Transition, retention and attainment: Strategic enhancement programme

Cardiff University

Case study: Developing a shared understanding of the changing nature and demands of postgraduate student study skills need, providing recommendations for best practice and developing online study skills material.

Project title
Developing a shared understanding of the changing nature and demands of postgraduate student study skills need, providing recommendations for best practice and developing online study skills material.

Project leads
The Project Lead is Director of University Libraries and University Librarian, Janet Peters. The Working Group consists of 10 members from across the Academic and Student Support Services Department along with representation from academic staff and the Students’ Union. (see appendix 1 for Working Group membership).

In addition to the Working Group, the project is supported by Cardiff University Senior Management. This includes:
- Pro Vice-Chancellor Student Experience and Academic Standards
- Academic Registrar

The project will also report to University Committees. These include:
- Academic Standards and Quality Committee
- PVC’s Education Advisory Committee
Key words
Postgraduate, PGT, study skills, online, e-learning, student experience; enhancing PGT study skills, Postgraduate taught, MA, MSc, Study help, Study guide, Study support, Tutorials, Essay writing, Notemaking, Employability, Online profile.

Abstract (why HEA involved)
Recruitment to post-graduate study is under threat across the sector for many reasons including student debt and lack of flexible post-graduate study options. As a consequence, an increasing number of those that may have moved directly from undergraduate (UG) to postgraduate taught (PGT) study in the past are delaying and seeking to return to PGT study much later, and often as part of professional development that may also involve employer support. This is changing the nature of the PGT community and the academic study support needs they have. HEIs need to address this. The HEA Transition, Retention and Attainment Strategic Enhancement Project enabled Cardiff University to undertake a piece of work to identify the particular study skills needs of PGT students and to develop appropriate online resources.

Why was the project undertaken?
Cardiff University provides a range of study skills support to Undergraduates however a series of comments and responses from surveys indicated the need to provide additional tailored study skills support for PGT students to enhance their learning experience.

Within the Academic and Student Support Services Department colleagues had already started to discuss the suitability of UG study skills material which was available online and accessible via the intranet. In addition preliminary conversations were taking place regarding recruitment of an online educational resources content developer whose remit would include study skills material for PGT students.

The HEA TRA-SEP initiative has enabled these initial discussions to develop into a focused project as a pump-primer for further activity. Since future growth in new jobs is likely to come from the high-skilled occupations, this will require a workforce that is equipped with a strong education background and transferable skills, particularly at postgraduate level.

Making postgraduate study accessible and providing support to PGT students so they can fully engage in learning is a key element of Cardiff University’s Education and Student strategy.

Aims of the project
In scope:
• Students studying on PG Certificate / Diploma / Masters
  • In the transitional period between acceptance onto the course and starting
  • And/or returning to study

• Audit of current online study skills resources, identification of gaps and re-purposing or developing a package of new material to provide:
  • Improved support for the transition to PGT
• Enhanced learning resources in the area of PGT study skills including flexible, e-learning, technology enhanced material
• Enhanced support to PGT students to improve engagement in their studies and to develop their transferable skills
• Support for prospective PGT students considering studying at Masters level.

How was the project implemented?

Preceding the HEA TRA-SEP application, a number of projects and working groups had already been established within the University which focused on topics that intersect in the area of study skills support for PGT students. These included outlining and collating the range of current UG study skills material to investigate their adaptability for PG students, and discussion regarding recruitment for a new post to develop online study skills across disciplines for PGT students.

Following the HEA letter of acceptance to our application under the TRA-SEP, we formed the Working Group and drafted our key milestones for delivery (appendix 2). Establishing the problem and gathering the evidence were the first key steps. Up until that point most evidence had been anecdotal. Evidence from a range of surveys (see References) indicated that there was a major issue for a particular subset of students, especially those who had been out of HE for five years. It was not age-related, but a gap issue, a gap in learning. The Working Group tasked itself to develop a shared understanding of student requirements for study skills support at the PGT level which addressed this gap.

From the outset it was important to have PGT students involved in the process. The Students’ Union Vice President for Postgraduate students was a member of the Working Group and supported the early consultation with existing PGT students to establish their study skills needs and requirements. Focus groups were also held with PGT students to collect their feedback on the new on-line study skills resources as they were being built.

What outcomes and improvements did the project achieve?

Outcomes of the project are particularly focused on establishing support for students’ transition from UG to PG or those who are returning to study.

Outcomes (short term):
• Audit of current available online study skills support at Cardiff University and improvements on visibility and access to these resources.
• Identification of current gaps in PGT study skills material.
• Re-purposing, enhancement and / or development of new resources which could be delivered initially via the University’s intranet to meet the needs of PGT students.
• Package of new on-line study skills resources under the heading ‘Studying at PG level - what does it mean for me?’ The first two resources will be under development by July 2016 (‘Writing at PG Level’ and ‘Managing your Persona Online’ - see appendix 3).

