

PHE 710: Developing Excellence in L&T

Case Study

Title: Widening Access Through Short Course Provision

Summary:

This case study illustrates the strategic role in leading and engaging academic colleagues to develop and grow the undergraduate Certificate in Personal and Professional Development (CPPD) short course framework. This framework is used to support the institutional widening access agenda and all staff through the Civic Ambassador scheme are encouraged to influence how short course provision is offered at Ulster. Through the Centre of Flexible Education, staff from across the University are supported to create and deliver novel credit bearing interventions that are in keeping with their academic objectives whilst meeting the strategic goals of the university. This case study will demonstrate how staff are encouraged to design, plan, deliver and assess a range of learning activities and programmes to support both widening access initiatives and partnership with industry.

What was done:

The 5 & 50 Strategy states that Ulster University will “transform lives, stretch minds, develop skills and raise ambitions...encourage a diverse university community...make a lasting contribution to society as a whole”.

Academic colleagues are mentored to write modules suitable for a widening access audience, recognising the challenges and struggles associated with an often-disengaged learner. By using recognised guidance from The QAA UK Quality Code for Higher Education when writing learning outcomes and applying the five key pillars of understanding adult learners coined by Malcom Knowles around the term “andragogy” into learning and teaching philosophy, module offerings will be real, specific, and clear to the motivated adult learner.

Employing the guidelines in Ulster’s new Learning and Teaching Strategy guarantees all provision on the CPPD Framework is shaped by dynamic, innovative and integrated curricula using contemporary methods of pedagogy to embrace diversity and increase opportunity for success for all.

Motivation and aims:

Over the years progress has been made in making Higher Education more accessible to traditionally excluded students, however, it is still one of the predominant challenges facing Universities today (Clarke, Beech 2008). In Northern Ireland Widening Participation in Higher Education is a key priority for the Department of the Economy (DOE) and they have set targets for all local third level education providers to increase the access and participation of disadvantaged students. The Access to Success strategy (DOE 2013) seeks to ensure that talented individuals are given every opportunity to benefit from the higher education that is right for them. Dr Stephen Farry (MLA) Minister for Employment and Learning stated that

“In order for Northern Ireland to secure a sustainable, globally competitive economy and to achieve the growth in the numbers of people with high level skills which will make this

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country world class, we must encourage participation from students from sections of society which have not traditionally benefitted from higher education.”

Ulster University are contractually obliged to undertake activities that promote fair access to higher education through outreach work and financial support to students through the Widening Access and Participation Plan in agreement with the Department for the Economy. From a strategic planning perspective, the achievement of level 3 accredited learning within Ulster contributes directly to educational attainment as an aspect of widening access and participation. Achievement of level 4 accredited learning pathways additionally contributes to the on-going protection of the block grant allocation.

Implementation:

The Certificate of Personal & Professional Development (CPPD) is an established modular framework of Ulster University at level 3 and 4 and was first considered through a full validation process prior to conception in 2007. As an institutional framework which hosts modules from across Faculties & Departments, the provision is centrally managed by the Centre for Flexible Education. To date the framework has supported over 6000 successful student enrolments on modules associated with the Certificate.

CPPD modular options are available at level 3 and or 4 for the following reason and purpose:

- i. Part time students intent on exploring the achievement of higher level skills and or a route for transition to further HE study (in line with the NI Regional Strategy Access to Success).
- ii. Curriculum enrichment for full time students to give credit for achievement of employability skills and understanding.
- iii. Workforce development for employers, to enable recognition and accreditation of skills (in line with the NI Regional Strategy Skills for Success).

The design and development of modular provision within the CPPD framework is informed by learning needs identified through on-going consultation with the education, community and business sectors. By collaborating with Associate Deans, Heads of School and academic colleagues, the number and variety of modules available to both the corporate and widening access market has increased year on year. As part of the development of the University's product offering of courses the CPPD framework at undergraduate level 3 and 4, provides opportunity for Faculty partners to meet a learning need through a short course solution for personal and professional development, explore and test markets to help inform course design and development prior to completing full validation.

With this change to a more diverse student population, teaching methods and practices have had to evolve and develop and a “one size fits all approach” to dealing with students is not appropriate. Swenson (1982) identified that lecturers must learn to value diversity and use it as a learning tool in the classroom rather than a threat to traditional academic experience. Providing an excellent learning experience for a widening access student starts long before the student enrolls on a programme. Students need to be fully supported from the outset and through their entire learning journey, to ensure they have confidence and trust in the University system. An excellent lecturer is not only responsible for delivering an innovative curriculum, they also need to be proactively involved in the various stages of the student lifecycle (HEFCE, 2001; Layer et al., 2002) such as, aspiration raising, pre-entry support, application, induction and welcoming,

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academic support, monitoring and tracking “at risk” students, personal tutors, mentoring, additional learning support, professional development planning, careers advice and skills development.

The flexible nature of the framework permits Faculties to be responsive to a business/community need and modules often transform from an idea to a live module within a matter of weeks. Staff are supported through the entire development process, from initial concepts through to delivery of a module. The course director for CPPD liaises closely with the Academic Office and Student Administration to ensure modules are approved and students are registered with appropriate access to systems, resources and teaching rooms within required time frames.

Successes and lessons learnt:

Dr Dalene Swanson Chief Examiner for the CPPD framework in her most recent report was highly complimentary of the framework.

“A definite strength of the programmes were the ways in they were designed to be useful and practical to students enrolled. They were clearly thought through to be of maximum benefit to students in everyday life. The focus was squarely on student development, recognising each student’s starting point and needs, as well as the nature of the community for which the modules were designed. There was coherence across tasks and assessments. The feedback mechanisms to students were also good.”

Partnership between central departments and faculty is essential to the framework running smoothly. The flexible frameworks react to need and quite often modules are approved, and students begin studying within days/weeks. Students are generally unaware of the chaos involved in such a quick turnaround and that is the main aim. Student feedback is collected and relayed back to module co-ordinators and best practice is shared with the wider CPPD course team.

Evidence from the community development pathway within the Faculty of Social Sciences demonstrates the potential to make explicit progression pathways and increase the engagement of part time adult learners through a trajectory of access and undergraduate degree. Opportunity to explore this further across other subject areas is welcomed as this provides opportunity to enhance flexible access for part time and work-based students.

Transferability:

The framework is available to any subject area wanting to deliver stand-alone modules at level 3 and 4. Ideally engaging with the academic team within Centre for Flexible Education at the earliest opportunity helps to ensure modules are developed, approved, advertised and students registered as smoothly as possible.

Further information:

http://addl.ulster.ac.uk/docs/127086_UU_Discover_opportunities_web.pdf

Feedback from a colleague who recently added a module to the framework highlights my contribution with her module:

“I have worked with Ursula McTaggart during this academic year in setting up a flexible short course within my discipline of Irish traditional music. I had made previous attempts at

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getting this course introduced but each time it got lost in the system. Ursula's commitment, dedication, availability and focus was critical in getting this module up and running, and for that I am hugely grateful. Due, in no small part to her contribution, Ulster University now stands as the first institution to offer accredited teacher training for traditional musicians."