

# To what extent does structure and voice in Access level curriculum improve the learning experience of widening participation students?

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## **Introduction**

The UK Open University (OU) offers a part-time Access Programme (Level 0) through distance learning. The programme is presented twice per year and lasts 30 weeks. The OU has an open entry policy, and consequently the Access Programme is designed with the needs of particular students in mind: adult learners who lack confidence and may have been out of education for many years, and who may also have low prior entry qualifications. It is additionally worth noting that a far higher proportion of OU Access students come from ‘disadvantaged’ backgrounds, and have characteristics associated with widening participation (the UK term for learners from under-represented groups) than enter the OU at undergraduate level. The programme’s purpose, therefore, is twofold – to deliver on the OU’s social justice mission by opening up access to higher education for students who come from groups that have traditionally been excluded, and to prepare those learners for higher education. The programme seeks to achieve these key objectives by preparing students to succeed and helping them to develop the skills to progress to undergraduate study.

5,500 students register each year, choosing one of three 30 credit modules:

- Arts and languages (Y031)
- People, work and society (Y032)
- Science, technology and maths (Y033)

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Although the OU teaches students from all four nations of the UK, about 75% of students on the Access Programme are based in England. The new regulator in England, the Office for Students, is charged with ensuring the higher education (HE) sector widens access and closes attainment gaps, requiring Access and Participation plans from every university to demonstrate how additional fee income is used. The OU reports a 50% fee subsidy on the Access modules (so students pay half the standard cost) and additionally offers a full fee waiver for students with a household income below a threshold of £25,000. As a result, around 60% of Access students study for free. A high proportion of OU Access students would be unlikely to meet the selection criteria for conventional universities, and as a result student satisfaction data on the Access Programme are subject to considerable scrutiny.

The Access Programme has recently undergone a mid-life review, as is OU practice, in which the presentation team sought to enhance the curriculum experience for entry level students with a view to introduce innovative changes to support students more effectively. The mid-life review aimed to:

- Learn from the experience of presenting modules for a number of years
- Enhance the student experience by adjusting for the unintended consequences of assessment weightings
- Improve online study
- Offer greater student choice
- Ultimately improve progression onto Level 1 (FHEQ L4)

The authors lead the Access team, and in this research sought to explore the extent to which some of the fundamental changes to the pedagogic approach in the mid-life review better met the needs of widening participation (WP) students. The changes were introduced for our October 2018 presentation and included: an increase in, and smoother transition to, online learning; a change to the assessment strategy so that all four written assignments and the five ‘mini’ computer-marked assignments were weighted to count towards a summative grade; and improvements to

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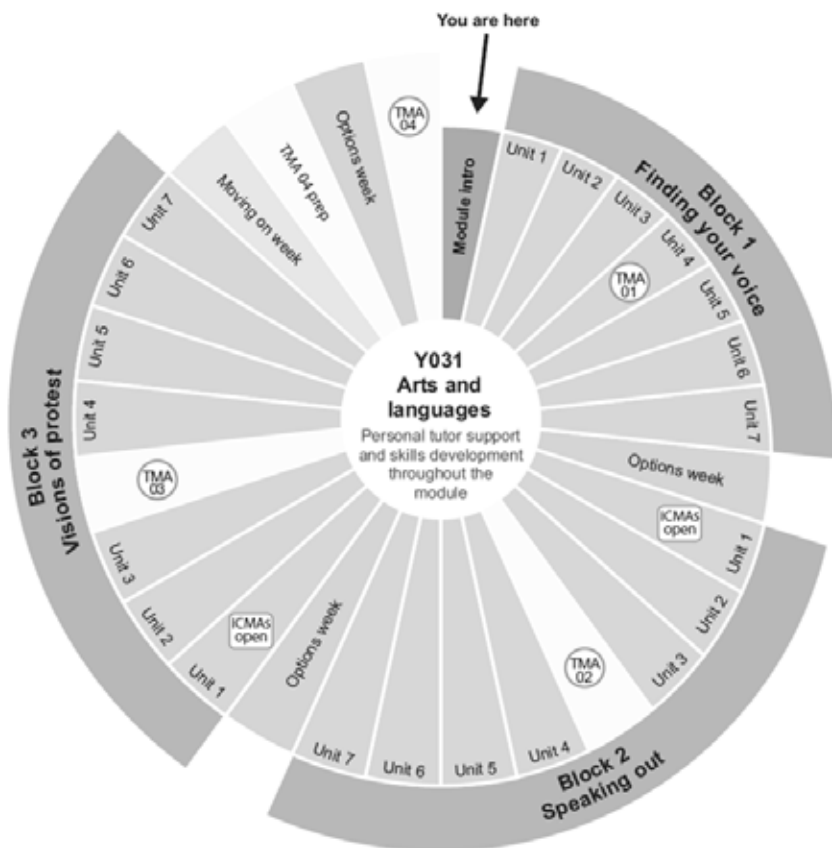
the structure of the module and the tone of voice used throughout. The ‘structure and voice’ changes included:

