

# The Academic Skills Hub project: an introduction

*(updated November 08)*

## Project outline

The Academic Skills Hub (TASH) will be a central point for students and staff to access existing online and face-to-face resources that can best enhance individual academic skills development and independent learning at all levels of University study. The key feature of TASH will be the development of interactive signposting materials that engage students within and beyond the University of Sheffield, enabling them to identify their own academic skills needs, and pointing them towards existing resources at the appropriate level and in a relevant disciplinary context. Led by a cross-institutional team, the project will bring together and disseminate the good practice and resources that already exist within the university, both in academic and student support departments; it will also draw upon the best resources available beyond this institution.

The online hub that forms the main output of the project will develop the user's capacity to recognise their own learning needs, to locate the resources most appropriate to address these needs, and to reflect upon their progress so that all users can flourish as independent autonomous learners. Underpinning the project as a whole is the strong belief that the development of such fundamental academic and critical thinking skills is not something which can be acquired, fully formed, out of the pages of a book. Rather, this development forms part of a process of engagement with study that has no definable beginning or end, but is present throughout any learner's journey from their first serious engagement with academic ideas. For this reason it is essential that the hub is valuable to learners at all stages of their learning journey, from those in pre-entry contexts encountering self-directed study for the first time, to post-graduate students developing a range of new or less familiar skills (e.g. statistical analysis and research design).

The main TASH resources will be made freely available to staff and students in time for induction week in September 2009. The process of developing these resources is as important as the final resource itself. This is because the process offers a crucial opportunity to share existing good practice across the institution; to secure the participation and engagement of the widest range of academic staff, staff in support departments, and students; and to ensure that there is a genuine sense of shared ownership and responsibility for the resource from the outset.

We are achieving this through a rolling series of project meetings and consultation events; by working closely with existing networks, such as Learning and Teaching Advocates and the CILASS Student Ambassador Network; and by having a large core team with a representative from each of the five faculties. Similarly, we will use established events within the university calendar (including the Spotlight conference and Good Practice Week) to offer engagement opportunities with the resource, and to disseminate the work as it progresses. The ultimate ambition is to embed the resource within departmental induction and academic support processes, as part of an institution-wide culture of academic skills development. The project is being funded by Access Agreement money and supported by Learning and Teaching Services; the core project group is answerable to the Directors of Learning and Teaching Development.

## Project aims and outcomes

The TASH project will:

- Raise awareness amongst staff and students of the range of existing academic skills support within and beyond the University;
- Help staff to support students more effectively and easily by explaining the purposes and uses of existing resources;

- Raise awareness amongst all staff and students of the benefits of timely and embedded academic skills development; and
- Provide accessible, flexible, and relevant opportunities for all students to enhance academic skills development throughout their learning journey.

The TASH project will result in:

- The creation of online resources that develop learner autonomy, including a range of self-assessment, inquiry, and problem-solving tasks;
- Increased engagement with existing academic skills enhancement materials including ELTC, Dyslexia Support, Careers Service materials, and Library Information Skills tutorials;
- The creation of disciplinary exemplars from across the five faculties, critically exploring how academic skills materials can be used and embedded in different academic disciplines; and
- Identification of gaps in the current suite of academic skills enhancement materials, and work to fill those either directly within, or in relation to, the TASH resource.

## Shape of the resource

The main student-facing resource will constitute a light central hub that is easily accessible, customisable in parts, and will cater for a variety of different learning styles. We intend it to include a number of interactive features, both individual and communal, including self-assessment tasks, discussion fora, comments and site-ratings functions. The hub will also include disciplinary specific areas as appropriate, and will operate a structure of parallel signposting to materials available both within and without the institution.

TASH will also offer enormous potential for individual departments to design pre-arrival induction activities targeted at students preparing to enter the University at undergraduate or post-graduate levels, wherever they happen to be located. Many of the interactive features will focus on the city of Sheffield as a case study, providing a common strand to the resource, and also offering support in terms of induction. There are obvious links to a number of existing university projects, most notably the [Generic Skills](#) working group, [MASH](#), the [Inclusive Learning and Teaching](#) and [Graduate Professionalism](#) projects, all of which encourage students as autonomous learners to identify and reflect on their own skills development, within formal education and beyond. Therefore part of the task as TASH develops will be to determine ways of most effectively relating to and working with these different projects.

