Northumbria Research Link

Evaluation of a self-audit tool to support information skills development in postgraduate students

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Introduction

This article sets out findings from a small-scale collaborative project evaluating the use of a self-audit tool to promote the development of information literacy in MA social work students at a university in the north of England. The project involved the use of the audit tool early in the first and second years of a two-year professional masters programme and, alongside this, completion of two evaluation questionnaires. Analysis of the data suggested substantially increased confidence (measured by self-report) in the identified skills over the first year of the programme. The authors recognise that many factors may contribute to improved confidence and skills. Nevertheless, students identified use of the tool and the signposting to resources within it as helpful, and most felt that the stated aims had been met.

The programme

Applications to the university's MA social work programme are high, and successful candidates are expected to perform well in a written test involving analysis of an academic journal article, as well as at interview. The programme recruits graduates with first degrees in a wide range of subject areas and from a range of institutions, some completed very recently and others years ago. These variations and individual factors may lead to the quite variable information skills evident in early parts of the programme. Some learners may have significant catching-up to do at the start.

A wider context for the required performance for postgraduate students is offered by the United Kingdom Quality Code for Higher Education, which describes expectations that masters level students demonstrate 'a comprehensive understanding of techniques applicable to their own research or advanced scholarship'.[1] To address this need, the curriculum for one of the first modules studied includes information retrieval and acquisition of the tools for critical appraisal of the evidence base for social work practice. Second-year modules support development of a more explicit focus on the more advanced information skills that writing a dissertation at masters level might require.

Close collaboration takes place between the Library Liaison Adviser for Social Work and module staff to ensure relevant and timely information skills support. Joint planning and evaluation led to consideration of the need to develop an approach that was self-driven, reflective and encouraged independence. We also wanted to find a way of making best use of direct input from the Liaison Adviser by clear identification of learning needs common to the group.

Developing information literacy

The SCONUL Working Group on Information Literacy defines information-literate people as those with 'an awareness of how they gather, use, manage, synthesise and create information and data in an ethical manner and [with] the information skills to do so effectively'.[2] A model is proposed for higher education based on core competencies, attitudes and behaviours, enabling individuals to perceive their personal information literacy at a given point in time. Research by Sloan and Porter has found that students engage more fully when skills provision is embedded and contextualised.[3] This includes the mapping of skills at

point of need throughout a student's programme of study, from induction through to dissertation studies.

Research undertaken at McGill University investigated the pre-assessment of students' library knowledge as a way of discovering what gaps exist between librarians' understanding of what students know and what they actually know.[4] Initial findings reported that this made students evaluate their own knowledge and helped break down barriers between librarians and students by validating the expression of questions or areas for development.

Northumbria Skills Framework and developing a self-audit tool

The Northumbria Skills Framework5 was developed by the university library to support embedding information literacy skills into the curriculum. We adapted this framework into a detailed self-audit tool incorporating information, study and IT skills as well as professional requirements for information literacy required at that time by the Department of Health.[6]

The regulatory and professional framework for social work students has since changed but similar requirements remain. The self-audit tool also offered direction to resources for independent study. It was trialled with MA students who completed the self-audit at the beginning of their first and second years. All students in the year group (about 26) were asked to complete the audit, review it with a partner and help each other to plan how individual learning needs would be met.

These needs were then reviewed as a group to agree areas where the whole group required specific input and support, and to highlight areas for students themselves to pursue. This was seen as a particularly appropriate approach with postgraduate students who, it could be hoped, would be more experienced and expert learners than undergraduates.

Figure 1 is an extract from the tool showing the kind of skills covered, as well as how students were signposted to support from the library, on line and from within the social work curriculum. They were encouraged to reflect on their skills and identify in the self-assessment section how they would develop each skill.

Northumbria Skills Framework – headline skills		
• Using and applying technology effectively • Recognising the need for information • Searching for information • Collecting and synthesising information • Thinking critically and reflectively • Organising, applying and communicating ethically		
Headline skill	**Self-assessment**	**Resources**
1 - Using and applying technology effectively		
Understand basic concepts of IT, including: Using a computer File management Northumbria e-mail U drive Desktop ANYWHERE e-LP [e-learning portal]	[This is where the students reflected and recorded their confidence and skill level for each element]	Skills Plus www.northumbria.ac.uk/skillsplus - I need help with...Using IT • desktop ANYWHERE • File management • Internet Explorer • Snapshot Guide • U Drive Guide Within Social Work curriculum • MA induction
2 - Recognising the need for information		
Know where to obtain help	[This is where the students reflected and recorded their confidence and skill level for each element]	Skills Plus www.northumbria.ac.uk/skillsplus - I need help with...Getting started - Prepare for success [Student induction leaflet] • Knowledge of ask4help and Library Liaison Adviser for social work • MA induction • Programme staff • Peer support

Fig. 1 Headline skills audit extract

Evaluation methodology
A small-scale evaluation study was designed to collect data on the student experience of using this tool, and this was put into effect following approval through the university's ethical review process.

The evaluation was completed as part of the module evaluation process, and all students consented to their anonymous responses being used as part of this research project. Feedback involved student evaluation at the start of the students' second year, and evaluation about six months later as they reached the end of the taught component of the programme.

