ual: university of the arts london

Inclusive attainment case study:

Make the Grade

Terry Finnigan, Head of Student Attainment at UAL London College of Fashion discusses the Make the Grade project, which aimed to reduce the likelihood of referrals and resubmissions from students in their first year.

Background

In my first year in post as Head of Student Attainment in 2015, working in close collaboration with the Head of Study support, Diana Aronstam, we were discussing the large number of referrals that students were getting in the first year and how some students were coming to academic support to discuss and resubmit. Being in a referral situation for a student in the first year is a difficult one as they may end up having to resubmit a number of assignments at the same time as completing the work for the term. This situation can cause high anxiety and stress for some students and make it difficult to complete the first year (Neville 2009).

The new role needed some concrete student interventions so we decided to jointly implement the Make the Grade workshops on one course where non-submissions and referral rates in the first year were particularly high. We were building on the successful course attainment interventions introduced by the universities of Coventry, Wolverhampton and Derby who were involved in the HEA BME Summit to research further into the degree differentials between home white students and home BAME students. They had introduced an intervention called 'Fit to Submit' which had been shown over a short period of time to reduce quite substantially the BAME attainment gap. It consisted of a checklist for students to tick off before they gave in their written essays, which was part of the Practical Recipes for Student Success (PReSS) pack.

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Design

The original checklist was created for students who were producing written assignments, which would be presented by staff as a workshop three weeks before the deadline. This would give students the opportunity to return to the unit brief and understand what was being expected of them within the assessment criteria.

This model was taken and revised within two practical units. The course team met a term before the unit was going to be taught and were asked a series of questions about the unit:

What do you think are the two most difficult aspects of this assignment for students?

What tends to bring their grades down?

What do you find yourself having to say repeatedly in your discussion with students about this assignment?

What are the two/three most frequent points you find yourself making when giving feedback?

What aspects of this assignment do you find that students tend to overlook/omit when doing this assignment?

How can a student excel in this assignment?

*Can you say in a very straightforward way, what will make the finished work an A?*

The questions were designed to encourage staff to be reflective, and meant the whole intervention was owned by the course team and they began to articulate the key learning outcomes. I took notes from the session and then read through the unit brief in detail and created the checklist that linked to the key parts of the assignment.

This checklist was written in draft form and then reviewed and agreed by the course team. A series of one-hour workshops were then jointly delivered with the tutor, three weeks before the date for submission. In these workshops the course tutor created a presentation that showed examples of the key assessment evidence expected in the assignment and the Make the Grade checklist was shared with students and they had the time to ask any further questions around the assessment and also to see examples of past student work.

Outcomes

The process worked as it was done in the spirit of collaboration and reflection and the space in which staff had opportunities to discuss the assignment brief was very powerful. They emphasized to students the importance of submitting their work and students found the session very helpful.

