



# **University UG pre-arrival academic skills acquisition**

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# Background

- Recognition that not all students arrive with the academic skills they need for HE study
- What happening now – “Academic Skills course for Divinity students” – compulsory, non-credit course for all first year students now in 2<sup>nd</sup> year of running (prior to this non-compulsory)



# Issues

- Students need some of these skills as soon as they arrive, but they have so much to do
- They have a “long” summer
- Many students nervous about the transition into University, can we help?



# Project in action

- Take a student-focussed approach
- Through questionnaires & focus groups decide what areas best to concentrate on – only asked “our” students
- Paper questionnaires in Oct 2010 and Jan 2011 – look at views early on and whether changed after first assessments
- Build a pilot resource and make available to students pre-arrival
- Survey the students again once they arrive at University in Sept 2011 (paper) and Jan 2012 (electronic)

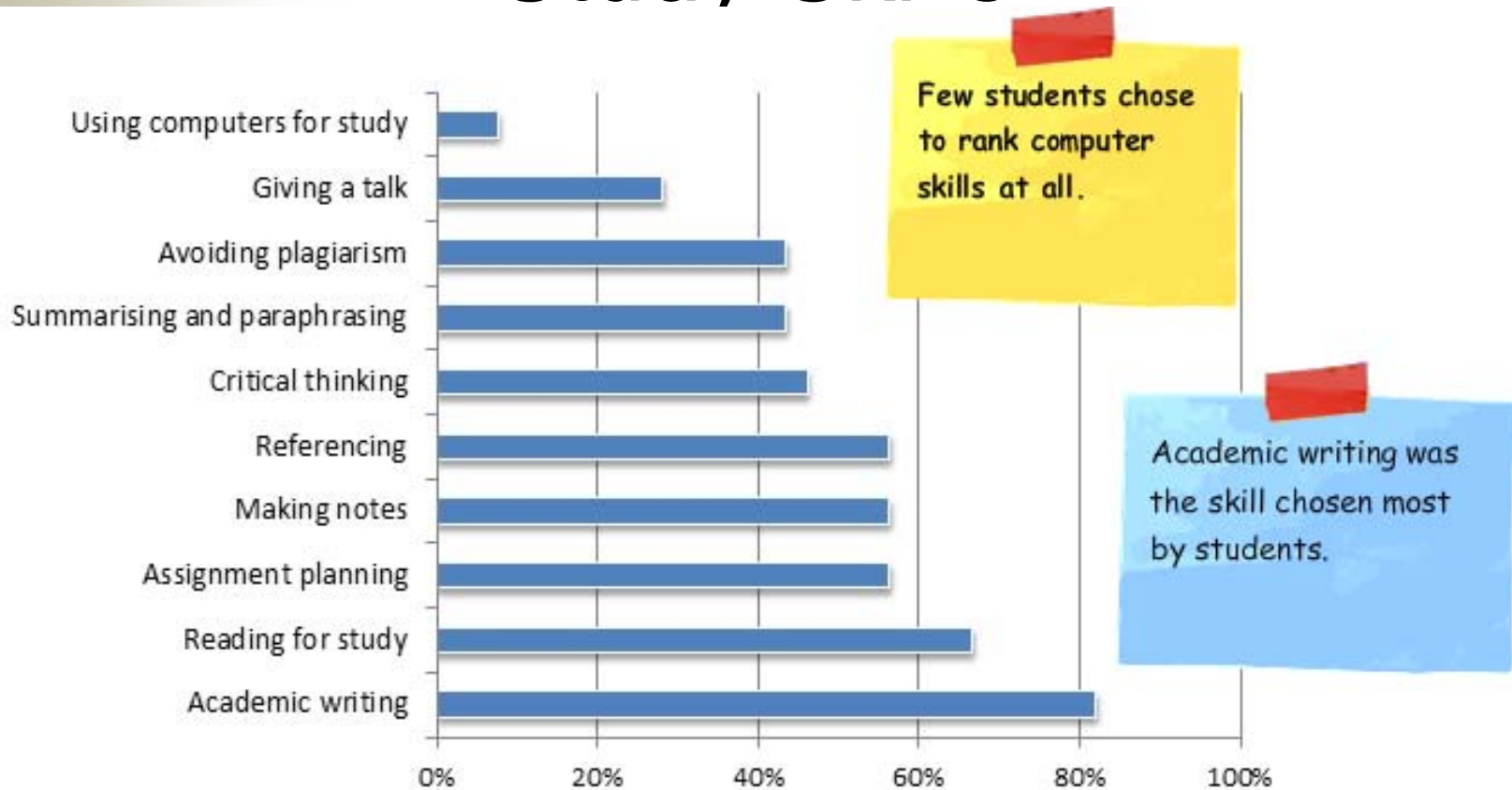


# What did the questionnaires & focus groups highlight

- Students not so concerned about particular skills e.g. how to use the Library, IT skills
- Most concern was around academic writing, how to prepare and contribute in tutorials?



