Anecdotal to actual: identifying users of learning development to inform future practice

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Abstract

With increasing pressure on universities to ensure their students are graduating with a good honours degree, understanding where Learning Development sits in the university and its impact is arguably becoming more important. The Centre for Learning and Study Support (CLaSS) at De Montfort University, Leicester, has investigated data, collected since 2010, on student engagement with our Learning Development Service. The study aimed to discover the diversity of students availing of learning development, with regards to characteristics such as: gender, ethnicity, disability, age, parental education and module marks.

The data presented shows how CLaSS can justifiably engage in university wide discussions about retention and achievement, as well as widening participation agendas. It compares, where possible, who is using CLaSS to the diversity of students within the university. Initial findings are presented, with discussion about how findings have impacted practice, with a particular focus on the attainment gap. From close analysis of the findings which demonstrate a lack of engagement by males with learning development, the paper proposes why this may be the case and offers insight into recent activities to try and reduce the gender gap. Overall, the paper recognises how interpretation of and greater awareness of our user diversity has informed our team strategy and future direction.

Keywords: learning development; impact; engagement; attainment gap; diversity; retention; achievement; gender; disability; ethnicity; parental education; age.

Introduction

> There is no shame in going to CLaSS and asking for help, they are amazing and
> will boost your grade even at a 2:1 (student feedback, 2015).

If the discipline of learning development emerged as a result of restructuring between
traditional universities, polytechnics, and other Higher Education Institutes (HEI), and in
response to widening participation programmes in the 1990s (Hartley, 2011), it is pertinent
to understand its user, to help qualify learning developments' potential impact on the
learning experience. This need to understand who avails of learning development, defined
as including study skills, academic advice, lifelong learning and support (Hartley, 2011), is
perhaps more important in recent years with the changing landscape of Higher Education
(HE), including the introduction of higher tuition fees (Molesworth et al., 2009). For learning
development to progress, and assert itself as an academic discipline (Samuels, 2013), it
must be able to converse about its role and contribution to the university's commitments,
as laid out through government and wider recognised bodies such as the Higher Education
Authority (HEA).

At the 'Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education', it was
presented that:

> access into higher education should be widened by fostering the potential of
> students from underrepresented groups and by providing adequate conditions for
> the completion of their studies (European Commission, 2009).

This proposal incites two clear aims; firstly, to widen university participation, and secondly,
to provide conditions to ensure those attending from underrepresented groups are able to
complete their studies. Moreover, the focus of the HEA in 2012 was on the:

> obligation [of the HE institute to] take reasonable steps to enable [all students] to be
> successful (HEA, 2012).

Both concepts acknowledge the diversification of the student body and impose the
responsibility of ensuring student success to the institute itself. Consequently, it can be

inferred that understanding the impact of learning development, and the diversity of its user, is a key factor to assist the institution's assessment of their proffered support and the subsequent attainment of students.

Recognising this need to formally enter into discussions, rather than relying on anecdotal experiences, the Centre for Learning and Study Support (CLaSS), a centralised service based within the Library and Learning Services at De Montfort University (DMU), commenced an investigation into 'who uses CLaSS?'.[1] Established in 2001, and relocated to the Library and Learning Services in 2006, CLaSS had a limited understanding about who used learning development provision; the only documented information was: overall number of bookings, year of study, course and faculty. This impacted on CLaSS' ability to critically assess its potential contribution to widening participation, and retention and achievement strategies. The aim of "Who uses CLaSS?" was to investigate the representation and diversity of the students who self-selected to utilise CLaSS provision, namely: tutorials, workshops and drop-ins, over a four year period (2010-2014). These provisions were identified at the outset as they are not compulsory to the students' course, therefore the results would provide a unique insight into the student learning experience. Such an understanding would help CLaSS to recognise the diversity of students accessing our services, but also identify non-engaging student groups, the results of which would impact on future direction. Fields examined, included: faculty and programme division; level of study; age; gender; ethnicity; domicile; disability; parental education and participation of local area rates - POLAR3 (HEFCE, 2015).

