Skill Up! Supporting Academic Success at UWE Bristol.

By Steve E. Hunt, Beth Lethaby and Ludovik Sébire.

**Introduction**

In September 2015 the University of the West of England (UWE Bristol) Library Services launched *Skill up!*, a new online learning platform to support Academic Success. This was a timely response to increasingly complex demands for more online materials to deliver information and academic literacy skills. Interactive workbooks, created using Jamroom (<https://www.jamroom.net/>) software, provided an integrated solution to meet this challenge. In this article we shall outline how the implementation of this open-source software fulfilled our requirements for a content management system that was easy for librarians to learn, and flexible enough to produce high-quality bespoke and accessible materials for the benefit of our students and staff. Our rapidly developing platform was shortlisted for the Credo Digital Award for Information Literacy in March 2016.

**The UWE Bristol context**

The technology enhanced learning resources we provide must be adaptable for a diverse higher education environment. UWE Bristol is a post-1992 university with just over 27,000 students across four faculties. There are practice-oriented and academic courses from foundational to post-doctoral level and a variety of modes of programme delivery at both UK and international partner institutions. Students on all of these courses need and expect to access authoritative and current academic support materials using multiple devices, wherever and whenever they are studying. In meeting these needs Library Services contributes to UWE Bristol’s strategic priorities to deliver ‘outstanding learning’ and ‘ready and able graduates’.

**Flexible and accessible platform**

The Academic Skills online learning platform is agile enough to meet the multiplicity of needs required by this digital environment. The software is open source so is affordable and can be readily adapted and developed by the Library’s Web Developer. It is compatible with all modern browsers and mobile devices and adheres to W3C and accessibility standards. The interactive workbooks enable us to generate customised learning pathways to match the needs of particular student programmes.

**Practical implementation**

The Academic Literacy Forum, made up of librarians, academic staff and other University-wide stakeholders, sets out the over-arching framework for academic support at UWE Bristol and is sponsored by the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic).

*“The development of the academic skills platform with the new style workbooks has, over the past year, provided high quality, ‘tangible’ outputs that have enabled the Library to consolidate its role as a strategic lead for academic literacy within the institution.” (Jackie Chelin, Deputy Director, UWE Bristol Library)*

Within this strategic context the Library’s Technology Enhanced Learning Operations Group (TELOG) is responsible for the practical implementation of learning resources on the *Skill Up!* platform. Our success in rolling out new materials speedily has been due to the software’s flexibility and the team’s collaborative approach to design. Content and elements of webpage structure can be readily repurposed through ‘cloning’ and then customised to suit a particular project. New features are added in response to team requirements, for example interactive quiz questions, picture galleries and embedded Twitter feeds. In this way the platform’s functionality continues to evolve according to emerging needs.

Library staff have been able to create workbooks with an attractive and accessible interface without the need to possess high order coding skills. The workbooks can accommodate individual creative impulses while at the same time providing a collective bank of ideas and content to draw upon. The ease of navigation and interactive elements help to ensure that the workbooks are pedagogically sound. The comprehensive content and its appealing format have already reduced teaching pressure from library induction sessions, freeing up time for more specialist face-to-face support when required.

*“Web Developer Steve Cole, who implemented the project, was pleased by the way that the software architecture ‘removed perceived barriers to web publishing’ and enabled knowledge sharing, thus generating ‘a very real sense of ownership of the project’ among workbook authors*.”

 **Technology and people**

The simplicity of the platform has decreased perceived barriers in creating online content, empowering more people to get involved and encouraging greater collaboration within the Library team and with academic staff. By witnessing both the output quality and the fast delivery process of the workbooks, library subject teams have started to become more open to using technologies in their teaching practices. New technologies are often viewed as fads or passing trends, inviting scepticism about their pedagogic value. They may be advocated as ‘must haves’ by champions while others may think it is forced upon them. The new platform, on its own, has not changed this view. Indeed technology is just a tool, and our Academic Skills platform only a toolbox full of workbooks. Their pedagogic merit is directly linked to the learning context in which they are used, and the discussions that surround their creation. The most successful workbooks involve strong collaboration between Librarians and academic staff in the planning, creation and beyond. Thus, the new platform, through its flexibility and ease of access, has helped to change colleagues’ perceptions on how technology can support learning.

Another great virtue has been to boost colleagues’ confidence in using technologies. As only standard, professional IT skills are required, TELOG members have felt more empowered, being able to focus their mind on what they are really good at: teaching information and academic literacy. Finally, from a service perspective, these workbooks have helped to shift and complement our teaching commitments from face-to-face towards a more blended and embedded approach. Our regular programme of staff development activities have enabled our team to build upon their existing expertise in this emerging area of learning and teaching. Creating and thinking about workbooks has become a *modus operandi* for the Library.

**How the workbooks have been received**

Evaluating the workbooks is at the forefront of our thinking yet it is a challenge for us all. To do so, we collect usage and behavioural statistics that help us with our quantitative analysis. Further work is needed, however, to establish clearer data collection and analysis. Furthermore, quantitative data gives us only part of the picture. Therefore, we have been collecting qualitative data with mixed results, using focus groups with students and staff, surveys targeted to specific cohorts of students as well as informal channels such as e-mails and/or face-to-face conversations. Overall, feedback has been positive, from both staff and students’ perspectives.

*“I've found adjusting to university style writing and research quite challenging so this is exactly the sort of thing I need!” (Year 1 student)*

*Watch feedback from a Civil Engineering lecturer who embedded one of the workbooks in his module:* [*https://vimeo.com/153364762*](https://vimeo.com/153364762)

This successful outcome derives from working closely alongside lecturers to develop appropriate workbook materials. The designers’ collaborative approach ensures that the content suits the academic needs of both staff and students.

Feedback, whether positive or negative, helps us to reflect on the quality and the purpose of the content we deliver, identifying ways of improving our products year on year.

**Future developments**

The Academic Skills platform is in a constant state of transformation and evolution, based on ideas from all our stakeholders, technological updates and our web developer’s can-do attitude. Short-term developments include developing an assignment planner: a time-management and academic tool. The planner will be launched in September. By responding to our Art students’ needs, we have developed a Visual Culture workbook that uses different ways of displaying information. The visually appealing nature of this workbook’s navigational interface is likely to be replicated in future workbooks. Its ease of use has also made it attractive for non-library partners wishing to develop content to support students, such as an *Essential Information for Exams* guide, produced by the Central Exams and Timetabling Team. Finally, the Academic Skills platform represents a sustainable solution to support at a distance our numerous partners around the globe.

**Conclusion**

It’s around a year since we started to develop the workbooks’ platform so timely to reflect on their success. We believe this is due to two major factors. First, their user-friendly attributes, for both creators and end-users. Second, the balance of bespoke elements within a standardised framework that is consistent in appearance and functionality, lending coherence within and across workbooks. Formerly our provision of online academic support was something of a Swiss cheese. We undertook a variety of approaches requiring challenging skills and, consequently, while we produced some excellent learning units, there were gaps in our offer as we tried to keep up with demand. Now we are confident that we have a flexible academic skills platform that is more like a Swiss army knife. It is an adaptable toolkit, evolving so that it is able to incorporate and embed emerging IT developments such as Storify and infographics for the foreseeable future. In the year ahead we hope and believe the academic skills platform is a model that we can share and proliferate, within other departments at UWE Bristol and beyond in the wider educational sector.