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Delivering inclusive and accessible education via a change in pedagogical approach using the student voice: reducing a high failure rate module into a highly successful module

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Abstract

The need to prioritise student engagement through inclusive, student-centred education is increasingly recognised in higher education institutions across the Globe. This study investigates how incorporating the student voice in a UK university can transform a challenging core module within a Business Management degree. Students need to be viewed as customers and be listened to, as they invest significant time and resources into their education. Consequently, the student voice has become crucial as universities globally strive to achieve positive outcomes on national student experience instruments. In the UK, responses on the National Student Survey (NSS) can lead to improved rankings, and reduced attrition rates, which impact revenue. By making proactive changes with students at the heart of decision-making, this study employs a three-stage mixed-methods approach involving secondary data, pre-intervention interviews, and post-intervention focus groups to explore how student feedback informed pedagogical changes in an Accounting and Finance module. The findings highlight the value of co-creation with students, demonstrating that such engagement can enhance academic performance and lead to higher pass rates.

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Introduction

In an era where students are increasingly viewed as customers, their voices have become pivotal in shaping the educational landscape. Universities in the UK are under growing pressure to achieve high National Student Survey (NSS) scores, which is one of the matrices measuring student satisfaction that not only impacts institutional rankings but also influences student retention rates and, consequently, university revenue (Frank et al., 2019). With student feedback being increasingly linked to the quality of higher education, national instruments are utilised by institutions globally for benchmarking (Shah, 2016). We should see students as partners rather than consumers although we advocate creating a strong relationship with them during their learning journey, which will be beneficial for all stakeholders. Given this climate, it is essential to place students at the centre of the decision-making process, by giving them a voice and ensuring that they participate in any changes to pedagogy. Universities need to be proactive rather than reactive and more importantly inclusive and engaging with their students. This approach aligns with the notion that students, as significant stakeholders in their education, warrant active involvement in curriculum design to improve both participation and academic outcomes.

Rationale

This research is informative for all modules from all disciplines, but the researchers focused on a first-year core module in the Business School due to the researchers' experience and subject knowledge. The current study focuses on a first-year Accounting and Finance module, a core component of the Business Management degree programme which had been 'problematic' for some years in terms of attrition and performance. All business students, regardless of any chosen specialisation, commence their academic journey with a uniform first-year core curriculum and this module forms part of this. This inclusive and comprehensive approach ensures that every student acquires an in-depth understanding of business's multifaceted dimensions, recognising the interconnectedness of its various aspects and providing them with a strong foundation (Carini et al., 2006). As such, every student, regardless of academic background, must successfully complete the same modules in the first year to progress to the second year. Accounting and Finance is one such core module, which all first-year students take, whether they are studying Business Studies, International Business, Marketing, Finance, Business Management, or Supply Chain & Logistics. However, in recent years this module has presented major challenges to the students as well as to the teaching team.

These challenges are significant, especially as the module is a mandatory component for all students in the Business School, irrespective of their specific focus. Students often encounter difficulties related to perceived subject relevancy, (*why do I have to study this module?*), culture shock, (*I hate numbers and didn't realise this programme had a finance module so it's a bad surprise*) and applicability (*will I ever use this stuff again?*) are some of the comments received from the focus groups. For staff, teaching this module presents its own challenges; it is considered a relatively 'dry' subject that can be 'heavy' to deliver; troublesome to teach such a diverse group of students who may be numerate or not; hard to create an engaging environment where students' skills are very individual (mixed financial abilities); difficult to adapt the teaching to suit everyone's needs, all compound these issues. Additionally, the large cohort, composed of several hundred students from both the UK and overseas, with many international students being completely new

to the UK Higher Education environment, further complicates the delivery of the module. These challenges frequently impact student progression, as evidenced by poor attendance rates and high failure rates, leading to potential disengagement, deferral, or even withdrawal. Furthermore, students often experience a lack of belonging (Cohen & Viola, 2022), compounded by cultural alienation and particularly overseas students (Al-Zoubi & Abu-Orabi, 2019; Bartram, 2008; De Wit et al., 2017; Kelly & Moogan, 2012; Murray, 2013; Sherry et al., 2010), which can result in misunderstandings about pedagogic assumptions and increased stress and anxiety (Webb & Chaffer, 2016).

