Student motivations and choices in a 'pick and mix' curriculum module at the Open University, UK

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STUDENT MOTIVATIONS AND CHOICES IN A 'PICK AND MIX' CURRICULUM MODULE AT THE OPEN UNIVERSITY, UK.

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Abstract

Making your Learning Count (YXM130) is an innovative new 30 credit undergraduate module at the Open University, UK. It allows students to tailor their own curriculum through selecting external learning resources for incorporation into a defined assessment framework. Students are supported to identify their interests and select appropriate external learning resources such as OERs and MOOCs to make up 150 hours of learning. This is complimented with 150 hours of generic skills-based module material and assessment which is common to all students regardless of their chosen discipline area. The 'pick and mix' module is designed to enable interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary study which supports students in developing cross-disciplinary thinking and approaches, as well as giving an opportunity to experience a range of discipline areas prior to committing to a specific degree pathway. This innovative module design allows every student to have an personalized learning experience tailored very precisely to their specific motivation and goals.

This paper reports on an analysis of student declared study motivation and their planned choice of external content for inclusion in their individual learning. Consideration will be given to whether the students' choice of learning resources is appropriate to support their stated aims, and if the intended promotion of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary study has been achieved.

Keywords: Student led curriculum, interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary

1   INTRODUCTION

Making your Learning Count (YXM130) is an innovative module developed at the Open University, UK (OU) offering students an opportunity to build their own curriculum through selecting external learning resources to include within a structured and assessed study framework. The module has been designed both to allow students to tailor learning to their specific interest or goal, and to promote interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary learning.

The OU has a long history of offering flexible curriculum through an open degree programme which allows students to combine modules from across the universities' curriculum to build their own personalised degree. YXM130 offers similar flexibility but at the module level. Students are directed to the Openlearn [1] platform in order to find suitable study resources but are free to include materials from other providers, if they are appropriate to meeting their study needs and goals. Students who are new to online study, and using YXM130 as their starting point for entering or returning to higher education(HE), tend to select all their learning resources from Openlearn. Those with more experience and confidence also include materials from elsewhere. If students have recently completed some MOOC, BOC or other OER learning within the three years prior to starting the module, these can also be counted within their 150 hours. In this situation the module is supporting students making the shift from informal to formal learning.

In the 2019/20 cohort there are over 400 students, consisting of three groups: corporate students, young students and standard students. The corporate students are sponsored by their employer and are engaged in some inhouse employer provided learning which counts towards a proportion of their 150 hours of resources. The young student group are registered through the OU Young Applicants in Schools Scheme and are under 18 at the time of commencing study. This study is restricted to the remaining standard students, anyone who is not part of the previously mentioned special groups, within the 2019/20 cohort, of which there were just over 200 at the module start.

2   METHOD

The first assignment in YXM130 requires students to articulate their study motivation and learning goals by answering a series of questions, and to produce a study plan detailing the 150 hours of resources they expect to include in their learning.

Initially 42 assignment scripts, submitted by standard students, were randomly selected for inclusion in the study. Three of these scripts were removed from the sample because the study plan was either missing or largely incomplete. Analysis of the remaining 39 scripts is reported here. This sample is approximately 20% of the cohort of standard students.

2.1   Learning plans

The learning plan (Figure 1) requires students to map out and schedule the learning resources they plan to complete. This helps them pace their study appropriately to complete all 150 hours of learning alongside the 150 hours of module materials and assessment within the allowed 30 weeks.

Figure 1: Extract from a student learning plan

Each of the learning plans was analyzed and the student specified learning resources were allocated to one of eight discipline areas. In most cases the discipline allocation matched that identified by the student in their learning plan. Engagement in a discipline was then measured by the number of hours of planned study within each discipline. If students had submitted a plan covering more than 150 hours of learning resources the hours allocated to each discipline were proportionally reduced to give a total allocation of 150 hours.