Over the next 12-24 months:
• Evaluation of the effect and success of the study skills material and establishment of a process and resourcing to enable the continual improvement and updating of material.
• Improvement in consistency of experience in study skills support between UG and PG.
• Advice and guidance for academic module leaders on how to promote and sign-post students to materials available. This will include identifying an onward project that forms
part of the strategy for the newly established Centre for Education Innovation (CEI) in Cardiff University.

- Collaboration across other universities.
- Re-purposing, enhancement and / or development of new resources which could be delivered via the University’s external-facing website to meet the needs of prospective PGT students prior to their return to either full time or part time study.

(see appendix 4 – TRA project, Impact assessment matrix)

**How will the intervention be sustained, monitored and evaluated?**

- A Learning Technologist has been employed for 12 months – line managed by staff within Library Services and jointly funded by four Divisions in the Department.
- During development of the materials, testing and consultation will take place with PGT students to ensure the content is appropriate and useful.
- Web site usage will be monitored – how far did the student get? How long did it take?
- A feedback form will be integrated into each resource as the last page of each study skills tutorial ‘What were you trying to improve and was it successful?’ ‘Would you recommend’?
- The project will be handed over to the newly established Cardiff University Centre for Education Innovation (CEI) with a view to further collaborative development, led by academic requirements.

**Lessons learned: reflections on successes, obstacles and challenges (best mistakes!!)**

- The forming of the Working Group created connections with people working in similar areas, engaging people in a devolved university working together in a coordinated manner.

- Challenges:
  - There has been a lack of belief in the University that something different is needed for postgraduate students. While there are useful study skills resources, they are not badged for post-graduates nor clearly signposted for this audience.
  - There is a lack of awareness among staff of the resources available on the students’ view of the intranet – which differs significantly from the staff view.
  - The language used in signposting is important - indicating that the postgraduate student is important/thought of/belong and that specific resources have been developed for their community.
  - Engaging staff – there has been a culture of ‘doing your own thing’. As Cardiff University devolves academic course provision to Schools, there is evidence of duplication in the development of study skills modules covering similar ground. They are often only visible to students enrolled on particular modules within the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). There is a need to to encourage collaboration and sharing. It is hoped that the new CEI will be a catalyst for this.
  - Little funding is available to provide resources to develop PGT study skills support.

**Reflections on scalability and transferability**

- It is not always clear how many resources there are given that many are embedded in the modules. Persuading people to share resources will help to share knowledge and skills, particularly across similar disciplines.
- Staff will need to be encouraged to signpost students to the study skills areas on the intranet.
The project enabled an initial main focus on a series of quick wins – for example reorganising and evaluating existing resources. The Working Group focused on identifying needs and targeting development on work that could be achieved relatively quickly and which would make a difference. This has helped to raise the profile of the demand for study skills for postgraduate students within the University.

Embedding the project into the strategic direction of the University and handing over to the CEI will ensure focus and drive is maintained and that developments will be academically led, rather than being a Professional Services initiative.

There is potential to change practice through the support of PVC for Student Experience and Academic Standards and the CEI.

Next steps

- The Working Group will meet on at least one more occasion and write a closing report for:
  - Pro Vice-Chancellor Student Experience and Academic Standards
  - Academic Registrar
- A dissemination strategy including how to signpost PGT students and academics to the resources will be developed. A variety of communication methods will be used, including information provided to: PG representatives; news items on the staff and student versions of the intranet; School Directors of Learning and Teaching; internal University on-line newsletter (Blas); an ‘advert on the homepage of the VLE (Learning Central).
- The Cardiff University Centre for Education Innovation (CEI) will be formally requested to take on the future development and sharing of resources, which will ensure:
  - Consideration is given to how we make academics aware of the study skills resources, encouraging the embedding of study skills into teaching.
  - Monitoring and evaluation of the on-line resources that have been developed.
  - A presentation is included in the University’s Learning & Teaching conference in June 2017 when almost one year of data from on-line resources will have been recorded.

Acknowledgements

Welcome to Cardiff Survey 2015: Results for Postgraduate Taught students

References

- Welcome to Cardiff Survey (internal University document)
- PTES 2015 - report looks in detail at the motivations and experience of taught postgraduate students. See this report at:
- Analysis of taught postgraduate comments from PTES - carries a number of recommendations on how to improve the experience of taught postgraduates. See this report at:
  - https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resource/their-own-words
## Appendix 1 – Working Group membership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Name</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project lead - Director of University Libraries and University Librarian</td>
<td>Janet Peters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-sessional Manager (English Language Programme)</td>
<td>David Harries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head of University Graduate College Administration</td>
<td>Terri Delahunty</td>
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<tr>
<td>Head of Education Development Team</td>
<td>Clare Kell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Dean of Learning &amp; Teaching, Cardiff University Business School</td>
<td>Helen Williams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager, Academic and Skills Development Centre</td>
<td>Ann McManus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vice President Postgraduate Students - Student Union</td>
<td>Katie Kelly</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education Lead, University Library Service</td>
<td>Rebecca Mogg</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning Technologist / s</td>
<td>Catherine Emmett / Neil Pollock</td>
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<tr>
<td>Head of CPD Unit</td>
<td>Clare Sinclair</td>
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## Appendix 2 – Key Milestones

