



Long-distance information? - How far does the Humanities Study Skills Website meet students' wants - and needs?

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Introduction: “Start where the student is”

* *Whether you like it or not* (my italics), universities are fundamentally about the education of students, both undergraduate and postgraduate...it is clear that a university becomes non-viable unless it is a satisfactory destination for good students. There is a flaw in the business of a research university unless it is seen to be dedicated as much to the learning outcomes of students as to its research outcomes.”

(Professor Alan Gilbert, quoted in an article: *Elites must teach better, says v-c in Times Higher Education, No.1,831, 7-13 February 2008*)

This statement is indicative of the current climate in much of HE in this country. There appears to be increased recognition, both locally and nationally, of the need for both strategic and practical changes to improve the student experience. The Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) has launched a student listening programme “to amplify the student voice in government”, one strand of which is a series of five student juries; the second of these met in Manchester in January 2008. This University set up a Review of Undergraduate Education which produced an interim report in February 2008; a number of universities across the country are engaged in similar activity. Unsurprisingly, the same issues and concerns come up again and again. They include: the need for good information and guidance for students, especially in the transition from school to university and post-university; the need - and heartfelt wish from many students - for more contact with tutors and more feedback - for a more personal university experience. A number of institutions - this one included - have already begun to implement practical measures to address these issues; some of these may build on the work, over many years, of those individuals and networks within universities who have long been committed to raising the profile of teaching and learning support.

And yet - “*Whether you like it or not ..*” suggests that there is still a culture of resistance to such developments, no consensus on what - or whom - a university is for. Even those who agree that the education of students is at the heart of the enterprise differ in their opinions of what this entails. Is the concern mainly the achievement of “learning outcomes” or skills and “employability” or the development of moral, social and civil values? What are reasonable expectations on both sides, student and institution, particularly when student numbers are increasing and there is still a research agenda to be addressed?

This is the context which informs this small-scale, discrete project, report and recommendations.

A Background

The Humanities Study Skills web site was originally developed (2003-04), mainly by Alyssa Phillips and Tom Liversidge, within the Faculty of Arts of the Victoria University of Manchester. The primary impulse seems to have been to take what information departments were providing in paper form, particularly for first year students, and to put it on-line. An initial trawl round departments in the Faculty did not produce sufficient material so the developers went further afield, to departments such as Law and Midwifery, adapting materials found there and writing some new ones. They also ran a series of focus groups with students to establish what categories of information they wished to see on site and what terminology should be used; research was done on similar sites elsewhere. The emphasis was on generic materials and there was, says Dr Phillips, no desire to make the site interactive; it was conceived as a static site, a reference point for students, with the assumption that actual study skills activities/experiences would be provided within the disciplines.

Once the Faculty of Arts saw the finished site they realized it would also be a useful resource for students prior to their arrival at university so it was decided to make it freely accessible; fliers were sent out in student packs distributed to students when they accepted an offer. The original target groups, then, were pre-arrival and first-year students.

Following the merger with UMIST - and within six months of the launch - the site was moved into the Faculty of Humanities; the template of the site was redesigned but categories and content remained the same. Since that time it has been maintained but not substantially redeveloped; it is currently maintained by a member of the Faculty Teaching and Learning Office. I have been unable to obtain any statistics on use of the website but this is not necessarily a drawback since, according to the proposal document for this evaluation, "website statistics suggest that it is frequently accessed although the current data capture system is rudimentary and may not reflect actual usage".

It was against this background that the LearnHigher CETL at Manchester developed a proposal for a two-stage project: the first stage to involve a structured review of the site; the second, the implementation of recommendations from the review - envisaged as enhancement and redevelopment of the site, though there must always, in a project of this kind, be the possibility of different outcomes.

B The Brief

The original brief for the first stage of the project was:

1. to elicit student and staff responses to current material on the Study Skills site in terms of the use and delivery as well as perceived quality of material
2. to (identify) student needs in terms of material for supporting study
3. to identify programme needs in terms of student learning development
4. to identify needs in forms of supporting study skills units delivered in schools
5. to identify required enhancements to the site drawing on work being conducted by the sixteen partners of the LearnHigher CETL in addition to those identified through in-house evaluation

(A Project Proposal for the Enhancement of the Faculty of Humanities Study Skills website 25.7.07)

This report and the work it describes is a contribution to this first, evaluative stage of the project and relates primarily to items 1 and 2 above, though with some relevance to items 3 and 4. The original proposal envisaged this work being done by a postgraduate student and costed a number of hours accordingly; higher costs have necessarily curtailed the scope of the investigation.

C Methodology

Given the particular focus of this evaluation, I decided - in consultation with Ann Barlow, Learning Area Coordinator for LearnHigher at Manchester - that the most efficient and effective way to carry out the work was *via* a combination of approaches:

a Desk research - familiarizing myself with the Humanities site and looking at similar provision elsewhere; reading relevant Faculty and University documents including outlines of study skills modules, the Interim Report of the Undergraduate Review Committee, a report from the National Student Forum - Manchester Jury, and notes from the newly-formed Faculty Academic Skills network

b Student focus groups - meeting with three groups of students, mainly undergraduates from the Humanities faculty but including one doctoral student and one undergraduate from life sciences.

c Semi-structured interviews with three members of staff: Ann Barlow (Director of Courses for the Public and Learning Area Coordinator for the LearnHigher CETL); Alyssa Phillips (Director of Combined Studies and co-founder of original website); Katja Stuerzenhofecker (Tutor and designer of an undergraduate module and leader of a CEBL-funded project). The choice of these staff for interview was a strategic one; all are familiar with and engaged with both the site and the development of study skills. Though it would be interesting and undoubtedly revealing to consult with staff who are not thus engaged that is for another time.

