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A Multidimensional framework for embedded academic skill development:

Transition pedagogy in Social Work

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Background informing the project

As a consequence of the widening participation agenda, student cohorts in Australian higher education are becoming increasingly diverse. While diversity is often characterised by a focus on culture or ethnicity, this variability also independently exists in regard to competence in academic skills (Dillon, 2007). Successfully developing discipline-specific academic skills is crucial to a student’s learning, progress and attainment in higher education. The growing recognition that students are entering Australian universities with varying levels of academic preparedness as a result of the widening participation agenda has made effective academic skill support even more important, since ‘access without a reasonable chance of success is an empty promise’ (International Associations of Universities, 2008, p. 1).

In order to address the equity issue arising from the widening participation agenda, a collaborative project was initiated by academics in the School of Health and Social Development, staff from Student Transition and Study Skills, and staff from the Equity and Diversity Unit to undertake the Strategic Teaching and Learning Grant Scheme (STALGS) funded project ‘A framework for academic skills progression: Transition pedagogy in social work’. The project aimed to develop a framework to support the acquisition of discipline-specific academic skills throughout an undergraduate social work program, and was designed to function alongside the Australian Education and Accreditation Standards (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2010) and the AASW Social Work practice competency standards (AASW, 2003). By linking academic skills with practice skills, the framework explicitly sought to support student transition both into their first year at tertiary study and throughout their degree.

Project objectives

The objectives specified to reach this aim were:

1) Identify students and academics’ perceptions of their roles in the learning experience and identify any gaps in these expectations; and utilise this to

2) Develop a framework of academic skill progression across the undergraduate program to support students’ academic transition into, through and from the university.

The study was approved by the Deakin University Human Ethics Advisory Group, Faculty of Health.

Project outcomes

The major outcome of the project was the formulation of the ‘Multidimensional Framework for Embedded Academic Skill Development’. This framework is designed to provide a set of principles and tools for university teaching teams to support them to clarify, and explicitly map, academic skill progressions throughout their courses, in order to embed academic skills into the curriculum. The approach ensures the relevancy of the skills to the requirements of their particular context and environment. It is not intended to be a prescriptive
methodology for application, but rather to provide an approach that best meets the needs of students, teachers and institutions. The tools that the framework provides are supported by the inclusion of worked examples that demonstrate how it can be applied. The framework tools can be found in the appendices to this report.
The project consisted of three phases as shown in Figure 1 below.

**Approach and methodology**

*Figure 1: Process of Developing the Framework for Embedded Academic Skill Development*

**Phase 1: Literature review**

A literature review of current research and scholarship was performed in the early stages of this project to establish what was already known in the area and identify gaps in existing knowledge. The initial focus was to review published works related to academic or study skills that have been identified as having particular relevance to or importance for social work students in the context of transition pedagogy. This project was based on Kift’s (2009) First Year Transition Pedagogy framework, and the project team broadened this concept to include the notion that transitions occur across the entire four-year social work degree. The review included peer-reviewed articles published in the past 16 years (1995–2010) and also enlisted reference list searching.
and the use of material the project team already had at hand from their own research and practice interests. The review was limited to English language articles.

A database search revealed 69 relevant resources but fewer of these were directly related to academic skills in social work specifically, thus a wider search was used to gather a variety of understandings among students and academics in relation to academic skills. The results of the literature review were used to develop the surveys and qualitative interviews subsequently conducted with stakeholders, academics and students.

**Themes from the literature**

*Academic skills are context and discipline specific*

A number of important themes were revealed through this literature search. A key theme that had considerable influence on the team’s thinking was the discipline-specific and contextual nature of academic skills and their definitions (Gamache, 2002; Lea, 2004; Lea & Street, 1998). Academic skills are not simply a cluster of generic activities undertaken by students across all disciplines. Writers observe that when academic skills development initiatives are modelled as separate services, the dominant pedagogy (or mainstream ways of teaching and learning) are retained, which may isolate or exclude some students (Hockings, Cooke, Yamashita, McGinty & Bowl, 2009). This differentiation and disciplinary context is particularly true in professional practice degrees in which the requirements of the discipline shape what skills are considered important. The focus on academic skills must therefore fit the disciplinary and professional context to be relevant and meaningful to students and achieve the learning objectives of the discipline. A key example of this was the varied definitions of core academic skills such as ‘critical thinking’.

A second important theme that emerged from the literature was the impact of epistemology on the academic skills that are required and valued in particular disciplines. Epistemology is the study of ‘ways of knowing’ and of what is considered ‘knowledge’ (Mason, Benjamin & Lewis, 1996; Sefa Dei, 2008; Sellar & Gale, 2011). Across cultures and class, there is a range of ways of knowing and demonstrating knowledge, but in Australian academic settings, the rational, linear and argument-based tradition tends to dominate teaching and assessment practices (Graff, 2003). A ‘Murri’ or Indigenous Australian approach is an example of an alternative way of thinking and of demonstrating knowledge that may be indirect and non-sequential and in which a circular, ‘time rich’ approach is valued over concise communication (Lynn, 2001). Thus, there is a need to acknowledge, value and include the diversity of students’ learning styles and backgrounds into skills development processes.

Closely related to the theme of the importance of epistemology awareness in teaching and learning is the need to ensure approaches to academic skill development are inclusive and student centred (e.g. Devlin, 2011; Gale, 2010; Hockings, Cooke, Yamashita, McGinty & Bowl, 2009; Kift, 2009). In a higher education system that is moving towards universal participation, universities need to pursue equity and excellence as dual and
interconnected goals, with socially inclusive teaching embedded in curricula and within the context of the subject (Hockings, 2010). While development of academic skills is the responsibility of all stakeholders, students are the main beneficiaries and have the most investment in acquiring them effectively. Therefore, approaches to academic skill development should begin with a learning needs analysis (what they know now and where development is required), while at the same time balancing the needs of the institution and required disciplinary, institutional and AQF learning outcomes. Customising approaches to the development of academic skills in this manner will lead to greater student engagement and satisfaction, and better attainment (Biggs, 1996).

Support for embedding academic skills into curricula

A third theme that was well supported by literature (and related to the themes discussed above) was the usefulness of building or embedding academic skills progressions into teaching and learning activities (Biggs, 1996; Kift, 2005; Kimmins & Stagg, 2009; Lea, 2004; Lea & Street, 1998). An embedded approach enables academic skills to be developed in a contextual manner to enable them to become tools to facilitate deep learning (Gamache, 2002). Kimmins and Stagg (2009) contend that initiatives to develop academic skills remedially outside the curriculum concords with a ‘deficit’ approach of student learning. This may also prevent students from accessing support due to stigma associated with such a perception of deficit (Hafford-Letchfield, 2007). Further, academic staff may have limited understanding about the role and services of academic support services available in the university, which limits their referral of students to the services (Hafford-Letchfield, 2007).

An embedded approach to academic skills development is also advantageous for academic and teaching support staff. This approach can create new opportunities for teaching and learning, foster innovation and, with sufficient resources, contribute to the development of new collaborative relationships between academic staff and staff in other divisions of the university. It is possible that due to a reduction in student anxiety and confusion, students will be more independent in completing required learning and assessment tasks, and this may ultimately release academic and learning support staff to engage in more creative teaching activities that improve the teaching and learning experience (Gunn et al., 2011).

However, it needs to be acknowledged that time and resources are required to implement and maintain an embedded approach to academic skill development in any course and it needs to be supported at policy and management levels within any university (Kift, 2009). Academic staff face considerable pressure due to the lack of status of teaching-centred activities compared to those activities associated with research (Butterwick & Dawson, 2005). It also needs to be acknowledged that the sometimes individualist and competitive culture in academia created by tenure-track recruitment processes (Butterwick & Dawson, 2005) can present challenges to the teamwork required to embed academic skills across a discipline curriculum. Nevertheless, while there are some challenges for academic staff, the literature supports the notion that embedding
academic skills in core curriculum can reduce some barriers to students in learning the academic skills needed to be successful in their chosen discipline.

The idea of student-centred progression arises from the constructivist ideas from the work of Vygotsky (e.g., 1978) and Rogers (e.g., 1980, 1983). Students are provided with just enough challenge at each stage and this is built upon as the course progresses. Scaffolding can thus be understood as the provision of challenging tasks with sufficient feedback and support to enable students to extend their abilities beyond their previously attained level and beyond the level they are able to achieve on their own (Rose, Lui-chivizhe, Mcknight & Smith, 2003; Vygotsky as cited in Simpson, Mathews, Croft, McKinna & Lee, 2010). A key feature of this approach is the support of a more knowledgeable person such as a mentor, teacher or peer, as it is this person who constructs and provides the scaffolding (Liechty, Schull & Liao, 2009). It is an approach that depends on social interaction between students and educators, with development being seen to occur as a result of these interactions. Hosken (2010) takes the idea of social interaction and mentoring further into an relationship approach called ‘mutual mentoring’ that highlights potential for an exchange of learning between teachers and students. Just as building scaffolding is removed once the structures are secure, scaffolding teaching strategies are designed to be temporarily available until students have moved to the next level of competence. Consistency of learning experience is important to this process, but can be a challenge in courses in which students are exposed to a range of tutors and perspectives (Parry & Reynolds, 2010). This fact supports the need for teams to work together to provide consistent messages concerning inherent expectations.

