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Academic Skills Development and the Enhancement of the Learning Experience

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This paper is based upon the experience of staff working on the part-time Bachelor of Business Studies programme at University College Dublin. Linda Dowling is Associate Director and Orna Ryan is a Learning Support Officer, both at the Centre for Distance Learning, UCD School of Business, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4.

Abstract

Making the transition to higher education can present considerable challenges to learners, and these challenges are evident in the development of effective study, learning and meta-cognitive competencies. The development of such competencies represents an integral element of a more satisfying and effective learning experience for both learners and tutors. In 2005, UCD School of Business introduced two accredited academic skills modules that are embedded in the programme of study being undertaken. These programme-specific modules aim to help learners identify and develop the key study skills, habits and practices that contribute to a more effective learning experience. Through workshops, exercises, coursework and formative feedback, learners put into practice academic skills, such as note-taking, essay writing and reflective writing. While this paper is based upon the experience at UCD School of Business, the case is located within the broader discussion of academic skills development. Little has been written about such provision in the Irish context but the paper acknowledges an increase in evidence of such developments. Thus, the literature base regarding skills development and provision in the UK has been useful.

The paper will, firstly, provide an overview of the literature surrounding the field of academic skills provision and explores best practice with regard to the design, delivery and assessment of academic skills development modules. Secondly, the paper will present a case study of an academic skills intervention at UCD and focuses on its design, delivery and assessment. The case challenges the current theory regarding the design and structure this intervention. It is suggested that such modules are most successful when offered within a programme-specific context (Cottrell, 2001). The case study institution at the heart of this paper has designed assessment to ensure learners develop academic skills within their chosen discipline. The use of formative feedback is well recognised as a key, but under researched, component of learners' assessment and can be used to embed the development of academic skills in the learning process. Such an approach requires a holistic approach to the programme, including module and assessment design and requires institutional support. The paper will argue that, while some provision for generic academic skills courses may prove worthwhile, this approach will not be effective without adequate provision for discipline-based academic skills development delivered in a progressive 'just-in-time' manner, reinforced with formative feedback on assessment and provided within the context of a broader framework of academic learner support.

The central argument of this paper is the need for institutions to move beyond a 'bolt-on' or built-in' approach to academic skills provision and to move towards a 'build-up' approach to ensure greater effectiveness in academic skills interventions.

Introduction

The changing profile of learners at tertiary level has instigated a growing interest in developing the skills learners require for success (Hendry and Farley, 2006). In recent years, there has been a profusion of studies examining the provision of academic skills interventions at tertiary level (Hattie *et al*, 1996; Webb, 1997; Wingate, 2006). A number of these studies have demonstrated that learners often lack the skills required for success (Lea and Street, 1998, Lowe and Cooke, 2003) and earlier research appears to focus on how learners have adapted their previous practices to those of the university rather than learning the techniques necessary for university learning (Gibbs, 1994a; Lowe and Cook, 2003).

While academic ability is probably the single most important determinant of success (Lowe and Cook, 2003), it is acknowledged that learners require not only a great deal of self-regulation and meta-cognitive skills, but also good study skills (Alexson and Kemnitz, 2004; Lindblom-Ylanne, 2004). Content knowledge alone is not sufficient for effective learning, and due to the largely independent nature of learning at university, core academic techniques, such as reading, represent a significant challenge for new entrants (Green, 2006). Learners entering university need to be taught how to function within the expectations that attend on them. Skills development is a central influencing factor in ensuring success in higher education (HE) and has been shown to improve academic performance (Harvey and Goudvis, 2000). While some suggest that such interventions might be required due to the more diverse learner profile which is becoming more evident, Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998) assert that a high number of learners who do complete university might actually have under-performed because of inadequate preparation for the requirements of HE.