A considerable contribution to the work was made by Chris Barker, a final year undergraduate and Community Projects Liaison Administrator (for Combined Studies). Chris tracked the broken links on the website, recruited students for the focus groups and gave them a tour of the website. In short, he provided considerable technical and administrative support but he also, importantly, gave me his views of the site - and the student experience - in face-to-face discussion and in a written response to the focus group questions.

Limits on resources precluded a quantitative, statistically viable approach but it was felt, in any case, that a qualitative approach would be more useful. What we have tried to capture is a series of snapshots at a particular time. The use of focus groups was particularly fruitful - and enjoyable. The effectiveness of both questionnaires and focus groups depends, to a considerable extent, on choosing the right questions; but where questionnaires are static, focus groups are - or can be - fluid and dynamic. There is less chance of self-editing because people become caught up in the discussion. Though I used the same set of basic questions with each group, this format allowed for supplementary questions - for further probing and clarification - according to the initial responses. And though the groups were small there was a good deal of interaction between the students, agreeing and disagreeing over views and experiences, which gave

a positive and lively feel to the proceedings. A number of students commented on how much they had enjoyed taking part; I was impressed - and heartened - by their honesty and commitment, and by their strong desire to get the most from their university experience. And whilst this included “doing well” and “getting good grades”, it was clear that many wanted more than a purely instrumental education.

D Focus Groups: Discussing the site

Initially twenty-one students agreed to attend one of three focus groups (more applied but were turned down; we wanted to keep the groups small not only because of room size but to facilitate in-depth discussion). Inevitably, perhaps, some of those who had agreed to attend did not turn up but we did end up with three lively mixed groups. Sessions ran for about two hours; the first half-hour was an introductory workshop session on the computers, managed by Chris with myself as observer/eavesdropper. We then moved into an adjoining room for refreshments and discussion; the first part of the discussion was guided by prompt questions relating specifically to the site, the second by questions relating to the broader context of studying at university. (For full list of questions see Appendix A)

First Impressions - “I wish I’d known about it at the very beginning of first year - the week after freshers’ week”

The most striking point to emerge here is that these were, indeed, first impressions. Out of thirteen students, eleven had never heard of the site or visited it; one person had heard of it and another had come across it “*by accident when looking for past exam papers*”. Admittedly, this is a very small number of students but it would still seem to suggest that the site is not well-known - which makes it difficult to assess its actual or potential usefulness. A comprehensive survey was not possible within this phase of the project but there are some indications of a similar lack of awareness amongst staff in the Faculty. One lecturer who provides a discipline-specific study skills module and is keen to advise students of available resources admitted to never having come across the site. Certainly, none of the students in the focus groups had been directed to it by tutors. Indeed, one suggestion made by a student was: “...*every time you’re given an assignment it should be given as a useful link*”. (Interestingly, Chris Barker first encountered the site in a presentation on independent study and learning techniques, given by a member of the Centre for Excellence in Enquiry- Based Learning.)

When the site was first established, students would access it *via* the then Faculty of Arts website but, accordingly to Dr Phillips, students rarely access the Faculty of Humanities site, where it is now situated; rather they tend to go directly to their school/discipline site from where there do not seem to be any clear or effective links to the Study Skills website. (Though a number do flag up guides to plagiarism...)

It is clear that, however it is redeveloped, the site itself needs a higher profile and to be readily and clearly accessible through a number of routes. Given high staff turnover in some areas - and remembering that students approach administrative staff for help at least as often as academic staff - it would be useful to have some mechanism /system for regularly informing people of its existence.

Using the site

It was interesting to see how students approached the site; some worked their way through the menu while others went straight to a specific section - with many making for time management. Everyone found the site easy to navigate - with some reservations:

It's set out really well so you don't have to read about something you don't want to read about

...the breadcrumb trail down the side does make it easier except sometimes it brings you back to a different section so if you're working through you might not be able to find your way back

(In his checking of the site, Chris Barker found that, though the format is generally simple and easy to use, " ...certain menu icons are confusing as they return you to the home page when it is not necessarily as far back as you would want to go. Similarly, certain links do not open a new window but instead replace the old one; when this is closed the whole browser closes and the site has to be accessed again from scratch.")

Discussion of likely use was necessarily hypothetical since none of the students had used it before but initial responses were generally positive:

It's very thorough - goes through everything so you could pick and choose what you want to learn about and find out about

If you've got it on-line you don't need to worry if you've forgotten how to do something - you can look it up again

Unsurprisingly, even in such small groups, there were different approaches:

I'd use it if I had an essay or something - not just sit and read it but go direct to the relevant bit

but others made the point that:

If I'd known about it at the very beginning I might have had a look at it all

and

I prefer to look at it all at once-that way it would always be in the back of my mind when I was doing an essay or planning for exams - I'd know where I could go to for help.

It seems likely that students will use the site in different ways at different times in their student life - and according to their preferred styles. However, all the above comments seem to emphasize the importance - and usefulness - of being introduced to the site early on so that at least one has the option of whether -and how - to use it. At the beginning of their university course many students do not have a clear idea of what their study support needs are; they are not clear about what they do - or do not - know, or what is expected of them. As students become more aware - of themselves and of the demands of their course - so they have a clearer idea of what they need. A single reference site is unlikely to meet all such needs but could certainly make a significant contribution.

Content

As discussion moved to looking more closely at the content and layout of the specific sections (how relevant and focused was the material, for instance), there were more negative comments. Many related to the fact that the site is heavily text-based - not surprising in view of its origins.

There are too many things on a page - too much information (This from an overseas student)

It covers most topics you need - really good - but in each section there's too much

I was looking at the referencing page - it's like War and Peace

The front page is a bit dreary not easily digestible. The first page is about presentation and this is a bit dreary - doesn't encourage you to go on

This last student cited the BBC news website as an example of an attractive, well-designed home page. Expectations of high production values probably increase year on year but, while it may not be practical to emulate the BBC, it should be possible to have a more inviting introduction to the site. And one that is more student-orientated - a mind map of the site, for instance - so that students can locate themselves within it and start from wherever they are.

