Leeds University Library

Academic Skills Strategy

Introduction

Following the move of the Skills Centre into the Library and the establishment of Skills@Library, the Library is now able to support and provide a broad and varied range of academic skills development for students. Academic skills are those generic and transferable skills which underpin the learning development of undergraduate and taught postgraduate students in higher education, enabling them to be confident, independent critical thinkers and reflective learners. In addition, supporting the development of students' academic skills is integral to Leeds for Life. Students are encouraged to maximise their university experiences, become effective learners at University and acknowledge how these skills will benefit them in their future careers.

The Library's Strategic Plan includes the aim to empower our users by "developing their academic skills to work independently, efficiently and confidently in learning, research, and enterprise initiatives" [1].

This aim supports the University's key theme to "inspire our students to develop their full potential" by contributing to the delivery of "an exceptional student experience" and "supporting high quality students from all backgrounds"[2].

A paper outlining the future of the Skills Centre within the Library was agreed by VCEG (Vice-Chancellor's Executive Group) in 2008. It states that the bringing together of academic skills and information literacy provided "an opportunity to create a comprehensive academic skills support service in the Library which extended existing support and would enable the adoption of new approaches"[3].

In many Schools and Faculties, academic staff already provide teaching in and support for academic skills, often in conjunction with Faculty Teams and Skills@Library. This paper outlines how the planned developments in the Library should enable us to improve our support for and provision of academic skills support to the University, working in partnership with Schools and Faculties. In addition, we hope that this strategy will complement the outcomes of the current reviews of Student Services and Curriculum Enhancement.

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[1] Leeds University Library (2009) Library Strategy Plan 2009/10 – 2013/14

[2] The University of Leeds (2009) Strategy Map http://www.leeds.ac.uk/downloads/file/217/strategy_map

[3] The University of Leeds Vice-Chancellor's Executive Group (2008) The future of the Skills Centre within the Library Academic Skills Group

Embedding academic skills into the curriculum

Supporting students' learning development is a creative process which enables all students to maximise their potential. Our experience of working with students, from teaching on modules and through general workshops and one to one support, suggests that high performing, confident students seek the opportunity to improve their grades and less confident students need help with academic writing, reading and critical thinking, as well as information literacy. This need crosses all types of students, traditional and non-traditional, home and international, as many find themselves ill-equipped to deal with the demands of higher education. A survey conducted as part of a Higher Education Academy research project on the first year experience found that of the 7109 students responding, a third had found coping with academic work harder than they had expected it to be[4].

Curriculum-based teaching of academic skills reaches a large number of students and is set in the subject context, making it relevant and timely for students. It supports the developmental process of learning, in which all students are engaged and find challenging at times. Through teaching academic skills in the curriculum, we aim to encourage students to develop an ethos of continual learning and development which they will take forward into the workplace and their future lives. Academic skills teaching is therefore an important part of Leeds for Life.

Nationally, as well as in the US, there has been a major shift away from separating academic or study skills from subject-focused learning and a move towards a more embedded approach[5]. This is primarily because evidence has shown that "learning how to study effectively cannot be separated from subject content and the process of learning"[6].

Faculty Team Librarians already provide information literacy teaching within modules in many Schools and Faculties, following the adoption of the recommendations in the Library's Information Literacy Strategy in 2003[7]. In addition, teaching in areas such as writing, critical thinking, presentation skills and time management is provided by Academic Skills Development Officers from the Skills@Library Team, some of which is embedded in the curriculum. There is a strong case for building on this further and including academic skills teaching in modules where appropriate, as opposed to a bolt-on approach, and this was the basis of the recommendations of both the IL Strategy and the 2008 review paper for VCEG, which identified the importance of working with academic staff to instil ownership of skills support within schools, and of engaging and supporting academic staff to embed skills within the curriculum.

Delivery

The University of Leeds is well placed to roll-out a strategy of embedding academic skills into the curriculum. The recently announced Curriculum Enhancement review offers an ideal opportunity to

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[4] Higher Education Academy (2007) The first year experience of Higher Education in the UK http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/teachingandresearch/First_Year_Experience_Survey

[5] Hill, P (2010) From deficiency to development: the evolution of academic skills provision at one UK university *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education* Issue 2: February 2010

[6] Wingate, U (2006) Doing away with "study skills" *Teaching in Higher Education* 11:4,457-469

[7] Leeds University Library (2003) Information Literacy Strategy http://library.leeds.ac.uk/downloads/ilstrategy_new.pdf

provide better integration of skills support within discipline specific, research led teaching. Faculty Team Librarians already work closely with and in most cases teach in Schools and Faculties. Much of the Faculty Team Librarians' teaching on information literacy already overlaps with other key academic skills, in particular critical thinking and academic writing. The aim is that by 2015 all Faculty Team Librarians will be able to deliver the full range of academic skills, with the exception of Maths support. The Skills@Library Team will provide strategic direction and a high level of support to both Faculty Team Librarians and academic staff for this, particularly in the area of learning technologies.

However, in the current financial climate, it is necessary to identify creative approaches to take this strategic direction forward. As it is not possible to increase the amount of teaching time offered to Schools, the Library will discuss with Schools the most appropriate ways of incorporating required the academic skills input into the curriculum. Options include:

- Redesigning existing information literacy and academic skills provision to bring these together, incorporating additional elements where necessary.
- Where only information literacy is provided, redesigning the existing provision so that time can be freed up for expanding this to include further academic skills.
- Increasing our use of online support where appropriate.
- Adopting a faculty mechanism for delivery of academic skills where appropriate.
- Increasing the use of generic materials, which can be easily adapted.
- Providing additional support to enable academic staff to integrate skills development opportunities into their modules.

The Skills@Library Team has particular expertise in academic skills support, learning technologies and providing e-learning and online support. We will harness these to move towards a blended approach wherever possible. The workshop programme of generic academic skills sessions will remain at present, encouraging students, researchers and staff to personalise their individual learning needs and self-select the skills and knowledge they wish to develop.

Next steps

The approach to realising this vision will be gradual. This paper outlines the general direction and is a first step in consulting with Schools and Faculties. The teaching needs of individual Schools will be negotiated in a staged process. Faculty Team Librarians and Academic Skills Development Officers will meet with Schools to look holistically at the current provision and future needs, and agree the most appropriate points for interventions within the curriculum based on the overall strategy outlined in this paper.

May 2010