



## **Academic Skills at NUI Galway**

### **An Analysis of Needs, Perceptions and Current Supports**

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## 1. Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of a short research project funded by the NUI Galway Student Projects Fund. Through a survey of academic staff and a second survey of students who had just completed first year, the research analysed the perceptions of academic staff and students on first year students' need for support in relation to the academic skills considered essential for success and engagement in higher education. The research also analysed perceptions and awareness of the academic skills supports currently available in NUI Galway and looked at best practice elsewhere in terms of support for academic skills.

Both students and staff were in agreement about the academic skills that first year students were most lacking on entering higher education: referencing and plagiarism, academic writing, communication (public speaking and presentation), research skills and information literacy, and critical and reflective thinking. The Library's subject support teams, the Academic Writing Centre and the online learning resource Skills4Study Campus each provide support on one or more of these areas.

Academic staff view the following as being the five most important skills to facilitate academic success and quality and in-depth learning for first year students: effective reading and note-taking, critical and reflective thinking, academic writing, referencing and avoiding plagiarism, and effective revision and study skills. Again, students are supported in each of these skills by one or more of Skills4Study Campus, the Library's subject support teams and the Academic Writing Centre.

Students believe that their academic skills improved during their first year, with significantly more students rating their skills as 4 or 5 on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is very poor and 5 is excellent. However, they still reported struggling in some areas during their first year. These were also the areas where they felt their skills were poorest at the end of their first year: skills of mathematics, communication (public speaking and presentation), referencing and avoiding plagiarism, academic writing and time management. Once again some level of support is available on all of these areas in NUI Galway through SUMS, Skills4Study Campus, the Academic Writing Centre and the Library Subject Support Teams.

Despite the availability of supports that are directly relevant to the reported needs of first year students, there is a very low level of awareness of those supports on the part of academic staff, other than the subject librarian teams and the academic writing centre. These are also the support services that academic staff value most highly for their students.

Student awareness of the supports available was somewhat better than academic staff however they were less aware of the subject support teams in the Library. The awareness of Skills4Study Campus was disappointingly low at 42% given all first year students are automatically registered on the Learning Centre module on Blackboard where Skills4Study campus can be found. The support service students are most aware of is the Academic Writing Centre, with over 90% of students being aware of the service.

Students most want support in the areas of referencing and plagiarism, academic writing and research skills and information literacy – all areas where the academic writing centre and the subject support teams can help them. However, only 30% of academic staff had referred their first years to a subject librarian and only 45% had referred a first year to the Academic Writing Centre. There

were somewhat more referrals of students in later years of study, however still almost half of academics had never referred their students to these support services.

Part of the reason for this could be a lack of knowledge on the part of academic staff regarding the location and opening hours of the support services. When asked about the accessibility and delivery of support services, academic staff answered 'don't know' more than any other response. Students expressed some dissatisfaction with opening hours of some of the support services and with advertising and publicity.

Both students and academic staff favoured a variety of delivery methods for support services, with most wanting both online and face-to-face supports, both one-to-one and group tutorials or workshops, and both open, generic services available to all and academic skills development embedded into academic programmes.

This report presents the detailed findings of this study as well as information on the support services provided in NUI Galway and best practice elsewhere. We are very grateful to all the students and academic staff who took part in the surveys, and for the wealth of valuable insight to be gained by their comments, which are reported throughout the report. We are also very grateful to the various support services who provided us with information about their services.

Based on the findings of the study and best practice elsewhere, the authors make a series of recommendations, which are outlined in Section 10.

## 2. Introduction

There is an impression frequently voiced that students now entering third level from second level are not well prepared for the needs of Higher Education and do not have the core academic skills they need. This issue was highlighted in the Hunt Report on National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030:

“Many people believe that second-level education does not prepare students adequately for the challenges of higher education. Students entering higher education directly from school often lack the critical thinking, problem solving and independent learning skills required for successful engagement in higher education....

Higher education cannot solve this problem alone; there needs to be complementarity and consistency in the approach to curriculum design and delivery through primary, secondary and higher education. Higher education will contribute to the solution by actively engaging with the process of second-level curriculum reform.

Pending such reform, higher education providers should address identified shortfalls in students’ skills during their first year in higher education. This can be done by expanding the availability of induction and preparation courses for first-year students, covering skills such as self-directed learning, time management, information literacy and critical analysis, and by providing additional support for students in subject areas where they are experiencing difficulties.”

National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030. Report of the Strategy Group, January 2011. The Hunt Report.

[http://www.heai.ie/sites/default/files/national\\_strategy\\_for\\_higher\\_education\\_2030.pdf](http://www.heai.ie/sites/default/files/national_strategy_for_higher_education_2030.pdf)

Supporting first year students in gaining these academic skills is seen as a key factor in the overall first year student experience and in enhancing student retention:

“A positive first year student experience is crucial to achieving the goals of higher education, and failure to address the challenges encountered by students in their first year contributes to high drop-out and failure rates, with personal and system-wide implications.”