Other comments also suggest that, at times, students felt overwhelmed by the amount of information and possibly need more guidance about selecting and using what is relevant to them at a particular time:

There are lots of links - especially if you're trying to find out the way you study. We felt you could spend too much time doing lots of tests and if they all came out the same you could get hooked on trying to learn like that - even if you didn't find it easy! (This is illustrative of the pitfalls of the unmonitored use of learning styles inventories - many of which have limited use, some of which have been discredited.)

I'm more inclined to read something that's bullet-pointed rather than a block of text

Too much information can be as confusing as too little; there is, perhaps, a need for more analysis of processes to identify the essential aspects and to edit accordingly.

Student responses to much of the content suggest there may be some merit in a two-tier approach to presenting information on the site: a bullet-point/tips section with links to more in-depth pieces for those who want it. Though the danger here, perhaps, lies in responding to wants rather than needs. Many students, feeling under pressure from deadlines and workload, want a quick fix. In responding to this want, it may be helpful - and less likely to encourage only surface or strategic learning - to include in the brief section some kind of self-assessment checklist. For instance, students might be asked to identify which skills/practices they feel confident about, which they feel are under-developed in the particular area - critical writing, for example. (The right kind of questions can prime us to think in particular ways.) In this more constructivist approach, links would then take them to further information or activity appropriate to their situation. This would also have the

advantage of making the student a more active participant and encourage reflection and self-assessment. (see also below: An Example of Integration)
For this kind of approach to work, however, the student really needs to know how to obtain and interpret feedback on a fairly regular basis.

Relevance/Importance of different sections

There was general agreement on the relevance of most sections on the site, especially “*the everyday stuff - lectures, note-taking, essays and stuff...*” and, again, many wished they had known about the site earlier. A number expressed views similar to this student:

..being expected to read all these articles - it just feels like you don't know what you're supposed to be reading for. On the site, it had a section on how to read and take notes and that would have been so useful. You get these articles and you don't know what you're supposed to be taking from them - no-one's checking up that you've got the right points. When it comes to the exam...if you pick up on the right things, then good for you but if you miss the point ... it is difficult - I don't know how you get help.

Several others cited time-management as one of the most important sections:

You always have an idea how to do it but you never think of little tricks like keeping diaries or writing action plans

Even topics many students felt they already knew about were deemed useful because “*it's reassuring to be able to check on something and find out you were right - gives you confidence*”. In other words, the website already functions, to some extent, as a checklist for what you do know - and for what you don't. Some students would like to see stress management as a separate section rather than, as they described it, “concealed” under Psychological Factors but only two areas provoked real disagreement about their relevance: **Making Yourself Employable** and **PDP (Personal Development Planning)**.

Some felt that improving one's job prospects was not relevant at this stage in their student life and that such information would be better placed on the Careers website. This view, however, was strongly contested by another student:

I would say the employability bit is most useful to me but that's maybe because at the moment we are being focused on thinking about it - being more arts focused than vocational I'm aware I have to do extra things to be able to be employed rather than just say I have a degree.

The **PDP** section provoked similarly divergent views on its relevance, mainly because of confusion or ignorance about PDPs; one student felt they were only useful for post-graduates; another commented that they were compulsory at some universities, but not here - and was contradicted by a Combined Studies student. Clearly, students' experience of the process varied widely and this affected how they viewed it. Some seemed very unsure of the nature and function of a PDP - or even whether they had one or not. (This latter point perhaps indicates one of the hazards of integrating a process - whether PDP or Study Skills - into a particular course or subject module: students may be unaware of what they are doing - and of the benefits of it. It may be useful - even necessary - to make such elements more explicit, encouraging students to reflect on what they are doing and how they can make use of it.)

I don't know exactly what it's working towards but you keep going on-line and putting in your thoughts and stuff - I keep looking back at it (we're being graded on it). I'm not sure what they're going to do with it but for me personally it's been very useful to have it all written down - looking back at what I was like, now I know what I was terrible at. With it being on-line you can just forget about it - in a good way - and think, 'Oh, I've got all that recorded.'"

In spite of some confusion about ownership and purpose, this student clearly feels some benefits from keeping such a log - awareness of development at the very least. Her positive take provoked this response from another student:

We should do that sort of thing on all courses - I remember doing PDP forms in the first week but have no idea what happened to them.

In fact, the consensus seemed to be that the PDP is a good idea in theory but that for it to be effective it needs to be compulsory and to be consistently managed; varying levels of interest among lecturers, even within the same subject areas, led some students to believe it was just an exercise in "ticking all the boxes".

Clearly widely divergent - and possibly inequitable - practice in setting up and running PDPs in different schools makes it difficult for a site such as this to give information that is relevant to all students. The underlying problem seems to be one of ownership/responsibility which is linked not only to independent learning but to being able to clearly see the personal benefit. Possibly, key aspects of both these sections - that is, essentially, transferable skills and self-assessment/reflection - could be integrated into other parts of the site. It might also be useful to clearly signal - maybe through peer testimony - at what stage(s) in one's university life these two vexed sections are most pertinent.

Anything missing?

It is difficult to be asked to identify any gaps on a site when you have only just encountered it and relatively little time to reflect. On the other hand, first impressions are very powerful - and an important indicator of future usage so the suggestions made may be particularly pertinent in terms of encouraging continued use of the site.

