

Benchmarking Exercise on Academic Skills Development in Higher Education: Executive Summary

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Overview

This benchmarking exercise was undertaken to provide a **comprehensive analysis of approaches to organising, delivering, and evaluating academic skills development across higher education (HE)**. It reviewed practices within the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The work was commissioned by the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) at the University of Oxford to inform models and approaches for academic skills provision and develop standards and principles for good practice. **This summary focuses on standards and principles, along with the case studies.**

Methodology

The benchmarking exercise took a **mixed-method approach including informant interviews, a literature review and series of case study interviews**. The **literature review** focused on identifying and classifying common features, principles and standards in the organisation, delivery, and evaluation of academic skills development, drawing on published and grey literature. The **case studies** were selected to provide in-depth examples of different models and approaches in practice, drawing on availability within the timeframe of the research. The research methods were informed by cultural, appreciative, and strength-based methodologies, focusing on identifying successful practices rather than assessing relative merits. **Theory of change was used as an organising framework** for the case studies to provide consistency and interrogate the outcomes and approach and exploring the uniqueness of each context.

Case study summaries

The **seven case studies** illustrate diverse, tailored and inclusive approaches to academic skills development:

University of Cambridge

Focuses on developing an 'ecosystem' for academic skills development, through cross-university collaboration and practitioner communities. Staff development and knowledge sharing is facilitated across colleges by the Cambridge Skills Educators Network. Students are supported through a Skills Discovery Tool and near-peer support system.

University of Glasgow

Employs a comprehensive, embedded, multidimensional approach, delivered by subject specialists. A mandatory Academic Writing Skills Programme is a core offer, with embedded services supplemented by optional standalone services and peer learning activities. There is an emphasis on data-driven decision-making and integration with institutional strategies and priorities.

Griffith University, Australia

Offers a school-led online study skills module for undergraduate students, aimed at improving transition and retention, particularly of first-year, male students entering with limited "academic capital". The module evolved iteratively based on student feedback and features interactive content with quizzes and multimedia. It is mandatory on some programmes and voluntary on others. It expanded significantly during the Covid pandemic, with its use peaking at 6,300 students.

Leeds Beckett University

Takes a partnership approach, with centralised teams collaborating with academic colleagues, exemplified by the development of a faculty led Essay X-ray digital academic writing tool. The central provision led by the library offers open-access workshops, online

resources, and embedded support. They emphasise peer learning provision and a data-driven approach to demonstrate impact.

University of Manchester

Offers a centralised, library-led service for all students, entitled 'My Learning Essentials' programme, providing a comprehensive suite of primarily standalone and peer developmental activities. It aims to normalise skill development, through structured, student-centred and inclusive support, reaching its 50,000 students.

Sheffield Hallam University

Provides a centralised 'Skills Centre' with a wide range of opt-in support through workshops, one-to-one appointments, and online resources. The centre focuses on student wellbeing, with a "Study Well, Stay Well" moto. The service promotes student partnership in its development and delivery and inclusion, serving a diverse student population.

University of York

Employs a faculty-based skills team providing academic writing support for postgraduate students, aiming to improve their in-class participation and academic success. Specialist skills lecturers are work in designated departments and programmes, in collaboration with subject lecturers and offer timetabled modules, workshops, 1-2-1 sessions, and specialist resources.

Standards of practice

A number of standards emerged as critical to the success of academic skills development, derived from case study interviews, informant interviews, and literature sources. Each one had several associated facets, as summarised below.

Infrastructure

Having an ecosystem for effective and efficient academic skills development.

Vision	having a shared purpose and aspiration
Language	using common, non-deficit language, emphasising growth and empowerment
Alignment	incorporating skills development within strategy, as contributing to the students' experience and outcomes
Positioning	helping students understand skills development as integral to their experience
Proactive	considering student needs pre-emptively, at known transition and pinch points
Co-creation	working together as stakeholders and beneficiaries to increase relevancy and ownership
Continuous improvement	monitoring and evaluating routinely, to identify gaps, improve and evolve

Collaboration

Working together across the university community.

Senior leaders	achieving synergy; positioning skills development; getting buy in and investment
Services	providing holistic, end-to-end, and connected provision
Students	building trust; ensuring engagement and relevancy; tailoring and personalising provision to meet individual and collective needs

Academic staff	tailoring skills to disciplinary or programme contexts
Practitioners	sharing expertise; improving consistency; raising standards; and increasing visibility

Cohesion

Ensuring skills services are interconnected, complementary and accessible.