Justification of the Methodological Stages

To address these challenges, a three-stage methodological approach was employed to assess how student feedback could drive pedagogical improvements and facilitate a student voice strategy where everyone participates and contributes to positive change. Stage one incorporated secondary data analysis by analysing the last three years of module statistics and reviewing the module student feedback forms. Stage two involved primary research through a small number of one-to-one interviews conducted by one of the researchers. Both stages one and two occurred during the academic year of 2022/2023 and prior to any intervention. These stages were used to provide the context and background to the 'problematic module' due to the suspicions of one of the researchers who chaired the exam boards and noticed a high number of resit students and the low module mean mark over previous years. Since significant issues came to light from stages one and two, the researchers put some interventions in place. For example, splitting the cohort into numerically and non-numerically experienced students via the doubling up of the module, as well as having two lecturers with two very different teaching styles; one more nurturing and one more strategic than the other, in terms of their delivery.

After this intervention, the researchers then decided to move to stage three of the research in order to capture the student voice and review the impact of the interventions. This third stage employed focus groups during the 2023/2024 academic year. Together, all of these data sources contributed to providing insights into how student feedback can inform positive changes in pedagogy, and how the student voice can contribute to improving the learning journey. Hence by applying a mixed methodology that was sequential and longitudinal, the stages are triangulated so enhancing reliability and validity.

Literature

Since the large restructuring of the UK Higher Education sector in the 1990s when the ex-polytechnics gained university status in 1992, institutions have had to treat students more as consumers (Euesden et al., 1990; O'Malley et al., 1997) and become more marketing orientated (Moogan & Baron, 2003). This approach accelerated with the introduction of student fees in 1998 (£1000 pa) and then later with the new system of variable deferred fees and tuition fee loans in 2006 (£3000 pa). However, today with the additional crisis in students' mental health (Lewis & Stiebahl, 2024), the financial pressures they are under (NUS UK, 2024) and the recent disruption in their studies caused by Covid-19 and lecturer union strikes, it is paramount that students have a voice and are treated as partners within the institution so that they can contribute to their learning journeys.

The Student Voice

For over twenty years, the student voice has become increasingly crucial in curriculum development. Taylor and Robinson (2009) stress the notion of power and student empowerment with regards to the student voice but this research is within schools (Robinson & Taylor 2013) and not the HE sector. Recent work by Ashton-Hay and Williams (2023) documents the pedagogical changes made due to the impact of the student voice, with ongoing communication and dialogue with tutors in a university environment. As universities in the UK face growing pressure to achieve high National Student Survey (NSS) scores, which significantly impact institutional rankings ultimately affecting university revenue, this climate has led institutions to place students at the centre of decision-making processes ensuring that changes to pedagogy are proactive, rather than reactive (Matthews & Dollinger, 2022). By positioning students as active stakeholders in their education, and encouraging them to speak out, institutions can foster engagement and enhance academic outcomes. The increasing recognition of the student voice influences classroom decisions, shaping the overall learning journey and extending into debates about assessment strategies and motivational factors associated with self-selected assessments (Hemming & Power, 2021; Jopp & Cohen, 2022; Kahl, 2017; Morris et al., 2019; Rideout, 2018).

Conner (2022) highlights the benefits of incorporating student contributions, noting that this collaboration facilitates positive impacts by empowering students to express their views. However, students may be hesitant to provide feedback due to potential repercussions, especially if their comments are critical. Despite this, research indicates that sharing information and collaborating with students can significantly promote engagement and increase retention when students feel part of the decision-making process and comfortable expressing their thoughts (Cook-Sather, 2018; Ashton-Hay & Williams, 2023). Engaging students in this way is essential to refine curriculum approaches, particularly for challenging subjects like Accounting and Finance, which often involve complex, theoretical content. This approach not only helps students to grasp essential concepts but also ensures they can relate theories to practical, real-world applications, enhancing their learning journey (Broadbent & Poon, 2015).