I feel it kind of lacks a home page

It's all very general - it would be good to have some subject specific stuff - or links to it

I'd just like a ten-point student survival guide

*It would be good to have a sort of forum where you could ask those 'stupid' questions you're too embarrassed to ask in person (Chris Barker mentioned that the Basement Groups set up by MAP (Manchester Access Programme) worked well in that way - see also below: **Friends, Peers & Mentors. A FAQ section might serve a similar purpose or possibly a Help or Search function responsive to key words.**)*

A number of students said they would like to see some more specific information and advice on accessing and using journals - though not the Life Sciences student who had

covered this in a Data-handling module which she had found extremely useful. One student said they like to see *“what would get you a first or a 2:1”* to which another responded, *“I think that’s in a handbook somewhere but no-one ever reads them...”*.

When one student remarked: *“On this site everything looks the same”* I asked if video or podcasts would be a useful addition. No-one responded to the suggestion of podcasts but a number were very positive about video- so long as it was the right kind. One student complained of a boring - and tiring - video on copyright which consisted simply of someone talking to camera; another mentioned, as a positive example, the University’s video clips showing student accommodation.

The general consensus seemed to be that showing real students in real situations - in three to five minute clips - could be useful and help students feel the website was about and for them rather than for the University. The basic information conveyed might be the same but students would find it more interesting and be more likely to explore further. As it stands, the site is lacking student voices - and faces.

This also relates to another lack which was identified: students wanted to see more specific examples rather than simply generalized advice - more showing and less telling. (Interestingly, a tutor made a similar observation, citing examples of reflective writing as something it would be useful to have on the site.)

When various students - from Combined Studies and Life Sciences, for instance - spoke of their experiences with virtual tutorials or on-line modules (covering a range of topics from preferred ways of learning to Data Handling and Critical Writing) a number of students expressed a wish for something similar, either via links from the site or within their own courses.

On my own first visit to the site, the omission I found most striking concerned feedback - how to get it, interpret it, use it. Interestingly no student mentioned this until I brought the subject up. (see below)

Preferred sources of information and advice

Clearly, much of the information on this site is available elsewhere: in books and handbooks/handouts, from tutors, and on-line in various forms. Handbooks were generally given short shrift, either because of the difficulty of getting hold of them (this from a Combined Studies student), or because they are not really so convenient to use - or because of the tone they take and the assumptions they make. One student commented, *“We’ve got the world’s most aggressive handbook - it just assumes you’re going to steal someone else’s ideas- some sentences! - you think, why not just put a big skull and crossbones.”*

Starting from a deficit model is perhaps not the best way to help students understand academic integrity- though this is not a problem confined to handbooks. Rather than equip students with the skills for managing information and appropriate referencing - and pointing out how and why they have made a mistake - it often seems we prefer to terrify them with the bogeyman of Plagiarism.

Most students showed a preference for a mixture of information available on-line and face-to-face. Those who had done on-line modules in various aspects of study skills (for

instance, in Life Sciences and in Combined Studies) found it particularly valuable to have to apply what they had learnt and progress in a structured way; they learnt through doing. Those whose sessions, either on-line or face-to-face, had dealt largely with presenting information as it is presented on some sections of this website (for example, How to reference) seemed to find them less relevant. And, of course, even where such modules are compulsory *“I know a lot of people who don’t go to them at all - they felt they already knew how to do it. - and - “If I were back in the first year I wouldn’t want to go to something if I didn’t have too - I’d be busy being independent”*

One suggestion was that study skills information be integrated into lectures early in the first year, with fifteen minutes of each lecture dealing with particular key aspects. Another was to more positively -and aggressively - market lectures and seminars on such skills: *“How to write a good essay” or “How to get a First”*.

A number of students said it is always easy to get information - just Google it; none mentioned issues regarding the reliability of the sources of such information.

In spite of some criticisms, everyone felt there is a role for a site, such as this, which can be accessed as and when one needs it, for information, clarification or reassurance about key study skills. But while on-line access to information and advice is necessary, no-one felt it is sufficient; all the students, at times, want personal and individual responses to themselves and their work. Tutors are one group they look to for this - with varying degrees of success.

E Focus Groups: discussing studying

How do you know how well you’re doing?

The blunt answer to this, from several people, was *“You don’t”*; others said, *“You just go by the marks you’re getting”*. Not surprisingly, students’ experience of getting feedback from tutors varied widely; in this small sample, however, the negative experience were probably most common:

We got feedback in first year but don’t get any in third year so if I get 42 for one essay and 68 for everything else I can’t find anyone who’ll tell me what’s wrong with that essay.

Those essays you do really well in, you want to know why as well. I was lucky because the module where I did a really good essay was marked by my personal tutor so I could ask her. (and I knew how she wanted me to write - from tutorials - that’s why I did well.)

I’m halfway through now - nine courses - and I’ve had feedback on one or two at the most. You’ve got to stick to your deadline no matter what - if you miss it you don’t get any marks. The lecturers stick to whatever deadline they want - there’s nothing to motivate them to get it back to you, especially before an exam

Basically, some lecturers will give a lot of help and some won’t. For instance, in our year one lecturer just gave feedback on spelling, grammar - that was it- whereas my dissertation tutor gave feedback on structure, argument- everything else. So, because the amount of feedback varies so widely within a particular area, it makes sense to have something like this website which provides you with a foundation on which to build.

One student was very happy with the detailed feedback she got on her essays in tutorials: grade sheets, how the work was marked, why a particular mark was given and individual pointers on how to improve and where one had done well. She was less happy with an on-line study skills module (pass/fail basis) which she felt failed to give useful feedback on how to improve her approach to learning.

A number of comments suggest that some students do not see feedback as particularly valuable - or, at least, are unable or unwilling to get the most from it:

My tutor tends to pick on something more specific to the question - not something general about skills but more 'You could have done this..' but then I'm never going to re-write that essay so it doesn't really matter.

I got one essay back - the tutor didn't write on it but used symbols instead - gave us a paper with what the symbols meant - I just didn't bother looking at it. Written feedback is better.

I quite often don't go back to it (written feedback). I read it when I get it but I don't go back and look at it before I do the next one - but that's probably just me.