Student self-reports of confidence were used as a measure of change. This has limitations as it explores only self-perception, but if we consider that learners can often make a reasonable assess-ment of their own performance and that this is informed by staff feedback on their work, it is arguable that this is a useful measure in this context. Similarly, the students were rating their confidence at the beginning of the programme in retrospect, and this might be less fresh in their minds. However, this might have the benefit of eliciting a more dispassionate view than that taken at the start of the programme when anxiety may have distorted their self-perception.

Evaluation of skills audit
Subsequent to being involved in this project, all students were asked to evaluate use of the tool via a final questionnaire. There are six key areas in the Northumbria Skills Framework:

• using and applying technology effectively (Q1)
• recognising the need for information (Q2)

- searching for information (Q3)
- collecting and synthesising information (Q4)
- thinking critically and reflectively (Q5)
- organising, applying and communicating ethically (Q6)

Students were asked two questions in relation to these topics:

- *These are the general areas addressed by the Headline Skills. Looking back to when you started the programme, how confident did you feel in relation to each of these?*

- *Thinking again about these areas. How confident do you feel now at the point of entering the second year of the course?*

Students' confidence in their information skills improved during the first year of their course in respect of all the questions in Figure 2, where the mean change represents the percentage change from year 1 to year 2. Changes were smaller in relation to questions 1 and 2, which also represented those areas in which learners thought that they had been most confident at the start of the programme. The mean change was slightly higher in relation to the possibly more complex skills explored in questions 3–6, such as collecting and synthesising information.

gramme. One could also hope that many elements of a professional masters programme would foster skills such as critical thinking.

Evaluation of skills audit tool
The second part of the evaluation focused more specifically on the audit tool itself. Students were asked to evaluate the skills audit tool in relation to the stated aims, and how effective this was in:
1 Encouraging them to identify their own learning needs
  Directing them to appropriate support to meet those needs
  Providing tailored input for their dissertation
2 Managing their own learning in relation to information skills

Figure 3 demonstrates that students overwhelmingly felt the tool was very or quite successful in meeting these aims.

There was some criticism of the length of the reflection process, form layout and clarity of signposting; this will be useful when considering how to use the skills audit with subsequent student cohorts.
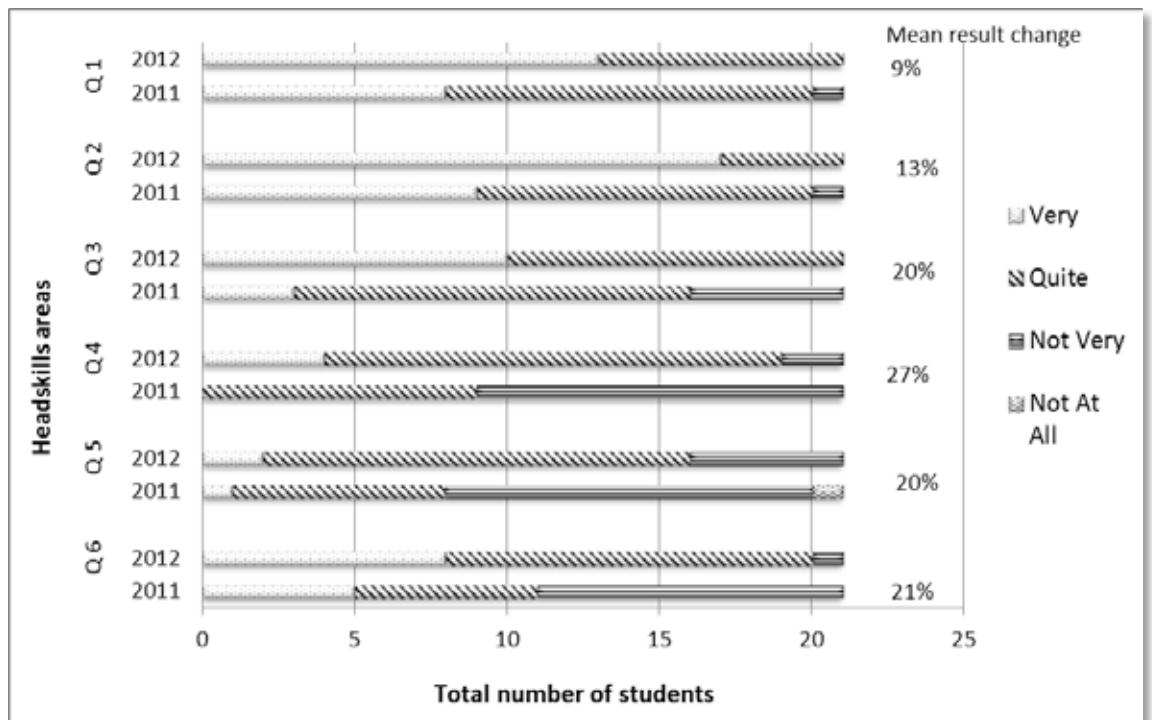

