

Academic support: Ensuring equality and inclusivity for all students

Louise Connelly and Donna Murray

Introduction

Academic support (Thompson & Mazer 2009) is a key concern for institutions, as it can directly impact on the quality of the student experience, their academic achievements, as well as attrition rates (Baxter 2012).

During the move to hybrid teaching in 2020, many existing delivery models of academic support which were offered to online distance students (ODL), were reimagined and redesigned to support a wider cohort of undergraduates, on-campus postgraduates, and PhD students.

The research presented here, focused on ODL students and academic support, however, the findings and recommendations are applicable to all models of online/hybrid delivery via academic study skills units, like the Institute for Academic Development, or at devolved School level.



Equality and inclusivity

The University Strategy 2030 has a strong focus on the values which underpin its activity, including valuing the contribution of everyone. We need to work closely with our student cohorts to understand what is unique about learning online, for example, many of our students will be juggling other commitments, employment, or studying part-time (Sheail 2018).

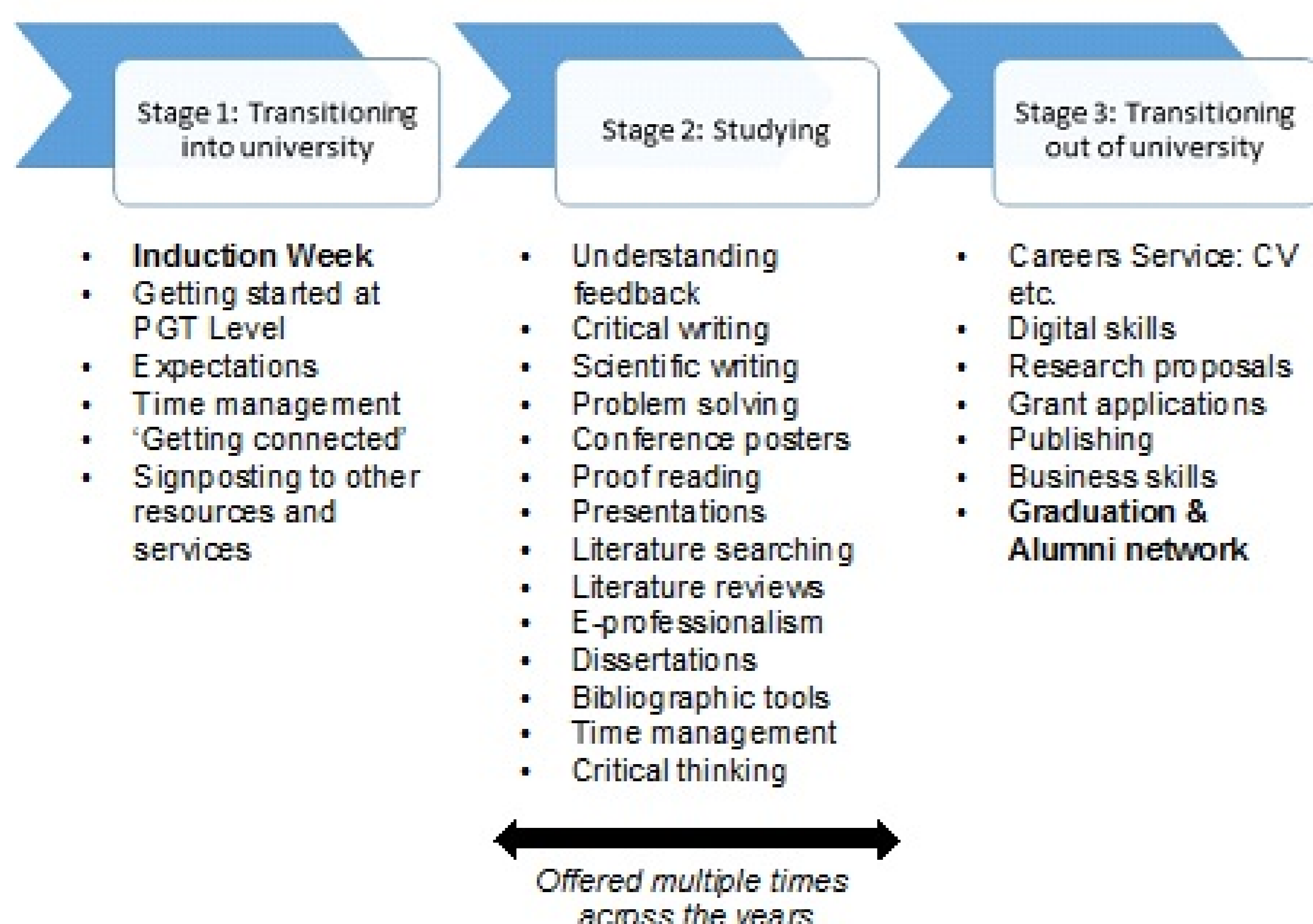
Other factors include accessibility and ensuring technology is an enabler not a barrier to learning. Students should feel part of the University community and that we can support them through the three transitional stages of their academic journey (on entering, while studying, and exiting).