# Questionnaire Oct 2010- Study Skills



Little change in January 2011

# Questionnaire Oct 2010 – IT skills

Some less familiar techniques may have been ignored.



Contributing to a wiki

Making a pdf

E-mail

PowerPoint presentations

Word processing

Contributing to online discussion

Evaluating websites

Using the WebCT VLE

Using an online library catalogue

Searching journals online

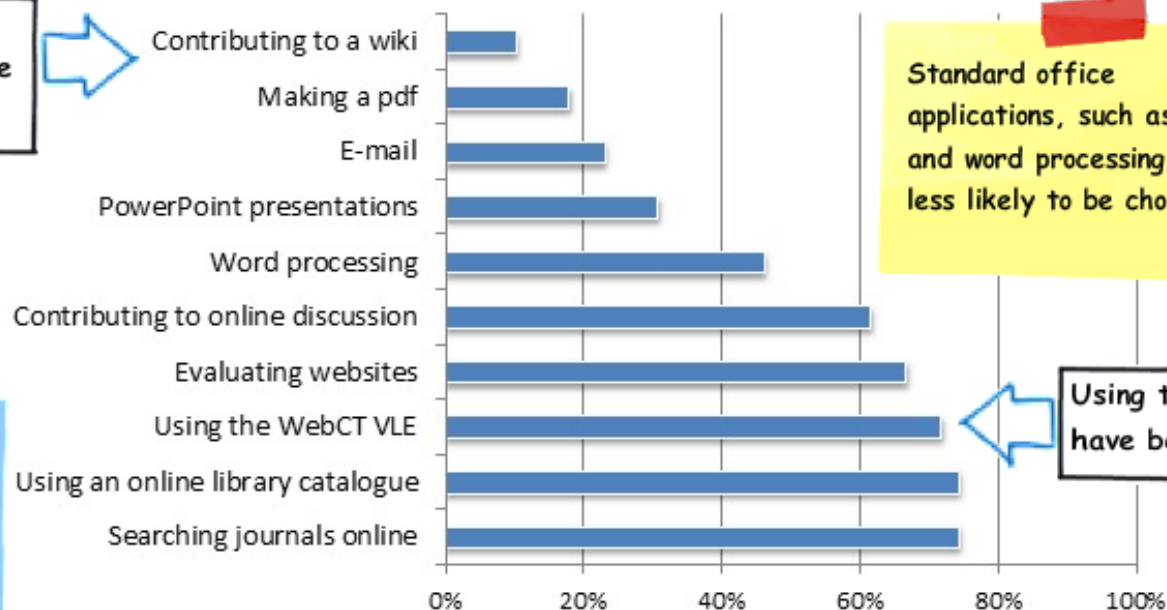
Standard office applications, such as e-mail and word processing, were less likely to be chosen.

Specific research-related activities were selected most often.

Using the WebCT VLE would have been new to students.

