



GLASGOW  
CALEDONIAN  
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**School of Nursing, Midwifery and  
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***The Enhance Project: Supporting  
Students in the First Year of an  
Undergraduate Nursing Programme***

**Project Report**

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## **Introduction**

In response to the QAA Scotland (2005a,b,c) enhancement theme, focussing on the first year experience in higher education, a team of academics at the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Community Health (NMCH), Glasgow Caledonian University, have introduced a comprehensive approach to induction in the first year of learning. The *Enhance Project*, although not a conventional research project, is an action-based approach that utilises a multi-method approach to data collection and evaluation. The project currently supports the academic skill development of over 600 first year nursing students. The project is an evolving practice-based initiative that aims to enhance student learning in the areas of academic and in clinical practice.

The project team Identified and responded to the clinical/academic practice needs of first year nursing students in the area of professional and academic skill development. Waterman et al (2001) state that 'knowledge may be advanced through reflection and research, and qualitative and quantitative research methods may be employed to collect data' (p11). Reflecting this approach, a number of qualitative and quantitative evaluative interventions have been utilised. These include focus groups with staff, students and clinical practitioners, simple questionnaires and critical debate and discussion.

## **Method**

The Enhance Project reflects a mutual-collaborative and interpretivist action approach, as it brings together students, academics, clinicians and managers to discuss, develop, trial and monitor potential interventions and solutions (Meyer 2006). The process follows three main phases. The first is the exploration phase where the nature of the problem is explored and initial data generated through focus groups and/or questionnaires. The second, the intervention phase, generates action cycles or 'spirals' of activity. The final phase is the evaluation, where the intervention is evaluated in the light of the participants' perspective on change effectiveness and achievement (Meyer 2006).

## **Pilot Study**

Informal discussion and debate with both staff and students indicated that there was a general desire to build in a more structured approach to academic skill building. From 2005-2006, the project researcher and project leader collaborated with colleagues, at team meetings /academic forums and with students (at all levels) within the School, to explore the nature and extent of the current support for first year nursing students. The following subject areas were identified as important in discussions with both students and staff.

1. Problem based learning
2. Adult learning
3. Time management
4. Listening/reading/note taking
5. Reviewing and referencing
6. Reflection
7. Introduction to support services
8. Plagiarism
9. Critical thinking
10. Academic writing
11. Personal development planning
12. Transition to 2<sup>nd</sup> year

Based on these identified areas, a programme of twelve student-centred, interactive, small group sessions was developed and piloted with two groups of first year undergraduate health/nursing students. The programme was facilitated by first year academic staff (Andrew et al 2007). The perceived effectiveness of the pilot programme was evaluated using focus groups with involved academic staff (2) and students (1). Attendance at the focus groups ranged from 5-10 per group (Andrew et al 2007). Focus groups have been used as a tool to collect qualitative data for over 20 years and their advantage is described as 'the dynamic nature of the interaction achieved with little input from the facilitator' (Millar et al 1996 p195).

The contents of each group was discussed and agreed in advance by the project team. Appendix 1 details the content of the student focus group schedule. The research advisor worked with the group facilitator to ensure the questions were both valid and appropriate. The facilitator had previous experience of group work in both clinical and educational settings. The team had to implement an

evaluation strategy in a very short space of time and within a limited budget. Focus groups presented as an ideal vehicle as they are time, resource and financially effective (Gray-Vickery 1993).

The results of the preliminary focus groups were encouraging. Students reported positively on the majority of facilitated sessions, finding them useful and informative. Staff members were also positive, discussing characteristics of and challenges for first year students in relation to the pilot sessions (Andrew et al 2007). The report focussing on responding to student needs (QAA 2005a) identifies issues of adaptation, independent learning and culture change at a national (Scottish) level. The project focus groups corroborated these findings at a local level (QAA Scotland 2005a). From the findings, it became clear that both staff and students thought that adjusting to a higher education culture was an important factor. Students identified the need to acquire skills to help them fit into and cope with student life. Academic staff identified the need for change, moving towards a culture of independent learning. They identified this process as a challenge for both students and themselves. The student and staff responses influenced the final content and delivery format of all sessions. The project researcher spent time with all first year academic staff and attended team and module meetings to ensure that those involved were comfortable with the content and delivery format of the material. The findings of the focus groups highlighted the need to build academic skills and indicated the importance of linking theory to practice (Andrew et al 2007). The sessions were adapted and changed to incorporate student and staff observations.

