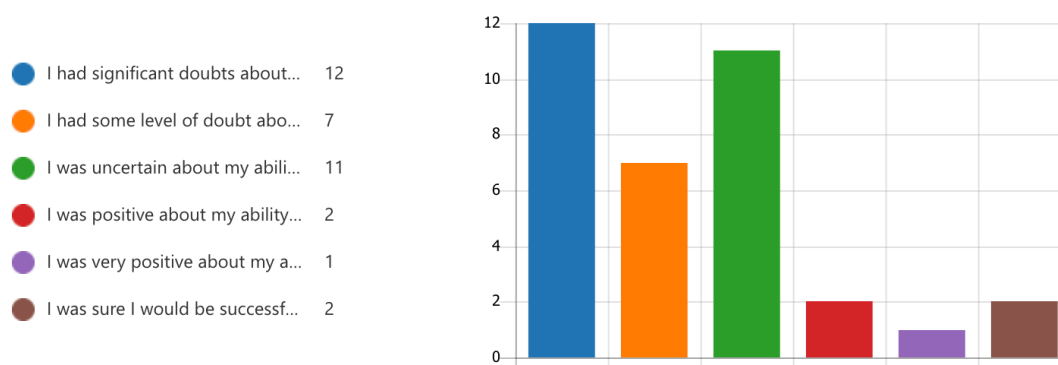Evaluation Project Regarding Student Self-Belief and Aspirations

Below is a discussion of the results of an evaluation project carried out with a sample of students on BA Applied Social Work at the University of Derby. All current students on the programme were informed of the project as were some who had recently graduated. 35 students and ex-students undertook individual questionnaires. (This represents approximately 25% of the total number of students on all 3 years of the programme). Participants were evenly distributed across the 3 years of the programme with 2 respondents who had completed the programme. 15 students undertook more detailed qualitative interviews, again spread evenly across the programme with one being a qualified ex-student.

The aim was to explore factors that may have impacted upon a student's self-belief and aspirations. This is part of a wider project exploring the same issues in a) A primary school and b) A community theatre group.

1. Prior to commencing the BA Social Work what would best describe your level of self-belief with regard to educational achievement on the following scale

More Details

- I had significant doubts about... 12
- I had some level of doubt abo... 7
- I was uncertain about my abili... 11
- I was positive about my ability... 2
- I was very positive about my a... 1
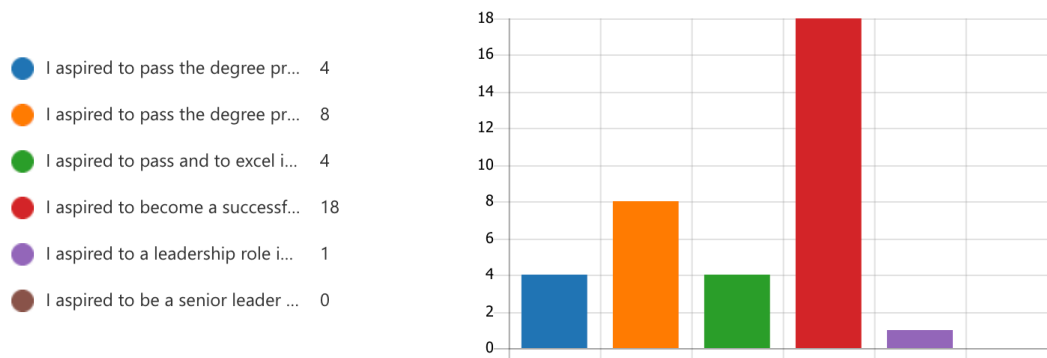- I was sure I would be successf... 2

It is interesting to note that the very significant majority of respondents had some level of doubts about their ability to undertake study at undergraduate level. Over 85% of respondents had significant doubts or some level of uncertainty about their ability in this regard.

This would suggest a key task for academics is in cultivating self-belief among students commencing their studies. We know from student results during their first and subsequent years that only a relatively small proportion of students exit because they are not able to study at undergraduate level. It is reasonable to conclude that self-belief has no necessary link to actual ability and potential. It may be a key task for academic staff to cultivate the self-belief of their students. Aryana (2010) has produced evidence to demonstrate a significant relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement in pre-university students.

2. Prior to commencing the BA Social Work what would best describe your aspirations

More Details

- I aspired to pass the degree pr...   4
- I aspired to pass the degree pr...   8
- I aspired to pass and to excel i...   4
- I aspired to become a successf...   18
- I aspired to a leadership role i...   1
- I aspired to be a senior leader ...   0

The answers to this question indicate that although there may be significant levels of initial self-doubt among students concerning their abilities with regard to undergraduate studies, the majority hold high aspirations. The largest group by far were those who aspired to be successful professionals rather than simply to pass the degree for example. This suggests that there is no necessary link between self-belief and aspiration at the start of HE studies for students on this particular degree programme.

