LevelUp@GRE Pilot Final Report May 2020

Executive Summary

The LevelUp module ran as a pilot in the academic year 2019-2020. It was created to help students to develop academic, information literacy and digital skills as they transition into their first year of higher education. At the end of the project, there were over 700 students enrolled from across the university. Student feedback on their experience and the value they place on LevelUp has been positive. Staff who have engaged with the project mainly agree that the project has been successful, however they have recommendations for improving the course.

It was agreed at the interim stage in January 2020 that the project would be refined and delivered at the next academic year. The second iteration of the project will see three discreet levels, differentiated for Level 3, Level 4, and Level 5-plus. Building on continued research and recommendations from LQSC, the project will be guided by a consultation group with representation from the faculties. Data analysis show patterns of behaviour and student preferences as they engaged with the module. This information is being used to develop the next phase of the project.

As the university prepares to deliver more student support online due to social distancing requirements, LevelUp presents an ideal way to continue supporting students as they develop their academic skills. An increase in usage over the exam period and during the lockdown indicate that students value the resource and recognise its usefulness. This pilot has provided valuable data, experience and feedback in order to build and improve the module for the year ahead.

Sharon Perera 22 May 2020

Background and rationale for LevelUp

The project was initiated by research into student non-continuation rates which showed that students arriving with BTEC and mixed pre-entry qualifications were up to three times more likely to fail in their first year and twice more likely to drop out, than their peers with A Level qualifications (PAS13, 2017-18). Additionally, the report showed that typically, students with BTEC and mixed qualifications came from BAME and WP backgrounds. Research also showed that study skills initiatives have successfully improved student progression rates in other universities (What Works, 2017). A paper was presented to LQSC in May 2019 proposing that a study skills module should be offered to all new students arriving to university. The LevelUp module was developed as a pilot project and launched in August 2019.

Module launch

Students were invited to enrol in August as soon as they received their username and password. They logged in to the portal and were invited to self-enrol. Following best practice from other successful projects at other universities, the main themes of the module were:

i.   A good start to university
ii. A sense of belonging
iii. Academic success

The start of the module presented students with a range of fun and informative activities to participate in. Badges and gamification were used to motivate and encourage participation. The module was complemented by workshops and tutorials delivered by the Academic Support Team. Within the faculties, LevelUp was used by personal tutors, embedded in the curriculum or absorbed into existing skills modules such as PPD (FBUS) and PDP(FES). The recorded usage below pertains to students using LevelUp on Moodle alone.

LevelUp Student Reporting								
Faculty	Department	October	November	December	January	February	March	April
FEHHS	Education	38	40	71	68	77	78	60
	Health Sciences	32	38	56	52	69	66	44
	Human Sciences	55	64	67	58	73	75	53
	Family Care & Mental Health	1						
FLAS	Design	46	50	45	40	48	48	28
	Humanities & Social Sciences	21	30	24	21	28	29	19
	Computing & Mathematical Sci.	70	76	74	76	82	82	64
	Law & Criminology	33	36	33	33	37	37	27
FBUS	Accounting and Finance	33	36	36	38	46	46	31
	Marketing Events and Tourism	48	55	54	47	60	60	45
	Human Res & Organisational Beh	20	21	22	22	30	32	17
	Systems Management & Strategy	21	21	22	17	23	23	18
	International Bus & Economics	36	38	38	38	40	71	30
FES	Medway School of Pharmacy	7	7	7	5	7	7	5
	Science	29	29	32	30	42	44	23
	Engineering	33	39	41	38	45	45	29
	Natural Resources Institute	3	3	3	2	3	3	1
FES	Various departments							230
	Students total	526	583	625	585	710	746	724

Figure 1: Student numbers across the faculties in October 2019 – April 2020

Student Numbers

New students enrolling on LevelUp followed an upward trend month on month. There are two periods when a fall in numbers was observed; in January 2020 and April 2020. The drop in January may be accounted for by student withdrawals in December '19. The drop in April numbers is yet

Sharon Perera 22 May 2020

unexplained, although it may be attributed to FES students pursuing optional modules in other departments. (see yellow highlight in figure 1).