Processes and Methodology

To carry out the investigation it was necessary to draw on the expertise of other teams within the university, as such a collaborative approach was adopted with the Content Systems team within the library and the university's Strategic Planning Services (SPS). CLaSS is a confidential service and therefore, a concern about collecting and analysing data was the risk of identifying individual students. To avoid this and to ensure confidentiality was maintained, CLaSS sought ethical approval to only use the unique

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[1] The Centre for Learning and Study Support (CLaSS) works with students in a number of ways, including: distance learners, research students, embedded teaching, dyslexia tutorials and workshops, and peer mentoring. For more information about CLaSS provision visit: www.library.dmu.ac.uk/link/CLASS

student number to gather set information, which excluded the student name, ensuring any analysis would not identify individual students.

Once the fields of interest had been decided by the CLaSS team, the outlined method of delivery at the inception of the project was to transfer the unique student number to SPS, who would then run a query through multiple centrally housed databases within the institution to extract the relevant information. However, previous booking processes employed by CLaSS had evolved over time, which meant an ad-hoc booking system was in place: self-selecting students signed up to workshops online, tutorials through a centralised service desk, and drop-ins recorded on arrival to the session. This meant that the unique identifying student number was recorded in three different mediums and consequently, initial steps to collate and clean the data to provide to SPS proved problematic due to issues with compatibility. Moreover, the cleaning of the data was more time consuming than expected and relied heavily on a volunteer within the library to undertake administrative tasks, such as checking the correct number of characters within a field.

Similar issues around compatibility of data when exporting from different databases were encountered by SPS when trying to present the data on the spreadsheet in the first instance. This meant the data went through multiple edits to ensure complete clarity and accuracy before being deemed suitable for dissemination. Initially the data was to be presented on an excel spreadsheet as this allowed for testing and to trial different multi-layered queries. The data would later be transferred to the software Tableau, which offers visual analysis of the data, permitting high levels of interaction, enabling different queries to be run. Overall, the project took in excess of 24 months to reach a state of completion, whereby CLaSS are now able to view a complete 4 year trend of data.

Findings

Outlined below are some of the initial findings about the diversity of those who utilised self-selecting CLaSS provision over a four-year trend pattern (2010-2014). The data is compared, where possible, to university data in order to contextualise the figures.

The findings presented below begin by offering an overview of the data, followed by focussed analysis on the widening participation remit, and retention and achievement strategies in relation to gender. Gender has been selected as the finding highlighted this as an area where CLaSS presented a deficit in proportion of users in comparison to university wide data.

Broader findings demonstrate the breadth of students CLaSS work with, in regards to level and year of study. They also show the gradual increase in students accessing provision. This is evident in both the number of bookings and the unique students (Figure 1). Although attendance figures increased so too did missed or cancelled figures, which is an issue currently under review. Further examination into the timing of assistance demonstrated that generally the level of engagement increased by an average of 16% between term 1 and term 2. In 2013/14 however, students appeared to front end support during term 1, with a 22% decrease in engagement between the two terms. A potential cause of this shift could be connected to the structural change to DMUs academic calendar in 2013/14. During this year, two weeks (one either term) became dedicated student enrichment weeks[2], the first of which corresponded to initial deadlines of the academic year. It will be of interest to monitor this pattern over the next period to see if the results remain the same for 2014/15.

Figure 1. Student interaction with self-selecting provision.

