

Re-visioning academic support as an innovative and inclusive offer for creative arts students

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University of the Arts London (UAL) is a specialist provider of art, design, fashion, communication and performance education from Foundation through to PhD level. It is made up of six colleges: Camberwell College of Arts; Central Saint Martins; Chelsea College of Arts; London College of Communication; London College of Fashion; Wimbledon College of Arts. The student population is circa 19,000 and approximately half our students come from overseas. Currently 74% study at undergraduate level, 14% at postgraduate level and 12% at further education level.

Historically, academic support was primarily provided by study support teams that were located in the colleges. They operated independently of each other and there were huge differences in resourcing levels. Inevitably the support provided was varied, and much of it necessarily focused on dyslexia support because of the high incidence of dyslexia amongst creative arts students.¹ Library Services, the Language Centre and Student Services also offered other aspects of academic support nuanced to reflect their specific roles, but largely delivered in isolation from any other academic support.

In 2011 - 12 a review of this provision was undertaken in order to

- develop a clearly articulated and shared vision for academic support, including the provision of study skills support, information and digital literacy, and English language support;
- outline a university-wide offer that specifies the core entitlement for academic support and ensures parity of provision to all students;
- determine the structure and funding for the delivery of academic support.

The review included extensive consultations with staff and students through one-to-one interviews and focus groups, as well as an analysis of feedback gleaned from recent student surveys, annual monitoring and quality review reports. It highlighted that those students who had accessed academic support generally had a very positive experience. However, it also revealed traits in students' perception of academic support that gave cause for concern, as many had little or no awareness of the provision or presumed that it was aimed only at students with dyslexia or those at risk of failure. In particular, international students expressed a resistance to take up academic support as they were anxious about being associated with a deficit model of support. Teaching and technical staff had varying levels of knowledge about the academic support provision, which impacted on their ability to refer students in a timely and appropriate manner. Consequently it became clear that many students were missing out on this opportunity to enhance their learning.

The review considered best practice across the sector and the latest research on academic support, as well as recent changes in higher education policy and current debates about the student experience, including those focused on transitioning and induction, retention and attainment, employability and enterprise, inclusivity and globalisation. In addition, the review considered the future of art and design teaching in the school curriculum and the growing importance of the creative industries for the UK economy.

The findings of the review endorsed much of existing UAL practice and also led to a number of recommendations to address perceived weaknesses in provision and to create added value. These were endorsed by both the university's Academic Board and the Executive Board in summer 2012, and included

- institutional-level leadership and co-ordination through the Director of Libraries and Academic Support Services and the creation of a new post, Associate Dean of Academic Support, plus the development of a governance structure to facilitate greater collaboration between study

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support, language support and library support teams;

- implementation of consistent structures and staffing levels across the colleges to ensure parity in provision, plus the creation of a small central team to develop a university-wide offer;
- development of an institutional strategy underpinned by a shared vision and set of core principles advocating the support and development of all students to fulfil their academic potential, and the promotion of academic support as an enhancement rather than a deficit activity;
- creation of a multi-faceted offer that combines subject specific / embedded support and semi-integrated support delivered in the colleges with a new generic / freestanding offer open to all students across the university;
- development of online, multi-media and print materials as a shared resource bank freely available to all students to complement face-to-face support;
- utilisation of libraries and learning zones for academic support activities and for promotional materials as part of a seamless, high-profile and accessible provision;
- transfer of specialist dyslexia support to the University Disability Service.

Appropriate funding was secured and a new organisational structure was put in place as the first priority. Parallel to this, work commenced in a consultative way on the development of the *Strategy for academic support 2013 - 2016*² that was endorsed by the Learning, Teaching and Enhancement Committee and Academic Board in summer 2013. The new strategy now underpins all that we do and acts as our institutional roadmap for developing academic support. The Strategy's overarching vision is

'to enable all students to become confident and competent independent learners, and achieve to the maximum of their potential through the development of their academic skills, literacies and professional attributes.'

During 2013 - 14 activity focused on four main areas: governance, including the development of a meeting structure to facilitate the sharing of good practice and greater co-ordination across teams; communications and marketing to increase the visibility and to clarify the identity of academic support for staff and students; developmental work to achieve a multi-faceted offer that would address the specific needs of UAL and our creative arts context.

The new university-wide freestanding programme of events was launched in February 2014 to complement the well-established activities delivered within the colleges. This distinctive offer seeks to enhance the student's 'own learning abilities, strategies and knowledges that underpin progress, achievement and future success' in an anticipatory and innovative manner. Sessions are often co-created and co-delivered under the guidance of the Academic Support Co-ordinator so that students benefit from the differing expertise of the staff involved. This is an additional great way of bringing together study support lecturers, librarians and language tutors to create a coherent and collaborative provision. Different approaches are adopted according to the purpose of each session and the preferred learning styles of creative arts students. Students have responded particularly well to: object-based learning³ as a technique to develop their research skills and to explore themes such as cultural identity through archives and special collections; Lego® Serious Play® (LSP)⁴ as a methodology to help students with 'stuckness' and as a means to explore the relationship between interests, identities and values; the use of Ketso® kits⁵ as a tool for group reflection on collaborative practice.

