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Redevelopment of the Course “Communication in English” for the Chinese Master Students in the Department of Business Studies

Project report

Pao Kao, Wensong Bai, James Sallis

Department of Business Studies

Uppsala University

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1. Abstract

This project aims to redevelop the “Communication in English (CiE)” course in the Department of the Business Studies. CiE course is offered to Chinese students who join our Master Program through international joint education agreement. Over the years, we observe the changing needs from the Chinese students for capability to share their knowledge and active participation. Accordingly, we plan to redevelop the course by employing active learning and the pedagogic approach of the “Flipped Classroom” method. The goal of the redevelopment of the CiE courses is to encourage incoming Chinese students to share knowledge, and empower them to take control their learning. This project has run in 19HT and 20HT with 21 contracted Chinese master students and there are three distinctive sessions were included – academic written communication, academic presentation, and assignment clinic. Reflection sessions were conducted with students to know their experience, and a questionnaire was also administrated. This report made a reflection and discussion about the progress of this project, and conclude on its accomplishment.

2. Project description

The project “Redevelopment of the Course “Communication in English (CiE)” for the Chinese Master Students in the Department of Business Studies” (hereafter the project) aims to establish an adaptation course for the incoming Chinese students through introducing active learning and personal mentorship. CiE course was developed in the Department of Business Studies as an adaptive course for Chinese students joining the Master Program in Business and Management through an international joint education agreement.

The CiE course was initiated around 2014 in the Department of Business Studies and it was meant to address the learning difficulties seen in the Chinese students. At that time, there was a strong concern from the teachers about the performance of the incoming Chinese students as they were seen to lagging their peers, and they also seemed unable to grasp the way of learning in the context of Swedish higher education. These difficulties were mostly stemmed from a difference in the education system and culture, lack of confidence, and insufficient language capability. Therefore, a series of CiE course was designed to cover topics of reading, writing, referencing, etc. to help these Chinese students to catch up at the beginning of the fall semester. Through this gradual development of the CiE, the original issues that led to the establishment of the CiE have been largely addressed.

Over the years, we observe the changing needs of the Chinese students joining the Master Program in Uppsala. The recent Chinese students, compared to those who came about 5 years ago, are much worldly (e.g., many of them have travelled extensively), have stronger language ability, and are relatively confident in expressing themselves. While there is still a need for them to be introduced and integrated into the learning environment in Uppsala, the focus (for us in the CiE course) seems to be moving to empower them to achieve their ambitious goal.

The Department of Business Studies just initiated and signed a new 5-year contract education agreement with Chinese partners and is ready to takes on future international collaborations in students exchange. With the support from the department head, we decided to apply for project grants for educational development in 2019. The main goal for the proposed project is to redevelop the CiE course to not only suit the demand of the incoming Chinese students. In addition, there is also a desire to develop an adaptive course that may be able to include future international students, too. We aim to contribute to the continuous effort toward internationalization at Uppsala University.

The lead applicant is Pao Kao (myself), a researchers and lecturer in the Department of Business Studies as the project manager and lead investigator. The second project investigator is Wensong Bai who has been working with one of the Chinese university that the department is collaborated with and receive students from, and will be working as a student academic mentors in the project. This project is supervised by Professor James Sallis, who was the Director of International Education for the Department of Business Studies in 2019.

We were grateful to receive funding from the pedagogical development unit from the Uppsala University, and we are also encouraged by the shared vision from the committee. The course redevelopment has begun from 2019.07, and a set of course guideline as well as course activities have also been established. The new CiE course has run two times with the Chinese students from contract education (2019 fall semester and 2020 fall semester), and feedbacks were collected in groups discussion and an online survey.

In the next section, we will introduce how the new CiE course was developed and how we implement it with the incoming students.

3. Implementation and method

The department received 17 Chinese contract education students for the 2019/2020 academic year, and 4 for the 2020/2021 academic year (many students decided to defer their studies for one year due to the Covid-19 pandemic). All these students were enrolled in the CiE courses. We chose fall semesters (19 Fall and 20 Falls) to implement these changes. These changes included 3 distinctive sessions with these students, and they are (1) communication in academic writing, (2) communication in an academic presentation, and (3) written assignment clinic. There was an introductory session prior to the start of the CiE course to introduce the CiE course, the purpose and expectation, and to get to know these students through a pre-assignment of academic reflection writing on “How Do I learn”. There was also a reflection session to discuss with students to know how these sessions work for them and wrap up the discourse.

