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A Road Map for Integrating Academic Skills in a Bachelor's Programme

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Abstract

Academic skills such as reading, writing, critical thinking and information literacy are foundational to university-level learning. However, although students often have a certain level of academic literacy on arrival, their skills do not necessarily match the context-specific requirements of higher education and often need to be explicitly taught. In contrast to ad hoc and isolated interventions, which seem to be the default response to this skills shortage, we argue for a more systematic, integrated and sustainable approach to academic skills development. We show that a joint venture between subject teachers, librarians, academic skills teachers and the programme management can bring about an effective and sustainable way of working with skills development. Based on our experiences in an international bachelor's programme, we outline a roadmap for fostering academic literacy that is resilient to staff turnover and aligned with course objectives. The proposed model aims to enhance student engagement, ensure continuity across courses, and support diverse learners in achieving their academic potential.

Introduction

Academic skills, such as reading, writing, critical thinking and information literacy are the backbone of all academic work at a university. These skills have been described in other terms, for instance, 'generic skills' (Barrie, 2006), or 'academic literacy'. It is often assumed that students already possess these skills when entering a programme or that

they somehow pick them up on their own during their time at university. However, in our experience, many students struggle to acquire these skills during their studies, which suggests that these skills need to be explicitly taught. This is also put forward in the literature (see for example Baker & Evans-Tokaryk, 2023; Beeks, 2006; Howard, Wood & Stonebraker, 2018; Jadefrid & Licht, 2024).

A common solution to this problem is to provide isolated and ad hoc interventions, for example a lecture on writing skills in the thesis course. Moreover, initiatives to strengthen students' academic skills often depend on relationships between course teachers and those involved in teaching these skills and tend to be difficult to maintain if these individuals are no longer involved in the programme or course. In our experience, these types of interventions, while helpful, often fail to provide a sufficient level of academic skills development for the students to reach their potential.

In this paper, we argue that there is a need for a consistent and systematic approach that goes beyond the efforts of individuals and ad hoc solutions. This would allow for a more integrated, meaningful and sustainable way of teaching academic skills, irrespective of changes in teaching staff. We propose a blueprint – or a 'roadmap' – for working more effectively and sustainably to create a progression of academic skills across the entire three years of a bachelor's programme. This is done by incorporating different stakeholders within the faculty, including teachers, librarians, academic skills teachers and the programme office.

We start by presenting the stakeholders, before summarising the theoretical basis for our revised approach. Following this, we explain how we integrate skills development into a programme by facilitating a collaboration between the different stakeholders and show how this integration is implemented. We then discuss some preliminary evaluations and conclude by reflecting on what makes our approach a more effective alternative to our previous ad-hoc solutions.

Students

Our main stakeholders are students undertaking a three-year international bachelor programme (Bachelor's in International Business) at Lund University School of Economics and Management (LUSEM). This programme, launched in 2017, has about 40% of students with international backgrounds that come to Lund. Because it is an international programme with students from all over the world, the students have experienced different educational systems, which means that they come with very

different levels and types of academic skills. This compounds the challenges in academic skills teaching. The students take courses in a wide range of subjects taught by different departments. While this broad range of subjects is one of the main strengths of the programme, it also means that courses do not always build on each other.

Library and Academic Skills Services

The School of Economics and Management features a unique unit called the Academic Skills Services (ASKS), which, together with the LUSEM Library, provides academic skills tuition to the students. ASKS was set up as a specific academic skills centre for LUSEM, separate from the university-wide skills service, to provide targeted support to students at the school. ASKS not only provides individual and group consultations for students, but also gives workshops on critical thinking, strategic reading and writing skills, as well as manages the online Teaching and Learning platform through the university's learning management system.

From the introduction of the programme in 2017, there have been regular interventions by the Library and ASKS, dealing with such matters as time management, working in teams, critical thinking, academic honesty, using the online search tool LUBsearch, reading academic sources efficiently, structuring texts and other various aspects of the writing process. However, these interventions have been implemented in a somewhat ad hoc fashion, delivered as standalone lectures and workshops quite often regardless of the context of the course itself, let alone the context of the whole programme. The librarians and study skills educators, therefore, have had to make certain assumptions as to what skills the students need at various points throughout the course, and whether these interventions can be accommodated by the course teachers. Moreover, the students themselves have limited incentives to take part in these workshops if they are not specifically related to course objectives, as demonstrated in the low attendance that many of these workshops have received in the past.

