



Developing learning and personal skills through the Social Policy curriculum

Authors: Anne Llewellyn and Zoë Irving

Anne Llewellyn School of Health and Community, Leeds Metropolitan University

Zoë Irving, Department of Sociological Studies, University of Sheffield

Origin

The following summary describes the development and delivery of a core level 1 module on the Social Policy route of a Modular Undergraduate Programme in Social Sciences. The module, entitled 'Learning and Personal development' was originally conceived and validated in response to two external drivers: recommendations in the Dearing report regarding the importance of traditional graduate skills in relation to employability and the widening participation agenda. Institutionally, the first of these had been interpreted as a need for courses to explicitly demonstrate the existence of the 'additional curriculum', and thus in the Social Sciences Programme incorporated in provision in the form of a stand-alone module.

The further development of the module including its change in title to 'Poverty and Social Exclusion' reflected three main concerns within the Social Policy teaching team (who were all involved in delivery):

- that the design of the module should recognise the diversity of students' backgrounds and experience with a move away from the traditional lecture/seminar format
- that institutionally determined modular reduction (from 10 to 8) combined with the introduction of the Social Science Programme required a more sophisticated integration of Social policy content
- that increased formalisation of pastoral support was crucial to staff as a workload management strategy and to students as a means to maintain a quality student experience and prevent attrition

Purpose

The generic aims of the module broadly covered the development of transferable skills and independent learning. In addition, Social Policy staff saw the purpose as an opportunity to

- engage students with Social Policy as a dynamic and actual lived experience
- familiarise students with key subject specific resources (local and national, paper and virtual, literary and statistical)
- reinforce the notion that learning is a lifelong active and reflective process
- build cohesion and a sense of community within the student body

Envisaged Outcomes

- The generic learning outcomes were:
- Make appropriate use of a range of study skill techniques
- Understand the requirements of a range of different assessment tasks
- Seek out information and apply it to different assessment tasks
- Identify own learning and personal development needs in the context of past experience and programme expectations

For the teaching team, the outcomes were focussed on enabling the students to become confident and effective learners through:

- being comfortable and familiar with the use of ICT and Social Policy resources
- the application of critical thinking
- the development of academic interests and planning for future study
- workload planning and reflection through the provision of formative feedback within a highly structured assessment programme

Preparation and Support

As a team-taught module, regular but often informal meetings between the course team were necessary to ensure parity in the student experience and to feedback on and evaluate delivery. Regular up-dates on developments in the institutional and subject learning environment are also helpful, occur on an ad-hoc basis and can be incorporated incrementally. Support within the institution includes 'Know-it-all' sessions provided centrally by the learning support services and covering a variety of skills and resources related topics.

Students assume the responsibility for booking into the sessions within this programme, which they feel are relevant to their individual learning needs. Use was also made of the university intranet where students can access a package entitled 'Skills for learning'.

Development Issues

Over a period of four years, the module was transformed from a centrally defined and loosely delivered study and transferable skills module with little subject specific relevance, to one which was firmly grounded in the substantive study of Social Policy. While retaining a skills focus, the module was tightly structured around conceptual, theoretical and practice-related issues. In its original format the module was felt to have involved too many moving parts (programme-wide, generic, skills-focussed lecture series supported by route based group meetings) which had led to problems in the comparability of student experience and outcomes. With greater devolvement of delivery, the Social Policy teaching team were able to redesign the academic content and reframe the aims and outcomes within a Social Policy context. The lecture programme fed into the student tasks and the assessment load was significantly increased from a summative portfolio to a staged assessment, which required continual engagement by students but also allowed formative feedback. The development of the module did necessitate a degree of flexibility on the part of the teaching staff but in practice did not dramatically increase marking loads since the student tasks were 'bite-sized' and no more than 8 students were assigned to each tutor.

Course in Action

Students were assigned to an action learning group (ALG) of about 8 students. Supported by a tutor, the group is the place where students are expected to discuss the assigned tasks and give and receive feedback as tasks are completed. Groups meet fortnightly and are required to participate in classroom based activities and complete assigned tasks throughout the academic year. In addition to these group based activities a series of supporting lectures were provided which covered study skills and topics relating to poverty and social exclusion. A module handbook was provided which gave detailed information on the module format, a selected bibliography relating to study skills and poverty and social exclusion and guidance on completion of the assessment.

The assessment for this module consisted of :

1. Completion and submission of a series of tasks throughout the module:

- A definition of plagiarism with a brief commentary on the implications for your own essay writing
- Synthesis of a short passage of academic writing (reproduced in handbook)
- A 1000 word essay
- Completion of the learning styles questionnaire located on the Skills for learning package and a 500 word discussion of how well the outcome reflects your own perception of your learning style
- A 500 word summary of a video shown to the group
- Location of two journal articles from refereed social policy journals
- Two 500 word commentaries which compare and contrast the articles
- Location of two websites and emailing website addresses to tutor
- In pairs, compilation of list of 20 necessities and small survey of general public to test list against views of others. Present findings to ALG using at least one illustrative graph or chart
- 500 word reflective summary of survey exercise
- A reflective summary on learning achievements, gaps and objectives

2. An individual project focussing on a group deemed to be socially excluded. The project was presented to the ALG in a poster presentation at the end of the academic year Review

The module described above was evaluated and revised annually over a four year period until it was felt that the right balance had been struck between the skills component and the academic content, and that the best format for delivery had been achieved. The team encountered no regulatory barriers in this customising process because the generic aims and learning outcomes were clearly retained; in effect it was a process of enhancement which centralised the study of an area of Social Policy; Poverty and Social Exclusion as the hook on which to hang the development of a range of study and transferable skills. The most significant constraint was the institutional requirement that the module be assessed on a pass/fail basis, which meant that its importance was underestimated by some students.

Despite this and although the students found the workload relatively demanding, the majority returned very positive evaluations at the end of last academic year. For the staff, one of the most positive achievements was the cohesion apparent within the student body and the excellent relationship between staff and students.

Next Steps

A module such as this necessarily requires regular up-dating both in terms of Social Policy content but also in relation to developments in the learning environment. This may be determined by the facilities available institutionally, particularly ICT facilities such as Blackboard or WebCT and the extent to which these are reasonably accessible to students.



**Social Policy
and Social Work
(SWAP)**

The Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Social Policy and Social Work (SWAP)
University of Southampton School of Social Sciences
Southampton
SO17 1BJ



Printed on recycled paper