Tom Boland, HEA, Submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills, Meeting on Curriculum Issues. <http://www.oireachtas.ie/documents/committees30thdail/j-educationscience/presentations/20101213-12.doc>

The NUI Galway Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy 2012-2014 also highlights the provision of academic skills supports as a key factor in First Year Experience and Student Engagement:

“A number of academic skills services (e.g. Academic Writing Centre, SUMS, ComputerDisc), online resources, special initiatives and formal courses will make up a broad ecosystem of supports for students **throughout their programmes of study**. The primary goal of these is to encourage active learning, build student confidence and, in association with their core discipline based modules, encourage optimum levels of intellectual engagement so that each student has the potential to flourish academically.”

<http://www.nuigalway.ie/celt/documents/revised-LTA-2012.pdf>

NUI Galway currently provides a range of supports to students in developing their core academic skills:

- Information skills training and support is provided by the Library's subject librarian team.
- The Academic Writing Centre provides support for academic writing.
- SUMS provides supports for mathematics.
- ComputerDisc provides computer programming support.
- The Learning Centre module on Blackboard provides broader study skills support by pointing students to the Skills4Study campus online resource.
- Academic schools and disciplines provide supports to students through various initiatives. For example, a Skills to Succeed module is included in the 1<sup>st</sup> year B.Comm. programme and Céim is a joint initiative between the Students Union and the College of Engineering & Informatics to provide peer-led support for first year Engineering students.

All of these support services operate independently of each other and many are funded on a project basis from year to year. This funding model is not sustainable and students are not being offered a coherent, clear package of supports. Given the perception that first year students lack the skills required to succeed at third level and the importance of these skills in student engagement and retention, it is essential that all students and academic staff are aware of the supports available.

During 2014 a project was funded by NUI Galway Student Services and the Students Union through the Students Project Fund, to carry out some research in this area. The project aimed to establish what academic skills first year students believe they were lacking in their first year in University and would have valued support with. It also investigated what skills academic staff believe first year students require and need support developing. The project identified and documented the supports currently being offered throughout the University and measured student and staff awareness of and views on these services. Best practice elsewhere in terms of academic skills support was also researched.

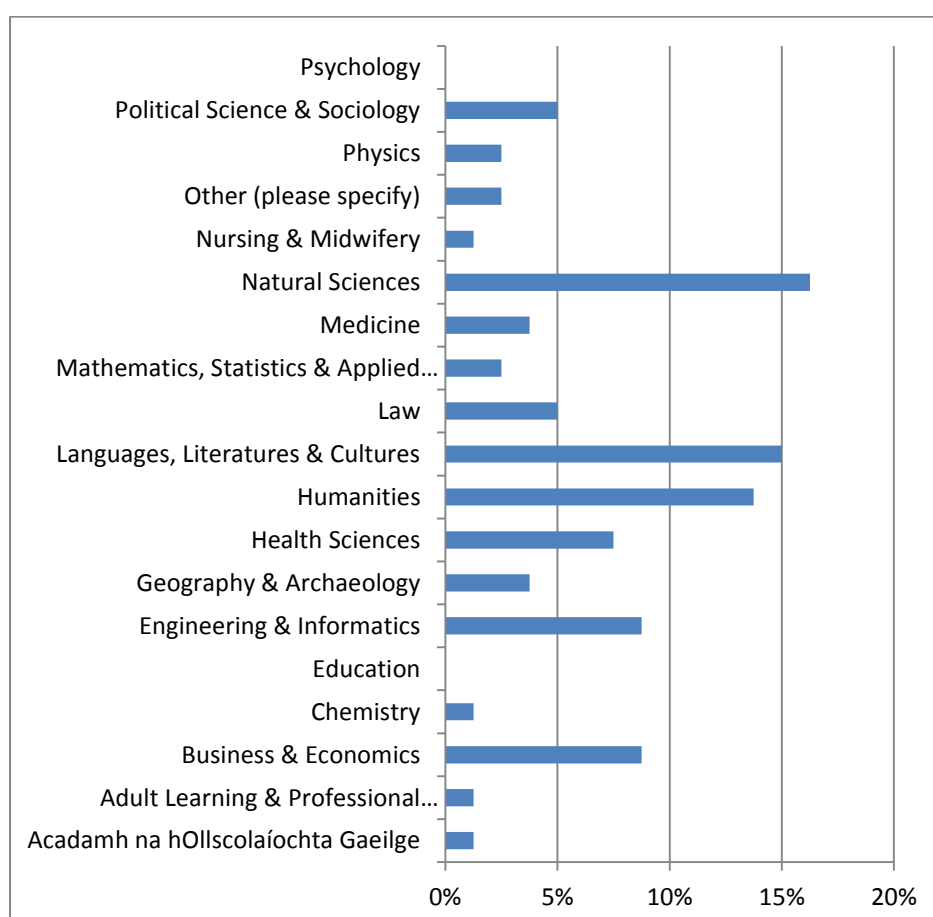
The findings of this research are reported here, and some recommendations are made in terms of a sustainable and coherent model for future skills development and support.

