

Chapter 2: Integrating Learning Support for Part-time Students



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Module Name	<u>SBUS1005D Introducing Academic Competencies</u> <u>SBUS1006D Developing Learning Competencies</u>
Universal Design Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Flexibility in use - Tolerance for error - A community of learners - Instructional climate
Discipline	Business
Level	UCD Level 1
College	Business
Learning Outcomes	<p>Learning Outcomes SBUS1005D Introducing Academic Competencies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identify and develop different learning and study approaches - Effectively plan and organise your study time - Develop key note-taking skills and memory techniques - Understand and apply the key principles of essay writing - Understand how to source and evaluate material from an academic perspective - Reference according to academic conventions - Identify the important elements in planning, structuring and writing an examination answer

Introduction and context

The undertaking of a Higher Education programme is a major decision by a student. It creates a number of challenges for learners and these challenges demand the development of meta-cognitive competencies. It is important that students feel supported during their studies while they develop these academic skills. Thus the design and delivery of the support should be well considered by the institution and an appropriate approach to student skills development support identified (Wingate, 2006). In particular, the needs of part-time or distance learners may require more deliberative, planned support for students given that they are not on campus every day. Dowling and Ryan (2013) demonstrate that there is a greater likelihood for success of the implementation of academic skills where these interventions are embedded within the learner support framework. Such approaches do not need to be complex but should be learner-centred.

Why Universal Design for these modules?

This case study provides insights into the support provisions on the Diploma in Business Studies programmes. Students on this programme are mature students, returning to study on a part-time basis.



Figure 1: BBS classroom discussion on business ethics

The programme has developed a set of supports for this student cohort which are premised on **Flexibility in use** and building a **Community of learners**. Students on this programme are provided with a dedicated Learning Support Officer (LSO) who acts as a single point of contact for all academic and administrative queries. This allows the student to build a rapport with a single person. The Learning Support Officer is very accessible to the student (See below), demonstrating the Universal Design principle of **Flexibility in use**. The LSO also develops and delivers a suite of academic skills modules which supports the student. Approximately 80 students commence the programme each academic year.



Figure 2: BBS Student Classroom

Design and implementation of the initiative

The students on this programme are mature students, returning to Higher Education. For many of them the return to education is an anxious period. The classroom experience is complimented by the provision of the academic skills modules in each semester of year 1 and support by the Learning Support Officer.

In addition to the classroom experience and the opportunity to draw on their experiential learning, it is recognised that students need support to navigate the institutional terrain as well as the academic terrain. Students will have queries from the receipt of a student card, to the payment of fees to the actual development of academic skills. For most new students this involves a steep learning curve and encounters with a variety

of university staff. The energy invested in this is possibly magnified for part-time students who are not on campus on a regular basis.

The intention of the Centre for Distance Learning was to develop a holistic approach to student support, whereby each student had a single key contact within the university who would be able to support them academically and operationally. Given students are not on campus every day, the opportunity to have a key liaison adds greatly to the student experience and feelings of engagement. Mindful of the supports required by part-time mature students, an appropriate structure has been developed to support students on this programme. The concept was to have an access point to the university for all queries and, if needed, a referral could be made to other university services, allowing **Tolerance for error**. Central to the success of the programme is the Learning Support Officer. Students on this programme are provided with a dedicated Learning Support Officer who acts as a single point of contact for all academic and administrative queries. The ratio is approximately 10-150 students to one Learning Support Officer.

In order to build a rapport with the student and university regarding assignments, exam technique, study approach or sourcing of suitable academic resources can be addressed by the Learning Support Officer

and a response provided within 24 hours. In each semester, a phone call is initiated by the Learning Support Officer to ask how a student's studies are progressing and answer any questions they might have. This helps to engage students demonstrate that there is meaningful support available to them during their studies. The Learning Support Officer is available to students during their block release weekend e.g. as they sign in for class, at their lunchtimes, etc. Equally, they have an active role in fostering a **Community of learners**, by organising an open coffee for all students in a class, or a networking event in each semester. This is intended to foster the relationships amongst those in the class themselves.

The relationship with the student starts with the application. Unlike other applications to the College of Business, the Learning Support Officer receives all queries to the programme and assesses the applications. Where interviews are required, the Learning Support Officer undertakes the interviews. This allows for a rapport to be developed at the first point of contact with UCD. It also means the Learning Support Officer is well placed to design and deliver the orientation programme for the Year 1 cohort, having met most, if not all, of the incoming Year 1 students. This allows for the execution of a positive **Instructional climate**. The climate is welcoming and inclusive and the concerns

expressed by incoming students during the recruitment process are addressed at this early stage.