This intervention improved student submission rates and reduced referral rates at a unit level. This intervention has been shared on a number of courses across the college and many courses are now finding a time three weeks before the deadline to have a similar workshop and give students and staff the time to discuss the unit brief.
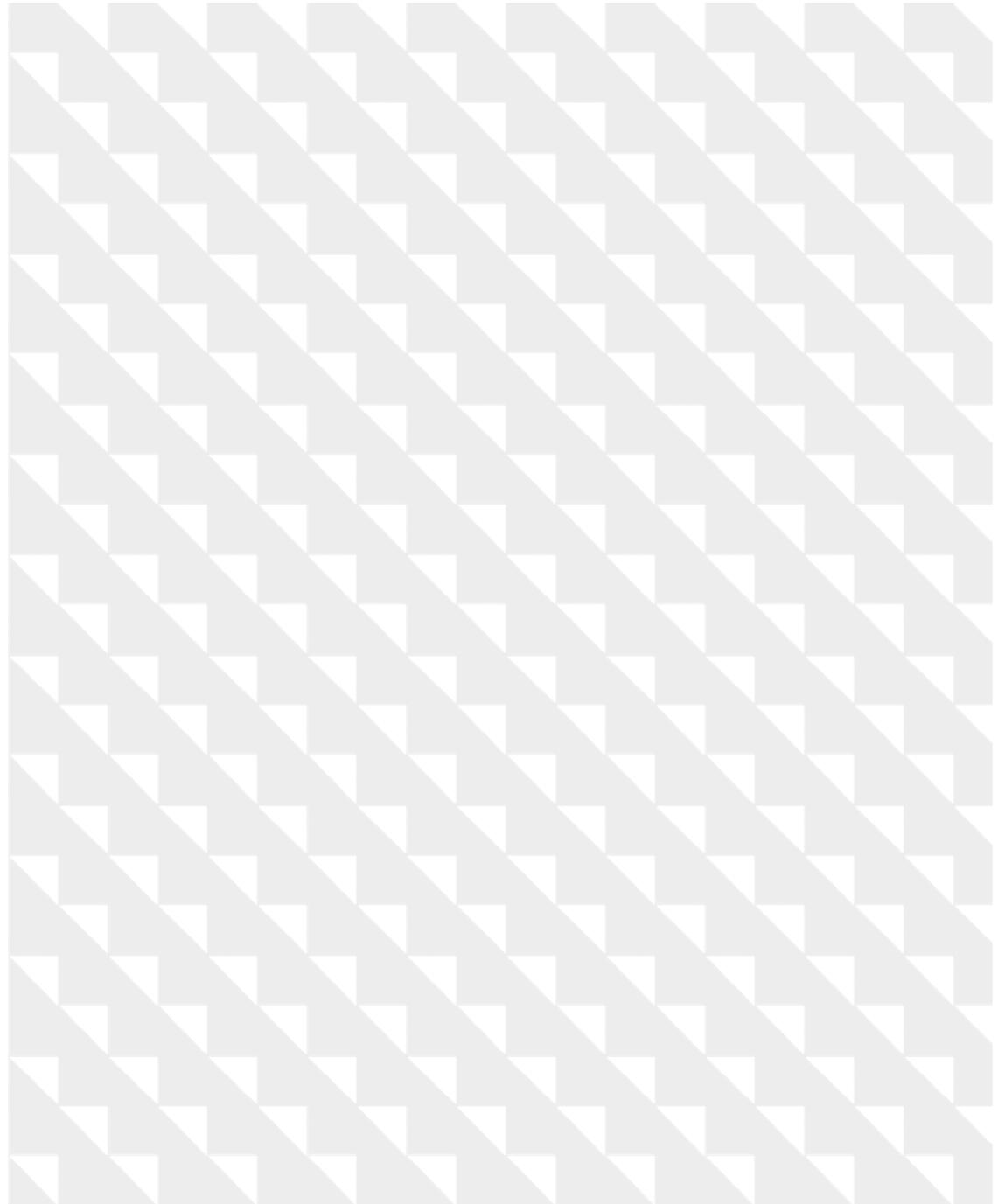
Make the Grade: Assignment Checklist (extract)

Unit: Cutting, Fitting and Tailoring

HAVE YOU READ THE UNIT HANDBOOK? IF NOT, DO IT NOW! In it you will find details of what is required in this assignment. It also includes the assessment criteria your work is marked against, and the learning outcomes – the basis for the assessment strategy in each unit.

Students often lose marks by forgetting some of the more straightforward elements of their assignments. We recommend that you "tick off" each of the points below as you prepare your work for submission.

☐ **Have you completed all three assessment requirements?**
1. Toiles and/or garment and/or samples of final design outcome: a classic tailored jacket
2. Portfolio of supportive work
3. A garment development diary
If you are not sure, check with your tutor.

☐ **Have you read and understood the assessment criteria?** You will lose marks and your work may even be referred if you have not.

The jacket

☐ Is the classic tailored jacket complete and well finished?

☐ Does the jacket show evidence of handcraft tailoring methods?

☐ Are the patterns for the jacket accurate, clearly labelled and well presented?

The portfolio of work

☐ Does the portfolio have evidence of primary and secondary research sources?

☐ Does the portfolio show evidence of the link to the historical, cultural and social context of bespoke tailoring and construction methods?

☐ Does the sketchbook read as a clear progression from research to design and 3D realisation? This means that you can show where your ideas started and how they developed in your design pages.

List of references

University of Derby (n.d.) *Practical Recipes for Student Success (PReSS).* Available at: https://uodpress.wordpress.com

Neville, C. (2009) *How to improve your assignment results.* Berkshire: OUP.

Steventon, G., Cureton, D. and Clouder,C. (2016) *Attainment in Higher Education; Issues, Controversies and Debates.* Oxon: Routledge.

Stevenson, J. (2012) *Black and Minority Ethnic Student Retention and Attainment.* Available at: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/bme_summit_final_report.pdf