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MyLab Accounting

INTO University of Exeter, UK

Improving students' experience, knowledge and skills acquisition, and supporting progression



About the resource

MyLab Accounting is a digital learning resource designed to work alongside specific textbooks as an online homework, tutorial and assessment programme. It provides a variety of different question types which can be studied independently or assigned by the lecturer. Assigned work is created and set with a deadline either as homework (for practice) or a test (for assessment). Settings can be adjusted to allow for single or multiple attempts. In anything other than a test, students will have access to a range of features to provide support and feedback such as 'Help Me Solve This' which offers a similar exercise, broken down into steps. Independent study is completed in a study plan with practice and sample test questions.

Achievement within MyLab Accounting can be measured in a number of ways including mastery. Students gain mastery points as they complete the online study plan, or in some cases assigned questions, to a maximum of 54 points. They must score 100% on the relevant sections and this score is translated as a percentage for the overall study plan score.

Key Findings

In 2015 we carried out a study¹ at INTO University of Exeter on the module *3605 Financial Management* which is part of a Graduate Diploma course. That study looked in depth at MyLab Accounting gradebook data and student study behaviour (see *References*).

Four years on from the original study, we revisited the same module in the academic year 2019/20 to explore how and why MyLab Accounting remains a core building block and to gather new student feedback. Our aim was to uncover the following:

- Whether MyLab Accounting continues to support consistent learner engagement and learner achievement.
- The impact of a clearly defined course structure alongside strong lecturer commitment to the use of digital resources.
- What students' responses to using the platform and their survey feedback tell us about the effect on their learning experience.

From a combination of lecturer observations and student survey data we found that MyLab Accounting:

- Enhanced individual students' experience, knowledge and skills acquisition.
- Allowed for early identification of struggling students who could then be offered additional support.
- Increased students' confidence, engagement and motivation in relation to their homework assignments, which were managed through MyLab Accounting.

93% of students thought that MyLab Accounting would have an impact on their overall performance in the course

83% of students would recommend MyLab Accounting to a friend

A large majority of students surveyed expected MyLab Accounting to have an impact on their overall course performance and would recommend it to a friend.



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The context & implementation of MyLab Accounting

In this study MyLab Accounting was used on one module – *3605 Financial Management* – which is part of a postgraduate level diploma.

The Graduate Diploma in Finance is taken by International Students as an access route to study a range MBAs at the University of Exeter Business School or other UK Masters courses. Much of the diploma is focussed on improving students' English language competency, as well as their knowledge and skills in a range of business areas from Finance and Accounting to HR and Marketing.

The mix of nationalities in the cohort has changed significantly over recent years – there used to be approximately 50% from Russia, with the rest from other countries around the world, whereas now over 80% are from Asia, with the majority of those coming from The People's Republic of China.

However, through the years, there have been few changes to the challenges and goals of this course. As students are all international and English is not their first language, there is a continuing need for accessible support and practice. The course is costly for the students and they therefore have high expectations of it. This does not necessarily translate into a motivated cohort, but students tend to have the ability and inclination to do well. In order to achieve their potential and progress through the course, students must be motivated to study independently, even if it is not for the completion of a credit-bearing assignment.

Mr Steve Astbury, Accounting Lecturer, has been the course convenor of the module *3605 Financial Management* since 2008. Upon taking over, he first changed the assessment structure and then in 2012 he introduced MyLab Accounting as a core, credit-bearing component of the assessment. This has remained the same since, with MyLab Accounting an essential part of the course:

- Students are assigned four MyLab Accounting online tests throughout the course.
- The final three account for 30% of the final course mark, with 70% attributed to the final exam.
- The first test allows students to become familiar with the format and platform, they simply have to log in to continue to the second test.
- Students are usually set 10 formative homework assignments online using MyLab Accounting throughout the course duration of 10 weeks – this homework is not mandatory and does not count towards the final mark.
- Students also have a written test in Week 5, which is run outside of MyLab Accounting – students receive personalised feedback on their submissions.

