

Study Skills Support: Where are we now? What should we aim for?

Abstract

This project reviewed current provision of support for study skills. Members of teaching staff completed a survey and students participated in focus groups. These data were supplemented with details of study skills provision from comparable institutions. A number of recommendations for future research and further action are included in the report.

Keywords

study skills, student support, library



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Introduction and Background

External and internal drivers indicated a need to address the topic of study skills provision within Anglia Ruskin: externally, changes in student/applicant expectations, and observations from the National Union of Students; and internally, driven in part by student responses to the National Student Survey, the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy contains a commitment to improving student experience and success, and employability.

There is clear evidence that we need to 'do more' in terms of the study skills support we provide. The purpose of this investigation was to determine what will be most effective and what it is that students want. At present, no clear overview of our current provision exists beyond a sense that both students and staff are unclear about the support available or how it can be accessed.

Using a definition of 'study skills' as 'study mechanics' (Carter, 1958, cited in Entwistle, 1960) including information and digital literacy, academic planning, strategies and organisational skills (Cottrell, 2003), we devised the following aims to:

- Conduct a systematic audit of the study skills provision currently offered via faculties and departments (Phase 1 – Staff Survey).
- Assess our students' views on current provision and their preferences for future development (Phase 2 – Student Focus Groups).
- Gain a comparative view of 'good practice' study skills provision in other HEIs (Phase 3 – Good Practice Review).

Our expected outcomes were:

- To develop an inclusive map of study skills provision that can be shared and publicised across our university, encouraging take-up of existing resources.
- To recommend and plan further development of study skills provision based on student preferences and examples of good practice.

Methodology

The first phase of the project aimed at gathering views from members of staff on current study skills support and how this might be improved. A questionnaire was developed and administered using SurveyMonkey (an online survey service) and distributed to 620 members of staff known to be involved in study skills support (i.e. teaching staff, library staff, and student services staff). 122 valid responses were received, representing a 20% response rate.

Phase 2 of the project was designed to assess students' views and preferences. These were obtained via focus groups.

The project team decided to gather information from each undergraduate year group to determine whether experiences differed throughout a students' learning path. Consequently, three focus groups were run at the Cambridge campus, and a further three at the Chelmsford campus. Forty students were recruited via the Employment Bureau, 32 of which attended. The main themes covered were:

1. Study skills support in programme of study;
2. Study skills support across the University;
3. Online study skills support:
 - I. exclusive to our University
 - II. available elsewhere;
4. Access to study skills support;
5. Self-assessment;
6. Feedback to the University's current provision.

The third and final phase of the project was a review of 'good practice' of study skills provision at four benchmark universities:

- University of Essex;
- University of East Anglia;
- University of East London;
- University of Bedfordshire.

The University of Leeds and the University of Loughborough were also reviewed as they were identified as examples of good practice. The desk research was conducted by searching the universities' websites and the focus was on the accessibility of information; ownership of study skills support provision; attractiveness of the website; the range of materials provided and the level of interactivity; internally/externally created content; provision of face-to-face support; obvious features of good practice; and the institutions' justification for their approach.

Findings

Survey

Analysis of the responses to the staff survey was extremely encouraging, with 70% of respondents rating current support for study skills as either good or very good. Some form of study skills support is offered in 85% of modules / pathways. Of these, 'discrete study skills sessions taught as part of the course', and 'study skills topics embedded in the substantive topics' are the most frequently offered types of study support. Respondents noted that sessions that are embedded within the curriculum are more successful.

The information skills sessions offered by the Library are the most widely used service offered to students across the university (86%). The Skills@Uni service provided jointly by the Library and Student Services is also very widely used (71%).

Respondents suggested increasing the flexibility of the timing of sessions, particularly to accommodate students with competing priorities, such as part-time students and those who travel long-distance, and those students who only attend on certain days of the week.

Responses indicate a need to improve publicity and raise awareness of what is currently offered, and the need for more cohesive, 'joined-up' consistent support accessible to all.

Focus Groups

Students find the study support they receive helpful but they lack awareness of what is on offer and where they should go to obtain it. Students particularly value library sessions on referencing, and 'book a librarian', and international students especially welcome the English Language sessions. A number of students, however, requested that Study Skills should be expanded to include basic IT support.