Student Participation

Students were active at the start of the academic year charting an upward trend from the launch of the module in August until October, with a slight peak in December 2019, possibly due to Christmas break. Activity dwindled in January but increased in February, with a spike in March which may be explained by the lockdown, but also possibly because of exam revisions.
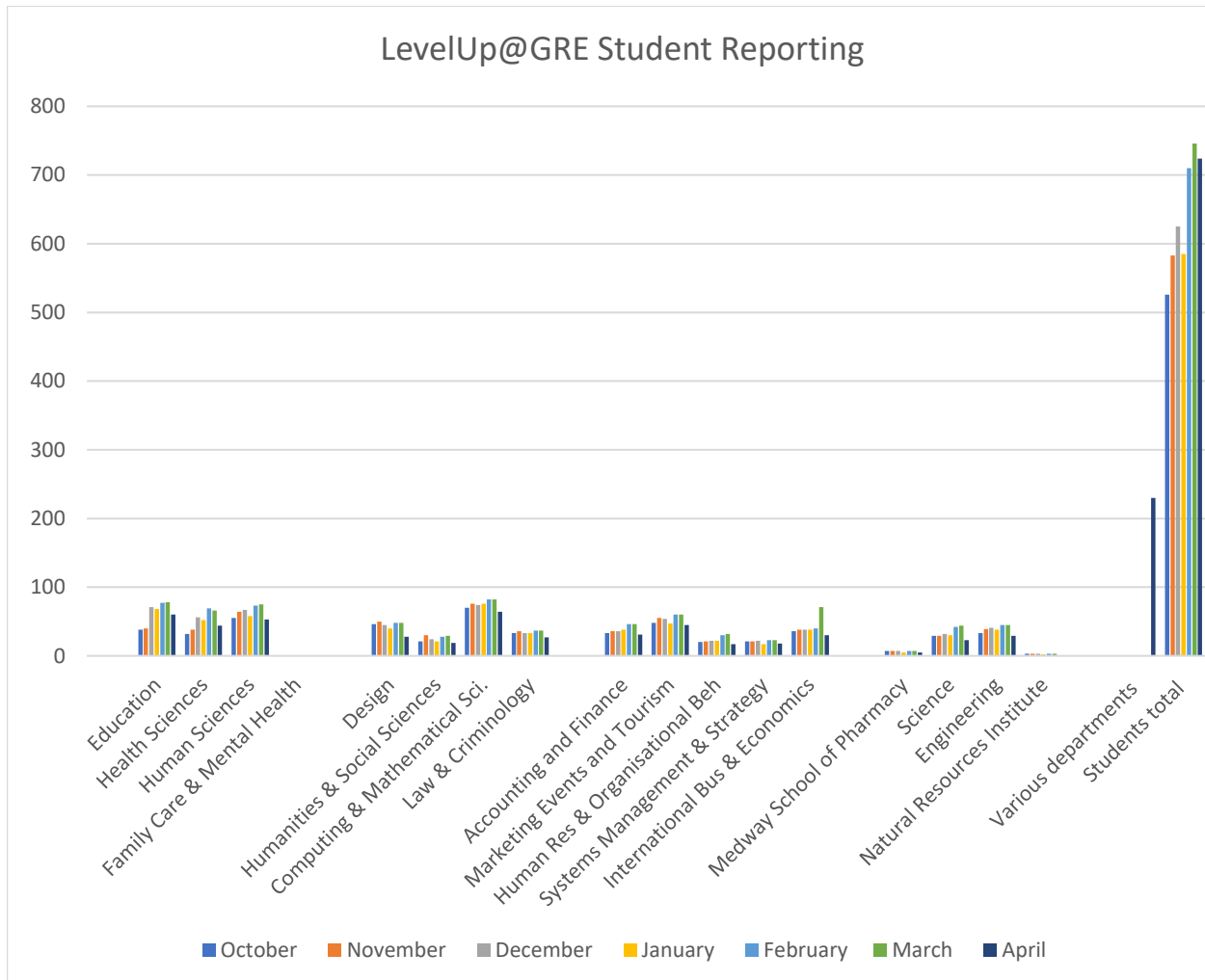
Figure 2: Breakdown of activity by School per month

