Proposal for an Academic Skills Hub (2023 Internship)

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Summary:

This report proposes the creation of an online Academic Skills Hub to help make academic skills provision at the University of Oxford more engaging, accessible, and inclusive. It recommends that the Hub be divided into two strands: a Workspace and a Forum. At all stages of the Hub's creation, the project hopes to bring onboard and collaborate with a variety of stakeholders, such as students, academic staff, and professional services. This report takes readers through the background and rationale for the Hub, its potential structure and finally how the Hub might attract and sustain engagement. In addition, a more visual 'Theory of Change' for this project is included in the Appendix as well as the list of consulted resources.

Background:

The Authors:

This proposal is the culmination of a four-week long internship at the CTL, that has focused on scoping academic skills provision at the University of Oxford and proposing a design for an online Hub. The two interns collaborating on this project have been Sneha Shiralagi and Xinyi (Angel) Cai. Below are some short introductions. It is hoped they give some insight into the people behind the proposal.

Sneha Shiralagi (she/her)

'Having recently graduated from Wadham College, reading History, this internship has given me an opportunity to pause and reflect on my years as a student. As well as the wider student body, the proposal for a Hub draws on my own experiences of Oxford. My time here has greatly highlighted the value of my peers; conversations with them have, in fact, helped my journey with 'academic skills'. Our proposal for a forum is thus a testimony to the genuine way that Oxford students 'share' skills- a rewrite to more conventional thinking. I look forward to seeing how the University might use our research to help make academic skills provision more dynamic and engaging.'

Xinyi Cai (she/her)

'As a student starting a new academic year, this internship has offered me a unique opportunity to gain a broader perspective on the university. During our research, I discovered valuable resources within the university that I can leverage in the later stages of my studies. In addition to my personal growth, the need for an interactive resource hub is intricately intertwined with my experiences at Oxford, and I look forward to contributing to the broader student community through this program. I am excited to see that some of our insights have the potential to enhance the overall student experience here.'

Rationale:

A. Academic Skills and their Value:

'Academic skills' can broadly be understood as those skills necessary to enable students to become **effective learners** in their discipline. As a broad term, it can encompass everything from **subject-specific skills** (e.g., coding) to more **generic study skills** (e.g., time management).

The peculiarity of a discipline's conventions and rubric means that such skills and how they are best developed can be difficult for students to grasp. In a highly competitive and rigorous environment like Oxford, this struggle to meet a discipline's standards can result in a **low sense of belonging and confidence**.

This lack in academic self-esteem is best known as **'impostor syndrome'**, a condition which disproportionately affects those students already disadvantaged and underrepresented at Oxford.

B. Current Provision:

There currently exists certain ways that students at Oxford can **access support for academic skills**, some of which include:

- College-based Study Skills Advisors, Writing Fellows, and resources on college websites.
- The University of Oxford Study Guidance website, Library resources, the Language Centre, and the Disability Advisory Service.

Nonetheless, the scope of such provision is **limited** by:

- The espousal of a more **deficit-based** approach to in-person academic skills support, whereby often only certain students (e.g., disabled or International) are identified as needing help, and which otherwise relies on students reaching out for help.
- The **scattered** nature of online resources and the lack of signposting; webpages lack frequent updates, guidance is often repetitive or contradictory, and students struggle to find the relevant help.
- A primary focus on **early academic transitions,** such as freshers, which fails to acknowledge the full range of academic transitions at Oxford. Namely, students are required to adapt their skills as their degrees progress.

- Resources which either tend to cater primarily towards **humanity** students or **lack enough discipline-specificity** to be useful.

Students often thus seek more relevant and readily available advice **outside of the University's official remit**, such as that from peers within social-media groups.

C. Objectives:

Our proposal for a Hub seeks to build upon some of the core goals outlined by the wider **Academic Skills Development Project**, primarily:

- To better **integrate** opportunities for academic skills development so that they are encountered by students at all stages of their educational journeys.
- To make academic skills provision more **inclusive** to all students, whilst still anticipating that such provision will most benefit those disadvantaged and underrepresented at Oxford.
- To reduce the pressure placed on services like the Disability Advisory Service (DAS) and the Counselling Service, by making general academic skills support more **accessible**.
- To bring together academics and professional services staff to **collaborate** on creating and synthesising academic skills resources.