The list of disciplines (Table 1) was taken from the Openlearn website. There are many different lists of disciplines available with a number of variations. The Openlean website discipline list was selected as this is a key resource that students are directed to within the module materials. However, it is recognized that this discipline listing is fairly arbitrary, and cases can be made for various other discipline listings. An additional category was added for study skills as the module is designed to be studied early in the undergraduate learning journey and possibly used to support moving into further study, therefore it might be expected that these students will particularly benefit for study skills development.

Table 1. Discipline areas listed on the Openlearn website [1]

Money and Business
Education and development
Health, Sports and Psychology
History and the Arts
Languages
Nature and Environment
Science, Maths and Technology
Society, politics and law

2.2 Study motivation

Alongside the study plan students are required to respond to a number of questions including:

- What do you want to achieve by studying this module?

- What are you hoping to achieve in the longer term?

Eight of the 39 scripts were selected for further analysis to discover the extent to which their choice of courses seemed to enable the student to achieve their aims. These eight scripts represented a spread of the number of chosen discipline areas. Two students with four discipline areas were selected, as the proportional spread of their chosen subjects were quite different. No students chose courses from 7 different subject areas.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Learning plans

The learning plans submitted by the students included a wide range of learning resources covering a wide range of topics. Individually the learning plans included the whole range from 1 to 8 discipline areas. The majority of students, 75%, had planned their study hours to be from 1-4 different discipline areas, with only 3 students electing to draw from 6 or more areas.

Figure 2: Number of different discipline areas included in individual student learning plans.
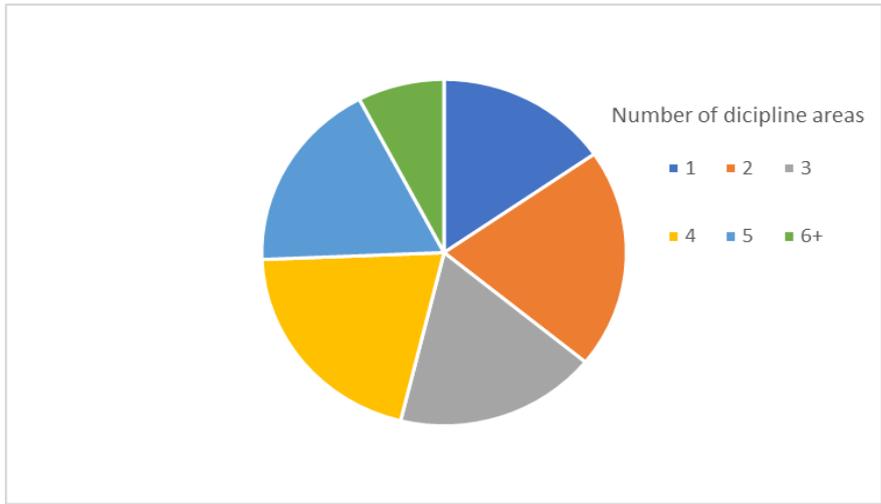
The students who planned to study in 2 discipline areas were consistent in having a major and minor subject having allocated an average of 128 hours, or 85% of their study time, to their main discipline area. Amongst the 15 students studying 3 or 4 disciplines, 8 had a major subject area having allocated at least 90 hours, 60% of study time, to a single discipline. The remaining 7 students had a more even split across the 3 or 4 discipline areas.

Being a level 1 module, first year of undergraduate level study, it is expected that many of the students are new to HE study and so might benefit form including some specific study skills development in their learning plans. However, although 1 student had allocated all 150 hours to study skills, more than half had not planned any specific study skills development in their learning plans.