- A weekly structure that began with an introductory and time management activity, and ended with a ‘check your understanding’ section
- An introductory week which inducted and oriented students
- A module structure diagram (see Figure 1) to help students visualise their learning journey
- Three new ‘options’ weeks designated to enable personalised learning
- A Moving-on Week which allowed students to think about their next steps into undergraduate study
- Consistent use of three main blocks (seven weeks each) across the three modules
- Repeated use of embedded videos of module team members
- A deliberate attempt to use a friendly tone, and informal and simple language

As a result of the mid-life review, each module was re-structured into three blocks. The first module was delivered in print and the remainder delivered online. As is conventional at the OU, teaching is delivered through the materials. Uniquely for the OU, students are supported by a one-to-one telephone tutoring model.

One of the most significant modifications has been the importance placed on structure and voice in the teaching materials (teaching is delivered in a printed book in Block 1, and via a virtual learning environment (VLE) in Blocks 2 and 3). We also innovated by exploring the extent to which predictability and familiarity aided students who were lacking in confidence and who had no experience of ‘the academy’ were able to flourish as learners. By ‘smoothing-out’ the teaching, we intended that students would concentrate on the content of the subjects which inspired them to enrol in the first place.

Figure 1: Module diagram



## Policy context/literature

The UK policy context in relation to widening participation was particularly important for framing our investigation. Across the UK the number of 18 year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds applying to higher education has increased in recent years (Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), 2017) However, concerns remain about the resilience and success of such learners across the student lifecycle (Office for Students, 2018). Issues include the extent to which the HE curriculum is inclusive, the extent to

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which students from non-traditional backgrounds are adequately prepared for HE study, and the efficacy of HE teaching approaches. Unfortunately, over the last decade the number of part-time adult learners from similar WP backgrounds applying to university has plummeted, resulting in a less inclusive HE system (HESA, 2017; Butcher, 2020). The issue of poor retention is amplified in the context of distance education (Simpson, 2013), a mode of study in which, globally, retention and success figures for disadvantaged students remain stubbornly problematic.

We are aware from the pedagogic literature that teaching approaches in distance education for students from backgrounds associated with widening participation is an under-researched area. Consequently, we focused on studies of blended learning approaches and learner support, on inclusive language, and on curriculum development aimed at preparing adult students to succeed in HE (especially addressing imposter syndrome).

A key factor informing our focus on structure and engagement was Jenkins' (2015) assertion that how we teach is as important as what we teach when engaging learners from under-represented groups. This resonated with professional insights garnered from evaluations with the 30,000 students who have registered on the OU Access Programme since 2013.

For example, Rabourn et al (2018) contrasted the learning experiences of adult and traditional (younger) learners in US higher education. While finding that adults were more likely to learn purely online and change institutions, they established that adult learners had fewer interactions with peers or teachers and perceived themselves to be studying in less supportive institutions. In a distance learning context, this suggests a university needs to prioritise a more systematic approach to embedding engagement with tutors, and to engineer opportunities for peer interaction. In traditional higher education, Thomas (2016) drew on the 'What works? Student retention and success' programme to identify student engagement and belonging through their learning as integral to student success.

Yun & Park (2020) established the importance of engagement for motivation and learning in HE study, arguing for the potential positive impact of the learning environment (both classroom and online). They identified a link

between interest enhancement and behavioural engagement, and crucially between goal orientation and both emotional and cognitive engagement. As a result, we explored the benefit of greater clarity and consistency in structure and voice to motivate learners, to help enhance resilience and support autonomous engagement in successful learning.

Lawrie et al (2017) noted much of the research on inclusive teaching has focussed on disability, with valuable insights from Universal Design for Learning principles, but that there was a fluid use of terminology around 'inclusion' in HE, which masked the kinds of flexibility students need to customise their learning. Cunningham (2013) reminded us that increasing participation is not the same as widening participation, and that inclusivity was more often espoused than practiced.

