

## **An investigation of self-efficacy: Can it help us to understand and improve the retention and progression of our students in the era of TEF?**

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### **Abstract**

Retention and progression issues are complex problems which are facing the sector. Therefore the academic self-efficacy of our students is something we need to explore to determine if we can provide more suitable support mechanisms and delivery modes of our traditional degrees. This study examines the self-efficacy of year one students and is the initial phase of a longitudinal project, tracking students through their programmes to learn which factors affect students' academic self-efficacy and the points at which our programmes have a positive or negative effect on the self-efficacy of particular sub-groups. We can then observe when and if any differences in self-efficacy arise across sub-groups, informing our understanding of the attainment gap for black and minority ethnic students (McDuff et al, 2018) and enabling us to monitor any difference in self-efficacy for the students with lower entry qualifications who progress to year one via the foundation year of our Extended programmes (Harwood, 2016).

### **References**

McDuff, N, Tatam, J, Beacock, O and Ross, F (2018), Closing the attainment gap for students from black and minority ethnic backgrounds through institutional change, *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 20:1, 79-101, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.20.1.79>

Harwood, D (2016), Extended science: a powerful tool in widening participation, *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, Issue 10. ISSN: 1759-667X.

### **Paper**

This project supports a strategy of increasing pedagogical research connected to improving the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) metrics with reference to first year continuation (Office for Students, 2019). The context for the study is the Faculty of Business within a post-1992 university with a commitment to widening participation (WP) and success for all students. As part of its commitment to WP, the Faculty of Business introduced its Extended degrees in 2016-17 for able students with lower entry qualifications to begin their programmes with an initial 'foundation' year. Baik et al. (2019) observe that students with lower entry qualifications may encounter academic difficulties at university inter alia because they are less likely to enjoy studying and they may have a weaker sense of purpose than students with higher entry grades. Therefore we have included significant bespoke content within the initial foundation year so that students learn subjects they are interested in and which prepare them for success in the remainder of their programmes once they progress from the foundation stage (Baik et al., 2017). To prepare students further for higher level study, we have also ensured that they are exposed to a variety of forms of assessment in this initial year at university. This research project will increase our knowledge of how confident these students feel about their ability to succeed in year one. We shall compare the factors which enhance the self-efficacy of continuing students on our Extended programmes with that of new year one students.

Understanding the differences between sub-groups, such as the black and minority ethnic (BAME) students, is also important, because they do not currently achieve the same outcomes as white students despite comparable level 3 qualifications on entering university (McDuff et al, 2018). This is an issue which is now receiving increased attention throughout the sector and the University is supporting the attainment gap project initiated by Kingston University (Warren and Reilly, 2019). This investigation therefore complements other work on designing an inclusive and decolonised curriculum to address the attainment gap; we shall compare the feelings of self-efficacy of BAME and white students to try to identify if and when a gap in academic confidence starts to appear.

Drawing on Bandura's (1982) work on academic self-efficacy, we have used Byrne et al.'s (2014) self-efficacy survey of closed questions to gather data from 124 year one undergraduate students regarding their perceived levels of confidence across 26 academic areas including asking questions in lectures and tutorials, judging the standard to get good marks in exams and assignments, and meeting deadlines. Building on Byrne et al. (2014), our survey adds open questions and this enables us to explore reasons why students feel confident, or lack confidence, that they will pass year one. We also use student discussion forums to explore and explain our survey findings. By analysing the open comments in the online surveys and transcripts from the discussion forums, we explore the sources of academic self-efficacy for year one students. Bandura (1997) identifies four sources of self-efficacy which we observe to be in operation: mastery experiences (the previous successful completion of academic study at school, college or in the foundation year for Extended programmes); vicarious experiences (working alongside other students to be encouraged by their success); verbal persuasion (confirmation by lecturers and peers that a student can succeed); and emotional state (the effect on future efforts of receiving either a high or low grade). We consider the mediating effect of support and encouragement from parties external to the university such as family, friends and colleagues at a student's paid part-time job and we also explore causes of the moderating factor of academic procrastination which reduces the time a student spends on task (Honicke and Broadbent, 2016). At the end of the academic year the relationship between academic performance and students' perceived self-efficacy will be investigated using quantitative analysis. Institutional ethics approval has been given for the project.

The project is in its initial stage but it has the potential to inform the implementation of mechanisms to enhance our provision for year one students. It also has the potential to be the first phase of a longitudinal project, tracking students through their programmes to learn which factors have an impact on students' academic self-efficacy and the points at which our programmes have a positive or negative effect on that self-efficacy for particular groups of students. We should then be able to observe if and when any observed differences in self-efficacy arise, enabling us to monitor whether we have an attainment gap for students who come onto our Extended programmes via an initial foundation year and informing our understanding of the documented attainment gap for BAME students.

A motivation for the study is the TEF that now sharpens our focus on particular sub-groups of students via the split metrics which include inter alia both ethnicity and also gender. Byrne et al. (2014) find very little difference between the self-efficacy of female and male students but note that the results of prior studies are mixed in this area. Therefore we shall test the effect of gender on our results to make an additional contribution to the literature.

The overarching Research question for our project is therefore: At the start of year one, do business students feel confident about their ability to succeed on their programmes, and can we focus on positive areas and address students' negative concerns to improve retention?

To answer this question, we shall use the following sub-questions to explore the confidence of various student groups. It is important to note that this is the basis of a large project, which will be divided into separate papers, addressing particular questions:

1. Does the initial 'foundation' year help our extended students to feel confident they can succeed in year one?

2. Is there any difference in the self-efficacy of extended and other students at the start of year one?
3. Is there any difference in the self-efficacy of BAME and white students at the start of year one?
4. Is there any difference in the self-efficacy of female and male students at the start of year one?

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