An email was sent to the students during the summer to welcome them to Uppsala, and introduce the CiE course – what it is, what it aims to do, and how we are here to help them to adapt to future studies in the Master’s Program at the department. In this email, we also provide a clear course calendar indicating the sessions and their topics. These sessions are arranged every second week from the beginning of September. The introduction meeting is arranged in the morning on the same day as the Master’s Program Introduction. A few assignments are also laid out and explained in this welcome email, they are encouraged to start early.

Introduction session– Academic reflection writing on “How Do I learn”

For the Introduction meeting, these students are expected to write a 500-word academic reflection of “How Do I Learn?” References on academic reflection writing are provided, and they are encouraged to do some research to understand both the topic and the way of writing. This small piece of writing is set out for two purposes. Firstly, this will provide a base for us to understand the level of their English writing. While academic reflection does have certain structures, it is still quite a free form of writing. We expect these students to express their thoughts and discuss through the writing.

Secondly, this assignment also encourages them to reflect on their own style of learning, and the potential challenges they may encounter when studying in another culture. The Chinese education system is known for pursuing repetition and memory, and it is likely this may be the way how these students feel most comfortable learning. But there is also a possibility that these students have explored and developed their own way of learning. They can reflect on their experience in this assignment.

First session - Communication in academic writing

For the first session, students are asked to complete a 2,000-word written assignment in the form of an academic essay. Academic essay is a common form of assignment used in the courses of the Master's Program. An academic article is pre-assigned to them with a clear question for them to answer. Sources of how to write an academic essay are provided, and students are encouraged to study available examples of an academic essay to structure their assignments.

Many students coming from other education tradition do face challenges to understand the style of academic essay and use it adequately. Over the years, we have observed that Chinese students do struggle to make analysis and discussion in a logical manner. Part of the reason for this observation may be due to these students are not familiar with the style of academic essay and have not come across it while they were studying in China. Another explanation can also be the style of writing used in China is rather different; article writing in China sometime puts stronger focus on description and association instead of ensuring a red thread is held clearly to guide the analytical process.

Second session - Communication in academic presentation

For the second session, students are asked to work in group to prepare a 10-minute presentation on "What is plagiarism and how to avoid it?" Most of the courses in the Master's Program have seminar, and group presentation and discussion are an essential components in these seminars. To be able to hold a presentation to discuss a certain topic and answer questions from the audience is important skill for students to succeed. We randomly split students into groups, and instruct them to focus on explaining what plagiarism is (using definition from Uppsala University and another university of their choice to compare and discuss), and presenting an example (of plagiarised text) and describing how these issues can be avoided.

This assignment of group presentation delivers two aims. Firstly, Uppsala University strongly emphasizes academic integrity. All students are held to a high standard of performance and are expected to follow the rules of academic integrity at all times. While there are multiple dimensions to academic integrity, one of the most important of which is to avoid plagiarism. Therefore, this is a good opportunity for students to work on this topic and get an in-depth understanding of plagiarism.

Secondly, Chinese students, from our previous observation, seems to shy away from group work and have received criticism from other students for not contributing equally. While language capability may sometimes hinder their ability to express their thoughts, we also notice some Chinese students do not consider the group work will help them to achieve the learning goal. Traditionally, Chinese students tend to entrust teachers to be the only source of knowledge, rather than the peers. It is also likely that many of these students are the sole child of the family and grow up in an environment that they are the centre of the attention. They also experienced strong peer competition in the school, which make working other students to help each other succeed a strange idea to grasp. Yet, in the business practices, the ability to working across culture is detrimental and this assignment provide a good opportunity to address this issue.

Third session - Written assignment clinic

For the third and last session, we arrange students to discuss their course work individually with a pre-assigned mentor. While working through previous sessions on writing academic reflection and essay, it is important for students to have an opportunity to apply their learning. The final assignment of their first course become an ideal project for them to work on and to receive feedback. An agreement with the headteacher of the course attended by students is obtained for our mentors to provide feedbacks solely on the structure of students' work. It is crucial for our mentors not to comment on the topic or the content of the work by these students to maintain a fairness to other students, and all these conditions are communicated clearly to the students and mentors.