Cunningham highlighted the language gap between lecturers and WP students, that resulted in a power imbalance, which amplified student feelings of alienation and isolation. She quoted from Hockings (2010: 1) to argue for a closer alignment with a student's cultural capital:

the ways in which pedagogy, curricula and assessment are designed and delivered to engage students in learning that is meaningful, relevant and accessible to all. It embraces a view of the individual and individual differences as the source of diversity that can enrich the lives and learning of others.

Morgan and Houghton (2011) suggested that in HE there was limited advice for inclusive curriculum design, so advocated a proactive anticipatory approach to take account of student characteristics, valuing equality of opportunity by making changes to the system rather than the individual. This included greater recognition of skills/qualification levels, self-esteem/confidence, age and language/cultural capital. Thomas and Heath (2014) identified a particular challenge for a diverse student body facing multiple disadvantages in their first year in HE. They argued such students might not understand the tacit requirements for participation and success in HE and may need to adapt to a 'unique culture'. Thomas and Heath also described a project aimed at bridging 'social incongruity' with a 'transition

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pedagogy', advocating accessible language to make expectations clear and utilising teaching staff in embedded video to advise on flexible choices.

As much of the teaching in distance education is delivered through print and online material, it is especially important that the author's voice is engaging and accessible. Hills et al (2018) investigated the nature of the language used in the OU Access programme, identifying a lack of clarity and consistency across assessment tasks for students, and within guidance for students and guidelines issued to tutors. This was considered particularly problematic when considering the support required by disadvantaged students entering HE for the first time. Butcher et al (2017) used the principles of fairness and equity to interrogate the extent to which inclusive language was explicit in assessment practices, with findings highlighting the need for pragmatic and conceptual attention to be given to the discourse around assessment. Findings argued for a more holistic approach to retaining students from groups under-represented in HE, based on greater clarity and the use of inclusive language.

The focus on curriculum development at entry level was informed by reflection on the OU's Openings programme (the precursor to Access). Marr et al (2013) argued that institutions could do more to increase student engagement by enabling learners from disadvantaged backgrounds to feel legitimate members of the academy and by showing them how to exercise agency in their learning. Their focus was particularly on designing inclusive approaches to learning.

We explored the hypothesis that curriculum design - based on an explicit use of a repeated structure - together with an inclusive, personalised and student-centred tone, creates an accessible, predictable and familiar learning experience for all, and that this particularly benefits WP students.

Our research questions therefore emerged from the widening participation policy context, the literature on inclusive teaching approaches in blended learning, and evaluative feedback across five years of presentation of the OU Access Programme. We sought to establish the extent to which the deliberate use of a clear and repeated weekly learning structure:

- enabled students to feel more confident about studying.

- made it more likely that students were retained
- made it easier for tutors to support students
- enabled a positive learning experience

## **Methodology**

In order to elicit data to address those questions, we adopted an iterative mixed methods approach:

- Step 1: Desk research (November 2018) into the behaviour of students from widening participation groups on one Access module (Arts and languages). This included analysis of the use of VLE tools.
- Step 2: Online group interviewing (December 2018) of a small sample of tutors who were invited to reflect on the improvements made to the pedagogic model (tutors taught both versions of the module and were therefore able to compare versions).
- Step 3: In-depth interviews with a small sample of students about their experience on the module and the extent to which they felt confident and able to learn (July 2019).
- Step 4: Online consultative forums (October 2018 and February 2019) with students to discuss specific elements of the pedagogic approach to evaluate benefits or drawbacks of the new model. Analysis of qualitative data collected.
- Step 5: Online survey to a wider sample of students and tutors (October 2018 and February 2019) and evaluate impact of changes to structure and voice. Analysis of responses from 959 students and 95 tutors.

This methodology gave us a rich insight into student and tutor perceptions of their learning, that allows us to understand intangible benefits such as increased confidence and time management skills.

## **Findings**

The evaluation activities showed that both students and tutors found the modules well-structured and the content enjoyable.



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In the interviews, tutors commented on how students gained much from studying Access both in terms of developing interests in new and unexpected subject areas and in gaining confidence and self-esteem.

...in terms of structure, the design of the materials, the course content, absolutely amazing.

...very well structured, students find it very well structured I think....

particularly this year I think some of the students have been quite surprised at how much they've learnt in such a short amount of time.

[quotes from Access tutor interviews]

The students also commented on the structure of the modules when prompted in the interviews:

I think it was structured well especially once you get online, it tells you what you're doing each week. I liked the little videos.

Overall I was very happy with the structure. I understood you were teaching me methods for learning and writing assignments in the right way whilst teaching the subject content and I think the balance was right.