Figure 3: Number of hours allocated to study skills development
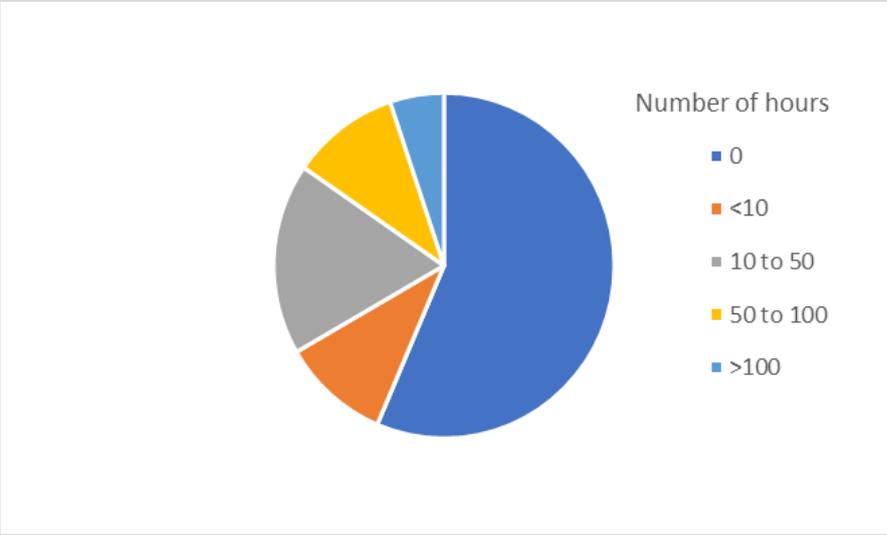
3.2 Study motivation

As stated previously eight students' scripts were chosen for further analysis to examine the extent to which their choice of discipline areas aligned with their stated aims. The scripts selected for this further analysis cover the full range from inclusion of a single discipline area to all 8 discipline areas.

Figure 3 shows the breakdown of hours by discipline for each of the 8 selected students. Where the student planned more than 150 hours of learning the number of hours has been proportionally adjusted to 150 in order to allow comparison between individuals. The actual number of planned learning hours ranged from 150 to 171 for students A-G and 227 hours for student H.

Figure 4: Allocation of planned learning hours by discipline for 8 students (A-H)
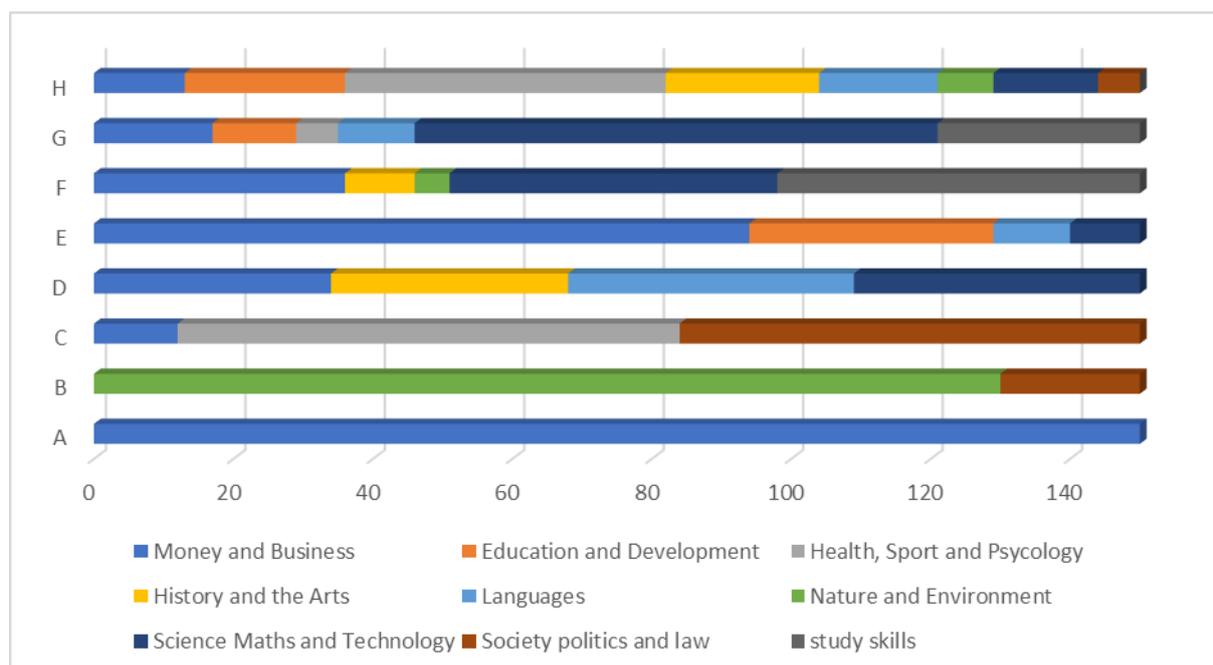
As might be expected, the students selecting learning resources from fewer disciplines had more clearly articulated study goals, however they also identified needs which are not being obviously address through there learning plan. Students A and B both had clear intentions for further study, beyond YXM130, with a specific discipline but both also identified needing to develop study skills. Neither of these students included any specific study skills development within their learning plans.

