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Title: The management of English language support in post graduate business education: the CEM Model (contextualisation, embedding and mapping).

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Title: The management of English language support in post graduate business education: the CEM Model (contextualisation, embedding and mapping)

Abstract.

The paper documents the background, research and preliminary findings relating to a key area emerging in Higher Education institutions in the UK: providing academic language and study skills to support international students in parallel with their study programmes. The paper presents research carried out by an English language specialist and a Programme Director in the postgraduate area of Newcastle Business School (NBS) at Northumbria University. The paper documents a critique of past practice and research leading to identification of key issues influencing the attendance and participation of overseas students on an in-sessional English Language Support Programme (ELSP). To address these issues, a model was developed, the CEM Model, which identified contextualisation, embedding and mapping as the foundation for improving ELSP provision in a postgraduate business context. The findings show that application of the CEM Model is already demonstrating added value in the key areas of student attendance, understanding and integration within academic programme learning objectives and outcomes.

Key words: international students, language support, contextualisation, embedding, mapping, business education, post graduate, Northumbria University, CEM Model.

Introduction.

This paper develops research presented at The Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Business, Management, Accountancy and Finance Conference in 2007. It describes the context, aims and methodology of the research and provides results from the data collected. The findings will be of use to subject specialists who collaborate with tutors of English for Academic Purposes (EAP).

In the past 10-15 years the international student market has grown to represent a significant impact on higher education, (Verbik, 2007). As identified by Turner (2005) the internationalisation of Higher Education is now a key area within the academic sector. Northumbria University currently attracts more than 3000 international students, with Newcastle Business School being one of the main destinations. This paper documents research arising from concern expressed within both the university and school about the perceived unwillingness of international students to attend an in-sessional ELSP ie. a programme of support running concurrently with their degree study.

The EAP context.

The teaching of English language and study skills to international students in Higher Education is informed by research and practice in what has been called English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP). More recently there has been a drift towards adopting a more specific subject-based approach to the teaching of EAP (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons 2002). Supporting this approach, Hyland (2002 p.394) argues that “effective language teaching in the universities involves taking specificity

seriously". For EAP tutors this means understanding the language used in specific academic contexts and organising the learning around subject specific, purposeful activities (Dudley-Evans and St John 1998). The approach suggests too that it is important that the content should be relevant to learners' goals and that this is most likely to motivate them (Flowerdew and Peacock 2001). This faces EAP tutors with two problems: one, they have only limited field specific knowledge to allow them to design such content and two, they are not always the best judge of what will interest and motivate their students (Murray & McPherson 2004).

Dudley-Evans (1980) suggests the solution to these problems is collaboration between subject specialists and the EAP tutors with different levels of cooperation across disciplines. Much has been written of his experience at Birmingham University in the 80s (Johns and Dudley Evans, 1980; Dudley-Evans 1984, Dudley Evans, 1995), where the collaboration catered for sessions with a small group of students who were considered to need help with English. The sessions focused on understanding lectures and the writing of examination answers. The work diversified to include work on assignment essays, research project outlines and the dissertation itself.

However such collaboration is not as easy to achieve as is frequently assumed (Tajino, James and Kijiima, 2005). Hyland and Hamp-Lyons, (2002, p3) hold the view that EAP tutors tend to "work for rather than with subject specialists." Collaboration, where it is achieved, rarely extends beyond two or three disciplines. Dudley-Evans' experience focused on students studying transportation and biology programmes. More recently, collaboration between EAP tutors and subject specialists has focused on the design of pre-sessional

EAP courses, ie. a programme of support running prior to the commencement of the degree programme. For example business, law and medical students have the opportunity to attend pre-sessional Summer schools in British universities such as Glasgow University, Edinburgh and Birmingham (University of Glasgow, 2008; University of Edinburgh, 2008; University of Birmingham, 2008).

Palmer- Silveira, (2006) and Madden (2000) both describe similar successful collaboration with business specialists, but again on pre-sessional courses.