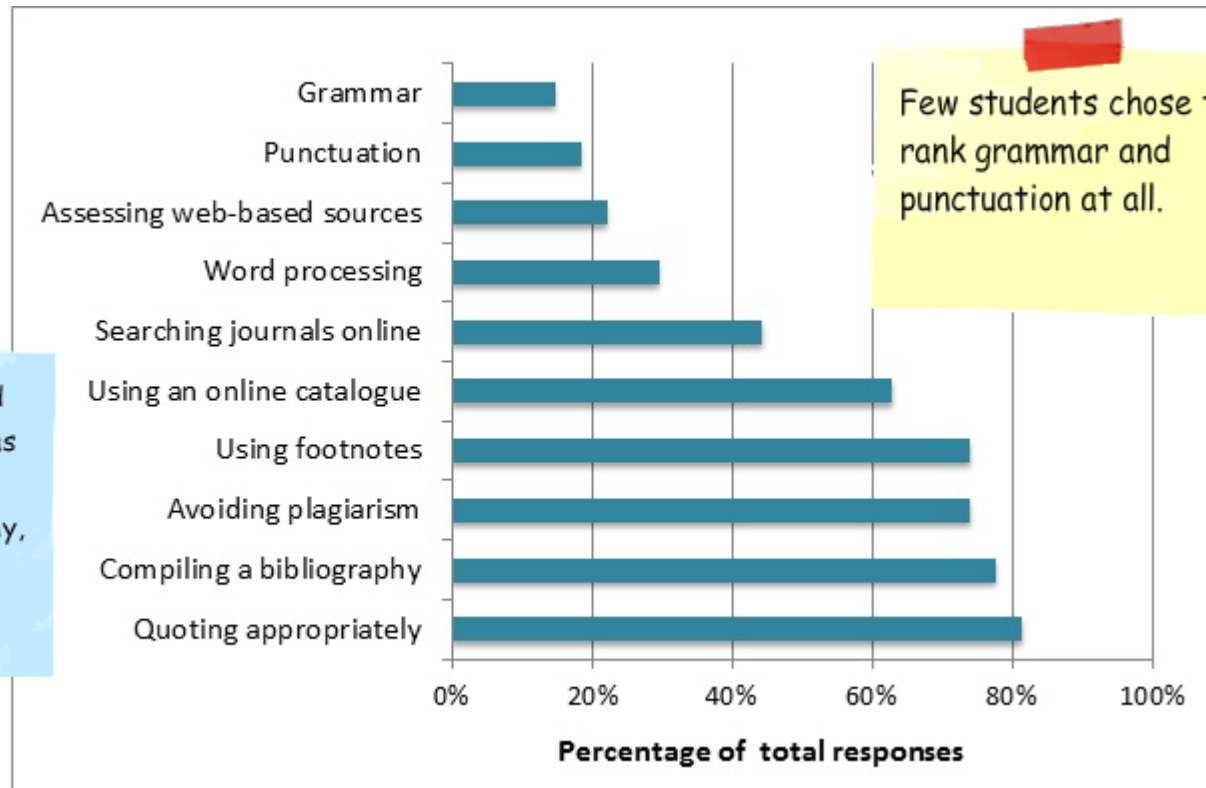
0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%

Percentage of all respondents



# Questionnaire Jan 2011- technical skills

Technical skills related to essay writing, such as using quotations and compiling a bibliography, were selected by most students.





# Web resource

- Wanted a tool that could provide information
- Wanted a tool that could allow some interaction
- Decided to include light touch graduate attribute introduction
- PebblePad chosen



# Web resource

- Built a webfolio in PebblePad – made open to the world
- Made components available in PebblePad to the pre-arrival students via the gateway so they could interact with the materials
- Emails sent to the students once status “confirmed, unconditional”

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Welcome to the School of Divinity. We are looking forward to meeting you in September.

We realise that coming to university can be both an exciting and daunting experience. Teaching and learning at university are likely to be quite different from the styles of teaching and learning that you have experienced before.

The aim of this site is to provide you with some materials that can help you before you arrive and also once you arrive. This is a pilot

and we are running this for the first time this year. In future years, we plan to have more materials and resources, but for this year we have picked some initial topics that we hope you will find both useful and interesting.

Logging into PebblePad

These materials are hosted on software called PebblePad, which is your private electronic diary space provided by the University of Edinburgh. Like all software, PebblePad has its own nomenclature and way of working. As you use PebblePad you will become familiar with these. For example, one term you will meet more or less immediately you log in is "asset". This means any item within PebblePad that the user has created or has been given. PebblePad provides a number of tools (like blogs, CV, etc) and each time you use these tools you create an asset.

To log into PebblePad go to [MyEd](#) (the university's portal). You will find the link to PebblePad under the "Studies" tab.

You can look at all of the information and resources on these pages without being logged into PebblePad, but you won't be able to do any of the interactive activities (like complete the form under "Seeing the Big Picture") until you log in to PebblePad. The first time you log in to PebblePad you will be asked to accept the "Seeing the Big Picture", "Gauging where you are on Academic Writing" and "Gauging where you are on Tutorials" assets. Once accepted, your copy of this assets will be available from your MyAsset store. Use the "view asset" or "edit asset" to access and interact with this resources.