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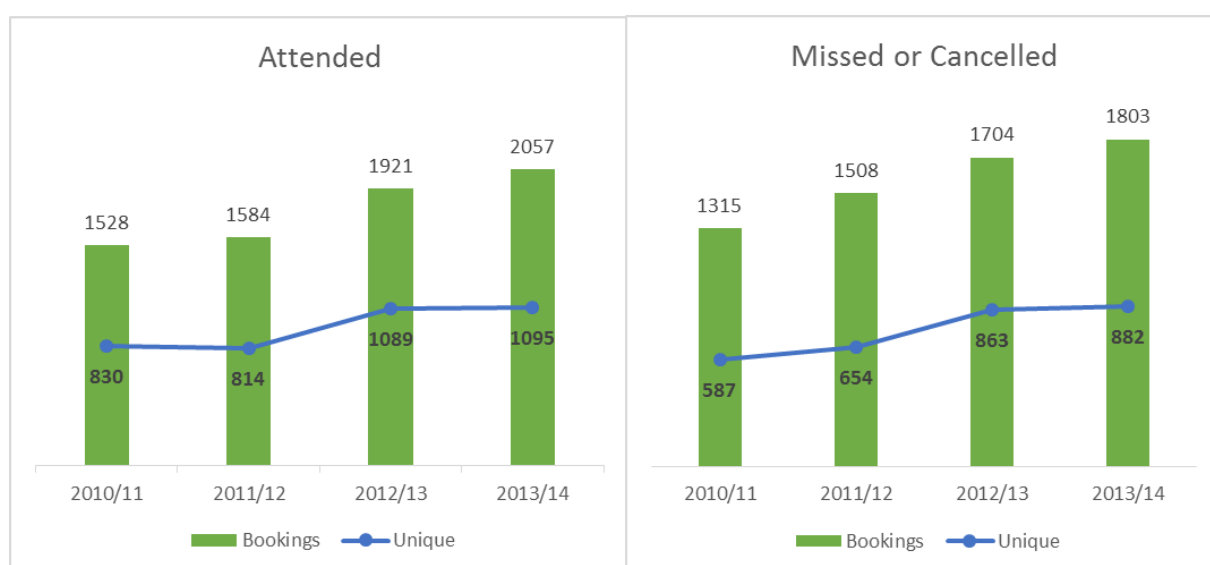
[2] Enrichment weeks are periods away from the students' academic timetable, during which courses put on sessions to help students. These sessions can be meetings with personal tutors; workshops on assignments; independent study etc.

Figure 2 depicts the average faculty representation over the four years; of those who self-select to attend CLaSS provision, the majority come from the faculty of Health and Life Sciences (42.8%). Within the institute in 2013/14 this faculty had the largest proportion of students, representing 33% of all students enrolled that year (Figure 2). This alone however, does not explain the potential reason for CLaSS' high percentage of users coming from this faculty. Closer inspection shows that those students who access CLaSS from within this faculty are more likely to either be mature students or have a specific learning difference (50% proportion of students who use CLaSS) or fall into both categories.

Figure 2. Faculty distribution of self-selecting students.
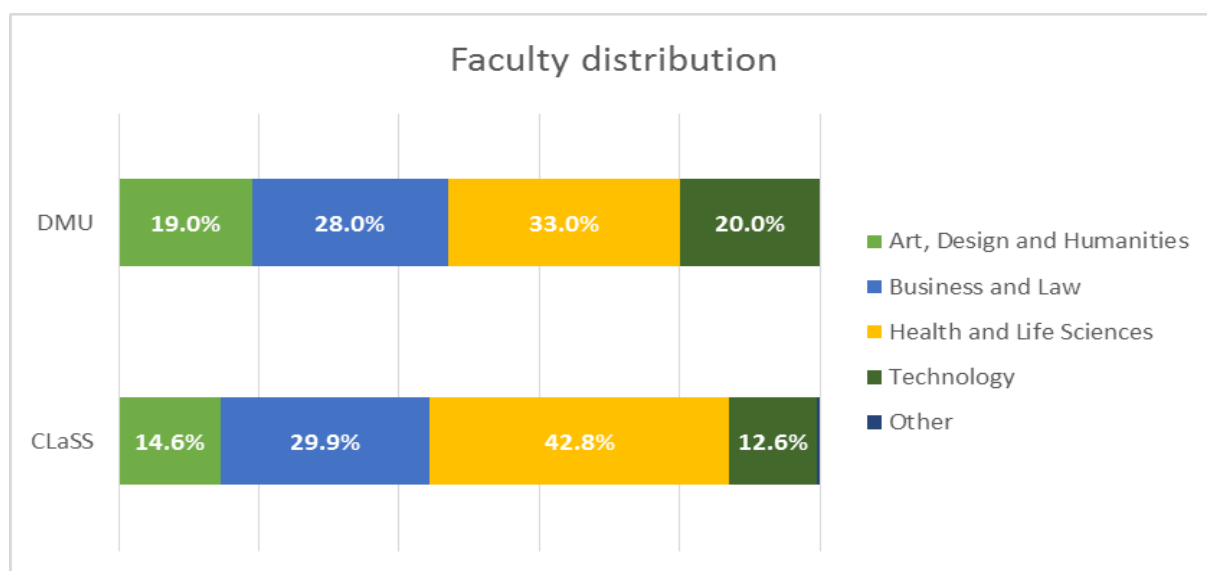
Further findings demonstrate CLaSS exceeds the university's representative data for its level of engagement with students under such characteristics as: ethnicity; registered disability; mature student engagement and domicile (Figures 3-6), this only differs on the characteristic of gender (Figure 7). These findings help to validate the inclusive teaching practice that CLaSS adopt, and also the wider reaching projects the team engages with (statistics for which were not included in this assessment so as to prevent skewing of the data). Our portfolio of work includes:

• Running workshops specifically for students who are recently diagnosed with a specific learning difference, to help draw out the positives from the diagnosis rather than focussing on a disability deficit model.

- Creating a series of workshops entitled 'Responding to your tutors' feedback', which targeted students whose first language is not English.

- Transitional work pre-entry to DMU, which involves delivering summer school sessions to incoming students from a widening participation background, and work with local colleges and further education institutes.

- Establishing alternative focussed ways of teaching through the use of student conference days, which assist mature students, distance learners and professional courses.

All of these sessions signpost students to our self-selecting services and so a next step in developing the research is to map the migration of students from such work to self-selecting provision.

Figure 3. Ethnicity distribution.

Figure 4. Disability distribution: the majority of those with a disability are registered as having a specific learning difficulty.
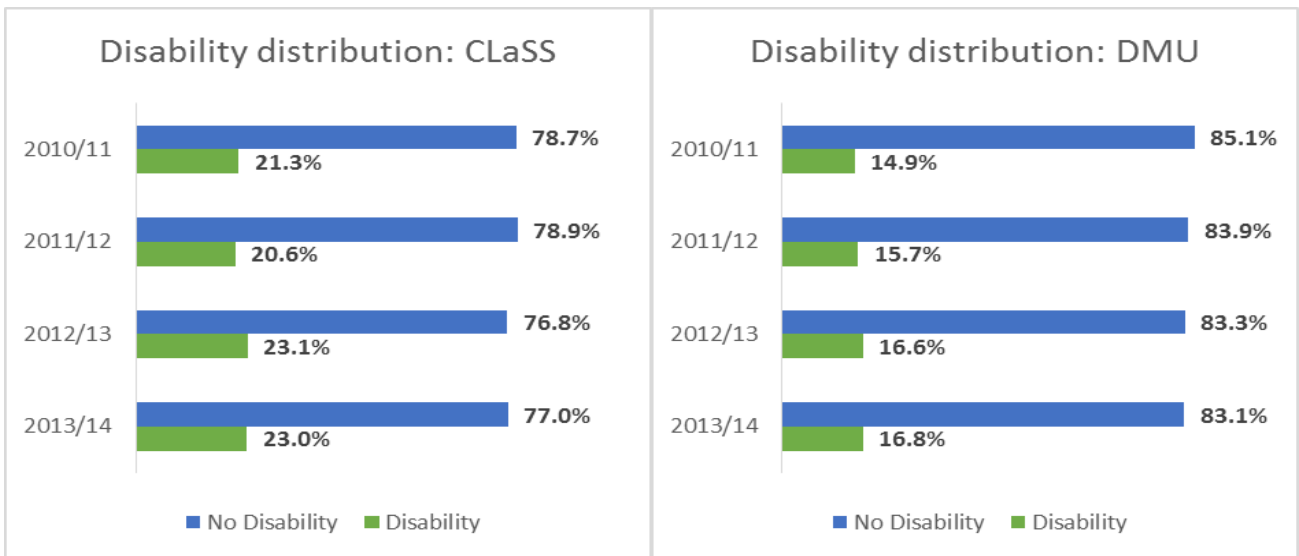