### **Main Intervention**

From September 2006-May 2007 a programme of twelve activity-based interactive sessions were delivered over one academic year (six per semester). They were facilitated by first year undergraduate lecturers to groups of (approximately) 20 students. Throughout this process the project researcher worked as part of the first year teaching team, attending team meetings facilitate discussion and ensure that both staff and students had access to appropriate resources required to underpin and sustain a student centred approach. In recognition of the need to link theory and practice, the project researcher worked with staff teams to discuss and decided on key learning landmarks within the first year. The sessions were constructively aligned with identified curricular benchmarks (Biggs 1999).

### **Evaluation**

To establish the overall effectiveness of the programme a simple, satisfaction questionnaire was distributed to all first year students; this is shown in appendix 2. The questions were straightforward, seeking only the information needed for the first action spiral (Murphy-Black 2006). The questions sought to establish whether or not, the students found the overall programme useful and to ascertain if they thought it would be of continuing use. Of the 480 questionnaires distributed to first year students, through the network of lecturers, 349 were returned. The data was analysed using SPSS (statistical package for the social sciences). The response rate was 70%. Although 80% is the general aim, the response rate was large enough for the findings to be useful (Murphy-Black 2006). Students were asked to evaluate and rank the sessions from two opposing positions. In Table 1, students were asked to rank sessions as most useful (most useful is defined as the greatest number of students agreeing). In table 2 they were asked to rank sessions as least useful (least useful defined as the greatest number of students agreeing). The inconsistencies in the results provide an insight into the way that the students completed the questionnaire.

**Table 1 Most useful – (Question 3 Appendix 2)**

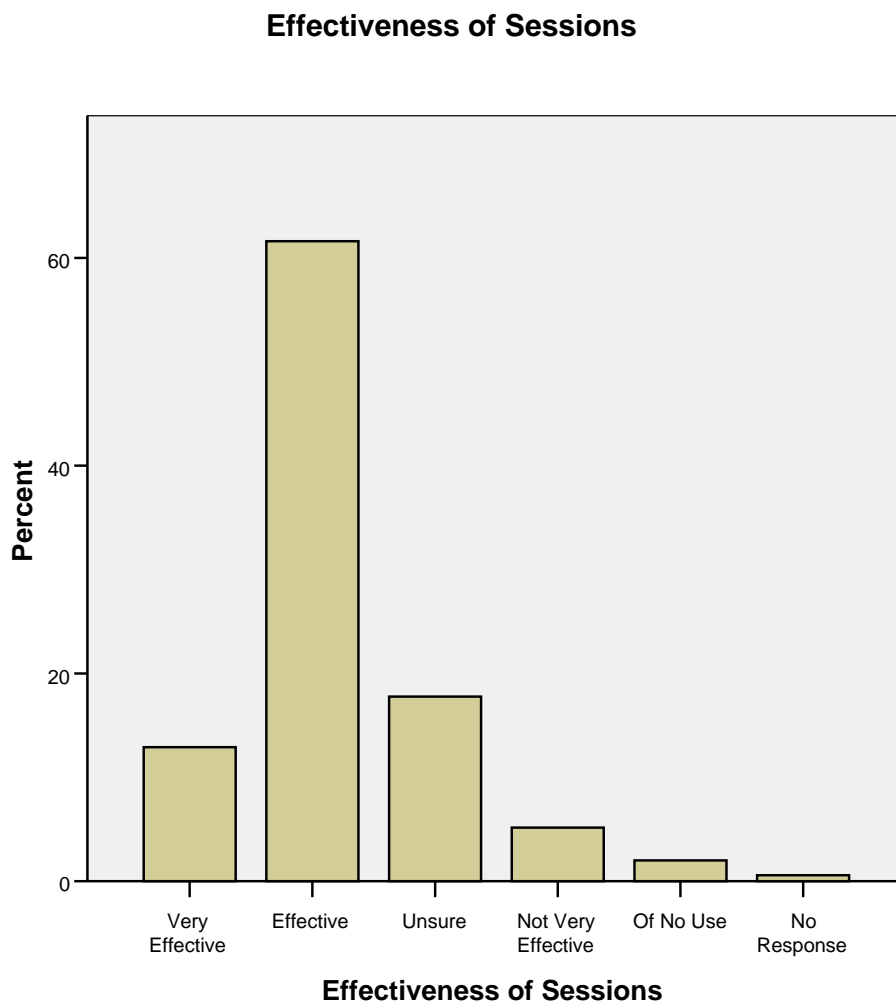
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	PBL	4	1.1	1.1	1.1
	Adult Learning/Mind Mapping	10	2.9	2.9	4.0
	Learning/Time Management/Organisation	17	4.9	4.9	8.9
	Listening/Reading/Note Taking	10	2.9	2.9	11.7
	Literature/Referencing/Annotation	45	12.9	12.9	24.6
	Reflection	13	3.7	3.7	28.4
	Intro/support services	20	5.7	5.7	34.1
	Plagiarism	30	8.6	8.6	42.7
	Critical Thinking	27	7.7	7.7	50.4
	Academic Writing	105	30.1	30.1	80.5
	PDP	39	11.2	11.2	91.7
	Transition	8	2.3	2.3	94.0
	No Response	4	1.1	1.1	95.1
	All Useful	17	4.9	4.9	100.0
	Total	349	100.0	100.0	

