

The case for a generic academic skills unit

Alison Bell and David Egan

Summary

The intention of this paper is to contribute to the debate on key skills by considering the case for generic key skills units. We argue that there needs to be a separate debate about how we best prepare students to participate in the learning environment of a university, concluding that a generic academic/study skills unit is an essential foundation at the beginning of an HE course.

Biographies

Alison Bell and David Egan are both Senior Lecturers in the School of Sport and Leisure Management at Sheffield Hallam University. Both have extensive experience of teaching at HND and undergraduate level both in their professional areas (Consumer Studies and Economics/Business respectively) and generic key skills.

Keywords

academic skills, key skills, employability

Introduction

Generic academic skills units create particular problems both for students and tutors. In this paper we will be exploring the case for such generic units in the first year of a undergraduate course.

Our perspective is undoubtedly coloured by our experience as unit tutors for a generic study skills unit on our undergraduate programme in food and leisure management. Our starting point is that many students are entering higher education (HE) with an academic skills level that is creating a barrier to them fully participating in the learning process. We feel the topic is of particular importance at the moment because a debate is beginning to develop between the use of generic skills units and embedding the development of academic skills within subject units combined with the support of Virtual Learning Environments (see Sheffield Hallam University Key Skills Online www.shu.ac.uk/intranet/keyskills.html).

Key skills and academic skills

Our belief is that part of the problem over key/study/academic skills is confusion over what is meant by the terminology.

Undoubtedly the publication of the Dearing Report *Higher Education in the Learning Society* in 1997 highlighted the debate on graduate employability, one of the recommendations being that:

'Institutions of higher education begin immediately to develop for each programme they offer, a programme specification which identifies potential stopping-off points and gives the intended outcomes of the programmes in terms of... key skills: communication, numeracy, the use of information technology, learning how to learn' (cited in Sloan, 2001, p2).

A key element of the Government's response was to support Dearing's recommendation particularly on graduate employability, lifelong learning and programme specifications.

Universities have responded to the pressures by putting emphasis on the development of key skills in degree programmes and teaching strategies. If we consider the case of Hospitality education that has followed the same trend with considerable success as shown by a recent HEFCE report (HEFCE 01/30, 2000) where among the findings was that:

'Hospitality management education provides graduates with the skills and knowledge that meet the needs of all sectors of the industry' (cited in Lockwood, 2001, p.5).

The question we wish to raise is not whether a university degree develops the right skills from the viewpoint of employability, but whether the academic skills required to participate fully in higher education are the same skills as required by employers and moreover whether they are best developed or enhanced in the same way.

A comparison of academic skills and key skills

We define academic skills as the skills necessary to participate fully in the academic environment of a degree course, in contrast to the key skills valued by employers.

Let us first consider academic skills. A good guide to what academics think of as necessary skills can be found in the skill packs provided by universities such as Sheffield Hallam and in the various study guides published such as Cottrell (1999). *The Study Skills Handbook*, Cottrell's book, contains chapters on:

- Working with others;
- Research skills;
- Writing for university;
- Developing your writing;
- Critical analytical thinking;
- Memory;
- Revision and exams.

By contrast, Sheffield Hallam University interestingly splits generic skills packs into two types: those related to course activities and those that are related to underpinning skills.

Under the heading related to course activities the following topics are covered:

- Group work;
- Solving problems;
- Gathering and using information;
- Essay writing;
- Report writing;
- Revising and examination techniques;
- Oral presentation;
- Note taking.

Generic topics, related to underpinning skills are:

- Identifying strengths, improving skills
- Organising yourself and your time
- Coping with pressure
- Negotiation and assertiveness
- Confidence with numbers
- Reflecting on your experience
- Critical analysis

If we now consider the types of skills identified by employers, a useful summary by Ennis-Reynolds (2001), although specific to the leisure industry, notes that the top ten requirements valued by employers are:

1. Willingness to learn
2. Commitment
3. Dependability/reliability

4. Self motivation
5. Teamwork
6. Communication skills (oral)
7. Co-operation
8. Communication
9. Drive/energy
10. Self management

Ennis-Reynolds also note that employers find the

'most significant shortcomings in graduates' oral and written communication skills, but are also not very satisfied with graduate recruits' commercial awareness and financial knowledge, their knowledge of political and social issues and general knowledge, their negotiating skills and their prior knowledge of the job and the organisation' (Ennis-Reynolds, 2001, p.6).

Thus while a superficial look at the skills identified by Dearing might suggest that the skills necessary to study for a degree are the same as the skills required by employers, a more in-depth consideration would suggest that they are rather different.

The need for the development of academic skills

Anecdotal evidence would strongly suggest that many students now entering higher education need to enhance their academic skills to be able to participate fully in the academic environment. In the literature this is often related to the wider diversity of backgrounds of students entering HE; however our experience and comments by other colleagues would suggest that even students from traditional A-level backgrounds appear lacking in a number of pre-requisite skills, eg essay writing, note taking and numerical skills, suggesting a need for skill enhancement at the beginning of a degree course.