For students	enabling users to navigate, make connections, and benefit from the range of support available
For universities	recognising all available resources, opportunities and services as part of a unified whole, reducing duplication, breaking down silos and maximising efficiency/ effectiveness.

Needs-driven development

Recognising students' specific and evolving needs as a key driver.

Transitions	assimilating the norms, values and expectations of each level of study.
Assessment	demonstrating learning outcomes and criteria, in formative and summative work
Career readiness	helping students acquire and articulate their skills to ensure their success as graduates within the labour market
Discipline	developing and applying relevant specialist and technical skills
Target groups	taking account of students' prior educational routes, experiences, heritage, culture, disability entitlements and situation
Further study	recognising students' differing needs at a postgraduate level

Evidence-driven development

Routinely collecting, analysing and using evidence of skills development for different purposes.

Effectiveness	demonstrating meeting students' needs, improvement, satisfaction
Strategic change	informing the case for change or investment
Improvement	identifying gaps, evolving needs and trends, to inform enhancements
Resources	informing the timing, tailoring or additional allocation of resources
Equity	verifying equitable access and reach across designated target group
Priority agendas	evidencing reach, value and impact, such as for APP or TEF
Assumptions	challenging pre-conceptions or stereotypes about students' needs or levels of engagement

Interconnected provision

Providing multiple, unified and applied ways of developing skills.

Sessions	connecting and structuring sessions to progressively develop skills
Learning experiences	aligning skills to curriculum content, assessments, learning outcomes, or independent study, to support their relevancy and application
Employability	furthering the transferability of skills to professional, business and/or industry contexts

Principles of practice

Accessibility

Ensuring equitable access and engagement with provision.

Different aspects of accessibility were identified, including proactive inclusive design; framing skills development as integral to academic success; using inclusive delivery methods; considering timing (time of day, time of year); using accessible delivery formats; making interconnections between services; and maximising access for all students.

Transparency

Making services visible and understandable to students.

Ways used to inform students about academic skills provision included, verbal signposting by staff; having a dedicated, holistic platform; using commonly accessed social media platforms; peer communication; partnership with academic departments; embedding provision within the timetable; and routine / tailored communications.

Flexibility

Recognising that skill development is an individual process requiring variation in the mode, pace, and place of delivery.

Flexibility was achieved through having a range of provision and delivery modes; choice for students; options for progressing at different rates; and variation in the place of delivery (physical or online; different venues).

Relevancy

Ensuring support is connected, meaningful, and impactful.

Relevancy was demonstrated by developing skills aligned with a stage of the student journey or key transition points; with their curriculum or programme requirements; with the assessment types and criteria being demonstrated; or with future graduate careers.

Authenticity

Ensuring provision has legitimacy or validity for students.

Authenticity was facilitated through student-led or co-designed provision as users of the provision or through engagement of peers, due to their relatability and shared experience.

Final remarks

The benchmarking exercise has highlighted complex and diverse ecosystems and approaches to academic skills development in HE, characterised by the following elements:

- a) There were **three distinct categories** of approach to academic skills development - **embedded** within the curriculum; **standalone** and **peer-supported**. Each existed on a continuum, varying in the level of sophistication and resources applied. A mix of these approaches were used in each institutional context, albeit with different points of emphasis, as relevant to the needs of their student populations, preferences and programmes of study.

- b) **Approaches have evolved over time**, as dependent upon organisational structures, available resources, the mercurial external environment and changing student needs.
- c) There was recognition of the **necessity for academic skills provision to be accessible, transparent and flexible to accommodate the varied and evolving needs of the student population**. Provision spans the entire student lifecycle, from pre-entry to post-graduation, with a recognition that it should be aligned to students' changing development needs.
- d) The longevity and efficacy of approaches to academic skill provision were **often associated with its strategic positioning, recognised as contributing to students' experience, outcomes and/or success**. They were also associated with a holistic, institution-wide approach, drawing together professional and academic services and in collaboration with students (as co-designers and peers), to deliver student-centred opportunities and materials with choices about how to engage.
- e) In recognition of the range of staff and students involved in delivering academic skills development across multiple approaches (peer, embedded, standalone), **having effective mechanisms in place for those involved to network**, share and develop their practice helps to set and maintain consistently high standards of provision.
- f) There was **limited evidence of monitoring and evaluation strategies in place**, from which to measure the impact of academic skills interventions on students' experience, outcomes, and success. Students' academic skills development was found to be evaluated through a range of behavioural, affective and cognitive outcomes, and evidenced through both quantitative and qualitative measures of impact.