This report proposes the creation of an online 'Academic Skills Hub', accessible to all taught (undergraduate and postgraduate) students at Oxford. It is envisioned that such a hub could be located on **Canvas**, a platform already familiar to the majority of Oxford students. The Hub aims to become a '**one stop shop**', where students can go for guidance on academic skills. Nonetheless, those in need of more personal and pressing support will still be encouraged to turn to professional services like the DAS.

Project Overview: The Academic Skills Hub

A. Potential Inspiration:

Other universities provide good examples of how academic skills provision can be **digitally innovative**:

- The University of Birmingham's Academic Skills Gateway, with an eye-catching design, uses Panopto **recordings** to explain skills, alongside a forum for discussion.
- The University of Edinburgh has skills courses for their online students, with a particular emphasis on the acquisition of **digital skills**.
- Oxford Brookes University's Course Resource Page provides comprehensive resources on skills, **subject by subject**, allowing students to easily navigate the website, whilst filtering out irrelevant information.
- Overseas, Stanford University's Academic Skills Page allows students to access a **Self-Assessment tool** that allows them to evaluate their improvements in academic skills.
- MIT includes **examples** which showcase both correct and incorrect academic practices for a range of skills.

B. Hub Structure:

It is recommended that the Hub has **two strands**:

- **Strand One:** The **Workspace**: A streamlined and filterable collection of academic skills guidance and interactive exercises for a range of disciplines and stages of study.
- **Strand Two:** The **Forum**: An online community of Oxford staff and students where advice on academic skills can be more casually exchanged.

C. Strand One: The Workspace

Our proposal for a Workspace will allow the University to:

- Better **streamline** existing academic skills resources for students.
- Create more **personalised** support for students by tailoring content to their needs.
- Enrich students' learning experience by not only providing guidance on the techniques needed to excel in their discipline, but **interactive opportunities** to practice those skills.

The Workspace hopes to repurpose and help students discover online resources around the University. Of particular interest are:

- The **Language Centre's** 'Academic Writing' page onCanvas, which they are currently creating as part of the student-facing side of the Academic Skills Development Project. The page comprehensively takes students through the process and techniques of writing, whilst providing student samples and quizzes along the way. Their current 'sandpit' provides a good idea of what an academic skills 'Workspace' might look like.
- The **Bodleian Libraries** have guides to help students learn how to use libraries and develop related academic skills. For example, they have handouts online for searching different types of materials and producing literature reviews.

How will the Workspace work?

- The Workspace will be based on **Canvas**, with SharePoint as a potential alternative. Canvas seems most appropriate as it is connected to many students' course materials and its **login** would restrict access to only members of the university.
- **Short Term:**
    - We propose to **collate** and organise pre-existing written resources on academic skills (including student samples) from across the university.
    - It might be helpful to organise skills webpages under the **problem** they help the student address e.g., within academic writing, the skill of 'signposting' and 'linking paragraphs' might be under the broader section of 'how to better structure essays?'.
    - Digitally **interlinking** the webpages will perhaps best capture the connected and interdependent nature of academic skills.
    - Students will be presented with an option to **filter** the skills based on their discipline and year of study, with each skill being digitally tagged accordingly. For example, both a History student and a Chemistry student would be shown the skill of 'concise notetaking', but only the latter shown the section on 'laboratory skills'.
- **Long Term:**
    - Eventually Strand One will turn into more of an interactive **'workspace'**. Within the skills webpages, guidance will be supplemented by **interactive exercises**. For example, students practicing 'concise notetaking' might be asked to read a passage and type out key points, with **AI** providing immediate feedback.
    - To ensure that the Workspace remains **digitally inclusive**, guidance on skills should be converted into a range of accessible

formats e.g., text-based guidance can be supplemented by videos or audio-clips. Consulting with the **DAS** and students with a range of digital needs will be essential.

- At all stages, key **stakeholders** in the University, including staff and students, will be **consulted** and involved in the building of the Workspace.

D. Strand Two: The Forum

Alongside the Workspace, the hub would benefit from a more casual **Q&A-style Forum**. Such an approach would help the University:

- Reframe ‘academic skills’ as not simply taught but **shared**.
- Move away from a model which treats 'skills’ and how they are gained as fixed by instead highlighting the **diversity** of academic journeys.
- Encourage **peer-support** and thus align themselves with current scholarship which stresses that students should be valued for their own expertise (Austen and Donnelly, 2023).
- Create more of a sense of academic **community** and thus further students’ sense of belonging.