Mr Astbury had always wanted to be able to give his students one-to-one, personalised feedback on the work they complete and on their progression during the course but doing that through paper-based homework or through face-to-face sessions proved a significant challenge due to time pressures.

The decision to use MyLab Accounting straightaway offered multiple ways to deliver immediate and personalised feedback. As students complete the weekly formative homework in MyLab Accounting, the questions they are working through often include access to support tools such as 'View an Example' and 'Help Me Solve This' and they receive automatic, immediate feedback on their submitted answers. Additionally, after the first assigned online test in week 2, the students were able to view their results and get instant feedback on their performance. Mr Astbury uses the results to identify any students who are clearly



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struggling and intervenes to provide personalised support. Students are able to review their MyLab Accounting test results as soon as the test period is over, providing further feedback on their progress. Students are also assigned a workbook and Mr Astbury's analysis suggests that a good mark in the workbook is a good predictor of success in the final exam.

Changing student needs

As with all Masters, and associated preparation programmes for international students, the INTO courses are high cost and equally high value for the students attending. The students are committed to their long-term career path and are generally self-motivated. That said, they still need clear guidance and encouragement to undertake consistent independent study throughout the course.

Although students on the course are graduates, those who studied for their Bachelor's degree in Asia tend to be most familiar with rote learning and reproducing information. Mr Astbury says: *"The change is that you have to get them thinking and developing opinions, and critical analysis, which they're not really used to. Even though they're graduate students, they're not used to doing critical analysis."*

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– Steve Astbury | Accounting Lecturer | INTO University of Exeter

In our 2019 white paper *Opportunities for Higher Education in the Era of The Talent Economy*² **"critical thinking"** was identified as a key skill to support problem solving. Closely linked to this, in our Future Skills³ research, which considered employment in 2030, **"originality"** was one of the top 10 skills, abilities, and knowledge associated with rising occupations. Originality is defined as 'The ability to come up with unusual or clever ideas about a given topic or situation, or to develop creative ways to solve a problem.'

Demonstrating critical thinking is fundamental to a student's success on Mr Astbury's course. He explains:

"My week five formative test is the first marked bit of work that they get significant feedback from. It jolts them into the real world saying, 'Right, if you just reproduce everything you've had for the last four weeks, that's not good enough.' They've got to start doing some research and some thinking."

It's also more important than ever for these students to work consistently throughout the course and be prepared for the final exam, because the university no longer allows resits. He has found that running 1 formative assessment and 3 summative assessments through MyLab Accounting is crucial to showing students, early enough in the course, the regular practice required to develop their accounting skills and achieve on the course. Mr Astbury adds: *"I find it's a way of getting the students to hit the ground running and start working in a way that they need to."*



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Problem solving is another key skill for Mr Astbury's (and all) accounting students. One particular strength of MyLab Accounting is that it supports students as they learn accounting concepts where practice leads to a clear wrong or right answer. A new feature called **Accounting in Action** was designed to bolster conceptual understanding and adds a more realistic, business-focussed scenario to the online questions. Students are presented with the surrounding context of a start-up business and have to analyse and solve problems associated with the financial success of that business.

"I tell my students that basically, if they can do all the things in Accounting in Action, then they will have no problem with the numeric element of their final exam."

– Steve Astbury | Accounting Lecturer | INTO University of Exeter

Mr Astbury considered this tool particularly valuable in helping students prepare for some of the more complex problems they will encounter in the exam: *"I tell my students that basically, if they can do all the things in Accounting in Action, then they will have no problem with the numeric element of their final exam."*

Supporting positive student outcomes

The Graduate Diploma course has a higher than 90% pass rate, with 80% of students going on to study for their Masters at the University of Exeter and 20% going to other UK institutions. There continues to be a correlation between how well a student performs in their MyLab Accounting assignments and how well they do on the Financial Management module overall, including the final exam. However, Mr Astbury noted the limitations of such a correlation: *"Those students who use MyLab [most extensively and get high marks in the assignments], are probably the brightest and most intuitive... [they are] picking up a tool and using it."*

"...students use the 'Ask my instructor' feature. It means I get useful feedback on what they don't understand."

