

Focus On: Collaborative Activity

Building learning communities at a distance

Case study – The Robert Gordon University (RGU) Associate Student Scheme

Where: RGU's Associate Student Scheme is open to eligible students from all Scottish further education (FE) colleges.

Date: The scheme was launched in 2008 and continues to be developed in response to student feedback.

Impact: The practice was introduced across all subject-areas where articulation agreements had been signed with Aberdeen College, but is now open to students from all Scottish FE colleges studying Higher National Qualifications (HNQs) where an articulation agreement exists.

The practice has been adopted by most Scottish FE and HE institutions, particularly since provision of the Scheme was recommended in guidance for the *Additional Articulation Places Scheme* (Scottish Funding Council, 2013).

Number of students affected: Since its inception 1,322 students have registered as Associate Students whilst studying at college, and a further 274 articulating applicants have enrolled on the scheme in advance of attending transition support programmes. To date, the scheme has directly benefitted 1,596 students.

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Others involved:

RGU – Senior Management, DELTA, Records, Marketing, Study Support, E-Learning, Student Ambassadors.

North East Scotland College (NESCoI) – Senior Management, Marketing, Records, E-Learning, Course Leaders.

Further information:

www.degree-link.org.uk

<http://www.rgu.ac.uk/future-students/degree-link/associate-student-scheme/associate-student-scheme>



Abstract:

The Associate Student Scheme was developed to support college students gaining advanced entry to university via degree-linked courses.

The scheme aims to support HN students whilst they are still at college by helping them to become familiar with the University's online resources, campus and facilities before they start their studies. Associate Students are welcome to join RGU's societies, providing an opportunity for HN students to socialise with students on their chosen degree-course. In addition, Associate Students receive regular communications via electronic newsletters and the Facebook closed group, helping them to feel part of RGU's learning community.

Description:

What was the rationale behind this work?

In March 2009, RGU and Aberdeen College formalised their commitment to providing articulation opportunities for learners in the region and signed a Memorandum of Agreement whereby Aberdeen College became an Associate College of RGU. The agreement included provision of an Associate Student Scheme, effectively providing eligible HN learners access to a range of University services and facilities in an effort to help prepare them for study at university level whilst still at college.

How was the work developed and implemented?

Both institutions worked collaboratively to promote the scheme and its benefits to eligible students. Once registered, Associate Students receive:

- an Associate Student card;
- access to a dedicated section of the University's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) which provides students with general guidance and information about studying at the University;
- regular newsletters and communications via Facebook;
- access to University Library and IT facilities;
- invitations to Open Days and transitional support programmes;
- access to RGU's societies;
- and access to the facilities at RGU: Sport at discounted student rates.

More recently a number of key developments have supported continued growth of the scheme:

- Continued development of pre-enrolment transition support programmes for subject-areas identified as requiring additional transition support. The subject-specific DegreePrep Programmes are designed in collaboration with course leaders and offer course preparation workshops as well as relevant study skills sessions and presentations from various Student Services staff.
- Launch of the Degree Link website www.degree-link.org.uk Managed by college staff, the independent Degree Link website provides up-to-date information about progression routes available to NESCol (formerly Aberdeen College and Banff and Buchan College) learners, as well as information about any associated conditions. The website also has information about the Associate Student Scheme and includes a sign up page.
- Recruitment of RGU students, who had previously articulated, to promote the Scheme within the college by holding 'pop-up events'; presenting to students in their classrooms; and representing Degree Link at various school and college events, as well as national conferences e.g. *Learning for All*.
- Continued development of the 'Coming from College' Moodle page (RGU's VLE resources).
- Increased visibility of the scheme, with links to the Degree Link website and sign up page on eligible students' Blackboard (NESCol's VLE) homepages.
- Development of animated advert displayed on plasma screens in partner colleges and link included on VLEs.
- Delivery of Study Skills sessions to cohorts within the college in how to approach assignments and how best to utilise the online resources available to them e.g. accessing the Library databases, referencing guides. etc.

What resources were needed?

- Staff time across institutions and multiple departments - development of procedures to ensure easy sign-up; record management and access to relevant online resources; development of online resources and interactive tools.
- Marketing – branding development, development of Degree Link website; development of annual Degree Link brochure; development of marketing materials - banners, leaflets, newsletters etc.; development of advertising campaign; promotion of Scheme at school and college events across the region and beyond.

What enablers helped the work to succeed?

- Memoranda of Agreements which formalised the partnership between RGU and NESCoI have been invaluable in enabling the Associate Student Scheme by formalising the commitment to providing progression opportunities in the region, and, in turn, a commitment to supporting students throughout their transition and maximising their potential for success.
- The commitment of both institutions to work collaboratively is evident in the range of staff and resources that have been invested in promoting the scheme across both institutions. Whilst Hub Funding from the Scottish Funding Council has supported marketing costs such as the development of marketing material, staff from both institutions e.g. Admissions, Records, Marketing, Study Support, Learning Resources/E-Learning, Library etc., have willingly invested time to support the scheme.

What advice would you provide to others trying something similar?

The recruitment of students who previously articulated to promote the scheme in college had a significant impact on encouraging students to register for the scheme and engage with the online resources. In addition, workshops delivered by University Study Support staff in how to make effective use of the resources has encouraged students to access University resources for college assignments, and better prepare them for academic writing at university level.

Outline any potential improvements/enhancements that you would like to make or are planning to make since first developing the work/project?

- Further development of the 'Coming from College' Moodle page to include subject-specific video case studies.
- Further streamlining of the registration process.

Perceived benefits:

For students

- Students feel part of RGU's learning community whilst studying at college
- Students can familiarise themselves with RGU's online resources and VLE, as well as its campus and facilities, in advance of degree-level study
- Students have access to Library databases and journals, as well as study skills guidance, helping them to maximise success at HND level study

For staff

- Development of relationship between teaching staff from both institutions, providing further opportunities for collaboration
- Staff welcome students who are well informed about continuing their studies at university level and familiar with the campus and its facilities, and therefore less likely to require non-academic support from teaching staff
- Pre-sessional transition support programmes have raised awareness of the help and support available to them via Student Services, helping to improve attainment and retention

For the institution

- The strong partnership between RGU and NESCol developed through the shared commitment to articulation has provided a framework for exploring further opportunities for partnership working
- Sector leading support for articulating students via the Associate Student Scheme has enhanced RGU's reputation
- Student experience has been enhanced and is evident in improved SEQ responses, attainment and retention

Issues/challenges:

For students

- Feedback from students has indicated they would welcome a more efficient registration process
- Students unfamiliar with the VLE platform may not find/utilise resources readily

For staff

- Labour intensive work required in creating Associate Student Records
- Demands on staff time and resources in continued development and delivery

For the institution

- Raising awareness of the Scheme and its benefits amongst college teaching staff to increase take-up of specific cohorts