There has been little research on the effectiveness of academic skills programmes. Saunders (2006) suggests that results and findings from degree programmes should inform the design of EAP programmes. Pilcher (2006) reported on the effectiveness of EAP from the students' perspective while completing their master dissertations and recommended that there should be more links between EAP tutors and academic departments in order to improve the quality of EAP provision and support. Yet even this literature reveals limited evidence of successful collaboration on in-sessional ELSP courses i.e. for students who have already begun their degree programmes.

Clearly the challenge faced by British universities today is how to extend the support to dramatically increased numbers of international students across all university disciplines. Professor Edwards, Director of the National Centre for Language and Literacy, University of Reading states in the Times Educational Supplement of February 2008,

Similarly, there is scope for exploring ways in which EAP tutors can collaborate with subject teachers to ensure that support materials are

move sensitive to the needs of students speaking English as a foreign language (Newman, 2008).

Relatively few students have the opportunity to attend pre-sessional EAP courses, even those which are discipline specific. This paper will therefore focus on the key issue of how to meet the need of delivering an in-sessional ELSP to increasing numbers of post graduate international students in parallel with their degree programmes.

NBS Postgraduate Context

With the increasing growth in the international student base within the postgraduate area of NBS, has come the realisation of the importance of ensuring a quality learning environment and experience to complement academic programmes. Key to this is the recognition of the role of language and the need to increase staff and student understanding of the importance of integration of language and study skills as part of the academic learning programme. The paper documents work which:

- examines the management of the ELSP to postgraduate students by developing a model to underpin a collegiate approach involving EAP and subject specialists.
- enhances the learning experience of the students through induction and guidance procedures aligned to their academic development.

The three key concepts of contextualisation, embedding and mapping of the ELSP were identified in this research as the foundation for the CEM Model (See Figure 1), designed to facilitate improved provision of the ELSP in a postgraduate business context. The paper discusses the evaluation of current methods used to inform the content and timing of English language

support and provides information as to how this could be enhanced. The paper concludes by demonstrating how the CEM Model contributes to the quality of learning agenda by assisting in understanding and addressing the diverse needs of the international student and improving the context in which the language support programme is delivered.

(INSERT FIGURE 1)

Methods used in the study

The findings are based on a series of surveys using a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection tools used to explore the learning styles and experiences of the Masters students based in NBS.

Two survey groups were established: a group of 150 full time international postgraduate students and the group of Business School postgraduate Programme Directors. Two questionnaires were designed and separate focus group meetings were held with students and staff.

Questionnaire 1 was distributed and completed by 128 students after twelve weeks delivery of the ELSP and sought to find the degree to which students perceived the ELSP as embedded in their business degree programme.

Focus group meetings with students, held midway in both semesters, also explored their opinions on the ELSP and the importance they attached to mapping delivery to their needs.

Questionnaire 2 explored the theme of mapping language support to their studies on the dissertation itself by exploring students work patterns. It was completed by 134 students as they submitted their dissertations at the end of their academic year. The views of NBS staff were collected at both key academic meetings and informal discussions with the relevant parties.

The quantitative results were tabulated using Excel. The qualitative using a basic grounded theory approach to identify the key issues and themes as discussed in the following sections (Silverman 2001, Gill & Johnson 1991).

Review of past practice and emerging issues

The in-sessional ELSP at Northumbria University has been informed firstly by the expertise of the EAP tutors and secondly by a language training needs analysis process carried out with students in the first week of the in-sessional ELSP. By contrast, the role of Newcastle Business School was solely an administrative one: supporting registration of students on to the ELSP and inviting the EAP tutor to make Induction Week presentations, to encourage students to attend the optional in-sessional ELSP. The presentations were aligned with non-academic satellite services such as Student Services, the Counselling Service and the Chaplaincy. The following issues were identified:

- ELSP was seen by students and staff as an ‘optional extra’ outside the academic programme.
- lack of synergy between the subject specialists and EAP tutor led students to undervalue the skills teaching and fail to recognise the transferability of the academic skills across their business modules.
- delivery of the ELSP ended at Easter, 5 months before students submitted their dissertations.