While the scaffolding skills approach has been used in social work courses in the United States (Liechty et al., 2009; Northcut, 2004) and Ireland (Dempsey, Halton & Murphy, 2001) for teaching content, there are relatively few studies reporting on scaffolding for academic and study skills. However, in a study aimed at accelerating the learning of Koori students, a team at the University of Sydney (Rose et al., 2003) provide one of the recent reports on scaffolding. Few Koori students enter university education with the long apprenticeship in academic reading and writing afforded to those from other backgrounds, placing them up to six years behind in these skills. The Scaffolding Academic Literacy pedagogy was developed in response to this, and was introduced in several units at both preparatory and undergraduate level. A major feature of this pedagogy is the devotion of class time to prepare students to read difficult texts with critical understanding, thereby giving all students a chance at success.

Importance of curriculum mapping as a first step to embedding academic skills into the curriculum

Devereux and Wilson (2008) also conducted a study investigating the issues related to scaffolding academic skills across an entire course in a Bachelor of Education Degree. The Bachelor of Education program is similar to the Bachelor of Social Work at Deakin University in that it attracts similar student cohorts and is a practice-based and professional course guided by outside accreditation standards. In a similar way to the current
project reported on here, their project was also informed by the idea of ‘multiliteracies’, emphasising the students’ need to become familiar with a range of genres and writing styles to be successful professionally. Using a longitudinal, qualitative methodology, the authors tracked the development of 10 students’ academic literacy across the four years of their course. Four challenges to the teaching of academic literacies were identified: managing diverse cohorts; the need for scaffolding to begin at the start of the student’s university experience; finding ways to provide ongoing scaffolding of critical reading; and the support of various genres in critical writing. The authors offer several suggestions on how to facilitate these aspects of scaffolding, and believe that course mapping is the first step towards embedding literacy development. This involves surveying both the generic and discipline-specific aspects of literacy in each unit of the course, as a first step of unifying the approach of all teaching staff under an agreed framework. This finding is important and will be further developed in the section describing the framework.
**Phase 2: Data collection**

**Method**

This study used a mixed-methods approach to investigate the research question, collecting data through online and paper-based surveys and individual, face-to-face and telephone interviews. Interview and survey data were collected from first year social work students at Deakin University and from social work academics recruited through a targeted and snowball sampling technique (Patton, 2002). Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive and inductive statistics, and the qualitative data was analysed using Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) process of inductive thematic coding. Each transcript was independently coded by two researchers, with concepts being grouped together into larger categories or themes. Each researcher produced a set of themes and subthemes that were examined for overlap or missing categories. The resulting thematic structure was then reviewed by a third researcher.

**Student sample**

Students enrolled in their first year of the Deakin University Bachelor of Social Work degree, and who had not previously undertaken study at a university were invited to participate in the study. Fifty students participated in the survey, which represents a response rate of 33.0% of the total enrolments within the two units approached across the first two trimesters in 2011. A further four students volunteered to participate in the semi-structured interviews. Not all respondents answered all questions, and when less than the total sample responded, the valid percentage and response numbers are reported.

The majority of student respondents were female (86.0%), and the average age was 30.54 (SD 10.14, Range 18–50). Most students were Australian born (84.0%), local citizens (82.0%) and had English as their primary language (spoken 96.0%, written 96.0%, home use 94.0%). When the postcodes of students were analysed using the POA Index of Education and Occupation 2006 from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 17.9% were found to come from low socio-economic areas.

Respondents had entered university via a range of pathways, with most entering via mature aged entry (45.5% valid responses), TAFE (34.1% valid responses), and secondary education (18.2% valid responses). Many had applied to university under the Special Entry Access Scheme offered at the institution (31.8%), with the most common categories identified as mature age, financial disadvantage and rural/remote. Many respondents held diplomas as their highest and most recent qualification, with high school completion as the next most frequently reported qualification. A significant percentage of students reported being first in family to attend university (36.4%), with some also stating that family members had attended university overseas (20.5%). There were also a substantial number of students who identified themselves as having a disability (18.2%), of whom half had registered with the university’s Disability Resource Centre.
Students were asked whether they had previously completed any academic skills training. While the majority had not, nearly a quarter (23.1%) had been provided with specific support or training in the past. The period of training received ranged from a single session to years, and skills learnt included academic writing, time management and referencing. Those reporting years of training indicated they considered all of their secondary education as providing them with training in academic skills.

**Academic sample**

Social work academics were recruited from Group of Eight, ATN and unaligned universities in Australia through a process of snowball sampling (Patton, 2002). Thirty-one participants completed an online survey and five academics participated in semi-structured interviews. The majority of respondents were female (90.30%), and the average age was 50.54 (SD 8.44, Range 30–62), which is 20 years older than the average Deakin student. The majority of respondents worked at institutions in the eastern states: Queensland (n=9, 29.03%), New South Wales (n=6, 19.35%) and Victoria (n=5, 16.13%). The remaining respondents (n=11, 35%) were located in South Australia and Western Australia. Around half of the respondents were employed as lecturers (n=14, 45.2%), with smaller numbers of associate (n=4, 12.9%) and senior lecturers (n=4, 12.9%). Six respondents cited roles as field education coordinators, clinical coordinators, private practitioners and professional officers. Six participants (19.4%) did not identify their academic classification.

Many of the respondents (n=22, 71%) stated they had formal qualifications in education, although it was unclear whether they were counting their professional qualifications or citing separate education specific qualifications. The level of these qualifications were spread fairly evenly between certificate (n=5), bachelors (n=6) masters (n=3) and doctoral levels (n=8). When asked to identify the nature of their current duties, all respondents chose more than one category. Duties that engaged the majority of respondents included teaching (n=24, 77.4%), course/curriculum design (n=21, 67.7%) and assessment design (n=20, 64.5%).

A breadth of teaching experience, in regard to both year levels taught and years of experience at those levels, was found in the sample.
Use and advance of existing knowledge

In order to achieve the aim of developing a framework, the project team sought to investigate social work students and academics’ understandings of academic skills and their perceptions of what was expected of them in relation to the teaching or learning of academic skills. The intention was to reveal any gaps in expectations between academics and students in order to develop a framework that could bridge these gaps. As noted above, quantitative and qualitative data was collected from students and academics. As the project unfolded, and our multidisciplinary team engaged more deeply into the literature, the data and debates that arose, it became apparent that profound differences existed between social work schools at different institutions and even within our project team as to what constitutes academic skills and how they could or should be developed and scaffolded into a curriculum. This difference was significant in developing a new way of conceptualising the development of academic skills that takes into account epistemology—the various ways of thinking, knowing and demonstrating knowledge. Quantitative and qualitative analysis also revealed the similarities and differences between students and academics in terms of what skills were considered most important for being a successful social work student. These findings will be discussed below.

Findings from data collection and implications for the framework

Survey data: Comparisons between students and academics in relation to academic skills and their importance

In the surveys, students rated their current overall competence in academic skills, while academics were asked what level of skill beginning students should have. The five available options were no skills, beginner, skilled, expert or other. The students were fairly evenly split between beginner (60.6%) or skilled level (39.4%). However, more academics expected the students to be beginners (81.0%) than skilled (19.0%). No respondents from either the student or academic survey thought student were either completely without skill or experts at the time of their transition to university.

When asked whether they taught academic skills as part of their duties, the majority of academic respondents stated they did (n=15). Eighteen different academic skills were identified as currently being taught, although 13 of these were identified by only one or two respondents. The most often identified skills were academic writing (n=13), research skills (n=9) critical analysis (n=8), referencing (n=7) and reflection skills (n=3).

Both students and academics were asked which academic skills they felt were needed to succeed in the social work course. The students identified 33 skills were identified from 138 responses, while the academics identified a total of 29 skills were identified from a total of 131 responses. There was a significant difference between the groups in the number of study skills identified on average by each respondent, t(52) = 3.52, p < .001, with the academic respondents identifying a higher number of skills. There was some overlap between the two groups, with 29.8% (n=14) of skills identified being cited by both students and academics. However,
students identified more academic skills specific to their group (n=19) than did academics (n=14). Quantitative data showed that there was only 29.8% of overlap of skills identified being cited by both students and academics, although this is not surprising given that the students were at the beginning of their study. This information is of interest because it demonstrates the gap in expectations between students and academics. Figure 2 illustrates the degree of overlap and those skills that were particular to each group.

**Figure 2: Student- and Academic-Identified Academic Skills**

It was also noted that some of the ‘skills’ being identified were also personal qualities, values or characteristics. It was interesting to note that 19.1% of all academic skills identified by both groups fell into
this category and included self-regulation, self-awareness, empathy, confidence, willingness to learn, and determination. Students identified a higher proportion of qualities, values or characteristics (32.0%) than academic respondents (7.7%), indicating perhaps a slightly different perception of what is included under the term ‘academic skills’. Interestingly, the only quality, value or characteristic cited by both groups was determination.