Students and his/her mentor will meet over a 30-minute time frame to go through the assignment sent prior to the meeting. These individual sessions allow students to ask questions and to receive feedback on assignment in a rather private occasion. Our mentors are junior researchers of the departments who have taught in their field, understand the quality requirement of the written assignment, and have knowledge on providing comments for students.

4. Theory coupling

What we witness in the transition of Chinese students highlights the imperative for new approaches to learning and teaching activities. Particularly, nowadays, a high-quality (and attractive) international education program should get students ready for the fast-changing world, and therefore enables young talents to gain competencies in communication and global mindset (Petersdotter et al., 2017). Moreover, it is important for them to develop an active learning behavior for individual growth (Kaartemo et al., 2018), and to become an agent for discovering and creating opportunity for future social change (Gruber and MacMillan, 2017).

Therefore, the question for us in the redevelopment of CiE course lies on how to encourage incoming Chinese students to learn actively (Vande Berg, 2007). The redeveloped CiE course should play a bridging role to carry on the path they have started in terms of strong international mobility (Engel, 2010), professional advancement (Sutton and Rubin 2004), intercultural competency development (Beamish and Calof, 1989; Terzuolo, 2018), and enhanced self-efficacy (Petersdotter et al., 2017). The redeveloped CiE ought to empower Chinese students on their own learning.

To achieve the redevelopment of CiE course, we will take on a pedagogical design that is characterized with student involvement in the form of active learning. It is defined as ‘an instructor stops lecturing and students work on a question or task designed to help them understand a concept’ (Andrews et al., 2011). The seminar class commonly employed in the Master Program in Business and Management is a simple form of active learning- students are paired up or grouped to think and discuss the questions posed by the instructor, and share their thoughts with the whole class. Comparing to the traditional lectures, active learning helps students to learn more effectively (Hake, 1998).

More specifically, the redevelopment of the course was inspired by the pedagogical approaches of the “Flipped Classroom” (Abeysekera and Dawson, 2015; Comber and Den Bos, 2018). The pedagogic approach behind the “Flipped Classroom”, which flips the traditional in-class activities and requires students to prepare and complete the instruction materials prior to attending the class, and dedicates the classroom time to most active and enquiry-based activities (Comber and Den Bos, 2018). Abeysekera and Dawson (2015) suggest the pedagogical approaches stemming from the flipped classroom method are: (1) Move most information-transmission teaching out of the class, (2) Use class time for learning activities that are active and social and, (3) require students to complete pre- and /or post-class activities to fully benefit from in-class work.

While the debates on the effectiveness of the Flipped Classroom method continue, studies seem to suggest it is an effective teaching method, generating positive impacts on particularly students that tend to be shy in personality, and from more collective mindset of cultural background (e.g. Asian background) (Chen et al., 2019; Zainuddin and Attaran, 2017). This may be explained by the inquiry nature of the assignment in the flipped classroom method, which requires strong need to collaborate between peers with certain dependency.

5. Result

Students from newly developed CiE course are observed to achieve performance equal to the rest of the students in the master’s program. We use the second course in the master’s program, The Global Firm, as a base to analysis students’ performance. The results show that students from the CiE course present a similar distribution just as the rest of the students.

6. Evaluation of the project

In 2019, we designed and conducted an online questionnaire to survey students' experience as a way for evaluating the effectiveness of the courses. 10 questions were asked and they covered the general feedback toward the course, as well as each individual sessions. The findings from the result show students were in general satisfied with the learning made in the course. When asked students "How likely is it that you would recommend CiE course to next year's students? (not at all likely) 0-10 (extremely likely)", the results show that 14 out of 15 students said they would more likely do so (7 and above out of 10 points scale). The completed survey can be seen in the attachment.

We also ran a session inviting students to join and reflect their experience and learning from the CiE courses. In general, students were extremely happy for the learning they made in the course, and considered it was useful for them to adapt to the studies in Uppsala. They in particular appreciated the individual mentor session to discuss assignment and were very happy for the opportunity to discuss their work privately. The recording of the session can be provided upon requested.