### 3. Methodology

The research commenced by reviewing best practice in other institutions in terms of academic skills support. This was done by means of desk research and by contacting those responsible for delivering those services.

Information was gathered and collated in relation to the academic skills support services currently on offer to NUI Galway students. The providers of these services were contacted and asked to provide information on their services, including uptake, funding and any feedback they'd received from students about their service.

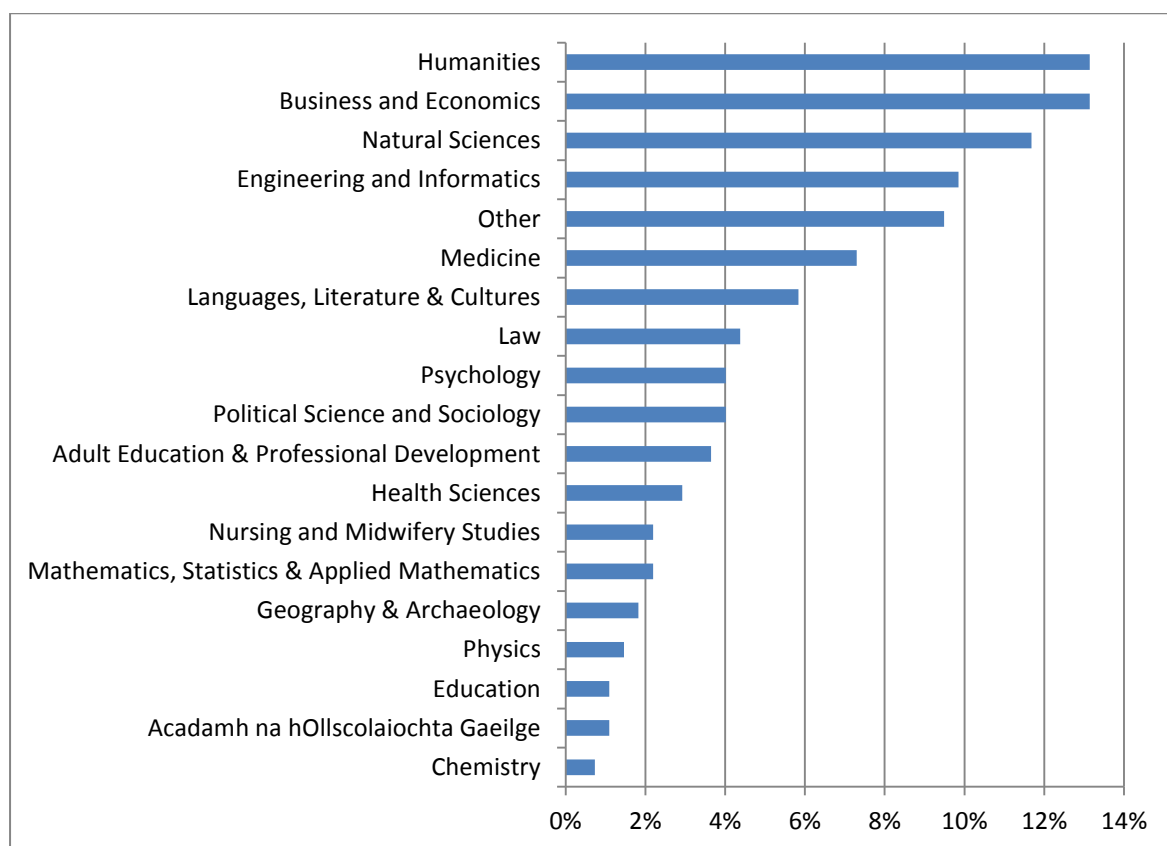
Two separate surveys were designed, tested and carried out. The first survey was directed to academic staff<sup>1</sup>. This survey ran from July 18<sup>th</sup> to August 11<sup>th</sup> 2014. As the response rate (40) was quite low, the survey was repeated in January 2015. A further 40 academic staff responded in January 2015, giving an overall response rate of 80. Almost all Schools were represented in the responses. Only the Schools of Education and Psychology yielded no respondents. By far the most responses were from the School of Natural Sciences (16%), the School of Languages, Literatures and Cultures (15%) and the School of Humanities (14%).



<sup>1</sup> Academic Staff Survey re Academic Skills Support -

<http://www.library.nuigalway.ie/media/jameshardimanlibrary/content/documents/usingthelibrary/publications/Academic%20Staff%20Skills%20Support%20Survey.pdf>

The second survey was directed to undergraduate students<sup>2</sup>. Our main aim was to target first year students, so students were invited to participate via the Learning Centre module 2013/14 on Blackboard. All first year students were automatically registered on this module, so they would all have received an email to their NUI Galway email address inviting them to participate. Other students may also have self-registered on the module and they will also have received the invitation, the respondents therefore included some non-first year students. This survey ran from September 3<sup>rd</sup> to September 14<sup>th</sup> 2014. 274 students responded. 56.6% of respondents had just completed First Year, while 43.1% had completed other years of study. One postgraduate student completed the survey. Every School in the University was represented in the survey by at least one respondent, with the greatest number of respondents being from the School of Business and Economics (13%), the School of Humanities (13%), the School of Natural Sciences (12%) and Engineering and Informatics (10%).