Students as Partners

In the UK, the adoption of a consumer-oriented model in higher education is closely tied to the transition from UK government grants to student loans, which has led to students investing more personal resources in their education (Office for Students, 2023). However, this phenomenon is not limited to only one state, with universities in many developed countries recognising students' increasingly transactional perspective toward their education (Shah, 2016). Viewing students as consumers grants them the right to express their opinions on the educational experience, reinforcing the importance of the student voice in shaping curriculum and teaching strategies (Watjatrakul, 2014; Woodhall et al., 2012). While this model supports the idea that students should influence curriculum design, it has also sparked debate. Critics argue that prioritising consumer satisfaction may compromise academic integrity and dilute the focus on intellectual development (Bunce, Baird, & Jones, 2017). Indeed, research indicates that students who adopt a consumer mindset may experience poorer academic outcomes compared to those who see themselves as collaborative learners (Poropat, 2009; Richardson et al., 2012). Nevertheless, the shift towards a consumer-oriented model has encouraged universities to deliver high-value educational experiences that justify students' financial investments. Treating students as partners and by

fostering a positive student experience through inclusive decision-making and effective support mechanisms, universities can support student retention and academic success (Canning, 2017). It is therefore essential for institutions to find a balance between consumer expectations and the collaborative, students-as-partners approach that promotes deeper engagement and ownership of learning. Therefore, students as partners should be embedded in all areas including curriculum, module design, assessment strategy, and delivery methods in order to establish an inclusive pedagogy.

Relationships

There is a growing consensus that students should be more than just participants in their education; they should be active co-creators and partners in the relationship particularly on a longitudinal basis. Smith and Worsfold (2013) discuss the students' feedback on placement modules which impact on the design and quality of the student experience. Likewise, Bovill et al. (2011) advocate for the involvement of students in curriculum design, especially when new modules or programmes are introduced. Co-creation can significantly enhance both engagement and academic outcomes, particularly in fields such as Business Management, where the content must remain relevant to contemporary professional practices (Bovill & Woolmer, 2019). Despite potential resistance to change from both faculty and students, co-creation fosters an adaptable curriculum that responds to both external forces, such as global disruptions, and internal pressures, including student expectations regarding tuition fees and value for money (Millican, 2014).

The distinction between student partnership and representation is essential in this context. While student representation often serves as a form of quality control, student partnership repositions students as active contributors to the learning process. Matthews and Dollinger (2023) stress the importance of establishing continuous dialogue between students and faculty, promoting an environment where students feel empowered to provide feedback that can inform meaningful change. This collaborative approach aligns with the student-as-partner model, which encourages students to view themselves as stakeholders in the academic process, working alongside educators to shape the educational experience. Consequently, the students are part of the decision-making processes and embedded within this working relationship. Therefore, students must not be made to feel frustrated or confused with their studies for they must be able to express their opinions and provide their feedback candidly and openly.

Student Shock

Core business modules, such as Accounting and Finance on level 4 of the Business Management programme, can pose unique challenges. Students from diverse backgrounds and with varied interests must engage with content that may seem dry or irrelevant to their career aspirations. Furthermore, it can also be a culture shock when students, particularly international students, arrive at university and have to adapt to a very different learning style to one they have been used to (Kelly & Moogan, 2012; Oberg 1960). Universities can often struggle with disengagement, high failure rates, and low attendance, during a first-year programme of study which can impact progression to subsequent years. This is particularly true when students do not understand the rationale for studying certain modules and the importance of successfully completing core modules in order to stay on their programme. In addition, it is crucial students know all about the

assessment process (Slee, 2010) and do not feel marginalised (Bruch et al., 2007) which is why student feedback is of importance. Furthermore, the diversity in students' numeracy skills and the large cohort sizes typical in such modules create additional difficulties for both educators and learners (Webb & Chaffer, 2016). Evidence shows that when student feedback highlights relevancy of the subject area in core business modules, the learning experience can be enhanced for the content is relatable and connected to real-world applications. By linking theoretical concepts to practical scenarios, students gain a better understanding of how these principles operate in business contexts, which can improve comprehension and allow educators to identify areas needing further support. Establishing a safe learning environment where students feel comfortable sharing their perspectives can build their confidence, promoting a sense of belonging and inclusivity (Broadbent & Poon, 2015).

Consequently, this culture shock can be reduced if students are involved in creating an innovative pedagogy that suits UK and non-UK students, especially in relation to assessment. As Kelly and Moogan (2012) state, "the programme of study must consider how the assessment strategy is established so making it fair and equal for all" (p. 26).