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## Seeing the "Big Picture"...

Every new student joining us will have a different perspective - some will be nervous about how they will manage in this new and perhaps strange environment, others will be feeling more confident and ready for the challenges ahead. Everyone is unique and it is important to see the whole process of coming to University as the start of a journey that will be fun, challenging and at times hard work, but it is a learning experience and a building block for the future.

The idea of this section is to start thinking about why you are here and what you want to get out of University. Don't be put off by this as this is really to help think further about your goals in coming to University. This will help when choosing courses and the pathways through the subject you are going to take. It is all aimed at making the University experience work for you and for you and to ensure you get what you want out of being at University.

If you like, you can log in to PebblePad and it will store your answers to the following questions. We think you will find it interesting to come back in a few months time and see if/how your views have changed.

These answers are only for your own use, and won't be available to anyone else. If you don't log in to PebblePad, they will not be stored. If you have not logged in previously you will need to accept the asset "Seeing the Big Picture". This will now appear in your asset store and you can use the option "view" or "edit" asset to see and complete this form.

**-Why are you interested in theology or religious studies as a subject and what areas in particular do you want to focus on at your time at University?** Keep Private  

At this stage you may not feel strongly about what areas you want to focus on - that is fine; this will come. For now just note what your initial thoughts are.

**-Why are you at University, why Edinburgh and what do you want to get out of your time here?** Keep Private  

Think about why you decided to go to University, and why from the options available you chose Edinburgh. The answers don't need to be complicated; going where your friends are going is understandable at this stage as long as you are ready to deepen this reason in time. Start thinking



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- Assessed Written Work at the School of Divinity
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## Gauging where you are on Academic Writing

### Research & Enquiry

Currently, how confident or able are you at...

- |   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| 1 | <p><b>Absorbing academic or professional texts?</b><br/> <i>This might be things like how well you understand or absorb the kinds of text you will read during your studies e.g. text books, journals, online material</i></p> |  |
| 2 | <p><b>Analysing and summarising text?</b><br/> <i>This might be identifying what's most important, highlighting the key points of an argument, understanding these and being able to summarise a long article.</i></p>         |  |

Overall rating: 0 out of 10  
Average rating: 0

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## The Process of Academic Writing

### The academic writing process



Writing an assignment is a process you should break down into bits. The exact way in which you do this will depend on the nature of the assignment set, but the pdf document 'Assignment writing process' provides an overview of the steps involved in writing a typical undergraduate assignment such as an essay. You will need to plan and research the topic before writing the final draft and find the time to do it in. Academic essays have parts which do a particular job and you will get better marks if you pay attention to these. Plus, we have some

essay writing tips for you.

- [Assignment writing process](#) (PDF)
- [Parts of an essay](#) (PDF)
- [Ten essay writing tips](#) (PDF)

### Clarify the task



The exact wording of a title or assignment brief is important. You should analyse it carefully and break it down into bits. What questions do you have? What do you need to find out? It can be useful to try and make a very rough plan even at a very early stage.

Try writing the title in the middle of a large sheet of paper. Highlight key words and phrases. Write questions you have round about it. Look up terms and add definitions.

Command or instruction words are a key part of both assignment instructions and examination questions. These tell you what to do with the subject matter. The pdf document Command Words has a list of many of the commonly used instructional terms, but no list can be exhaustive. Study guides also have lists of such words and it is useful to look up a dictionary to clarify the meaning even when a word is familiar.

- [Command Words](#) (PDF)

### Research and reading

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**Some Useful Information on Tutorials**

## Some Useful Information on Tutorials

### What is a tutorial?



Tutorials build on material covered in lectures and/or introduce new ideas. Tutorials are a key learning feature of courses and often contribute to assessment. Students in 1st and 2nd year are assigned to a tutorial group, which is usually led by a Postgraduate Tutor under the direction of the Course Manager.

Tutorials are an integral part of the teaching and learning offered in the School of Divinity. They take place alongside lectures, independent library reading and related research work. The tutorials have several aims:

- They provide a space for students to develop oral and writing skills through class discussion and presentation, and essay writing, particularly in the construction and presentation of academic arguments.
- They also introduce students to working in groups in a secure but critical and stimulating learning environment.
- They ensure that students know how to use the library and other University resources to their advantage.



### Importance

You must attend tutorials, and complete any preparatory work.