**Qualitative findings from student data**

Not surprisingly, analysis of qualitative data showed that a number of students experienced difficulties in the acquisition of academic skills. These included confusion about what to focus on and where to turn for help, and lack of clarity about what was expected with academic skills.

In addition, in keeping with the literature (e.g., Hafford-Letchfeld, 2007), designated study skills assistance was perceived by students as stigmatising and too time consuming to access, given the time pressure they were already experiencing. Students who matriculated to university from the Special Entry Access Scheme seemed to have particular difficulty accessing and using current services including approaching lecturers, using feedback and approaching study skills support. This is likely to be due to a number of factors including cultural differences in help seeking and unfamiliarity with the dominant ways of thinking, creating and conveying knowledge (epistemology).

**Qualitative findings from academics’ data**

There were diverse opinions about the role of academics in students’ academic skill development and they can be summarised according to the following two themes.

**Unclear locus of responsibility: The need for a ‘champion’**

A number of academics identified that more needed to be done to support students in developing required academic skills, but others believed it was the responsibility of study skills advisors external to the discipline to help in this area. There seemed to be competing pressures on academics so that while they saw the need for help for students, due to competing demands and priorities, they did not have the ability to mobilise team members and embed a coherent progression of academic skills throughout the course. A further challenged is posed by the individualised nature of unit chairing (Butterwick & Dawson, 2005), rather than working as a team within and across years levels in designing and delivering university courses. Thus, any development with respect to a unified approach to academic skills development across degree courses in their team would only occur if there were a ‘champion’ to lead it. Uncertainty regarding competence in, and seeing others as responsible for, teaching academic skills meant that many academics felt neither confident nor compelled to ensure their students know what to expect with respect to academic skills and how to learn how to acquire them.
Support versus self-reliance: The mantra of sink or swim

Other areas of complexity for academics revolved around the question of what degree of academic skills support and instruction should be provided to university-level students. Some academics saw universities as places where students need to use their own initiative to learn the required skills, and failure to do so signified that they were not ready or the right ‘sort’ for university. Others felt some responsibility but felt stymied due to a perceived lack of skill in teaching literacy.

The tensions were encapsulated with the following quotations from interviews with social work academics:

I don’t know how to fix it or how to get them fixed because I’m not a teacher of literacy.

So one of the first things would be they have to be pretty smart. Now that’s not an academic skill but it’s a pre-requisite for acquiring academic skills.

Thus, the notion that only ‘smart’ students will learn what they need to know is explicit in the second statement, while the notion that those who do not acquire them are somehow deficient is alluded to in an implicit manner. More recent literature (e.g., Devlin, 2011; Lawrence, 2002, 2005) moves beyond this deficit conception towards valuing multiple ways of knowing, and acknowledging that comfort with university processes has less to do with being ‘smart’ and more to do with background and the opportunities that come from a more privileged position in society. This notion informed this project and underpins the development of the framework for academic skills development, as outlined below.

The shift from deficit to discourse

In order to move beyond ‘deficit’ responses to the widening participation agenda, the team focused on what staff teams could do in order to meet the objectives of Deakin’s strategic plan, which are to design and implement curriculum and teaching so that it is ‘flexible and accessible to all students irrespective of social, economic or geographic background or level of disability, minimising the need for special adaptation or accommodation’ (Deakin University, 2011, p. 22). We therefore explored a range of approaches currently existing in order to design our framework. In particular, we have referenced Lawrence (2002, 2005), who has been particularly prolific in writing about diversity, and the work of Graff (2003) and Devlin (2011) who have also contributed significantly to this area.

Lawrence (2002, 2005) explains that when considered from a discourse approach, universities can be thought of as containing sub-cultures that all have their own discourses, languages and practices. These are rarely explicit, and Lawrence recommends that academics talk openly about the requirements, rules, practices, behaviours, processes and expectations that students need to master to be successful in their course. She includes a series of suggestions for teaching via lectures and assessment that are designed to make these
processes more visible, but acknowledges that those students who are most likely to be successful are those who allow themselves to join the culture of the university.

Academic skills can therefore be seen in the context of the students’ socio-cultural context and their socio-cultural competency and flexibility across the range of cultures encountered at university. It is also influenced by self-awareness of their cultural context and ability to reflect upon the education process itself. In the first year of a course, students are under particular pressure to rapidly acquire these skills and simultaneously negotiate multiple discourses. The ability to ask for help and information is cited as a prime example of this, and Lawrence (2002, 2005) believes academics have a crucial role in providing environments where it is safe to seek help and feedback.

Devlin (2011) also identifies that many students who come from lower socio-economic areas are not familiar with academic culture, discourses and practices—for example, the terms used and their meanings—which makes the adjustment to university life more difficult. Building on the work of Bourdieu and Margolis, Devlin (2011) suggests that students from higher socio-economic areas and others who traditionally attend university are familiar with the ‘particular types of knowledge, ways of speaking, styles, meanings, dispositions and worldviews’ (Margolis as cited in Devlin, 2011, p. 2). Therefore, to enable students to master this aspect of the environment and understand unspoken requirements, it is important to move beyond identifying the student or the institution as the problem, and work towards a ‘two-way process of change and development’ (Bamber & Tett as cited in Devlin, 2011, p. 7). This means that the university and the students are encouraged to ‘understand the value of the discourse or code they already possess, as well as to understand the value of the alternate one’ (Priest as cited in Devlin, 2011, p. 7). In this way, the environment becomes one where different epistemologies are acknowledged and accepted and students are more likely to feel valued and connected to the learning environment. This concept also has similarities with the two-way progression used in the framework developed by the project team (see Appendices 1 to 6).

The idea of moving away from a deficit-based approach by enabling all students to be aware of the unspoken expectations and requirements of academic discourse has also been explored by other writers. Graff (2003) argues that first year university courses need to go beyond the inclusion of ‘study skills, time-management, using computers, and test-taking to give students more help in entering the academic culture of arguments and ideas’ (p. 12). He promotes the need to make academic skills transparent and teachable, rather than what he argues is the current state of play in which the core academic skills of ‘argument literacy, the ability to summarise, and respond’ are hidden in a confused way from students. Students from equity (non-mainstream/non-white middle class heterosexual male) backgrounds need educational recognition of their ‘voices’ and opportunity to express in their own ways, but they will better realise their own voices and be able to challenge mainstream/dominant voices if they are literate in the agreed standards of academic written discourse.
Lawrence, Devlin and Graff’s work also complements the ‘academic literacies’ model discussed by Lea and Street (2006) and others. They propose that diversity can be managed using three different models: study skills, academic socialisation and academic literacy. The first models sees writing and literacy as a series of individual and cognitive skills to be mastered, while the second focuses on the students’ acculturation into specific disciplinary- and subject-based discourses and genres. The authors propose that the third model is the most successful for developing greater academic literacy, as it deals with meaning making, identity, power and authority for all students. However, they acknowledge that the first two approaches are also appropriate in certain circumstances. They go on to describe two case studies using the academic literacies model, the first of which focused on teaching students to switch genre and mode as a means of increasing their participation in higher education after completing high school.

A critique of the assertion that increased student diversity leads to the ‘dumbing down’ of the curriculum also shifts the focus from the individual characteristics of the student to consideration of activities, patterns of interaction and communication failures that affect learning experiences (Haggis, 2006). Haggis contends that the reality of focusing on differences leads to a need to diagnose deficits and then offer support if necessary. Even the notion of support is seen to suggest there is a superior group that are strong in these skills, thereby pathologising those for whom academic conventions are less clear. Among the unspoken values of higher education identified by the author are the notions of being an independent learner, learner responsibility, taking a ‘deep approach’, critical distance and reflective practice. Haggis identifies fives features of curriculum that can prevent students from accessing their discipline: 1) student lack of familiarity with processes; 2) wide-ranging motivations and types of engagement; 3) understanding the orientation of the discipline; 4) problems of language; and 5) the nature of process in the discipline. He concludes that the challenge for students is not in ‘learning how to learn’ but ‘learning how to do the learning in that subject’. Once they have become competent in this, transferability to other settings can be achieved with growing confidence and experience through the course. The exploration of these discipline-specific processes and values is recommended to occur in an embedded manner, rather than as a standalone unit or workshop.

