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## **International students' perceptions of their global skills development: a collaborative approach**

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### **Biographies**

#### **Caroline Burns**

Caroline Burns (B.A. Hons. Modern Languages, P.G.C.E., DELTA, M.A. Applied Linguistics) is Lecturer of English Language and Academic Skills for International Students at Northumbria. Based in the English Language Centre, her main role is the delivery of Academic Skills support for undergraduate students in the Newcastle Business School. Her research interests relate to the Internationalisation of Higher Education and the acquisition of academic literacy where she is currently involved in some action research in collaboration with a colleague to evaluate the results of the embedded model of academic skills support, and the use of formative feedback with international students on one year top-up programmes.

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### **Abstract**

This paper analyses the student perceptions of the progress they made in skills development over two semesters, and attempts to gauge the contribution made to this development by a collaborative approach across two disciplines. The authors contend that this collaboration which seeks to embed academic literacy into a specific credit bearing module in Newcastle Business School is an example of curriculum design which is suitable to today's multicultural classroom. First of all, some background is offered which documents recent changes in higher education, particularly the internationalisation of the classroom which is recognised in the literature and reflected in this particular case. The rationale for the collaboration will be considered from the perspective of both schools, with an explanation of how academic literacy is offered by ASk International in Newcastle Business School and how this collaborative approach attempts to identify issues and intervene to meet the perceived needs of the changing student profile. An attempt is made to specify the various skills,

understanding and attitude necessary for the multicultural classroom in this age of internationalisation. The methodology is situated in a framework of action research and the results of student questionnaire responses and our own reflections will be considered. The questionnaire gives an insight on the students' past learning experiences, their perceptions of the progress made, and their evaluation of this collaborative approach.

## **Introduction**

The higher education landscape has changed dramatically over recent years, particularly for English speaking countries which have seen a significant influx of international students. This has been recognised by Skyrme (2007, p.357):

*"Universities in many parts of the English speaking world have experienced major changes in the constitution of their student body in recent years. A significant element of this change has been the presence of large numbers of students who do not share the academic, cultural or language background of the students for whom that system was broadly designed, the skilled school leavers from the domestic community".*

De Vito and Case (2003) also discuss the challenges and opportunities that an increasingly diverse student population brings with it, and the importance of educators reflecting on their practice to meet these.

*"We should therefore address issues of cross-cultural pedagogy that require us to become reflective about how we teach, how to cater for and take advantage of individual and cultural differences..."* De Vita and Case (2003, p.395).

Both De Vita and Ippolito raise a number of questions for consideration within the university sector in terms of pedagogy and implementation of policies which may conflict with the dominant culture. De Vita (2002, p.221) questions

*"...whether the way we currently teach can effectively cater for the learning needs of home and international students, and whether special skills in teaching across cultures should be developed."*

Ippolito (2007:749) raises the issue of implementation:

*"the challenge to internationalise the HE curriculum is the difficulty in operationalising policy in a way that genuinely changes entrenched institutional culture and attitudes and behaviours of students and staff."*

In parallel with the changes in higher education, the business environment has experienced similar changes due to globalisation. This increases the need for business graduates to be equipped for working in the global market place. Commenting on the emerging challenges, Mohamed and Lashine (2003, p.6) write

*"...it becomes necessary for a business graduate... especially accounting graduates to survive in the global market environment. Therefore, an accounting graduate has to constantly improve his/her current skills and acquire new ones."*

A number of international employers concur with this, for example Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC)'s professional development programme, Ulysses, has a strong emphasis on global reasoning and positive world change:

*"PWC's young people will have to take on some very complex global challenges in the years to come, and they will need more than business skills and an MBA - they will also have to be socially aware, possess intercultural communication skills, be thoughtful, committed to accountability and above all compassionate"* (Bourn, 2008, p.21).

The challenge that globalisation of higher education brings is widely discussed in the literature. A number of universities particularly in North America recognise the role of educating students as the global citizens of tomorrow (Schultz and Jorgensen, 2009). Here in the UK, there are also examples: University College of London (UCL) has declared that the University's primary aim is to 'educate for global citizenship' (Schultz and Jorgensen, 2009, p.12).