The cumulative effect of these issues raised questions at a senior level in the university about the relevance and timing of the in-sessional ELSP.

Findings from the staff group: key themes

As a result of the meetings with staff, three key themes emerged as pivotal in the project; *contextualisation*, relating to the context in which the academic

skills were presented and communicated to the students; *embedding*, the position of the ELSP within the overall academic programme; and finally *mapping*, the identification and understanding of the post graduate student needs in relation to language learning and the appropriateness and timeliness of the ELSP throughout the academic year. These three themes and how they were addressed in the project are discussed below.

Contextualisation: specificity versus generic

Specificity implies teaching language skills in the context of the subject which is being studied. To achieve this, links were required between the business module tutors and the EAP tutor. Two modules, taken by all postgraduate students on their Masters programme were identified and analysed from a language perspective. For the first time in the Business School, the EAP tutor had access to business module descriptors, assignment briefs, marking criteria and subject-specific teaching and learning materials.

The subject and EAP tutors shared their understanding of the key weaknesses in assessment performance. Based on this, a revised ELSP syllabus was presented to Business School Programme Directors and Leaders for further analysis and comment. This draft syllabus was then negotiated with the Module Tutors, who are ultimately responsible for the delivery of the subject modules. The final syllabus for the ELSP was agreed between the EAP tutor and the subject tutors.

Embedding

Embedding relates to changing the perception of subject specialist staff and international students from one where the ELSP is seen as abstract to their

postgraduate programmes to one where it is recognised as a core part of the postgraduate academic programme.

In order for the embedding to be effective, five key areas were identified and addressed:

1. The placement of the ELSP presentation in the Post Graduate induction programme week was considered. It was realigned with business modules, not satellite services.
2. The timing of the ELSP delivery was altered so that it was running in parallel with business modules.
3. The ELSP seminars were included in the business programme timetable. On the surface this would appear to be a minor change but in practice this represented a major cultural shift by the Business School and reflected recognition of the importance of the ELSP at both staff and student level.
4. The integration of the EAP tutor within the subject teams. Past practice created a relationship of “them and us”. A more inclusive and supportive partnership was achieved through active invitation and participation of the EAP tutor in regular management meetings at Programme Director and Programme Leader levels, ensuring understanding of what the ELSP could provide and how this could be incorporated more effectively into each specific Masters programme.
5. The extent of NBS management support for the ELSP was critical. None of the above changes could have taken place without support occurring at a number of management levels. At a macro level, key decisions relating to the central timetabling of the language support

sessions were sanctioned at Associated Dean level, whilst at a micro level, the role of the Programme Directors, Programme Leaders and Module Tutors was essential. With such initiatives the role of the project ‘champion’, a senior subject specialist, cannot be underestimated. This key role is needed to promote, drive and maintain the profile of the project to key individuals and staff with the purpose of achieving visibility and co-operation.

Mapping language support

Students are more likely to acquire features of language as they need them, not at a time determined by a set syllabus. Thus it would seem appropriate to identify their patterns of working on their dissertation more accurately so that the ELSP can provide support in key areas at the right time. The question arose as to whether the long established delivery of the ELSP over twenty four weeks between September and March was appropriate and met student needs for support on their dissertation.

It was also felt that effective mapping could only be achieved by creating better communication channels between the EAP and subject tutors. Weekly reports to a group of key subject specialists regarding the content of the ELSP seminars and the responses of the international students to their teaching and learning were initiated. Such has been the interest generated that the group has been expanded to include the Associate Dean for Quality and the Schools Teaching and Learning Group. The subject tutors responded to the reports, commenting on the focus of the ELSP and raised issues for further consideration when evaluating the ELSP syllabus.