Learning is not automatic, it requires sustained and conscious effort on the part of individuals (Letteri, 1985). Learning at university requires changing to 'new ways of knowing: new ways of understanding, interpreting and organizing knowledge' (Lea and Street, 1998:158). Indeed, it involves what Wingate calls

'learning to learn', where students experience a complex process of changing learning habits and perceptions (2007:395). This process occurs in the transition between school and university and also during the return to education experienced by adult learners. Gettinger and Seibert (2002: 350) suggest that the provision of study skills should be viewed as 'academic enablers' that provide learners with systematic instruction in, and repeated practice of academic techniques. Indeed, they cite Scheid who argues that through skills instruction, learners become more efficient, thoughtful and independent. In addition to the development of academic skills, such provision can also be seen as a vehicle to assist with peer and staff-learner interaction, assisting with the socialisation of new learners in HE. While a number of benefits are associated with such initiatives, it is recognised that their embedding within the curriculum of HE programmes requires profound institutional change to facilitate modification in programme design and structure (Drummond *et al*, 1999).

This paper will review best practice in academic skills provision and will present a case study of the approach adopted by the School of Business at University College Dublin (UCD) on its part-time degree programmes. In addition to attention paid by UCD to the content and delivery mechanisms, the use of assessment and feedback represents a critical element in facilitating the development of study skills. Both assessment and feedback aid learners in self-diagnosing the need for learning, in providing greater motivation to learn, rather than a need being externally diagnosed (as suggested by Knowles, 1984) and has also attempted to empower learners to take responsibility for their own learning using a number of different agents. The model at UCD also attempts to endorse a integrated 'learning to learn' approach across the programme, rather than an initial school to university transition approach as suggested by Wingate (2007)

While a profusion of terms associated with the discourse of study skills development is acknowledged, including, academic skills, academic literacies,

study skills and study competencies, for the purposes of this paper, the term 'academic skills' is used throughout. The selection of this term recognises that these skills are about more than just learning how to study and encompass developing learners understanding of their own learning, including reflection.

Designing Academic Skills Provision - A Disciplinary or Generic Approach?

There has been much debate within the discourse of academic skills provision on what might constitute the most suitable design for interventions in this area (Angelova and Riazantseva, 1999; Cottrell and Jones, 2003; Durkin and Main, 2002; Gibbs, 1981; Hattie *et al*, 1996; Ladd, 1999; Norton and Crowley, 1995; Thomas, 1994; Wingate, 2006). Two main approaches are evident in practice.

The first, and most prevalent, approach is what has been referred to as the 'bolt-on' approach (Bennett *et al*, 2000; Hattie *et al*, 1996, Wingate, 2006). With this approach, institutions offer 'extra-curricular 'study skills' courses' (Wingate, 2006: 457) delivered independently of the disciplinary programme of study being undertaken. These academic skills courses are generally offered by a central learning support service within the institution and are removed from the learners' core programme. The provision of this type of academic skills support has its origins in a deficit approach, where learners were expected to have developed the key learning skills for success in HE prior to entry and where academic skills provision was available to those seen to be weak in this area (Wingate, 2006). It is fair to say that the majority of learners are not prepared for the independent learning required in HE and that a deficit model is not sustainable or effective.

While the 'bolt-on' approach is still evident in HE institutions, there is consensus that generic academic skills provision is not effective (Hattie *et al*, 1996; Wingate, 2006) for a number of reasons. Wingate (2006) suggests that this approach results in academic skills becoming divorced from subject content and knowledge. In a study undertaken by Durkin and Main (2002), it was found that

generic academic skills provision lacked explicit relevance to the programme of study being undertaken resulting in these courses not being attended by those most in need of this support. A further limitation of this approach rests on the fact that it fails to recognise that all learners need support in developing effective approaches to their learning (Wingate, 2006). Furthermore, it has been recognised that for effective learning to take place, opportunities must be provided for practice in handling various course-specific academic tasks and for receiving feedback on these tasks (Wingate, 2006). The 'bolt-on' approach does not provide these opportunities. Finally, it has been suggested that where academic skills development is not embedded in a programme, learners may simply see these skills interventions as a means of learning the 'tricks and techniques' needed for success in HE (Wingate, 2006: 459).

The second approach adopted by a smaller number of institutions is the 'built-in' approach (Angelova and Riazantseva, 1999; Durkin and Main, 2002; Gibbs, 1981; Ladd, 1999). This approach recognises that discipline content and academic skills development cannot be divorced (Wingate, 2006) and that both of these elements go hand-in-hand.

