Dedicated academic transition modules

Whilst our advice is that student learning is best supported within mainstream academic modules, some programmes still feel it necessary to run dedicated modules to support academic transition. Such modules can be effective, provided they are not experienced as ‘bolted-on’ to the programme but rather as fully integrated components, relevant to the programme as a whole. The same argument can be made around support for the development of digital literacies; students need the opportunity to explore how ways of using software are meaningful in the context of their discipline. The following activities are designed to help teachers and module conveners evaluate and develop their current approaches to such modules, beginning with the question of whether dedicated modules really are the only and/or best option.

Questions for lecturers and conveners of dedicated transition modules

**Preliminary questions**

1) Why do you have a dedicated module to support student learning in the first place?

2) How do you draw links between the ability to operate software and an understanding of the how it can be used to achieve an academic goal?

3) What does the module set out to support students in being able to do, that the mainstream content-based modules would not be better placed and/or able to do and why?

4) How, in your experience, do students tend to engage with the module?

**Assuming you want to keep the module**

5) How and in what direct and explicit ways does the module support students’ engagement with content-based modules?
   - How does it reference the knowledge developed, themes discussed etc. in these content-based modules?
   - How does it support, directly, students’ engagement in the assessment tasks (and accompanying feedback) for content-based modules?

6) How is the module taught and/or assessed and what is the rationale for this?
   - What is the balance between instructional approaches and more practical/experiential approaches and what are the pedagogical bases for this balance?
   - Is assessment of the module ‘stand-alone’ or is it linked to/integrated with assessments students are undertaking on other ‘content-based’ modules? Why is this? What is it assumed/desired the assessment of the module will help students to learn?

7) What digital practices should students be developing in order to participate fully and effectively in their academic discipline? How are these practices built into assessment tasks? How are they supported and discussed?
8) How do the experiences, insights and expertise of more senior students on the programme inform and support the design, content, development, delivery, evaluation etc. of the transition module?
   - How do more senior students share their experience of learning in a digital environment with their lecturers and with newer students?

9) What role do teachers and conveners of the module play in the design, content, development, delivery, evaluation etc. of the content-based modules the transition module is designed to support students’ engagement with?

Questions for teachers and conveners of content-based modules

1) How familiar are you with the aims, content, structure, assessment etc. of the dedicated transition module for the programme you teach on?

2) How and in what ways do you believe the module supports student engagement in your content-based module?

3) How and in what ways are references and links drawn between your module and the dedicated transition module?

4) How do the assessment tasks students have to produce for your module, and the feedback you provide for these, relate to and support students’ engagement with the aims and themes of the dedicated transition module?

5) What digital practices should students be developing in order engage with your module? How are these could be further supported on the dedicated transition module?

6) What role do teachers and conveners of content-based modules play in the design, content, development and delivery of the dedicated transition module?
Discussion and planning activities for teachers and conveners of all first year modules.

The following activities are designed to help first year programme teams map the inter-relationships between the dedicated module and the content-based modules. We also strongly advise that, where possible, student representatives from the programme are involved in some or all of these activities.

1) Divide into two groups: a content-based module group and a transition module group.

2) Give each group 10-15 mins. to discuss the following question: ‘In what ways could the other group’s module(s) help support students’ engagement with the content, academic and digital practices and assessment of your module(s)?’

3) As each group reports back, make a note of any particular themes, convergences, tensions etc. that emerge. These can provide a reference point for the later exercises.

4) On a large table, lay out parallel sheets of paper (e.g. wall-paper liner or sheets of flip chart paper taped together) big enough to map the modules that students are studying

E.g.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content-based module</th>
<th>Week 1, Week 2, Week 3...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transition module</td>
<td>Week 1, Week 2, Week 3...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content-based module</td>
<td>Week 1, Week 2, Week 3...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5) For the content-based modules:
   a) note the academic literacy practices and digital practices that students are required to develop in order to engage effectively with the module and its assessments; and
   b) draw a week-by-week timeline for the modules noting key assessment and feedback points (including the methods by which students are assessed).

6) Next, for the transition module:
   a) note the academic literacy practices and digital practices that the module currently seeks to help students develop and how far this aligns with those identified for the content-based modules in 5(a);
   b) consider and note any changes and adjustments in content and focus that may need to be made in light of (a);
   c) draw a week-by-week timeline and note how and when the module supports students’ engagement in the assessment and feedback points identified in 5(b).
7) **Taking stock.** Based on the discussions so far, produce summary answers to the following questions:

   a) What needs to change to ensure greater alignment between the academic literacy practices and digital practices required to engage with content-based modules and those addressed in the transition module?
   
   b) What needs to change to ensure the transition module supports, in a timely and relevant way, the assessment and feedback activities of the content-based modules?
   
   c) What needs to change to ensure the content and activities

8) **Narrating the process to students.** This exercise is designed to ‘test’ the coherence and sense of the whole process discussed above, from the point of view of those students it is designed to support. It can be done as an imaginary exercise, but for obvious reasons, it is far better to do it with an actual audience of students from the programme!

So, with a student audience in mind, produce a narrative (illuminated by examples) that addresses the following questions:

   a) how the transition module supports students with the content-based modules the students will be studying
   
   b) how the transition module supports the assessment tasks students will be required to undertake for the content-based modules
   
   c) how the content-based modules help students to build on and develop the academic literacy practices discussed in the transition module

If narrating this to a student audience ask them to provide feedback and questions based on their experiences of transition and previous approaches to supporting them. If a student audience is unavailable, perhaps ask colleagues to act as ‘critical friends’, providing you questions and feedback to consider.

**Working with students to review and develop practice**

In addition to contributing to the discussions and exercises outlined in the previous exercise, there are a number of ways in which the insights and experiences of students on the programme can further inform the development of support for academic transition. These include the following:

- students providing feedback on how they experienced the dedicated transition module and how effectively or otherwise they felt it supported their own transitions to HE, including their experience of digital practices around study
- staff and students working together to review and develop the content and structure of the dedicated module as well as well as its integration with, and relevance to, content-based modules
- more senior students contributing to the dedicated module, sharing their insights and experiences (Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL))
- staff and students co-designing relevant resources to help those newer to HE-level study (e.g. through the Digital Innovation Partnership or Learning Associates).