Student engagement

Students were asked to record their reflections at the end of each section to earn a badge. Click rates in figure 3, show that these sections had higher usage than others. *Independent Learners' Toolkit,* a gamified virtual campus experience, shows the second highest usage followed by resource repositories from which slides and worksheets can be downloaded; indicating that students accessed the notes rather than watched the self-directed videos. Other sections popular with students include *Academic Writing* and *Be inspired by former students*.
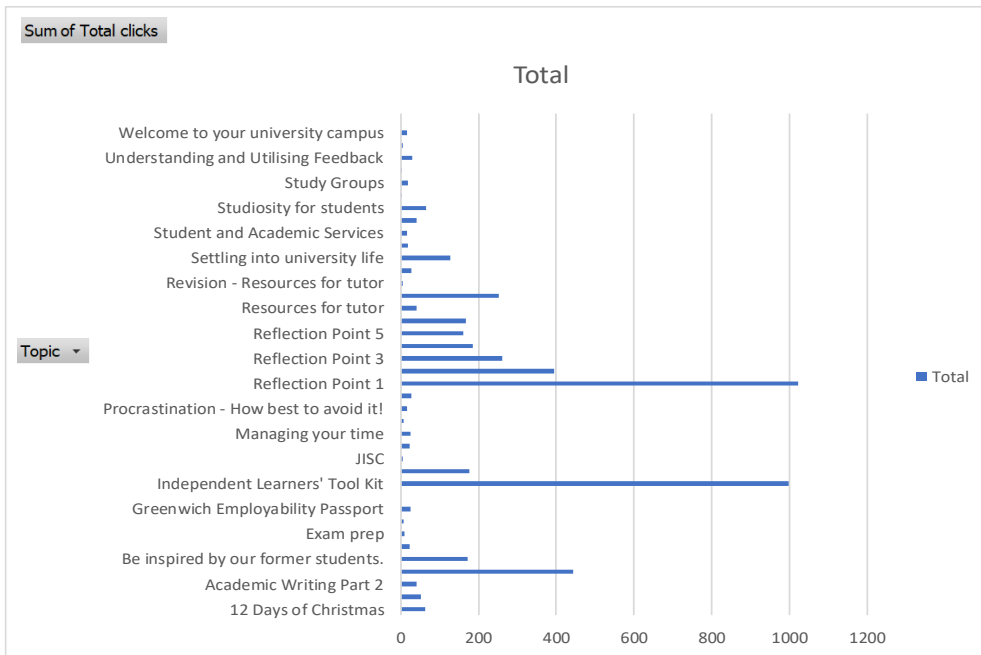
Sharon Perera 22 May 2020

Figure 3: Topic click rates showing high-usage sections

Student survey responses

On starting the LevelUp module, students were asked to complete a survey to capture how they were feeling at the start of their university module. This relates to research findings showing that students who feel a sense of belonging, high self-confidence and feeling settled were more likely to stay and thrive in the university environment (What Works, 2017). 96 students completed the survey, reflecting 13% of the cohort. Students were asked questions to indicate how they were feeling in their university environments. 63% students agreed that they felt comfortable with 10% disagreeing/strongly disagreeing.
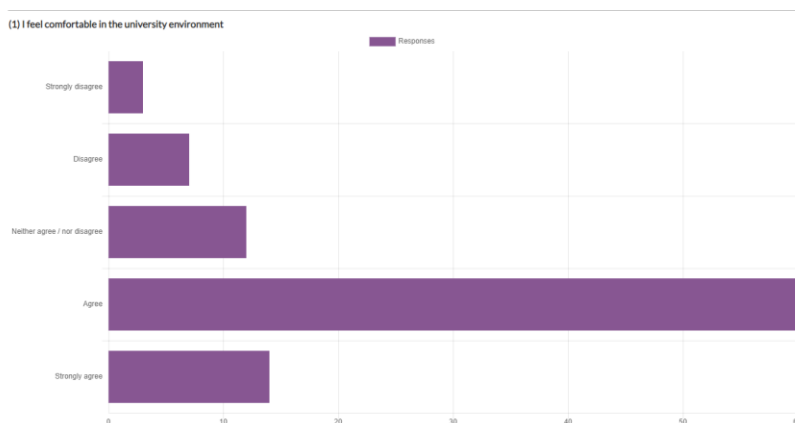

Figure 4: I feel comfortable in the university environment (module beginning)

Students were asked to choose from a list of options to describe how they were feeling about their social and academic environments. Similarly, this showed a positive picture where students reported feeling **excited**, **happy**, a **sense of belonging** and **being safe**.