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Object-based learning
Photo: Graham Barton



Ketso® kit
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Re-visioning academic support as an innovative and inclusive offer for creative arts students



Lego Serious Play
Photo: Graham Barton

Most of the sessions are open to any student through an online booking system, and although attendance levels vary, with some sessions being fully booked and others attracting lower numbers, students from all six colleges have attended sessions regardless of geographical location. In fact many of them have stated that one of the things they value about this offer is the opportunity to meet up with students from other disciplines and from other colleges.

We always seek student feedback and are particularly monitoring the following indicators to evaluate the offer: changes in behavioural intention; changes in viewpoint or perspective on discipline; new learning / ideas / sensitivities triggered; increasing self-awareness; understandings of cultural / disciplinary difference. The following is a sample from recent feedback:

'Every way / suggestion of how to manage stuckness was helpful. Some of them are known things but we don't realize if someone don't say it to you.' (about a session on stuckness)

'How different people have really different perspectives on the same object.' (about an object-based learning session)

'I think this kind of workshop just opens my mind and I still need to keep thinking.' (about an object-based learning session)

'Yes, try not to think about the question first. Just start to build something and I will find a solution from the process - learning by playing!' (about Lego® Serious Play® as a methodology)

We are in our second year of the programme of workshops and continue to experiment with different topics and approaches, continually remodelling the programme to reflect student feedback and to respond to requests from academic colleagues. Recently we have added sessions on: thinking through drawing; thinking through moving image; researching skilfully through artists' books and multiples; exploring flow (using 3-dimensional printing pen technology).

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Re-visioning academic support as an innovative and inclusive offer for creative arts students



Learning through drawing
Photo: Graham Barton

The major priority for 2014 - 15 has been the development of a new web-based tool, Academic Support Online. This will be a community-based website for engagement with the debates and skills surrounding learning development at UAL through which both staff and students can contribute content and provide commentary. It will have a direct relationship with the freestanding offer noted above but also link with academic support provided in colleges and by other services, such as Library Services and the Language Centre. Many of the online resources in its knowledge bank will be generated within the university, hence they will be tailor-made for a creative arts community, and links will be provided to the vast array of high-quality resources freely available via the web. It will also offer a booking option for academic support events. To date, Academic Support Online has proved to be an immensely challenging project, but phase one of the knowledge bank is on schedule to be launched in summer 2015. We shall then develop further phases in an agile manner with students and staff being consulted on the design and functionality of the site at every stage.

Other developments currently under way include focused work on pre-arrival and induction support in order to enhance this academic support and thus aid students transitioning into the university. One college has experimented with crowd-sourcing amongst students pre-arrival through the use of blogging in order to promote student engagement and to instil a sense of community prior to arrival. Student-generated induction as advocated by Nicholas Bowskill⁶ has also been piloted in an effort to move away from induction through information transmission to induction through co-construction with students. Additionally, special welcome events have been organised for overseas students to aid their integration into the academic and cultural life at UAL and to create a greater sense of 'belonging' from the outset. Future priorities include: targeted support at known crisis points to support retention and attainment; expansion of peer support and peer mentoring schemes; more work on multicultural awareness and valuing diversity amongst both staff and students as part of our commitment to inclusive practices. We also want to build our research capacity and publishing activity on topics associated with academic support, thus contributing to the wider learning development community.

In conclusion, it is three years since the original review, so it seems timely to make some personal reflections. The process of writing this article has highlighted just how much has been achieved in a reasonably short time as

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most of the recommendations arising from the review have been implemented, although inevitably some things have proved harder to progress than others. There is definitely a strong collective commitment amongst the staff to support students in their academic endeavours and there are many examples of very effective collaborations between study support lecturers, language tutors, librarians and archivists; these have undoubtedly enhanced the student and staff experience. Student feedback has been overwhelmingly positive and statistics suggest that academic support is benefitting a more diverse student community than before. However, one area that requires a lot more work is evaluating the impact of these interventions. This is notoriously difficult but we are hoping to dovetail this work with a wider review of quality processes at UAL that will go beyond standard data gathering and monitoring of activity and take us further into the territory of quality enhancement and learning analytics.

Undoubtedly the biggest gain of all has been the fact that the profile of academic support has changed radically within the institution, and the strategic importance of this activity is now acknowledged at course, college and university level. This endorsement provides an excellent context for further developments as we are still only part way through our journey to making academic support at UAL an exemplar offer which both supports and enriches students' academic experiences regardless of their level of study and discipline, mode of attendance, social and cultural background.

For more information on the provision please see *About academic support*.⁷

References

- 1 In 2013/14 20% of University of the Arts London Home students disclosed they had a specific learning disability, e.g. dyslexia.
- 2 http://issuu.com/artslondonlibraries/docs/academic_support-8
- 3 Prown, J. (1994) 56 'Mind in matter: an introduction to material culture theory and method', in S.M. Pearce (ed.), *Interpreting objects and collections*. London: Routledge, pp. 133-38
- 4 <http://www.lego.com/en-gb/seriousplay/>
- 5 <http://www.ketso.com/>
- 6 Bowskill, N. (2013) *Student-generated induction: a social identity approach: a staff development guide*. South Carolina: CreateSpace
- 7 <http://www.arts.ac.uk/media/arts/study-at-ual/library-services/documents/UAL-Academic-Support-leaflet-2014-15.pdf>

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