

**Sheffield  
Hallam  
University**

**INCREASING THE  
REACH OF THE  
SKILLS CENTRE**

**REPORT**



Written by:  
Samuel Dougherty

# Increasing the Reach of the Skills Centre

## Introduction to the study

The Library Skills Centre provides centralised academic support to students across all levels and courses within the university, with a focus on empowering students to achieve their full academic potential. This support comes in a variety of forms, including taught webinars and one to one sessions that focus on developing skills such as critical thinking.

In the 2021/22 academic year, the Skills Centre saw 3837 unique students. While the service is inclusive, groups of students are underrepresented in our attendance figures, who have also been highlighted in the university's Access and Participation Plan, for example:

- Male students (26% of all attendees at Skills Centre group sessions in 21/22, or 3.3% of total male student population).
- Black British students (18% of all Skills Centre attendees, or 10.2% of total black British student population).
- Most disadvantaged students (19% of all Skills Centre attendees, or 5.5% of total POLAR4 Quintile 1 student population).

In addition, members from these groups are at an increased risk of disadvantage and being affected by the degree awarding gap where intersections occur.

Therefore, while the Skills Centre wishes to be inclusive of all students, it is with the above groups in mind that the research was undertaken and that interventions were planned.

## Background

Patterns of low engagement with support services amongst underserved students are well-established and may have been exacerbated by the move to an increase in online delivery in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Dunn, Rakes and Rakes, 2014; Smith, Hodgkin and Young, 2022). The link between engagement with support and a sense of belonging at university has been well established (Bryant, Cook, Egan, Wood and Mantzios, 2021) and, as such, a lack of belonging – documented as being felt most keenly by racially minoritised students (Samatar, Madriaga and McGrath, 2021; Unite, 2022) – poses a significant barrier to help-seeking amongst the student groups prioritised in this project. Highlighting the need for universities to support students from underrepresented backgrounds, Sanders, Daly and Fitzgerald's (2016) study of Foundation Year students in the UK identified students who are the first in their family to attend university, mature students and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds as being at particular risk of not finishing their courses which demonstrates a need for targeted academic skills support for these groups.

The transition period to HE is a crucial time in which to build relationships with students and position accessing academic support as a positive trait, rather than adhering to a deficit model (Blake, Capper and Jackson, 2022). Alongside this, the need for students to be given explicit guidance on academic skills such as critical thinking and assignment planning is a crucial aspect of academic success in higher education (Blair, 2017; Dunn, Rakes and Rakes, 2014). As such, support must be given from the outset to support students in developing these skills, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds such as mature and first generation students (Briggs, Clarke and Hall, 2012; Gale and Parker, 2014; Gill, 2020). Male students tend to recognise the need for support later than their female counterparts, are less likely to perceive the practical value of engaging with support services, and value informative support more highly than the interpersonal, supportive work seen as typical of central academic skills services (Aymans, Kortsch and Kauffeld, 2020).

In response to the needs identified in analysis of attendance data for Skills Centre sessions, combined with related themes highlighted in the wider literature, the following aims for the project were identified:

- Conduct research that engages underrepresented students in order to develop knowledge about potential barriers to accessing academic skills support.
- Using this data, co-design an intervention with students that seeks to improve engagement with academic skills support.
- Work with student researchers and Skills Partners to investigate potential barriers to learning and develop a new resource to engage students.
- Evaluate the chosen intervention and provide recommendations for future practice in relation to engaging underrepresented student groups with academic skills support.

## **Summary of methods**

A theory of change model was developed early in the project planning process in order to have an effective evaluation framework in place. This helped to ensure that researchers had considered factors such as assumptions and that project aims had been carefully considered, factoring in participants and resources.

A mixed methods approach to data gathering was taken. We ran a pilot questionnaire with a group of Skills Centre Partners. This was really helpful and allowed us to iron out some ambiguities related to terms we were using in the questions.

