Staff and student perceptions of the Skills@Library service

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Project Snapshot

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Project Overview

The Learning Development Team aims to develop the academic literacies of all taught students through a dual model of embedded and co-curricular support. This study focuses on the centralised co-curricular Skills@Library offer, the ethos of which is developmental, supportive and complementary to the curriculum rather than 'generic', 'remedial' or 'bolt on', which are critiques generally associated with non-embedded skills development. A recent and scathing view of centralised support was offered by Richards and Pilcher (2020) in their provocative article 'Study Skills: neoliberalism's perfect Tinkerbell'.

What is worryingly absent from this debate however, is the student voice. There is little if any research on the student's perception of centralised, open support services. It is this that motivated me to investigate our students (and staff) perception of the Skills@Library service. Particularly, whether they view it as remedial and there to "fix" a perceived problem. Of particular concern is that this perception encourages students to think of themselves as the problem- that it is they that need fixing.

This small-scale research project aimed to better understand how the Skills@Library co-curricular service is perceived by academic staff and students, with a particular focus on the latter. This will inform the development of new practice that ensures all students have the opportunity to benefit from an empowering and developmental service; one that enables them to better understand "the rules" of academia and then make their own, informed decisions about their work and learning, perhaps even breaking those rules to challenge the status quo. This emancipatory approach is a core value of Learning Development.

Project objectives

The project sought to answer four questions:

1. Do students perceive the Skills@Library service as a 'deficit' service?
2. How does the student perception compare to that of staff?
3. Is there a link between students' educational self-efficacy and their perception and engagement with the service?
4. How does this perception impact on student engagement with the different elements of the service?

Methods

This project used a mixed method approach. Firstly, a survey was sent to staff and students to gain a broad perspective of their perceptions and use of the service. The student survey

included a validated educational self-efficacy scale (Centre for Higher Education Research and Scholarship, 2023), to ascertain whether there was a link between students' confidence in their educational ability and their perceptions and use of the Skills@Library service. The student survey received 189 responses, the staff 22. Focus groups were then conducted with nine of the undergraduate and postgraduate students who had completed the survey; the intention was to obtain a deeper understanding of how students felt about their academic skills requirements and how they perceive the role of Skills@Library.

Key findings

- There is no significant correlation between students' self-efficacy and their use or perception of the service
- Students consider that they should only be expected to have a minimal level of academic skills for university study upon starting their degree (and therefore no deficit should be perceived). Staff expectations of students' skills level seems to be higher than students'.
- Students' perceptions of the purpose of the Skills@Library service were varied, but in the main the students used positive language like 'development', 'enhance' or 'improve'. Staff perceptions were more likely to view student use as remedial and they used more negative terminology such as 'failing', 'desperate', 'struggling'.
- Students expect the 'University' but in particular, their school, to take responsibility for helping them develop the required academic skills. Some students stated the importance of this being carried out in collaboration with the Library and other professional colleagues.
- Students want to be able to access co-curricular opportunities for academic skills development in addition to, but not instead of, embedded. Staff were more likely to perceive Skills@Library as a 'fixing service' for what cannot be covered in the curriculum (deficit model).

Implications for practice

- To change the perception of students being in deficit to one where we recognise that our students come to university with varied valuable experiences and that we can amplify and build on their existing academic skills.
- All staff should use language that reflects a developmental approach to students' skills and literacies and to move away from deficit terminology such as students' 'lack of...' 'issues with...' 'inability to...'

- Programme and module leads should work in partnership with the Learning Development Team to build in, and not bolt on, academic skills and literacies into the curriculum. Curriculum Redefined offers an opportunity to tackle this in a creative and sustainable way.
- The Learning Development Team should work in partnership with students to review the Skills@Library co-curricular offer and ensure we are not perpetuating the deficit approach.
- Consider novel approaches to improve the communications around the role of Skills@Library to staff and students to emphasise the service as complementary to but not a replacement for embedded skills and literacies development.

Outputs

Intended outputs:

Internal:

- LITE fellowship showcase -May 2023
- New communications aimed at staff and students about our service: September 2023
- SEC Conference presentation: Jan 2024
- Case studies showcasing the relationship between in-curricular and co-curricular academic skills teaching

External:

- Conference presentations at AldinHE and LILAC
- Journal article for the Journal of Learning Development

Challenges

Ethical approval took longer than anticipated. This delayed my data collection resulting in fewer undergraduate students in the focus groups. In addition, I made the decision to focus on the student voice and collate staff perceptions through the survey and previous studies in the literature. The staff survey response rate however was lower than expected. In hindsight, a more fruitful comparison between staff and students could have been achieved through in depth interviews or focus groups with staff. On reflection this could have been a longer project where student perceptions were collated, analysed and themed and then used as a basis to research staff perceptions.

Next steps

Further research could be undertaken into whether there is a link between how we talk about and enable students' skills development and our ability as an institution to address the hidden curriculum and students' sense of belonging. Does the University's current approach perpetuate a false narrative that academic skills is something that under-represented students in particular need help with to 'catch up to' the 'traditional student'? Is there a focus on assumed weakness rather than on how we can build on and benefit from people's existing strengths and lived experiences? Is the way in which we are addressing "sense of belonging" based on a premise that students should assimilate into existing structures and practices, rather than having the opportunity to influence, disrupt and change those structures?

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