In pre-honours years (Level 8), to pass a course you must pass all components of assessment; including all the components associated with tutorials. For each course details of these will be given in the course entry in the appropriate handbook.

### Preparation

- **Reading** - For each tutorial a listing of required reading will be provided; the source of these will vary but will include locating sources in the Library, use of a text book, collated course reader (this may need to be purchased), electronic sources on WebCT or elsewhere. You may find it useful to look at the reading and making notes sections in [academic writing](#), as these are equally applicable when reading for tutorials. Keeping your own summary sheets from readings is useful for revision (and also a good skill to acquire).
- **Guidance** - The topic for week for each tutorial and where to get the preparatory materials will be given in the course entry for each course in the



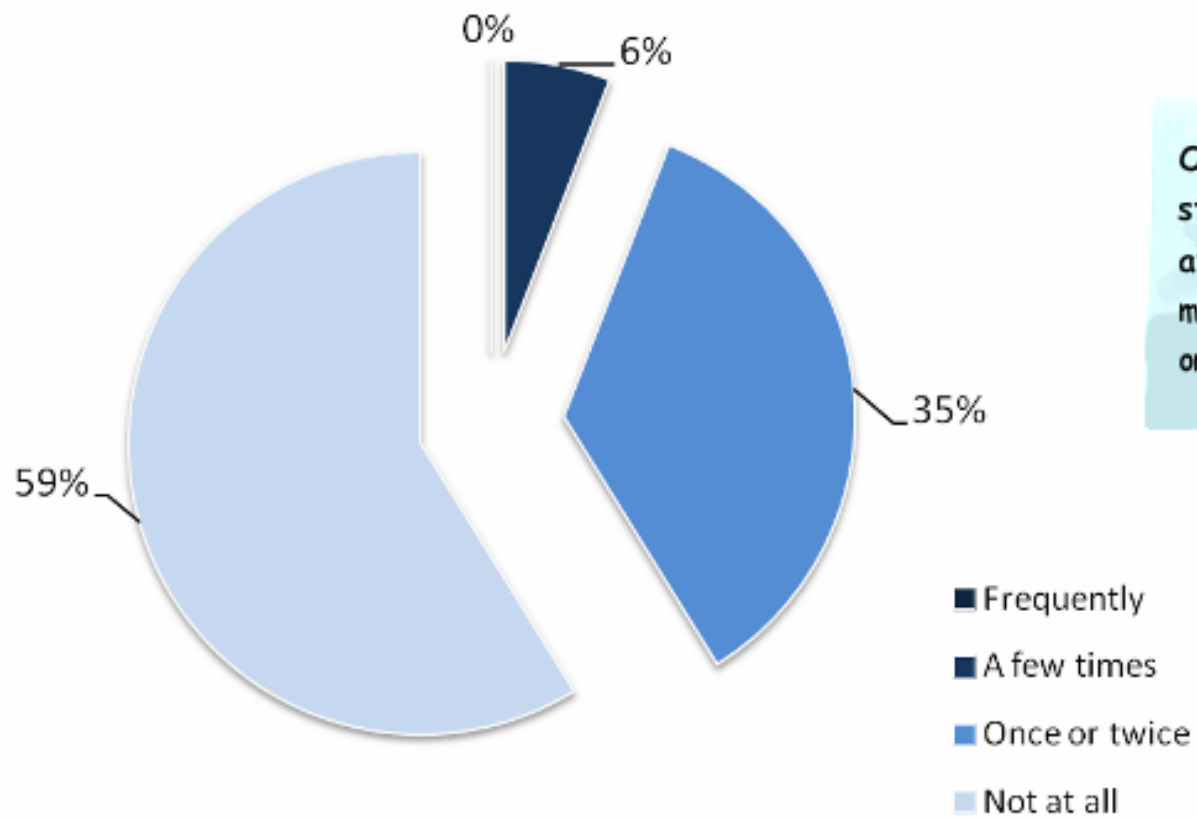
# What happened?