Teachers and Programme Management

Since the start of the programme in 2017, there has been a forum where the programme management has met with the directors of studies of all involved departments as well as student representatives called the Programme Council. These meetings have been important for staff and students to communicate information about the programme

across all departments. The Programme Council typically addresses questions that affect the educational process on a larger scale, for example how the school should work with Generative AI or how we deal with low attendance.

However, the Programme Council did not include the course teachers. The courses on the programme are taught by teachers from all the six departments of the school, who often did not know each other and were not familiar with the programme structure. This impacted not only their overall curricular knowledge but also their knowledge of the connections between the courses, for example in terms of content development or approaches to teaching. They were also unaware of which academic skills had been taught to the students at which point in the programme, and therefore could not assess whether an intervention was needed within their own course.

theoretical Basis

Our theoretical basis is a constructivist approach, which emphasises the fact that learning is based upon previous knowledge of the learner. Since the students' previous knowledge and experiences are rather diverse, we need to take this into account when creating an environment that encourages learning (Cooperstein & Kocevar-Weidinger, 2004). A constructivist approach to learning also enables a more active view of how knowledge is acquired and created in the long term, which ties into the notion that academic skills as a concept needs to be explicitly taught with active learning activities. These activities lead the students to the concept, they construct the knowledge, and learning happens (Cooperstein & Kocevar-Weidinger, 2004, p. 145).

Another important principle is that knowledge is acquired in context (Allen, 2008, p. 31). Since our students are in a new context and learning environment, we can assume that they need to adapt and develop their academic skills to this new environment. For the students, with their diverse backgrounds, learning happens in the balance between the surroundings or context that the students are situated in and the content of the courses, for example the subjects of the courses and the learning activities connected to them. It is constructed as a constant, ongoing process where the environment works with the knowledge that the students bring with them (Waite-Stupiansky, 2022).

In a more concrete approach, by bringing teachers, ASKS, librarians, and the programme office together, we provide an opportunity to develop students' academic skills in the specific context of each course in the programme. We thus organise the academic skills progression within the programme in a systematic way throughout the

semesters. In line with the pedagogical principle in Lovett et al. (2023, p.67) that “how students organize knowledge influences how they learn and apply what they know”, we provide a structure for our students to develop their academic skills.

Integration – the Central Hub of the Programme

To achieve a more integrated and systematic approach instead of isolated and ad hoc interventions, several changes were needed. The most important ingredient of this new approach is the central hub of the programme, which developed step by step over time.

As a first step, a newly appointed program director in 2022 added teacher meetings to the program council meetings. The teacher meetings include all teachers in one semester of the programme (before that semester starts) and thus ensure that teachers meet each other and become familiar with the programme structure, which is shown in each of these meetings.

This additional type of meeting facilitates coordination and cooperation between teachers and courses in one semester. The meetings also connect to the classroom more directly, as the teachers are in the classroom and interact with the students directly (while the directors of study might not be). The idea here is to discuss potential struggles of students and teachers, and collect input on ongoing issues or behavioural trends. Moreover, as the programme director and coordinator host all teacher meetings, they can also spread information across different semesters. This ensures a certain level of coherence also in the programme as such.

However, even though the teacher meetings proved to be helpful, an important element was still missing. The teacher meetings highlighted the lack of academic skills progression during the programme and led the central hub (ASKS, library, program management) to develop a strategy of ensuring academic skills teaching and training in several courses of the programme. As an important second step, therefore, members of the Academic Skills Services and LUSEM library became a constant part of the different teacher meetings as well as the Programme Council meetings.

The role of the central hub is to develop the academic progression throughout the programme, thus facilitating the combination of subject knowledge and skills knowledge, which is vital in teaching academic skills.

Implementation

The implementation that we have strived to achieve is, in some respects, specific for the subject of business and management, though it could be applied to any programme in any subject. As Wingate puts it: “The development of academic literacy cannot be separated from the subject” (Wingate, 2015, p.8). The students begin the first semester with a generic lecture on study skills, including topics such as time management, working in teams, critical thinking and academic honesty. The skills of effective teamwork are also developed in one of the initial courses on intercultural communication, where the students receive an introduction to different learning styles to enable them to be more understanding of and empathetic towards those students who come from very different educational cultures. These skills are developed and assessed through a joint project presented to the class.