Inclusive Pedagogy

Inclusive pedagogy, which incorporates the student voice and considers diverse learning styles, is a key strategy for improving engagement in higher education. Differentiated instruction, as described by Tomlinson (2014), involves adapting teaching methods to accommodate students' varied abilities, backgrounds, and interests. In the context of an Accounting and Finance module, differentiation can include providing additional numeracy support for less confident students and incorporating practical examples for those who struggle with abstract theory. Peer-assisted learning is another effective technique, fostering collaborative learning among students and helping to create an environment that values diverse perspectives (Topping, 2005).

Formative assessment is particularly valuable for promoting engagement in an inclusive setting, as it offers students regular feedback and the opportunity to reflect on their learning. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) highlight the role of formative assessment in fostering self-regulation, enabling students to actively monitor their progress and adjust their learning strategies as needed. This approach is beneficial for students who may feel overwhelmed by the pace or complexity of a core business module, as it allows them to build confidence and resilience in a supportive environment. Again, removing the 'culture shock' can aid the effectiveness of learning and aid retention. By implementing formative assessment alongside differentiated instruction, educators can create a learning experience that is both accessible and challenging, promoting higher levels of student engagement and success.

The literature underscores the pivotal role of the student voice in shaping curriculum and pedagogical practices in higher education. By viewing students as partners and incorporating their perspectives into decision-making, universities can create a more inclusive, responsive, and dynamic educational environment. While the student-as-consumer model has sparked debate, it underscores the need for universities to provide a high-value educational experience that justifies students' financial investments. This study builds on existing research by exploring how feedback from students can inform pedagogical changes, fostering an environment where students are active participants in their learning journeys.

Methodology

The research employed a three-stage sequential mixed-methods approach (Brewer & Hunter, 1990), leveraging the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to achieve distinct but complementary objectives. Quantitative analyses were utilised to uncover patterns in student engagement and performance, while qualitative methods provided a detailed exploration of students' lived experiences, first as individuals and later within a focus group setting. This approach facilitated a comprehensive examination of how student feedback could inform the development of a more effective and inclusive module design. This trilateral methodological framework integrated the benefits of both qualitative and quantitative data collection, enabling the researchers to identify and address specific challenges holistically by combining the breadth of insights afforded by quantitative data with the depth of qualitative accounts.

In 2021, the researchers identified significant issues with the core Accounting and Finance module, including a high failure rate and notable student disengagement. These challenges adversely affected student progression to subsequent academic years. Many students struggled to pass the module or chose to leave the programme altogether, often citing fatigue and a lack of interest. Such disengagement appeared to stem from perceptions of the module's irrelevance and a broader misunderstanding of its significance within the overall degree structure.

The methodology began with **Stage One** analysing secondary data from previous cohorts' exam results, module feedback scoring forms and retention data. Data from two academic years (2021/22 and 2022/23) were examined to ensure no year presented as an outlier. This analysis, which compared the current data against previous cohort data (pre-2021), highlighted a consistent pattern of underperformance among students, reinforcing the need for an intervention to address these issues. All weekly attendance registers were checked by the module leader and the module website was reviewed regularly by the module leader for an overview of the levels of engagement. For example, attendance data was manually recorded during all workshops, with students using swipe cards for lecture registration.

Stage Two Primary Research utilised interviews involving informal discussions conducted in December 2022 with three student representatives, pragmatically selected by the module leader due to her familiarity with the cohort. Although the selection method was practical, efforts were made to ensure the representatives provided a range of perspectives. These discussions, held after the semester ended, proved critical in identifying specific needs within the student body, particularly the necessity for differentiated support to address the diverse numeracy backgrounds present in the group.

The feedback emphasised the need for more personalised teaching strategies to accommodate varying levels of numeracy skills within the cohort. Students participating in this phase were treated as co-researchers, actively contributing to decision-making processes and collaborating with researchers to shape the subsequent implementation. This participatory approach reflects the distinction noted by Matthews and Dollinger (2022), who differentiate between students as collaborators and mere representatives, ensuring meaningful engagement in research design and execution.