The hub will be useful for academic and academic-support staff by providing a shared location for academic skills development materials to which staff can refer students, as well as learn more themselves about what is available. It is intended to enhance and extend much of the good student support work that already goes on, and fit sensitively with the range of current practice within departments and support services. It will also be an open-ended resource, with content that can develop in response to feedback, and be adapted over time to the needs of future students.

There are a range of diagrams representing our evolving thinking on the hub available on the project website and blog; the URL is given at the end of this document.

## What we've done so far

Since the project began in June 2008, we have been working hard to include all stakeholders within the design process. This has led to a large core project team, detailed at the end of the document, with representation from each of the five faculties. It has also meant a series of large project meetings, with a total of 70 individuals attending from 44 departments, exploring the issues raised and addressed by TASH.

As a product of these meetings, the TASH core team has developed a rough framework of seven skills that

they think are developed and required by students in higher education. This framework is intended to be a heuristic aid, giving structure to the necessarily wide and diffuse understandings of academic skills; it is also unlikely that these seven skills areas will be presented as such in the final resource. Furthermore, it is entirely possible that identified skills needs and resources will sit across more than one category. However, to aid the development process, this framework is a useful device and starting-point for conversations, and has been developed and approved in the project meetings.

The seven skills areas on which TASH is concentrating are:

1. Academic literacy
2. Personal and interpersonal skills
3. Research and data-handling
4. Problem-solving and analytical skills
5. Written communication
6. Oral and other communication
7. Reflective learning

This framework has been discussed in a series of focus groups with staff and students, where they have generally received a seal of approval, although with significant modifications of tone and hierarchy within the skills set. Focus group participants also reinforced the fundamental role of TASH in providing a single starting-point for accessing academic skills resources. As one student put it, "Occasionally I've felt there's almost too much [available to support students' skills development] - I don't know which one to go to get what I need". Students also expressed a desire both to quickly find resources solving one particular need, and to spend longer working at more in-depth, reflective tasks. For more information about how we are addressing this, please see the information about the hub structure on the project website.

Another key task has been beginning to share the resources that are already available within the institution. The way in which we've organised this is through the completion of resource guides, giving information for academic and support staff about a skills development resource. This information will firstly be available in this tutor-facing form through TASH, or possibly another cross-institutional project; and secondly in a more student-friendly form through the completed TASH resource. The tutor-facing resource guide template is available on the project website, and specimen responses on request. We would very much welcome further sharing of academic skills resources; so if you have anything that you think would benefit a wider range of students than it currently serves, please let us know.

Detailed information about what we've been doing in the project, including who we've met and what we've said, can be found on the project blog. Materials relating to previous project meetings can also be found on the project website.

## **Where we are going now, and how you can be involved**

We are now in the process of sifting, combining, developing, and extending the resources that are already available, both within this institution, and through external providers (notably other HEIs). The intention is by the next project meeting – Tuesday 16<sup>th</sup> December – to have a clear sense of how existing resources will fit with the TASH resource, and what gaps remain to be filled. These gaps might be addressed through commissioning of bespoke material; through adaptation of existing resources; links to external resources; or some combination of all three.

This all means a provisional design of the resource by the end of the semester, and production of a testing version in the early new year. From the end of February on, we will be testing and adapting the resource. One of the intentions of the TASH project from the outset has been that it is open-ended, so the resource as it launches in September 2009 will only be the first version, and additions, adaptations, and spin-off projects relating to particular departments, skills areas, or student needs, will be strongly encouraged.

We are keen for you to be involved in all of these stages, and for you to attend the next project meeting and celebration on the 16<sup>th</sup> of December. If you have academic skills materials that you feel could benefit students across the institution, then please let us know. If you have a particular expertise or experience in developing student support, again get in touch. And if you feel the resource would particularly benefit your students, or would fit especially well with something that you already do, tell us about it; we are keen for TASH to sit as closely as possible with existing practice, and for information about those local adaptations to be shared.

The TASH project is designed to bring together the best of what we do already, and to make this more widely accessible; to identify and connect with external resources; and to point students and tutors to both in a targeted and time-efficient manner. We are not interested in re-inventing the wheel, but in learning more about what already exists, and designing a framework in which that can fit together.

## Further information

The TASH project team are:

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In the first instance, inquiries should be addressed to Tim or Willy. You can also learn more about the project, and find out how to get involved, on our website:

<http://www.shef.ac.uk/tash/>