Students view lecturers as the primary means of communication between our university and themselves. While first years believe that it is the lecturers' responsibility to refer them to appropriate sources of skills, as they progress through their undergraduate career, students recognise that they must also take responsibility for finding out what is available. There was, however, a lack of clarity about in-programme support.

In addition to lecturers, students also noted that the provision of study skills support via the VLE would be welcome. A well-promoted, clearly defined gateway to study skills could be 'the place to go'. They also noted, however, the need to deliver this consistently for all courses, and that online support should complement, rather than replace, face-to-face sessions.

First year students reported high levels of general study skills support, and third year students commented positively on support targeted at their major projects. Second year students, however, seemed to receive little study skills support in comparison to the other years.

Referring to the perception of study skills, students called for a balance of compulsory and optional study skills elements. Students reported that they tend not to attend non-compulsory study skills sessions. They reported that, despite being aware of the importance of these sessions to their study skills development, if they are given the option to attend, they would not do so.

In line with the staff responses above, students requested increased flexibility in the timing of study skills sessions. Some students, for example, noted that they prefer to receive support at the end of the semester to coincide with assignment preparation. Others observed that session times conflicted with timetabled lectures or took place on days when they were not on campus, restricting their opportunities to attend.

Good Practice Review

The main finding of the good practice review is that, despite minor differences, all the universities examined offered study skills support that was broadly similar in all important respects.

Accessibility is a key issue when considering online provision. Some institutions provided direct links to study skills support from their home page while other institutions did not. Where direct links were not available, location of support was only possible via the search function.

One issue that was highlighted in the review of the institutions' websites was the need to provide a range of online materials, including printable downloads (such as PDF files), audio and video files (especially demonstrations), self-tests, blogs, and glossaries.

The various websites visited included a combination of internally produced resources plus links to external sources. Those institutions that relied more heavily on external sources than others appeared less well prepared than those that hosted institution-generated support.

Online provision at all institutions included details of the types of face-to-face support available, including drop-ins, tutorials and workshops. Some universities, however, only provided full details of these courses to staff and students via password-protected sources.

Conclusions and Recommendations

One of the anticipated outcomes from this research was an inclusive map of existing study skills provision across our university. From the online staff survey we were able to ascertain that some form of study skills development or support is offered in more than 85% of pathways/modules. However the granular detail relating to the types of study skills provision was not fully elicited from the survey participants. From the data provided it will be possible to identify and therefore promote the most popular study skills support that is offered either by faculties or by support services.

Recommendations for further development:

1. Increase student and staff awareness:
 - Lecturers must be aware of and endorse any/all study skills provision as they are the primary channel for communicating and promoting this to students;
 - Provision should be a clearly articulated component of all programmes of study;
 - Ensure multiple communication channels and regular, timely reminders.
2. Support should be 'on-demand', offer flexibility of access and include a range of delivery formats:
 - Students need to be able to access support when they actually need it;
 - Delivery formats should include face-to-face and online provision to cater for learning preferences;
 - Provide flexibility in the times available for face-to-face support including evening provision;
 - Provide ongoing support for all levels (basic/introductory and advanced support) that can be 'dipped into' as required by late arrivals, part-time students, those requiring refreshers and students on all levels of study;
 - Provide targeted and 'packaged' online support via the VLE (see 3 below).
3. Develop a well promoted, clearly defined study skills area on the VLE that is the gateway for online study skills provision:
 - This should include access to subject/course specific skills support and a range of resource types including: video tutorials, links to recommended resources, summaries and refreshers

- Provide training for staff so that they can maximise the use of VLE components such as: email, discussion forums, wiki and chat facilities.
4. IT Skills support:
 - Basic IT skills development should be available to students from the start of their courses;
 - Offer students the opportunity to develop skills to a higher level;
 - Provide support to develop skills specialist programs (Photoshop, SPSS, Dreamweaver, etc.).
 5. Careful consideration should be given to identifying any compulsory skills development training and clearly articulating this to students.
 6. Our university should build on and develop existing successful provision that is generally valued by students, integrating this into any new developments.

We intend to build on the success of our Skills@Uni programme by actively publicising sessions and improving the scope and number of very popular sessions (e.g. referencing sessions). Within the University Library we are planning to update our Information Skills tutorial, PILOT, to include increased interactivity. We actively promote this within our information skills sessions with students and the link is available university wide.

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