It is against this background that a project has been undertaken in Newcastle Business School at the University of Northumbria. It involves a collaborative approach to embed English Language and Academic Skills for International Students (ASk) within a specific credit bearing module in NBS – the Professional Development Project. The aim is twofold: firstly, the collaborative project aims to respond to the immediate need of international students to meet the learning outcomes of the Professional Development Project. At the same time, the broader aim is to create an inclusive curriculum for all of the students on the programme, which acknowledges and builds on the strengths of the multicultural classroom. In effect our aim is to develop across the whole module the skills and attributes of the global citizen as outlined above. We would argue that the collaboration between the subject specialist and the ASk specialist is key to achieving our goals. The need for academic literacy / subject specialist collaboration to achieve these goals is widely recognised in the literature. *'A study skills programme tailored to the specific requirements of a degree course can only be achieved through substantial liaison with the teaching staff'* (Durkin and Maine, 2002, p.27).

In what follows, we argue the case for subject specific embedded study skills. We then provide a rationale for the collaboration within the Professional Development Project. Then we analyse the concept of 'global citizenship' and consider the knowledge, skills and attitudes such a person might hold. It can be seen that there is some overlap in the academic literacy skills taught on ASk for the Professional Development Project and those proposed by advocates of global skills. Then, the nature of our collaboration is explained along with an outline of the content and pedagogical approach of the ASk classes. The questionnaire shows the students' analysis of their progress and the value they attribute to the collaboration.

Until five years ago, academic literacy was taught to international students in multidisciplinary classes throughout Northumbria University. This was, at the time, a common approach known as the 'stand alone' or 'bolt-on approach' which offered English language or study skills courses via dedicated learning support staff as an optional or extra-curricular activity (Cranmer, 2006). The bolt-on approach has its roots in the previous highly selective system, in which students were expected to enter university adequately equipped with the skills to study effectively. It aimed to deal with a lack of 'study skills' to be encountered by only a few 'at risk' students in what is described as the 'remedial approach' by Cottrell (2001, p.40).

A number of limitations of the bolt-on approach have been discussed by Wingate (2006); which mainly stem from the separation of skills support from subject content. She points out that students are not always able to see the relevance of the skills, nor transfer them. Furthermore,

*"This separation suggests that there is a difference between studying successfully and learning, and that, if certain techniques are acquired, students can be successful without deep engagement with the subject"* (Wingate, 2006, p.459).

Elander (2003, p.48) also notes that

*"Discipline-based skills training allows generic skills to be related more directly to subject-specific studying, so that the relevance of generic skills is clearer to students"*.

Another drawback of the bolt-on approach is that by targeting specific groups, rather than the whole, often those who most need help do not get it. In other words, extra-curricular classes are often attended mainly by motivated and able students who want to enhance their performance further (Durkin and Main, 2002; Wingate, 2006).

Having experienced similar problems, in 2006 Northumbria University moved towards an embedded approach, now known as ASk International (Academic Skills for International Students) and, as the acronym implies, ASk provides more than English language support, placing emphasis on academic literacy and understanding of academic cultures. ASk is implemented via the CEM model (Sloan and Porter, 2008). CEM is an acronym for Contextualisation, Embedding and Mapping. In essence it means that the specific skills needed in a particular module or assignment are taught at the appropriate time and are delivered as an integral part of the module.

In the 2007/08 academic year the Professional Development Project (PDP) was piloted across three programme areas involving 125 students as an alternative to the final year dissertation for students on a one year top-up degree. Typically, these students are more diverse and come from non-traditional backgrounds compared with students on standard three or four year programmes. A significant number are international students who have studied for two or three years in a partner institution in their home country, others may be mature students who have gained credit through work in industry.

Unlike the standard dissertation, the PDP is comprised of two sections: the first involves an exploration of the student's learning styles and preferences and the implications of this on his or her career choice (3-4,000 words); the second section is a literature review to address a question of the student's choice, which should also be related to their future career, but with no requirement for any primary research (5-6,000 words). A further important difference in the delivery of the PDP is the regular week by week contact throughout semester one and for the first five weeks of semester two, unlike the relative hands-off supervisor – student relationship of the dissertation. It was considered that a more structured framework and more contact time would work to the benefit of this group.