For the final questionnaire, all students who had attended a Skills Centre webinar from September 2022 to February 2023 were invited to answer a mix of 10 quantitative and qualitative questions about the Skills Centre, which were shared with students via Unihub. Of the 3000 who had attended, 51 chose to complete. This data helped to provide a great foundation to work from and, following initial thematic

analysis, a list of focus group questions were decided upon between ourselves and a student researcher. All students who completed the questionnaire were invited to participate in one of three focus groups in March 2023, to which we had 14 participants in total. Participants were given a £20 voucher, funded by Sheffield Hallam's Student Engagement, Evaluation and Research team (STEER).

The focus groups were held on Zoom in order to make them as accessible as possible for students and so that we could easily record and transcribe the focus groups. The focus groups attracted a diverse range of students from across the university, representing several underrepresented groups, including male students, mature students and students from global majority backgrounds.

Findings from the focus groups were thematically analysed; work which was carried out between staff and student researchers. Alongside this, student researchers and staff conducted a literature review to better understand the findings from the focus groups.

Following analysis of the data, it became clear that one of the most significant barriers to students accessing academic support was a lack of awareness of the service and a need for a clearer and more engaging induction session delivered by the Skills Centre. A new induction workshop was planned in collaboration with Student Skills Partners (students employed by the library, working with the academic skills team), to be delivered online and in person. In addition, marketing resources such as social media posts were created with the input of the Student Skills Partners.

The new induction sessions were delivered as part of the Welcome Weeks in October 2023 and January 2024. Attendees to these were invited to complete a poll to feed back on the sessions and also to participate in a focus group to review the sessions. Two participants agreed to participate in these focus groups, who were also given a £20 voucher to reimburse their time.

## **Findings**

### **a) Barriers to attending sessions**

Students in both the questionnaire and the focus groups highlighted barriers to attending academic skills session.

One significant factor was not being aware of Skills Centre inductions that took place during Welcome Week or not having time to attend due to other commitments. For example, participants stated that "timing of sessions may clash with lectures" and that the time of day that inductions sessions were held "may not be convenient for everyone".

Aligning with findings from research about the awareness of academic skills support (Poobalan, Barrow and Cleland 2021), participants mentioned "we didn't know where the Skills Centre is because we didn't have chance to meet them" and "I wasn't

aware of existence of these skills during study during Mod 1 and 2. Used them a lot for Module 3". This highlights a need for better advertising and communication of sessions to students to increase student awareness.

A highly significant point raised by one participant was the need for environments and attitudes to be inclusive. They stated that "m class is majority white and majority are younger and so I felt like it was really hard... 'cause they kind of start to form their own groups".

An increasingly significant issue facing students is financial concern. Reid, Jessop and Miles (2019) highlight this as a multifaceted problem, impacting students' ability to engage with their courses as well as their sense of belonging within their HE institution. This was also an issue raised by participants, with one stating that "financial barriers are the main thing for me". It is therefore important for this to be taken into consideration when planning skills sessions in terms of potential digital poverty and accessibility.

### **b) Advertising sessions**

Participants were asked to share how they had found out about academic skills support and strategies they felt would work in order to engage underrepresented groups. An observation of some concern to the researchers was that several participants were unaware of support that was on offer although, most commonly, participants shared that they had found out about academic skills support through their lecturers or via their course.

In advertising support, there was an emphasis placed on the need for "specific skills" such as "how to analyse research" and "how it [academic skills support] will help us".

In order to communicate upcoming events effectively with students, social media, in particular Instagram, was recommended to engage students and that this needed to be done early in the academic year.

### **c) Need to develop academic skills due to time away from education or different educational experiences prior to university**

There is an interesting cross over between the needs of mature and international students, particularly in the area of confidence in academic skills. This is particularly important as many international students are also mature.

International student participants stated that: "Our way of writing differs widely from the way it's done here" and "the style of teaching in the University is diverse from my background." In addition, "[Critical writing] was a complete new thing for me, and I didn't know anything about it. So it was tough." Mature students highlighted the need for academic skills development, for example "needing a reboot into studying".

It is clear that critical writing is a significant consideration for students and something that must be addressed early on in their time at university.