I don't know if I'd make any changes, it flowed and of course there was the theme going through so that kept it together. I don't think I'd change anything really. I didn't find anything that was awkward or in the wrong place or anything. It worked well for me.

[quotes from Access student interviews]

The student questionnaire also gave some positive indications that students found the structure easy to navigate and helpful.

- 96% of students either agreed or strongly agreed that the module introduction helped them to understand how the module was organised.

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- 93% of students either agreed or strongly agreed that the module diagram was useful for navigating the structure
- 94% of students either agreed or strongly agreed that the ‘check your understanding’ sections were useful in reviewing learning from each unit.
- 85% of students either agreed or strongly agreed that they liked the introductory videos (at the start of each unit) from the Chairs.
- 99% of students either agreed or strongly agreed (with 57% strongly agreeing) that it was useful that each unit had the same structure.

The informal tone and use of video were also appreciated, as noted by students in the consultative forum. One student appreciated the more detailed explanations given in the videos rather than just reading materials.

Another student added that seeing the members of the faculty in the videos helped to give a sense of being connected to the university campus. The consultative forum also delivered feedback on the module diagram with most respondents finding the diagram useful, especially having it at the start, as it allowed them to see both an overview of the module as well as the structure of the assessment.

Students and tutors seemed to appreciate the simplified and repetitive structure of the modules, the purpose of which was to free up students to concentrate on the content and their learning. Two of the most positive findings from the interviews were the enthusiasm with which students talked about the content of the modules and how well they were able to articulate their development as learners.

The history in itself was the most interesting. What was most useful was getting back into the habit of studying; things like allotting time to do it, notetaking and just getting used to the cultural expectations of study....

I learned a hell of a lot, not just academic stuff but personal stuff too.

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Learning how to learn was the most useful. I learnt why I wasn't able to complete previous courses. I'd not been managing my time properly... Getting through the course itself completely has given me the best feeling. I really do feel I've been equipped to be able to go on and complete further study.

[quotes from Access student interviews]

As can be seen, there were a number of positive findings from the evaluation, however there were also a few elements that required improvement, some of which have already been actioned for the module presentations which began in October 2019, with updates to be included in our October 2020 presentation. These included further explanation, via video, of how the assessment strategy works and slight adjustments to assignment deadlines. There are also issues around access to appropriate computing equipment and the internet, which we are seeking to address via bursaries and clearer information. Finally, although the online forums were a source of great support for some students, others found them overwhelming and suggested that they complicated the module narrative, and as such we are looking at how we use the forums and the guidance we provide.

The 'Options' and 'Moving On' weeks were positively received in two ways. Students and tutors were positive about greater opportunities for personalisation of learning and for guidance on future study choices being embedded in the module. However, many students used these weeks to catch up with their study, a practice endorsed and, in fact, suggested by the production team. We are looking in detail at when these weeks come in the study calendar to try and maximise students' ability to take part without losing the opportunity to catch up.

In conclusion, tutors find it easier to mediate a consistent learning experience, students find it easier to plan their study time when workload is evenly spread, and embedding an opportunity for some students to use 'Options' weeks to catch-up if they have fallen behind is highly effective.

## **Discussion**

We developed a model to illustrate the close links between interventions designed by us (the University) to frame teacher approaches in a more deliberately inclusive way, and the impact on students - especially students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are likely to be new to higher education as well as to distance learning.

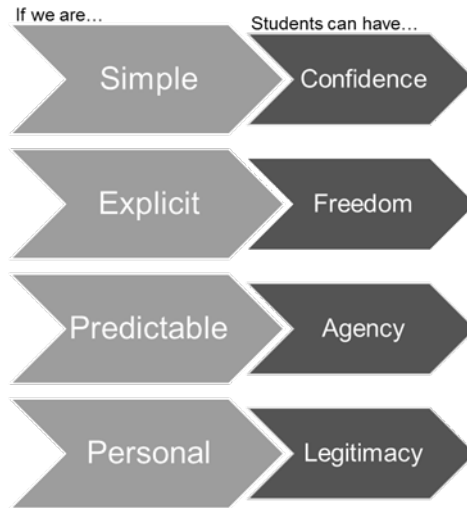
The model operates across four inputs (institutional decisions) conceptualised as a series of 'If we are...' prompts. Each input is related to an effective learner outcome, conceptualised as 'Students can have...'