Thomas (1994: 19) is 'sceptical' about the value of having a generic academic skills module and whether this type of module can really remain a 'stand alone' entity. Gibbs (1981) has highlighted the need for learners to develop academic skills in the context of their everyday activities and that HE institutions should not attempt to impart these skills in a general way. What is needed is an approach that reaches all learners (Wingate, 2006) and that embeds academic skills as an integral component of all programmes of study (Cottrell, 2001; Drummond et al, 1998; Gibbs, 1994a). Ladd (1999) and Angelova and Riazantseva (1999) highlight the importance of directly and explicitly linking academic skills provision to the immediate and precise needs of learners. Indeed, in research conducted by Durkin and Main (2002: 25), it was found that greater learner demand existed for a 'discipline-based' approach to academic skills development and that this

approach helped to clarify for learners the expectations of their tutors. Durkin and Main also claim that the high attendance at discipline-based academic skills courses is testament to the fact that learners see the development of these skills as integral to their programme of study. This approach reinforces the role of faculty in instilling in their learners an understanding of how to learn in his/her own subject area. By designing academic skills provision to cater for the specific needs of learners, HE institutions can encourage greater motivation among learners to engage proactively in their own learning. Furthermore, a discipline-based approach helps to ensure that learners develop an appropriate vocabulary which they will need during their disciplinary studies.

There are a number of reasons why a 'built-in' approach has not been more evident in HE. Firstly, a move away from a 'bolt-on' approach calls for a shift in the mindset of faculty. Norton and Crowley (1995) suggest that academic skills courses would only be seen as an integral feature of an academic programme if faculty consider these courses to be developmental and not remedial in their focus. They suggest that academic skills courses should be designed and delivered within academic programmes. Secondly, organisational and management difficulties present institutions with obstacles in implementing and embedding this approach (Drummond *et al*, 1999; Wingate, 2006).

While Thomas (1994) suggests that learners have traditionally developed academic skills through, for example, course assessment and feedback, there is a need to move away from solely providing 'front-end' academic skills provision to a more integrated and progressive approach across a programme to facilitate greater learner engagement. He suggests that a coherent strategy is needed that identifies learning skills needed at each stage of a programme and that it is important to avoid a segmented approach to learning. The abiding factor to bear in mind when designing academic skills provision is to ensure that the skills being imparted are relevant to what learners are studying within their own discipline, to

how their learning will be assessed and, furthermore, which will encourage a deep approach to learning.

The literature also emphasises the importance of developing the commitment of, and close relationships with, faculty and that customised academic skills courses can only be developed where this commitment is evident (Durkin and Main, 2002; Wingate, 2006). Furthermore, Norton and Crowley (1995) suggest that once the mindset of faculty moves to academic skills provision being seen developmental, and not remedial, that a built-in approach will be more likely to succeed. Durkin and Main (2002) also highlight the importance of having a 'champion' to push the academic skills provision agenda. However, they also suggest the need for faculty to see academic skills provision as part of their role and not only the role of the 'champion'.

Clearly, many combinations of academic skills interventions may prove successful in different institutional contexts. However, while some provision for generic academic skills courses may prove worthwhile, this approach not will be effective without adequate provision for discipline-based academic skills delivered in a progressive 'just-in-time' manner within the context of a broader framework of academic learner support.

Best Practice in Academic Skills Provision: Content, Delivery, Assessment and Feedback

In the UK, there is some evidence of HE institutions providing accredited modules for skills provision, save the Universities of Birmingham, Warwick and York with their Skills Awards as outlined by Wingate (2006), but research on the role of assessment within these programmes has yet to be addressed. In Ireland, there is increasing evidence of the provision of accredited academic skills modules, such as those in UCD, National University of Ireland, Galway, Dundalk Institute of Technology and Waterford Institute of Technology. However, the effectiveness of these modules requires empirical research.

In identifying best practice in academic skills provision, three areas warrant attention - content, delivery and, assessment and feedback.