**Table 2 Least useful - Question (Question 4 Appendix 2)**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	PBL	32	9.2	9.2	9.2
	Adult Learning/Mind Mapping	56	16.0	16.0	25.2
	Learning/Time Management/Organisation	31	8.9	8.9	34.1
	Listening/Reading/Note Taking	25	7.2	7.2	41.3
	Literature/Referencing/Annotation	10	2.9	2.9	44.1
	Reflection	6	1.7	1.7	45.8
	Intro/support services	73	20.9	20.9	66.8
	Plagiarism	33	9.5	9.5	76.2
	Critical Thinking	11	3.2	3.2	79.4
	Academic Writing	5	1.4	1.4	80.8
	PDP	5	1.4	1.4	82.2
	Transition	10	2.9	2.9	85.1
	No Response	49	14.0	14.0	99.1
	All Unhelpful	3	.9	.9	100.0
	Total	349	100.0	100.0	

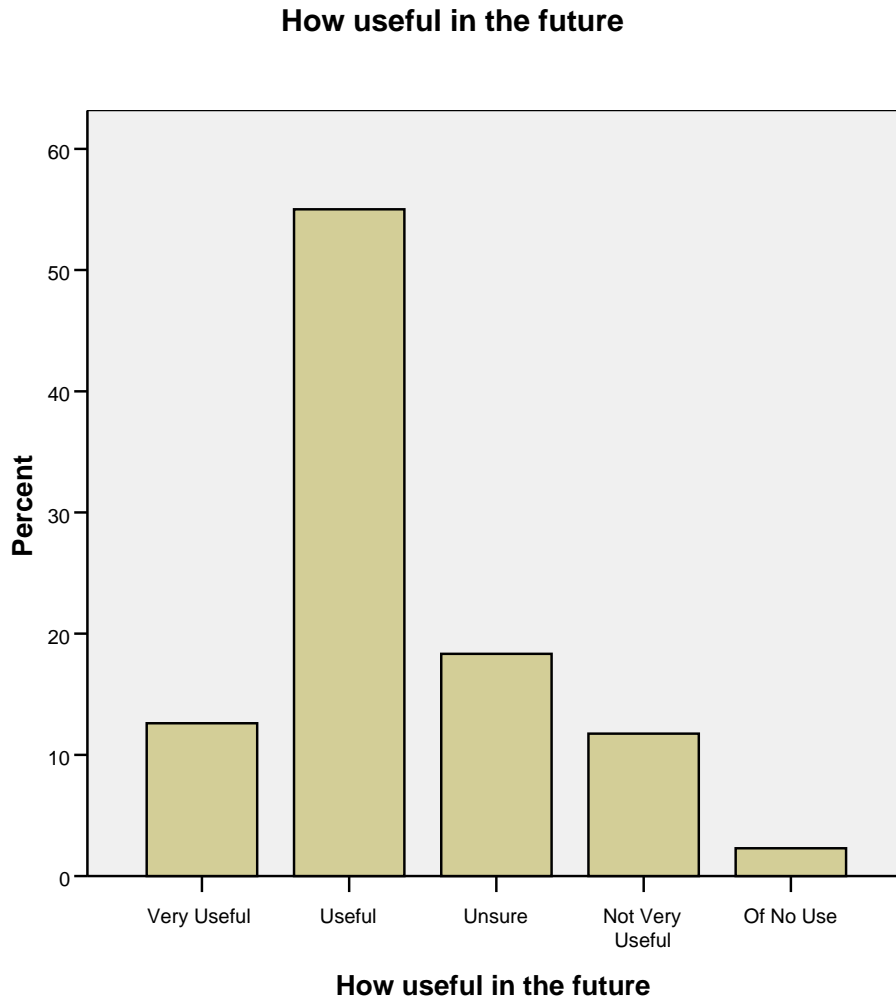
In table 1, *academic writing* is considered, by a clear majority (105 students), to be the most useful. In table 2 however, this not the case, as *academic writing* scores jointly with *personal development planning*, a session introducing the development of a clinical portfolio, integral to the first clinical placement (5 students). Although there are inconsistencies across the findings, (the response to the session introducing the support services is again inconsistent), the most popular sessions shown in both tables, are those aligned with immediacy. The least popular, (with the exception of *personal development planning*) are more general and less focussed. Overall, the majority of students found the sessions to be effective (Figure 1), 75% stated that they found all sessions to be *effective* or *very effective*, only a minority were unsure (18%) or thought that they were *not effective* or *not very effective* (7%).