Prior to the beginning of our research, the academic performance of this group reflected the difficulties they experienced. The degree classifications were in general of a lower standard compared with the conventional three year and four year awards. From the subject specialist's point of view, a number of problems had been identified in the previous pilot year:

- a breakdown in communication at times
- a lack of engagement in workshop activities
- little evidence of learner autonomy
- poor research skills
- poor academic literacy skills in terms of both normative practices such as referencing to other more complex concepts such as 'critical evaluation'

It was then decided that the subject specialist and the ASk lecturer would jointly draw up the ASk syllabus in accordance with CEM, observe each other's workshops and meet for a post lesson discussion to decide if and how the workshops or ASk sessions could be modified to respond to student needs. A questionnaire was given to students to gain greater insight into their previous educational background and experience of the key skills, and to gauge their development in them between semesters one and two and to see to what extent they felt the collaboration was useful and had contributed to their progress.

Table 1 below specifies the academic skills deemed necessary for the Professional Development Project, as well as the more general understanding of the expectations of the UK academic culture the ASk programme aims to deliver. The criteria are presented in an order so as to highlight the overlap of the skills, knowledge and attitudes deemed necessary for the global citizen, for business and accounting graduates, and for those more generally identified as the skills of the 'successful student', The notion of a "successful student" has been explored in Anderson's (2003) study of university teachers in two departments to establish which criteria they regarded as being indicative of success in their students.

**Table 1: Global Skills Matrix**

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Academic literacy skills taught by ASk for the Professional Development Project	Oxfam's Global citizen's skills and attitudes as cited by Schultz & Jorgenson	Bourn's globalisation skills for business	Anderson's Skills for student success
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Oral and written communication skills in English		An ability to communicate with people from a range of social and cultural backgrounds	Written communication skills
Skills for working in multicultural teams	respects and values diversity	An ability to work within teams of people from a range of backgrounds and other countries	Social skills
Critical analysis	Awareness of the wider world and has a sense of their own role as a world citizen and	Willingness to play an active role in society at local, national and international level	Ability for abstract thinking / theorising Critical analysis
	Has an understanding of how the world works economically, politically, socially culturally, technologically and environmentally	Openness to a range of voices and perspectives from around the world	
Information / research skills			
The importance of referencing sources of information		Recognition and understanding of the impact of global forces on people's lives	
Genre awareness			
Reflection and self analysis		Willingness to resolve problems and seek solutions	Reflection

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Sources: Shultz and Jorgenson, 2009; Bourn, 2008; Anderson, 2003.

Whilst studies advocating an embedded approach emphasise that individual disciplines will require specific skills, Table 1 also points to the need for more rounded skills within a global setting.

Table 1 includes a range of concepts with political resonance. Byram and Feng (2004) argue that education is inherently and unavoidably political, and particularly so in the case of foreign language learning. Language learning and cultural learning, the authors claim, are inseparable, particularly when learners are in an environment where that language is spoken as a first or 'native' language. At the same time, language teachers find themselves engaged in politics, and in questions of 'moral relativism' where values of their own and other cultures and societies are compared and contrasted (Byram and Feng, 2004). Caruana et al. (2006) adds that the consideration of academic cultures and their relationship with learning styles and preferences is considered a part of the ethics of a sustainable, global education. Hyland and Hamp-Lyons (2002) present this issue in terms of a choice for language educators: Should they teach towards passing the assignment and in essence reinforce the existing power relations, or should they raise consciousness in their students in order for them to challenge the status quo? Byram and Feng note that the political dimension can be 'watered down' by the need to teach towards summative assessment. This project could be said to be an attempt to reconcile these concerns by moving away from an 'assimilation' model in which perceived adjustment 'problems' are smoothed over, and allowing a space for a consideration of where students are coming from, and what they can contribute to the current learning environment as well as new challenges they are still to face.

