Activity name	Post-16 Personal Statements
Date	86 individual dates delivered throughout Tranche 5 and 6 (September 2020 to June 2022)
Total number of students	1647
Total number of target students	427
Institutions involved ** Institutions that completed surveys*	Bideford College, Bodmin College*, Bridgwater & Taunton College*, City College Plymouth, Cornwall College*, Exeter College, Heathfield Community School, Hele's School*, King Edward VI Community College, Petroc*, Plymouth College of Art*, Redruth School, Scott College*, Sir John Hunt Community Sports College*, South Devon College, St Cuthbert Mayne School, Stoke Damerel Community College, Strode College, Teignmouth Community School, The Blue School, The Ilfracombe Church of England Academy, The Spires College, Tor Bridge High, Torquay Academy*, Truro & Penwith College*, Yeovil College*, West Somerset College*

Introduction

This report outlines the impact of the Personal Statement sessions delivered by Next Steps South West (NSSW) staff. The sessions were delivered to Year 12 and Year 13 students across 27 NSSW target schools and colleges throughout the 2020-21 and 2021-22 academic years; the Tranche 5 (T5) and Tranche 6 (T6) periods for NSSW. Sessions in Tranche 5 were delivered online due to covid restrictions. Sessions in Tranche 6 were delivered in person.

Aims

The Post-16 Personal Statement sessions aimed to broaden students' knowledge of HE by explaining the role of personal statements in the UCAS application process and developing students' confidence by drafting and tailoring content for their own personal statement. These aims align with key barriers to HE progression identified by NSSW: lack of *Knowledge of HE* and lack of *Soft Skills*. Table 1 details the anticipated outcomes of the Post-16 Personal Statement sessions.

Table 1. Anticipated outcomes of the Personal Statement sessions

| Barrier to HE	Short-term outcomes	Indicators
Knowledge of HE	Increased understanding of personal statement role in the HE application process Increased understanding of techniques for drafting and tailoring content for personal statements	Increased understanding of how to access HE courses
Soft Skills	Increased confidence in drafting and tailoring content for personal statements	Increased awareness of transferable skills for future study and employment

Evaluation Design and Data Collection

The Personal Statement workshops were evaluated using anonymous post-activity evaluation surveys, including quantitative and qualitative questions. The surveys were designed to evaluate the short-term outcomes by using the indicators as outlined in Table 1.

Results

This section presents the analysis of findings gathered from 337 student surveys collected throughout T5 and T6, and the impact these sessions had on addressing the barriers to HE progression.

Students were asked their level of agreement on a number of statements about the writing of personal statements (see Figure 1).
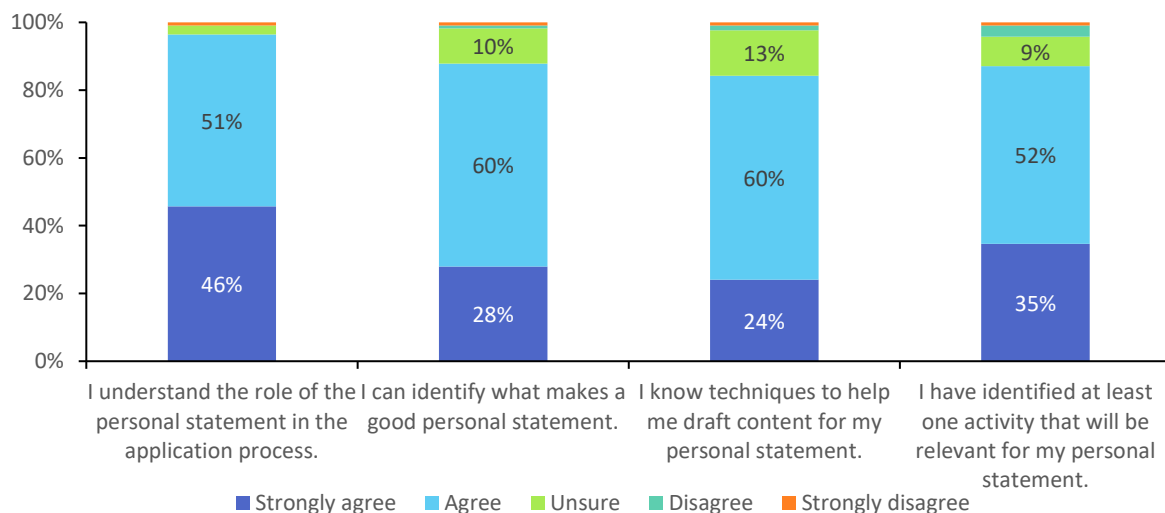

Figure 1. Statements relating to the writing of personal statements

At the end of the session, 97% of students either strongly agreed or agreed that they understood the role of the personal statement in the application process. 88% of students strongly agreed or agreed that they can identify what makes a good personal statement. 84% of students strongly agreed or agreed that they know techniques to help them draft content for their personal statement. 87% of students strongly agreed

or agreed that they had identified at least one activity that will be relevant for their personal statement. These results show that the sessions have equipped students with an understanding of the personal statement's purpose and given them practical skills to write a good statement.