– Steve Astbury | Accounting Lecturer | INTO University of Exeter

MyLab Accounting does appear to have boosted student confidence, motivation, and engagement with the module. Mr Astbury observes that, *"If they got really good marks in their online test, then you see them buzzing the next week."*

It also helped him identify individual and class weaknesses: *"Quite a lot of my students use the 'Ask my instructor' feature. It means I get useful feedback through the MyLab on what they don't understand as well."*

Mr Astbury stated that early identification of any students who are particularly struggling was a huge benefit of doing assessments through MyLab Accounting. Being able to pinpoint those students who are struggling, and where, is a big advantage. He expanded:

"I don't have to wait for week five or week ten before I identify problems. I can identify those problems very quickly. I can give those students some help, give them another go at the formative assignment. And we can take them aside and give them extra support if they really are struggling with it."

– Steve Astbury



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Student experience

Student Feedback

The institution purchases access to MyLab Accounting for every student as an investment into both their experience and the perceived and real value of the course for their students, who pay substantial fees to take this course. Mr Astbury described how he introduces the system at the start of the module. *"I tell them you're going to need it for the online tests. Even if you do nothing else, you need it for online testing. But, I say, the minute you start using it, you'll find that there's a lot more in there than just online testing."*

Mr Astbury referenced the kind of responses he receives in yearly mid-term evaluations, noting that the answers often reference **'feedback'** and **'practice'** such as: *'We like the MyLab Accounting because we get immediate feedback, and it basically makes us work all the time.'* He added, *"The platform is integral. I wouldn't want to run the course without it."*

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– Steve Astbury | Accounting Lecturer | INTO University of Exeter

Students in 2019/20 responded well to the use of MyLab Accounting, as these comments from our survey indicate:

"Very useful and easy to use."

– Student, INTO University of Exeter

"There are lots of questions so we can easily become familiar with the concept"

– Student, INTO University of Exeter

"Various types of exercises help understanding"

– Student, INTO University of Exeter

Student Survey Data

We gave the class an opportunity to share their feedback on MyLab Accounting via a short, paper-based survey; 14 students provided responses and the results can be summarised as follows:

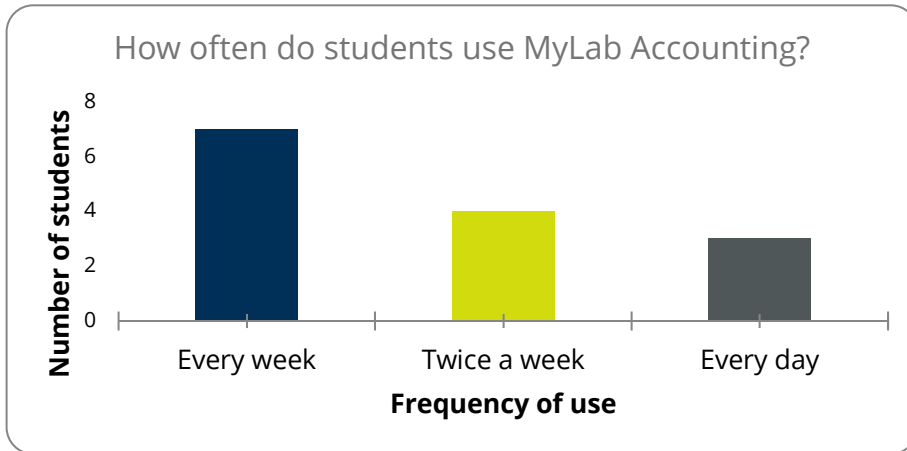
- 100% of students said they used MyLab Accounting every week and 21% used it every day
- 100% agreed it provided a safe space for them to practise their accounting skills
- 93% agreed it would improve performance
- 83% of those who answered would recommend MyLab Accounting to a friend
- 71% rated MyLab Accounting 8 out of 10, or higher