The ASk sessions are for one hour per week of contact time with the ASk tutor, which arguably is not enough. However, it is in fact more time than is dedicated to other international student cohorts since being final year top-up students, they are considered to be a priority. There is a general agreement that short but frequent contact benefits language learners as opposed to longer more dispersed contact time, and the regular contact allows input to be delivered at the appropriate time, as specified by the CEM model referred to earlier (Sloan and Porter, 2008). As a consequence of the highly contextualised nature of ASk within the Professional Development Project, materials used in ASk classes, for example texts, are selected according to the relevant subject and are thus 'authentic' and relevant rather than reliant on published generic materials for study skills and EAP

The delivery mode of ASk can be adapted depending on the subject matter, and may take one of the following forms:

- a practical workshop which aims to develop a particular skill
- a semi-structured seminar discussion designed to understand the student experience and elicit any difficulties, or to raise consciousness of the academic culture and expectations in NBS, where possible comparing and contrasting with students' past experience



- mini interactive lectures providing input of how to use a particular tool or system, such as the Harvard referencing system or TurnitinUK
- individual (rare given numbers involved) or small group tutorials in which students bring in academic writing for tutor feedback, or more commonly peer feedback sessions where students are asked to give each other feedback on a number of clearly defined academic skills.

The first type of session, namely the practical workshop is perhaps the most common occurrence and is likely to proceed as follows. The aim is to carry out a practical exercise aimed at developing a particular skill, such as referencing using the Harvard system, to offer feedback on the student's attempt and reflect on the process / difficulties. The session would begin with (or will have been preceded by an earlier) discussion of why referencing is necessary, and elicit students' past experience of this practice. There would be an explanation of why and how it is done on the students' particular programme, and then typically a piece of student writing would be given in a relevant / authentic topic with references missing. The task would be for students to insert the in-text citations, and other related exercises. Students are often asked to complete the task in groups in order to foster communication and teamwork skills as well as peer tutoring, and the tutor would circulate giving advice / feedback. A model answer might be provided if appropriate, and a discussion would ensue of the process and challenges, related questions, where to find further help etc. Relevant books from the relevant reading lists might be brought into class and students asked to produce a reference list following the rules of the Harvard system, again a discussion would ensue as queries about the authors, publishers etc. arise. As the group develops confidence in the expectations, 'exemplars' or authentic student work is analysed, the task being to offer feedback within a clearly defined area, such as academic writing style. Their feedback would be compared with the ASk tutor's feedback and wherever possible with that of the subject specialist, and a grade. This helps students who have no prior experience of having work assessed at Northumbria to understand the strengths and weaknesses of a piece of work, and see the expectations / perspective of the tutor. This is done in a very sensitive, mutually respectful environment. The relaxed nature of the sessions, are to some degree due to the fact that the module is not credit-bearing and as such is perceived as 'low risk'. The skills focussed on in ASk sessions in the 2008/09 in-take as well as their perceived usefulness from the student perspective is shown in Table 5 supported by qualitative comments which highlight the value given to the friendly low-risk environment.

### Methodology and findings

Action research is concerned with reflective practice, which is a term that has been credited to the work of Schon (1983). The term *reflective practice* has a range of meanings according to Loughran (2002, p.33), from '*simply thinking about something*' to '*a well defined and crafted practice that carries very specific meaning and associated action*'; within this range of meanings, a common factor is the notion of a problem. Norton (2009, p.56) is of the opinion that as practitioners, '*it is driven from your need to know why there is a problem or an issue in your students' learning and what you might be able to do to improve matter.*'

According to Smith (2007, p.2) Lewin is generally acknowledged as the person who developed action research, with the integration of theory and practice at the heart of his work. His approach typically involves the following cycle: diagnose, plan, take action and evaluate. Similarly, Norton sets out the cycle in the following stages:

1. observe or notice that something is not as it should be and/or could be improved (observe);
2. plan a course of action which involves changing something in your practice (plan)
3. carry out the change (act)
4. see what effect your change has made (reflect)

The process is iterative in nature, as commented on by Norton (2009, p. 70) '*Typically, the researcher will go back and forth, in a number of spirals of the action research project, reflecting, reformulating and retesting.*'

This collaboration identified the problems outlined above, and largely guided by Norton's cycle, proceeded as follows:

1. The ASk lecturer and subject specialist observe each other's workshops.
2. There is a post-lesson reflection and discussion following each observation.
3. The curriculum is modified in response to the above.
4. The collaboration was evaluated via student questionnaire at the end of the semester.