Content

Much of the literature suggests that academic skills provision is of least benefit where it is perceived as a set of reducible skills which must be learnt and which are transferable to other contexts (Lea and Street, 2000). Research demonstrates that where academic skills are embedded in a programme and are assessed, they provide learners with an opportunity to develop skills which are integrated with subject content and knowledge rather than as a separate focus of study (Cottrell, 2001; Drummond *et al*, 1998; Wingate, 2006). Where academic skills interventions are offered as distinct modules, there is a real danger that they deteriorate to become about tricks and techniques and about how to pass a piece of assessment, rather than being about developing a deeper approach to understanding and utilising the skills of learning (Gamache, 2002).

In addition to the need to integrate the provision of academic skills into the curriculum, it is recommended that provision emphasise the process of learning (Coles, 1986; Newble and Entwistle, 1986). Cloete and Shochet (1986) suggest that the difference between learners' success or otherwise is not just the academic skills method used but also the learners' awareness of why they are using a specific technique and an understanding of the learning process itself. Indeed, while some learners may be provided with academic skills development, often they do not understand their own learning and the process of learning (Norton and Crowley, 1995). Indeed, Farley (2006) suggests that one of the outcomes of education should be that learners become skilled at learning. This is a somewhat contested view, with Biggs cited by Ramsden (1987) arguing that we should not teach meta-cognitive skills, rather we should teach subject skills meta-cognitively i.e. the focus should be on the quality of what learners' learn, not on improving how they learn. There appears to be some commonality across institutions in the content of academic skills development modules, with modules

covering areas such as, essay writing, time management, note-taking technique and examination technique (Bennett *et al*, 1999; Cottrell, 2001; Drummond *et al* 1998; Norton and Crowley, 1995; Thomas, 1994).

Delivery

It is suggested that, particularly in first year, resources be allocated to systematic induction of learners and development of skills that are closely linked to the curriculum (Power *et al*, 1987). Lowe and Cooke (2003:75) recommend that induction and provision of skills development be seen as a 'process instead of an event'. Others have suggested that an eclectic approach might be best where learners are first exposed to academic skills and then progress towards a meta-cognitive approach (Zuber-Skerritt, 1987). It is recommended that the complex skills learners require be provided progressively throughout the programme of study (Biggs, 1987; Wingate, 2006). However, the literature appears rather silent on how effective academic skills interventions are actually delivered in practice.

Assessment and Feedback

Assessment constitutes a necessary component of learning as best demonstrated with the seminal meta-analysis completed by Black and William (1998). A key tenet of this approach is that, at HE, formative assessment and feedback should be used to empower learners to become self-regulated. Research suggests that skills which are assessed are far more likely to be of use to learners (Cottrell, 2001; Drummond *et al*, 1998). There is a dichotomy in the approach to academic skills provision and this appears to permeate the resultant approach to assessment. With the 'bolt-on' approach, direct assessment of academic skills is neglected with learners being provided only with limited materials to assist them. It would appear with the 'embedded' approach, that academic skills are developed through the disciplinary-based modules. This embedded approach calls for tutors to be more aware of learners' need for skills development within their regular teaching. Discussion of the direct role of

assessment within academic skills development is largely overlooked in the literature.

In addition to assessment, feedback is an integral component which reinforces learning (Black and Williams, 1998; Juwah *et al,* 2004; Sadler, 1998). As suggested by Sadler, for formative feedback to be effective, the learner must actively engage with the feedback. It is also suggested that feedback should be integrated into learners' subsequent work (Ramaprasad cited by Taras, 2006). Furthermore, the role of feedback, specifically in the context of academic skills development, is not directly addressed in the literature either.

To summarise, what is clear from the literature is that whilst the 'bolt-on' approach may be limited, the alternative 'built-in' approach is not without its own serious weaknesses. It is suggested that the 'built-in' approach would be strengthened by addressing two additional aspects – firstly, the integration of academic skills development into the programme design and secondly, support for learners so that they progressively develop their academics skills and apply these in enhancing the learning experience.

The case that is described below concerns a part-time programme in UCD that has a strong system of infrastructural learner support in place since the foundation of the programme in 1996, and that has recently introduced a number of academic skills modules actively linked to other disciplinary modules within the curriculum.