Both surveys and the analysis of supports available focussed on the following core academic skills:

- Effective Reading & Note-taking
- Effective Revision & Study Skills
- Research Skills & Information Literacy
- Critical & Reflective Thinking
- Academic Writing
- Referencing & Avoiding Plagiarism
- Computer Literacy & ICT Skills
- Collaborative Working

<sup>2</sup> Student Survey re Academic Skills -

<http://www.library.nuigalway.ie/media/jameshardimanlibrary/content/documents/usingthelibrary/publications/Student%20Academic%20Skills%20Survey.pdf>



- Time Management
- Problem Solving
- Communication - Public Speaking/Presentation
- Skills of Mathematics

This report is structured to look at various areas relating to academic skills support and the results of both surveys including relevant comments are included in each section. All graphs show percentage of responses.

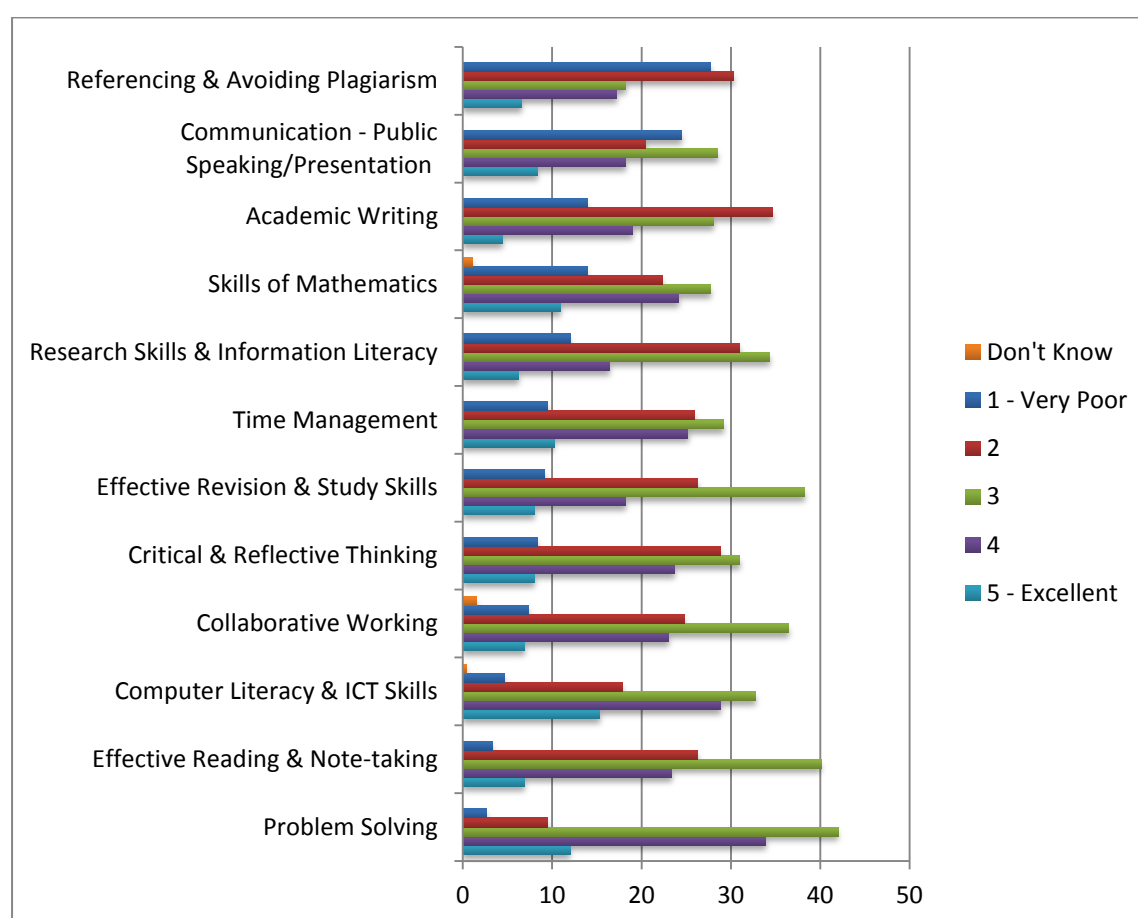
## 4. First Year Student Readiness in Terms of Academic Skills

### *Student Perceptions*

The areas that students reported having the poorest skills on entry to University (i.e. the categories with most ratings of 1 (very poor) or 2) were:

1. Referencing and Avoiding Plagiarism
2. Academic Writing
3. Communication – Public Speaking/Presentation
4. Research Skills and Information Literacy
5. Critical and Reflective Thinking