(On the contrary, this practice seems widespread. Alyssa Phillips tells of the difficulty in persuading a student who had approached her for advice on her essays but bring in not just the last one but all previous ones - and to read all the feedback. The feedback was clear and consistent but the student had never read it before starting a new essay - and repeating the same mistakes.)

If you are the sort of person who wants feedback you will get it - find ways of doing it. If you're not that focused towards it, don't see it as fundamental to what you're doing, you won't - I think it's a personal choice.

Many students expressed a wish for more individual and specific feedback from tutors - but also showed a considerable degree of understanding about why they were unlikely to get it. These focus groups were taking place when there was a great deal of discussion - and some unrest - amongst students, both locally and nationally, concerning such issues as contact with tutors. Though a number of students echoed the more widespread complaints, most also saw their tutors as, to some extent, fellow victims in a divisive system:

I think the University, in building this 2015 thing, is driving a lot of people mad

All lecturers are under pressure- they have a quota to meet by the end of the year. To do that they may have to ignore some other things - if that means not seeing you, then that's what's going to happen. They don't have time for students any more - they're being told that they have to spend all their time doing research or giving lectures'

They don't like it any more than we do. Lecturers don't just want to be shut away in their offices - they want us to talk to them.

When I asked students what helped them most in their studies, a number said, simply, "Doing it." That is, getting on with the task, finding out through making mistakes, learning from experience. Clearly, this involves some degree of reflection; timely, specific individual feedback - another perspective on what went

well, what would make a difference -can make a considerable contribution to the quality of that reflection. To neglect feedback - whether you are student or tutor - is to neglect a powerful developmental tool. Some courses - and the PDP - build in opportunities for feedback and reflection ("If there's one thing I've got out of geography it's reflecting more', said one student.) but most students would probably benefit from some help in obtaining, valuing, interpreting and using feedback. A website such as this, for instance, might carry a pro-forma feedback form (or tutor/student dialogue form) which both staff and students could use; a section on interpreting feedback could translate some of the most commonly used phrases ("lacks structure', for instance) and link them to sections which address the problem.

It is interesting to note that, whatever complaints students might have, most still trust in and have regard for their tutors; asked what advice they would give to a new student, many said "If you want to know something just ask your tutor"...

The crucial first year - and the importance of the social

In the later part of our discussions, I asked members of the focus groups to think back to when they first arrived at the University: how did it feel? what did they know - and not know? what -or who - helped them most? One of the most telling moments came when a geography student told us of her experience at the very beginning of her first year:

...we went on a field trip before freshers' week and it was literally hundreds of people stuck together for three days and you met everyone on your course - the head of department and tutors came too. Afterwards I felt I could talk to any one of them - even though I hadn't talked to them since the trip I could go up to any of them and say, 'Look, I can't do this - you're on my course, can you suggest anything?' I found that really useful - on a lot of courses people don't know each other so much. ...At the time it was really scary and I just wanted to get back home but, looking back, it's the best thing they ever did.

This was meant with a heartfelt - and somewhat envious - response from other students:

That sounds really good!

On the whole - and in spite of complaints about lack of contact and feedback from tutors - students' attitude to the challenges of the first year seems to be one of pragmatic acceptance:

It's very daunting but it teaches you a lot really quickly. It's important that you're in that experience. You're left out there and that's life in the real world...support is there as well but at first you want to be left to do your own thing - then you realize work's piling up and you find your own ways of doing it and realize after that there is all this support - you're still finding out. It's good in a way - you're just left to fend for yourself

It feels like you're suddenly - for most people at eighteen - just being completely set free. If you're someone who likes to do something all the time you're, like, 'What's going on?' - but once you've got your mates and got a routine it becomes home.

It's about learning to be independent as a whole. I need a kick up the backside...I'm great on theories but I've got no commonsense.

Some adapted to their situation more quickly than others - and developed strategies to get the most out of it:

I used my first year to write essays in different ways; because the first year didn't count- you just had to pass it - I thought, this is the time to work out which gets me the highest marks.

These, of course, are the students who are still here, who have survived, though some still remember keenly what it felt like when they first arrived:

I'm a second year and I'm feeling different because I've gone through the first year now and I'm more comfortable but as a first year you think. 'I'm a first year- where's my support - no-one cares...' It would be good in the first week - even days - to have tutors coming up to you and saying "It will be fine" - everyone knows you don't really get that idea at the start

It is easy to see why so many envied the geographers their field trip. They all knew that university would be different from school but none had been able to fully envisage what it would be like - and how relieved they would feel just to see a familiar face in the lecture hall. A number said they were continually told there was support available but that they did not actually see any; clearly actions - like the field trip - speak louder than words. There is no shortage of information - surveys, research papers and the like - on the importance of a student's first year, not only in relation to retention but affecting other factors too. **One paper which may be particularly relevant in the present context is one I first encountered several years ago, when the Victoria University of Manchester was first implementing PADPs (Personal and Academic Development Plans). The paper in question: *Teaching Self-Parenting Techniques to First Year Undergraduate Students*, written by Peggy Foster, detailed a study skills module introduced to the then undergraduate degree programme in Social Policy. She writes:**

As well as aiming to improve students' academic skills we also aimed to help them negotiate the major life change from home/school/college to university. In the main, it is now unrealistic to expect lecturers in a research-led university to have either the time or the inclination to parent undergraduates through the difficult transition from being closely supervised 'A' level or 'Access' students to being independent undergraduate students. We therefore decided to develop a range of exercises designed to enable students to parent themselves through their undergraduate years in a nurturing yet disciplined way. Three linked 'self-parenting' techniques were built into our Study Skills teaching: goal setting, time structuring and a system of student initiated rewards for achievement

(Note: I am unable to give precise reference here as I have only photocopied sheets distributed at the time by Curriculum Innovation and Development. There is, however, an article detailing these techniques: *Parenting timetabled* by Alison Utley in The Times Higher Education Supplement 18 September 1998, available through the THE archives.)