- Created a flyer to go out with materials to all new students – gave the web address
- Number of emails sent to students “home” email addresses from mid-August to early September

# What did the students say from questionnaires & focus group?



- 41% of students used the resource of 51 completing the questionnaire
- Some students claimed they did not know about the website
- Mixed views on usefulness – 21% said they found it useful
- Graduate attribute materials appeared to cause confusion
- PebblePad interaction was a “step too much”



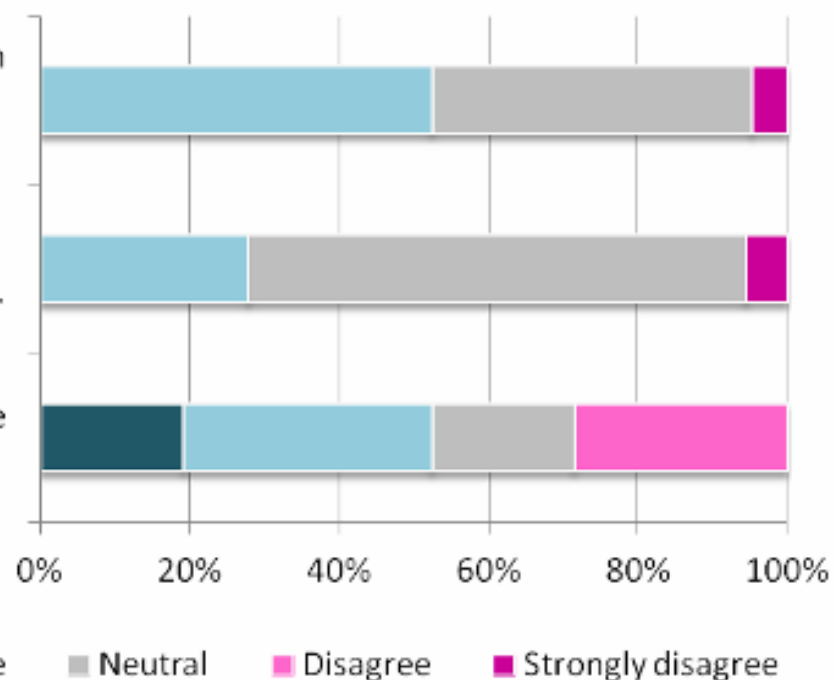
Only a few students looked at the website more than once or twice.

Opinions about the website were mixed.

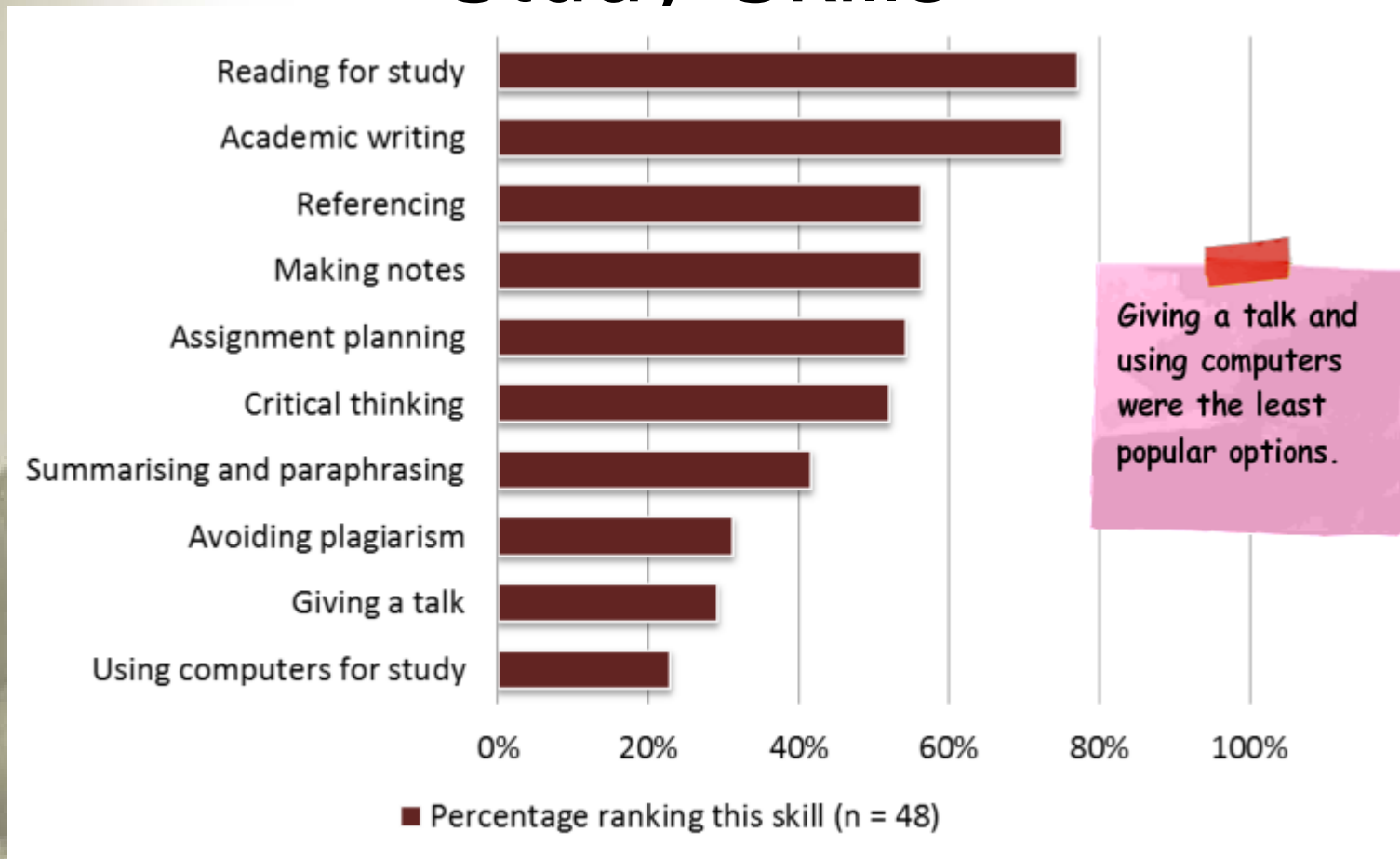
Generally I found the information and advice on the website very useful.