In line with the findings from these discussions, the next cohort (September 2023) was split into two groups based on students' educational backgrounds (e.g., A-Levels, BTECs, and T-Levels). This segmentation allowed for tailored instruction to better meet the diverse needs of the students. Two lecturers were assigned to teach these groups, enabling differentiated approaches to teaching. The numerate group progressed more quickly, engaging with complex tasks, while the non-numerate group moved at a more gradual pace to ensure they understood foundational concepts and theories before advancing.

To foster collaboration and peer learning, a 'buddying' system was introduced during tutorials, pairing numerate students with non-numerate peers. This structure encouraged interaction within a supportive, small-group environment, promoting collective problem-solving and knowledge-sharing. Such an approach aligns with Broadbent and Poon (2015), who underscore the effectiveness of peer learning in enhancing academic outcomes and building inclusive classroom dynamics.

Additionally, the co-created nature of this process ensured that students were aware of and aligned with the research objectives. Themes emerging from the discussions informed the creation of targeted strategies and further research design. This transparent and collaborative approach, as advocated by Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bovill (2023), reinforced the shared ownership of the research outcomes, aligning teaching practices more closely with student needs.

In **Stage Three** Primary Research - Focus Groups, following the pedagogical adjustments in the academic year 2023/2024, focus groups were conducted to assess the effectiveness of these interventions. The selection of these students was made by the programme director who invited all students to participate, both student representatives as well as non-student representatives from the 'numerate' and 'non-numerate' groups. Hence it was decided to hold two separate focus groups.

The focus groups conducted during Stage Three allowed for 'rich' discussions with students providing an in-depth look at their learning environments and engagement with the module. By categorising the focus groups based on the instructional groupings, the researchers were able to examine the impact of the differentiated lectures more closely and gather detailed student feedback on their learning experiences. These conversations were recorded to encourage open and honest dialogue, allowing students to suggest further improvements for the next academic year (2024/25). The insights gained from these focus groups underscored the importance of creating a module that is both engaging and adaptable, meeting the varied needs of students and enhancing their overall educational outcomes. Ethical approval was obtained for all stages of this research and participants' confidentiality maintained throughout this longitudinal data collection period.

Results - *Secondary data analysis*

With 270 students enrolled in 2022-23 and 264 in 2023-24, the data indicated a significant improvement in the module's pass rate, rising from 47% in 2022/23 to 80% in 2023/24, as shown in Table 1 below. These results suggest that the restructuring of the module, combined with differentiated learning strategies, positively impacted students' success rates. The failure rate dropped considerably, and more students achieved higher awards compared to the previous year.

Table 1

Improvement in Grades and Pass Rates, 2022-23 to 2023-24

Grade	2022-23	2023-24
	%	%
1st	15	23
2:1	11	18
2:2	10	21
3rd	12	18
Fail (Pass)	53 (47%)	20 (80%)

Primary data analysis

In **Stage Two** of the research (*pre-intervention*), students expressed frustration with the pace of lectures, which they felt did not adequately accommodate the varying levels of numeracy skills within the cohort. However, there was a difference of opinion in how this was manifested. One student reported difficulty in keeping up with lectures that moved too quickly through complex material, while two other students found the content repetitive, basic and boring as well as too similar to their previous studies in business or mathematics-related courses from their 'A' levels. Nevertheless, all three students reported issues about relevancy, for the numerate students had studied this content before whilst the non-numerate students did not understand why they had to do a financial module on a non-financial degree programme. This feedback laid the foundation for the intervention's focus on differentiated learning approaches. Some of the students' comments are as follows:

Student A: *I thought it would be a lot more difficult… but it's the stuff I've already learnt, not sure why I have to repeat this kind of thing*.

Another elaborated:

Student B: *I thought it would be harder because at the start I was writing everything down, even though the majority of it I already knew.*

This sense of familiarity appeared to contribute to procrastination and disengagement, with students indicating that they sometimes found it challenging to stay focused during lectures. One student openly admitted:

Student B: *It's hard to not go on your phone or something.*

However, these sentiments were not shared by all; one felt overwhelmed by the amount and type of information they were expected to learn:

Student C: *I'm just not good at Maths…I can't do all the numbers stuff, it's too much*.

In **Stage Three** post-intervention, focus groups allowed triangulation with the secondary data acquired that highlighted a significant increase in grade and pass rates following the intervention of the previous year.

