

Session title: The Practical Skills Passport: supporting student lab skills and confidence post-lockdown

Session type: Research paper (20 mins plus questions)

Presenter: Dr Anna Smith, University of St Andrews

Session summary:

I will report on the design, implementation and impact of the Practical Skills Passport (PSP). Launched in academic year 21-22, the PSP is a series of lab skills support sessions that aimed to increase student lab confidence post-lockdown.

Session outline:

This proposal fits with the themes of programme design for student wellbeing and changes in learning and teaching activities post-pandemic. The paper will address the issue of ameliorating the impact of the 2020-2022 lockdowns (and consequent lack of in-person lab instruction) on student lab confidence.

A good grasp of lab skills is important for progression in Neuroscience, Biology and related degrees. During the academic year 2020-21 many lab classes that had previously been delivered online were redesigned as virtual labs. These conditions may have made it more challenging for students to achieve practical learning outcomes (Khan et al 2021). Evidence is emerging suggesting students who attended online labs had lower confidence in practical skills (Kochlar et al 2023).

This session will provide an account of the development and delivery of the Practical Skills Passport (PSP) - a programme of optional, open lab sessions outside of scheduled classes in which students can practice a range of fundamental lab skills. Our aim was for students to supplement their programmed lab classes with additional practice to increase their lab confidence post-lockdown.

PSP sessions were run weekly in the 2021-22 and 2022-23 academic years and were attended by students from all degree stages. 76 students attended at least one PSP session in 2021-22 and 26 students attended at least one session in 2022-23. In a survey sent out to PSP participants, feedback was extremely positive. Respondents (n=9) indicated that working on a particular skill in the PSP increased their confidence in that skill. Free-text comments in the survey indicated that students appreciated being able to practice in a low-stress environment, and that PSP participation made them feel better prepared for their in-module lab classes.

References:

Khan, U. R., Khan, G. M., & Arbab, K. (2021). Creating 'COVID-safe' face-to-face teaching: Critical reflections on on-campus teaching during a pandemic. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 18(5). <https://doi.org/10.53761/1.18.5.9>

Kochhar, S., Tasnim, T. & Gupta, A. (2023) Is cadaveric dissection essential in medical education? A qualitative survey comparing pre-and post-COVID-19 anatomy courses. *Journal of Osteopathic Medicine*, vol. 123, no. 1, pp. 19-26. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jom-2022-0016>