



## Student Transitions: Example of transitions practice

**Title:** The Academic Skills Project: Helping undergraduate students develop discipline-specific skills

**Transition(s) the practice supports:** Transition from School to University

### Abstract:

The Academic Skills Project (ASP) was established by the Centre for Academic, Professional and Organisational Development (CAPOD) in summer 2014 in order to create a framework for subject-specific academic skills to be delivered to a large number of UG students via high quality workshops delivered by PGR students, creating benefits for both cohorts. Until this point academic skills workshops were delivered centrally by a member of CAPOD staff via 'open courses' that only generated very limited interest. Specifically, the project aimed to improve the transition of undergraduate students from School to University, and help PGR students develop their teaching skills in a different way.

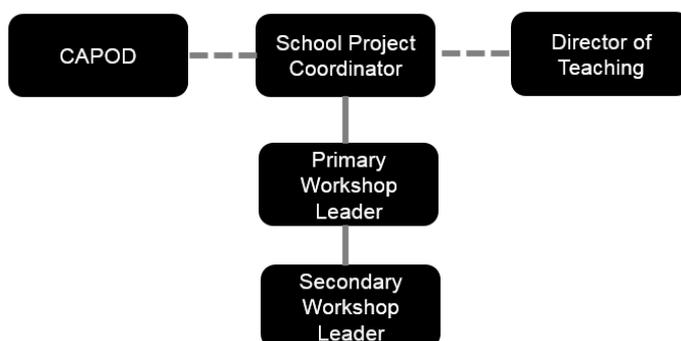
### Description:

#### A: Background

The concept for the ASP was first tested by three PhD students in the School of History who introduced a series of academic skills workshops for History undergraduates in 2012. In the summer of 2014 the scheme was expanded, via CAPOD, to all Arts Schools.

#### B: Structure

The project ran in each participating School through the following structure:



#### CAPOD's role:

- To take an overview of the project and provide continuity between Schools.
- To provide financial backing.
- To provide opportunities for ideas dissemination between participating Schools.
- To evaluate the success of the project.
- To provide quality guidance via our Academic Skills tutors.

**Director of Teaching's role:**

- To provide guidance and support over programme design
- To oversee the quality of the programme
- To help School Coordinators troubleshoot any problems.

**School Coordinator's role (£150 stipend):**

[Must be experienced tutor/marker within the School]

- To design the programme, in consultation with the DoT.
- To recruit workshop leaders.
- To publicise the programme within the School.
- To manage the £500 budget.
- To book venues.
- To ensure evaluation takes place.

**Workshop leader's role (£13.51/hour tutor rates):**

- To design, deliver and evaluate workshops.

The structure of having PGRs deliver subject-specific academic skills was welcomed by University of St Andrew's Psychologist, Dr K Maver who researches in the field of personal and social self-categories and identity. He welcomed the "discipline-based social-identity" which relates to the use of deep-learning approaches: *"We argue that this is also modified by the normative effect – that is, it matters what they think is normative for students in their discipline. We speculate that again this could work either way: if you identify as a student in a discipline and see deep learning is normative, you are more likely to engage in deep learning; reciprocally, if you already engage in deep learning and see that as normative, then your identification [as a student of the subject] will increase. If we are right, then the current strategy being used for the academic skill project is quite close to optimal, and either making the courses discipline free, or losing the interactive element, would reduce the effectiveness.<sup>1</sup>"*

**C: Programmes offered**

The Schools' academic skills programmes ran across broad themes (comprehension, analysis, rhetoric), but often presented as subject-specific topics. Many of the School Coordinator's arrived at their programmes through extensive discussions with module coordinators, PGR tutors and Directors of Teaching to identify skills gaps within the Schools. Examples of this specificity include:

- Group work (Management)
- Critical Engagement and Research Skills (Modern Languages)
- Thinking critically – thinking Geographically (G&SD)
- Visual Analysis Trip (Art History)
- How to argue like a Philosopher (Philosophy)
- How do I watch film? (Film Studies)
- Analysis and use of different sources (Classics)
- Researching in IR (IR)
- Speaking Skills (Modern Languages)

In total, 61 workshops ran in semester 1 of 2014/15 across the 10 Arts Schools. The average cost per workshop was £71.78

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<sup>1</sup> email correspondence, K Mavors to C Wilson, 15/10/14

## D: Student engagement

Exact number of students engaging with the Academic Skills Project are not known as record keeping by School Coordinators and Workshop Leaders was not 100% accurate.

However, a strong indication can be taken from the number of workshop evaluation forms returned (the true number of students attending will be higher). In total 787 feedback forms were returned.

In terms of year groups engaging with the programme, the following table shows the distribution of participants by year:

Year Group	% Attendance
1 <sup>st</sup> year	76.2
2 <sup>nd</sup> year	16.0
3 <sup>rd</sup> year	4.0
4 <sup>th</sup> year	0.1
Other	3.6

There was no significant difference between each year group in terms of how well they received the workshops.