Implications of the gap in expectations

To summarise the key points arising from the discussion above, it was apparent from the data collected by the project team that students expected more support and guidance than they received. Data collected from academics demonstrated that many academics assumed that students arrived knowing that they needed to be self-reliant in their learning and were not prepared or resourced to respond to the level of need students expressed. Social work academics were ambivalent and uncertain about their role in supporting students’ academic skills development, with many believing it was not their role to teach this, and others believing they should not need to be taught if they really belonged at university.
Contribution to knowledge

Use of the framework therefore enables discipline teams to plan their support for students and it requires the expectations of performance at various levels of the course to become explicit. The recommendation for scholars to build academic skills progression into their teaching and learning activities is not new (Biggs, 1996; Kift, 2009; Lea, 2004). Many have highlighted the problems associated with leaving the task of academic skill support to study skills advisors, may not be familiar the context of particular disciplines. However, it has been established that an embedded approach enables academic skills to be developed in a contextual manner to enable them to become tools to facilitate deep learning (Gamache, 2002). New understandings about the importance of awareness of student and teacher epistemology and context in the development of a scaffolded progression of academic skills have been developed from this project. In addition, a deeper understanding of the tensions facing academic teaching teams in developing a unified approach to academic skill development has been revealed, as has a persistent belief and expectation that students should to be ‘smart’ enough to learn them on their own and, if they do not, that they are deficient. As a result of this, it is suggested that teaching teams are supported to use the framework, both with institutional mandate and with practical resources such as funding to include sessional staff who provide marking and tutorial services, and assistance from academic literacies teams who have expertise in literacy.

Selected factors influencing project outcomes

The multidisciplinary research team was important to the success of this project. While the project was located in the discipline of social work, expertise was provided by representatives from the Equity and Diversity team, the Higher Education Research Group, Office of the Pro-Vice Chancellor, and Division of Student Life, as well as from team members from the disciplines of occupational therapy, psychology, and public health and health promotion. While this is a diverse group, we were united in our commitment to develop a framework that would improve access and equity for students. Each team member contributed the perspective of their discipline, their research methodology knowledge, and their experience and knowledge from teaching within their discipline. We met fortnightly and this regular contact maintained the project momentum. We also maintained a central DSO site where all our material was stored and could be accessed by all team members, and where important discussions could take place when required. We could also post recordings of conference presentations where available.

In many ways, the diverse perspectives enabled the development of a much broader conceptualisation of what sort of framework was required in order to effectively embed academic skills into a curriculum. The discipline of social work, like other disciplines, values particular ways of thinking and creating knowledge (epistemology), which guides not only what is taught, but how and what knowledge and skills are valued. Discussions reinforced how important these differences are, and how the framework produced needed to be
flexible enough to take such epistemologies into account. When the framework or tool for embedding academic skills can take the epistemology of the discipline into account, the resulting embedded academic skill progression will be realistic and reflect the actual skills students need to be successful in that particular discipline. Alongside the acknowledgement of what is valued by particular disciplines, our teaching and research experiences led us to consider how the university might value and acknowledge the epistemologies that students bring with them, moving beyond an ‘assimilation’ perspective towards an ‘epistemological equity’ stance (Sefa Dei, 2008; Sellar & Gale, 2011). Thus, our resulting framework considers how teaching teams, within university settings, might adjust to meet the needs of those whose path to university is through non-traditional means, thereby increasing the likelihood of their ongoing engagement and success (Rose et al., 2003).

Phase 3: Consultation around the draft framework
The draft framework was presented at a number of at conferences, including the Academic Literacies Symposium, the Social Inclusion Conference, and the Deakin Teaching and Learning conference. The reference group reviewed the draft documentation and one reference group member was invited to attend a whole day working party to provide input and feedback on the draft conceptualisations and framework. One conference workshop invited participants to report on how they experienced the framework and its overall usefulness. Helpful critique was given in regard to ensuring its flexibility to context and discipline, and this too further reinforced the need for a flexible and responsive framework, which we produced. Conference participants stressed the need for institutional support and mandate for teams to work together to map their courses and then scaffold academic skills into the curriculum—which was in keeping with the data we had already collected from social work academics across Australia.

Validity and limitations
The academic skills progression framework was devised in response to the data from students, themes from literature, and consultation with colleagues and reference group members. In this context, the framework is presented as a snapshot in time, acknowledging its own limitation as it is written. The scaffolded approach and domains of progression such as autonomy and identity (see Appendix 3) are themselves products of, and embedded in, a Western professional social work discourse that values development, sees a necessary change from bad to better, and desired growth from dependence to autonomy. Clearly, these domains are a product of particular cultural and economic values that are not necessarily shared or desired by other cultures. The framework positions itself as iterative, acknowledging the need to embed a constant cycle of reflection, engagement and change.

Trustworthiness and validity
This project enlisted a mixed-methods approach, thereby gathering a number of different types of information to reflect the multiple perspectives sought by the project. In regard to the qualitative surveys, all four aspects of trustworthiness identified by the Rosalind Franklin Qualitative Research Appraisal Instrument (RF-QRA)
(Henderson & Rheault, 2004) were reflected upon to ensure the quality of its method. Credibility (internal validity) was enhanced by the triangulation of interviewers and coders, and the involvement of a very experienced research team. Generalisability (external validity) is not the aim of qualitative research, but the sample included both student and academic perspectives to ensure the data was broadly representative. Dependability (reliability) has been enhanced by this detailed description of method, independent judging of data, peer review and triangulation. Finally, confirmability was addressed through a process of review and reflexivity undertaken by all members of the project team.

Implementation of project outcomes

Despite being a new development, the framework created by this team has begun to make a substantial contribution to equity and access both within the university and in the broader community. Through the partnerships developed through the project and forged as a result of wide consultation within Deakin, our project caught the attention of the Language and Learning team within the Division of Student Life. As a result, they have nominated the Bachelor of Social Work to be one of the four priority courses for embedding academic skills. In addition, our work has led to the development of a pathways project between the local TAFE and Deakin funded by the Deakin University Partnership and Participation Program (DUPPP). By funding and supporting this project, Deakin has demonstrated itself to be an inclusive organisation that is committed to the principles of social justice and fair treatment. The framework’s focus on supporting students to realise their individual potential regardless of their background or personal circumstances supports Section 5 of the University’s Strategic Plan ‘Delivering Effective Partnerships’. In particular, in keeping with Section 5.3, the intention of the framework is to support university teaching teams to design and implement curriculum and teaching so that it is ‘flexible and accessible to all students irrespective of social, economic or geographic background or level of disability, minimising the need for special adaptation or accommodation’ (Deakin University, 2011, p. 22).

Dissemination

The contribution of this project to the promotion of equity and access has been recognised by others through the dissemination of the research. To date, the framework has been presented at three conferences within the university, with very positive and interested verbal feedback received from the audience on all occasions. A peer-reviewed journal article has been accepted for publication, with reviewers’ comments indicating a very positive response to the project and its potential applications. A further three conference papers and a journal article have been submitted for review, while another is in preparation. Thus, it is anticipated that a number of papers will be published or will have been presented to a conference by the end of this year, enabling the framework to have influence within Deakin University and among wider Australian audiences.
Linkages

This project led to the establishment of a Deakin University Partnership and participation project partnership with the local TAFE. This project, ‘It’s my dream….’ aims to:

- Assist students to overcome barriers to university education and to transition successfully
- Partner with TAFE to raise awareness of students’ potential to aspire to university education.

It also led to a further project with the academic literacies team to use the framework to embed academic skills into the four-year Bachelor of Social Work degree at Deakin University.

Evaluation

While summative and formative evaluation has not yet occurred due to the framework’s recent development, a number of outcomes have been achieved as a result of this project. For example, the major outcome of the project was the formulation of the Multidimensional Framework for Embedded Academic Skill Development. This framework is designed to provide a set of principles and tools for course teams to clarify, and explicitly map, academic skill progressions throughout their courses, in order to embed academic skills into the curriculum. The approach ensures the relevancy of the skills to the development of approaches to identify and embed discipline-specific academic skills into the curricula, thereby supporting the development of academic skills by students that meet the requirements of their disciplinary context and environment. The tools that the framework provides are supported by the inclusion of worked examples that demonstrate how it can be applied. It is not intended to be a prescriptive methodology for application, but rather an approach that can be applied to meet the needs of students, teachers and institutions. This broad-based approach will enable the framework to be relevant regardless of the context or diversity of a course and its students.
References


Conference on Educational Integrity (4APCEI). Presented at the 4th Asia Pacific Conference on Educational Integrity (4APCEI), University of Wollongong, NSW.


Appendices

Appendix 1: Framework three-dimensional view
First year

University/Schools/Disciplines

Progression of epistemological equity skills stages

Second year

Third year

Fourth year

Students

Progression of academic skills in first year, to be increasingly practice based by fourth year

Epistemological assimilation

Epistemological unawareness

Epistemological humility

Epistemological equity

Academic skills progression framework

Practice Skills

Academic Skills
Appendix 2: Cross-sectional view of the student’s skill progression (left hand side of the framework)

Key: Yx refers to year of course progression
L. O denotes Learning Outcome
Appendix 3: Four key learning outcomes for the BSW: structural analysis, critical thinking, ethical behaviour and reflexivity/reflectivity (AASW, 2010) with domains of progression in the social work degree: complexity, autonomy and identity
Appendix 4: Epistemological continuum (adapted from Mason et al., 1996) (right hand side of framework)

- **Assimilation**
  - If other epistemological views are recognised, they are expected to conform and be subsumed into the dominant epistemological view.