7. Reflection and summary discussions

As the newly developed CiE course has run two times (19HT, 20HT), there are a few reflections can be brought forward:

Student participations are key to the success to the course

As the CiE course is not compulsory, students' willingness to participate and their commitment become the key factor to whether this newly design course will work. Fortunately, these students from China have shown great enthusiasm to engage with us, and amazing tenacity to work harder (than their peer) to ensure the assignments for the course are done in time. From the discussion in the reflection session, as well as the survey we conducted, we know the students were fully aware difference in the mode of learning existed and classroom environment could be challenging for them. They were eager to learn to adapt, and happy to work hard to deliver better performance.

Support the department and pedagogic unit is critical for this project to succeed

Similarly, as CiE course is not an official course in the department, the support we received when revamping the content of the courses from both the department and the pedagogic unit is critical for this project to succeed. The department has entrusted us to make the necessary change to ensure a better learning experience for these incoming Chinese students. Without the generous support from the pedagogic unit in the form of scholarship, many changes will not be possible to implement since there is very limited resource we can rely upon.

While active learning is key, flipped classroom approach may be challenging for conduct

While the newly developed course has predominantly operated in a course structures to be consist of pre-assignment and in-class discussion, spending some time during the session to explain the designated topic seems unavoidable. These are new coming students who have little prior knowledge about the education system in Uppsala, and it is difficult for them to comprehend certain issues simply from reading what is available on the university website or brochure. Their newness to the university and Sweden, also pose challenges for running the flipped classroom approach as certain peer-trust is necessary for students to know to lead.

Be aware of our own biases

Too often we are not aware how comfortable we are in our own way of teaching and lose sight that our tradition may be strangely incomprehensible for people from another education tradition. For example, our grading system – VG, G, and U and the ideology behind it can become "lost in translation" when explaining it to students used to the 100% system and see difference in every scale. The challenging

thing is, even ourselves are using 100% system (assessment point/unit) as a framework to distinguish students from VG, G and U, which can lead to confusion and unsatisfaction (does the students with 79% of G perform equally to the 61% of G)?

It is possible to image an adaptation course for a bigger audience in the university level

During the last two times when we taught the new CiE course, we heard there were interest from the international students enrolled in the master's program. We were unable to expand these activities to them due to the resource restriction. However, it does show that students coming from another culture and learning system may need help; while there is a half-day introductory session to cover some basic with the incoming international students, but there is little chance for these students to understand how their performance is expected in the classroom setting, and as well as the opportunity for them to connect with other students and teachers personally. In many countries, e.g., UK, a formalized pre-session academic program is available for international students prior to the start of the semester. Not only does it offer students a valuable chance to be familiar with the academic requirement of the program in advance, but it also provide an occasion for them to settled in a new environment and feel connected.

8. Conclusions and prospects

The Inquiry set out by the Swedish Government in 2018 (U 2017:02) stated the importance to establish “Sweden as a study and knowledge nation with higher attractiveness”, as well as to ensure “all students who earn university degrees have developed their international understanding or intercultural competence” in the path to increase internationalization of higher education institutions. This project aims to redevelop the CiE course as an adaptative course for incoming contracted Chinese students joining the Master's Program in the Department of Business Studies is an answer to the strategic goal set out by the government, as well as fit to the pedagogic demand we have observed. The redevelopment of CiE course will lay a solid foundation for building the attractiveness and effectiveness of the Master Program from the Department of Business Studies, thus enhancing Uppsala's reputation among international partners.

The works put into this project in the last two years will form a temple to enable continue innovation to be made to ensure the course to work with and for the students.

9. Reporting

This project has had a mid-term report in the pedagogic seminar held by the PU in 2019 autumn. Additionally, the preliminary result from the 19HT was also presented in academic visits made by South Eastern University & Zhejiang University of Technology in 2019 winter.