3. To what extent has a positive learning culture (a culture where there is a good balance between being supported and being challenged to achieve) improved your level of self-belief over the course of the programme (so far)?

More Details

- Not at all   2
- A little   5
- A significant amount   19
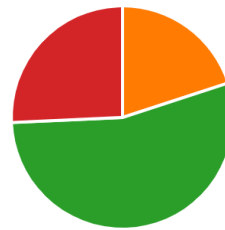- A very significant amount   9
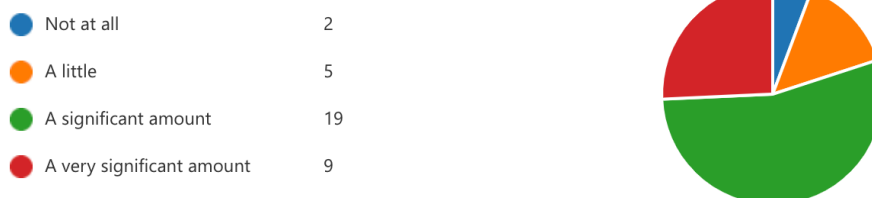
80% of respondents identified a learning culture where there was a balance between support and challenge as having improved their levels of self-belief by a significant or very significant amount. A key concept in Action Learning is that of high challenge, high support. This is the idea that in order to assist people to develop and to problem solve the balance between being supported and challenged is crucial. (Revans. 2016). The concept is also found in the thinking of a Compassionate Focused Approach. Gilbert (2013) has suggested that in order to support people we also need to motivate and challenge them. This is further reflected in much of the writing concerning rapport building in professional supportive relationships. Good rapport building provides the foundations for professionals to challenge their 'clients' and move them forward. (Sybing 2019). Individual interviews with students highlighted the importance of prompt positive communication from academic staff as being a key factor in promoting a sense of being valued. Being valued and validated was a key theme from students who undertook individual interviews. *"It makes a difference when tutors value us as people and allow us to see that they are real people as well".* The sense of being valued and validated for strengths and skills may have been the single most important factor in

promoting self-belief that was identified by students. This indicates that academic staff may need to give significant thought to how they might value and validate their students or fail to do so. Ayllon et al (2019) found that students in higher education are more likely to succeed if they perceive that academic staff are there to help. There is a link here to the work of Griffin and Tyrrell (2013), who identify needs for attention, status and a sense of competency as fundamental human needs.

4. To what extent has quality feedback from tutors and module leaders improved your level of self-belief over the course of the programme (so far)?

More Details

|		
🔵	Not at all	0
🟠	A little	7
🟢	A significant amount	19
🔴	A very significant amount	9

There were no respondents who did not value quality feedback from tutors with 80% saying that quality feedback had improved their level of self-belief significantly or very significantly. This was another theme from student interviews. It was clear that students perceive poor quality feedback as detrimental. Perception is subjective and this indicates that academics will need to be pro-active in ascertaining the style and content of feedback that their learners find most useful. In individual interviews students frequently stated the value of feedback that both highlighted strengths and that was specific. *"It is important to receive feedback that starts from the point of my strengths and it is even more important that feedback states a belief that I am capable of learning and developing."* Lopez and Louis (2009) have highlighted the importance of a strengths-based approach in all aspects of education.

5. To what extent has a variety of assessment methods improved your level of self-belief over the course of the programme (so far)?

More Details

|		
🔵	Not at all	2
🟠	A little	7
🟢	A significant amount	20
🔴	A very significant amount	6
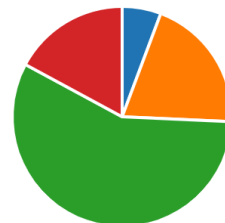
Approximately 75% of respondents identified that having a variety of assessment methods on the programme has assisted their self-belief significantly or very significantly. The BA Social Work programme has made a large number of changes to assessment methods over the last 5 years. Written assignments no longer dominate. Discussions, vivas, presentations and video presentations have added considerable variety to the assessment portfolio. Not

only does this variety more accurately reflect professional practice but it allows those with strengths in other areas than writing traditional academic assignments to shine. Assessed discussions have generally tended to raise the level of marks because there appear to be more students who are comfortable when discussing their work than there are students who excel at academic writing. These assessed discussions also enable immediate oral feedback to be provided and, as has been observed by Race, immediate feedback tends to be of greater assistance to students. (Race. 2005). Gibbs (2010) has collated evidence that indicates students will focus their learning on the content of their assessments and it therefore follows that provision of variety in assessment methods will allow more students to learn in ways suited to their strengths.