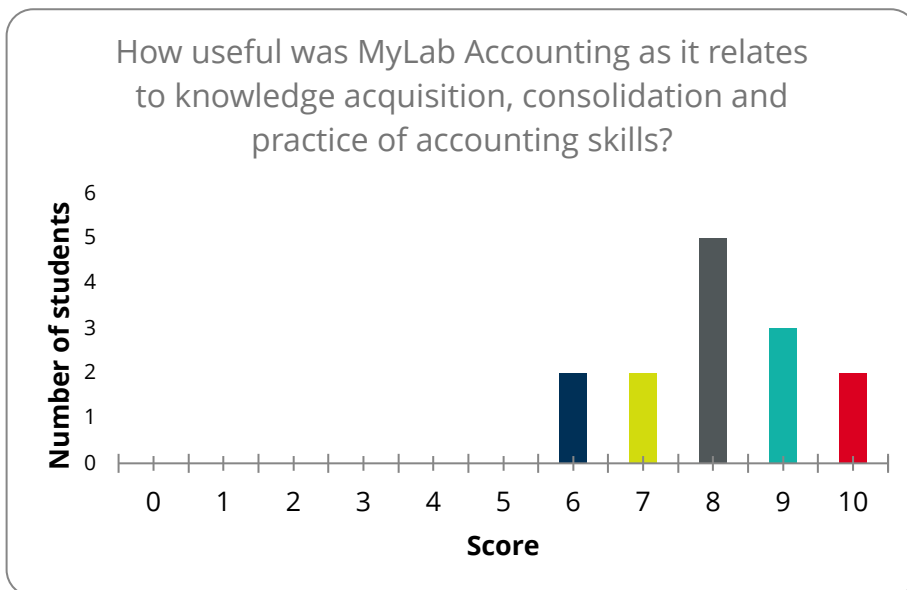
Usage and impact on learning

In our survey we asked the students to consider their use of MyLab Accounting and how they felt it impacted on their learning in the course.

The graph below demonstrated that students used the system regularly throughout the course, and *not* just for the credit-bearing online tests.



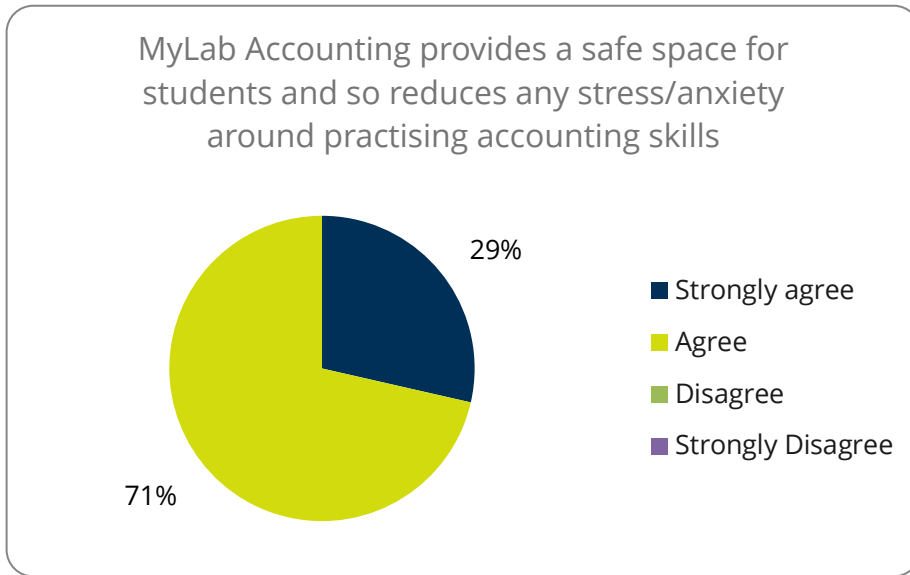
When asked about the usefulness of MyLab Accounting in relation to 'knowledge acquisition, consolidation and practice of accounting skills' **71%** of students rated it 8 out of 10, or higher.



