

Approaches to course design [from handbooks and accreditation documents]

Institution A Statement of Principles of Course Design

i. Overview of Academic Aims

- The overall aim of the Pre-Sessional programmes is to provide students with the scaffolding of academic thinking, literacy and language skills necessary for degree-level study...
- Given the summative requirements in academic departments, academic development on Pre-Sessional involves placing academic literacy skills (particularly writing) and critical thinking (principally, the notion of a thesis) at the centre of our provision.
- Students are grouped according to the broad *text-type(s)* the students are required to produce as degree students. This allows some differentiation of reading and tasks across groups. Law students, for example, have separate sessions on the Oscola referencing system and on the particular use of footnotes expected.
- While there is broadly an 'integrated skills' approach, all skills defer ultimately to writing. We do *not* have a 'balanced' curriculum in terms of the 4 skills, since we believe course materials, lectures, readings and seminar speaking function (largely) to feed into writing.
- Components are, however, tightly connected through content-led threads in the syllabus, such that student knowledge of content builds through reading, lecture content, seminar speaking and writing. This is the approach taken in, for instance, the August *managed essay*.
- This approach emerges from a strong belief that 'criticality' can only emerge in spoken and written tasks with the development of content knowledge. Students cannot 'be critical' without knowledge of a subject area. Such knowledge must extend beyond the anecdotal and must build from sustained engagement with authentic academic texts.

Institution B Approach [extract from teachers' handbook]

The course is based around a response to perceived learners needs. [...] students have generally studied English for enough years to give them some proficiency (IELTS 5.5). They will have studied undergraduate or postgraduate degrees probably in their home country but are likely to be unfamiliar with studying in a UK context. Culturally they bring with them their beliefs and assumptions about language, study and the UK. Our experience of working with postgraduate students suggests that without pre-sessional preparation, their previous experience does not prepare them for the type of work undertaken at postgraduate level in the UK. Initially students can be bewildered and stunned by the type and amount of reading and writing that they have to do in a short time. Thus, [...] takes a needs and task based approach. It considers the tasks that students need to do on postgraduate courses and [...] develops their ability to understand, analyse and carry out these tasks effectively. [...] we find that as the students work on the tasks necessary to complete the projects they are developing the appropriate language and modes of academic behaviour for their own discipline. Our experience also shows the importance of individual contact between a tutor and a student and so the programme also includes individual consultations with tutors generally every week. These are used to discuss students planned work and give feedback on work which has been done.

5.4.1 The pre-session programme to be accredited consists of two courses, a ten-week Project course and a six-week Portfolio course. The content of the Portfolio course mirrors the first six weeks of the Project course. In both courses students sit exams in week 6. In the Project course they then go on to complete a small research project. Both courses are divided into an Academic Literacy strand and an Academic Engagement strand. Academic Literacy introduces a range of genres, reading and study activities and written assessment tasks that are typical at university and then requires students to apply these through an independently researched project. Academic Engagement involves learning to interact appropriately in seminars, contributing evidenced-based views, and making research presentations (See 5.4.2 *Course calendar*).

Both courses are based on a set of principles designed to help students build their competence in academic language and study strategies and begin to acquire graduate attributes: 'the skills, knowledge and abilities of university graduates, beyond disciplinary content knowledge, which are applicable to a range of contexts and are acquired as a result of completing any degree' (Barrie, 2006: 217).¹ This is achieved by

- helping students to improve their language skills so that they can communicate effectively in English with tutors, peers and members of the wider community
- providing practice in the ways in which students will have to use English in their degree studies
- providing students with a background knowledge of the social and academic cultures they will be living and studying in
- developing students' abilities to study independently
- developing the problem solving, analytical and critical thinking skills required for studying at a UK university

The requisite competencies are acquired and developed through lectures, communicative tutorials and independent self-study supported by the virtual learning environment (VLE). Personal abilities and language learning skills and strategies are practised through interaction with the tutor and with peers in pair and group work. Links to selected self-access resources are available on the VLE, and in the central library. There is a Social & Cultural Programme enabling students to mix with staff and the wider local community to gain opportunities for authentic language practice, during social and cultural activities on Tuesday afternoons and Carbon Café and Topical Talks on Monday and Wednesday afternoons (See 5.4.2 *Course calendar*).

¹ Barrie, S.C. (2006) Understanding what we mean by the generic attributes of graduates. *Higher Education*, 51, pp 215–241.