I do not know if these techniques are still being used but it would be interesting to know how successful they were - and whether they might be adapted and adopted for current use.

Friends, Peers and Mentors

All students may not have found the degree of support they expected or hoped for from their tutors but most of them did find it elsewhere - primarily from friends.

The social side is so important for seeing it through to the end - you couldn't write a dissertation without friends.

The support friends offer is not just emotional but practical and strategic, whether it's encouraging each other to actually get down to work or acting as a sounding board and source of feedback

If you have an idea for a topic, you go over and over it in your head, you can dig yourself a hole. But sit your friend down, say "Don't say anything - I'm just going to tell you what I'm thinking" and then it gets clearer

and, in response to my question about who you ask for comments on your essay draft:

Definitely my friends are the first people I turn to - they're doing the same thing. I prefer it, if we've got coursework to do, if we're all doing different questions - it works really well. If you turn too much to friends you could end up producing the same work but I'd still turn to friends before anyone else.

I only turn to friends who are not doing the same course. My friend is doing civil engineering - a totally different course. I get her to read my essays...It's good to get someone who's not got the foggiest idea of what you're on about to check if you are clear. They'll notice things that someone who is only concerned with content won't - like if you've repeated yourself.

Other students, not necessarily just friends, were also seen to make a valuable contribution; students working on their dissertations said:

We've got some third years who handed in their dissertation in January so it's still fresh and they talked to us - it was really useful. Tutors did it, I know, but they did it some time ago - it's nice knowing you're going through the same process as someone who did it last year and panicked like you're panicking now and had the same hitches only a year ago. It's very reassuring - and you can be more frank about it as well.

Here the third years' contribution obviously has an affective as well as practical dimension, something it may be hard for tutors to offer with any credibility in such a situation. (And such students could have a useful role in video clips on site.) Some students made similar comments about being taught by post-graduates, that they used more accessible language and seemed nearer to the undergraduates' experience. One student, however, instanced a session with a post-graduate "with no social skills whatsoever - there were long silences, no words of encouragement - it made you want to scratch your eyes out."

A number of students spoke very positively about being involved in peer marking - "it was very interesting to see what others had written"; similarly:

We had PASS sessions in the first year - just talking to people older who did your course - really useful. They told us where you actually get exam papers - we didn't really know. It

was nice that they had done it - they had the information and passed it on to you and you only found out because you'd spoken to them.

It seems likely that a large part of the information passed on is available elsewhere but clearly, transmission through peers makes it not only more accessible but, again, more credible and trustworthy.

Attitudes to mentoring schemes were more mixed. Clearly the instance of the third years mentioned above was a successful application of mentoring but for many, rather like the PDP, Mentoring schemes are a good idea in theory but work less well in practice. A common reason given for this failure was that different people - mentors, mentees, lecturers - were told different things and had different expectations. There appear to be a number of different models in use but lack of clarity, structure and communication were cited as hindering the success of many. There appears, however, to be a lot of goodwill and a feeling that it's worth persisting to try to get the schemes to work more effectively.

Supporting Independent Study

When I asked students what helped the most, as independent learners, there were two responses that dominated: "Doing it" and *Friends" - and, often, the two come together:

Group work is so important. We'd go off to the pub and go through our work - talk and relax - eat - getting ideas off each other. We had revision sessions, really informal, in a room like this

It is interesting to note that the CEEBL has a social learning space, not only making this sort of working explicit but clearly valuing it. Some students, however, recognize that it is not without difficulties:

One friend of mine doesn't want to give her ideas away - she sees it as a competition

-She must be awful in group work!

It can be annoying - one person in my group liked my idea and she's doing it as well and will probably do it better.

It happens in the real world - everyone's going to steal your ideas, especially the good ones. I've done it - I asked a friend if I could use part of her dissertation.

Clearly these students found considerable benefits in working co-operatively -which is also a skill much promoted by those wishing to improve graduate employability. Yet the culture of the University - indeed, of higher education generally - can be confusing in this area. When does co-operation become collusion? when does sharing ideas become plagiarism or theft of intellectual property? Most official advice seems to assume the worst; it starts from a negative, assumes students will collude and plagiarize, and sets out ferocious punishment. Given the instinctive and necessary impulse for students to work together and support each other it would surely be better to build on this, to educate them about collegiality and academic integrity?

There is a similar confusion about expectations concerning independent study itself. One student remarked: "They should not be telling us what to do - they should suggest and recommend if they want us to be independent, not just tell us." **Often, it seems, accepted practice is presented as the only way to do things;** there is no argument about this when it comes to such currency as referencing systems but a number of students - especially the bright ones - object to being told, for instance, how they must write. And so strongly do they feel that they refuse to conform, even when told this will cost them marks and mean a lower degree classification.

The message is mixed: Be independent - but only where we say you can. Aim to become a reflective, deep learner - but respond to these deadlines and assessments which may mean you have to embrace surface - or at least strategic - approaches to succeed. Academics complain of students expecting to be spoon-fed after their closely monitored A-level experience but, where the university places unnecessary or unjustified strictures on how students work they are, in effect, spoon-feeding by proxy - without the personal touch. It is interesting to note that the Student's Guide To Enquiry-Based Learning, written by students, refers often to conventional HE study as "spoon-feeding". (One student referred to her A-level private school experience as "force-feeding - in the name of league tables" and expressed fears the University was going the same way.) **At least one lecturer would like to see the study skills website more informed by EBL. Though it is not without its own difficulties and takes time to develop, EBL is arguably one of the best ways of encouraging independent learning.**

The question of what the University could do to help students learn independently and successfully prompted, unsurprisingly, requests for more contact with lecturers, specifically more tutorials, but also another interesting response: **better teacher training**

I know it's hard because you've got experts but a lot of them are so, so vague. My tutor - I love the man, he's brilliant but he's so vague. Lecturers need to say "What do you think about this?" to students - not to catch them out but to wake them up. They shouldn't just lecture at them.