**Thinking back to your first day as an undergraduate student in NUI Galway, how would you rate your ability at that time, in each of the following academic skills categories? (Please rate from 1 to 5, where 1=very poor and 5=excellent)**



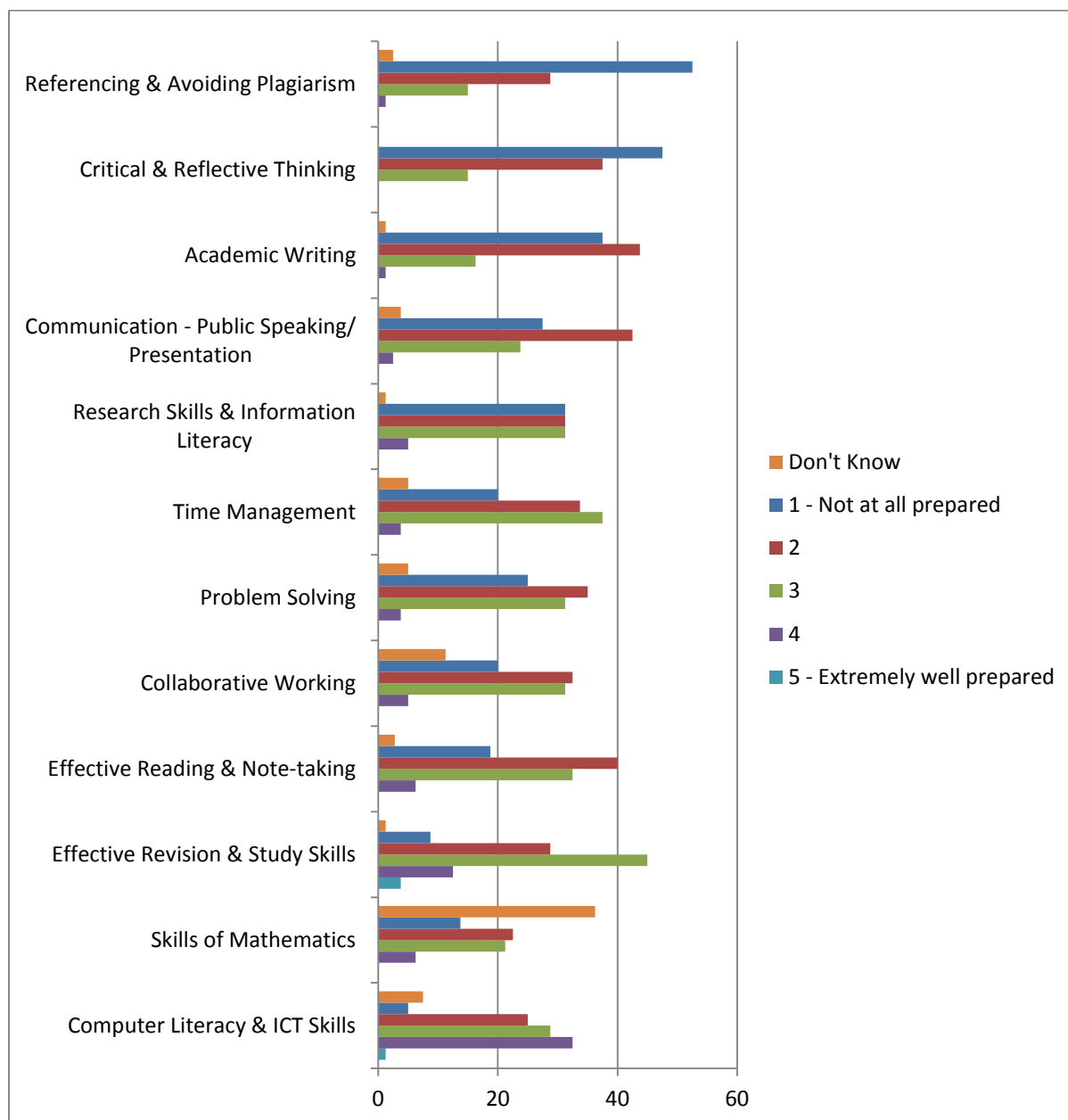
### *Academic Staff Perceptions*

The areas that academic staff reported first year students having the poorest skills on entry to University (categories with most ratings of 1 (Not at all prepared) or 2) were:

1. Critical and Reflective Thinking
2. Referencing and Avoiding Plagiarism
3. Academic Writing

4. Communication – Public Speaking/Presentation
5. Research Skills and Information Literacy

**In your view, how well prepared are incoming first year undergraduate students, in relation to each of the academic skills outlined? (Please rate from 1 to 5, where 1 = Not at all Prepared and 5=Extremely well prepared)**



Academic staff and students are in agreement on the top five areas where new students arriving at NUI Galway are least prepared for third level study. Of these, support is available from the Academic Writing Centre for academic writing and referencing and avoiding plagiarism. The subject support teams in the Library provide support and training for research skills and information literacy, as well as referencing and avoiding plagiarism. Some support for critical and reflective thinking and for giving presentations is provided within the Skills4Study Campus module, but no face-to-face support is available for this skill other than from the lecturers themselves, nor does the online module provide students with the opportunity to practice public speaking/presenting.

