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Academic Skills Provision and Learning Development: Situation, Synergy and Sustainability

Dr Pat Hill and Dr Amanda Tinker
Exploring the Position of Academic Skills Provision in Higher Education
Cardiff Metropolitan University
25 April 2017
embed@hud.ac.uk
Our Journey: from Deficiency to Development

- Evaluation & QAA Institutional Audit
- Permanent academic contracts
- Seven Schools, Individual Management but sharing best practice
- Collaboration with subject specialists, librarians, disability, IT, careers
- Sustainability
- Inclusion
- Multiple strategies
- Embedding, progression & curriculum design
- Widening participation
- Remedial
- Retention & Tutorial focused

2002-2005 HEFCE Project
2002-2005 - Beginnings

Largest HEFC funded TQEF project at the University -
‘The Establishment of a Distributed Academic Skills Unit for the University’

The central aim: To establish academic skills support across the University that will provide support for students with the non-subject aspects of their work, with the target of 200 student contacts per year by 2004.
Controversial Appointments

Huddersfield University is advertising for "academic support tutors" to help students "with grammar" and "to read academic books". How have we arrived at a state where universities are recruiting remedial teachers to help students with basic reading and writing skills?

Jane Magill, Huddersfield

I enclose a newspaper advertisement placed by Huddersfield University for "academic skills tutors" and wonder what you make of it. The university is looking for three such tutors…Their duties are to "teach students how to read academic texts, find information, write clearly and construct arguments". They should also be able to help with "some aspects of numeracy". **I am surprised the need is for only three.**

1990s expansion and widening participation (Radford et al, 1997)

Reacting to a perceived ‘problem’ or student ‘deficit’ (Ivanič and Lea, 2006)

Retention-focused – diagnostic to identify students ‘at risk’
Key Questions: Retention and Achievement

Have you ever seriously considered leaving your course?

If yes, has the support from your Academic Skills Tutor kept you from leaving?

Do you feel that your academic work has improved as a result of seeing the AST?

74% cited the help of AST as a major factor in their decision to continue.

79% of students said that the Academic Skills Tutors had made a significant contribution to improvement in their coursework.
The University’s internal evaluation of the AST system concluded that the service was highly valued and a major contributor to retaining students at the University; the [audit] team had no reason to dissent from this finding…it has the capacity to improve the confidence of some first-year students who might otherwise not thrive. Overall, it seemed to the team that the University’s development of its AST scheme represented a feature of good practice.

University of Huddersfield
QAA Institutional Audit (2004, p.24)
Our Devolved Model

7 Schools

13.5 (FTE) Academic Skills Tutors
## A Devolved Model

### Benefits

- Part of school
- Working relationships with course tutors
- Awareness of curriculum and assessment
- Timely
- Accessible
- Team collaboration and liaison with library and Student Services

### Issues

- Funding of resources/units within Schools varies
- Organic (not strategic) growth
- Inequality of provision across the University
- Ability to cope with periods of high demand
- Still some perceptions of deficit model

### Opportunities

- Research – empirical/action research: writing in the disciplines/ course and curriculum design/student engagement
- Further embedding and progressive learning development
- Need for staff as well as student development – a ‘whole institution approach’ (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2004; Wingate, 2006)
Sustainability
Inclusivity, Achievement and Development for All

Multiple Strategies

- Individualised Tutorials
- Stand alone (open) workshops
- Academic Skills for International Students
- Integrated workshops
- Module leadership & Curriculum Design
- Online Resources
- Peer Involvement
Why Embed Skills?

“…non-embedded skills teaching tends to be perceived negatively by many students.” (Wall, 2006, p.xii).

“bolt-on’ study skills provision ‘has severe limitations’ (Wingate, 2006, p.457).

“…writing development needs to be contextualized within the disciplines, and interest in adapting such approaches to the UK context is burgeoning” (Clughen & Connell, 2012, p.333).