There is an argument, which I have heard from colleagues in other universities as well as from this student, which says that first years should have the very best - the best professors, researchers, teachers. I find it very persuasive.

F -Some staff perspectives

Clearly there is recognition amongst staff of the importance of support for study skills. This is evidenced, to some extent, by the number of such modules/ provision - both face-to-face and on-line - within a number of undergraduate courses. This would seem to accord with the original aims for this site, namely that it should act as a generic reference point whilst discipline-specific teaching of skills resides within the schools and their courses. If such discipline-specific provision continues to grow, is there still a place for a website such as this? For the most part, the answer seems to be yes - with some qualifications.

The staff I spoke to were all agreed that the study skills website offers a good starting point; as it stands, and in keeping with its origins, it is primarily there to be read, a reference point. It is well-structured, with a good index and can be used to get somewhere else - if you know what you are looking for. One view was that, in its current state, it is in

the wrong place; the kind of information it provides would be better as part of a library website since it is basically print information - and it does not actually give people much to do.

However, it could be redesigned so it could be used as a framework for study skills units, perhaps with a separate portal - and training package - for tutors and other staff, It could be embedded in Blackboard and, with video and sound added, become more interactive; this format would give it a rationale for being on the web (Alyssa Phillips suggested videos could be made by Combined Studies students working on community projects.)

Another staff member, while agreeing that sound and video would be useful and make the site more attractive disputed whether this would, in itself, make it interactive; a truly interactive site would be labour-intensive and would be a different animal - it would be seeking to teach study skills (the role of those integrated units) rather than, as this one is, to support them.

A redesign, including the addition of sound and vision, could not only go some way to addressing the needs of those who find printed information difficult but would better reflect the variety - and human messiness - of the student experience. There is potential to more actively support student learning rather than simply study skills. One approach might be to have fewer categories - to identify key processes underpinning independent study at different stages in a student's life - and to present these in a more attractive and accessible way but with clear links into other, more complex areas and activity. Such a site could be a useful both as a stand-alone reference resource, for students and staff, but could also contain elements which would inform discipline specific provision.

An example of integration

Katja Stuerzenhofecker is a graduate teaching assistant who teaches - and is largely in charge of - a second year undergraduate course: *Religion, Culture and Gender*, in the school of Arts, Histories and Cultures. Most of the students are doing a Combined Studies degree; there are very few overseas students or mature students on the course but students do have very varied ideological backgrounds. This last point is important because it highlights an area of student underdevelopment which is probably common to many discursive subjects: according to Katja, few students at this stage have the emotional competence for controversial discussion of matters which are very personal. A CEBL session on the positive impact of diversity on learning made a big difference here; students got to know each other in groups, "collected their diversities" identified the different resources and backgrounds - including study skills - which they had as a group. However, even after this session there was a lot of evidence that people were avoiding issues, not responding to controversial statements.

The affective dimension is often neglected in teaching but even when directly addressed, as here, one has to allow time for development and opportunities for practice and reinforcement. Issues relating to personal/emotional confidence are also relevant in the development of other skills within this unit; these include facilitation skills - managing a student-led discussion, posing questions to the floor, dealing with lack of response, moving the discussion. Effective note-taking skills are also addressed; one student from the discussion group is required to take notes on the board in real time; decisions have to be made about whether to record process or outcomes, and in what format. This activity

was introduced as a way of validating peer learning - though Katja admitted that the validation effect is best when people are good at it. Students struggle with these skills - ones which are crucial for enquiry-based learning but which are generally not addressed in conventional group skills training - and Katja felt it was probably necessary to accept that there will be some level of dysfunction in a group. (She is involved with a new EBL project concerning linked progression from year 1 to 2, and beyond, which should help to address some of the issues.)

Katja definitely sees it as part of the tutor's role to help develop study skills; *"If I want these pedagogical methods to be effective I need to. I need a merger of subject enquiry and methodology.* Formative feedback - and constructivist theory - are important here. Students are given early formative feedback on their presentations and portfolios - *I make them aware of their shortcomings* - and are directed towards specific resources, including the study skills website. Katja views the support for study skills as so important she has taken interesting and decisive action (and this before a similar recommendation was published in T&L Review):

I have decided that the workload was too heavy - it left no time and inclination to work on study skills. Next semester I'm cutting compulsory reading in half and reducing the issues to be addressed in learning journals. Their knowledge base is not yet developed enough so I give them a very tight structure of questions to be addressed in their journals. Their evaluation indicates that because they find this course so interesting and personally relevant they stick with it - possibly to the detriment of other courses. They develop skills - for instance, different ways of reading and taking notes - by doing them. I tell them that the first three entries in their journal won't affect their assessment (I do give them feedback on these) - I tell them I'm interested in seeing improvement distance travelled.

Here, it seems, the development of study skills is both integrated and made explicit; the teaching starts from where the student is and expectations are made clear. (So much so that, after an initial lecture on the demands and potential affect of the course on beliefs and number of students, forced to examine their commitment, drop out.) Study skills development is also integrated with assessment, much of it concerned with developing the ability to self assess. For instance, when they receive feedback on the first few entries in their journal students are, in turn, required to reflect and comment on the feedback they have received. (5% of assessment is linked to this). WebCT is used as a repository for materials and for exchange of feedback. There is sustained impetus and support for self-assessment and reflection.

Katja is one of the people who would like to see Enquiry Based Learning recognized more of the study skills website; she also echoes others' requests for more examples (reflective writing; different templates for note-taking) and for a tutor portal which would use the same material as that for students but with suggestions for how to integrate into tutorial or assessment activities. Some indication of what resources are most useful at particular stages in a course would also be useful; students producing portfolios, for instance, need editing skills towards the end of the task.