The purpose of the questionnaire was to gain insight into the student perspective, with particular regard to the following areas:

- To gain more in-depth knowledge of the cohort and their previous learning experiences
- To establish the progress international students have made in key skills

Furthermore, the results of the summative assessment of this module, as well as the final degree classification of the cohort have been compared, which might indicate that the collaboration is having a positive impact on students' ability to meet the learning outcomes and accelerate the development of global skills.

The following table illustrates the issues identified in observations of the professional project workshops, and the interventions which were provided in the ASk sessions.

**Table 2: ASk Issues and Interventions**

Issues	Interventions
Confusion between the structure and aims of the professional project and the dissertation	Separation of project and dissertation students into distinct groups for ASk
Use of academic vocabulary not understood, e.g. 'theory' when referring to the need to underpin arguments with academic theory/	The meaning of relevant terminology was reinforced in ASk sessions with relevant examples provided by the subject specialist.

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apply theory to practice'

Students self selected their learning sets and grouped with people from similar ethnic backgrounds.

Discussion, learning sets were selected by the workshop tutor randomly but where possible to include a mix of gender and ethnic group representative of the group as a whole

A lack of integration in the learning sets

An element of enquiry based learning was introduced into the workshops, which involved students meeting outside of the workshops in learning sets to research an aspect of the following workshop.

Some international students felt uneasy at writing 4000 words about themselves, in an extended reflective statement. They did not see how to integrate their reflections with evidence and theory. It was something they had not done before.

ASk classes acknowledged the students' lack of experience and instinctive inhibitions with this task. ASk sessions encouraged students to see this as a challenge to really find out about themselves and using reliable tools and objective feedback from a variety of sources. ASk sessions also addressed the issue of the cultural nature of learning and highlighted the possibilities of exploiting the culture shock and new ways of learning in the assignment.

Students found it difficult to respond to the Socratic mode of teaching (Butcher and McGrath, 2004) in which the tutor gives feedback by posing new questions. They found it difficult to set a question for themselves and wanted explicit approval / guidance from their tutor akin to individual supervision.

ASk sessions offered individual / small group tutorials to discuss questions informally so that students could discuss and present their questions and objectives coherently. No specific feedback was given to the content / viability of the question, however.

Students reported the need for feedback at an earlier stage.

Formative feedback has now been introduced into the module, to be given via the use of a specially designed sheet indicating at what level students are on a number of key skills and what they need to do to improve. The use of the sheet means that feedback can be given in a timely manner in workshop time keeping the impact on workload to a minimum.

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Of the 152 students enrolled on a final year module in the Business School, the majority are from overseas, with 85 (44.3%) from the Far East as the main ethnic group, only 16 being British. Almost all 149 (98%) being new to the university as direct entry students at final year, 128 being new to the UK. The findings below are based on the response of the 136 international students.

As an attempt to gather the international students' perception of their language skills upon entry, and measure any improvement over the first semester, the students were asked to comment on their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills as they were at the start of semester one and as they were at the start of semester two. The study relies on students' self assessment for several reasons: firstly, since there is an assumption that the students have already demonstrated a level of English sufficient to allow them to enter the final year of their programme and so formally testing this again would be unnecessary and unpopular. Secondly, even if there were a formal language test in semester 1 and 2 of our study, it would not be possible to argue that the development of these skills could be attributed to the collaboration alone. Most importantly, the questionnaire is concerned with the student perceptions, their attitudes towards the collaboration and the extent to which they feel it has supported their transition and developed their skills.

The student's perceptions of their language skills at the start of both semester one and semester two were as shown in Table 3:

**Table 3: International Student's Perceptions of language Skills across semesters**

Criteria	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing
<b>Very Good</b>				
Semester One	25 (16.4%)	13 (8.6%)	18(11.8%)	10(6.6%)
Semester Two	44 (28.9%)	27 (17.8%)	36 (23.7%)	18 (11.8%)
<b>Good</b>				
Semester One	31 (28.2%)	24 (21.8%)	34 (30.9%)	28 (25.5%)
Semester Two	85 (55.9%)	84 (55.3%)	91 (59.9%)	92 (60.5%)
<b>Poor</b>				
Semester One	10 (9.1%)	18 (16.4%)	3 (2.7%)	14 (12.7%)
Semester Two	5 (3.3%)	23 (15.1%)	7 (4.6%)	24 (15.8%)