“…is embedded in the curriculum as a compulsory requirement and is inclusive of all groups whatever their linguistic backgrounds. It is firmly framed as being concerned with the next stage of students’ development and is not in any way remedial or compensating for any deficiency (Hathaway, 2015, p.507).
One quick question…

What does embedding skills in the curriculum mean to you?
“...the integration of critical thinking, to inform study and critical writing, to inform the demonstration of understanding and application of knowledge, into each stage of a student’s journey through their degree. Each year stage is different requiring incrementally different skills.”

“It can mean different things according to context...but the word 'embedding' implies that something is to be integrated, not added on at the end or done separately.”

“It means cutting back on genuine academic content. It also means patronising our 18-21 year old students with Mickey Mouse bullshit they’ve already learned in school and patronising our mature students by treating them like school kids.”

“If skills are truly embedded students shouldn’t be aware that they are learning them, as opposed to the subject material, and the delivery should be by the core academic staff.”

“Clear alignment within the assessment criteria, learning outcomes and assessment task of activity which evidences the skills you’re trying to embed, together with clear direction on supporting information within teaching.”

“...something that can be used at a later date in employment, after the student has graduated...we should highlight the need for cross-transferable skills in our modules and record what they are. Things like critical thinking, problem solving, initiative, planning, collaboration etc.”
Generic Principles

Collaborative
Holistic
Inclusive
Timely
Relevant
Reflective
Interactive

Hill and Tinker
(2013)
Integrated Learning Portfolio (First Year Textiles Module)

Academic Skills Tutor works alongside module tutors to give relevant input at the appropriate time. Assessment is through a reflective blog and final portfolio in which the students are encouraged to apply their learning holistically.

Introduction to Critical and Cultural Theory
Second Year English Module

Weekly seminars but lectures are put on podcasts to allow room for team-taught workshops on:

- Reflecting on learning (1)
- Presentation skills and peer evaluation
- Reading the cultural landscape
- Using critical theory to analyse a text
- Library - Information Literacy
- Essay structure and planning
- Essay Assessment Criteria
- Self-evaluation
- Applying theory to cultural materials
- Understanding and using assessment
- Evaluating and including sources
- Putting a portfolio together
- Reflecting on learning (2)

‘Working with the Converted’
## Collaboration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initiator</th>
<th>What stage</th>
<th>Who is involved</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Context given</th>
<th>Degree involved</th>
<th>Integration</th>
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Progressive Learning Development

Foundation

- Induction
- Referencing
- Academic Integrity
- Writing process, structuring essays/reports
- Basic Research strategies & evaluating and using library resources (with librarians)

Intermediate

- Referencing refresher
- Understanding and acting on feedback
- Arguments and critical thinking
- Adapting different formats and styles
- Advanced Research with librarians

Honours → Postgrad

- Major written Assignments
- Literature reviews and critical reading
- Referencing refresher/research management tools (Q&A)
- Academic Voice
- Primary research methods
- Advanced presentation skills

Extra

- Oral presentation skills
- Reflective writing
- Reading & note-taking strategies
- Team work
- Dissertation proposals
- Organisation/Time Management
- Annotated bibliographies
- Reflective writing
- Library database refresher
- Archives and using other libraries

One-to-one Tutorials (by appointment) and ‘Drop-in’ Sessions, (open access)
Embedding Web Resource

- Current Research
- Generic principles
- Embedding Skills?
- Progressive Learning Development
- Challenges and Solutions
- Embedding Journeys
- Case studies, videos, templates and workshop materials

http://aldinhe-embeddingskills.hud.ac.uk
Teaching Excellence Framework

**Teaching Quality**
- Feedback
- Specialist support staff

**Learning Environment**
- Development of independent study and research skills
- Personalised Learning
- Non-continuation (retention)

**Student Outcomes and Learning Gain**
- Lifelong Learning Skills
- Graduate attributes
- Students’ learning gain

HEFCE (2016)
Conclusion

• Not a straightforward journey
• Flexibility
• Promotion, relationship building and collaboration
• Challenges: status; visibility; measuring impact
Thank you

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References