To test the students' knowledge on the content of the activity and to provide evidence to help validate self-reported data, students were asked to select one of four definitions *which best explains the 'ABC' rule* (see Figure 2).
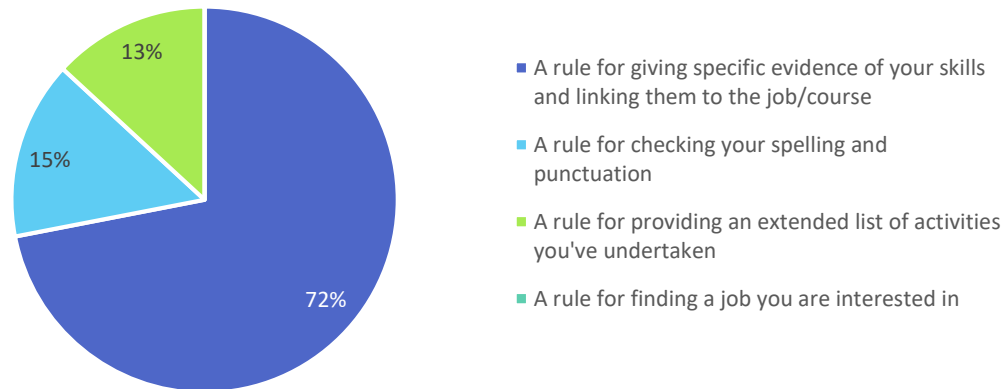
Figure 2. Students' understanding of the 'ABC' rule

The majority of students (72%) chose the correct definition: *A rule for giving specific evidence of your skills and linking them to the job/course.* However, there is also room to improve upon this result to ensure that students do not confuse the 'ABC' rule as one that helps to check spelling and punctuation or one for providing an extended list of activities they have undertaken.

Students were asked to rate their level of confidence in drafting their personal statement (Figure 3).
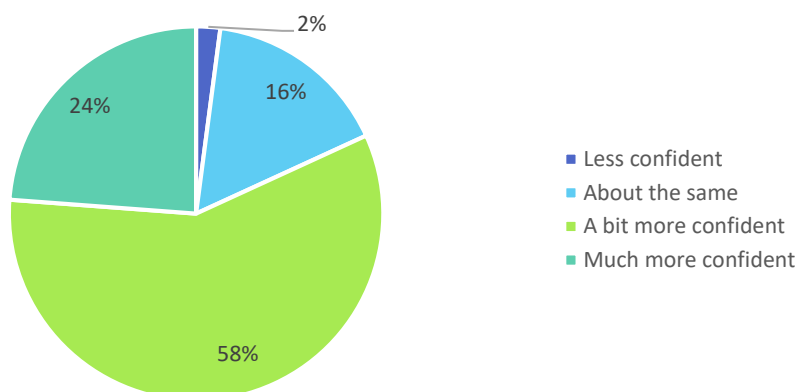
Figure 3. Students' confidence in drafting their personal statement

Following this session, 82% of students said that they were confident in drafting their personal statement. This suggests that the intervention supported the majority of students in feeling more prepared to draft their personal statement.

Students were asked to provide an example of one skill or experience they had identified that could be used in their personal statement and explain how/why they would use it (see Figure 4).
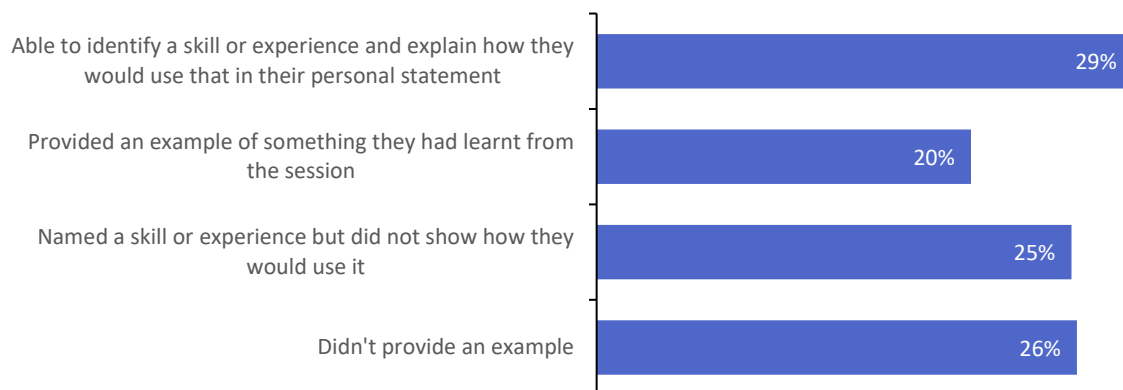
Figure 4. Students' asked to provide a skill/experience and how they would use it.