The image is a collage of three parts. The top part is a photograph of a modern building with large glass windows, identified by a sign as the 'UCD Michael Smurfit School of Business'. A logo for the 'Centre for Distance Learning' is overlaid on the top left of this image. The middle part is a blue banner with white text that reads 'SBUS1005D Return to Learning' and 'Dr Orna O'Brien November 2015: Exam Preparation'. The bottom part is a white slide with a blue header 'Common Concerns'. It features three colorful thought bubbles: a purple one saying 'I don't think I'll remember anything in the exam...', a blue one saying 'Will the examiner be able to read my hand-writing?', and a yellow one saying 'I don't know where to start with my notes'. A small number '4' is in the bottom right corner of the slide.

Figure 3: Sample of resources from Introducing Academic Competencies session on examination technique

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Figure 4: Sample of study guide index for SBUS1005D Introducing Academic Competencies

As well as the day-to-day academic and administrative supports, the Learning Support Officer also develops and delivers a suite of academic skills modules which support the students, as shown in figure 3. An insight into one of these modules is provided below in Figure 4. This is critical to the support and engagement of year 1 students. These 5 ECTS modules provide the students with the essential tools to support their return to learning. The modules are assessed with practical assignments which support the students' learning and allow for meaningful feedback. For example, if the students are undertaking the module HRM1010D People Management, the assignment for SBUS1005D might be to prepare an essay plan, essay and reference list. This ensures the academic skills modules are deeply embedded into the curriculum and allows module coordinators to work closely with Learning Support Officers to reinforce key messages. The Learning Support Officers assess and prepare the feedback for these academic skills modules for the students. This is a further means to reach out to the students and to help them to develop their academic skillset.

The Learning Support Office actively monitors a student's progress across all their modules in addition to the academic skills modules, and is thus well placed to offer any additional academic support

identified. The curricular resources for all modules are reviewed by the Learning Support Officer so they are familiar with the content and the assessment. The assessment for all modules is designed in consultation with the Learning Support Officer so that the module coordinator and Learning Support Officer are working with the same messages to students. All Learning Support Officers are qualified to postgraduate level in business so they are well placed to support the students as they develop key academic skills and advise on the queries re. assessment, reading and complex concepts.



Figure 5: UCD Lochlann Quinn School

How do we know it worked?

To date, this has proven to be an effective strategy with a relatively high retention rate for this typically vulnerable cohort. The provision of such academic support ensures

that students are well supported in their studies. It provides a service available to all students on the programme. It is flexible in its provision; students can call, email or meet their Learning Support Officer. It is not complex in that the student has a clear understanding of who to go to ask questions and navigate the university environment. The presence of the Learning Support Officer and the modules they provide are embedded into the programme framework. Module coordinators and Learning Support Officers work together to provide cohesive and comprehensive information to students.

The support framework allows for the development of a **Community of learners** for the students and empowering the students to take an active role themselves in this regard. The programme staff encourage students to form study groups and actively facilitate this based on geographical location. Because they are familiar with individual students, they are often well placed to pair suitable students together for study groups. This adds not only to the educational experience of students but also the social dimension. It encourages students to develop a social network, something which is often missing for part-time students.

The high retention rate for the programme of approximately 80% suggests the framework works well. Admittedly, it is a resource intensive approach but is a clear

commitment encouraging participation in Higher Education.

Advice to others for implementation

While the model is resource intensive, there are elements which may be effective for other providers. It is inherently student centred and works to address common difficulties which part-time students might experience. Some of the considerations which other practitioners might like to consider include the following:

In semester support

- The initiation of a phone call to a student in each semester.
- The inclusion of a clear orientation or academic skills module upon programme commencement which is embedded with other academic modules.
- The accessibility of programme staff to student during the times of their sessions.
- The visibility of staff inside and outside of the classroom is very important.

University infrastructure

- The strong working relationship between programme management staff and academic staff to ensure there is a cohesive programme of studies and clear programme messages.

“The support from Learning Support Officers (and the CDL team) throughout the four years made life easier – it is a challenge to complete part-time study while working, so anything that makes life a little easier is very welcome.”

“I am surprised to have received so much from these modules, I learned a lot on how to express myself using better structure, the tasks to write essay were great and challenging”

“...made life easier – it is a challenge to complete part-time study while working, so anything that makes life a little easier is very welcome”

References & resources

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