Numerate group findings

The discussions with the numerate group revealed several key positive themes, including the perception of course difficulty, familiarity with the content and the use of real-world applications, with students expressing a marked increase in engagement. They also noted that linking theoretical concepts to practical scenarios significantly enhanced their understanding and levels of interest making it more enjoyable.

One student reflected:

Student D: *You have to link it to something real, like hyperinflation in a country, then it makes sense.*

Another student concurred:

Student E: *When you talk about world culture… it clicks like that*.

In addition, the numerate group expressed satisfaction with the tutor's teaching, highlighting that clear communication in terms of the tutor's pitch and delivery using live examples to illustrate the complexities of financial recording was appropriate. Comments were also made about the tutor's responsiveness and engagement if they had any queries about the lecture and this supported their learning:

Student F: *I've been emailing him (the tutor) about questions… he's been responsive, and I've understood the replies*.

However, perhaps the most significant insight was provided by one student when discussing how the content and curriculum delivery related to their previous studies:

Student G: …*I've done it before (Business Studies) but this is different…I like it.*

These findings suggest that through the intervention's use of real-world current examples and case studies, numerate-group students were more embedded in their learning journey. Despite some having prior knowledge, analysis of the focus group transcript indicated that having more customised content stimulated their interest for they understood the rationale for studying this module.

Non-numerate group findings

The non-numerate group's focus group revealed a different perspective, with students generally expressing appreciation for the slower, more structured pace of the revised lectures. The students were not afraid to ask the lecturer to repeat herself if they did not understand the calculations and she made sure the basics of finance were understood before moving on to the next topic. Students reported that the division between numerate and non-numerate students in the lecture setting had been beneficial, allowing them to engage with the material at a more accessible level. One student reflected on this:

Student H: *The lectures are going ok—it's not too slow but it's steady as the tutor goes through the basics in a structured way*.

However, in the small tutorials, non-numerate students were mixed with numerate students so that peer learning could take place. Student H went on to say: …*but the tutorial class is hard*

although we are mixed with students who have studied this topic before…so they help us with the exercises.

Having tutorials that are diverse and inclusive is an excellent way of enhancing the learning experience for everyone (Carroll, 2008; Summers & Volet, 2008).

Another student noted the benefits of the buddying system, which enabled peer learning:

Student I: *I find that students are similar to me and get confused at the same places in the lecture but in the smaller classes it is good to put the stuff from the lecture into practice and to sit with students who have studied this subject before so it helps us*.

This feedback highlights the positive impact of peer-assisted learning, which allows students to work collaboratively through case studies and practical exercises. Caruana & Ploner (2010) refer to the benefits of a buddying system, particularly for international students who are new to higher education. The non-numerate students indicated that working in smaller groups helped to build their confidence, making it easier to grasp challenging concepts, especially when there was a 'numerate' peer in their tutorial group. Further, the integration of online materials, including lecture recordings, was also appreciated by non-numerate students, who valued the ability to revisit content at their own pace.

Student J stated: *The lectures can be daunting but as they are recorded we can listen again and pause to repeat*.

Students also pointed out the importance of readily available resources, such as lecture slides and module guides, with reading lists and examples of financial computations which served as reference points for reviewing material outside of class. A student noted:

Student K: *I find some topics are complicated but I can go back to my notes and the slides and also ask the tutor to repeat certain bits in the lecture and in the tutorial*.

These responses emphasise the importance of providing non-numerate students with a clear, structured learning environment supported by robust online materials which they can access freely and flexibly. Additionally, the non-numerate group's feedback underscored the value of the tutor's attentiveness to 'student signals,' recognising when to intervene with additional explanations or guidance. This approach aligns with formative assessment practices, which help students build self-regulation skills by offering consistent, meaningful feedback on their progress (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

The role of student voice in enhancing engagement

Overall, the findings demonstrate that viewing students as essential contributors to curriculum design fosters a more inclusive and dynamic learning environment. The changes implemented in the Accounting and Finance module—such as peer-assisted learning, lectures being differentiated according to students' prior knowledge and smaller, mixed tutorial groups—addressed students' diverse needs making the material more relevant and engaging. This shift towards co-creation underscores the value of incorporating the student voice in pedagogical decisions, not only enhancing engagement but also aligning with students' expectations of a modern, responsive university experience where they feel heard and valued. Knowing that they are being listened to and that their contributions are having impact, is what being the student

partner is all about. This student voice is a crucial element of the NSS data collection; for example, question 22: “Do you get opportunities to give feedback on your course”? and question 24: “How clear is it that student feedback on the course is acted upon”?