To test this view we undertook a survey of academic staff in the School of Sport & Leisure Management and a survey of students starting on our Hospitality courses (HND & Degree) in the academic year 2001/02 at Sheffield Hallam University.

Students' self-assessment

Our survey provided the following outcomes:

Writing skills

- I feel confident about writing essays: 55%
- I feel confident about report writing: 43%
- I feel confident that my level of English (grammar etc) is adequate to give full justice to my studies: 78%

Numerical skills

- I feel confident that my level of mathematical skill is adequate to give full justice to my studies: 62%

Staff assessment/views

In our survey:

- 73% of staff felt academic skills have deteriorated since they entered teaching.
- 67% think that a lack of academic skills limits the ability of a significant minority to participate fully in their degree studies.

Specific problem skills identified by staff:

Numerical: 82%
English: 88%
Essay writing: 79%
Report writing: 42%

Referencing: 76%

Library/information searching: 33%

Thus from this sample there appears to be a need, identified by both staff and students, to develop academic skills. Interestingly enough the staff survey found that 73% of those staff who completed the questionnaire thought that there should be a Level 1 generic skills unit.

In addition there is some evidence in the literature, particularly from the USA, that study skills courses have a beneficial effect. This is of particular interest given the US's longer tradition of students entering higher education from a diverse range of backgrounds. In particular, Alverno College, located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin has a long track record in this area (O'Brien 2000).

The case for a generic academic skills unit

The need for the development of academic skills is, we suspect, clear to all academics in higher education. What is more debatable is the case for generic units in academic skills. The trend appears to be towards embedding the development of academic skills within academic units, the reasons being economy, the reluctance of many academic staff to teach such units and student reluctance to engage with such units.

In our view, if embedding academic skills within academic units fails to deliver an improvement in skills then it is a false economy. If we consider the experience of the introduction of Common Skills in BTEC programmes in the 1990s, our joint experience from very different programmes of Home Economics/Hotel & Catering Management and Property Management is that embedding the common skills within subject units did not work, neither staff or students showed commitment and after a short while it became little more than a paper exercise. Even those staff who did try to undertake the grading of common skills seriously found difficulty in separating the common skill from the subject grade, and the active development of the common skills is minimal in practice given the time and resources demanded by subject development.

The reluctance of many academic staff to be involved in the delivery of generic skills units is an unspoken reality probably based on academic snobbery. The reality is that such units are often allocated to new staff or seen as a useful way of making up timetables to meet staff audit requirements.

The reluctance of many students to engage actively in generic skills units is a serious problem and, we would suggest, reflects the over-optimistic belief of many students that they have the necessary skills at the required level or that they cannot acquire them if they do not already possess them. How many times have we heard the refrain 'I can't write essays' or 'I can't do maths' etc? Our experience as tutors of such a generic unit suggests that there is a real and serious underestimation by most first-year students of the importance of academic skills to successful study.

A generic academic skills unit will not in itself solve these problems unless a number of conditions are met. Firstly, it should be staffed by tutors who believe that the development of academic skills is important and are prepared to do the necessary development work and experimentation to ensure the successful delivery of the unit. Secondly, from the students' point of view, the unit must be assessed and perceived to be equally important to the other units studied, ie it must be passed in order to progress. Thirdly, the unit must also be perceived to be of equal importance by School management and resourced and staffed adequately.

Weblinks

There are many web resources on academic/key skills. The following are a small selection of those available:

<http://www.port.ac.uk/keyskills/>

<http://www.dfee.gov.uk/key/>

<http://www.lmu.ac.uk/lis/lss/lcpubs/lcn/autumn99/sfl.htm>

<http://www.mtsu.edu/%7Estudskl/>

<http://www.medi-smart.com/study.htm>

http://www.rio.maricopa.edu/distance_learning/tutorials/study/links.shtml

<http://www.sas.calpoly.edu/asc/sslother.html>

http://www.bournemouth.ac.uk/learning_support/html/study_skills_web_sites.html

<http://www.alverno.edu/>

Bibliography

Cottrell, S. (1999) *The Study Skills Handbook*. Macmillan Press Ltd.

Ennis-Reynolds, G (2001) Are Leisure Degrees Out of Touch With Employability? *Link Newsletter of the LTSN Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism* 1: 5.

HEFCE 01/30. (2000). *Getting ahead: graduate careers in hospitality management*. Council for Hospitality Management Education HEFCE Report May 01/30.

Lockwood, A. (2001) Graduate Careers in Hospitality management. *Link Newsletter of the LTSN Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism* 1: 5.

Sloan, D. (2001) Doing Dearing in Hospitality management Education. *Link Newsletter of the LTSN Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism* 1: 2-4.

O'Brien, K. (2000) 'Ability-based education' in Fallows, S. and Stephen C. *Integrating Key Skills in Higher Education*, London: Kogan Page (2001), pp 33-56.