

# **Principal's Teaching Award project May 2010: University undergraduate academic skills acquisition prior to arriving at University**

## **Final Report June 2012**

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### ***Background to and Aims of the project***

Induction and skills acquisition are widely seen as key components to success at University. Acquiring appropriate skills early on ensures that undergraduate students are not hampered in their academic work and ensures that they work efficiently and productively right from the start - easing the transition from School to University. However, there are well documented disadvantages of overloading new students with information immediately on their arrival at University. The School of Divinity has been active in the provision of academic skills training to its undergraduate community for some time, and from 2010-11 an undergraduate skills course has been compulsory for all School of Divinity Honours students. Students have asked whether sections of this course could be made available to new students during the summer, before they arrive at university, when they have more time to engage with materials and think about their learning needs.

This project allowed students to be fully involved in the process of shaping the preparation of appropriate general skills material for future students as they carried out the Academic Skills course. The 2010-11 cohort were asked to identify those sections of it which might most helpfully be offered to future cohorts before they arrive. They were consulted as to how these might be best presented, and as to which skills could be covered before students arrive, and which would be best kept for later. The new materials were made available to the 2011-12 cohort, and their experience of it evaluated for future years.

### ***Progress of the Project***

The project took on a very student focussed approach.

1. Through a series of questionnaires and focus groups, the views of the 2010-11 School of Divinity student cohort (i.e. those students enrolled in a School of Divinity degree programme) were taken.
2. From these findings a web resource of materials was made available to students arriving in 2011-12. These materials were made available using PebblePad and in particular via the PebblePad's webfolio tool. This tool was chosen to expose pre-arrival students to a resource that they might find useful once at University. It also provides a means of presenting content as well as

- allowing some interaction/recording in a space that is owned by the student (i.e. private to each student).
3. The 2011-12 students were informed of the resource using a paper flyer sent out by the CHSS undergraduate office as well as by email during the late summer.
  4. During 2011-12 the new students' views of the resource was evaluated via a series of questionnaires and focus groups.

## ***Outcomes I: Project Findings***

### 1. Initial work and materials produced

From the initial questionnaires and focus groups it was clear that the students were not concerned about individual skills but more about their usage within the academic work that they were required to do. Interestingly, there was little change in students' views between October 2010 and January 2011 when the students had received the results of their course and exam work. Details of the questionnaire results are available from

<https://www.wiki.ed.ac.uk/display/skidiv/Skills+Divinity+students+could+prepare>.

Two areas – academic writing and preparation for tutorials - were particularly highlighted and these were chosen as the focus for the pre-arrival web materials we produced. In addition, it was decided to include a “light touch” introduction to the University's graduate attributes in the hope that early engagement would foster longer term awareness of this. The publicly viewable version of the final web resource is available from

<http://www.pebblepad.co.uk/edinburgh/webfolio.aspx?webfolioid=156611>

### 2. Evaluation of the materials

From the questionnaires and focus groups carried out during 2011-12 the major finding was that students either did not receive any information on the availability of the resource or they chose to not look at it. Of the fifty one students who completed the questionnaire in September 2011, 41% used the resource but only 21% found it useful. Although this was discouraging, a number of students who claimed not to have seen the resource when they explored it during the focus group did comment that it would have been useful. Most of the students found the graduate attribute material confusing and found any interaction via PebblePad a “step too much”.

Although, this is a small cohort and the results are only available for one academic year there are some valuable lessons learned:-

1. Students do not have a “long” summer prior to coming to University. Most of the summer is taken up with uncertainties of whether they will get the grades they require. When the grades are finally available there is a mad rush of preparation around practical issues such as accommodation etc without time to think about academic skills.
2. There are some students who are highly nervous about coming to University and that any assistance and resources is valuable.
3. Communicating with students pre-arrival is problematic. Using University email addresses is inappropriate and emails to their EUCLID admission email addresses may not be read in the rush of preparing for University.

## ***Outcomes II: The aims of the project realised***

### 1. Preparation of pre-arrival materials

The materials created for the project are being ported from PebblePad to a permanent place within the School of Divinity website. Additional materials will be added over time. The materials will be made available via the new students' part of the website.

### 2. Research in the value of pre-arrival study skills materials

As interest in induction and transition into University grows the findings of this work are able to inform thinking. Although the results must be tempered with the fact that only a small cohort was involved, they do highlight particular problems in engaging students prior to their arrival at University.

## ***Outcomes III: Dissemination***

The findings of the project were presented formally on one occasion:

University of Edinburgh Teaching and Learning Forum, June 2012

Presentation available at:

<http://www.docs.hss.ed.ac.uk/divinity/About%20the%20school/Elearning/PTAs%20day%20-%2011th%20June.pdf>

Further dissemination events are being explored.

## ***Outcomes IV: Immediate Benefits of the Project and Future Plans***

1. A repository of pre-arrival skills materials has started and will be made available to students. We plan to grow this resource
2. Strong networks have been built with the IAD Study Skills staff and there is regular exchange of ideas and materials.
3. The University Induction Working Group has watching with interest the outputs of this project.
4. Within the School, the existing academic skills course has been revised and renamed to "Academic Literacies in a Digital Age" for 2012-13 on the basis of the findings of this project. Rather than focussing on individual skills the course will concentrate on their use within academic work e.g. academic writing.

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