N.B. Total percentages are less than 100 because of undisclosed responses

Speaking which is ranked as a top five criteria in Anderson's study of successful student criteria (2003), is perceived to be the worst language skill by international student's at the start of the first semester, with over a sixth (17.3%) of students regarding themselves as poor or very poor, just over a fifth (21.8%) as good and just under a sixth (15.5%) with very good speaking skills. Writing which is the other important criteria discussed earlier in Anderson's study and is perceived to be the second worst language skill by international student's at the start of the first semester, with under a third (15.4%) of students regarding themselves as poor or very poor, just over a quarter (25.5%) as good and just less than a sixth (14.5%) with very good verbal skills.

In terms of listening, just over a tenth (10.9%) of international students regarded themselves as poor or very poor, just less than a third (28.2%) as good, and exactly a fifth (20%) considered they had very good listening skills. International students perceived their reading skills to be, less than a twentieth (3.6%) as poor or very poor, approaching one third (30.9%) as good, and around a sixth (14.5%) with very good reading skills.

After the first semester, the differences in valid percentages are quite significant, particularly in listening and reading, where poor drops from 23% and 15.1% to 3.3% and 4.6% respectively. Writing and speaking remained as the weakest two of the four language skills. However, across the four listening, speaking, reading and writing skills there is virtually a 100% increase in the very good percentages as perceived by the student population.

The questionnaire also attempted to ascertain the level of experience the students had with respect to key academic skills: working in groups, finding and reading journals, referencing, reflection and self analysis, critical analysis and extended academic writing. As before, these criteria were compared to Anderson's successful student criteria.

The students own experience of the academic skills as compared in the table above, at the start of the academic year is now shown in Table 4:

**Table 4: International Students academic experience background at the start of year**

Criteria	Very little	Some	A Lot
Group-work	22(16.2%)	78(57.3%)	36(26.5%)
Journals	55(40.5%)	64(47%)	17(12.5%)
References	60(44.1%)	52(38.2%)	24(17.7%)
Reflection	56(41.2%)	55(40.4%)	25(18.4%)
Criticality	57(41.9%)	66(58.5%)	13(9.6%)
Academic writing	47(34.5%)	72(48.5%)	29(17%)

The majority of students (57%) had some experience of group-work, with just over a quarter (27.6%) having a lot of experience of group-work and around a sixth (15.1%) with very little experience. The student's use of journals however is different, with a large proportion (40.8%) having very little experience, less than half (47.4%) having some experience and just over a tenth (11.8%) with a lot of experience. The student's use of references is similar, with 42.8% having very little experience, 38.2% having some experience and around a fifth (19.7%) with a lot of experience. As far as reflection and self analysis, 38.2% of students had very little experience, 42.1% had some experience and 19.7% had lots of experience. For critical analysis, just over two fifths (40.1%) of students had very little experience, exactly a half had some experience and almost a fifth (9.9%) had a lot of experience. Finally for academic writing, 33.6% of students had very little experience, 47.4% had some experience and 19.1% with a lot of experience. This analysis clearly shows that according to Anderson's criteria for success, the students' background indicates that they start off from a low base.

To gain further insight of the student experience, the international students were asked to state whether or not they found the sessions according to the ASk Teaching and Learning Plan useful or not, their responses now shown in Table 5:

**Table 5: International Student's Perceptions of the usefulness of ASk sessions**

ASk session	Ranking	Useful	Not useful	Undisclosed
CV writing	1 <sup>st</sup>	102(67.1%)	3(2%)	47(30.9%)
Developing a research outline	8 <sup>th</sup>	69(45.4%)	17(11.2%)	66(43%)
Referencing	2 <sup>nd</sup>	87(57.2%)	9(5.9%)	56(6.8%)
Reporting	6 <sup>th</sup> =	71(46.7%)	10(5.2%)	71(46.7%)
Note taking	9 <sup>th</sup>	57(37.5%)	16(10.5%)	79(52%)
Critical thinking	3 <sup>rd</sup>	75(49.3%)	8(5.3%)	69(45.4%)
Presentation Skills	4 <sup>th</sup> =	74(48.7%)	12(7.9%)	66(43.4%)
Academic writing style	4 <sup>th</sup> =	74(48.7%)	10(6.6%)	68(44.7%)
Essay structuring	6 <sup>th</sup> =	71(46.7%)	10(6.6%)	71(46.7%)