#### **d) Type of activities**

Participants were asked about the type of activities that would engage them in an academic skills session. Interestingly, there was a call for face to face interactions. One participant stated that “It should be like face to face and all, it can move to the online session later” with others echoing this sentiment: “before you start thinking about online for people that get easily distracted like us, let’s do some physical activity.” and “For me, there is something about online I don’t really get.”

This highlighted a need for in-person delivery which also tied into the need for an element of interactivity in academic support sessions. Participants expressed a desire for “less theoretical classes”.

One suggested “have an actual writing workshop where people have to write and this would instantaneously would be corrected/would be given feedback - this means smaller classes but I think people would get more out of it” and another putting forward the idea for “five minute activities we could embed in sessions to generate discussion and learning”.

#### **e) Activity development**

The diverse students who participated in the research reflect the diversity in the University’s student population and the ideas shared during the project regarding acquiring academic skills and transitioning to university echo complexities that are discussed in wider literature (Hussey and Smith, 2010)

Based on the themes highlighted by students in the focus groups, it was decided that a new induction session should be developed to support transition to university and to raise awareness of the academic skills support on offer early in students’ time at university. This was led by a member of the Skills Team, working with Skills Partners. Acting on information from the focus groups, the new workshop was kept to one hour and broken down into short sections, with time built in for informal conversation. In Semester One (2023/24), three sessions were timetabled, two in person (one at each campus) and one online. Refreshments were included at the in person sessions to help provide a welcoming and informal atmosphere. These sessions ran two weeks after the university’s Welcome Week, to avoid clashing with other induction activities and overloading new students with information.

To promote the sessions, marketing materials were developed with Skills Partners to advertise the events on Instagram, library television screens and on communications shared with staff to pass on to students.

#### **f) Working with student researchers**

We had two student researchers on the project, both mature, final year students. One was studying BA Fine Art and the other BSc Biomedical Science. It was really interesting having students from very different areas and the skills and observations they brought.

Both students were enthusiastic and keen to engage with research tasks, including editing questions and being actively involved in the focus groups.

The researchers supported in the analysis of the initial questionnaire data, which then helped us to inform our question development for the focus groups. Both researchers were consulted on the questions to be used in the focus groups and their feedback was acted upon in order to ensure the relevance and accessibility of questions being asked to students.

Student researchers co-chaired the focus groups, participating by asking questions and briefing participants in the focus group sessions. Student researchers also undertook secondary research in order to develop their own and the team's knowledge of potential barriers to learning, which they also commented on being both interesting and a useful skill to develop.

Student researchers then supported staff in analysing the data, using a thematic analysis.

Both researchers considered being involved to be a positive experience, with one stating that they "*had learned a lot*" and the other researcher stating many positives, including:

- The opportunity to work with different types of data.
- Developing communication skills through working with a variety of colleagues.
- Developing skills through running focus groups.

#### **g) Work with student skills partners**

Following analysis of questionnaire and focus group data, a project was undertaken to develop a new Skills Centre induction session for new students in order to better share information about what the team does and to engage with a broader range of students.

This was developed in conjunction with three student skills partners. These partners reviewed the findings from the focus groups and then supported staff in planning a new induction session and producing promotional materials to advertise the sessions. Skills Partners were involved in co-delivering the new induction session, sharing their insights with other students of their own experience of academic skills development.

#### **Recommendations**

- More interactive and better advertised induction events needed for library and skills teams to make clear the support being offered to students. These need to be run online and on campus.
- Careful consideration of when to hold a library and skills induction – most likely shortly after the university Welcome Week.

- Clearer signposting to what support is offered and sharing this in a simple format with students, through staff, Blackboard, social media channels and societies.
- Consideration of more timetabled and embedded academic skills sessions, delivered by skills advisors, as part of students' courses.
- Continuation of paid work with student researchers and partners to support the inclusion of a diverse student voice in the development and delivery of materials.