Figure 4 shows 29% of students were able to identify a skill or experience and explain how they would use that in their personal statement. One student said, for example, "Working at a bar and serving very complicated cocktails, this helps with organisation and time management." Another said, "I volunteer on Saturdays at a charity shop. That shows the ability to work as part of a team." 25% of students named a skill or experience but did not go on to show how they would use it in their personal statement. For example, one student said that they had volunteered at Derriford Hospital but did not explain how they would use that experience in their personal statement.

26% of students did not provide a skill or experience, either leaving this question blank or saying they were not sure. 20% of students provided an example of something that they had learnt from the session such as the ABC rule or to check their spelling and grammar. It may be that these students did not read the question properly or misunderstood it. For future surveys it might be helpful if this question was separated into two parts: the first part asking the student to identify a skill or experience that they have identified for use in their personal statement and the second part asking them to explain how/why they will use that in their personal statement. This may minimise the risk of misunderstanding the question.

Students were asked to identify the most useful aspect of the session. Figure 5 shows the results of the responses given by the 236 students that answered this question. 98% of students came away from the session learning something useful. Of those, 43% said that the most useful thing they had learnt was how to write and structure a good personal statement. One student explained, "*I know a lot more about how to write a personal statement, before the session I had no idea where to start.*" 5% of students felt the opportunity to research different universities and courses that might interest them was the most useful aspect of the session. For example, one student said, "*I actually figured out what course I wanted to do.*" 7% of students found learning

the ABC rule was the most useful aspect of the session. One student said, "*The ABC rule is very useful for quickly and clearly putting content into my personal statement.*"

How to write and structure a good personal statement	43%
Generally positive	11%
Dos and don'ts of writing a personal statement	9%
What a personal statement is and its purpose	9%
Made a start	8%
The ABC rule	7%
How to identify transferable skills/ experiences and use…	6%
What course to do/how to apply to uni/UCAS	5%
Didn't learn much	2%

Figure 5. Most useful thing aspect of the session.

8% of students found the session most useful for helping them make a start on their personal statement. One said, *"I started and I am very happy, it wasn't too bad! Thank you for your help."* Another said, "*I finally found the motivation to start.*" 12% of students did not identify any particular aspect of the session as useful but came away from the session finding it was generally helpful. For example, one said, "*I found the session to be very understandable.*" Another said, "*I really understood everything that was being said in the lesson.*" Of the small number who answered negatively, one student answered "*Not a lot as I'm not going to uni so the meeting didn't necessarily apply to me."* However, it is evident that the vast majority of students found the content of this session helpful.

Conclusion

To monitor the success of the Personal Statement sessions, results were evaluated against short-term targets and outcomes as presented in Table 2. The table illustrates that all targets were achieved, indicating that the Personal Statement sessions have been successful in increasing student knowledge about HE, as well as addressing a potential lack in soft skills.

Table 2. Personal Statement sessions – Outcomes achieved in T5 &T6

Barriers of HE	Short-term Outcomes and Targets	Indicators, we are able to report:	Evidence	Target Outcome
Knowledge of HE	Increased understanding of HE application process, including personal statements for	Students are able to identify role of personal statement	**97%** agreed that they understood the role of the personal in the application process.	**Achieved**

	for ≥ 80% students	Students are able to identify strategies for writing a personal statement	**84%** of students agreed that they knew techniques to help them draft content for their personal statement. Target 80%: T5/T6 achievement 84% and over	
Soft Skills	Increased confidence in drafting and tailoring content for personal statements for ≥ **80% students**	Students report increased confidence in drafting content for personal statement	**82%** reported feeling more confident in drafting their personal statement. Target 80%: T5/T6 achievement 82%	**Achieved**

Recommendations

There is scope for future Personal Statement sessions to strengthen how the ABC rule is explained so that more students are able to correctly define it. The survey question - Please provide an example of one skill or experience you have identified for use in your personal statement, and explain how / why you will use it - should be separated into two statements to ensure that it is fully answered.