**Figure 1: Effectiveness of Sessions** (Question 2 appendix 2)



These percentages changed moderately when the students were asked about their perceptions of usefulness of the sessions in the future (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: How useful in the future** (Question 5 appendix 2)



The majority (68%) thought that the sessions would be very useful or useful; the remainder thought that they would *not be very useful* (14%) in the future. Again 18% remained unsure. These findings largely reflect CHERI (2004) and QAA (2005c), highlighting the need to respond to student needs appropriately, providing the right information at the right time.

The QAA (2005c) states that an induction period should include the development of both computing and e-learning skills. In addition to the programme of academic activities, a virtual Learning Environment (VLE) was designed to complement the face-to-face activities. All sessions were posted after delivery and the project researcher posted recorded video and audio presentations. To encourage the students to access the website and to launch the project, prizes such as study skills handbooks, memory sticks and pens were raffled at the start of first year. Students were asked to log on to the website to establish whether they had won. The questionnaire revealed that 46% accessed the VLE; the remainder either had not accessed it at all, or were unsure whether they had accessed it successfully (54%).

### **Limitations**

A major limitation, identified at the outset, was that of facilitator consistency. There were twenty small groups and a similar number of facilitators involved. To ensure a basic level of continuity, the project researcher coordinated all the sessions and delivered them to each facilitator in the same format, at the same time. All materials and comprehensive facilitator prompt notes were included. The project

researcher was also a member of academic staff and involved with first year teaching. To promote openness and clarity, she spent time with all first year lecturers in groups and individually, explaining any implications of this dual position. The project team could not regulate the actual delivery of the sessions. It is acknowledged that the evaluation of both the sessions and the overall programme may have been directly influenced by the approach and method of individual facilitators. The project was also constrained by the demands of the curriculum. The timings and delivery of the sessions were designed to be simultaneous, however it was difficult to regulate this as facilitators had to respond to the demands of both the time-table and the student body.

The data collection approach was also a limitation. A simple questionnaire can only provide basic information and no data, on this occasion was collected on the supportive nature of interactivity with peers or lecturers. The students did not consistently rank the sessions and that is evident in the findings. They did however demonstrate sufficient consistency to allow some key points to emerge.

## **Discussion**

The main findings in this study relate to immediacy, and focus and motivation. Firstly students were aware, from the beginning of their programme of study, that they would have to start preparing and submitting written assignments within a short time period. The sessions that were more favourably evaluated were those that connected directly to preparation of assignments. The exception to this was the session that focussed on *personal development planning* (PDP). PDP was however linked to the development of the mandatory integrated clinical/academic portfolio which was again of immediate relevance to the first clinical placement and this finding directly reflects that of Seale et al (2000).