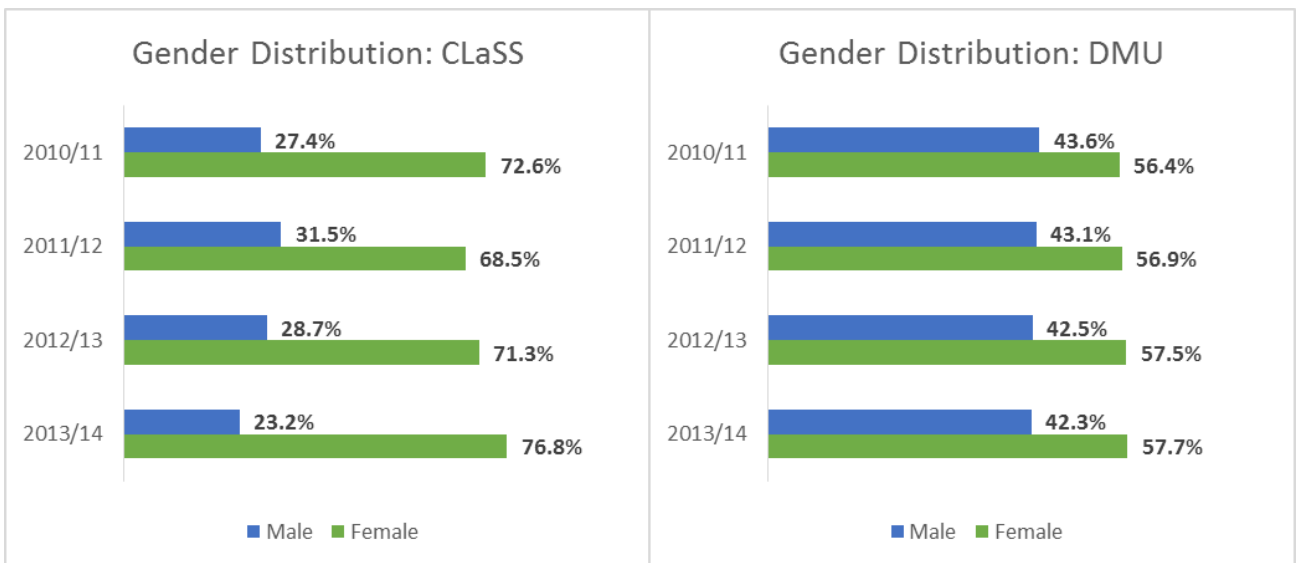**Figure 5. Age distribution calculated on age at commencement of study.**