- **Unawareness**
  - Organisations and individuals believe that epistemological differences are of little importance; people are viewed through a Western epistemological mainstream lens, messages are communicated to others that their epistemological views are of little consequence to the organisation.

- **Humility**
  - The organisation or individual recognises and responds to epistemological differences. There is an open acknowledgement of the need for epistemological equity; however there is an acceptance of the dominant epistemological view.

- **Equity**
  - The individual and organisation values and appreciates epistemological differences. Exploration of issues related to knowledge, cultural history, equity, social justice. People’s epistemological experiences and differences are valued and integrated into the learning process.
Appendix 5: Case study

Embedding reflexivity in the social work curriculum

The stance teachers adopt with respect to epistemology can be represented on the right hand ‘cake’ in Figure 1. The purpose of including this contextual continuum for institutions, disciplines and schools is to promote dialogue about what epistemologies are important and valued and for what purpose. It also may invite dialogue about how to support and value the ways of knowing that students might bring from their respective backgrounds, thereby promoting effective engagement with them and increasing the likelihood of their success. While this is a fundamental part of this framework, an example relating to student progression will be presented in support of this nomination due to space limitations. In the above diagram, the words autonomy, complexity and autonomy in red have been identified as progression domains as a result of team discussions in the discipline of social work. This concept, discussed by Moon (2002), refers to the ways learning or progress can be described. Other teaching teams in other disciplines are likely to identify their own domains.

The following case study is based on a series of questions and prompts developed by the team to enable teaching staff to explore the alignment of their practices with the framework:

What skills do you want to develop in your graduates?

There are many practice skills required by social workers, some of which were explored by the team during the development of the framework (see Figure 6). To demonstrate the applicability of the framework to teaching and learning, the team decided to focus on reflectivity and reflexivity due to its centrality to all areas of social work practice. If this process were to be applied at a course level, each of the identified practice skills would need to be analysed as follows.

The first step is to succinctly define the skill required. In social work, reflectivity is considered a process of reflecting upon practice for the purpose of improving it, whereas reflexivity refers to a stance of being able to ‘locate oneself in the picture’ (Fook, 2002) or to appreciate how one’s own self influences situations and events.

What discipline-specific domains of progression do you want to focus on?

In social work, autonomy, identity and complexity were chosen as domains after team discussions about what knowledge and skills are expected of graduates, and how progress is measured. It is expected that over time, these domains will be developed to reflect broader and more epistemologically equitable notions of what constitutes progress and how it can be observed.

Are there any pre-existing scaffolding models available for this practice skill?
There were two pre-existing reported scaffolds for reflection in social work, but neither was entirely suitable for the current context. One focused on postgraduate education (Dempsey, Halton & Murphy, 2001; Murphy, Halton & Dempsey, 2008), while another specifically focused on religion and spirituality (Northcut, 2004).

**What academic skills are required to learn and demonstrate this skill?**

The following academic skills were found to be essential to the learning and demonstration of reflectivity and reflexivity:

- Ability to receive and act on feedback
- Application of knowledge to practice
- Analytical skills
- Connectedness
- Cultural humility
- Assessment preparation
- Independent working and self-management
- Metacognitive processes
- Stress management.

**Are there time checkpoints at which students must be able to demonstrate certain skills to a certain level, for example, prerequisites to field placements?**

Like other professional courses, there are specific checkpoints and milestones for the acquisition of crucial skills in social work. Students must pass a second-year practice skills course prior to embarking on the year three practicum program. First year is seen as the baseline and foundation for building a foundation of knowledge for all subsequent development. Students need to have a beginning level of ability in all of the above skills to engage in learning to engage in reflective and reflexive practice and hence to make progress in practicum in year three.

**What are the characteristics of the students entering the course, and how might they impact on their academic skills progression?**
Specific data regarding the characteristics of students entering the course can be sourced from the university, but the sample that responded to the student survey completed in this project is broadly representative at 33% of the total student sample.

The majority of students were female, and were somewhat older than the average age of most undergraduates. Sixteen per cent of the students were overseas citizens, and 6% of students speak a language other than English at home. Around 18% of students came from low socio-economic areas.

Almost half of the students had entered higher education through mature aged provision, with a substantial proportion also coming from the TAFE sector. Many had applied to university under the Special Entry Access Scheme offered at the institution, and analysis of the survey data revealed this group of students were least likely to approach academic skills advisors and more likely to ask family for help.

A substantial percentage of students reported being first in family to attend university (36.4%). There were also a number of students who identified themselves as having a disability (18.2%). Therefore, this group is made up of students for whom academic skills acquisition may be either very unfamiliar or even problematic for a range of reasons.

What are the expectations of staff and students regarding academic skill acquisition and performance?

A clear theme throughout this project has been a lack of understanding around expectations between both staff and students, producing confusion and frustration on both sides. One recommended way to remove some of this confusion is using level descriptors to identify expected performance.

Level descriptors are generic statements of the outcomes that students are expected to have achieved by the end of a level of learning (Moon, 2002, 2004). They may either guide the development of appropriate learning material or specify what the student needs to achieve for them to gain a particular qualification. Generic descriptors can be translated into discipline-specific language when needed, and Moon advocates careful consideration of both the descriptor immediately below and the descriptor immediately above that being written to ensure progression is reasonable.

To make the expectations for each of the academic skills required for reflection and reflexivity as clear as possible, the team reviewed the literature for existing examples of level descriptors and developed their own where none existed. They are not included in the scaffolding diagram purely due to limitations in the amount of information that can be displayed in this manner. However, they can be used in a targeted way in the development of teaching and learning activities.
Appendix 6: Reflectivity/reflexivity examples
Exemplar Progression of Academic Skills

Reflexivity

Four core AASW Defined SW skills

Structural Analysis

Reflective and reflexive practice

Critical Thinking

Ethical and Professional Behaviour

Academic Skills
- Ability to receive and act on feedback
- Academic Writing
- Analytical skills
- Application of knowledge to practice
- Connectedness
- Cultural humility
- Epistemological awareness
- Exam / Assessment Preparation
- Independent working / self management

Autonomy
- Independently synthesise content of own and others' knowledge, values and actions to generate meaning and relationships
- Independently use reading to generate knowledge base from which to practice
- Ability to articulate without assistance a clear "I" in writing, speaking and acting (self awareness and self responsibility)
- Ability to give and receive feedback independently

Complexity
- Ability and willingness to sit with uncertainty and tensions
- Ability to understand and acknowledge multiple and competing viewpoints and needs
- Ability to conceptualise the multiple dimensions of client's and own situation or perspectives simultaneously
- Ability to conceptualise the structural dimensions of oppression including the political and economic structure and its implications for personal distress

Identity
- Willingness to identify and act on needs for continuing professional development
- Professional skills and actions have become second nature
- Ability to articulate own practice framework from knowledge, values and skills
- Ability to generate own practice framework from knowledge, values and skills
- Ability to see self through someone else's eyes
- Independent working / self management

Reflection skills
- Metacognitive process

Stress Management
- Exam / Assessment Preparation
- Independent working / self management
Ability to know when to seek help or to ask for clarification.
Ability to manage self (e.g., anxiety, stress).

Ability to conceptualise the personal dimension in the subjective experience of distress or oppression.

Know your personal, cultural, structural background and location.

Understand how your personal culture and structural location influence your perspective and assumptions.

Independently use reading to generate knowledge base from which to practice.

Ethnomethodological process.

Ability to see self through someone else’s eyes (impact of self).

Ability to give and receive feedback independently.

Application of knowledge to practice.

Academic writing.

Independently synthesise content of own and others’ knowledge, values and actions to generate meaning and relationships.

Ability to articulate without assistance a clear ‘I’ in writing, speaking and acting (self-awareness and self responsibility).

Ability to understand and acknowledge multiple and competing viewpoints and needs.

Ability to articulate own practice framework from knowledge, values and skills.

Willingness to identify and act on needs for continuing professional development. Professional skills and action have now become second nature.

Analytical skills.

Ability and willingness to sit with uncertainty and tensions.

Reflection skills.

Exam/assessment preparation.

Epistemological equity.

Stress management.

Ability to receive and act on feedback.

Connectivity.
Appendix 7: Framework principles

Collaborative: Given the contextual nature of academic skill development, approaches need to embrace contributions from all those involved. Negotiation and collaborative approaches can facilitate this process, and enable the introduction and consideration of multiple epistemologies and perspectives.

Explicit: A consistent theme throughout the theoretical and research based information gathered for this framework has been that academic skills are current, implicit and assumed (Queensland University of Technology, 2009). In particular, student and academic respondents to our survey identified many skills that were confined only to one group, with few being identified by both (Goldingay et al., 2011). Without an explicit statement of what is expected by teachers and institutions, students may not reach their full potential with respect to grades and learning outcomes.

Discipline specific: Academic skills do not exist in isolation, nor should they be taught as a ‘one off’ learning activity. Each discipline has its own repertoire of important academic skills that are embedded in the culture of that discipline and the needs of the practice skills into which they must eventually integrate. To be relevant to the aspirations of students and teachers, approaches to developing academic skills must therefore be developed from an understanding of that specific discipline.

