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## **Building StudySkills@Sheffield through partnership: student-centred development of a university skills hub**

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### ***Presentation abstract***

At the University of Sheffield, skills support for learning is delivered by more than one department. Previously, this required students to navigate multiple websites to discover the range of skills support available to them. For the 24/25 academic year we launched StudySkills@Sheffield, a new collaborative skills support website, bringing together skills development resources from across the university. With the aim of delivering skills support in a student/task-focused way, student input was key and they were directly involved in the planning and design of the site. This included mapping activities which gave insight into what topics students felt should be included, how these should be grouped, and the language that students use when discussing study skills. This also revealed similarities and differences across disciplines. This information was used to develop the site structure and assisted in balancing the presentation of resources in a cohesive way with ensuring students know where to go for further information. Close collaboration was required across a number of services: the University Library, 301 Academic Skills, and the English Language Teaching Centre taking on a coordination role. It was also necessary for stakeholder buy-in to link the project to institutional strategy and priorities, specifically the Sheffield Graduate Attributes and the mySkills portfolio. This paper will outline how the student voice was incorporated throughout the project, plans to continue the inclusion of the student voice in evaluation, and will provide a brief showcase of StudySkills@Sheffield and the collaborative work that was key to its success.

**Keywords:** collaboration; academic skills support; student focused; user experience; task-led approach.

## ***Community response***

Colleagues were interested to understand the processes involved in bringing Sheffield's study skills provision together under one banner. Given the mixed practice across the sector there are already many examples of established units that serve specific Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in different capacities, with different levels of integration. The consultative methods of working were praised by colleagues as good practice, as was the involvement of the English Language Teaching Centre given its established skills focus.

The opportunity to reflect on the division of skills training into different sub-areas based on student need inspired colleagues to make comparisons with the approach at their own institutions, and to consider whether there may be an 'optimal' institutional design. The links between each point of contact for students also attracted attention, for example, a student who identifies as having needs with writing skills may discover, by engaging with the support team, that they have additional needs impacting on their wellbeing, or indeed with their approach to research, critical thinking, or digital skills, so the ability to refer a student from one element of the service to another is very important.

Colleagues praised the level of detail provided on the guidance pages, and the fact that these have been written in a mature and respectful tone that succeeds in being highly informed and up-to-date without being too technical or prescriptive. Student user testing following the launch has clearly shown some positive impacts through the responses already gathered, but attendees were additionally interested in the approach to collecting further evidence of impact, with that evidence often being the key to successful capture of resources and funding for the future.

**Figure 1. The Sheffield Graduate Attributes.** <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/skills/sga>.



**Next steps and additional questions**

The concept of ‘graduate attributes’ and indeed the qualities listed in any taxonomy of the same remain up for debate, although there is considerable overlap in how these are typically perceived. As the work of the new integrated system evolves, it would be very interesting to see how the new provision addresses each of these attributes, and therefore to what extent the Learning Development teams are directly delivering on these objectives. Being able to demonstrate the value of the services through good data and analysis should ensure the continued investment in these key support areas and that may prove essential during the current lean years facing the sector across the UK and elsewhere.

Comparative analysis of the methods and structures used for student support across different institutions would also be helpful to better understand how efficiencies can be made, avoiding duplication, while being able to cater for specific student populations. The demographics are different for each HEI, so to what extent is this the best model for Sheffield students, or for students in general, and how will this be assessed in future?

## ***Authors' reflection***

We decided to focus on student input within the project. We felt this would be most relevant to all institutions, many of whom may have variations in services and structures to The University of Sheffield. We were pleased with the positive feedback on our approach and welcomed the opportunity to share insights from our experience with the wider Learning Development community. We didn't intend to focus on the site structure or content within the session. However, we were pleased with the positive feedback we received on this, both during and after the session.

We welcomed the high level of engagement in the session and the number of questions asked, particularly within the chat. We would have valued more time to discuss these questions, particularly those about student input within the project.

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