Secondly, those sessions less favourably evaluated tended to be more general and less focussed, such as *adult learning* and *time management*. This may have occurred because at the point of delivery students could not see the immediate relevance. Although the majority of students found the sessions both effective and generally useful, those that were linked to assessment were rated most useful. This finding would appear to support the idea of extrinsic motivation where learning is valued chiefly because it is directly linked to assessment and immediacy. This finding also indicates that extrinsic motivation starts in the first year of an undergraduate programme, suggesting that encouraging students to value learning and look at *the bigger picture*, characteristics of intrinsic motivation, requires a supportive and developmental academic framework (Entwhistle et al 1974).

The supportive nature of small group working, in relation to motivation, interactivity and peer support was not investigated as part of this evaluation. This omission meant that an opportunity to further explore the findings and expand on the important areas of motivation, peer and lecturer support that are identified in the literature was, on this occasion missed.

## **Conclusion**

First year is challenging for students in HE and the evidence appears to indicate that although withdrawal is a complex mix of both social and academic issues, the use of programmes, such as the Enhance Project do have something to contribute to the creation of a positive initial experience. The literature indicates that all students, not just those from non traditional backgrounds, require help to develop academic skills. The need to use academic skill sessions as more than just information giving in large groups has also been highlighted. The sessions should be facilitated in small groups to encourage interaction with both peers and lecturing staff from the start of the undergraduate journey. There is also an argument to be made for a more thoughtful approach to the delivery of skill development sessions. To begin to relate theory to practice, key sessions could be integrated into the first year curriculum, over a sustained period of time, avoiding induction overload.

The Enhance Project has arisen from an identified need to promote the growth and development of independent learning skills. Underpinned, by an action research framework and borrowing from action learning, ongoing development is informed and guided by the findings of focus groups, questionnaires and critical debate and discussion. The results of the evaluation of the programme although at times inconsistent, identify the input and subjects most valued by the students. The issue of student motivation is discussed frequently in the literature, mainly concluding those who are largely extrinsically motivated may be less fulfilled by their university experience. However further work is required to investigate this in the light of changing student profiles, external work commitments and wider access policies.

Recognising the need to expand on this work, the project team have organised events where students, academic staff and clinical colleagues collaborate to identify wider academic/practice based needs of first year student nurses. Students need to feel academically and professionally involved and they identify heavily with the practice role. Stakeholders from both academic and clinical backgrounds have clearly identified integrated clinical/academic support as a first year priority. The project team have continued to work collaboratively with students, peers, clinical and academic colleagues to further identify and address the academic and clinical needs of nurses in their first year of undergraduate education.

## Dissemination

### • Publications/Presentations

Andrew, N., McGuinness, C., Reid, G. & Corcoran, T. Greater than the sum of its parts: transition into the first year of nursing (in press).

Andrew, N., McGuinness, C., Reid, G. & Corcoran, T (2007) Supporting students in the first year of an undergraduate nursing programme: The Enhance Project. *Practice and Evidence of Scholarship and Learning in Higher Education*, 2(2) 128-150.

Andrew, N. & McGuinness, C. (2007) 'The enhance project: promoting integration in the first year of university based nursing programmes' NET 18<sup>th</sup> International Participative Conference September 2007.

Andrew, N., McGuinness, C., Reid, G. & Corcoran, T. (2007) 'The Enhance Project: Supporting Academic Practice Development in the First Year of Learning in Higher Education'. Higher Education Academy, Bristol, Education Subject Centre (ESCalate).

Andrew, N. & McGuinness, C. (2007) 'The enhance project: an integrated programme of support for health students in the first year of university'. Learning and Teaching symposium, University of Glasgow.

Andrew, N., Reid, G., Corcoran, T. & McGuinness, C (2007) 'Achieving integrated scholarship in the first year of learning'. CRLI International Conference, University of Stirling, June 2007.

Andrew, N., McGuinness, C. & Reid, G. (2006) 'The Enhance Project: Supporting Learning at Level 1'. *First Year Experience in Continuing Education*, International Conference, University of Stirling/EScalate March 2007.