10. References

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Redevelopment of the Course “Communication in English” for the Chinese Master Students in the Department of Business Studies

Project report appendix – Survey on HT19 CiE Course

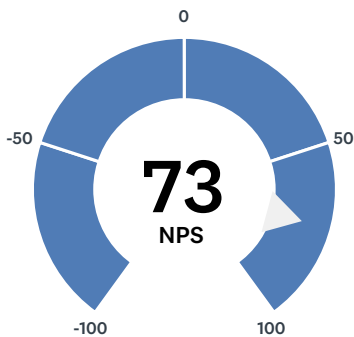
Pao Kao, Wensong Bai, James Sallis

Department of Business Studies

Uppsala University

Q1 How likely is it that you would recommend the CiE course to next year's students?

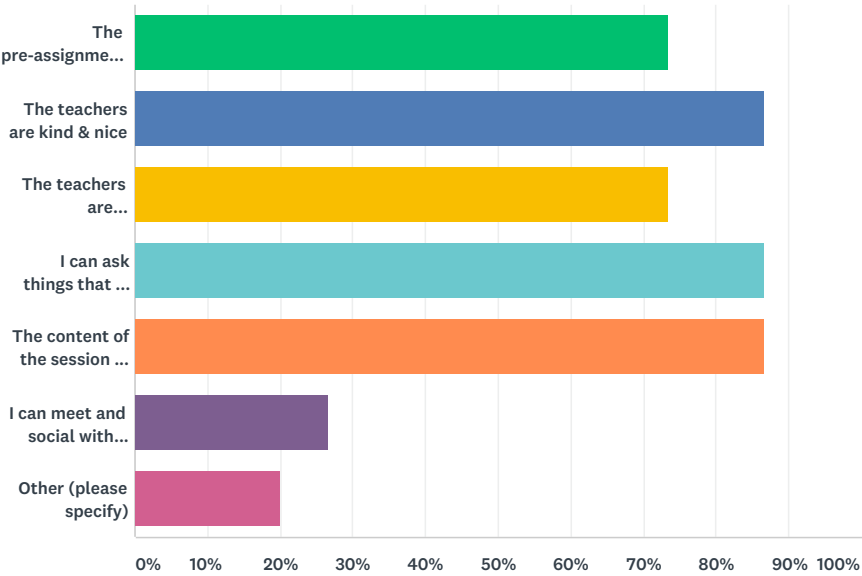
Answered: 15 Skipped: 0



DETRACTORS (0-6)	PASSIVES (7-8)	PROMOTERS (9-10)	NET PROMOTER® SCORE
7% 1	13% 2	80% 12	73

Q2 What aspects of the CiE course would you recommend the most?
(Please select more than one option where relevant, as well as use the "other" to add your own comment)

Answered: 15 Skipped: 0

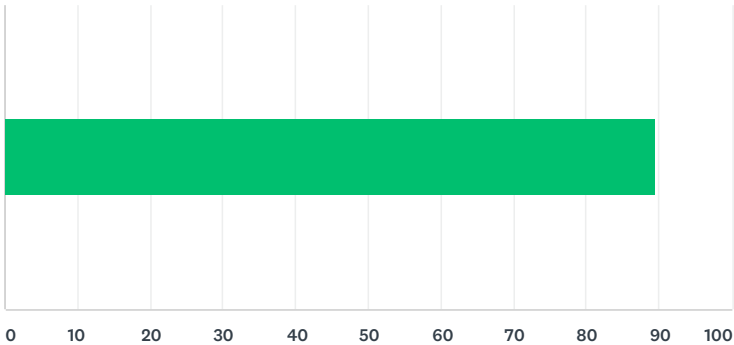


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
The pre-assignment and the feedback	73.33%	11
The teachers are kind & nice	86.67%	13
The teachers are knowledgeable about the subject	73.33%	11
I can ask things that I do not understand	86.67%	13
The content of the session is useful	86.67%	13
I can meet and social with other Chinese students	26.67%	4

Other (please specify)	20.00%	3
Total Respondents: 15		

Q3 Please think back to the session on Sept 3 Academic Writing - How useful was this session providing you with tools that you could use in other courses?