One of Katja's most telling points came towards the end of our meeting:

Tutors need to analyze what study processes and tasks their course involves. My understanding of the tasks I'm setting is much better when I've done those tasks myself - in Teaching Equals and the follow-on module, for instance.

(Note: *Teaching Equals* was a module in Manchester University's PGCertificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. It was designed and delivered by the Centre for Continuing Education specifically for part-time lecturers, or those who had teaching as only part of their role. The Certificate was discontinued following the merger with UMIST.)

G - Conclusions and Recommendations

It is clear that there could be considerable benefit, for both students and staff, in retaining a study skills website - but not in its current form. It is a product of its time: totally text-based, university- rather than student-centered; there is, to quote one of the interviewees, "no real rationale for it being on the web".

So how should it be redeveloped? There is no single right option; much depends, not only on resources, but - more importantly- on being clear (or, at any rate, making a decision) about who and what the site is for. No single site, however, well-designed, can be all things to all students. Similarly, a study skills website cannot directly address issues such as insufficient tutor contact, or many others raised in discussions here -and raised in the Student Juries and in Teaching and Learning Review. That is not to say, however, that any development of the site should ignore these wider issues; on the contrary, since they inform the context in which people teach and study, they should also inform the design of the site. It seemed to me, listening to the students in the focus groups, that from their perspective much of what study skills are about seems fragmented and incoherent; thus, they see feedback on an essay as pertinent only to that essay - if they see it as relevant at all; they cannot make the link between generic and discipline-specific study skills so will often dismiss the former as not relevant. A student skills website could at least make some connections more explicit, and should, itself, be part of a more coherent and holistic approach not only to study skills development but to students. (The PDP was, I assume, designed in part to be a place where reflection takes place and connections are made for, and by, each student. However, its success seems patchy; the early PADP (Personal and Academic Planning) which was strongly tied to personal tutorials was possibly more effective.)

The recommendations given below go beyond the confines of the site itself, both in order to do justice to the contributions made in the evaluation by students and staff but also to indicate the desirable context within which a redeveloped site would operate. Recommendations relating most directly to the site are nos 1-11.

1 Whatever form the site takes, it should have a high profile and be accessible through a number of routes; other locations apart from the Humanities website should be considered to see if they might offer better exposure and access.

2 The site needs to be clearly designed from a student perspective so that students can easily locate themselves within it. This is particularly pertinent if the site seeks to address the needs of students other than the first year humanities students for whom it was originally intended. Some students identify themselves very much by their discipline, others by the stage they are at in their university career: starting out, final year or postgraduate, for instance. A different -and more attractive - home page would be a starting point. It may be useful to have a site map which allows different ways into the same topics but which also caters for particular needs at different stages e.g. writing dissertations. A Help menu, responsive to key words would also be useful, as would FAQ

sections for core topics. This more constructivist approach can accommodate a whole range of ways in which students might identify themselves.

3 The site should remain predominantly generic but with clear links to discipline-specific applications. The relationship between the two - the underlying principles and practice - should be made clear. (As it is, for instance, in referencing: different systems but same fundamental rationale.)

4 First encounters with a topic on the site should not be through large blocks of text. Possibly a two-tier system could be used: essential points/ "top tips" first but with the option to click for more in-depth information

5 There is a need for more examples: more show, less tell. It would be helpful for many students to see good and less good examples and applications, along with some indication of *why* they are so rated. This could also help to indicate that there is not always one right way of doing something.

6 Video clips, by students and staff, could enhance the site considerably, providing they are of sufficient quality and pertinent. These might include students demonstrating some particular activity or describing aspects of the experience

7 The core of the site should remain for use as a reference but with links from each topic to structured on-line tutorials/modules for those who wish to apply and practice, in a safe environment, what they have learnt.

8 Consideration should be given to having a core menu - the foundation study skills as identified through analysis of academic tasks.

9 There should be some section of the site which deals with feedback: how to give it, how to get it, interpret it and use it. This could include downloadable tutor-student dialogue forms and/or templates for tutors or others providing feedback. **Working with peers and mentors might also be included in this section**

10 There should be a separate portal for staff which includes practical suggestions and materials for integrating study skills support into their teaching or developing a discipline-specific module

11 There should be investigation to discover what Enquiry-Based Learning methods and material might usefully be included, either directly on site or via links

12 The crucial importance of the first year, and of the social and affective aspects of learning should be recognized and inform practice

13 Potentially valuable schemes such as Mentoring and PDP should be implemented more equitably and transparently

14 Staff development for integration of study skills development in teaching

Appendix A Questions for focus groups

The questions below formed the basis for our discussions. They were used to provide a loose structure rather than a tight script - and some were answered without being asked - but they do indicate the range of the discussion

What were your first impressions of the website? (Have you used it before? Did you know about it?)

6. How easy is it to use/ find your way around?

7. How clear and focused are the different sections - is it obvious where to go to find out what you need?

8. Are all sections equally important/relevant? Which would you say are most/least useful?

9. When do you think you would be most likely to use it?

10. How would you describe it to a friend? What are the best/worst things about it?

11. Much of the information on the site you could get in different ways eg books, tutors, fellow students - which way do you prefer?

12. Would video or audio clips be a useful addition to the site?

13. Think back to when you first arrived at university - how confident/well-equipped did you feel to study independently at this level? What help did you need and where did you go to get it? (Did you *know* what help you needed? Who/what helped you most?)

14. How do you think your needs - for help/advice/information - have changed over time?

15. What advice would you give to someone starting at university to help them manage independent study?

16. Thinking back over the various aspects of study skills support we have discussed, how do you think the website might be improved? (or Name one thing the University could do/offer to improve your life as a student.)

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