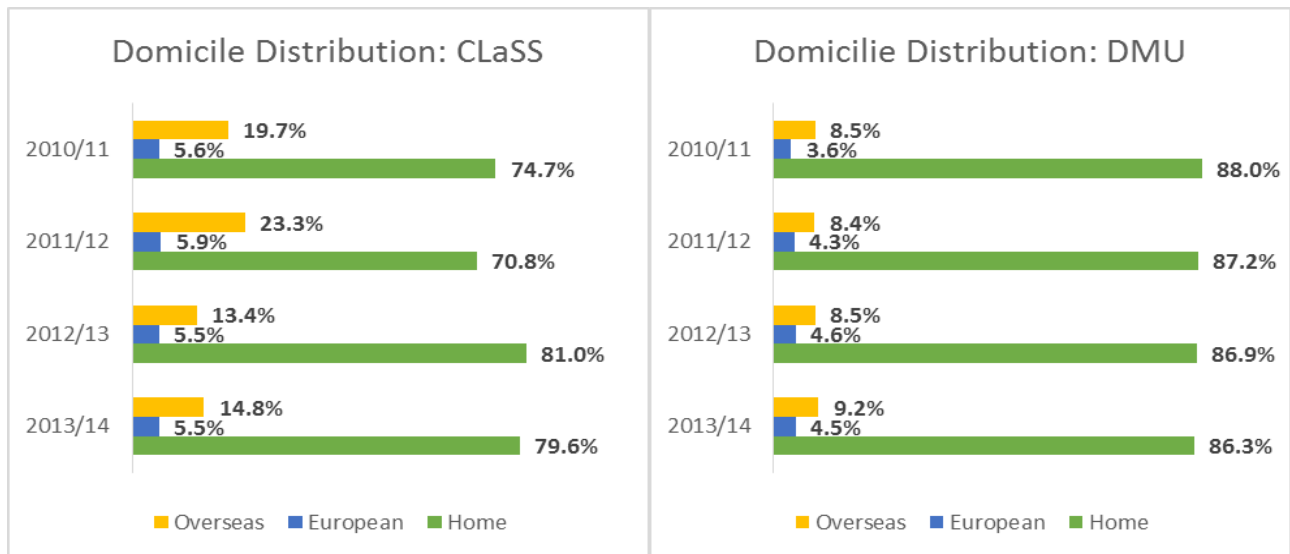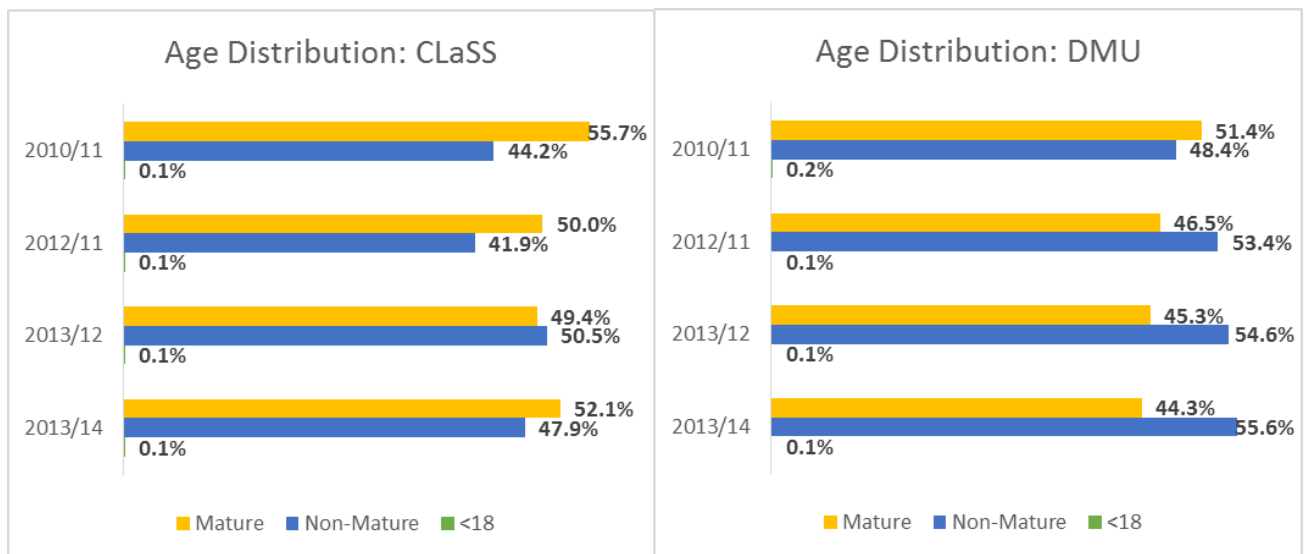
Figure 6. Domicile distribution.