A Case Study of Accredited Academic Skills Provision at UCD School of Business

The case study outlined in the next section will document one approach to academic skills provision and assessment in the context of a business degree at UCD School of Business. The approach to skills provision and some observations from the case are presented below.

Background to the Case

In September 2005, two disciplinary-driven academic skills modules were introduced as part of the first year of the part-time Bachelor of Business Studies (BBS) programme – Module 1 (semester 1): 'Induction and Returning to Learning' and Module 2 (semester 2): 'Developing Learning Competencies'. Approximately 160 learners have completed both modules worth a total of 10 ECTS credits.

Content

A scaffolding approach was adopted, with basic cognitive skills covered in Module 1, such as note-taking, reading, academic writing, referencing and examination preparation. The aim of Module 2 is to build on Module 1 and aims to develop meta-cognitive skills. It introduces learners to the theory of learning, Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning, developing the skills of reflection, further development of academic writing styles, development of critical thinking, criteria for evaluating literature and approaches to handling different forms of assessment.

Both modules have been designed to assist learners progressively develop academic skills and the approach taken to this has been two-fold. Firstly, while the modules are separate entities in their own right to ensure that all learners are exposed to the development of these skills, the modules are very strongly integrated with the other disciplinary modules undertaken at the same time.

Secondly, the integration between the skills modules and the discipline-based modules is made and reinforced through assessment and feedback.

Assessment and Feedback

The assessment of these skills modules is built around the other modules learners are taking at the same time and this helps to ensure a discipline-based approach. This approach also acknowledges the need to have academic skills development tailored to the needs of the discipline. The assessment design outlined below ensures that skills provision is firmly embedded within the BBS learner support framework and that learners engage in actively developing academic skills. Figure 1 illustrates the link between the academic skills modules and the disciplinary modules.

Figure 1. Assessment of Academic Skills Development & Link to Disciplinary Modules

SEMESTER 1		
Disciplinary-Based Modules	**Academic Skills Modules**	**Disciplinary-Based Modules**
Employee Relations (ER)	*Module 1: Induction and Returning to Learning* Module Assessment: • Essay: Challenges of Pursuing a HE Course • Sample essay plan using ER assignment • Two answers to past examination paper from either ER or PM • Note-taking exercise using chapter from PM textbook	Principles of Management (PM)
SEMESTER 2		
Disciplinary-Based Modules	**Academic Skills Modules**	**Disciplinary-Based Modules**
Organisational Behaviour (OB)	*Module 2: Developing Learning Competencies* Module Assessment: • Reflective learning journal reviewing feedback from ER and PM (i.e. Semester 1) • Complete a critique of an OB essay • Reflective journal on approach to learning at the end of Semester 2 (OB / PFS)	Preparing Financial Statements (PFS)

In Semester 1, Module 1 calls for learners to submit four assignments: one of these requires learners to draft an essay plan with an accompanying bibliography for a 'Principles of Management' assignment. The assignment was designed so that learners could submit their essay plan and receive formative feedback before that essay was due to be submitted. The assignment is assessed on the basis of the learner's ability to demonstrate the key skills of academic writing, structure, argument formation etc. Bearing in mind, the different note-taking styles reviewed during the module, a second assignment calls for learners to submit a set of concise notes on a chapter from the 'Employee Relations' textbook using on a single or mixed note-taking style.

In Semester 2, Module 2 calls for learners to submit four assignments: one of these calls for learners to prepare a critique of an assignment submitted in previous years for the module, 'Organisational Behaviour'. The critique requires learners to comment on the essay content, writing style and approach, level of critical analysis, structure, presentation and adoption of referencing guidelines. A second assignment calls for learners to reflect upon their learning style, to provide evidence of their learning style in practice and to suggest how they might explore other styles to maximise their learning and to reflect on the formative feedback received for all Semester 1 modules with a view to identifying areas requiring further development. The aim of the latter element of this assignment was to empower learners to reflect upon their development while assessing their own learning needs and to encourage learners to focus more on formative, and less on summative feedback. These assignments have encouraged learners to engage with their own learning.

