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Looking to the future: Developing an academic skills strategy to ensure information literacy thrives in a changing higher education world

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Abstract

This paper looks at factors influencing the development of information literacy (IL) teaching within UK Higher Education (HE). It includes a review of recent literature on the current HE climate, curricula developments and the scope and breadth of IL. Using the experience at Leeds University Library as a case study, the paper outlines the development of a new strategy to deliver IL teaching and support to students. It describes the process of developing an academic skills strategy, which places IL within a broader range of academic skills, with the aim of contributing to the overall learning development of students. The case study describes the implementation of the strategy and the key stakeholders involved in this, including faculty team librarians, academic skills development officers and academic staff.

The paper concludes that there were significant external and internal developments which had an impact on the direction taken by the strategy, specifically in embedding IL within an academic skills framework. In looking at the broad picture and by providing a case study from one of the few UK HE libraries to have progressed the academic skills agenda, it is hoped that the issues raised in the paper allow for reflection of the position of IL at the current time by all those involved in ensuring the acquisition of these skills by students.

Keywords

information literacy strategies, academic skills, learning development, higher education, HE, UK, England

1. Introduction

This paper examines how changes within the UK Higher Education (HE) environment and the scope and breadth of IL itself influenced the development of an Academic Skills Strategy at Leeds University. The paper will discuss how the strategy, which incorporates IL as part of a broader set of skills, was implemented; a process which involved librarians, academic skills development officers and academic staff.

In 2003, Leeds University Library developed an information literacy (IL) strategy which was agreed at Learning and Teaching Board in the university and rolled out by faculty team librarians (FTLs or subject librarians) to all schools. The basis of the strategy was that IL should be taught within the curriculum, as part of subject studies, to ensure its relevancy to and timeliness for students. FTLs were supported by a small central IL team, providing generic learning and teaching resources and teaching sessions. Library staff engaged academics successfully with the strategy (Howard and Newton 2005) and it led to a huge increase in the amount of teaching delivered to students: by 2007/8 over 20,000 students were receiving IL teaching as part of their core studies (not including induction sessions). In 2006, the Skills Centre, a unit providing academic skills support to students, became part of the library, resulting in overlapping areas of support for students' IL, academic skills and overall learning development. To address this overlap, a skills team was established to work alongside librarians in the four faculty teams, providing academic support and liaison with schools and faculties. Section 3 of this paper highlights how academic skills and IL were brought together in an academic skills strategy and operationally; both sets of skills being central to a student's

ability to succeed in their studies and contributing to their employability. The case study highlights the development and implementation of the strategy but does not present an evaluation of this approach. The skills team leader, having overall responsibility for the library's strategic direction in academic skills and IL teaching and support, is the author of this paper.

2. Review of recent literature

As well as the internal changes outlined above, two significant external factors influenced the development of the academic skills strategy and the future vision of academic skills and IL support at Leeds University Library. The literature review in this section outlines these two external factors: the UK HE climate and changes to curricula, and the potential impact of these on IL; secondly, the scope and nature of IL itself.

The HE climate in the UK is changing radically, with the lifting of the cap on tuition fees for September 2012 entry likely to result in a drop in school leavers opting to come to university and therefore greater competition for those who do. Given that students who take arts, humanities and social science degrees will often be funding their entire studies themselves, they are likely to appraise their course and university much more critically. Does it offer them value for their money? Will it guarantee them a good job? The majority of students go to university to improve their career opportunities (National Union of Students 2008) but with increased fees, students will be looking even more closely at their future employability before embarking on a course, scrutinising data on the employment of previous graduates provided as part of Key Information Sets. A survey of undergraduates for Universities UK and the CBI in 2009 found that already 35% of students would have taken up the opportunity of a stand-alone employability programme had it been offered, with a third also keen to undertake internships or short periods of work experience. The Browne Report (2010, p. 31) predicts that post-2012 "courses that deliver improved employability will prosper; those that make false promises will disappear".