Findings from the student survey group

Contextualisation and embedding

The data from Questionnaire 1 showed that 93% of the respondents believed that the ELSP was an integral part of their degree programme. This was in sharp contrast to the perception of students in previous years when ELSP was seen as separate, an optional extra, and not important to their degree programme.

The focus group meetings explored the student perceptions of the ELSP and supported the findings from Questionnaire 1:

We're being briefed the detail of things, how this should be done, how the assignments have to be done and everything is explained.

Chinese student

I don't think the content needs to be changed. It's particularly what's going on.

Chinese student

I learned more from the English session, more than my expectation. I thought skills or report writing skills I should learn from my (business) tutor.

Thai student

Students commented on the transferability of the skills they were learning on the ELSP, despite the teaching context being based on only one of their degree modules:

It's quite relevant to other subjects because we can totally understand how to go on with that exactly. It really helps us with writing assignments.

Iranian student

Mapping

At the start of this study the ELSP did not map to the students need for support at the time they were writing their dissertation. Students produced predicted schedules of their research which indicated that they spread their study across the period January to July. The data analysed from the results of Questionnaire 2 shows that their actual work patterns were very different.

Figures 2-4 below show their work patterns were focused in a period after the ELSP had ended when there was no further support from the EAP tutor.

INSERT FIGURE 2

INSERT FIGURE 3

INSERT FIGURE 4

It is evident from the data in Figures 2-4 that most of the dissertation activity is done in the May to September period. There may be several reasons for this, ranging from time constraints (exams and assignment submission deadlines in mid May) to the wish to collect data from sources on their return to their own countries.

Discussion

Figure 5 illustrates the approach to ELSP delivery prior to the introduction of the CEM Model. Only two key actors are involved, NBS administration and the EAP tutor.

(INSERT FIGURE 5)

Following the introduction and wider understanding of the CEM Model came the realisation by academic staff that more ‘actors’ had to be involved. Figure 6 depicts the resulting participation of all the actors and in particular captures the enhanced level of explicit communication and understanding.

INSERT FIGURE 6

The explicit inclusion of the NBS Module Tutor directly addresses the issue of contextualisation, in particular the argument of specificity versus generic contexts. It also ensures that the content of the ELSP sessions are relevant to the programme and furthermore appears relevant to the student.

The inclusion of Senior Management Support, the Programme Directors (PD) and the Programme Leaders (PL) addresses the issue of embedding.

Without the support of Senior Management, the physical placement of the language support sessions on the student timetable, an indirect, but subtle signposting of the importance of the sessions within the overall academic programme would not have been possible. This latter point was re-enforced more explicitly through the involvement of the PDs and PLs in the design of the syllabus of the ELSP. Furthermore the inclusion of Senior Management recognises not only the importance of strategic support in driving through the initiatives, but also the importance of ensuring inclusivity and dissemination of findings. This, in turn, ensures operational support and feedback from academic colleagues.

Conclusion

This paper presents a critique of an approach to the design and delivery of in-sessional English language support programmes in response to the increasing number of postgraduate international students entering Newcastle Business School. In the current climate of expanding numbers of international students in the university, the Business School has had to respond to varying language and learning skills. The critique of past practice and preliminary research has identified the key areas of contextualisation, embedding and mapping as emerging issues in providing quality of provision at an academic level, whilst ensuring participation and 'added value' for the student. From the associated definition and discussion on how to incorporate these into the academic experience, these three areas emerged as critical in the future planning and development of the ELSP.

The resulting CEM Model (Figure 1) promotes and sustains collaboration between EAP tutors and subject specialists in order to increase the learning

opportunities for the students. As previously discussed, much research has focused on pre-sessional programmes, which run prior to commencing full time study (Dudley-Evans, 1998). This research focuses on a gap identified in existing research by facilitating the crossing of boundaries between EAP and subject tutors encouraging inclusivity and synergy.

As a result of implementing the CEM Model, all students now have a clearer understanding of the link between their language support programme and their subject specific modules. The ELSP can focus on, for example, the skills required to be analytical in the context of a business module. This motivates students to attend the language support programme and has been shown to increase attendance figures significantly.