Student C indicated their study goal is to expand their knowledge 'on a variety of topics under the umbrella of mental health and wellbeing'. Their learning plan appears to address this aim well and having drawn on 3 discipline areas is showing an interdisciplinary approach.

Student D has a fairly even split across four discipline areas. They state an interest in language and the humanities, however their learning plan demonstrates an interest across many subjects. Their aims, both on module and longer term, are around completion of a degree which will then 'open many doors of opportunities for me when it comes to a career or further education (i.e. a Masters)'. This student appears not to have aims related to any particular discipline area but is focused on learning and completing a qualification.

Student E explicitly stated that they were using YXM130 as an opportunity to study across a range of topics to help them plan further studies beyond the module. It is allowing them to have a taster in exploring a range of subjects and gain a small amount credit before committing to a specific qualification pathway. Although they have allocated 95 of their 150 hours to the Money and business discipline, they had selected quite diverse topics within that area. This student's learning plan is multidisciplinary in exploring a range of discrete topics.

Students F and G both express a lack of confidence and a need to develop their study skills in order to progress further in HE. They have both selected a significant amount of specific study skills learning within their plans. Student F describes themselves as having 'many weaknesses' and highlights that they are the first in their family to attend university which is possibly exacerbating their lack of confidence.

Finally, student H has selected learning resources from all 8 of the discipline areas but did not include any specific study skills development. This individual was the only student in the whole 39 student sample to have included more then 6 study areas and it should be noted that their study plan totaled 227 hours, so it is reasonable to assume they might have covered fewer areas if restricted to 150 hours. This student expressed a number of different learning goals wanting to 'help with job prospects' but also expressing a desire to 'study something that is just for me because I enjoy it'. As with

students A and B, student H had a goal to improve their study skills but has not included any specific study skills development within their plan.

4   DISCUSSION

The module appears to have achieved its aim to offer flexible curriculum which caters for a range of different student learning goals and motivations. The diversity of learning plans, which draw in resources from a wide range of topics and disciplines, will provide a significantly varied study experience for the individual students within the cohort, whilst allowing them to complete common assessment tasks in order to gain their formal learning credit. However, from the research so far, it appears that some students are not embracing the interdisciplinary opportunity presented by this module, having selected learning resources from just 1 or 2 discipline areas. Students are encouraged to review and can change their learning plans as they progress through the module so they may branch into other discipline areas once they have engaged with more of the generic material which highlights the benefits of interdisciplinary approaches.

It appears that Students A, B and C, who have the smallest number of discipline areas, have stated aims related to particular subject areas. The courses they have chosen are directly related to the aim they wish to achieve. Students D, E, F, G and H have chosen from a wider range of subjects and their aims are more likely to be around discovering which areas interest them or expanding their knowledge.

An interesting element is our students' approach to study skills. Most students hope to improve their study skills but only two have explicitly chosen study skills courses. It may be that the other students assume the module itself will help them develop these skills, but this perhaps is the most interesting divergence from the students' aim and their course choices.

4.1   Further work

This paper report initial observations of student study goals and plans within the module YXM130. Further work will be carried out throughout the 2019-2020 module presentation to investigate if students make any significant amendments to their study plans and if at the end of the module they feel that their study goals have been achieved.

REFERENCES

[1]   Openlearn, Free Learning from the Open University, Accessed 6 January 2020, Retrieved from https://www.open.edu/openlearn/