Figure 7. Gender distribution.

The findings have also brought to light information that is not available about the university as a whole, but helps further validate the transitional work carried out in the form of year-10 campus days and summer schools. Analysis of who self-selects to use CLaSS identifies that a higher percentage of students (45%) over the four year period have not had a parent attend HE in comparison to 36% who have (the remaining 19% either provided no response or did not know). Further to this, a higher proportion of students (39%) who access our services have entered university from areas deemed to have low participation rates (areas 1 and 2; POLAR). When this is cross examined to consider faculty distribution, the results go a step further to explaining the high usage CLaSS

receives from the faculty of Health and Life Sciences, as they have a far higher proportion of students from the first two lower quintiles of POLAR than the other three faculties, representing 57% of these two areas.

A further element that this project has shed light on is the module marks of students who use learning development. In 2012/13 the average mark was 54.65, with a standard deviation of 16.98. This indicates that the average range of marks was 37.67 up to 71.63. These findings demonstrate that CLaSS work across the board for achievement rates, and at this early stage of analysis the data also suggests that continued access of CLaSS provision contributes to an improvement in marks.

Discussion

The findings of the study have revealed far more than was initially anticipated and raised lots of different issues for how CLaSS responds to the changing needs of its students. As the project evolved it became possible to understand dynamics and relationships that were previously only reflected upon anecdotally. Furthermore the demonstrated diversity within our findings has validated the importance of continuing our inclusive teaching practice and wider reaching work. A particular focus is how the findings, including results from multi-layered questions surrounding module marks, has increased our understanding of and ability to enter into discussions about the gap in attainment of a good honours degree.

The attainment gap

A key focus within HEIs is on the attainment gap between different groups, notably white and BME students, students with and without a disability, and gender differences. An early study, which highlighted the complexity of the problem concerning the attainment gap and ethnicity, was carried out by Broecke and Nicholls in 2007. Their work for the Department for Education and Skills demonstrated that even when controlling for a wide range of factors thought to contribute to this gap, being from a minority ethnic community had a significant and negative effect on degree attainment. In response to this study and ongoing investigations, the discussion of attainment gaps has continued to take place within HEIs. Prior to this study, despite the attainment gap between white ethnic background qualifiers and BME qualifiers reducing year on year at DMU (DMU, 2014), CLaSS were unable to

confidently state how our student engagement mapped onto such agendas. Due to this study however, it has become apparent that a high proportion of self-selecting students who use CLaSS identify with those key groups; this has enabled more active engagement in university discussions in which CLaSS are able to provide critical commentary on our potential contribution.

Nevertheless, a previous speculation that this study has confirmed is the lack of males who self-select to avail of CLaSS services. This is reflected not only in terms of direct gender distribution, but also faculty usage whereby the Faculty of Technology, who have the highest proportion of male students (74%) of all four faculties, have the lowest level of self-selecting engagement with CLaSS. Research to date has demonstrated that while males tend to achieve more first class degree certifications than females, overall fewer number of males will graduate with a good honours degree and those males with marks outside of the first class honours are typically at the lower end of the grade boundary (HESA, 2014), findings that are mirrored at DMU (2014). Investigation into potential reasons for this gender division results in the suggestion that a contributing factor is the gender difference in help-seeking behaviour, whereby it has been identified that males, particularly young males, at the very least delay seeking help (Pillai, 2010; Galdas et al 2005). These findings correspond to the emerging CLaSS data where investigation into the gender divide between student levels decreases the higher the level of study. For example, over the four year trend at undergraduate level males only account for 25% of CLaSS' unique users. This female dominance changes however, at postgraduate taught and research level where there is a more even distribution, with males accounting on average for 49% of unique users.

Moreover, the notion of a correlation between help-seeking behaviour and patterns of gender distribution within CLaSS are supported by examination of average marks of those students seeking assistance. Of particular interest is the average mark at which the different genders sought help; for females the average mark was 54.9, whereas the average mark was 51.8 for males. Closer analysis of the data indicates a further decline in marks for males when one-to-one help, as opposed to group help, is sought in the form of attending drop-in or tutorials; the average mark is 44.06 and 47.53 respectively. In contrast the average female mark is consistently within a 2:2 classification. These statistics can be considered in light of help-seeking as complexly related to perceived notions of

acceptability in asking for help (Pillai, 2010). The findings begin to indicate that males are predominantly identifying the need for one-to-one help as a last resort, whereas the female engagement mark is suggestive of a view of actively seeking how to develop for developments sake.