Recently, graduate employers have raised concerns about a lack of key employability skills in graduates (Universities UK and CBI 2009). The Association of Graduate Recruiters' manifesto (2010, p. 5) asks institutions to embed employability skills in all degree courses: "Employers need graduates who are equipped with a range of core work skills as well as academic ability. It is these competencies, such as interpersonal skills, communication skills, team-working and customer awareness which, in the final analysis, make graduates employable". In addition, employers are often not specifically seeking the subject knowledge gained through degree-level studies; a report by Universities UK (2010, p. 14) found that: "approximately half of all graduate jobs are available to graduates of any discipline (whether vocational or non-vocational), suggesting employers are seeking 'graduate-ness' as often as specific skills or knowledge."

Wider access to HE has already had an impact on both the range and numbers of students at university. The change to the fees structures in 2012 may well increase the number of students coming to HE study from a broad range of backgrounds and as part of widening participation schemes, following the Browne Report recommendation for improved access for anyone with the potential to succeed and the access agreements required by the Office for Fair Access (2011). In addition, it is possible that more students will opt for part-time courses because of financial pressures. Increased support for these groups in particular will therefore be needed, both in the form of effective transition and continued developmental opportunities.

How are universities responding to these external factors? Universities up and down the country, and indeed internationally, are introducing new curricula or new elements to their existing provision and many have already articulated their “graduate attributes”; the Universities of Sheffield (2011) and Aberdeen (2011) provide two examples. The King’s-Warwick Project (2010, p. 9), which was set up to explore the graduate capabilities developed in the course of undertaking a degree, found that “the teaching and assessment of student literacies requires greater prioritisation within the curriculum”.

As part of looking at how IL and academic skills should relate and sit within our own curriculum at the University of Leeds, developments in a number of other institutions in the UK and beyond were examined. This revealed that a wide range of core curricula elements is being discussed, including specific topics such as: enquiry-based learning; research opportunities; ethics; academic literacy; internationalisation; and enterprise. Universities also appear to be responding to employer demands, with a much greater emphasis on transferable and employability skills evident. In addition, many universities are discussing broadening their curricula and are seeking to offer increased opportunities for extra-curricula activities, such as learning languages, work placements and study abroad, as well as the ability to select from modules outside a student’s defined subject area. In a bid to recruit students, respond to employer needs and improve quality, universities are seeking to demonstrate their added value and highlight what makes them distinctive from others. Examples of this include: The Difference at the University of Aberdeen (2012) which allows students to choose options outside their discipline or to select a multi-disciplinary course based on real-world issues; the LSE100 course at the London School of Economics (2012), a compulsory course for all first-year students to consider core elements of social science reasoning; and the Education for Global Citizenship programme at University College London (2012). These developments and initiatives may have an impact on IL teaching and support, but more importantly there is potential for IL to be part of many of these, whether through a greater embedding of skills in the curriculum or an emphasis on transferable skills through curriculum broadening.

A review of recent literature on the scope and nature of IL revealed that interpretations of IL have broadened significantly to include a wider set of academic skills. The following paragraphs discuss the importance of taking a broad view of IL rather than reducing it to a limited set of skills.

Firstly, there is increasing evidence that, as technology and the internet allow us to readily find information, skills in evaluating, managing and using information effectively become ever more vital. The Information Literacy Project in the US found that the majority of students are confident in finding information but reported that “the sheer act of just getting started on research assignments and defining a research inquiry was overwhelming for students” (Head and Eisenberg 2010, p. 2). In reality, finding the right information may actually prove more difficult in the information-rich digital age and the apparent ease of accessing knowledge results in a much greater need for analytical and information management skills. Webber argues that one of the key aspects of IL in the 21st century is that it should not just be about searching, but about “encountering, browsing, monitoring, managing and creating” (Webber 2010, p. 4).

Using technology successfully in an academic context requires a growing range of digital literacy skills, some of which overlap with IL. The changing behaviours and attitudes of students, often “digital natives”, to information searching and handling are reported by both Carr (2010) and CIBER (2008) who found that skimming, scanning and making quick decisions about quality are common practices within the learning experience in a digital age. CIBER’s research with young people also found that they lacked understanding about the overall make-up of the internet, including issues of ownership and authority. This highlights again the need to develop skills in critical evaluation.