6. To what extent has your level of self-belief over the course of the programme (so far) improved because you have taken on responsibility for the support, learning or development of other students?

More Details

🔵	Not at all	1
🟠	A little	17
🟢	A significant amount	12
🔴	A very significant amount	5
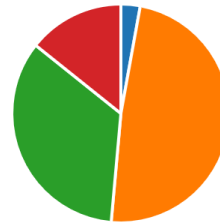
Virtually all the respondents indicated that taking responsibility for the support, learning or development of others had benefitted their self-belief to some extent. Individual student interviews reinforced this, particularly in relation to the value of supporting fellow students in small informal study groups. The Student Mentoring Project on the BA Social Work had previously produced considerable feedback from mentors that attested to the beneficial impact of taking some degree of responsibility for the support and learning of other students. There is significant evidence that student peer mentoring is beneficial or students in higher and further education. (Andrews and Clark 2011. Collier 2017).

7. To what extent has your level of self-belief over the course of the programme (so far) improved because you have been given support, advice or guidance from other students ?

More Details

🔵	Not at all	4
🟠	A little	15
🟢	A significant amount	15
🔴	A very significant amount	1

The discussion re the above question is relevant here. However, although nearly 50% of respondents indicated that support from other students had assisted their level of self-belief it was clear from individual interviews that some advice and guidance from other students could compromise their self-belief and in particular their confidence to make decisions for themselves. This may indicate a need during induction and then ongoing in

tutorial support to discourage students from being too heavily influenced by the opinions and guidance of others without first reflecting on the value of said opinions and guidance. Maclellan (2019) has identified that it is counter-productive for school students to compare themselves with others. The wider academic writing on the benefits of student peer mentoring above are however still relevant.

8. To what extent has your level of self-belief over the course of the programme (so far) improved because of the passion and creativity of any of the teaching staff?

More Details

|	
● Not at all	0
● A little	3
● A significant amount	20
● A very significant amount	12

It is noteworthy that all respondents believed that their self-belief had been aided by the passion and creativity of academic staff. Over 90% said that the positive impact on the self-belief had been significant or very significant. This was a perspective that was heavily reinforced by individual interviews. Importantly student interviews also heavily supported the view that a lack of passion and creativity by academic staff had a detrimental impact on their self-belief. *"The passion of tutors has fostered my own passion. I aspire to succeed and believe that I can."* Clearly the question of whether a lecturer/tutor is passionate or creative is a subjective opinion. This would indicate a need for staff to make good use of any feedback opportunities to find out how their teaching and tutoring is perceived by students.

9. To what extent has your level of self-belief over the course of the programme (so far) improved because you have been set challenges which stretched you ?

More Details

|	
● Not at all	2
● A little	6
● A significant amount	21
● A very significant amount	6
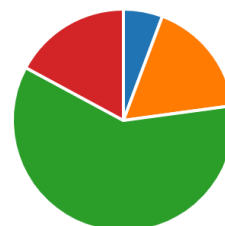
These results indicate that academics should not shy away from stretching and challenging their students. Nearly all respondents indicated that being stretched was beneficial to their self-belief with approximately 85% suggesting the impact on their self-belief was significant or very significant. This may indicate a need for academics to re-consider some of the common practices in a marketised higher education sector. When students are treated as customers there is a greater likelihood that the focus will be on support rather than challenge. Results here indicate that it would be a mistake to refrain from challenges that stretch a student. The work of Griffin and Tyrrell (2013) highlights that achieving and being stretched is a human need.

As aspirations are explored below it will become apparent that there are similar results mirroring those results for questions about self-belief. It is worthy of note that in individual interviews a number of students discussed how their aspirations had changed from desiring academic success to becoming more focused on wanting to become proficient professional practitioners. These individual interviews tended to highlight the passion and creativity of academic staff as a key factor that had brought about this change in the focus of aspirations.

10. To what extent has a positive learning culture (a culture where there is a good balance between being supported and being challenged to achieve) raised your aspirations over the course of the programme (so far)?
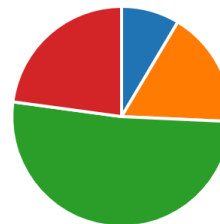
More Details

🔵	Not at all	1
🟠	A little	7
🟢	A significant amount	19
🔴	A very significant amount	8
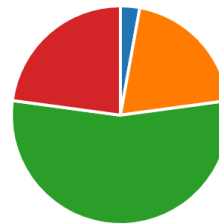
11. To what extent has quality feedback from tutors and module leaders raised your aspirations over the course of the programme (so far)?