The central thread which helps to ensure the effectiveness of these academic skills modules is the extensive formative feedback provided for all coursework submitted. In addition to individual feedback, learners also receive general feedback which provides an overview of the key elements of feedback across the entire class. This ongoing feedback on assignments which assess academic skills in a discipline-based fashion ensure a strong relationship between the skills

modules and discipline-based modules. It is evident that learners need adequate feedback on performance and an opportunity to reflect on what they have learned, what they need to learn and how they can self-assess and reflect on their own academic competencies. This provision of feedback has created plentiful opportunities for discourse between tutor, learner and Learning Support Officer (LSO) (the role of the LSO is outlined below).

Delivery

The academic skills modules are designed, delivered and assessed by the LSO. These tutors are available to provide ongoing academic support to learners across all modules on the programme (see Ryan and Dowling, 2006 for further detail of the learner support framework in place). LSO's provide a 'one-stop-shop' for handling all academic queries. The design and content of these modules are customised to the particular needs of the learner body, and is also informed by the monitoring of individual learner progress and close liaising with other module tutors. The LSO's also review all formative feedback provided by course tutors, thereby allowing LSO's to develop an ongoing awareness of a learner's progress. This mechanism ensures that a profile of an individual learner's progress is possible on an ongoing basis and that academic skills interventions (aside from the above two modules) can be implemented where a prevalent common requirement emerges. Contrary to the approach suggested in the literature, the approach to the delivery of the skills provision at UCD is a 'build-up' approach which will be presented below.

Figure 2 provides an illustration of the role played by the LSO and the integrated approach to academic skills development adopted by UCD School of Business.

Figure 2.

An Integrated Approach to Academic Skills Development and Learner Support
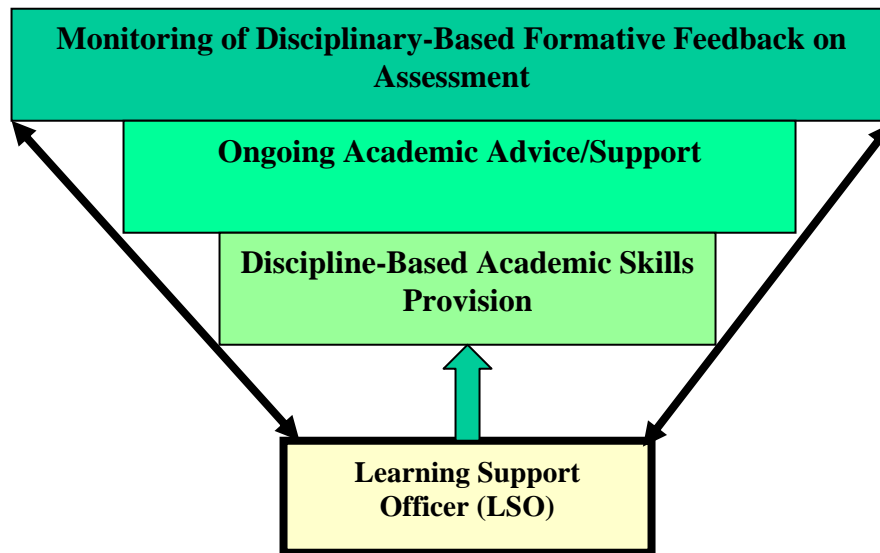
The LSO maintains regular contact with each learner (at least twice each semester), the purpose of which is to establish how their studies are progressing and to identify any academic difficulties being encountered. As LSO's are qualified to Master's level in business or a cognate discipline, they are well placed to evaluate learners' general academic progress across the programme.

Furthermore, two issues relating to the timing of academic skills interventions deserve mention. Firstly, the delivery of these academic skills workshops are timed to ensure learners are developing the necessary skills 'just-in-time'. For example, a note-taking session is covered in mid-semester one and an examination technique session in late-semester one. This allows learners to develop skills as they need them. Secondly, the timing of the delivery of academic skills modules provides an opportunity for customised progressive skills development. As learners progress to higher levels of a programme, the academic demands on them become greater and this necessitates the scheduling of progressive study skills workshops at key intervals throughout the Degree.

