

Achieving Potential: the Essex toolkit

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1. Feedback matters

Clear and quality feedback is crucial for a student's academic progress and development. Some students can be unclear as to how to engage with feedback, as well as how to apply it to their next assignment.

- Consider using Ritta Husted's "Feedback Matters" checklist and reflective forms; these help students carefully consider all stages of assessment. (*Feedback resources to be linked and added to the Talent Development dashboard*)
- Additionally, the evaluation form encourages students to have a two-way dialogue with their lecturer around feedback; including what was useful, what they will consider applying to their next assignment, and anything they would like more clarity on. These forms can then be discussed at a meeting with the lecturer to help structure the conversation and enable students get the best out of the session; aiding academic development and confidence.

Where from:

Ritta Husted, International Academy
HEA Feedback report (2013)

The University of Derby also have a similar system, where students are given marks for including what feedback they have acted upon since their last assignment in the cover sheet.

2. Sense of belonging

Although sense of belonging is less 'measurable', it is strongly suggested to be a key indicator in student continuation. Belonging in the academic context is particularly important. Something as simple as knowing a student's name can help them feel like they belong at Essex.

Consider simple tactics such as:

- If appropriate, the use of name cards, provided to all departments at the start of the year, can be beneficial within classes, and normalising their use can help reduce feelings of isolation for those who choose to use them (*to be included if the name cards are being provided again this year*)
- Greeting students at the door at the beginning of a lecture/seminar
- Look into the use of "flipping the classroom" if appropriate, to allow more time for student interaction
- Refer to section titled "Classroom community" about another intervention which may be appropriate
- Ensure opportunities for learning outside the classroom (for example, departmental society events, debates, and study groups) are promoted through noticeboards, internal communication methods etc. Departmental newsletters and blogs can be a good mechanism, and it is important not to just rely on students being active on social media
- This will also relate to the new NSS question; "I feel part of a community of staff and students."

Where from:

Widely cited in a variety of literature regarding student retention/continuation

Dr Sandstrom (department of Psychology) is currently researching sense of belonging within the classroom
Ismene Gizelis has trialled this at Essex with good effect (*below link to be included within the dashboard*)

<http://blogs.essex.ac.uk/inpractice/2015/10/06/flipping-the-classroom-in-teaching-conflict-resolution/>

3. Goal-setting

Research has suggested that using a goal-setting intervention is one aspect that can help students be more likely to progress to the next stage.

- Consider using a goal-setting activity within an employability module. This could include asking students to think about and record what their ideal future would look like (for example, their professional/social/leisure/personal future), what future they would like to avoid, and start to form action plans about how they can obtain these goals. This is a form of “self-authoring”.
- Vision boards could also be created if appropriate
- This should be used mindfully for students who are ASD or have mental health difficulties; they may struggle to engage with this activity fully

Where from:

Schippers et al (2015) (see Achieving Potential OneDrive under Further Reading -> Educational Aspects)
Sports and Exercise Science also have a similar process that is used

4. Real-life learning

Asking students to consider the value of what they are learning has been suggested by recent research to help increase module marks for all students; especially for those from a BAME background and/or a lower socioeconomic class.

Consider asking students to write short (optional) reflective pieces during the term, in a core module, about the use of what they are learning. Encourage students to explain why and how the specific information is relevant to their life or useful to them, as well as giving examples. This is particularly relevant for the new NSS question “my course has provided me with opportunities to apply what I have learnt”. It is also useful to gather feedback on the course itself being taught, and how the material could relate better to the student experience and future aspirations.

Where from:

Harackiewicz et al (2015) (see Achieving Potential OneDrive under Further Reading -> Educational Aspects)

5. Raising aspirations

This has been suggested by research to help improve self-perception of academic ability, encouraging students to think of themselves as intellectually minded and capable individuals. It is important to develop behaviours that enhance academic achievement; for example, actively engaging in discussion.