Fig. 2 Change in students' confidence levels

As suggested earlier, it is difficult to attribute these changes to particular elements of a pro-
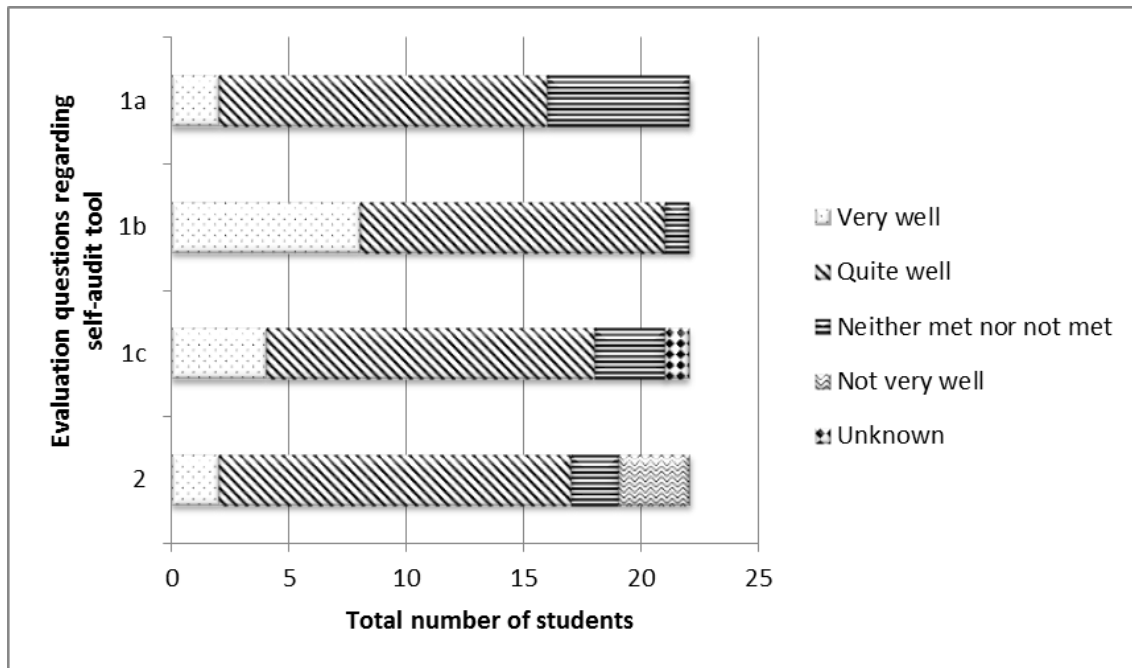
Fig. 3 Students' views on the effectiveness of the skills audit tool

Student feedback

The statistical response was one method of evaluation, but the small size of the sample made it less significant than the qualitative comments, which provided the most interesting insight into the students' experiences.

- *It highlighted what areas I needed to work on in relation to Northumbria University practices and the level expected in relation to an MA.*
- *Did identify learning needs particularly with critical learning.*
- *Already quite aware of what my learning needs are – I found headline skills contributed to my awareness of abilities that needed developing and also highlighted some things I was unaware of such as mind mapping.*
- *Staff are always available for support much appreciated, thank you.*

Requests were made for practical computer laboratory sessions where students could be supported in implementing search strategies relevant to their dissertation topics. This was the practice employed for previous student cohorts, and emphasises the importance of having supported hands-on practical sessions to help with application of the skills. Part of the rationale for the project was about not making assumptions as to what might benefit the students most. We believe this type of support is the most effective way of embedding these skills at the dissertation stage, so it is reassuring the students also find this beneficial. Students identified a need for a 'power surge'

on creating a search strategy and applying knowledge of search techniques to a range of resources, as well as wanting to see previous social work dissertations. Involving students in the decision-making process, along with subsequent 'bite size' input, was evaluated positively by the students.

Discussion

Overall, comments suggested that these learners found explicit identification of information skills as areas for audit and development helpful, and that self-evaluation and direction to resources for independent study were also welcome. They evaluated direct input very highly, and we are not suggesting that self-directed learning is an alternative to this. However, self-directed learning is a useful reinforcement that can support brief and tailored input when resources are scarce.

One striking feature of the findings was the lack of confidence that these graduates identified (in retrospect) when they reflected upon their information skills. The Quality Assurance Agency expects that holders of honours degrees are to be able to 'critically evaluate arguments, assumptions, abstract concepts and data (that may be incomplete), to make judgements, and to frame appropriate questions to achieve a solution – or identify a range of solutions – to a problem'.[7]

Although the students expressed a fair measure of confidence in relation to the use of technology and searching for information, they were much less certain about their ability to collect, synthesise and use the information, which was somewhat at odds with QAA expectations of graduates. This

may simply reflect the extent to which learners entering a programme that they recognise to be at a higher level may feel de-skilled. It does, however, suggest that explicit attention to these areas in postgraduate programmes may be needed. Social work programmes in England are under revision because of regulatory changes, and all social work programmes at Northumbria are currently undergoing a revalidation process. This provides the authors with a valuable opportunity to develop and evaluate information skills provision across the programmes at all levels, not just that offered to the masters students.

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