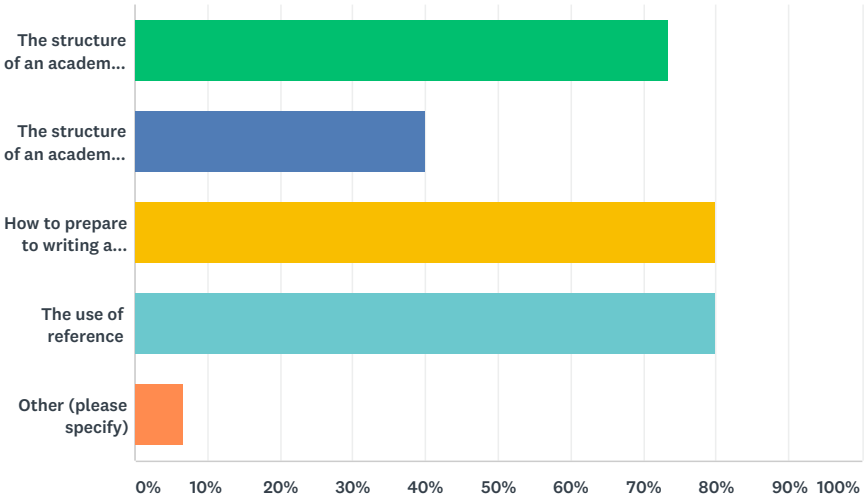
Answered: 15 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	AVERAGE NUMBER	TOTAL NUMBER	RESPONSES
	90	1,344	15
Total Respondents: 15			

Q4 Please think back to the session on Sept 3 Academic Writing - What specific aspects of this session did you find the most useful? (Please select more than one option where relevant, as well as use the "other" to add your own comment)

Answered: 15 Skipped: 0

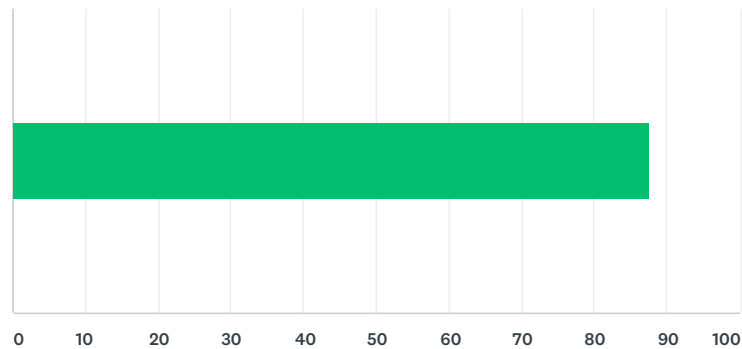


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
The structure of an academic essay	73.33% 11
The structure of an academic essay	40.00% 6
How to prepare to writing an academic essay	80.00% 12
The use of reference	80.00% 12

Other (please specify)	6.67%	1
Total Respondents: 15		

Q5 Please think back to the session on Sept 17 Academic Presentation - How useful was this session providing you with tools that you could use in other courses?

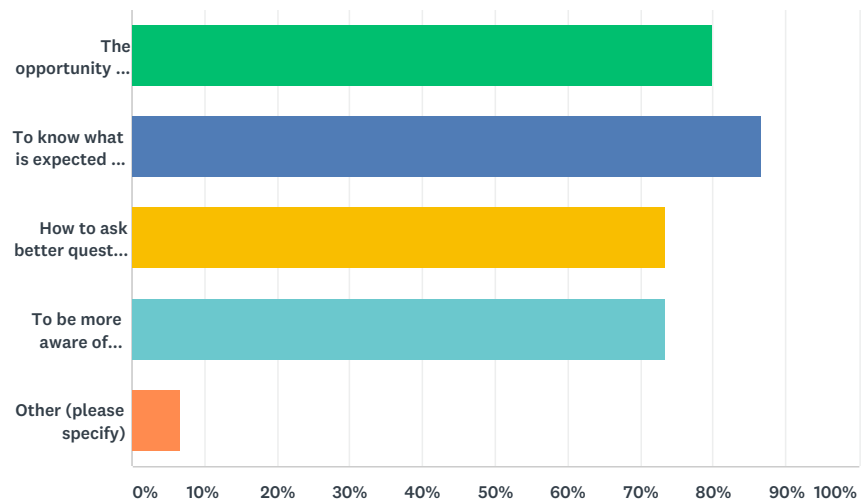
Answered: 15 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	AVERAGE NUMBER	TOTAL NUMBER	RESPONSES
	88	1,314	15
Total Respondents: 15			