Responsive to student potential: Student cohorts are becoming increasingly diverse, as the widening participation in higher education agenda of recent years begins to have an impact. There can no longer be an assumption that students will arrive at higher education by traditional pathways, or come from a section of the community already familiar with Australian educational conventions. Approaches to developing academic skills should therefore take the characteristics of different student groups into account, and be regularly reviewed as these change.

Adequately resourced: The embedding of academic skills into an entire curriculum is a resource- and time-intensive exercise, particularly in the initial phases. Teaching staff will need time and support to align their individual assessment and learning tasks. Without adequate resourcing, the institution’s approach will remain fragmented and most likely be ineffective.

Reflexive: The adoption of an epistemological approach that works towards equity requires reflexivity around current practices and assumptions. Institutions looking to adopt this framework need to allow space and time
within their development process and ensure its output is translated into new assessment and learning opportunities.

**Student centred**: While responsibility for the development of academic skills is the responsibility of all stakeholders, students are the main beneficiaries and have the most investment in acquiring them effectively. Therefore, approaches to academic skill development should begin with their needs (learning styles, backgrounds, interests) at the same time as balancing the needs of the institution. Customising approaches to the development of academic skills in this manner will lead to greater student engagement and satisfaction, and better attainment.

Appendix 8: Data from interviews

**Part one: Student data**

Assumptions and expectations

Overall, students stated they felt unsure or uncertain of the expectations for academic skills initially, and had to ‘learn’ them over their initial weeks at university. Some felt they had achieved this better than others had:

> Before I did my first subject and did my first few assessments, I wasn’t sure about what uni requires as opposed to what sort of TAFE required (Student interview 2, p. 2, paragraph 2).

> I didn’t include something that I probably should have and because the university didn’t actually tell us this is what you have to do as opposed to school .... I think you should be well prepared in advance (Student interview 3, p. 3, paragraph 5).

> The only solution to this appeared to be student initiated self-directed learning around academic skills, which was undertaken simultaneously with learning course material and the navigation of the institution as a whole.

> I’ve had to find myself the unit guide and online, and actually go through them and what is expected of me (Student interview 4, p. 1, paragraph 4).

> Clear statements of expectations were always appreciated, as students then felt comfortable that they were ‘on the right track’.

> They said okay, you have topic tests which were like sort of multiple choice or true or false, so they told you which readings to focus on (Student interview 3, p. 1, paragraph 4).
When asked who was responsible for the development of their academic skills, most students discussed their own individual agency and success. For some this was part of an owned sense of personal responsibility, while others indicated more that if they didn’t do it for themselves no one else would.

The way my parents bought me up, it was brilliant, it was great, they really made sure I was disciplined enough to just look after myself but also if I needed help they made sure I knew there was always somebody to get help from so I wasn’t too impacted by that (Student interview 1, p. 2, paragraph 5).

It’s all a matter of how much effort you want to put in and your dedication and enthusiasm to what you’re doing (Student interview 3, p. 5, paragraph 5).

I’m going to be the one who’s going to have actually to hand in essays or do things, so I’m going to do the preparation for it. (Student interview 4, p. 2, paragraph 5).

However, students also lay some responsibility for academic skills development with university and academics. This was usually portrayed as a mutual effort, but the staff contribution was characterised in a more contradictory than complementary or cooperative way. While they acknowledged that developing academic skills is a process that requires multiple actions, players and stakeholders, students did not perceive this process as negotiated.

Students could be willing with everything they’ve got to get every resource possible to do their best, but if Deakin’s got nothing, this is exaggeration, but if they’ve got nothing to go off, so it’s definitely mutual (Student interview 1, p. 6, paragraph 9).

I see it as a bit of a shared responsibility, one is I guess we need to be given the information about how to develop that but it sort of sits with us to go and do that (Student interview 2, p. 2, paragraph 4).

So you think that maybe they’d prepare you in such a way that they’d tell you this is exactly what you have to remember (Student interview 3, p. 1, paragraph 4).

A number of assumptions and expectations were identified by students that were not generally experienced as being inherent and not explicitly stated to them at the beginning of their students. Their perception of the expectations of the university was that they had to work far more independently than in other settings, and that there were specific areas that the university saw as a priority.
It would be useful to see things has a list … some sort of priority order … like okay these are the things you need to learn … literacy and grammar … construction and research skills, and these will be the priority areas (Student interview 2, p. 3, paragraph 7).

However, at times they found these expectations unrealistic:

The lecturer expected everyone to be able to memorise all the readings, all the study guide, well basically every reading that you’ve got, and I felt that they shouldn’t have imposed that especially at first year level (Student interview 3, p. 1, paragraph 4).

The students themselves recognised that they entered higher education with some assumptions and expectations, which had been met to differing degrees. A common assumption was that they would be receiving more individual support and attention than they did, which is in direct contrast to the universities emphasis on independent learning:

It would be nice say to have someone actually sitting there with me maybe and trying to encourage me to actually do the writing or to actually just help me (Student interview 4, p. 2, paragraph 9).

While some students felt able to approach teaching staff for this individual support, lack of continuity between different roles made this difficult at times:

If I approach the lecturer for some reason or another she would tell me … you might do it later on in the trimester or you should talk to your tutor about it, and … I thought to myself well that doesn’t sound right because … you’re the one who’s giving the lecture … to actually have someone you could talk to rather than just your tutor, because … you’re only seeing them maybe one hour a week (Student interview 3, p. 2, paragraph 12).

Barriers to success

Successfully developing academic skills was seen to be dependent on a range of factors, which were both internal and external to the student. One student did identify a positive influence of life outside of university, when discussing the benefits of maintaining an active social life. However, all acknowledged that pressures and distractions from life outside of university can impinge on studies and make academic skill development more difficult.

I have a friend whose doing my course … he came from a really rough background … he was caught up in a range of problematic behaviours, drugs and that sort of stuff, dropped school and so he’s coming back as a mature age but he’s really struggling a lot (Student interview 1, p. 2, paragraph 5).
I had ongoing problems as well throughout the trimester outside. And even though I sort of tried to keep up with where I’m at … it was very, very difficult to be able to just block out everything (Student interview 3, p. 1, paragraph 8).

A lack of resources was also commonly cited as a barrier to academic progression. Many of the students work part time in addition to studying, but despite this often feel under financial constraint:

There’s a few fees you’ve got to work for and a bit more than high school, because usually parents pay for your high school and then you go to uni and also you’re expected to pay for your own books and get all your equipment all setup (Student interview 1, p. 1, paragraph 2).

I’ve got a friend of mine who’s doing the same course as I am, and she’s an air hostess, and like in her case she’s always on the road travelling for whatever. So in her situation maybe if she got the materials a bit earlier she’d be able to work towards being able to get a proper grade at the end of it (Student interview 3, p. 3, paragraph 7).

While students were aware of existing study skills support offered through the university, many expressed uncertainty on how to access their services or lacked awareness of the range of support available. Opinions about these services were generally positive, but there was also a sense that using these services entailed ‘extra hassle’, which they did not feel they needed on top of all the other adjustments they were making for university:

They just found it too tiring to look for (the guide to assignment writing), because every time they went oh see its referring to the book, or every time they’d ask they’d be told that they would get in contact with somebody who’d help them with it, they generally just forgot to get back to them …. It was just too much to worry about, too much running around (Student interview 1, p. 3, paragraph 1).

I know there are a lot of programs available through … Student Life, and I mean they’re very, very good (Student interview 3, p. 3, paragraph 9).

These services were seen to be separate from their courses or faculty, and that was a source of reluctance for some students. Several also indicated they felt stigmatised by having to seek out these ‘special services’:

Sometimes you just don’t feel comfortable going to other places … Every time I go or I go past there there’s no one in there, I don’t know it’s probably just me, it’s just okay at times I might feel embarrassed about doing it, going in there and getting help. It’s just something … it does feel intimidating as well (Student interview 4, p. 4, paragraphs 1 & 5).
Other features of the university experience were also seen to pose barriers to academic skills progression. The concept of implicit or unclear expectations was also raised in relation to this theme, with students reporting it left them feeling adrift and uncertain:

I wasn’t sure what to expect and I’m still trying to find my way around the academic skills ... I’m still not sure how to go about them. I haven’t been to school for so long (Student interview 4, p. 1, paragraph 2).

Students consistently stated that formative assessment, which continued throughout the unit and provided ongoing feedback was experienced as helpful in developing skills. Alternatively, summative assessments at the end of units left them no time to improve using feedback:

I think every unit should at least have multiple choice quizzes through the trimester to be able to see where you’re at and you can sort of refer back to it ... there was far too much to remember all together at the end of the semester (Student interview 3, p. 2, paragraph 3 & 5).

The learning environment itself was also identified as a possible barrier, with large class sizes and lecture theatres negatively affecting their ability to gather and retain information from lectures:

The lecture sizes are quite large ... sometimes it’s really hard to concentrate because there are people who tend to talk a lot behind you ... I just thought I can’t concentrate and then I lost motivation as well for a little bit because I can’t sit there and not concentrate (Student interview 3, p. 4, paragraph 7).