First is the key pedagogic driver of simplicity. This should shape interventions in both the structure and voice of teaching to ensure nothing extraneous impedes the clarity of any ideas being imparted to students. For example, in distance education there is a tendency to layer guidance and advice to provide greater support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. While this may be well-intentioned, in reality, extensive additional guidance obfuscates key meanings and purposes in teaching and, as a result, confuses students (Butcher et al, 2017). Worse still, if adult students are returning to education after a gap, with confidence already fragile, complex routes through additional material can threaten any tentative sense of learner confidence – leading to unnecessary withdrawal or under-achievement. Simple structures and unpretentious teacher 'voice' can bolster confidence by allowing students to concentrate on understanding what really matters, and not to be derailed by additional complexity.

Second is the need to ensure that assessment tasks are written in explicit language, so that students who may already be unsure about their own 'right' to be in higher education are not sidelined by a battle to understand precisely what they are being assessed on. If assessment is framed in the technical obscurantism of higher education, it limits the responses students can make, and reduces the freedom of learners to express themselves. Being explicit also helps tutors to mark consistently (Hills et al, 2018) and thus ensure that students from non-traditional backgrounds are not penalised. By being explicit, teachers can open up the academic rule book, so that students new to higher education are not disadvantaged

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Figure 2: Structure and voice model



by not understanding the ‘rules of the game’. Confident learners, with the freedom to focus on key assessment objectives, are more likely to perform well and to be less anxious about doing something wrong.

Third is a crucial point about structuring teaching in a predictable way. The Access team had always aspired to a predictable model, however, individual authorial styles and iterative changes had resulted in complexity and inconsistencies. It is easy to allow unnecessary differences in custom and practice to intrude in multi-disciplinary teaching material written by multiple authors, but they place the burden on the student to mitigate these differences in tone, vocabulary and approach. To be clear, the use of relevant subject specific terminology is incredibly important to our teaching and we would never shy away from using the correct language; the point here is that a teaching model should not be built on the authors’ habits or preferences but on predictable rhythms designed to enable students to feel they have agency in their learning. If students are not worried about where they are or how long something will take, they can

use their time and emotional capital getting to grips with concepts, ideas and learning.

Finally, the fourth element in the model is about enabling the student experience to feel personal. This can be achieved in a number of ways and it is helpful if a student can recognise themselves in the materials. This is particularly challenging in a distance learning environment but the liberal use of student videos throughout the materials not only legitimizes the student voice but also shows a variety of faces and voices which can help increase a sense of belonging and reduces 'imposter syndrome'. An informal tone and extensive use of video material also helps to make the module team feel more like people, which again goes some way to humanizing the experience of distance learning. Finally, giving students choice over some aspects of their learning, via the Options weeks, provides opportunities for owning the learning and taking charge.

## **Conclusions**

We knew from our work with Access students over a number of years that the greatest challenges come from the issue of confidence – learners on Access programmes may carry with them a sense of failure from previous schooling, and a sense of being an imposter in higher education. They lack confidence in their own potential to succeed, and thus lack the resilience to continue when they experience a learning problem.

Three conclusions emerged from our research into addressing the impact of fragile learner confidence. We suggest learner anxiety can be mitigated by universities that design learning around a very simple and predictable structure, so students can predict study time and quickly feel familiar with the pedagogic approach they are presented with. Engaging with an accessible, clear and repetitive learning structure allows students to grow in confidence and to develop a sense of themselves as legitimate participants in the academy – they are thus less likely to feel 'lost' in the teaching, and more likely to persist.

We would argue that applying a simple structure to learning activities works for vulnerable students in a distance education setting and may also help support similar learners in conventional face-to-face teaching

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contexts who feel unprepared for the ‘rules’ of the academic game. The need to guide new students through an unfamiliar and scary terrain is one contribution to an under-researched field.

A second conclusion from our research is that at level 0 we should not try to sound ‘academic’ or to express ourselves pretentiously – our language should be accessible and inclusive, with assessment activities clearly signposted and expressed in a way that avoids obfuscation. Clarity and common-sense language will benefit all students, but it will particularly benefit students lacking confidence, and those who have been out of education for many years but aspire to re-engage despite previous ‘failures’.

A final conclusion is that students from backgrounds associated with widening participation are entering a world of higher education in which academics and more confident students will appear distantly sophisticated and knowledgeable. This can be dispiriting and off-putting and can result in WP students limiting their ambitions. To achieve more positive outcomes, what they need to encounter in their teaching materials are people like them – people of similar backgrounds who role model what is possible. This is about consciously incorporating diversity into the approach to teaching and recognising the positive power of regional accents, ethnicity and disability (both visible and invisible) – it is about inspiration rather than aspiration.

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