It is necessary therefore, to consider how the role of learning development can be presented as development and non-threatening. Nadler (1990) identified that individuals are more likely to seek help if the problem is not considered to be related to qualities they deem as highly important in defining their character, such as intelligence or success. It could subsequently be inferred that males are less likely to seek help because it negatively impacts on their understanding of self and it is only when there is a risk of individual failure that help is finally sought. Failure being more broadly defined as the student not achieving their desired marks, which can be anything from the pass mark of 40 up to a first classification. It is it therefore crucial to reinforce the notion of accessing learning development as a normalised notion within the HE context. If seeking help is considered to be common practice, research has indicated males are more likely to partake in the future (Nadler, 1990).

To this end, and in recognition of this divide, CLaSS has launched a new advertising strategy in conjunction with staff in the Faculty of Technology to try and engage male students, and concurrently those from faculties who do not engage with CLaSS. After examination of current methods for promoting CLaSS activities, we identified a very text-dominated dissemination method (i.e. posters and PowerPoint slides). There was a need therefore, for greater acknowledgement of learner diversity across the institution to reconsider methods for raising student awareness of, and then potentially increasing engagement with, the support available. It was decided that as part of our promotional material CLaSS and a member of staff within the Faculty of Technology would create series of videos (c.27 seconds in length) that could be shown in lectures, across the campus and on our website to advertise our services. This strategy for creating the video adopted an individual learner bottom-up approach, rather than a top-down curriculum approach to accessing study support; focussing on the flipped classroom notion of increasing student autonomy, heightening opportunities for peer and deeper level learning (Doolittle, 2014). It utilised the concept of peer-learning by not only having students appear in the videos to assist with normalising the concept of accessing learning development

opportunities, but also had a student direct and edit the videos. As such, it pushes a stage further to normalise the concept of seeking help.

Results of this initiative are still in the early stages of being analysed, having been trialled in the academic year of 2014/15. Initial findings however, indicate a significant increase in the engagement of students from the previously underrepresented Faculty of Technology, which has a higher proportion of male students (74%), a correlation is therefore expected between this finding and a potential increase in engagement by males (gender analysis is pending at time of publication).

Future plans for the project

It is apparent that this work is still under-development and there is more to be done for this project to reach its full potential. On a practical level the system needs to continue to be tested for functionality to reach our end objective of updating about users once a month. In order to achieve this, CLaSS implemented a new online booking system for tutorials and workshops, which ensures the data is collected in a manner that corresponds to SPS' systems, while currently drop-in data continues to require manual entry. This transformation of our booking system will enable sight of timely information as opposed to a lag between the student engagement and understanding who is using CLaSS. The new booking system also generates a confirmation email, sent on booking a workshop or tutorial; contained within this email is a link to cancel the booking without needing to come to the library or phone. A small term aim for the development of this project will be to assess how this change impacts on the number of students who miss or cancel sessions to further understand how the needs and responses of the students are changing.

Other future directions for this study need to assess the bigger picture of who engages with CLaSS. This will entail:

- Qualitative research to further understand the student perspective of learning development, this aspect has commenced in light of findings from this study.
- Incorporate analysis of students who attend embedded teaching sessions.
- Examine how academics promote and subsequently engage with our service.

In widening the remit of the project to consider such aspects as embedded teaching, it will be possible to begin to map and understand the impact of future engagement with learning development by examining the extent to which embedded teaching encourages students to migrate to use self-selecting provision. This is an important next step as it will not only validate how learning development can be confident in voicing the positive impact its work is having on the wider HE agenda, but will provide a more in-depth picture of precisely who and how CLaSS is being used.

By recognising who is engaging with learning development within De Montfort University it has been possible to raise awareness with colleagues about our role and give them confidence in recommending our service to students. A key goal, therefore, is to ensure this project can continue to respond to current discussions within HE, while ensuring the diversity of students using CLaSS upholds our belief that all students should feel confident and able to access learning development.

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