Methodology

An academic transitions roadmap (ATR, shown in image 1) was developed by drawing from three different sources:

1. Examples of the current delivery models offered by the Institute for Academic Development (IAD);
2. A pilot study with an online MSc programme, which included a mixed methods approach of interviews (n=2) and a survey (n=17) carried out in 2017-2018;
3. A review of the literature on academic support and student transitions.

This methodology helped to address the research questions: 1) what academic support is needed by students 2) does academic support needs vary at different stages of their studies 3) how is academic support communicated to students.



Results

- **The Institute for Academic Development (IAD):** Students can book academic support via the IAD website or MyEd. The IAD promotes the workshops and support via a newsletter, which is often cascaded via Schools. In 2018-2019, the IAD delivered 56 online workshops (for postgraduate students - PGT) out of a total of 124 workshops, with 5,319 registrations. In 2020-2021, the delivery shifted to online delivery and 143 online workshops were delivered from Mar 2020-May 2021. 10,481 students registered for these workshops, with many workshops, such as 'Dissertation Toolkit – Structure and Focus' having a waiting list of more than 70 students, as demand is high for these resources.
- **The pilot study** provided an insight into student perceptions and experiences of academic support. The survey results and interviews highlighted varying levels of confidence at different stages of the academic journey, as well as awareness of academic support available, and how academic support is communicated to students.
- **Survey Data** helped to pinpoint levels of confidence in relation to different aspects of academic support. For example, 82% felt "quite" or "not" confident in relation to critical reading. Whereas, other responses highlighted academic challenges related to time management, sourcing information, and critical reading and writing. Areas with the lowest confidence score related to dissertation (12%), data and statistics (12%) and groupwork in assessment (12%).
- **The results** help to inform the type of support that students may require and consider when it should be offered. For example, when transitioning into the University - time management or sourcing information, will ensure students have a better chance of succeeding. Whereas, topics specific to the dissertation stage need to be actively promoted and provided at that particular stage of the academic journey.

"I accessed anything I could, time management ... writing for scientific papers, critiquing scientific papers, and I mean anything they offered that wasn't filled up, I got a seat on it and went to that." Interview 1

- **Interviews:** Only two students self-selected for interview, however, their contribution to the pilot study provided further insight into their motivation for engaging with academic support; the challenges they experience, such as many workshops are fully booked, or they are not familiar with the variety of support on offer, or there are time zone differences.

Conclusions and recommendations

This study has helped to reshape academic support delivery at a central and perhaps also at local level. Five recommendations manifest as a result of the study, which are applicable to hybrid/online academic support delivery:

1. Identify the specific academic support needs for your students.
2. Identify limitations in delivery e.g. technology, financial, staff, time zones.
3. Consider the pedagogical and technical aspects of delivering academic support in different ways.
4. Consider how the support can ensure inclusivity and equality.
5. Engage with other colleagues, such as learning technologists and other support departments to ensure the ATR model includes and/or signposts to other resources/departments during the academic journey.

References

- Baxter, J. (2012). Who Am I and What Keeps Me Going? Profiling the Distance Learning Student in Higher Education. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 13(4), 107-129.
- Sheail, P. (2018). Temporal flexibility in the digital university: full-time, part-time, flexitime. *Distance Education*, 39(4), 462-479
- Thompson, Blair, and Joseph P. Mazer (2009). "College Student Ratings of Student Academic Support: Frequency, Importance, and Modes of Communication." *Communication Education*, 58.3, 433-58.