
The evolution of a skills development team

Lisa Thompson
Learning and Skills Development Manager
University of Wolverhampton
l.thompson@wlv.ac.uk

Pamela Morris
Learning and Skills Librarian
Skills Development Team
University of Wolverhampton
p.morris@wlv.ac.uk

BACKGROUND

The Skills Development Team at the University of Wolverhampton is in its second year of existence – August 2012 saw the team celebrate its first birthday. This article outlines the team's initial impact and how they established and developed formalised skills provision, and it considers lessons for the future.

The establishment of a skills development team was one part of a complete restructuring of Learning and Information Services (LIS) at the university. The formation of a separate team responsible for skills provision reflected the growing importance of skills in the university and higher education sector as a whole.

Prior to August 2011, skills support had been available (by appointment) through a pool of postgraduate student study skills advisers, with information literacy support and teaching provided by the library team. The statistics indicated that though the service was popular, it was in reality helping only a few students who were making repeat appointments for remedial help, rather than developing their skills. The creation of a skills development team not only highlighted the commitment of LIS to skills provision but also emphasised its intention to change the ethos of the service to one that was committed to developing students' skills, reaching out to many more students and offering an array of learning opportunities. Whittaker advises: 'Focus on an enhancement rather than a deficit model: for learning

support that values and builds on learning and skills achieved so far.¹

PREMISE OF TEAM

The premise of the new team is that if students develop their academic skills and can put them into practice, they will improve as learners, engage more deeply with their course and achieve more, both in their studies and in their future careers. The skills development team role in enabling this was initially to provide a wide range of skills development opportunities to our students and allow them to access development activities on their own terms. Further development of this role means that skills support is now embedded into subject teaching in order to ensure that skills development opportunities reach the maximum number of students.

INITIAL SET UP AND REMIT

The initial challenges facing the team were three-fold. Firstly, skills development team members needed to become familiar with their new role, to become fully aware of the issues involved in skills support and to develop their own skills set to match. The team was appointed following interview, and consisted of six existing members of LIS with various library backgrounds. Team members brought diverse skills, commitment and, importantly, enthusiasm to the job – vital when working from an essentially blank sheet! All had previous experience of supporting students in various roles and several held a PGCert qualification. The second challenge was to have a suite of skills development opportunities in place for the first weeks of the new academic year, six weeks on from the establishment of the team. Finally, the team needed to make academics and students aware of their existence and introduce the purpose of this new service to customers and LIS colleagues alike. A challenge, yes, but exciting also!

FIRST WEEKS

The first six weeks of the team's existence were spent in a flurry of activity developing a suite of workshops for the new academic year, writing accompanying study guides, developing the team's web presence and working through the wide range of logistical and planning issues facing the launch of this new service. The whole suite of activities sits under the brand 'Skills for Learning'. The decision was taken to continue to offer a face-to-face drop-in element to students in an effort to fill the gap left by the defunct study

skills adviser service. The focus for the new skills drop-ins was to be very different, however, with the intention of providing advice on skills development rather than focusing on remedial support. A programme of workshops was devised around core information literacy and academic skills. The development brief was for one-hour interactive workshops, with a variety of activities to engage the prospective attendees. This model of provision was by no means exceptional but was one that suited requirements as the team attempted to meet the differing needs of students at various stages of the learning and skills journey. The logistical challenges facing the team added an extra element to the initial set up process, particularly in the light of the university's cross-campus provision. The team delivers workshops and drop-ins on four campuses, and this has necessitated a system of piloting and reviewing provision levels on different sites in order to achieve a balance of support for the students and academic schools involved.

The inclusion of information literacy in the Skills for Learning programme was a deliberate decision to draw together the two strands of non-subject-specific information literacy and academic skills. Subject-specific information literacy teaching, often embedded in courses, is part of the remit of the liaison librarian team. Generic information literacy is a valid topic to be covered by the skills development team, essentially because of the overlap with academic skills. Howard argues that 'there is increasing evidence that teaching information literacy 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'.² To underline this further, the skills development team led a project to create an online induction package of information and academic skills which has been favourably received across the university, thus forming another strand of skills support and development. This creation of online resources fits in with the wider university digital literacies framework.

FITTING IN

A key feature of the first year has been establishing the skills development team as a central aspect of the LIS provision to the university. The team falls under a wider umbrella of liaison services, and includes a liaison librarian team charged with all aspects of liaison with academic schools. The liaison services team then falls under the over-

arching title of client services, which combines liaison and customer services.