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Meeting / action / milestone</th>
<th>Involved / responsible</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13 Jan</td>
<td>1(^{st}) Working Group meeting</td>
<td>Working Group</td>
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<tr>
<td>20 Jan</td>
<td>HEA – event meeting (Treforest)</td>
<td>Clare Sinclair</td>
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<tr>
<td>w/c 1 Feb</td>
<td>Analysis of PGT data including Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) and ‘Welcome to Cardiff’</td>
<td>Student Survey Team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Feb</td>
<td>2(^{nd}) Working Group meeting</td>
<td>Working Group</td>
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<tr>
<td>w/c 23 Feb</td>
<td>Audit of Study Skills currently available:</td>
<td>Rebecca Mogg, Education Lead in Library</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Desk based research auditing current availability of online study skills material on</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Cardiff University website and intranet (indicated that very little is openly available,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>except on the Your Study section of the Student Intranet)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Presentation to Education and Student Experience Policy Network to seek out further</td>
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<td></td>
<td>content with restricted access ie imbedded into modules (some identified may have potential</td>
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<td></td>
<td>to be repurposed for more general use)</td>
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<tr>
<td>w/c 29 Feb</td>
<td>Visibility improvement for current study skills:</td>
<td>Working Group</td>
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<td></td>
<td>intranet portal, Link on Learning Central, Promotion, Materials under new headings,</td>
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<td>information included in Staff Inductions.</td>
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<td>2 Mar</td>
<td>HEA on-site visit to CU</td>
<td>Working Group</td>
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<td>10 Mar</td>
<td>Interview for Learning Technology Officer role</td>
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<tr>
<td>11 Apr</td>
<td>3(^{rd}) Working Group meeting</td>
<td>Working Group</td>
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<td>20 Apr</td>
<td>HEA – event meeting (Treforest)</td>
<td>Clare Sinclair</td>
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<tr>
<td>May-Jun</td>
<td>Developing / Repackaging current online resources for PGT audience</td>
<td>Catherine Emmett</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(Recruited a current member of staff to work for 2 days per week on a secondment to develop online resources. Agreed her workload for the project - from 25 April to end June)</td>
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<tr>
<td>8 Jun</td>
<td>4(^{th}) Working Group meeting</td>
<td>Working Group</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jun</td>
<td>Learning Technology Officer starts (full time for 12 months)</td>
<td>Neil Pollock</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jun</td>
<td>Focus Groups run (look at developed/ repackaged on-line study skills material)</td>
<td>Neil Pollock</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jun / Jul</td>
<td>Develop a new study skills package (perhaps similar to CU Equality &amp; Diversity mandatory</td>
<td>Neil Pollock &amp; Catherine Emmett</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>training) e.g. asked a question – depending on answer submitted it takes user down a</td>
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<td>different route for more reading etc.</td>
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<td>6 &amp; 7 July</td>
<td>HEA Conference - Presentation to conference</td>
<td>Clare Sinclair, Catherine Emmett,</td>
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</tbody>
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Appendix 3 – On-line resources

Writing at PG Level

Managing your Persona Online
## Appendix 4 – TRA project, Impact assessment matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project: Study skills for PGT</th>
<th>Impact on you institution</th>
<th>Impact on you institution</th>
<th>Impact beyond your institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What impact might your project have on you as an individual and your project team?</strong></td>
<td>What impact might your project have on students and staff within your institution?</td>
<td>What impact might your project have on employers, other stakeholders, and the wider HE community?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Raising awareness
- Gain multiple perspectives from team members and eliminate duplication
- Awareness of each other’s areas and Study Skills available to share
- Understanding target audience
- Raise awareness with staff of resources available via the Student Intranet
- Created connection with people working in similar areas – people in devolved university working together in a coordinated manner.
- Promotion of Study Skills available to students by providing sign-posting to materials
- Guidance for academics after project
- Encourage academics to put resources that could be of use to other students on the Intranet or Extranet rather than just within modules in Learning Central (the VLE)
- Sharing process with other universities.
- Resources made available on Extranet therefore employers more aware of PG study and the transferable skills that students can acquire eg project & time mgt
- Recognise the value of developing their employees

### Increasing understanding, knowledge, or skills
- Knowledge of existing resources
- Understanding of Survey data (use of PTES and ‘Welcome to Cardiff’)
- Learning Technologist skills - developing online resources
- Feedback to and from students – involved and understanding students.
- Students’ involved in trial of on-line material while in development stage (therefore evaluation as we progress)
- Creating guidance for staff/students
- Increased usage of materials, increased competence in study skills of target students (measures – hits to website & post self evaluation questionnaires)
- At least 2 resources will be shared as OER’s
| Changing practice and / or policy | • Awareness of learning analytics – data for different purposes eg use of library / hits on study skills modules already available on-line | • PVC – potential to change practice through the support of PVC for Education | • Better understanding of PGT level of study for employers |