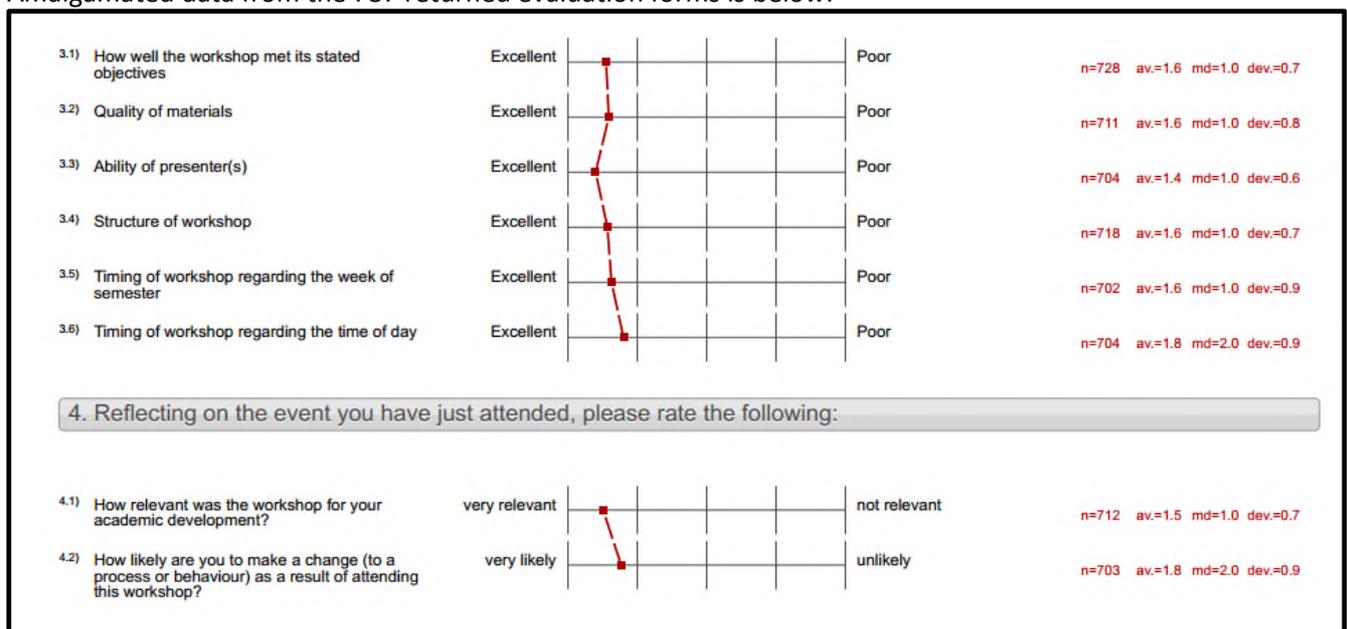
### Student benefits

The ASP produced benefits for both student participants (undergraduates) and student presenters (postgraduates).

### Participant evaluation:

Participants rated the workshops highly in terms of objectives, material, presenters, structure and timing. They were also very positive about the workshops' relevance and the likelihood of making a change to their behaviour as a result.

Amalgamated data from the 787 returned evaluation forms is below:



*"I will be more selective in how I read sources."*

*"The prospect of coursework is terrifying. This was so helpful and reassuring. A++"*

*"I will look at sources differently and be able to choose them better."*

*"I'll spend more time than I previously have structuring my essay research."*

**School Coordinator evaluation:**

School Coordinators each reported personal benefits from taking part in the project. The skill most mentioned as having been developed was curriculum design, followed by Teaching (2<sup>nd</sup>=) and Leadership (2<sup>nd</sup>=); Recruitment and Selection (4<sup>th</sup>=) and Team working (4<sup>th</sup>=). Budget management, event management and Marketing were also mentioned.

- *"I think we helped clarify what the School expects of its first and second year student, and we helped explain key concepts and techniques to help the students perform better in their modules."*
- *"It provided training that lecturers and tutors have said students need."*
- *"The students were very keen and seemed to be grateful for the existence of the project. The tutors were enthusiastic and committed to doing a good job, and recognised the value of improving the academic skills of our undergraduates."*

**Workshop leader evaluation:**

91% of workshop leaders thought that the project had a positive impact on the students who took part, and a large majority felt it had also been beneficial to them as a PGR student, with the skills most frequently cited as having being developed being teaching delivery, teaching design, team working and leadership. 91% of workshop leaders indicated that they would be willing to continue in the project should it run again.

- *"I heard from a number of tutors that mistakes in referencing were less compared to previous years"*
- *"Students expressed frustration and confusion at the beginning of the class; understanding and relief at the end. Feedback attested to students' confidence going forward."*
- *"A fantastic programme. Very happy to have taken part, and would love to see this continue to grow."*

**Future plans**

CAPOD plans to roll the ASP out to Science schools in the summer of 2015 to create a joined-up programme across the whole University. Further evaluation and review is ongoing.

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