McGuinness, C., Andrew, N., Reid G. & Corcoran. Integrating clinical and academic practice in the first year of health and nursing programmes (in press).

Andrew, N., Reid, G. & McGuinness, C. (2006) 'The Enhance Project'

Learning and Teaching Showcase, GCU. [www.learningservices.gcal.ac.uk/apu/showcase](http://www.learningservices.gcal.ac.uk/apu/showcase)

### • Events

Presentation by project team to SWAPWest at SWAP National Nurse Forum: March 2008.

Presentation by project team to QAA (Scotland) Enhancement Theme Conference: March 2008 (case study for theme of 'Transition into First Year').

First Year Experience in Nursing Conference, January 2007. Hosted by Enhance Project Team, Sponsored by NMCH.

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## **Appendix 1- Focus Group Schedule (Students)**

- 1. What topics were covered in the course?**
  - a. How were they delivered?
  - b. Were they useful?
  - c. What did they help you with?
  - d. When did you see/realise the benefit?
  - e. Have you ever had a course like this before?
  
- 2. What skills have you learnt that are linked to this course?**
  - a. What do you think of the ICT sessions?
  - b. What about.....(use flipchart with examples of course content to prompt discussion)
  
- 3. Did the work undertaken support your coursework?**
  - a. What was particularly useful?
  - b. In what way was this useful?
  - c. What was not so useful?
  
- 4. Was anything missing that would have helped you?**
  - a. If so what?
  - b. Can you give me examples?
  - c. What do you need help with?
  
- 5. What skills did you already have when you started the course?**
  - a. If asked what advice would you give to a friend starting your course?
  
- 6. In what way – if at all – did the Enhanced Induction (explain) help you to settle into year one of university life?**
  - a. How did it make you feel (example: more confident/able?)
  
- 7. What other support are you aware of for students?**
  
- 8. What other support services do you use/have access to?**
  
- 9. Is there anything else you think we should know?**

## Appendix 2-Project Evaluation



### Enhance Project Evaluation

Now that you have completed Enhanced Induction, the Project Team would like to evaluate the sessions delivered; this evaluation will include the sessions from both Semester A & B 2006/7. Please note that the information from this evaluation may be used by the Project Team in any or all of the following:

- **Ongoing evaluation of the sessions being delivered**
- **Development of future sessions for delivery**
- **Educational discussion and presentations**

With this in mind we would be very grateful if you would complete the attached questionnaire.

It should be made clear that completing this evaluation is **not compulsory** however, please be assured that we value your comments and hope you will contribute. Please also be assured that all submitted evaluations will remain **anonymous** and with this in mind please **do not enter any personal information on the form.**

Should you wish to discuss this matter further please contact a member of the Enhance Project Team at any time.

Many thanks in anticipation of your assistance,

### The Enhance Project Team

Contact Name	Role	Direct Dial
Nicky Andrew	Project Leader	0141 331 8320
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Terry Corcoran	E-learning Co-ordinator	0141 331 8184

**When completing this evaluation please choose the most appropriate answer for you.**

1. Did you find the Enhanced Induction sessions useful?

Very useful	Useful	Unsure	Not Very Useful	Of No Use
1	2	3	4	5

2. Did the session content address the topic effectively?

Very Effective	Effective	Unsure	Not Very Effective	Of No Use
1	2	3	4	5

3. Which session did you find **most useful**? Please tick **one** session only.

An introduction to PBL	-----
Adult learning at level 1 & Mind Mapping	-----
Learning to learn, time management & getting organised	-----
Actively listening, critical reading & how to take notes	-----
Searching the literature, referencing & annotation	-----
Introducing reflection	-----
Re-introduction to ELS & the library	-----
Plagiarism	-----
Critical Thinking Skills	-----
Academic Writing	-----
Personal Development Planning	-----
Transition from level 1 to level 2	-----

4. Referring to the list provided in question 3, which session did you find **least useful**?

.....

5. Do you think the information given during Enhanced Induction will be of benefit when undertaking future coursework at university?

Very useful	Useful	Unsure	Not very useful	Of No Use
1	2	3	4	5

6. Did you access the online Enhance resources: Enhance on Blackboard?

Yes	Unsure	No
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**Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.**