Furthermore, the module’s emphasis on formative assessment practices aligns with Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick’s (2006) principles of good feedback, supporting students’ active engagement in their learning journeys. The positive response from both numerate and non-numerate groups following these changes highlights the importance of considering students as key stakeholders in the educational process and active partners in that relationship.

Addressing retention and progression through student-centred approaches

The intervention also appears to have positively impacted retention rates, in addition to module grades and pass rates—a critical outcome given the high attrition previously associated with this module. By adopting a proactive, student-centred approach to pedagogy, the module became more accessible and enjoyable for students, both numerate and non-numerate cohorts. This outcome aligns with existing research on the student-as-consumer model, which suggests that when students perceive their investment as respected and valued, they are more likely to remain committed to their studies, reducing attrition and enhancing satisfaction (Bovill et al., 2011).

Discussion

The current study undertook an in-depth investigation into the role of student feedback in the design and delivery of a first year Accounting and Finance core module within the uniform core curriculum of the Business and Management degree programme over a period of four years. Through a combination of secondary data analysis, student feedback meetings, one to one interviews and focus group interviews, this research aimed to explore how students’ input could be systematically integrated to enhance the module's delivery and structure. By foregrounding the student perspective, the study identified ways to refine the module to better accommodate diverse learning needs, in line with the literature on student-centered pedagogical approaches (Bovill, 2020).

Initial discussions with student representatives in 2022 revealed several learning barriers, which secondary data analysis corroborated. These insights informed the implementation of a targeted intervention, which involved dividing the student cohort into two groups with tailored lecture styles. One group experienced a faster-paced lecture format, incorporating advanced examples and deeper analysis, while the second group followed a slower pace with interactive elements, simplified examples, and more frequent opportunities for questions and clarifications. Both groups, however, participated in collaborative workshops, mixing numerate and non-numerate students to foster peer learning. All students completed the same assessment. Additional support structures, such as a buddying system, were also introduced to assist non-numerate students and encourage cooperative learning whereby peer learning is facilitated (Fewster-Young & Corcoran, 2023).

The primary data indicated that non-numerate students, in particular, benefitted from peer support, highlighting the value of peer-assisted learning for overcoming barriers (Lorenzetti et al., 2019). For instance, integrating international students with home students enriched the classroom environment, adding a dimension of cultural diversity and enhancing peer knowledge exchange.

Research suggests that such interactions are associated with a range of educational benefits, especially when staff facilitate and support collaborative activities (Caruana & Ploner, 2010, Eisenchlas & Trevaskes 2007, Quintrell & Westwood, 1994). The findings point towards the potential of further subdividing students into smaller, more targeted groups to reduce frustration and disengagement, especially for those with varying levels of prior knowledge. This aligns with feedback from students who expressed that the material was often repetitive and insufficiently challenging, underscoring the need for tailored approaches that consider the diverse backgrounds of learners (Bovill & Woolmer, 2019).

The success of the mixed-ability workshops and positive responses from non-numerate students emphasise the importance of creating an inclusive, interactive learning environment that caters to diverse preferences and supports peer learning. (Kelly, 2009; Rose & Bylander, 2007) This aligns with pedagogical literature on the benefits of differentiated instruction and adaptive teaching methodologies, which are shown to enhance academic outcomes and improve satisfaction by addressing specific needs within diverse student populations (Bovill & Woolmer, 2019; Ryan, 2008). However, numerate students expressed a desire for greater autonomy in the workshops, preferring increased control over content composition and delivery. While the adaptations introduced were largely beneficial, attendance for both groups fell slightly below initial expectations, which may be attributed to early morning scheduling, the availability of recorded lectures, and non-mandatory attendance policies at the university. Although flexible access to recorded sessions is generally perceived as beneficial, the impact of such resources on student engagement requires further investigation and the researchers plan to conduct work in this area. Many students reported finding remote access useful but viewed in-person workshops as more essential, as evidenced by higher attendance in these interactive tutorial settings. This trend supports research advocating for active, hands-on learning environments over traditional lecture formats in promoting engagement.