## Conclusion

The project was a great opportunity to find out more about what students feel are the main barriers to underrepresented students seeking academic support or accessing academic support sessions. The main groups who the project aimed to engage, particularly male students and black students were well represented in participating with the focus groups.

While we have not seen an increase in numbers of under-represented students attending support sessions at this point, the project has provided good evidence for measures that might work in future. There is no single intervention that will improve engagement with underrepresented groups, but continued pursuit of increasingly inclusive practice will support positive steps to ensure academic skills services are accessible for a diverse student population and support equality of outcome for all. Importantly, elements of co-design were embedded throughout the project: working closely with student researchers and skills partners in order to conduct research and produce a new resource.

## References

- Aymans, S. C., Kortsch, T., & Kauffeld, S. (2020). Gender and career optimism—The effects of gender-specific perceptions of lecturer support, career barriers and self-efficacy on career optimism. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 74(3), 273-289. 10.1111/hequ.12238
- Blair, A. (2017). Understanding first-year students' transition to university: A pilot study with implications for student engagement, assessment, and feedback. *Politics (Manchester, England)*, 37(2), 215-228. 10.1177/0263395716633904
- Blake, S., Capper, G. and Jackson, A. (2022) Building Belonging in Higher Education: Recommendations for developing an integrated institutional approach (wonkhe.com)
- Briggs, A. R. J. (2012). Building bridges: understanding student transition to university. *Quality in Higher Education*, 18(1), 3-21. 10.1080/13538322.2011.614468



- Bryant, A., Cook, A., Egan, H., Wood, J., & Mantzios, M. (2022). Help-seeking behaviours for mental health in higher education. *Journal of further and Higher Education*, 46(4), 522-534. 10.1080/0309877X.2021.1985983
- Dunn, K. E., Rakes, G. C., & Rakes, T. A. (2014a). Influence of academic self-regulation, critical thinking, and age on online graduate students' academic help-seeking. *Distance Education*, 35(1), 75-89. 10.1080/01587919.2014.891426
- Dunn, K. E., Rakes, G. C., & Rakes, T. A. (2014b). Influence of academic self-regulation, critical thinking, and age on online graduate students' academic help-seeking. *Distance Education*, 35(1), 75-89. 10.1080/01587919.2014.891426
- Gale, T., & Parker, S. (2014). Navigating change: a typology of student transition in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education (Dorchester-on-Thames)*, 39(5), 734-753. 10.1080/03075079.2012.721351
- Gill, A. J. G. (2021). Difficulties and support in the transition to higher education for non-traditional students. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 26(4), 410-441. 10.1080/13596748.2021.1980661
- Hussey, T., & Smith, P. (2010). Transitions in higher education. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 47(2), 155-164. 10.1080/14703291003718893
- Poobalan, A., Barrow, J., & Cleland, J. (2021). "I had no idea the university offered"...: The support needs of postgraduate taught students. *MedEdPublish*, 10(1)10.15694/mep.2021.000121.1
- Samatar, A., Madriaga, M., & McGrath, L. (2021). No love found: how female students of colour negotiate and repurpose university spaces. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 42(5-6), 717-732. 10.1080/01425692.2021.1914548
- Sanders, L. D., Daly, A. P., & Fitzgerald, K. (2016a). Predicting Retention, Understanding Attrition: A Prospective Study of Foundation Year Students. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 18(2), 50-83. 10.5456/WPLL.18.2.50
- Sanders, L. D., Daly, A. P., & Fitzgerald, K. (2016b). Predicting Retention, Understanding Attrition: A Prospective Study of Foundation Year Students. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 18(2), 50-83. 10.5456/WPLL.18.2.50
- Smith, E. R., Hodgkin, K., & Young, N. (2022). Student transitions to university in Wales: A mixed-method study of the enablers and barriers of first-year engagement. *International Journal of Educational Research Open*, 3, 100216. 10.1016/j.ijedro.2022.100216

Unite Students (2022) Living Black at University, Research into the experiences of Black students in UK student accommodation

**Sheffield  
Hallam  
University** | **Student Engagement,  
Evaluation and  
Research**