Facilitators of success

Two main factors that facilitated successful academic skill progression were identified: structured, explicit expectations and support. The first of these themes echoed similar findings about assumptions and expectations, in that students felt more able to develop academic skills when they had a clear sense of what was required.

I guess students need to be, I guess given some clear outline of the things they really need to develop (Student interview 2, p. 3, paragraph 7).

A concrete example of this cited by a couple of students was the provision of practice exams or exemplar assignments, by which they could judge what would be considered ‘good’ performance:

Where you sort of go online to the Deakin website, here’s some outlines and gives you a shot at answering this question and this is what it should look like, or test exams just to have a look at how students respond to a certain question. I couldn’t find anything like that (Student interview 1, p. 6, paragraph 5).
Understanding exactly what I have to put into the essay ... (and what a good essay looks like) that would be a great help (Student interview 4, p. 2, paragraphs 13 & 15).

Another student cited purposeful assessment as a facilitator because it assisted them to link their academic skills to what they would be doing upon graduation:

*It helps you also when you do your assignments, because you know you’re doing it for a real purpose* (Student interview 3, p. 5, paragraph 7).

When considering their support needs, students were able to identify a range of sources for information and guidance around academic skill development. Some were formal (such as lecturers, tutors, mentors and university services), and while these were generally perceived to be helpful, access was an issue in some cases:

*Just the fact there’s not that amount of contact between yourself and the lecturer, that is a very big issue because I mean all very well they say you have to do this reading and that reading, and then you go to the lecture and okay they talk about it, but then if you want to talk about it at another level you should be able to rather than them say ‘oh well, speak to your tutor about it’.* (Student interview 3, p. 4, paragraph 5)

*I feel like there’s a trail there, and that is there’s enough contact points for me to be able to make that contact even if that’s not the correct place that I’ve landed, that I’ll get directed so I get a trail of breadcrumbs somewhere to find it* (Student interview 2, p. 4, paragraph 1).

Other supports were informal (such as family, friends and other students), but while these people were identified, the nature of the support they could provide was not clearly articulated:

*I’m not sure, probably other students as well helped ... But I wasn’t sure who to speak to with the teachers and students in regards to that* (Student interview 4, p. 2, paragraph 3).

*My parents who were pretty good helped me with that sort of thing and they didn’t constrain me at all, but if I really wanted to do something they wouldn’t stop me from doing it, but they encouraged me to sort of stick to time constraints and to be home by certain times to be up early enough to get to school the next morning, to study enough* (Student interview 1, p. 2, paragraph 5).

An individualised approach to support was felt to be most effective by the students, particularly those forms of support that enabled them to receive personalised and especially interactive support. Positive relationships with those from whom they were receiving support were beneficial, and better academic skill development was felt to occur in the interpersonal space between them:
Also the tutors and lecturers in person they were always waiting at the end of lectures to talk to and because they give you their room number and email address, it’s just like they’re pretty much just inviting you to just come there and chat to them about whatever work you need to do (Student interview 1, p. 11, paragraph 8).

Being lucky to get a couple of particularly dedicated teachers there (TAFE) I guess who are able to sort of give us good grounding in that (Student interview 2, p. 1, paragraph 10).

I know that they’re always there beside me, I’m not sort of left on my own to fend for myself, it makes sense of the situation (Student interview 3, p. 6, paragraph 2).

These positive interactive supports could also be formed with peers, and a basis of this was the common experience of being on the course:

What do you want to get out of this class? … The whole class talked about it and teacher said into groups and write down some ideas and then present them to the class, and then we agreed on what ones and what we wanted and so everyone agreed to them and everyone got a copy (Student interview 4, p. 3, paragraphs 14 & 16).

I think interaction with other students is a really good starting point because that’s where you start to sort of bounce off concerns or gaps in knowledge or start to get reflections from other students about similar things (Student interview 2, p. 2, paragraph 6).

Online support (particularly that provided on DSO) was found to be helpful, particularly as a forum to ask specific questions and get advice:

The postings on DSO have been really good to get answers from other students or just to sort of resolve some of that (Student interview 2, p. 2, paragraph 6).

The DSO they’ve got this discussion board and tutors and lecturers are always on there and if you’re too scared to ask questions there’s always bound to be someone who’s like, they ask stupid questions in terms of they weren’t listening during a lecture … but it’s not anonymous, it might help if it was anonymous sometimes … you can just read through and see all the different questions people have and sort of say just questions you’re too afraid you’re going to ask (Student interview 1, p. 11, paragraph 3).

The interactive quality of these resources seemed to be an important feature, as static resources were not always experienced as helpful:
There’s weekly planners and … not many people actually use them … I’ve tried using one but I was a bit unsure about how to use them properly. I’ve only used the one so … I wasn’t sure who to speak to about it (Student interview 4, p. 4, paragraph 13).

The format of support offered was also discussed by students, with all agreeing that academic skills support should begin at the very start of the course. Orientation week was thought to be a good opportunity for this, but voluntary attendance was thought to mitigate the potential benefits of this approach.

Working out [what’s expected of them] at the start, and basically it would be nice say for each class … actually set up some ground rules (Student interview 4, p. 3, paragraph 14).

Well, it’s like the compulsory things [in O week] were just the really general information sessions … but there were some things which were optional like how to write an essay … if you though you already knew how to write an essay you’re not going to show up … some students will still say the compulsory ones, what are they going to do, they’re not going to call our my name and punish me and send me away from uni … still compulsory is a big incentive in terms of showing up (Student interview 1, p. 7, paragraph 8).

You can prepare yourself a lot better if it’s well in advance rather than in the very last minute (Student interview 3, p. 3, paragraph 7).

There was also some recognition that basic skills had to be mastered before others could develop. Some students felt the assumptions and expectations discussed previously led teachers to assume all students had a similar level of academic skills upon commencement. Those who were yet to reach this level were in danger of being left behind, but graded support enabled everyone to develop:

There’s those who don’t have that basic knowledge (essay writing) and so if you stuffed there all this stuffs not going to help you really too much, because you don’t have anything to sort of build-up on in the first place (Student interview 1, p. 11, paragraph 1).

Rather than just throwing the answers in front of you and doing the work for you, they were sort of i out a bit of a lead and sort of saying follow that and it’s frustrating too! (Student Interview 2, p. 4, paragraph 3).

Regardless of the format or people involved, students indicated some concept of what made for effective support. However, they generally found it difficult to clearly articulate specific features or principles:

People were really helpful and they were able to sort of direct me, that is not the right place you need to call them da, da, da and I just found that was really helpful to me … I feel like there’s been
enough there for me to get the traction I need and to get the knowledge I need to sort of well, to use the cliché move forward (Student interview 2, p. 4, paragraph 5 & 9).

I had a learning problem for a while and I had someone who was helping me in my classes ... There’d be someone there to help you out who I can negotiate learning with, rather than being left on your own sort of thing (Student interview 3, p. 3, paragraph 11).

Finally, the students gave several descriptions of the quality of support experiences they had encountered. Many had an emotional aspect to them, and this was at times more important than the content or skill being ‘taught’ through that support:

I guess it’s difficult to sort of try and remember the exact content on the day, I just know that I left with that impression ... I think’ I’m okay where I am and with the decisions I’ve made so far, so that helped guide my decision making (Student interview 2, p. 1, paragraphs 4 & 6).

I feel it’s no point in being really successful with your marks if you’re not happy with what you’re doing, there’s no success in that (Student interview 1, p. 9, paragraph 5).

I write to her (lecturer) saying I’ve done really well and she’d just congratulate me and keep encouraging me. I mean I never would have thought that would happen (Student interview 3, p. 6, paragraph 10).

Skills

When it came to the academic skills themselves, the students focused on many of the skills identified as important in both the literature and quantitative surveys. Some of these skills—researching, library skills, and critical thinking—were simply identified without further comment. However, the students felt they either already had some skills or needed to develop them further. Dedication was identified as a pre-existing skill, although it is more properly considered a personal quality or characteristic. The skills that students felt they had already mastered included stress management and using feedback.

If there’s an assignment due next week you haven’t really got the weekends to study for it because you’re working, but usually it just comes down to how much time you prepare beforehand because there’s always, I think there’s always enough time to study for exams and for assignments and stuff, and people just make their own choices about whether they want a really good mark or whether they don’t want to stress out too much (Student interview 1, p. 2, paragraph 1).

Several skills were always identified as being areas for further development—including self-management, grammar, reading, exam preparation and oral presentations. Retaining information and note taking was
identified by many students as a skill they felt they needed to work on, as they had not needed to draw on this in previous learning environments:

Sometimes I find it hard because I can’t find the information I need or might have trouble actually writing it down (Student interview 4, p. 2, paragraph 7).

How to make perfect, well not perfect notes, but like notes that will be sufficient enough to remember like even if it’s just key areas let’s say the readings like what you have to focus on (Student interview 3, p. 2, paragraph 1).