- Consider asking students at the beginning of the module to complete an ‘intellectual identity self-evaluation tool’, where students rate their self-perceived behaviours and abilities (*example resource to be added online*)
- Deliver workshops around the literature/theories behind issues such as negative stereotype threat, growth mind-set, academic confidence and resilience etc. (*Short article regarding growth mind-set to be included <https://www.edutopia.org/article/growth-mindset-resources>*)
- Be mindful of engaging students in critical dialogue throughout the delivery of the course, for developing critical thinking abilities and self-confidence
- Ask students to repeat the questionnaire at the end of the module to evaluate development and progression
- Additionally, UK students will have often come to HE from A-level and may benefit from a session comparing what was needed at A Level in comparison to what is expected in HE; including awareness of transition within the curriculum itself

Where from:

See DiSA Briefing Paper, “Raising Aspirations and Intellectual Capability” – Dr Singh and Dr Cowden (Coventry University) on the Achieving Potential OneDrive under Further Reading-> Awareness raising
Department of History currently do this

6. Stereotype threat

Stereotype threat can negatively impact student performance, and consolidate any feelings of uncertainty or not belonging at university, including aspects such as “imposter syndrome”.

https://www.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxford/field/field_document/Expectation%2C%20Transitions%20and%20Overcoming%20Imposter%20Syndrome.pdf

- Consider how diversity is represented within the curriculum, such as reading lists and content – are they “Eurocentric?”
- Are uniquely diverse modules being promoted adequately in recruitment/prospectuses?
- Are student leaders within the department, for example course reps and peer mentors, visible and representative of the student population?
- Ensure when communicating with students it is clear that they are valued as individuals with multiple identities and unique experiences
- Are a variety of role models visible within the department? (see section on role models and student success for more ideas)
- Communicate that some initial difficulty when transitioning to university-level of study, as well as within the curriculum itself, is normal and transient, and that support is available to help
- Convey high standards for the module due to one’s confidence in the students’ ability, rather than the module being a “tough” choice – critical feedback can reflect this
- Consider use of growth mind-set language within teaching and contact with students who may feel they are under-performing; emphasise the importance of effort and process
- Provide students with opportunities to reflect on their core values as a person to help with self-affirmation
- Be enthusiastic about the intake of new students with a variety of experience and skills, and how they can further enrich the classroom

Where from:

Walton, Cohen et al (2012); see paper on Achieving Potential OneDrive under Further Reading -> Awareness Raising
The department of LiFTS have reviewed the diversity of their reading lists within certain modules

7. Assignment briefs

A clear and concise brief for assignments can help reduce students’ anxiety and stress around how to proceed with an assignment, particularly in the first year when students are adjusting to university-level writing and learning.

- Are the tasks appropriate for the module’s stage/level in the year?
- Use clear language and avoid turns of phrase within the guidance – this is particularly important for international students who may not have English as their first language
- Is the task manageable as an assignment?
- Is the brief/guidance related to the learning aims and outcomes of the module?
- Do students have enough time to prepare for the assignment in regards to timing of lectures that relate to the assignment?
- Consider peer discussion (small groups/pairs) around what students understand from the assignment when it is first distributed. This could also be used for students to discuss the marking criteria for an assignment – what would the differences between the marking bands be, for example? Consider how best to monitor the discussions in case they come up with the wrong idea!
- Communicate clearly to students how they can get in contact if they require clarity around anything in the assignment brief, as well as consider how to collate these concerns and communicate the responses to all students as a group
- The use of clear language is particularly beneficial for ASD students
- Try to avoid changing assignments after the course has started, as they can cause distress for ASD students. If a change has to be made, endeavour to talk through the reasons why clearly to the class
- Students can often lose marks through structural errors, even if the content of the assignment is of good standard. Consider sharing VP Education 2016-17’s “Fit to Submit Checklist” (hard copies and online version available) (*online version to be included*)

Where from: The University of Wolverhampton

<http://www.wlv.ac.uk/about-us/internal-departments/the-college-of-learning-and-teaching-colt/academic-development/how-to-guides/how-to-raise-attainment-with-a-good-assignment-br/>

The University of Derby have used a “Fit to Submit” checklist

8. Marking criteria

Students are likely to perform better if they understand what is being asked of them, and what is required in the marking criteria.