It is note-worthy that the position of 'Critical and Reflective Thinking' differs quite a bit between staff and students. This is reflected in many comments from academic staff about first year students' lack of confidence in their own opinions and lack of ability to think critically.

**Academic Staff comments in relation to first year undergraduate students and their academic skill-set:**

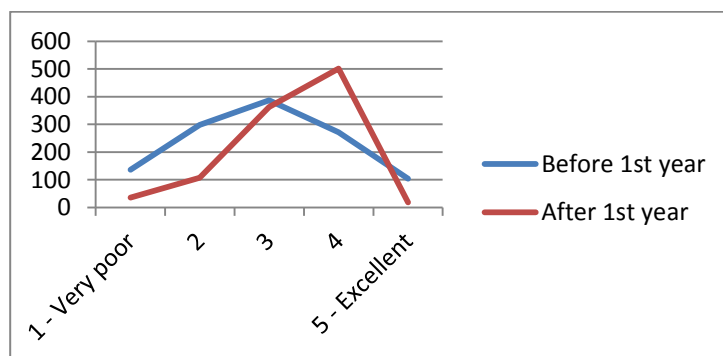
- "facility for self-directed learning is absent for, I'd estimate, 75% of 1st year (Science) students."
- "There is a need for first year undergraduate students to take ownership of their studies"
- "Building and developing the skills outlined above assist in this process, but students need to actively participate in their learning process as opposed to being a bystander."
- "They don't really understand the concept of plagiarism and referencing. They also need to be told exactly what it is they have to do. Further to this they struggle to express critical opinions in essay, preferring to provide facts and descriptions."
- "Students appear to feel that provision of lecture materials on Blackboards precludes their need to take notes, or in some cases even their attendance at lectures. This is despite research (indicated to students at study skills sessions) that students attending lectures and taking notes attain, on average, higher levels of understanding as reflected by achievement in examination and continuous assessment. Students appear to have been taught to rote learn and not where to seek information or problem solve even at the most basic level. For example if students have a question relating to exam format, even if it has been presented in class and the information included on Blackboard and highlighted as a fact sheet, many students will e-mail lecturers first before looking for the information. That said students who are finding difficulties should be able to directly contact lecturers. However, it would be better if it was about subject-specific understanding rather than information that is easily available. The first year students are entering University with increased CAO points but reduced learning skills relating to independent learning i.e. how do I find which page in a textbook will have information on a specific subject area. I should also add that this comments do not relate to all students. We have many very good students but also many that are clearly struggling."
- "I had never experienced students with so low mathematical skills before coming to Ireland - the worse being that mathematics are not embedded in the teaching program of SNS"
- "Plagiarism from internet sources is a growing and very serious problem. Many students simply don't understand that copying and pasting online material and then changing a few words is a serious academic offense. What is more, I think that it is students' lack of confidence in their own critical reading and thinking abilities that leads them to such acts of academic dishonesty to begin with. They have little confidence in their own abilities, for instance, to read a piece of literature and then make an argument about it."
- "Very poor Verbal expression when asked to respond to a question asked by Lecturer ; first years are unable and/or unwilling to contribute in a discussion format class; they don't seem to have the confidence to respond with their own unique ideas; tend to be passive learners in many cases"
- "Standards in all of these areas vary widely."
- "It is my experience that in recent years students have been taught to learn by rote and they are unwilling to move from that. They appear very closed in their view towards learning, its all exam focused and not learning focused."
- "There is a very wide range of abilities, and one of the biggest problems is getting those who lack the skills (i.e., the weaker students) to engage with the opportunities to obtain the skills."