There is a danger that some interpretations of early IL models, such as the original SCONUL 7 Pillars model (SCONUL Advisory Committee on Information Literacy 1999), over-simplified the holistic learning process and led to a tick-box or skills list approach to IL. As Webber and Johnson describe it, this may reduce “a complex set of skills and knowledge to small, discrete units... this fragments the field of knowledge and reflects a surface learning approach (with a short term focus on the job in hand)” (Webber and Johnston 2000, p. 384). However, more recent developments in IL teaching practice recognise that students require IL skills which do more than fill a particular information gap or allow them to carry out a specific task. This reflects the ongoing and continuous nature of skills development: a skill is rarely acquired once and never reviewed, revised or improved. As Green (2010, p. 317) describes it “advanced IL is achieved through practice and rehearsal, reflection, and the capacity to draw information, literature and knowledge critically from multiple sources in order to create new knowledge”. Johnston and Webber (2006) assert the need for a move away from IL as a set of skills or personal attributes in favour of IL as a discipline relevant to a broad range of contexts. This broader view of IL also links to the growing employability agenda, in that IL skills have the potential to contribute to a student’s employability. However, to ensure this is achieved a student must develop holistically and be able to value and reflect on their skills development (Peacock 2011, Webber 2010) and articulate these skills to potential employers. In practice, this means students must have the skills required to use information in an academic setting and in addition develop an understanding of their importance beyond this, in order to transfer them appropriately to different contexts in the workplace. This must take precedence over acquiring a discrete set of skills which may be difficult to transfer to other environments.

In the everyday experience of faculty team librarians and academic skills development officers at Leeds University Library, students increasingly reveal a lack of some of the academic skills which relate closely to IL, in particular in the areas of academic writing, reading and critical thinking. Within many HE institutions these skills are taught separately from IL, and traditionally viewed as general academic skills, study skills or skills for learning. The separation of IL from other academic skills can be confusing for students who have to make their own links in the cycle of planning, structuring, finding information, using it effectively, managing their time, referencing and presenting their piece of work. There is increasing evidence that teaching IL in conjunction with other academic skills not only makes more sense to students but also enables them to develop further as learners and therefore produce better results (Peacock 2011). IL has become more closely linked to the work of learning developers (Towlson and Pillai 2008) and Pillai (2010, p. 124) argues that there are synergies in both the work and aims of librarians and learning developers, identifying “clear areas of commonality in relation to the focus and purpose of our work. Together, we are able to tell students the whole story of producing academic work”. As Peacock describes it “librarians and academic skills advisors spend time with a high volume of students, assessing their academic needs, assisting them to focus on a topic and build discipline knowledge, and recommending strategies to assist them to meet their study commitments under time pressures” (Peacock 2008, p. 2).

The development of a joined-up approach to IL and academic skills may also be helped by a move towards integrating the latter into the subject curriculum, as has already happened for IL in many cases. In the UK, as well as in the US, there has been a shift away from separating academic or study skills from subject-focused learning and a move towards a more embedded approach (Hill et al 2010). This is primarily because evidence has shown that “learning how to study effectively at University cannot be separated from subject content and the process of learning” (Wingate 2006, p. 457).

3. Developing an academic skills strategy

Taking Leeds University Library as a case study, this section will discuss how an academic skills strategy, incorporating IL, was developed by the library and implemented within the university. It will also highlight how the evidence gathered through the review of the literature relating to both the UK HE environment and the nature and scope of IL influenced the strategy's development.

The strategy development was led by the library's skills team leader (the author) and the four faculty team leaders, with staff from these teams contributing to the process, including therefore FTLs. The skills team comprises academic skills development officers, e-learning specialists and maths support tutors.

A definition of academic skills was drafted for clarification and later used in the final academic skills strategy: "academic skills are those generic and transferable skills which underpin the learning development of undergraduate and taught postgraduate students in HE, enabling them to be confident, independent critical thinkers and reflective learners" (Leeds University Library 2010). In our context, these skills comprise: finding and evaluating information; academic writing; reading and note-taking; preparing for exams; working in groups; presentation skills; referencing and avoiding plagiarism; time management; and critical thinking. We specifically excluded maths support from the definition and strategy discussions. The definition aims to be broad enough to encompass learning and academic literacies, such as the competences outlined by the LLiDA project (Beetham et al. 2009) and, more recently, the strands described in the New Curriculum for Information Literacy (Secker and Coonan 2011).