I really liked being able to record my own thoughts using PebblePad.

Overall the website was quite straightforward to use.



# Questionnaire Sept 2011 – Study Skills



Academic Writing still highly rated as area needing help



# Summary

- This was a small cohort and only one discipline
- This was very much a pilot
- There is no “long” summer
- Some students will find these types of materials useful before they arrive, but for others they will not engage until they arrive or after their first assignments
- Communication of the availability of materials is not straight forward



# Going forward

- Students still highlighting Academic Writing as particular problematic transition issue
- Changing the Academic Skills course to be less “skills” focussed but more focussed on HE processes e.g. academic writing, tutorials, lectures with their component skills



# Pre-arrival

- Students did comment they found the materials useful so we will continue to provide resources and build on the pilot
- Materials moved from PebblePad to static web pages as part of School website induction materials
- No graduate attribute or PebblePad usage pre-arrival



# PTAs project – RA comments

- *“As an outsider used to working with very different students, the project provided me with a valuable insight into a traditional university school where teaching is based around lectures and tutorials with traditional modes of assessment. Being able to listen to students explaining their experiences in focus group sessions was enlightening. There were however obvious constraints in undertaking such small-scale project work. It was necessary to cut methodological corners in order to undertake the surveys within the funding available. The surveys were not really properly piloted and could only be conducted within a narrow window of time. Despite this, I feel the information we obtained was and is useful and informative.” – KW*
- *“Think what I realized the most is importance of putting the materials in a way that will catch the attention of the incoming student. It is one thing to know what they need - but it is another to know how to put it together so it can be appealing and useful.” - AS*



# PTAS project – academic staff comment

- *"Staff and tutors marking first year essays and exams are acutely conscious of the lack of certain skills among some of our students; however, this study shows that those skills whose deficiency often bothers us most (grammar and punctuation, giving a good presentation, avoiding plagiarism) are not those which the students most identify themselves as needing to improve. Also, although the period over the summer before they come to University is in theory a good time to send students materials, in practice it is difficult to engage students at this point without an established peer group or any personal face-to-face contact. I also suspect email (as opposed to, say, Facebook) is not a valued communication medium for many school leavers today.*

*Our project period was too short (covering only two cohorts) to allow us to set about addressing these issues as fully as we would have wanted, but the study has given us some valuable pointers to how to continue trying to tackle some of these problems." SP*



# Links

- Wiki of results of questionnaires - Skills Divinity students could prepare  
<https://www.wiki.ed.ac.uk/display/skidiv/Skills+Divinity+students+could+prepare>
- PepplePad webfolio  
<http://www.pebblepad.co.uk/edinburgh/webfolio.aspx?webfolioid=156611>



# Thanks to

- PTAS for funding the work
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