Following on from this, we have established what we call “academic bootcamps” which take place once every year. The content for these was conceived in teacher meetings, where the teachers discussed the optimum approach with ASKS and the library. The first bootcamp is given about a month into the first semester and is split into three workshops, one taught by the library and the following two by ASKS.

The workshop run by the library focuses on learning how to identify and understand different types of information sources in business, with a specific emphasis on scientific articles. Questions such as “What is the difference between a scientific article and a Wikipedia entry when both can include credible references?” or “When can you use financial data to strengthen your argument?” are asked during the workshop. The students, by active participation, first identify source type by watching a preparatory video quiz. The librarians and course teacher chose the sources in the video together to ensure that they were relevant to the assignment. These sources are then investigated in more detail in a classroom setting by ranking the scientific level and discussing credibility.

In the following workshops, students are given the task of taking a scientific article and learning how to read it efficiently, how to extract the key points and then how to combine these into an effective summary. These summaries then form the basis for a discussion. The assignment consists of writing a summary of another, related article and, in the following workshop, they present the summary to their peers for feedback followed by a discussion.

The skills taught during the first bootcamp are revisited and developed the following semester. During a course in informatics, the students are given a workshop on synthesising sources and creating an argument through the development of their academic voice. There is also input on the advantages and disadvantages of using AI in academic writing, an issue that has become particularly prominent since the release of ChatGPT in November 2022. The second bootcamp is held in the fourth semester focusing on methodological and presentation skills, and the third bootcamp is held in the final semester in preparation for the thesis. Further input is given regarding how to formulate research questions, how to search for sources, how to structure the chapters and how to integrate different sources into the text in the most effective manner.

Preliminary evaluation

We are constantly developing our interventions within the programme building on feedback from teacher meetings, programme council meetings, course evaluations and informal conversations we have with students. Since the first cohort is yet to complete the programme, our evaluations are preliminary.

The feedback that we have had from teachers has been positive. For example, the teacher involved in the assignment we worked with in the bootcamp expressed her view that the quality of response from the students on average was higher compared to previous cohorts. The feedback from students has been more mixed. For example, we conducted a survey after our first bootcamp which generated mainly positive comments, such as “very useful”, or “at my high school, we were not told this”, but also some negative comments, such as “too easy” or “I already knew this”. These comments could be interpreted in different ways, for example it could mean that some students do not need the intervention, or it could mean that they do not fully grasp the value of it.

As part of our continuous development of the academic skills progression, we are currently discussing how to address the needs of those students who express that the intervention was too easy. One idea is to include them in the teaching in the workshops. Another idea is to work on how we motivate our intervention, for example by making explicit that skills need to be taught in context, and that this is a new context for all of them.

Conclusion

In this conference paper, we illustrated our revised approach to academic skills teaching across a three-year bachelor programme. We highlighted the limitations of our previous approach and described how a more integrated and systematic way of working together with all involved stakeholders creates a more meaningful and sustainable learning environment.

With a constructivist approach to learning, new knowledge is created in the balance between the environment or context the student is situated in, and the knowledge that they have internalised from previous contexts. We have strived to make the context of learning academic skills as seamless as possible for students in this programme.

We propose that this is possible regardless of subject or field or discipline. We want to emphasise the importance of co-creation, of building an organisation that enables conversation between the different stakeholders: students, teachers, programme director and coordinator, and key services such as library and academic skills services. By creating an infrastructure of recurring teacher meetings, programme councils and close contact between all relevant stakeholders and the central hub, we ensure a sustainable strategy. Furthermore, our approach gives academic skills a level of consistency, visibility and legitimacy, removing the unintegrated ad hoc approach to the teaching of those academic skills that are fundamental to learning, and putting them into the context of the student's whole education.

Finally, by addressing these questions in recurring meetings, we can create a feedback-loop that allows everyone involved to learn from each other and assess the impact of our systematic approach. By being proactive, what happens in one course can then be expanded on in upcoming modules, and by being dynamic, we can coordinate the efforts of support services to ensure the desired effect. Integrating the support services into the conversations creates a win-win-win situation for all the stakeholders involved.

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