During the year spent developing the academic skills strategy, we looked at various options for how to move forward. It was important to develop a strategy which did not reflect a remedial model where we only support struggling students. This was never our approach with IL and it would not be with academic skills. We would aim for any future support to be developmental, enabling and enhancing continual learning, rather than being designed to fix a specific problem; for example, building a good understanding of what it means to search for high-quality information in the digital environment, as opposed to learning how to interrogate a specific database to find a single piece of information. Working together over the previous few years, faculty team librarians and academic skills staff had a growing awareness of each other's areas of experience and expertise which facilitated discussions and outputs.

3.1 Scenario-based planning

The first step was to rethink our service with the aim of agreeing a strategy for the provision of academic skills and information literacy support to the university that would work for all library teams and could replace the existing IL strategy. The team leaders developed four different scenarios based on our own visions for the future, as well as resulting from the research work outlined in section 2 which highlighted models and strategies used at other institutions and the external environment we needed to consider. The purpose of the scenarios was to enable staff to consider overall service provision, as well as their individual roles, in different contexts. The scenarios were designed to be radical and challenging and provide useful starting points for discussions.

The following scenarios were considered:

Vision 1: a central skills team provides generic support, e-learning resources, teaching sessions and teaching materials. Tailored support within the curriculum on all academic skills is provided by FTLs. FTLs develop their capacity for teaching academic skills alongside IL content. A package of support is negotiated with schools based on the hours available and using more online solutions. Faculty teams and the central skills team work together to achieve this.

Vision 2: FTLs continue to teach IL within the curriculum, but academic skills are dealt with separately by a central team and are not substantially rolled out within the curriculum: generic workshops and e-resources are available. IL is treated differently because of its links to library collections and FTL knowledge of the resources available.

Vision 3: FTLs and skills team staff provide a tailored package of support for academic staff, working closely with them over a few years to develop their skills in teaching academic skills and IL, and then handover the teaching to them or provide an online alternative. Help with evaluation and regular reviews could be provided. Provision is embedded but not delivered by faculty teams or the skills team, though the teams work closely with the Staff and Departmental Development Unit (SDDU) to achieve this.

Vision 4: all provision is e-only. FTLs, supported by existing e-learning staff, build up their skills in developing e-learning materials, tailoring these to subject-specific resources as requested by schools. A large bank of generic materials supports the majority of students, with significant use made of the virtual learning environment (VLE).

The final strategy adopted vision 1, which aims for all FTLs to be able to teach the full range of academic skills within the curriculum by 2015. There were a number of reasons for selecting this option. Firstly, the links between IL and academic skills, which FTLs and academic skills staff felt were evident at our own institution, were also evidenced in the literature. This meant that the separation of IL from other academic literacies in terms of service delivery was neither beneficial for students nor meaningful to staff and students, given that the library had responsibility for both areas. Secondly, the curriculum broadening and developments seen elsewhere, as well as at our own institution, indicated that limiting our IL teaching to a narrow scope (particularly focusing on finding information), meant that it was likely to become less relevant to students and we would not be able to respond to the changing nature of HE and curricula outlined above. In addition, we did not want to reduce or withdraw the embedded IL face-to-face teaching provided by FTLs which was highly valued by schools and students. A curriculum-based approach which brought IL and academic skills together would enable us to respond to internal and external changes and allow us to reach more students, tailoring provision to subject, level and need.

The strategy was then disseminated within the university, first to the Learning and Teaching Board and then to faculty committees. All committees endorsed the approach and accepted it as university strategy; no comments were received which made it necessary to alter it.

3.2 The implementation plan

The next stage involved developing an implementation plan. This work was led by the library's academic skills group (ASG) comprising three FTLs and four members of the skills team, including the paper's author. It was based around three key areas:

1. Internal information gathering by FTLs and the skills team
2. Liaison with schools and faculties through meetings with school directors of student education
3. Library staff training and development

3.2.1 Internal information gathering

In order to move the strategy forward, the Academic Skills Group identified the need to establish what teaching was already provided in each faculty or school, both by library staff (FTLs and academic skills staff) and by academic staff in the school itself. The Group developed guidance and questions for FTLs to use in conducting a scoping exercise with their schools, as outlined the following section. The ASG also worked on an internal document on staff roles and ways of working within the long-term vision, following concerns from staff of a lack of clarity on future responsibilities and roles; for example, to what extent would academic skills staff continue to be involved in curriculum teaching?; where would responsibility for one-to-one support for academic skills lie? On a practical level, the skills team started attending internal faculty team meetings to discuss and address any issues arising through this process.