- "Each 1st year student would benefit enormously from a compulsory small class face-to-face tutorial style module in 3rd level study skills. This is aspirational, as I realise resources do not permit this at present, however NUIG should put a plan in place to provide this for the future. Most entering students do not have sufficient independent learning experience to successfully independently follow an online module and apply its content to their own circumstances. Moreover many are reluctant to seek support voluntarily and may only do so when problems arise, rather than viewing the supports as a means of ongoing development. In addition many are unaware that their academic skills need improvement. A module with student-staff contact will enable staff to help students be aware of, and identify, their own academic strengths and weaknesses and which steps to take to improve them."
- "They are coming into science with very poor mathematical skills - many cannot do basic things like use powers of ten, let alone do algebra, trigonometry etc."
- "In my experience and in comparison to International students Irish students are completely lacking in confidence in relation to communication, presentations and public speaking. Writing ability is also very poor."
- "I feel that while they clearly have some academic skills they lack the realization that they are now responsible for their own learning."
- "In general, they lack the notion of etiquette or appropriate register when writing e-mails to their lecturers. There is also an over-dependence on the use of on-line resources in detriment of individual thinking and questioning the information they encounter."
- "There is huge variation in how well-prepared they are - the good students are v well prepared in almost all of these areas and the poor students in none of them."
- "I feel that our students often lack, and urgently need to be taught, basic skills of reading comprehension, critical thinking, and academic writing (to include sentence-level grammar as well as essay composition). I suspect that, to be effective, this teaching needs to be integrated into the 1BA1 academic programme as a compulsory core element."
- "Many of my students claimed they had never written an essay before and it was evident in their submission at the end of the semester. In short some of them should not have been admitted to this institution."
- "It's focused far too much on short term memory (exam success) and passive consumption of content. Students are very inactive and don't take responsibility for their learning success. For example they can work in groups if organised by their lecturer, but they don't collaborate naturally organised by themselves, or when they get an assignment back with comments and advice for improvement, they are only interested in the grade but not actually in the comments and would not work at those weaker points until the next assignment unless it is directly worded as a "homework" by the lecturer."
- "In many instances, they are unaware of what is expected of them. They should be made more generically aware of the grading systems, what is expected of them, why learning standards matter, why the university should have a responsibility to cull/remove students who should not really be in university, and they should start building a CV from the day they set foot in the university...that is evaluated every year as a continuous professional development."
- "Students in the sciences don't require (yet) much in the way of Academic Writing, Research Skills, Referencing etc. So a low score on these does not mean that it is a priority to do something about them (yet). It is far more important to address their mathematical, ICT, problem solving, and critical thinking skills - even if they come in to university with a modest scoring already in those categories."

## 5. Requirement for Academic Skills Support

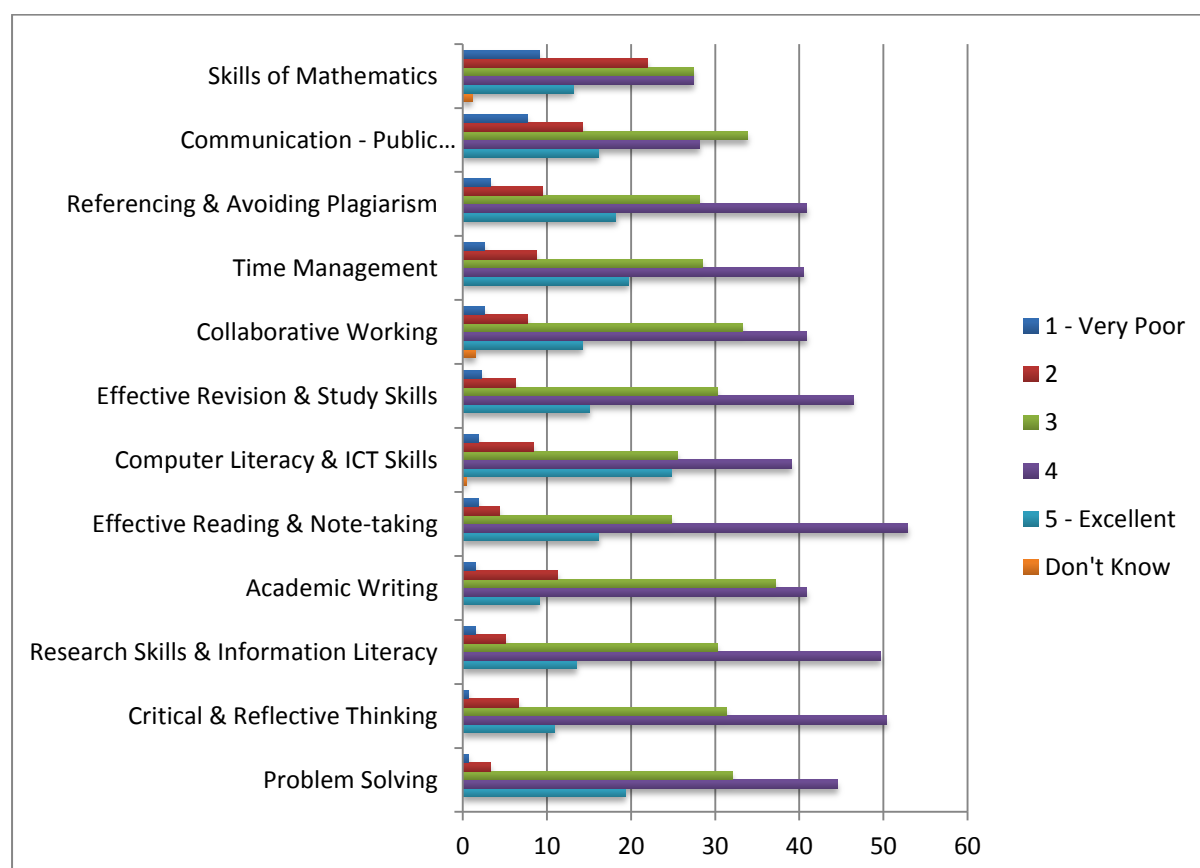
### Student Perceptions

Most student respondents believe that their academic skills significantly improved during first year. The graph below shows the frequency each rating was selected across all skills before and after 1<sup>st</sup> year.