Sharon Perera 22 May 2020

Positive responses were higher in the social environment than in the academic environment, suggesting that students have less confidence in their academic skills. Conversely, negative responses were higher in the academic environment. Thus, students reported they were more **nervous**, **worried** and **overwhelmed** in their academic environments.
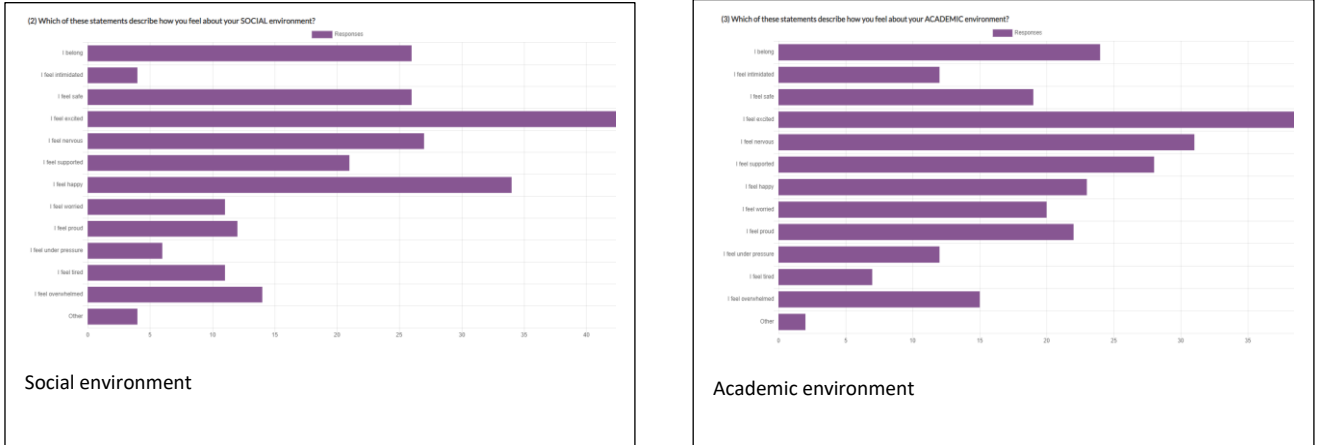

Social environment

Academic environment

Figure 5: The social and academic environments (See appendices for more detailed diagrams)

Exit survey

In April 2020 students on the LevelUp module were added to a MS Team to provide them with additional support in the lockdown/remote learning environment. Students were advised that they had access to the Academic Support team and were encouraged to contact the LevelUp team for help over the revision period, if required. A small minority of students contacted the team individually enquiring after one-to-one appointments, Maths and Stats and exams. Everyone was invited to participate in an exit survey and 14 students responded. Although this is a very small number, it provides a snapshot of how students were feeling about their academic skills during this period.

The exit survey showed a similar narrative compared to when they first arrived. Majority of the group felt comfortable in the university environment, 13 people agreed/strongly agreed (94%) and 1 person strongly disagreed (6%). Responses are polarised possibly indicating a greater self-assurance then earlier in the year.
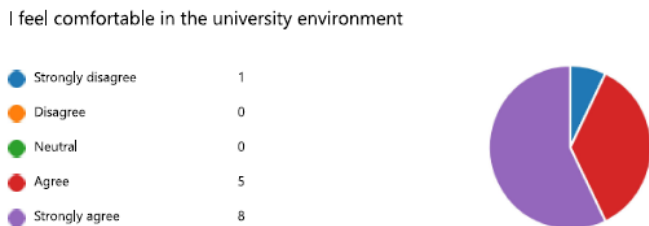

Figure 6: Exit survey, I feel comfortable in the university environment (module end)

Sharon Perera 22 May 2020

Asked how they were feeling, students' responses varied between their social and academic environments (Figure 7).

- In the **social environment** students felt happy (35%); safe (21%) and supported (21%) and that they belong (7%).
- In the **academic environment**, students felt happy (28%); supported (50%); they belong (14%). As well as these, students also reported feeling excited and proud.
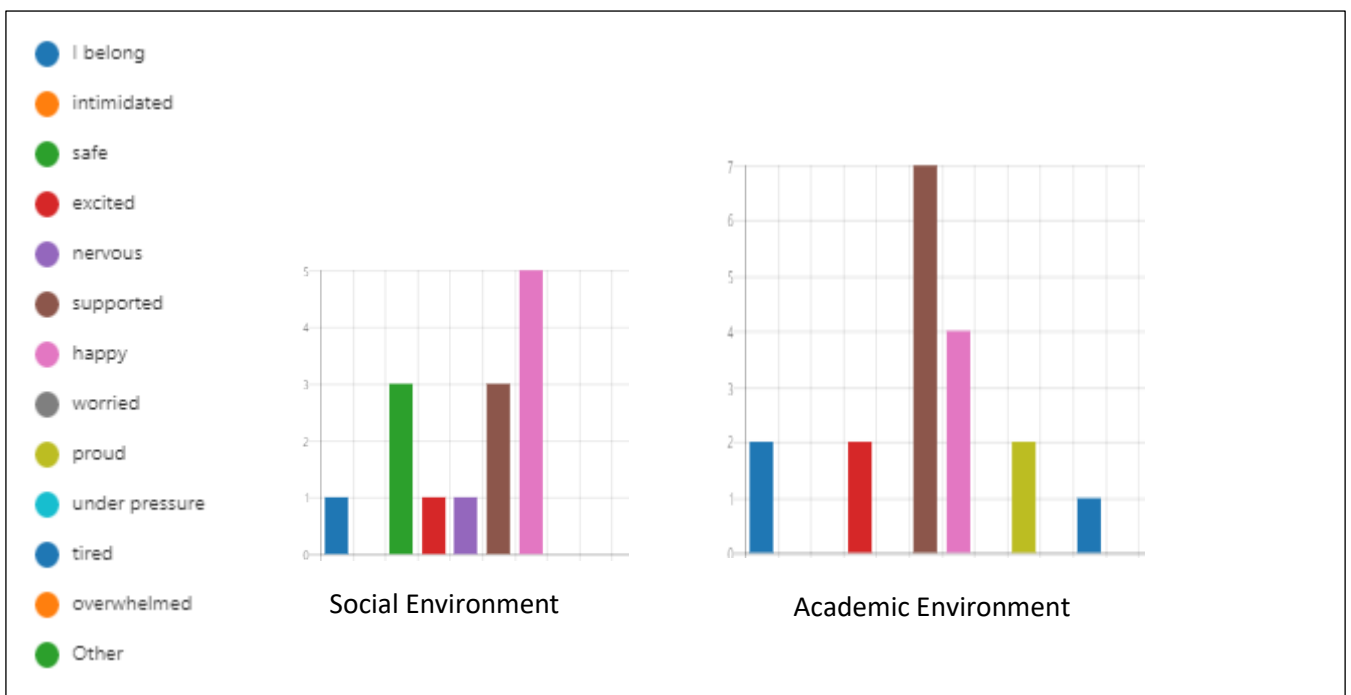