Four further skills were identified as both skills that some student felt they already possessed, but other felt they needed to development. Two of them—-independent learning and communication skills—drew equal responses on both sides. However, academic writing and time management garnered far more responses indicating a need for development than confidence in performance:

Not feeling confident and then having a solid enough grasp on how to construct an essay, how to sort of develop that academic writing is the other thing (Student interview 2, p. 3, paragraph 5).

It jumps on you so quickly with all this different stuff you’ve never done before, you’re just not ready for it ... it was still pretty heavy especially because at the very start I felt like because I only had eight contact hours ... like you’ve got all the time in the world (Student interview 1, p. 5, paragraph 6).

There was also some recognition from students that the obtainment and possession of academic skills is not a didactic model of have/do not have. Rather, there are degrees of academic skills and their development occurs along a continuum. This links back to the idea of a graded support previously discussed.

[When asked if they had the academic skills they needed at this point in their study] ... Actually probably not fully. I think I’m better this time of the year than what I was at the start of the year though (Student interview 4, p. 2, paragraph 1).

While students could name academic skills further analysis of their responses showed an uncertainty about what academic skills were:

I don’t really know if this is really a study skill ... [when speaking about approaching a lecturer] (Student interview 3, p. 2, paragraph 13).

I guess for me it’s just been using the term academic or study skills for a while and try to think well, what is the researchers definition of that, am I grasping the concept properly? (Student interview 2, p. 4, paragraph 7).
In some cases, there seemed to be a lack of clarity about what the named skills actually involved. While the term ‘academic skills’ was used during this project, the students may not have conceptualised that term in the same way as the researchers:

*Actually finding the time management to actually sit there and prepare for the exam (Student interview 4, p. 1, paragraph 12).*

Personal experience

The final theme drawn from the student interviews referred to their personal experiences with academic skills as an individual. These experiences were reported as being both positive and negative, and there was a definite sense that higher education had completely different demands than their previous educational environments.

*It was a little bit of work to get used to the fact that entirely, well nearly entirely, independent compared to high school (Student interview 1, p. 1, paragraph 2).*

*Learning about all the different techniques which they probably wouldn’t have learnt at school (Student interview 3, p. 1, paragraph 4).*

*The university didn’t actually tell us this is what you have to do as opposed to school (Student interview 3, p. 3, paragraph 5).*

Some students had the benefit of specific preparation for higher education from careers counsellors, teachers and even through the programs offered by Deakin itself. These students seemed to experience their transition into higher education in a more positive manner:

*The students at my school we had some Deakin tour days, and we came in and got a tour, and some students would talk to us about what the workload’s like so we got plenty of warning (Student interview 1, p. 2, paragraph 5).*

*I found the ‘Off To A Flying Start’ presentation really useful, and that sort of helped me (Student interview 2, p. 1, paragraph 4).*

All students alluded to the need to not only develop academic skills but also ways of managing themselves. This included skills such as developing work/life balance, self-control, confidence and become discerning in their choices around study:

*You need to be so committed to medicine, you’ve got to go far because you’re not going to give someone the wrong dose and kill them but social work, while its important there is that leeway that you can make … so I feel that while I know what I need to do to get the highest mark, I do*
compromise that sometimes and settle for a bit of a mark ... because I know that if I tried to go any higher than that I’d be cutting into time that would make me feel absolutely zoned out and sick of uni and sick of education and probably not even want to do the job after (Student interview 1, p. 8, paragraph 3).

I’m more relaxed knowing that I’m in an environment that I really want to be in (Student interview 3, p. 5, paragraph 5)

Some students also described feelings of anxiety and perfectionism in relation to their performance of academic skills. They had all developed individual strategies to manage these mental stressors and prevent them from having a detrimental impact on their ability to study successfully.

I guess it’s was about how much pressure I want to place on myself when I’m doing my first subject so it was a case of okay, don’t go in there with half an effort but don’t try to kill yourself (Student interview 2, p. 1, paragraph 6).

I think some anxiety and fear can be some of those things, so it’s a case of like I said probably needs to put a voice to that somewhere or so that you can put it in perspective (Student interview 2, p. 2, paragraph 10).

Process of analysis of student surveys
Data from interviews with academics

There were diverse opinions regarding whether it is the role of academics to attend to academic skills development. Some see it as part of the role of academics generally:

*I think that we need to be graduating people regardless of their age, regardless of their location who are able to engage in technology because I think it’s the technology that’s actually has the potential to overcome many of the issues about rural and remote and regional practice. So we have a responsibility to really ensure people are up to date. So reading, writing and engaging the technology. Along the lines of that I think they have to understand things like plagiarism and whose work is whose and how one deals with that. So referencing is important as a skill (ACA002, pp. 1–2).*

*We do need to be looking at supporting students in the development of these skills (ACA002, p. 3).*

*We check and double check to make sure that the courses have adequate skills (ACA003, p. 4).*
But primarily directly involved with students I think yes the academics, the tutors obviously and the librarians who are specifically allocated social work so to speak and then the more generic learning skills advisors would be the primary one (ACA002, p. 4).

While others perceive it is not strictly speaking the role of academics, but rather is something that falls under the mandate of individuals:

You think you’ve got everybody marching in the same direction and then they run off like looms the moment your back is turned and do all clever stuff. It’s just amazing. Sorry, I’ve pretty much worked out that I need to be on people’s case the whole time to make sure we’re all working in the same direction. So the way that I do that is that I make us have a curriculum day at the beginning of the year (ACA 001, p. 3).

Most recently I’ve been very committed to ensuring that they graduate with an ability to engage with technology above and beyond just basic computer skills (ACA002, p. 1).

Yeah, you know really, you know academics, it’s a bit hard to say who’s, really I think it depends on almost finding a champion. So I don’t think it’s anybody’s role in our actual department. Even though we have the curriculum scholar obviously, he’s committed to that but it really requires the individual lecturers who are responsible for individual subjects to recognise the importance to agree to get on board with it. If they don’t there’s no authority to say you must join in this way (ACA 002, p. 5).

I think the school and the university would see that it’s my job with no—just part of my job…. I think that’s fine. I don’t want anybody else outside of social work getting their hands on social work. Because they’d stuff it up. They don’t understand it. They’re always trying to water it down and I just don’t want them anywhere near me. Go away (ACA001, pp. 3–4).

It [the University] makes assumptions that the students come to class. They don’t. So that means that if the timetable is scheduled, they’re saying, well I’ve done my job, there’s the timetable, we’ve provided the spaces for learning but the students don’t come and then if you want to do your job properly, you’ve got to try and catch them at other points in time (ACA001, p. 4) [suggests that the onus falls back onto the academics to reach students].

Well I guess the course coordinator, the program director of the undergraduate social work degree was overall responsible for making sure that the curriculum addressed those issues and those needs for students. But it would be the individual unit assessor, sorry subject coordinator that particularly the introduction to social work unit subject where the primary responsibility would be in terms of how to deliver that, and how to make the material available to students (ACA006, p. 3).
Others were of the firm opinion that the role of the academic is about teaching social work, not to develop academic skills:

_We’re taught to teach social work. We’re not necessarily taught to teach literacy and I know when I pick up an assignment in fourth year and its crap, badly written, that I kind of don’t know what to do with it. I don’t know where to go. I don’t how to fix it or how to get them fixed it because I’m not a teacher of literacy (ACA 001, p. 4)._ 

But some are trying anyway:

_We have at various stages tried to work out what it is that we can do to teach students these skills but we’re all social work practitioners, we’re not educators or educational experts so we’ve structured into our program things.... we’re attempting to scaffold those skills (ACA 004, p. 2)._ 

_But I think everybody’s out to do the best they can, but we do feel as if we’re often having to do the basics around bringing students up to tertiary level and that’s awkward (ACA004, p. 4)._ 

_You kind of like know what you’ve got to do but because you’re not an educator or you’re assuming year 12 prepares students at a certain level (ACA004, p. 4)._ 

Some conveyed that the task of developing academic skills was not primarily their role, but rather the role of other divisions or services:

_Also have a student mentor that we hired, who actually works with students, particularly students who are more problematic. They help them develop their academic skills. We have student services across campus that do the same thing (ACA 003, p. 1)._ 

_But as I mentioned that the, there’s also the support services within the university which have responsibility for making sure that students can have access to that information and develop those skills as well (ACA006, p. 3)._ 

Some suggested that the role of academics is to direct students to other support and resources:

_We could certainly refer students to that or encourage them to make use of those resources (ACA006, p. 2)._ 

_We’d always encourage people to make use of those resources in a preventative kind of way rather than after they failed three assignments and just struggling to get through the semester (ACA006, p. 2)._
Other

[In reference to the curriculum scholar, a faculty position dedicated to students’ academic skill development] ... While his role is not so much the direct transfer of skills to students it is a support role, particularly I suppose for academics to include academic skills integrated into their subjects (ACA002, p. 4).

One academic (ACA001) spoke of the role of the Academic Skills Unit as being inadequate, but did not suggest that academics or students should be doing more, only the university.