3.2.2 Consultation with schools and faculties

The implementation plan included the aim for all FTLs to have met with one of their directors of student education by September 2011 and the others by early 2012. The aim of these meetings was to identify existing good practice, gaps and areas for future development. FTLs and schools could then identify some key projects in different programme areas that would help progress the strategy through 2011/12 and beyond. In addition, the meetings would enable us to understand the School's perspective on the strategy and consider the key drivers for them, for example, the skills needed by or lacking in their students. For some schools, the solution is to redesign existing IL provision to add in elements of academic skills, for example combining note-taking and reading strategies with finding information; or extending teaching on plagiarism to include writing skills such as paraphrasing and summarising.

3.2.3 Staff training and development

The staff training and development elements of the implementation plan were led by the Learning and Teaching Development Group (internal to the library, but with regular input from the university's Staff Development Unit). FTLs started to become involved in academic skills sessions, initially observing teaching provided by the skills team which enabled them to see this in practice and consider areas for their personal development. A series of training sessions was organised, including a day's summer school with external speakers drawn from the Association of Learning Development in HE (ALDHE). These sessions aimed to share knowledge and increase confidence and ran as a follow-up to the successful LibTeach programme undertaken in 2010/11 which provided support and development for librarians as teachers (Myers and Dearden 2011). A bank of reusable teaching resources already existed on the library website, both for face-to-face and online support, in the form of lesson plans, presentations and activities. Originally developed for academic staff, these have been increasingly used by FTLs for academic skills teaching. In terms of online support, FTLs started to work with the skills team e-learning staff to develop subject-specific online resources, to supplement face-to-face sessions and sometimes to free-up teaching time. A longer-term goal is to develop a "review and report back" mechanism to monitor progress against the strategy aims and to ensure that appropriate support is continually provided.

4. Conclusion

The development of an academic skills strategy was influenced significantly by both internal and external factors. Specifically, two key conclusions were drawn. Firstly, that the skills agenda is of growing importance both nationally and locally and that IL and academic skills will continue to be vital for students. Rather than a bolt-on to subject studies or a remedial solution, academic skills are required by all students, some more than others and some at different times, depending on their starting point and the requirements of their learning and research. The strategy has provided a route into supporting student skills development in the curriculum and engaging academic staff on discussions around this.

The second conclusion was that IL should be part of a bigger academic skills agenda rather than standing alone. The inclusion of IL at the heart of the new academic skills strategy strengthens its position at a time of increasing demands on the curriculum and provides clarity for staff and students in teaching and learning academic skills. The joined up IL/academic skills approach provides an improved service with a single point of support and skills teaching tailored by content, level and need. It has demonstrated to academic staff and students how IL is a core academic skill sitting within and closely linked to a broader set of skills and that there is value in teaching these skills together.

In terms of staff roles, the strategy has allowed FTLs to expand their role, but has also brought the need for different roles within the library team, notably academic skills development officers and e-

learning specialists. As part of a central skills team, these staff support FTLs by providing e-learning packages, ready-made teaching materials and training, as well as team teaching in the early stages. It is too early to judge the longer-term impact on roles and workloads and this will be monitored. It is likely that the library will need to be flexible about future roles and responsibilities as the service develops, as well as continuing to provide professional development and support to staff extending their roles into new areas.

As well as continuing to implement the main aims of the strategy, a key area of work over the next 2-3 years is to establish a system for monitoring progress and measuring success. This will include looking for gaps in provision both in face-to-face teaching and e-learning support, and extending support into these areas. Establishing a set of measures will be key to assessing the extent to which the strategy's objectives are met and the impact it has on the university's curriculum and the success of our students, both at university and beyond.

Resources

Leeds University Library's academic skills strategy is available at: <http://library.leeds.ac.uk/library-academic-skills-strategy>

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