with withdrawal
information.
Outcomes

623 profiles were completed at induction, from which the indications were:

- 455 no apparent risk of underachievement/low–medium risk
- 168 identified as possibly medium–high risk

Of the 168 (some falling into more than one category):

- 33 high risk by scores
- 77 statement completed, dyslexia/disability identified
- 49 EFL/E2L
- 78 assistance requested

Cross-referencing Semester 1 results of the 168 identified at medium–high risk:

- 62 achieved D5 or below in one or more modules
- 18 no results (all 4 modules)

Cross-referencing Semester 2 results and student withdrawal—current, in progress.

Interim findings: positive

- ILPs distributed and returned (95% +) within the day
- Initial data clear/rapidly processed
- Early indication of students requesting assistance/early remediation
- Early indication of potential difficulties
- Students utilising School learning support resource well
- Staff referrals increased/awareness raised
- Significant amount information now available for more detailed processing, both individual and generic
- ILPs facilitate students and staff in understanding how best they learn
- ILPs highlight how students may help themselves
- ILPs facilitate a greater understanding of student as a ‘whole’, provide focus for discussion in tutorials
- Generic information indicates students would benefit from additional support with presentation skills
- The material used allowed rapid completion and processing of returns, but also showed more ‘hidden’ indicators of students at risk such as sections incomplete (written paragraph) rather than relying entirely upon scores

Interim findings: negative

- Staff use of profiles variable
- Students are not always honest when completing questionnaires for many reasons, not least the fear of admitting problems
- Students are not always the best judge of their abilities
- Accurate data unavailable at initial analysis (student subject lists, contact details etc.)

Benefits

Awareness of the differing needs of individual students has been significantly raised within the School, both from the staff and student perspectives. Embedding learning support generically (as a ‘normal’ student service) from the outset within the curriculum is facilitating the removal of the stigma of seeking assistance and subsequent admittance of weakness. The overall number of students who have received help has increased by 50% during this academic year (currently 76 SAD learning support ‘open’ files for 2000/1).
The project has facilitated not only early identification of a substantial number of students who might benefit from support, but has also enabled some resource to follow needs. A substantial amount of the 1:1 support has been provided by one of the School’s own PhD students. Not only was this student au fait with the subject requirements of the School, but she was able to empathise from her perspective of recent undergraduate and current postgraduate experience.

Whilst it is difficult to assess precisely how the project might have affected overall improvement in student performance (i.e. without evidence of prior underachievement), it has undoubtedly enhanced the learning experience for many. For some students, the knowledge that support was available and easily accessible helped build confidence, and despite having initially requested assistance they found that the need to utilise the resource was minimal or even unnecessary. For others with severe specific weaknesses, support undoubtedly facilitated potential achievement (SAD/LS files). Use of the learning support via student recommendation to their peers was an additional and unexpected dividend that underpinned the goal of embedding the service as a ‘normal’ school resource.

The ILPs have established a substantial database for comparison and tracking of the cohort of students from both subject and School perspectives.

**Evaluation**

Success of the project so far can be attributed to willing participation overall from both students and staff, and having identified a potential need it was possible instigate appropriate action and support immediately. Early indications (semester 1 LS data) underpin theories, both identifying and addressing the needs at the earliest opportunity, and raising awareness for both students and staff, benefits all concerned, facilitating the goal of achieving true equal opportunity for learning.

Whilst students have not been formally required to feedback their approval (or otherwise) of the initiative, their appreciation has been noted (LS files, JC/PS). Requested feedback (June 2001) from subject and level 1 module leaders has included:

‘It has helped to make staff more aware of the difficulties and needs of students.’

‘Really useful reference for someone like myself who is not involved in teaching the majority of the modules in the subject.’

‘Very useful. Formal enough without being threatening.’

‘Year tutors will find them useful as the students progress though the three years.’

Only one subject leader reported that the ILPs had not been used. Several highlighted concerns and the need for further support:

‘these students should be targeted for follow up as their own voluntary access to support is only partially taken up despite staff recommendations.’

‘proactive liaison with contextual modules (is needed with) module leaders to identify and target student support more effectively.’

**Current and future developments**

Current data analysis centres upon cross-referencing first semester achievements with information from the July assessment boards 2001, focussing upon those students who were ‘fail or borderline fail’ in February 2001 and/or after their first year of study. Reference will also be made to any students identified by registry as ‘withdrawing’ from study. If additional funding were available the analysis and comparison could be extended to all Level One students regardless of achievement levels or identification through the ILP.
The content, design and function of the Individual Learning Profiles is currently being evaluated via the SAD Teaching and Learning Committee and decisions made as to modifications for its use in 2001/2.

Additional CeLT support for 2001/2 will permit further monitoring of the cohort in level 2, and allow comparison of the data with that from incoming students for September. Future initiatives will embrace the latter two quotes above, by both directing specific assistance more proactively (resources permitting), and initiating a system of student ‘paired’ support in a module with large numbers of low achievement and/or failure rates. ‘Paired’ support could utilise L2 student (paid) volunteers to assist those who are struggling but are unwilling to contact LS services, and aim to remove some of the remaining stigma associated with admitting weaknesses.

Discussions with a representative from SAS have recently taken place as to minor modifications of the profile for use within their School in the forthcoming academic year.

Discussions will take place with De Montfort University Learning and Training Support Unit on our findings to date, facilitating a comparison from a national perspective.

The ILP is now firmly embedded into the range of learning and teaching tools available within the School. It is anticipated that the information it provides will continue to indicate the most appropriate methods and effective times for intervention and focus for learning support resource, that it also provides a means of identifying value-added scholarship, facilitating the provision of true equal opportunity for learning.