The student body of Oxford already **engages** well with interactive forums, such as The Student Room, Oxfess and Facebook groups. Nonetheless, there is still a need for a more **inclusive and focused Academic Skills forum** that might supplement such pre-existing platforms:

- The Student Room primarily caters towards prospective university students, rather than current undergraduates.
- Frequent academic related questions on Facebook’s Oxfess distract from the confession platform’s more humorous tone.
- Splinter Facebook groups that work outside the University’s remit are often - understandably - created only for disadvantaged groups, e.g., the ‘Oxford Women History Self Care’ group.

How would the Forum work?

- The Forum could function through **Canvas’ ‘threaded discussions’** system (alternative: Microsoft’s Yammer); **SSO logins** would ensure that only members of the University have access.
- Its new **optional anonymity feature** would facilitate a less inhibited discussion; whilst moderators could check the forum remains a safe space.

- **Sub-forums** (e.g. a Medicine forum) would make the platform easy to navigate and help students access more tailored help.
- **Short term**: In its early stages, when traffic is lower, student and tutor ambassadors could be appointed to monitor the forum and make sure questions are not left unanswered.
- **Long term:** Over time, as the forum increases in popularity, the need for ambassadors would lessen giving way to more free-flowing, organic conversation.
- It is hoped that the forum will be useful to not only students with the confidence to ask questions, but more **silent readers** of the threads.

E. Uniting the Hub

The Workspace and the Forum show two sides of the Academic Skills Hub. Together, they hope to make academic skills provision **dynamic** and vibrant. In fact, the two strands can help inform each other:

- Student and staff testimonies from the forum could **inspire** the content of the Workspace.
- Participants in the Forum could **refer** to the webpages and exercises in the Workspace to help anchor advice and tips.

Such **interaction** could ensure that the hub remains not only a reliable source but also an **engaging** and **evolving** platform.

F. Building the Hub

Funding will be needed to build this hub, as it is foreseen that **many parties** will be brought onboard to help with this project: technical specialists for the Hub's design, as well as students, academics, members of the CTL, Language Centre, Bodleian Libraries and the DAS for the Hub's content. Time dedicated by such parties to work on the project should, where possible, be accounted for in the form of **buyout**, whilst students should be paid for their time.

It would be useful to **consult the Language Centre** and listen to their experience with the Academic Writing page, to better understand the scope of resources (time, money, personnel) needed for a more large-scale project.

In particular, resource-allocation should keep in mind the long-term perspective i.e., **sustaining** the Hub, rather than simply its creation. For

example, it is likely that the Hub will require a long-term team dedicated to its **upkeep**.

Attracting and Sustaining Hub Engagement

A. Advertising:

Hub engagement relies on effective methods of **attracting** users. Possible ideas for advertising include:

- Sending a **Canvas Notification** to all students, signposting the Hub. For those (I.e., Maths students) not as familiar with Canvas, they could be alerted about the Hub through their primary platform (e.g., Moodle).
- Advertising the Hub through Oxford SU weekly newsletter.
- Recruiting **student ambassadors** to spread the word through academic social media groups e.g., Facebook.
- **Student-to-student** recommendations within societies.
- **Tutors** might include a link to the Hub or specific skills pages in the Workspace in their **reading lists**.
- Encouraging **colleges** to move their Academic Skills online resources to the Hub and include a link to the Hub on their current skills webpages.

B. Integration:

The Hub could have a section outlining potential ideas of how staff can use the Hub within their teaching or work with students. For example:

- **Tutors** could hold **workshops** using the Workspace e.g., a tutor could hold a dissertation workshop where they go through the skill of writing a literature review with their students.
- **Study skills advisors** and **writing fellows** could set individual students tasks on the Workspace.
- The **DAS** might encourage a student to turn to the forum to hear different **perspectives**.

C. Evaluation:

The volume of **engagement** with the Forum will be self-evident; for the Workspace engagement might be **monitored** through webpage traffic or levels of exercise interaction.

