

**Title:**                    **The Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA+): An institutional case study of using standardised testing to measure students' generic skills**

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### **Session Learning Outcomes**

By the end of this session, delegates will be able to:

- Understand the context and rationale behind the importance of measuring learning gain in Higher Education
- Apply the work carried out at Birmingham City University to your own institutional context
- Analyse the effectiveness of utilising standardised testing to measure higher order thinking skills such as critical analysis, problem solving and writing effectiveness.
- Critique the suitability of using a standardised test such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA+) in UK Higher Education based on student results data from our pilot project.

### **Session Outline**

This project involves 4 partner institutions using a piece of standardised testing called the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA+), however this session will be structured around the lived experience of BCU staff and students. The CLA+ is heavily used in the United States, which focuses on measuring the development of “general collegiate skills”, or known more widely known as generic skills (Arum and Roksa, 2014: 37). As the study reports, students are in an era of subject-specific learning where core skills such as critical thinking are difficult to practice within large lectures and workshops (Arum and Roska, 2014). Considering this study, the session will explore a number of key themes, both locally and sector wide in relation to our project. In particular, the use of the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA+), a form standardised testing, to measure and support student development in higher order thinking skills will be explored. This will be followed by a discussion on some of the implications this may have on the now implemented TEF awards, and how this particular project may play a part in contributing to the ‘Student Outcomes and Learning Gain’ metrics. In addition, with the subject-level TEF now forthcoming, how can standardised testing contribute to this?

A central theme to the logistical elements of the project will also be the matter of staff and student engagement. As Arum and Roska (2011) highlight in a previous study, Higher Education is a vastly social experience, meaning the relationships developed during these periods are key in fostering meaningful development within our students. However, the study focuses on peer relationships, whereas our project will explore the importance of staff-student relationships. A key question we will consider is how can we encourage staff to meaningfully engage with such a process? How can we incentivise this for students to see the value of taking such a test? To finish, we will also examine the importance of embedding this within curriculum in order enable students to see the value of the CLA+, using specific staff within faculty as case studies for best practice.

## **Session Activities and Approximate Timings**

The outline of the workshop is as follows;

The session will firstly cover the context behind the initial call for applications sent out by HEFCE **(5 mins approx.)**. This will include a discussion of how other institutions perceive the term Learning Gain, and how they approach its measurement in their own roles/institutions **(10 mins approx.)**. Following this, we will also give a brief overview of the standardised testing instrument, the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA+), which we have opted to use as part of the project's delivery. After covering its structure, we will identify how we have used it at Birmingham City University whilst giving an overview of key issues experienced so far, particularly the ways in which we recruited staff students **(10 mins approx.)**. We also now have rich source of data to share consisting of over 500 student profiles and performance scores across Levels 4, 5 and 6. This will cover an opportunity to analyse the extent to which the CLA+ can accurately measure generic skills. The session will finish with questions on the challenges of using CLA+ and more importantly, how we could holistically embed such a tool into the development cycle of our students **(10 mins approx.)**. For example, group discussions will be facilitated to encourage critical dialogue on the suitability of utilising an instrument such as CLA+ in Higher Education based on our case study and results **(10 mins approx.)**.

## **References**

Arum. R and Roksa. J (2011) *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press Ltd.

Arum. R and Roksa. J (2014) *Aspiring Adults Adrift: Tentative Transitions of College Graduates*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press Ltd.