According to the results above, 67.1% of the students thought the most useful session offered was on CV writing, 57.2% of the students thought the session on references to be the second most useful. Thereafter, a lot of responses are grouped quite close together from critical thinking at third on 49.3% to developing a research outline at eighth on 45.4%. This analysis indicates that the students' priority is vocationally orientated rather than academically. The number of 'undisclosed' responses is larger than might be expected, and informal discussion with students indicates that this can probably be attributed to the fact that the students did this retrospectively, and the time lapse prevented them giving an accurate response. Examples of some of the student's comments are:

*"Everything we do in the ASk sessions is rather useful because it is somehow related to the other modules we have. Also communication there is rather easy because it is not a credit module so we don't feel scared or something." (Quote paper 119)*

*"Very good environment, nice teacher, interested subject" (Quote paper 147)*

*"I liked group work, [communication.]" (Quote paper 9)*

*"It is useful to talk to different students in groups."* (Quote paper 110)

The average mark during the 07/08 pilot year for the PDP was 55.84% for 107 students and during the 08/09 year of this study it was 56.46% for 243 students, which if nothing else is very consistent. The degree classifications are now shown in Table 6:

**Table 6: Degree Classifications for one year top up students**

Degree classification	Pilot year	2008/09
First	3(3%)	17(7%)
Upper second	18(17%)	91(37%)
Lower second	46(43%)	96(40%)
Third	23(21%)	14(6%)
Pass	10(9%)	22(9%)
Fail	7(7%)	3(1%)
Totals	107	243

(Source: author compilation from Newcastle Business School degree results)

The overall degree results show an improvement during the 2008/09 academic year, as observed in the increase in firsts and upper seconds, from 3% to 7% and 17% to 37% respectively.

### **Conclusions and limitations**

This cohort of students began with poor language skills and little experience of the skills necessary for success in NBS, or for success in the global market place. Over the course of a semester, the majority perceive that their language skills have developed significantly. It is acknowledged that there may be some inherent bias in the students' self analysis, but in the absence of a reliable test, it was considered sufficiently reliable. A test would have been no more reliable in proving the correlation between the ASk support and improvement in language skills due to the significant number of possible contributing variables. The fact that the students find sessions useful and relevant is an indicator that the support is playing a positive role in their development. Observations and student feedback clearly showed that they found the ASk environment to be safe and supportive, and that they felt confident to ask questions.

Students also feel that the skills learned in the ASk classes are transferable to other modules. Again there is no claim of a direct causal relationship between the improvement in grades and the collaborative project, but the overall improvement in the summative



assessment grades of the PDP students and in the overall degree classifications which show an increasing number of international students gaining a first class or upper second class degree, along with their satisfaction with the support offered suggests that this project may be a contributing factor.

From both the lecturers' perspectives, working together means regular and direct communication, which results in clear unified messages to students; it allows student needs to be quickly identified and addressed. A further advantage is that we do not face change and complexity alone. With regards to the methodology, the iterative and cyclical nature of action research means that the work is always in progress; we are always striving to improve and respond to new challenges. Action research provides a forum for the student voice to be heard and a mechanism for theories to be tested and evaluated. It leads to a deeper understanding of the issues, and gives lecturers a sense of control and empowerment to pioneer change. As a result of this study, one of the issues to emerge has been the need for earlier formative feedback, and a subsequent intervention is currently being trailed.

In summary, the project is making a positive contribution to academic success in this particular context, and to the development of the global skills which are needed by business graduates, and global citizens generally. The partnership between the discipline specialist and the ASk specialist means that both the immediate academic needs of the student can be met in conjunction with the broader global goals in a safe and positive environment which seeks to recognise and build on the diverse experiences of the group. We see this interdisciplinary, reflective approach as a useful model for curriculum design in the global age.

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