- Devote some time to develop students' understanding of the marking criteria and what is expected
- A simple and valuable exercise is to put students into small groups, giving out assignments from previous students (which have been anonymised), and ask them to consider what mark they would give in relation to the marking criteria, and why (as well as revealing what mark the essay received at the end of the session)
- This allows students to ask for clarity on any areas of the marking criteria they are still unsure of from both peers and lecturers

Where from: The University of Wolverhampton

<http://www.wlv.ac.uk/about-us/internal-departments/the-college-of-learning-and-teaching-colt/academic-development/how-to-guides/how-to-help-your-students-improve-their-grades/>

9. Classroom community

Student-student relationships and peer networks are an important mechanism to help encourage a sense of belonging and for students to feel part of a learning community; this can be just as important as student-staff contact. Students often feel the strongest connection to their departmental community and it is useful to help foster this, whilst encouraging active learning and developing useful team-working skills.

When setting individual assignments, consider forming students into groups, and then use the average mark of the group as a portion of the individual's mark. Students can feel more invested in each other's success, have an "excuse" to interact with others, and may form additional friendships. It is important to remain mindful of cultural and cognitive difficulties of potentially engaging with this format, however.

Additionally, consider using student leaders (for example, course reps/peer mentors) to facilitate study groups for students.

Be aware of the groupings and mix of your cohort, and how you can ensure positive interaction and engagement.

Where from:

University of Coventry/UCL Medical School

Peer networks – University of Wolverhampton <http://www.wlv.ac.uk/about-us/internal-departments/the-college-of-learning-and-teaching-colt/academic-development/how-to-guides/how-to-help-your-students-improve-their-grades/>

10. Hello, my name is

Staff can sometimes struggle to pronounce student names. This can unintentionally be a form of micro-aggression early on in the university experience, and can distance students from feeling like they belong. Students often give alternative names that are more "Eurocentric" in nature to avoid the discomfort/difficulty of introducing themselves in the future to others. This can induce feelings of not belonging.

Consider dedicating time in the first session, where appropriate (in small groups, where it is easy to hear others), to ask students if they wish to talk about their names to both staff and their classmates. This can include:

- How to pronounce the name
- What the student prefers to be called
- The story behind their name; where it came from, any interesting meanings etc.

Additionally, consider printing out photos and names of students before the cohort arrives to help put names to faces.

Where from:

Kingston University & Coventry University

11. Inclusive learning

Students have a variety of learning styles, and previous educational experiences; there is no “one size fits all” approach to teaching and learning.

Examples of good practice at Essex include;

- A first year module including teaching study skills to help students adjust to HE level of study
- Promotion of peer mentors and personal tutors as peer support networks
- Considering the use of peer assessment (*links to resources on peer assessment to be included*); students create a draft of an essay and give it to peers for peer marking and thoughts, before submitting the final essay
- Staff members within the department reach out to students to offer support, rather than waiting to be approached
- Lecturers leaving space for questions within lectures
- Ensuring that PowerPoints include clear points
- Use of Listen Again to help consolidate learning
- Module guides – are they written clearly and easy to understand? Is time taken to explain them?
- Use of confidential feedback forms at the end of modules, as well as transparency around what is changed as a result of the feedback
- Adapting teaching for all learning types; problem based learning, group work, lecturing etc.
- Different assessment methods can engage different types of students (for example, some dyslexic students can often enjoy creative modes of assessment, Learning and Development can provide some useful suggestions)
- Feedback – consider provision of both verbal and written feedback (see “Feedback matters” section)
- Timely provision of lecture slides on Moodle
- Regular reminders of what is expected from students in the module
- Students really appreciate clarity of learning outcomes from the beginning
- Group work can be a welcome activity for peer interaction and to enhance understanding. This is relevant for the new NSS question; “I have had the right opportunities to work with other students as part of my course”.

Where from:

Inclusive practice report by Helena Hughes, Student Support

12. Essex Reader: Race, Ethnicity and Inclusion

This will be a collection of contributions for an interdisciplinary volume, including short academic essays written in a conversational yet academic tone by Essex staff and students (a different subject matter, but the same structure to the “LGBT+ perspectives – The University of Essex Reader”.) This can be used as a teaching resource celebrating diversity, and can also encourage personal involvement in issues affecting the BAME community (and other protected characteristics, if the volumes become a series). It also gives staff and students opportunities to be published!