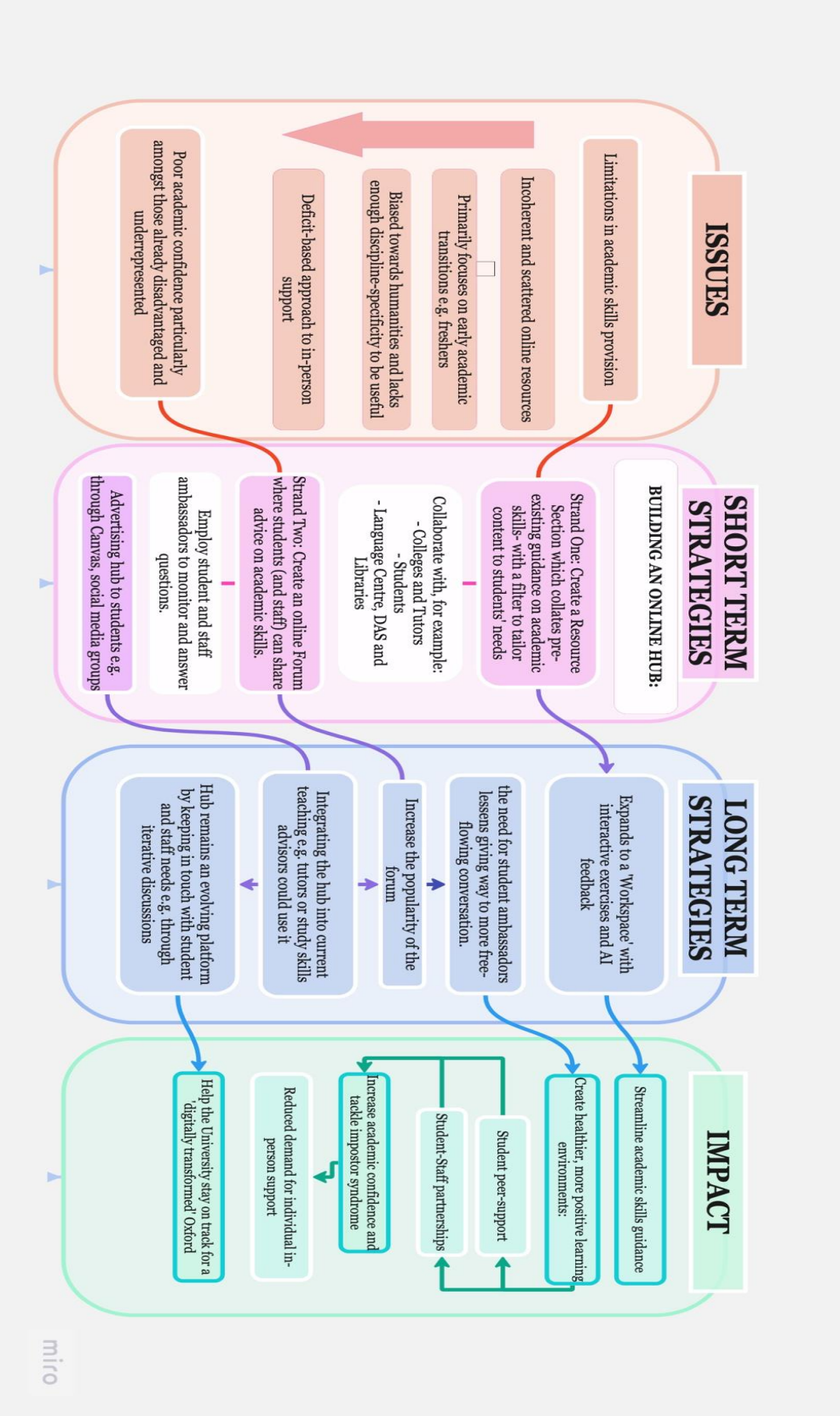
Nonetheless, whilst this might give insight into engagement, it will not directly speak to the **Hub's effectiveness**. To better gauge how helpful the Hub is, it might be useful to:

- Have pop-up **rating** boxes on individual skills webpages in the Workspace, which allow students and staff to rate the page and give brief **feedback**.
- Engage in **iterative discussions** and focus groups with students and staff to discuss how the Hub might better serve their needs (see the CTL's upcoming Student-Staff Partnership Toolkit).

Engaging in a long-term and continuous process of **evaluation** in such a way will ensure that the Hub remains an **evolving** platform **responsive** to feedback and user needs.

Contributors: Xinyi (Angel) Cai and Sneha Shiralagi (2023 Academic Skills Hub Interns at the Centre for Teaching and Learning)

Appendix A: Theory of Change



Appendix B: Related Links and Consultation Sources

In the course of preparing this report, we engaged in consultations with various departments and drew upon the following authoritative sources:

1. The Language Centre's 'Academic Writing' Page on Canvas

2. Canvas Discussions Function Details

URL: Link

3. Study Skills Pages from Other Universities:

1) University of Edinburgh:

   URL: Link

2) University of Birmingham:

   URL: Link

3) Oxford Brookes University:

   URL: Link

4) Stanford University:

   URL: Link

5) Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT):

   URL: Link

This list of consulted departments and sourced materials greatly contributed to the thoroughness and reliability of our research for this report.