More Details

🔵	Not at all	3
🟠	A little	6
🟢	A significant amount	18
🔴	A very significant amount	8

12. To what extent has a variety of assessment methods raised your aspirations over the course of the programme (so far)?
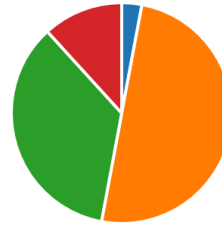
More Details

🔵	Not at all	2
🟠	A little	13
🟢	A significant amount	15
🔴	A very significant amount	4

13. To what extent have you raised your aspirations over the course of the programme (so far) because you have taken on responsibility for the support, learning or development of others?
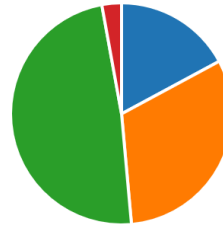
More Details

🔵	Not at all	1
🟠	A little	17
🟢	A significant amount	12
🔴	A very significant amount	4

14. To what extent have your aspirations raised over the course of the programme (so far) because you have been supported, given advice or guidance by other students?

More Details

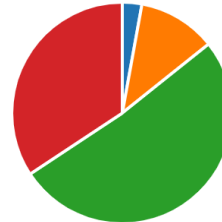|		
🔵	Not at all	6
🟠	A little	11
🟢	A significant amount	17
🔴	A very significant amount	1

15. To what extent have your aspirations raised over the course of the programme (so far) because of the passion, creativity and engagement of teaching staff?
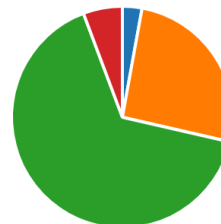
More Details

🔵	Not at all	1
🟠	A little	4
🟢	A significant amount	18
🔴	A very significant amount	12

16. To what extent have your aspirations raised over the course of the programme (so far) because you have been set challenges which stretched you?

More Details

|		
🔵	Not at all	1
🟠	A little	9
🟢	A significant amount	23
🔴	A very significant amount	2

There are some important findings below regarding the results of the questionnaires with regard to factors that were found unhelpful to student self-belief and aspirations. A number of factors clearly have the potential to negatively impact on both self-belief and aspirations. A stated previously it is the perception of students that is being discussed here. These are not objective categories. This emphasises that academics need to be utilising all available feedback mechanisms to highlight when and if their input is perceived as being unhelpful.

17. Click any of the following that have lowered your self belief on the degree programme (so far)?

More Details

🔵	Lack of support from tutors or...	10
🟠	Poor feedback from tutors an...	8
🟢	The variety of assessment met...	1
🔴	Supporting, advising or guidin...	2
🟣	The advice, guidance or 'supp...	6
🟤	The lack of passion or creativit...	7
🩷	Taking on too many challenges	6
⚫	Being challenged too strongly...	3
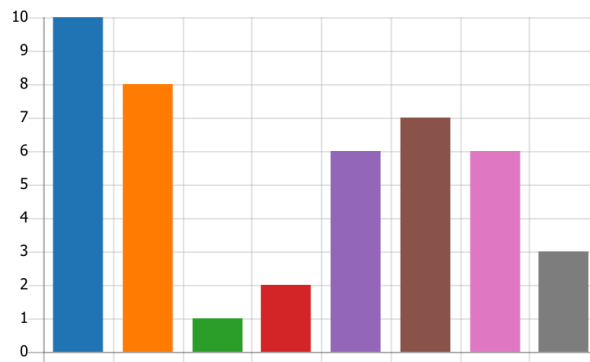
18. Click on any that have lowered your aspirations on the degree programme (so far)?

More Details

🔵	Lack of support from tutors or...	9
🟠	Poor feedback from tutors an...	9
🟢	The variety of assessment met...	1
🔴	Supporting, advising or guidin...	2
🟣	The advice, guidance or 'supp...	4
🟤	The lack of passion and creati...	4
🩷	Taking on too many challenges	5
⚫	Being challenged too strongly...	2

Gavin Jinks .April 2020
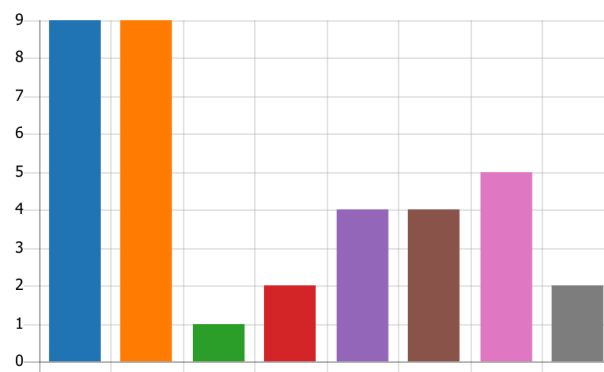
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