Discussion

Best practice identifies a number of issues that are critical to the successful development of academic skills in the case of learners in HE. The literature suggests that where an academic skills module is delivered in isolation from other modules, learners will see it as just another module that needs to be completed in order to 'get through' the programme. As a result, learners will tend not to regard it as a critical part of their development and will not see the importance of applying what they have been taught on academic skills to other modules. However, it would appear that learners can benefit greatly from the provision of modules designed to develop their academic skills (as also suggested by Hendricks and Quinn (2000).

The framework adopted by UCD School of Business draws on the strengths of both the 'bolt-on' and 'built-in' models and puts forward an alternative, i.e. the **'build-up'** approach, which overcomes the inherent limitations of the two original approaches. The 'build-up' approach uses assessment and formative feedback to progressively develop learners' academic skills. The use of assessment here ensures that academic skills modules are meshed with the discipline-based modules <u>and</u> also with the overall learner support framework. With this approach, skills development is explicitly developed through an embedded approach, semester-by-semester and stage-by-stage. Wingate (2006) presents a 'bolt-on' versus embedded dichotomy in the approach that might be taken to skills development. It would appear that these approaches might be presented as two extremes on a continuum, rather than as two absolute approaches. While the embedded approach puts the onus on individual course tutors, who are subject experts, to ensure skills are developed within the content–oriented modules, it does not provide time to focus exclusively on academic skills, such as referencing and development of academic writing. The 'build-up' approach, as outlined within the case, draws upon the embedded philosophy in terms of longevity and integration with discipline-based modules but also ensures that responsibility and time is allocated to the provision and developments of skills

development in a symbiotic relationship between academic development and discipline-based modules. The experience at UCD would support Durkin and Main's (2002) suggestion that there is a need for a champion within faculty to push forward the academic skills development agenda and to manage such progress across a programme of study. This role has been taken up by the LSO in the case study presented.

Conclusion

This paper set out to present both an overview of best practice in the provision of academic skills interventions in HE and also to present a case study of the approach adopted by UCD School of Business in the context of its part-time programmes. There is a profusion of literature on the topic and growing evidence of institutions developing accredited academic skills modules for undergraduate students. However, there remains considerable debate about the positioning of and responsibility for delivering such modules and variation exist in the practice of academic skills interventions.

The literature highlights two main approaches in the delivery of academic skills interventions in practice, namely the 'bolt-on' or generic skills approach offered by a central learning support service at the level of the institution and the 'built-in' approach offered at the level of the programme or discipline. The literature suggest that the effectiveness of academic skills interventions is greatly enhanced by adopting the latter approach. However, this dichotomy suggests these interventions are mutually exclusive but instead are perhaps best conceived as two poles on a continuum of interventions.

A number of factors contribute to the effectiveness and success of the approach put forward by this case study. Firstly, the evidence from the case study suggests the appropriateness of moving away from the 'bolt-on' and 'built-in' approaches, and to the need for institutions to adopt a 'build-up' approach, adopting elements of both approaches on an ongoing basis as required by

learners. This approach can result in a more effective 'just-in-time' approach to the delivery of academic skills provision and emphasises the importance of developing learners academic skills on a progressive, staged basis throughout their programme of study. Secondly, the use of comprehensive formative feedback and the role played by the LSO in monitoring and responding to academic developmental needs identified in this feedback is instrumental in ensuring the relevancy of academic skills provision in meeting learner needs. Thirdly, the case study suggested the importance of integrating academic skills provision into the broader learner support framework in place on a particular programme.

The delivery of academic skills interventions in the manner suggested by the case study reinforces the suggestion made by Drummond *et al* (1999) that the embedding of skills throughout the curriculum requires institutional changes and also requires the positioning of an academic skills champion as promulgated by Durkin and Main (2002). Institutional change of this nature requires full support of all institutional actors, including tutors, teaching and learning boards and faculty deans. Regardless of the approach taken, the development of academic skills is best targeted where resources for such a champion are provided.

To conclude, the authors acknowledge that empirical research is needed to test the effectiveness of the UCD approach and to explore the complexities of learner development and how the development of academic skills can be reinforced through the use of innovative assessment and feedback. However, from preliminary observations and feedback received from learners and tutors alike, there is considerable evidence to suggest that the approach adopted is effective and enhances the overall learning experience.

Notes:

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