Q6 Please think back to the session on Sept 17 Academic Presentation - What specific aspects of this session did you find the most useful? (Please select more than one option where relevant, as well as use the "other" to add your own comment)

Answered: 15 Skipped: 0

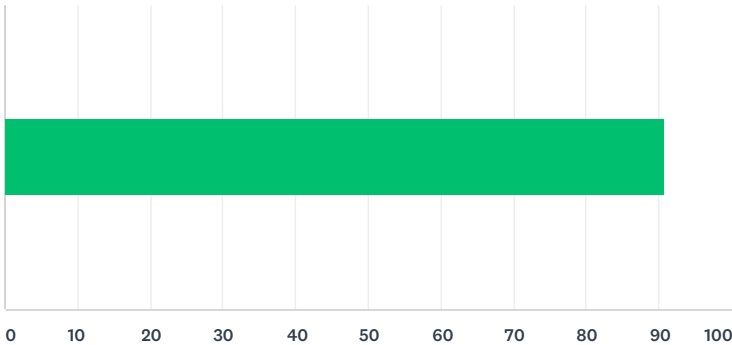


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
The opportunity to practice presentation	80.00% 12
To know what is expected in an academic presentation	86.67% 13
How to ask better question and reply to the question	73.33% 11
To be more aware of plagiarism	73.33% 11

Other (please specify)	6.67%	1
Total Respondents: 15		

Q7 Please think back to the assignment clinic on Sept 30/Oct 1 - How useful was this session providing you with tools that you could use in other courses?

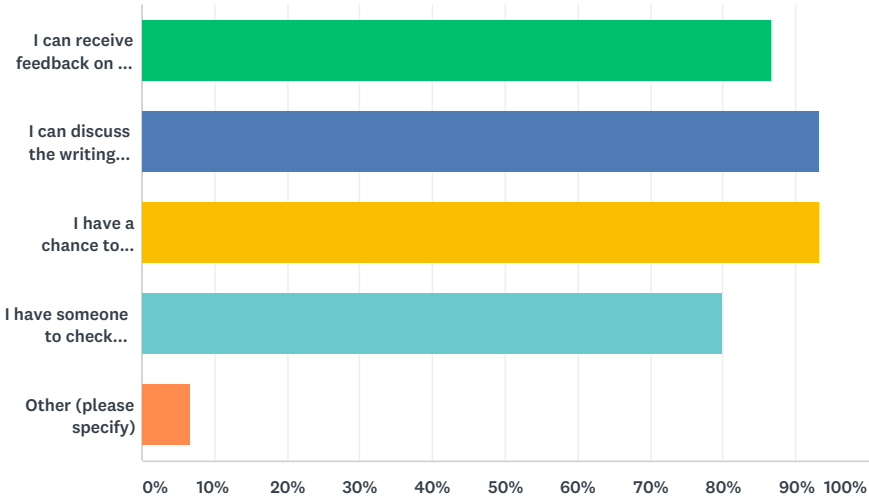
Answered: 15 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	AVERAGE NUMBER	TOTAL NUMBER	RESPONSES
	91	1,363	15
Total Respondents: 15			

Q8 Please think back to the assignment clinic on Sept 30/Oct 1 - What specific aspects of this session did you find the most useful? (Please select more than one option where relevant, as well as use the "other" to add your own comment)

Answered: 15 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
I can receive feedback on the style of my writing assignment directly	86.67% 13
I can discuss the writing style of my assignment with an instructor privately	93.33% 14
I have a chance to revise my essay before submission	93.33% 14
I have someone to check whether I have used reference correctly	80.00% 12

Other (please specify)	6.67%	1
Total Respondents: 15		

Q9 What have you found the most challenging regarding the courses you have taken at Uppsala University so far? How can we address these in the CiE course?

Answered: 15 Skipped: 0

Q10 What aspects of the CiE course do you think could be improved upon? Do you have any other comments or feedback about the CiE course that you would like to share with us? Please provide these here.

Answered: 14 Skipped: 1