Skills and the Access to HE student: ready for take-off or still at the gate?

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What does a University Study Adviser do?

- One-to-one individual advice sessions
- Paper and online self-help resources
- Generic and embedded teaching on study skills
- NOT just widening participation – learning development not deficit
What skills do HE students need to develop?

Traditional skills:
- Report writing
- Referencing
- Exam preparation
- Essay writing
- Time management
- Research methods

New skills:
- Giving presentations
- Reading and note-making
- Reflective writing
- Group work
- Blogs & wikis
- Studying online

...and new skills
And consider...

- Every discipline has different requirements
- Every institution has a different academic culture
- Every student is different

With all these variables to take into account as well as the shortness of the course, how can Access to HE courses best prepare students for undergraduate study?
So, I’m a successful Access to HE student on my first day at university...

What’s on my t-shirt?

Activity adapted from Alan Mortiboys, in keynote speech to LDHEN conference, Bournemouth University, April 2009
What worries new mature students?

Could be aged 21 - over 80; various educational and work backgrounds; not a homogeneous group

“Will I be able to keep up with the younger students?”

“Managing paid employment alongside study”

“Is it okay to lie about my age?”

“Want to make friends but not get drunk every night!”

“Parking permit!”

“Returning after previous difficult education experience”

“Not in Halls – what do I do in Freshers?”

“Am I good enough?”
What did former Access to HE students say?

All students interviewed were on ‘academic’ courses, and had not studied Access to HE locally.

“Definitely a good grounding for uni”

“My [science] course leaned more towards tests than essays”

“University was a complete culture shock”

“Didn’t pick up my dyslexia”

“Careers module wasn’t useful – would have been better to do more IT skills”

“An amazing experience for someone who hadn’t been in education for 20 years”

“More information on university level research and reading scientific papers”

“My experiences were wholly positive”

“Didn’t pick up my dyslexia”
Pre-sessional event for mature students

- One day free event offered to all new mature undergraduate entrants with a confirmed place
- Takes place mid-late Sept (1-2 weeks before Freshers Week)
- General transition advice, campus orientation, introduction to services, taster sessions on key study practices
- Lots of opportunities for networking – most important!
Feedback from attendees

“This is a great idea – well done!”

“Good to be signposted to support mechanisms for when needed”

“Lovely to meet some very friendly & helpful people”

“Great to meet people & talk about experiences – not so scary now”

“It has really helped to calm my nerves”

“I was very impressed with the high standard of content today – it exceeded expectations”

“Learnt lots we didn’t learn in Access course”

“First sign I’ve seen that the University cares about mature students.”

“I was very impressed with the high standard of content today – it exceeded expectations”
Discussion: skills prep on your course

• What kind of skills do your students need? Now? Later?

• Could skills teaching be more embedded in subject teaching – or is it better as a standalone module?

• Do you feel confident teaching all the skills your students might need? Who could you call on for support?

• Do most of your students feed into a particular university/degree course? Could you build these links?

• Could you offer some bridging resources for students to use when they finish their Access course?
Concluding remarks

• Can’t cover every skill – so help them to help themselves

• Build confidence – make sure they know it’s okay to seek support

• Teach principles and academic culture, not just skills

• Promote peer support

• No one-size-fits-all answer