Academic Adjustment: Learning Skills

The skills required to engage academically with university coursework emerged as the most significant group of academic issues. In addition to the issues above, staff cited further significant learning skills issues, like:

- Don't know how to take notes in lectures
- Don't know how to do work on their subject in their own time and to consolidate what is covered in tutorials
- Don't know how to write and punctuate English correctly, “as a result of being short-changed in their earlier education” (Teaching staff respondent)
- Don't understand why appropriate referencing is necessary
- Don't know how to write an academic essay

“Although the situation improves year by year, many new students, even those straight out of the WA school system, still lack adequate computer skills to help them learn how to use the Library system for academic purposes. Their fund of basic word processing, file management and similar knowledge does not permit them to present work that is at the level expected by academics. Many find it very difficult to participate appropriately in the increasingly prevalent online component of academic courses.” (Centralised support respondent)

There are some learning skills issues that overlap with issues in the sections “Academic adjustment 1: adjusting to a new, independent learning style” and “Administrative adjustment”. These issues are further discussed in these other sections.
Typical Responses that sought to address learning skills issues

Some initiative responses sought to embed learning skills training within course content. This included in-course advice that pointed students in the direction of the university’s language, learning and research skills supports:

“Provision of comprehensive and helpful electronic resources (usually in WebCT) containing information about study hints, practices quizzes and exams, guides to correct referencing and hints for research techniques.” (Teaching staff respondent)

“We have a lab report writing guide specifically for our first year students.” (Faculty support respondent)

“I provide lots of feedback in written material so that they learn to write appropriately (this is part of our normal work). The first assessment is a short written piece designed to identify those students with problems. If they do have problems they don’t lose too many marks.” (Teaching staff respondent)

“I encourage all rural students to attend courses run at Student Services - ie writing scientifically which has helped them adjust to their academic studies.” (Faculty support respondent)

“Information Literacy, such as what is within 'InfoPathways' could be further embedded into coursework and be assessed in order to be effective. As a supplementary course with no formal assessment it can easily be ignored by students.” (Centralised support respondent, initiative that “could be done”)

“Have devoted a lecture to invite someone from Student Services to address the lecture on how to get the most out of a lecture - preparation beforehand, note taking during and what to do afterwards.” (Teaching staff respondent)

Further responses described ways that learning skills training could be provided externally to units, in some cases a dedicated external foundation learning skills course was suggested. Learning skills that needed to be taught included: English grammar and written expression, writing styles within particular disciplines (i.e. Law, Science), information literacy and IT skills:

“A general English grammar and written expression course, compulsory for all first year students, would ease the transition and ensure that all students were receiving this support, rather than just those who have sympathetic lecturers.” (Teaching staff respondent, initiative that “could be done”)

“Initiate and deliver "special classes" for first years devoted to: "writing in law school".” (Teaching staff respondent)

“Teach generic skills like science and its communication, lateral thinking in separate units.” (Teaching staff respondent, initiative that “could be done”)

“Development of an induction phase during which generic skills are learned and academic objectives are defined.” (Teaching staff respondent, initiative that “could be done”)

“The faculty has generic courses which help students find these skills.” (Faculty support respondent)

“Ideally each student should be given ample time and support to develop these generic academic skills. Murdoch University’s "Foundations" units for first year students may serve as a model of the type of support which could be offered.” (Centralised support respondent, initiative that “could be done”)

There was an extensive response from staff who described or used the library’s information support services. These services included the 'Infopathways' web resource, orientation tours, dedicated courses in information literacy, and discipline-specific support:

- "The Library provides the open access 'InfoPathways' WebCT course accessible from the Library web site. This instructs on basic research skills i.e. finding resources and how to reference correctly.” (Centralised support respondent)
- "I have included a lecture/training session from library staff to assist students in literature researching skills.” (Teaching staff respondent)
- "Library exercise as part of the tutorial program”. (Teaching staff respondent)
- "We offer library skills sessions for all new students both one on one and in class formats.” (Faculty support respondent)
- "We provide advice and instruction on using the libraries resources, how to begin researching for an assignment and guides to referencing in specific styles.” (Faculty support respondent)
- "Library offers a range of classes, embedded courses and online units dealing with these issues.” (Faculty support respondent)
- "Library orientation and written information on correct referencing.”(Faculty support respondent)
- "A first year unit that dealt with Library skills would be beneficial.” (Faculty support respondent, initiative that “could be done”)  

**Specific Initiatives that seek to develop learning skills in students**

**Initiative - Online learning skills unit**

*The Library provides the open access 'InfoPathways' WebCT course accessible from the Library web site. This instructs on basic research skills i.e. finding resources and how to reference correctly.*  
Centralised support respondent, Library IT

**Initiative that “could be done” - Learning skills embedded within core units**

*Information Literacy, such as what is within 'InfoPathways' could be further embedded into coursework and be assessed in order to be effective. As a supplementary course with no formal assessment it can easily be ignored by students.*  
Centralised support respondent, Library IT

**Initiative that “could be done - Dedicated learning skills unit external to core units**

*Consider even a half semester compulsory unit to be taken by students during 1st semester that identifies their learning style, helps them identify the teaching style of staff, helps them address issues such as independent study, note taking, computer use, referencing, plagiarism (not how to do it, but how to avoid it by better paraphrasing etc.).*  
Teaching staff respondent, School of Human Movement and Exercise Science
Initiative that “could be done” – Dedicated IT skills unit

I believe that, for students with no high school level IT credits, a bridging course in IT basics is essential.

Centralised support respondent, Library

Initiative - Learning skills tutorial/workshop

Organise tutorials one on one / group for students re referencing, essay writing, or subject related.

Faculty support respondent, School of Indigenous Studies

Initiative - Promotion of new learning environment to teachers and students

Promote the different learning environment - students are independent and are encouraged to communicate directly with academic staff.

Centralised support respondent, Student Services

Make sure that staff spend time on teaching-learning, time management and performance enhancing issues. These are best done in the lecture - we well know that students who most need help will not use it!

Teaching staff respondent, School of Mathematics and Statistics

Initiative: Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Science’s Ecosystems Processes 100: Developing and implementing outcomes based learning in a First Year Foundation Unit (see featured initiatives on transition website for further details)

In Ecosystem Processes 101, our first module is on how to write scientifically- we 'hold their hands' through the process of designing an experiment, collecting data, and writing, using two tutes a week (all in groups of 4-5 students). For example, students write a section of a paper for Monday's tute, discuss individual sections in tute, and work on combining the group’s efforts into a better section that is handed in for comments on Thursday’s tute.

Teaching staff respondent

We have developed two problem based, outcome based units (EP 101 and EP102) that teach principle of team management and how to work in groups. The units are modular and we offer a variety of experiences ranging from hands-on work with native animal or livestock to social events such as barbeques. One on one assistance/interaction by lecturing and demonstrating staff in labs, tutes and fieldwork: crucial. The above units are extremely labour intensive and we would do a much better job if we had more staff, especially tutors to support the teaching of the modules.

Teaching staff respondent

I coordinate and teach in EARM (704 110). We aim to gently introduce students to the unit and university and incorporate team work during tutorials to encourage academic and social adjustment. I also coordinate and teach in ARE’s module in Ecosystem Processes where we extend upon this aim.

Teaching staff respondent