- Promotion of the submissions for the volume to staff and students across departments (deadline 25 April 2017)– this can help create a strong sense of community and celebration of diversity
- When collated, this can also provide a valuable teaching resource that can be used for assignments. This has been previously used with success in Economics with the LGBT volume; a third year module was linked to the topic of LGBT; the author of the best assignment was able to contribute to a chapter of the volume.

Where from:

Dr Ilaria Boncori, Essex Pathways Department

13. Learning how to learn

Students come to Essex with a diverse range of previous educational experiences and different learning styles. In order to set students up for success, we need to ensure this is accommodated for, and a level of prior knowledge is not assumed. Mature students, for example, may have had a large gap in time since they were previously in education. International students may have been taught in a different style or context.

Consider linking up a compulsory first year module with an academic writing skills module, delivered by the Talent Development Centre. (*TDC to supply additional information regarding provision available for departments*)

Where from:

The departments of Sociology, LiFTS and CSEE have used this

14. Proactive personal tutoring

Effective relationships between students and staff are extremely important for support, both academically and pastorally. Personal tutors are promoted to students as the first port of call for any issues relating to a course, or difficulties that may affect studies. September to December is a particularly important time for contact between personal tutors and students, to encourage continuation.

- Consider using personal tutor meetings to include reflective logs, and collating portfolios if relevant to a vocational/professional degree (for example, those that require evidence of fitness to practice). These reflective logs could include how students are developing academic, pastoral and employability skills
- Attending personal tutor meetings could also be a non-credit rating module that students have to pass to proceed to the next stage, to embed how important the Personal Tutor system is
- Contact studentengagement@essex.ac.uk if additional training around the role of personal tutoring may be of benefit; different skills are needed to engage with students on a one-to-one basis than those needed to lecture a large audience, for example
- Consider how to make personal tutor training compulsory within the department
- If appropriate, reading weeks could be replaced with “academic development” weeks, where a form of intensive group tutorial is given, supported by the Talent Development Centre
- Be aware of the physical space for conversations – is it welcoming? Does it feel safe to students? Is this a space where students are allowed to be themselves and acknowledge any difficulties?
- Be mindful of the fact that tutors’ and students’ lived experiences and academic journeys may vary – an open mind is important. For example, cultural differences may also make students reluctant to constructively challenge an academic, as a person of authority
- Consider how accessible tutor meeting booking systems are; e.g. are sign-up sheets on the door accessible to commuting students, who have limited time on campus and may have to travel back for the meeting if they cannot sign up via email/online?
- There is a difference between the staff and student demographic. Encourage students to seek out role models they feel they can relate to where they feel safe, but also help students to build up confidence to approach those who they don’t immediately relate to – they can often have something valuable to give, even if the immediate connection is not there
- Additionally, when recruiting new members of staff within the department, consider how to test a variety of skills in the recruitment process (for example, listening skills), and ensure transparency around expectation of personal tutor duties from the start.

Where from:

Inspired by the University of Coventry and Kingston University

15. Role models and success stories

Visible role models that students can relate to, with similar experiences, are a great tool to help raise aspirations and encourage a culture of success. Successful individuals that have experienced difficulties at university are also important to promote, to help normalise transition. A variety of role models is important, from recent graduates to alumni well established in their careers, to help capture a diverse audience and show the different stages of success.

- Consider working with Employability and Careers/the Alumni office to produce a small publication (for example, a magazine) profiling success stories of the department’s graduates, for distribution to students; ensure inclusion of a diverse range of students
- Promotion of the career mentoring scheme, provided by E&CC, where students can be mentored by business professionals and alumni, will also be of benefit
- Ensure that peer mentors, course reps and Project Workers continue to be highly visible within departmental activities, events etc., and are able to share their own stories
- Staff shouldn’t be afraid to share personal experiences and stories of Higher Education with students, as well as passion for the subject being taught. Consider how to profile these stories, whether it’s within lectures, on departmental webpages, through videos, interviews, posters etc.
- Be mindful of language used in feedback and in seminars/lectures etc. in relation to how students feel internally and what their motivations may be.
- Encourage a culture of success; communicate one’s own high standards for module (in a positive context) to help encourage students to go further – research has suggested that the more belief tutors/lecturers have in their students, the more likely students are to perform better

Where from:

Publication idea from University of Greenwich
Consideration of language used by Ritta Husted