A recognised challenge has been to confirm the skills development team as an integrated resource within the department, to encourage cross-team communication and promotion. This has been an ongoing process of determining the team's focus, introducing that focus and related activities to colleagues in other teams and then reinforcing the message via various communication methods. As the role of the skills team overlaps with the customer service and liaison areas, the definition of the relevant team's areas of responsibility and how the overlap is managed has resulted in increasing collaboration between colleagues across the department. Alongside the internal relationships developed within LIS, successful partnerships fostered with other university departments have enabled the team to make an impact at a university-wide level.

REVIEW OF FIRST YEAR

Establishing the first year as a success involved reviewing statistics for online resource usage, attendance at workshops and drop-ins, examining feedback from students and academic staff and making the team's resource development and skills delivery activities into part of the busy, student-filled academic year. Statistics have been encouraging. During the 2011–12 academic year, 235 workshops were run, with 734 attendees, whilst 503 students attended drop-ins from September 2011 to July 2012. The skills web pages showed over 130,000 hits, with over 2500 hits for downloadable study guides developed by the team. The amount of skills resources developed by the team increased during the year to include further workshops, a wider suite of study guides and a range of associated activities and tasks for student use. The team's web pages were comprehensively restructured and redesigned in house to create a brighter, easy-to-navigate web presence. Some of the successful outcomes could have been anticipated – for example, the development of the i-skills online induction package for new students; others were more unexpected, such as the team being shortlisted in the innovation category in the Vice-Chancellor's annual staff excellence awards for 2011–12.

LESSONS LEARNED AND YEAR 2

Now that the skills development team is well into its second year, we are putting into practice those lessons learnt in year 1. The team have a

heightened awareness of how important it is for any skills provision to take into account the needs of a student population who vary not only in age, gender and nationality, but also in their method of study (part- and full-time, on campus, distance learners) and preferred style of learning, and who are at different stages in their learning and skills journey. Collis & Moonen 'emphasize the need for learner choice in different aspects of the learning experience',³ and, as Hockings notes, 'There is a need to develop inclusive pedagogic practices ... that take account of the diverse interests and needs of the students in each class'.⁴ The team have introduced a rigorous review of materials introduced in the first year, and are continuing to ensure that the skills development opportunities offered to students are considered, evidence-based and targeted at student needs. The service has evolved considerably – other LIS teams now deliver some of the materials developed by the skills development team, and there is increased joint delivery. We recognise the need for embedded sessions, whilst still maintaining a balance between optional and compulsory attendance. Wingate states that 'learning how to study effectively cannot be separated from subject content and the process of learning'.⁵ There is also a shift towards offering joint face-to-face sessions with liaison librarians; such sessions are targeted at specific subject groups, levels of study or student groups such as international students.

The team's awareness of the diversity of the student population has been the impetus for the creation of a wider range of learning opportunities for students, either by increasing the choice available or by offering more in-depth / tailored / levelled experiences. Using lecture capture, presentations with a signer have been developed for hearing-impaired students. Several workshops are now delivered at both an undergraduate and postgraduate level. A Facebook page has been created with the intention of not only publicising the skills team but also developing a learning community through which students can offer peer support. Research carried out at the University of Wolverhampton by Brett and Cousin indicates that students are receptive to the use of social media for learning purposes: 'The increased learner engagement as compared to the VLE... all make a strong argument for the use of free, student understood and led, web 2.0 technologies to house "e" support'.⁶ As we continue to develop our presence on the university VLE, it will be interesting to compare how the two engage our students.

Following the initial period of running workshops, the team began to realise that while students found the workshops invaluable, they were not always aware of the individual skills they had gained and that these needed to be explained to them; this led the team to venture into the employability skills area. We were mindful of the importance of this by Pegg: ‘The development of graduates with relevant skills and knowledge – the employable graduate as “Future Fit” (CBI/UUK 2009) – has placed graduate employability at the centre of the HE agenda’;⁷ therefore, utilising the expertise of a new team member, an employability skills workshop was created to form part of the suite of skills workshops; it has already been embedded into various modules with great success.

If year 1 can be seen as the year of establishment, year 2 is the year of promotion. A frequent comment in feedback from workshops was: ‘I wish I’d known this earlier’. The team have vastly improved their marketing techniques, introducing a university-wide strategy of skills promotion through the use of a range of media, from plasma screen slides to individual messages via the virtual learning environment, social media and posters. Current indications are that our improved promotion has had a direct effect on uptake, with the result that in Semester 1 of 2012–13, 532 attended our workshops. The team are also aware of the need to take students’ views into account and have expanded the breadth of feedback collected.

THE FUTURE

The future looks bright for skills development at the University of Wolverhampton. The skills development team’s innovative mindset and team-based approach ensure a constant stream of ideas to improve opportunities for our students. Built-in review and recognition of the need to move forward and embrace new technologies and ideas are sure to lead to further success.

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