The effort to embed the language support programme into the postgraduate programme area has met with considerable success. The EAP tutor is now perceived as part of the Business School academic team attending relevant meetings and providing regular feedback through recognised communication channels.

Finally, mapping the language and study skills support programme to students' needs involves delivering the support at the best time in the academic year to meet the needs of international students. The research shows that what is required is regular delivery of the ELSP for the full academic year with focused support when students are working actively on their research.

Whilst the paper has identified key areas to address in understanding the issues of delivering English language support to postgraduate international students, elements of the CEM Model are already being applied at undergraduate level and within other schools at Northumbria. The findings

continue to inform pedagogic debate relating to the design of the postgraduate curriculum in NBS with changes to the e-learning portal, teaching and learning plans and the development of podcasts and vodcasts. Acknowledging the relevancy of the findings within NBS the research is therefore ongoing. The next stage is to formulate a strategic framework within the Learning and Teaching agenda to ensure the findings and the CEM model become explicit within overall programme and module design and NBS School policy.

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Figure 1. The CEM Model

Figure 2 Month students submitted their dissertation proposal.

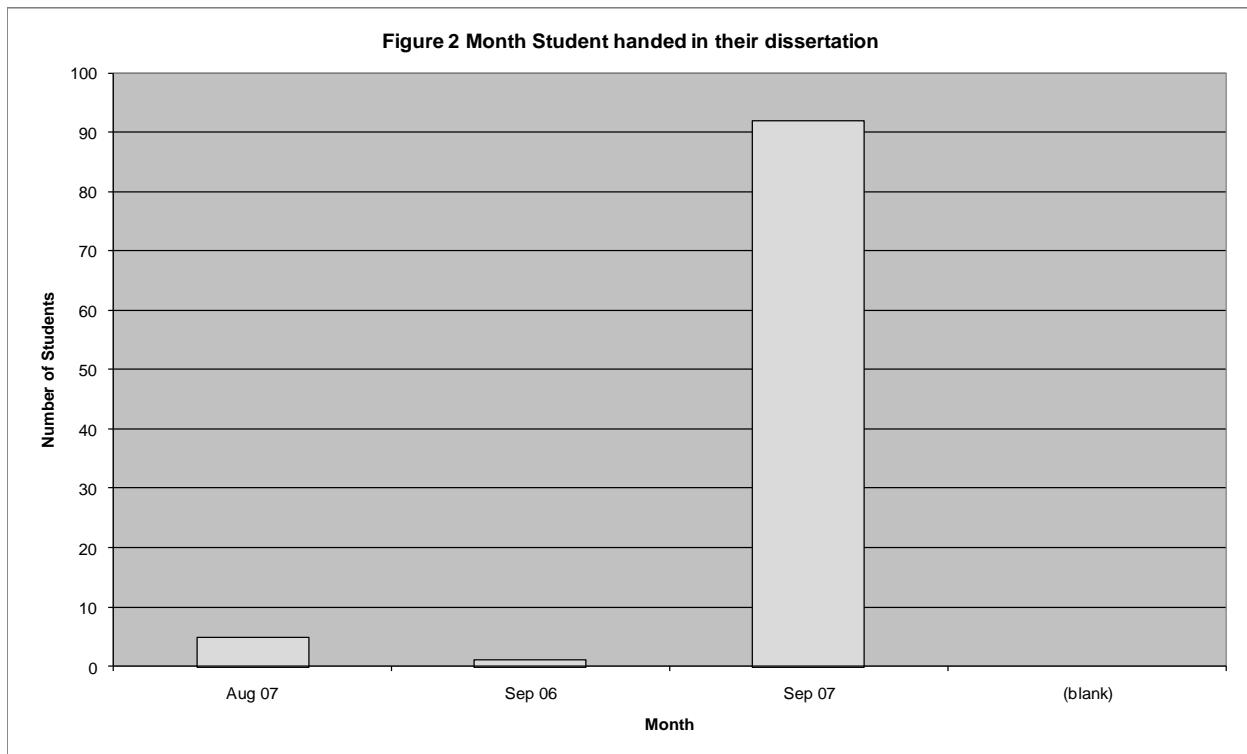


Figure 3 Data Collection

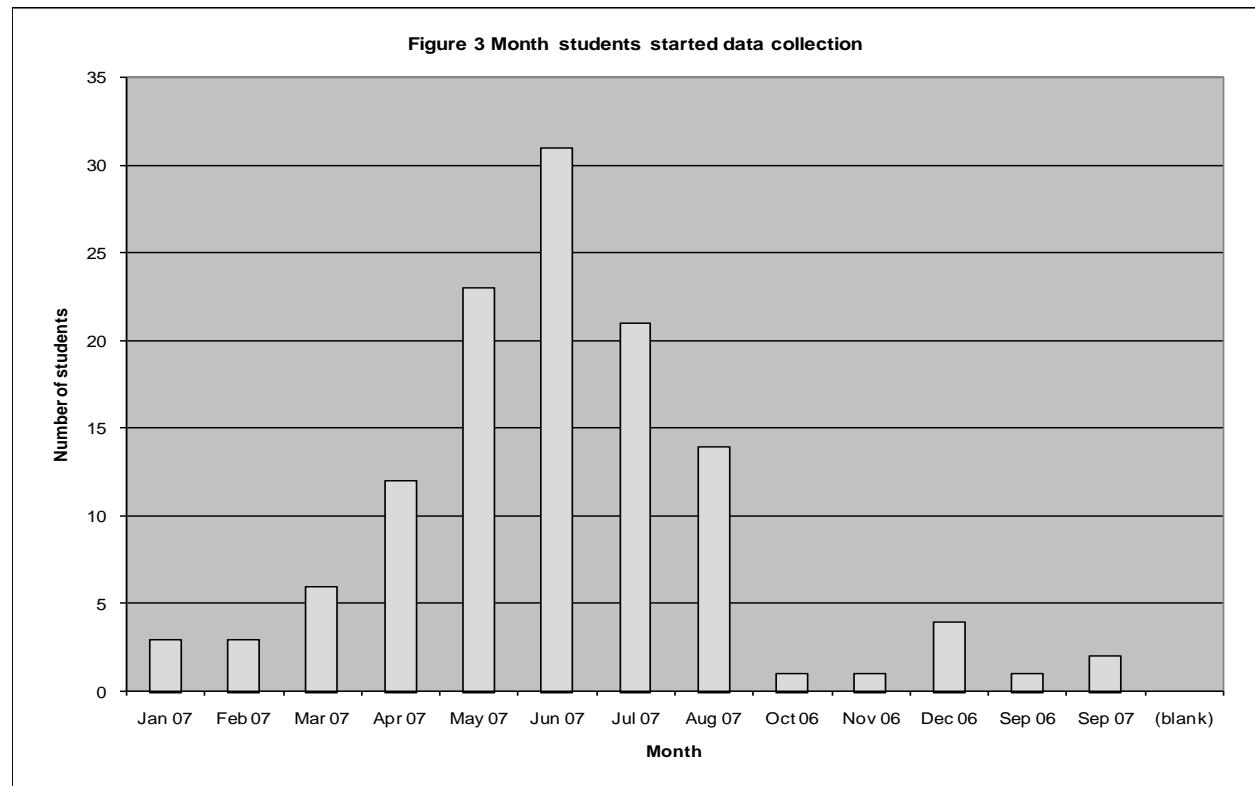


Figure :4 The Data Analysis Chapter

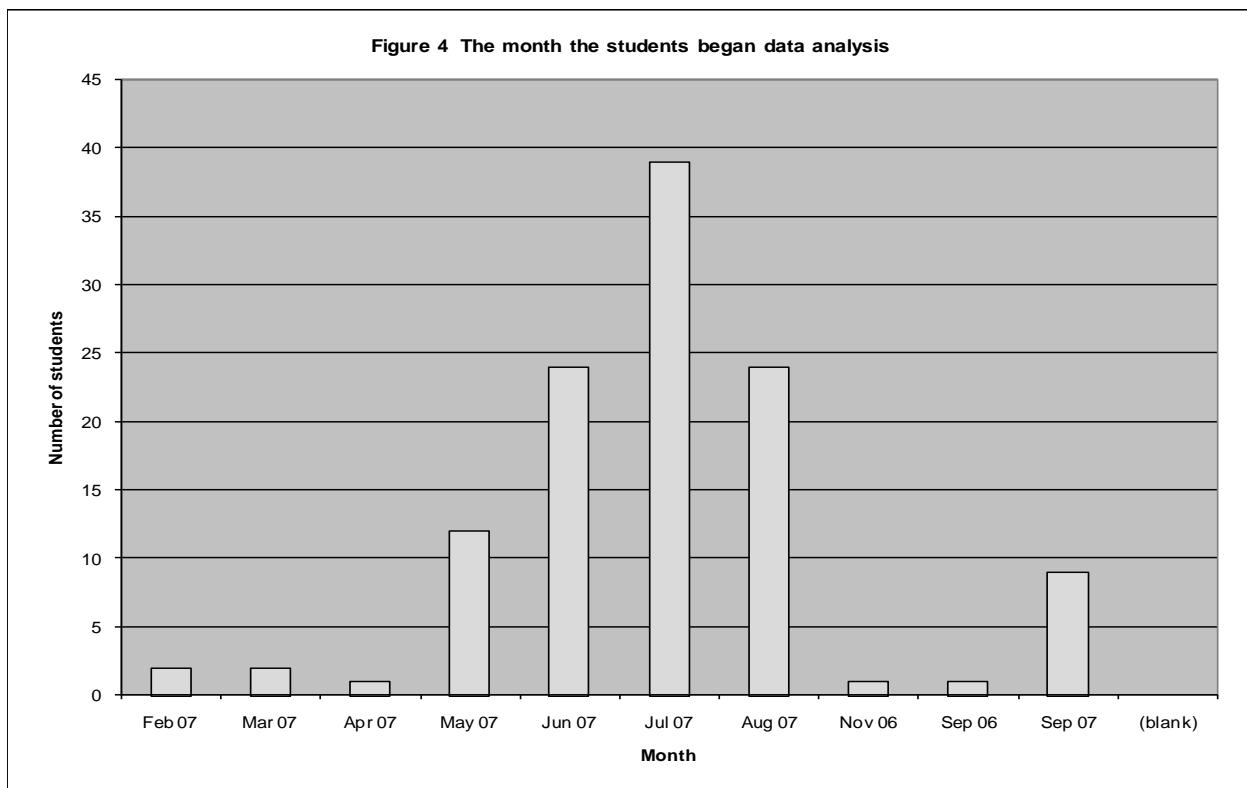


Figure 5

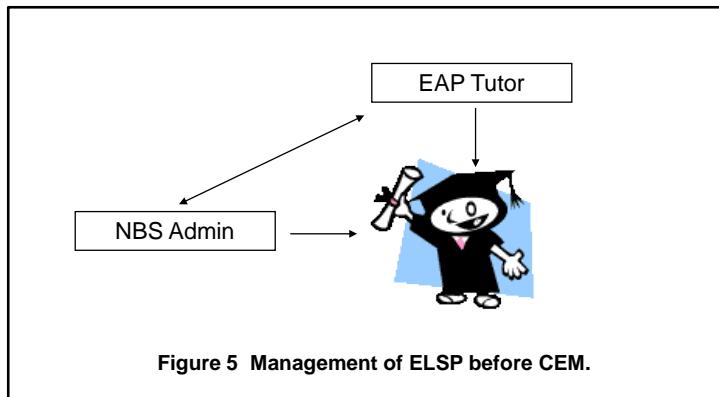


Figure 6

