

‘Interventions and approaches [to support students’ development]... should as far as possible be embedded into mainstream provision to ensure all students participate and benefit from them.’

Thomas, L (2012) [*What Works? Student Retention & Success \(Final Report\)*](#)

Developing academic skills and literacy practices

As we know, participating in higher education (HE) requires students to develop and adapt their approaches to learning. Sometimes this is a question of improving particular **skills** (e.g. managing time more effectively) but more often it involves a deeper and more critical process of developing **academic literacy practices**; of understanding and getting to grips with the cultures, values and expectations of HE (e.g. writing critically, challenging established ideas, accepting and embracing contingency) and developing the confidence, willingness, and ability to participate accordingly. Skills and literacy practices often overlap and inform each other. Developing more effective **note-making** skills, for instance, depends also on developing a more critical and assertive approach to the book, journal, website or lecture the notes are based on. Likewise, **avoiding plagiarism** is about far more than knowing how to reference properly, important though this is. It requires a deeper understanding of the values of academic integrity and scholarship which underpin how relevant literature is deployed in essays, reports, dissertations etc.

Integrating support for developing academic skills and literacy practices

Academic literacy practices and skills are *integral*, rather than *auxiliary*, to HE learning. After all, students’ abilities to analyse, research, write and present are not some sort of nice added bonus to ‘core’ subject knowledge and understanding. They are, rather, the very means by which that knowledge and understanding is acquired, developed, reflected on, and represented. The support we provide for development should, therefore, be integral to students’ learning experiences and available to all. Where larger-scale curriculum-level provision is concerned, successful integration also depends on such questions as: timing of activities; perceived and actual linkage with mainstream curricula, including assessment and



feedback procedures; and the pedagogic approaches most likely to foster student engagement.

How to (and how not to) integrate support

Integrating support for development within the curriculum is about much more than simply 'time-tabling extra help'. Indeed, depending on how it is done, such an approach can alienate and ill-serve students. Delivering a lecture on 'how to write an essay', for example, is rather like delivering a lecture on 'how to dance the Charleston'. Provided participants can remain awake long enough, they may pick up some useful information, but they will be denied the types of active and experiential activities (experimentation, interaction, critical reflection, observation etc.) that enable learning to happen. Unsurprisingly, feedback tells us that where support for academic development is perceived as generic, abstracted, didactic or 'remedial', it is often judged as irrelevant, boring and patronising. Conversely, where support for development is engaging, interactive, rooted in experience and clearly relevant to mainstream curriculum tasks, it is well-received and engaged with by students at all levels of study. This is why engaging *students as partners* in the design and development of support is also crucial. The Leicester Learning Institute provides advice and resources to help you design support which is relevant and integrated into mainstream curricula.