Figure 7: Students in the social and the academic environments

Asked about the effectiveness of LevelUp in providing support, responses were slightly more spread out across a Likert Scale. Majority of the students felt that LevelUp has helped them to develop study skills (64%) and half (50%) felt that LevelUp has helped them to settle into university.

Students' qualitative feedback

Student's feedback has been positive:

- I heard a lot of terms that I was not familiar with, also I was feeling a little 'lost' and overwhelmed by it all
- I found the section on Settling into university life 'life changing'. Literally, got me focused, improved my confidence and just made me know that I'm on the right track with my studies
- I spent an afternoon reading and writing down the entire student glossary. I was able to share the information that I'd learnt with another student in my class.
- My confidence level has certainly increased as a result of the settling into University level up guide.

Sharon Perera 22 May 2020

Students also fed back that they found the module structure confusing having to click on additional links to embedded resources, and the new design for the next stage will take this into consideration.

Practitioner engagement and feedback

Academic and professional services staff were also asked to participate in a survey about the effectiveness of LevelUp. Although the survey was sent to a large number of staff (in excess of 1000), only 14 people responded. 3 members of staff wrote back to say that they had never heard of LevelUp. The lack of response may be interpreted as:

1. There is low staff engagement with LevelUp
2. LevelUp wasn't promoted sufficiently across the university
3. Staff do not perceive LevelUp as a valuable resource.

Responses from the 14 members of staff who responded, provide rich feedback on the project. More staff felt the project was **successful** rather than **not successful**. (see detailed survey report in appendices). In their free text responses, staff reported that the project could be improved with the following:

1. More time to develop materials, train staff and communicate with the wider university.
2. An improved module design that is simple to use and one that motivates and engages students.
3. More consultation, engagement and support from students and faculty staff;
4. A shared vision of the project goals plans and progress.
5. Greater buy in and belief from the development team

Next steps

In January 2020, an interim report was submitted to LQSC indicating future project plans. The committee approved these plans and work has continued despite the interruptions from the COVID19 lockdown.

LevelUp 20-21

The development team have been creating two discreet modules; **LevelUp 3** for level 3/Extended and **LevelUp 4** for Level 4/Year 1. LevelUp 4 will comprise new material to avoid any repetition. In order to support university initiatives to deliver online learning during social distancing, a third module, **LevelUpPlus** will be created for level 5 skills and above including Masters level.

A consultation group has been formed with representatives from each faculty. In the development period, the team to refine the module design, materials and activities. The team will consider all the feedback received from across the university in designing the new iterations. More time will be spent on consulting and raising awareness amidst students and teaching staff prior to the launch of the LevelUp module before it is launched in August 2020.

Sharon Perera 22 May 2020

References

PAS13 – University of Greenwich tariff analysis report for 2017/18 students

'*What Works? Student Retention and Success*', Paul Hamlyn Foundation: 2017 available on
https://www.phf.org.uk/publications/works-student-retention-success-full/full-report-final/
accessed on 22 May 2020

Appendices
1. Welcome Survey responses
2. End of LevelUP survey responses
3. Practitioner survey responses