

Evaluation of e-learning

University of Birmingham – ‘skills4uni’ study skills

This case study illustrates Epic’s approach to evaluation of e-learning, based on the ‘skills4uni’ study skills programme. The programme has been thoroughly evaluated in partnership with the University of Birmingham (UoB), with results linked to Kirkpatrick’s 4 levels.

Background

The transition from school to university can be a culture shock, particularly for those not used to self-study. Consequently, some undergraduates struggle to cope and drop out during the first year.

UoB’s Access to Birmingham (A2B) programme is specifically geared to attracting students from under-represented backgrounds to apply to university. Attracting these students is the first challenge - supporting their transition comes next. This isn’t easy, since they generally experience a more profound culture shock than their peers, as their family and friends have little or no experience of higher education.

As a response, UoB commissioned Epic to work with them to develop ‘skills4uni’, a highly interactive online programme, which gives prospective students an idea of what to expect from university life. It includes tools to help students identify what kind of learner they are, advice on critical and objective thinking, how to use the library, and practical tips on taking notes/asking questions in lectures.

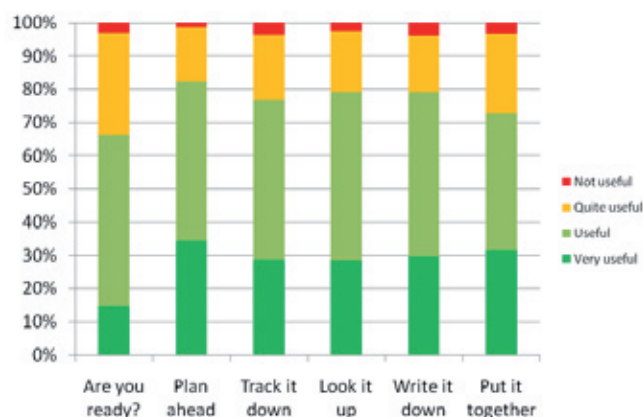
Immediate results – evaluation at levels 1 and 2

In 2008, skills4uni was launched to 16-18 year-old prospective students, receiving a highly favourable response. Over 90% of users passed the assessment and 95% said they’d recommend the course to their friends.



It was crucial to fully analyse the programme’s effectiveness, as it would offer important lessons for the university sector as a whole. Epic worked in partnership with UoB to evaluate the learning using the Kirkpatrick model:

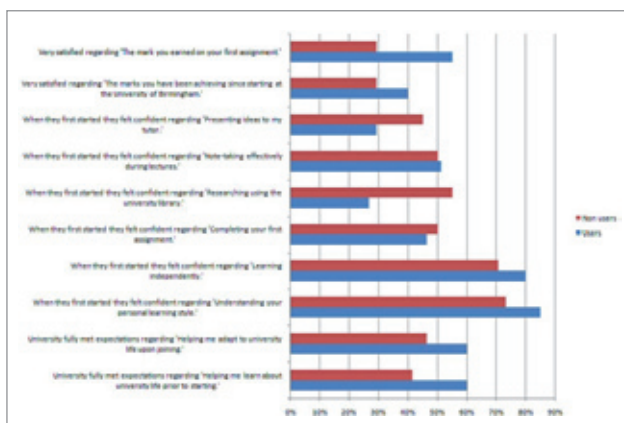
- **Level 1 (user reaction):** An online survey asked users to rate how useful they found each module in relation to the programme’s 6 key learning objectives. The results are shown below. User reactions were highly positive, particularly in giving users the skills to plan ahead
- **Level 2 (user learning):** The post-course assessment results involved students answering randomised questions from a large database. Despite a challenging pass mark, only 3% of A2B students failed the assessment



skills4uni longer term impact – evaluation at levels 3 and 4

That was 2008. Of course, the students who completed skills4uni have since applied to university and completed their first year. So what impact did it have?

- **Level 3 (increase applications to UoB):**
Applications to UoB overall were up 10.5% in 2009 and up 14% from A2B students, compared to a national increase of just 8%, evidence that skills4uni had a highly positive impact
- **Level 3 (improve preparedness for HE Study):**
A year after starting, skills4uni students and their parents were sent online surveys relating to how they/their children coped and performed in their first year. The results were then compared with those from identical questionnaires sent to a control group of non-users and their parents. The results were highly impressive, e.g:
 - 77% of students who completed skills4Uni felt confident learning independently, compared to just 52% of those who didn't complete the e-learning
 - 60% of users felt their first year met their expectations of university life compared to only 40% in the control group



To illustrate what this meant to students, here's one of many spontaneous comments from A2B students about skills4Uni:

"It gave an invaluable insight into what uni life was like, and what was expected, in a virtual manner, even before we started uni, so I felt I kind of had the upper hand compared with students who hadn't done anything as such!"

- **Level 4 (reduce drop out rates):** Clearly the overall aim was to ensure that students were better prepared for higher level academic study, thus minimising the number of students dropping out of university before completing their studies. This has major cost, resource and skills shortage implications for the UK economy. Having measured the drop out rates over two years, UoB is delighted that the number of students failing to complete the A2B scheme in preparation for university has halved - falling from 12% to just 6%. Once at the university, retention for A2B students from first to second year is 96%. The e-learning programme is making a major contribution to this performance.



Summary

Highly interactive e-learning is nothing new, nor is study skills training. But this is the first time e-learning has been used in the UK higher education sector to develop study skills for pre-entry learners.

The programme has demonstrated its value in all 4 Kirkpatrick levels and shows how e-learning can have a positive impact where it matters most.

skills4uni has caused quite a stir amongst the academic community, with 12 other universities now interested in using the solution as part of their collaborative work.

For more information on our work in this area, call +44 (0) 1273 728686.

skills4uni is currently under consideration for a 2010 National Training Award and a 2010 Training Journal Award for "Best e-learning Programme"