71% of students rated MyLab Accounting as useful for 'knowledge acquisition, consolidation and practice of accounting skills'

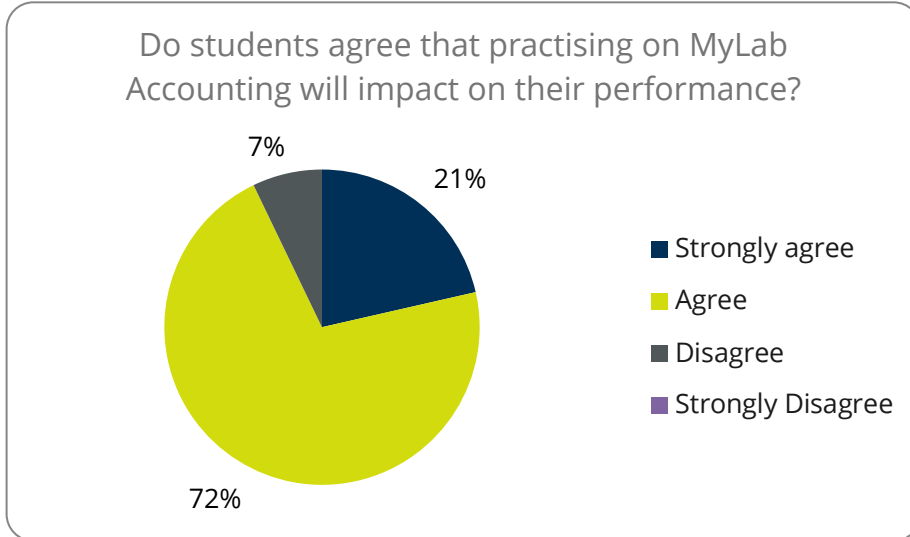


Students valued the opportunity that MyLab Accounting provided for them to practise their accounting skills in a safe space; all 14 survey respondents *strongly agreed* or *agreed* with this.



100% of students agreed that MyLab Accounting provides a safe space for practising

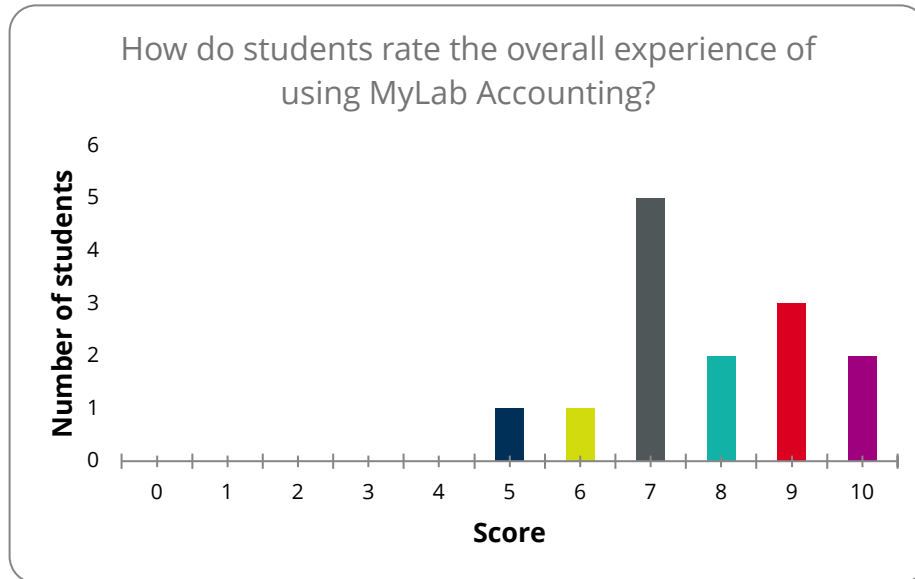
The vast majority (**93%**) of students thought that MyLab Accounting would have an impact on their overall performance in the course:



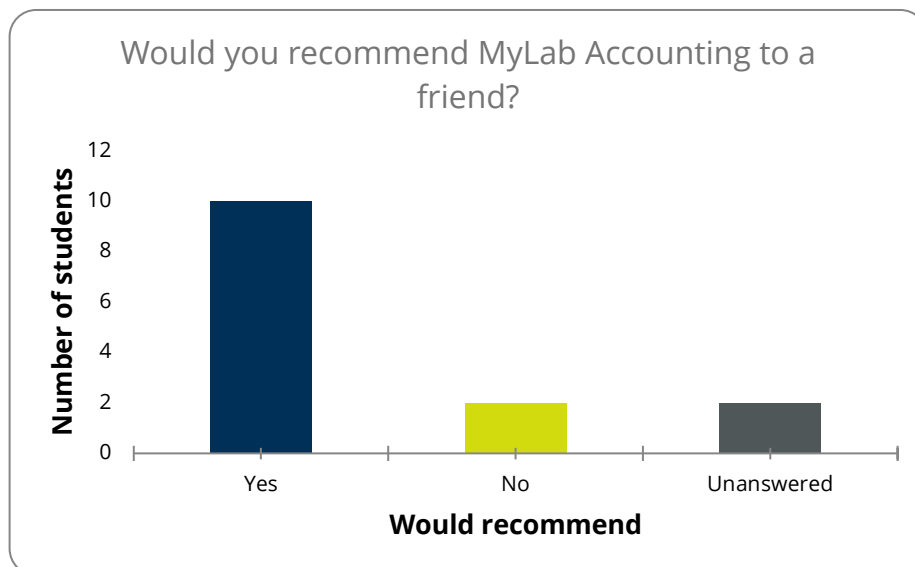


Satisfaction

92% of students stated a level of satisfaction with the experience of using MyLab Accounting as above neutral and **50%** of survey respondents rated the system 8 out of 10, or higher:



Of the 12 students who answered the question 'Would you recommend MLA to a friend?', only 2 would *not* have recommended it.





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Making a big impact with a blended learning approach

MyLab Accounting was an integral part of the Graduate Diploma at INTO University of Exeter in 2019/20. Having used MyLab Accounting so effectively on his module for 7 years, Mr Astbury described it as: *“absolutely fundamental to the way I teach it.”*

MyLab Accounting encouraged student participation in regular practice and provided an efficient way of setting summative assessment throughout the course. In particular, feedback from students and teachers alike demonstrated that MyLab Accounting:

- provided a safe space for students to practise and receive feedback, particularly where international learning styles are different and rote learning is not encouraged
- allowed the lecturer to identify any students struggling with numeric problems and critical thinking earlier in the course, ensuring they could offer the relevant support earlier
- increased student engagement and confidence
- supported students’ acquisition of critical thinking and problem-solving skills
- prepared students for the level of knowledge and depth of problem-solving skills required in their final exam.

It is testament to the success of Mr Astbury’s approach that other lecturers teaching on the Graduate Diploma acknowledge the benefits it offers, and they are either already using it or are considering greater use of online testing through the MyLab in their own modules.

Mr Astbury’s concluding advice to other educators is:

“Once you start using it, you realise how powerful it is. But it’s that leap of faith. That’s the most difficult bit; pressing the button the first time and going, right, I’m really going to go for this.”

– Steve Astbury

“Once you start using it, you realise how powerful it is.”

– Steve Astbury | Accounting
Lecturer | INTO University of Exeter

References

- 1 <https://www.pearson.com/uk/educators/higher-education-educators/success-stories.html>
- 2 https://www.pearson.com/content/dam/one-dot-com/one-dot-com/global/Files/news/gls/Opportunity_for_HE_Sept2019.pdf
- 3 <https://futureskills.pearson.com/research/assets/pdfs/media-pack.pdf>