The student feedback gathered throughout the study has informed a series of pedagogical adjustments. By adapting teaching styles and enhancing content relevance, the intervention addressed many of the challenges identified by students, aligning with broader educational research advocating for student-centered approaches to improve outcomes and satisfaction. Young and Jerome (2020) discuss the importance of a ‘feedback loop’ in elevating the student voice, noting that institutional politics and management structures can sometimes impede its effectiveness. Establishing a feedback loop that integrates student perspectives into teaching practices supports the notion that education is a collaborative process with relationships being the key component of this. This approach aligns with research suggesting that involving students in curriculum design enhances motivation, assessment literacy, and engagement (Deeley & Bovill, 2017) and is beneficial for all stakeholders (Ashton-Hay & Williams, 2023). Through such collaboration, educators can cultivate a more effective, responsive learning environment that actively engages students as co-creators, transforming the traditional educational model. Brooman et al. (2015) similarly argue that curriculum development incorporating student input adds relevance, creating a more effective learning environment tailored to students’ needs.

The findings of this study echo the conclusions of existing research on the impact of student voice on curriculum development. Deeley and Bovill (2017) emphasise that student involvement in co-creating classroom practices significantly improves motivation and assessment literacy. Lubicz-

Nawrocka and Bovill (2023) further observe that while co-creation presents risks and challenges, it can be transformative for students, allowing them to question established practices and adopt new perspectives. This study's findings align with these insights, revealing notable improvements in pass rates and engagement following the intervention. Increased participation also facilitated the development of students' academic identities, consistent with the observations of Bergmark and Westman (2016). Like Tomlinson (2017), this study suggests that tutors who remain open to student perspectives contribute to the development of students as more than mere consumers, but as key partners in a working relationship that fosters deeper engagement and a more meaningful academic experience.

This study highlights the positive impact of incorporating student feedback in curriculum development, demonstrating how such insights refined the Accounting and Finance core module to enhance relevance and engagement. A student-centered approach to course design fosters inclusive, responsive learning environments aligned with students' diverse needs, improving academic outcomes and satisfaction. This method supports the overarching goals of higher education in promoting lifelong learning and intellectual growth.

Conclusion

Hibbert and Foster (2022) suggest four strategies for sustainability in Business Schools: institutional quality, elite branding, creativity, and expert pedagogy. This study underscores the value of creativity and pedagogical expertise, particularly within a challenging first year core module that is compulsory for all students in the Business School. A programme shaped by contributions from all stakeholders, especially where students become partners, is better positioned for success, through enhancing programme quality and strengthening institutional branding. By involving student voices in this constructive manner and creating a strong working relationship, this benefits all stakeholders and keeps the curriculum relevant until the next review.

Findings show that treating students as vital contributors to curriculum design fosters an inclusive and dynamic learning environment. Adjustments to the Accounting and Finance module, such as peer-assisted learning and differentiated instruction, addressed diverse student needs and improved relevance, underscoring the value of co-creation in curriculum decisions.

Further, the module's emphasis on formative assessment aligns with Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's (2006) principles of effective feedback, so promoting student engagement and self-regulation skills, resulting in deeper material comprehension. This approach aligns with a shift towards student-centered models in higher education, highlighting students as stakeholders in their education and active working partners.

This sequential mixed-methods study also indicated a positive impact on retention rates—a significant improvement given the module's historically high attrition rate. Centering curriculum development on student feedback made the module more accessible, aligning with the student-as-consumer model, which suggests that students who feel their investments are respected show greater commitment, reducing attrition (Bovill et al., 2011).

In summary, this study demonstrates that inclusive, student-centered education significantly boosts engagement and performance, especially in core modules with diverse student needs. By involving students as partners in learning and incorporating their feedback, universities foster

environments that support engagement and success. The positive outcomes in the Accounting and Finance module underscore the value of student voice in enhancing pedagogy, serving as a model for other programmes. Future research could extend these findings across disciplines, assessing the long-term impact on retention and success, particularly in regards to post graduate international students.

Further studies might examine the roles of peer learning, group assessment and differentiated instruction in student satisfaction and performance, offering insights into effective teaching strategies. By adapting in response to student needs, higher education institutions can meet diverse requirements, fostering continuous improvement and educational excellence.

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