The table below shows their perceptions of their abilities after first year, and as shown above there is a notable shift in all areas towards the more positive end of the scale in comparison with the ability levels they reported having at the start of first year (see Section 3 above).

**After completing your first year of undergraduate study, how would you now rate your ability in each of the following academic skills categories? (Please rate from 1 to 5, where 1=Very Poor and 5=Excellent)**



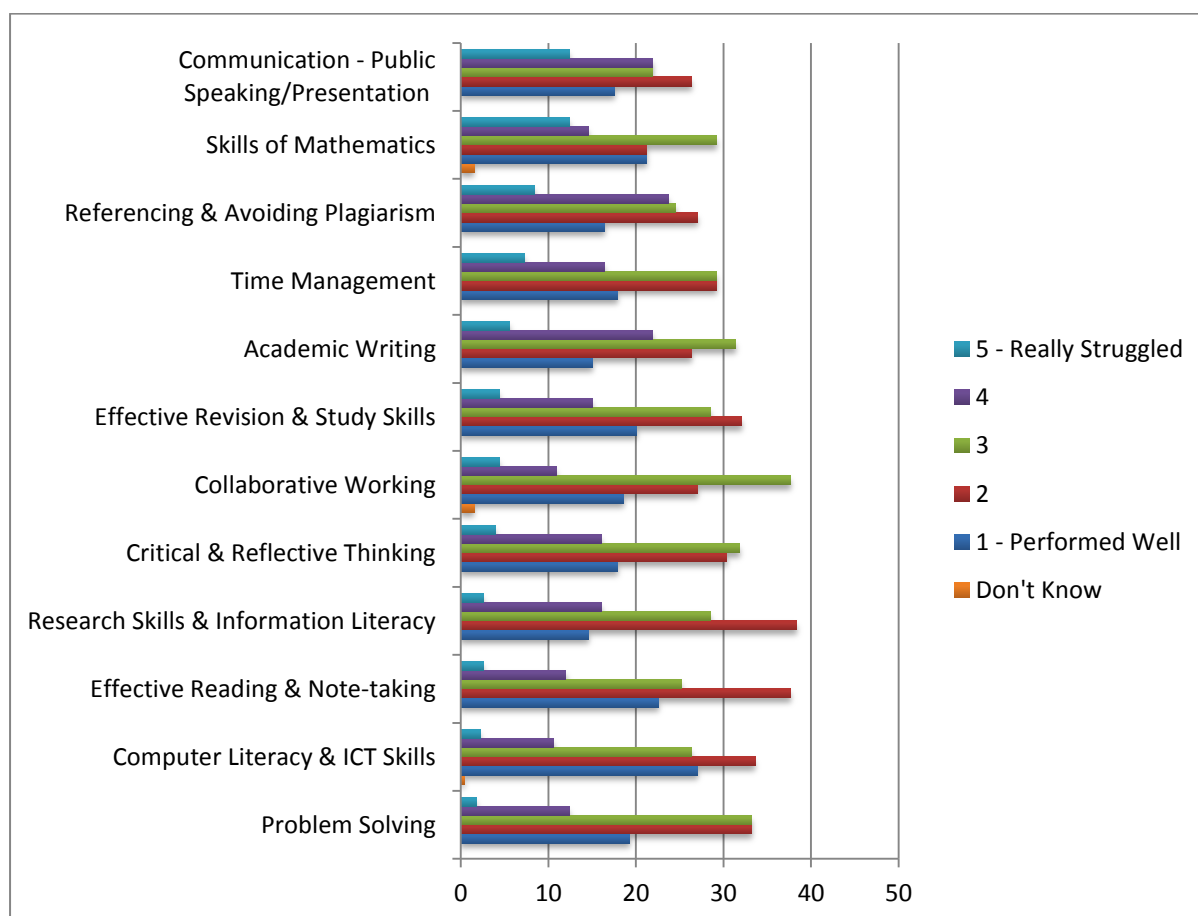
Interestingly, the areas that the students reported as having poorest abilities at the end of first year differed quite significantly from the poorest 5 at the start of first year:

1. Skills of Mathematics
2. Communication – Public Speaking/Presentation
3. Referencing and Avoiding Plagiarism
4. Academic Writing
5. Time Management

Not surprisingly these were also the areas that students reported struggling with during first year, but in a slightly different order:

1. Communication – Public Speaking/Presentation
2. Referencing and Avoiding Plagiarism
3. Academic Writing
4. Skills of Mathematics
5. Time Management

**Do you feel that you struggled with any of the following areas as part of your first year of study at NUI Galway? (Please rate from 1 to 5, where 1= Performed Well and 5=Really Struggled)**



The comments below indicate a wide range of other areas where students struggled during their first year. Some common themes emerging are difficulty understanding what's expected in assignments or exams, time management and motivation and some level of IT or Blackboard difficulty.

**Are there any other areas where you feel that you struggled academically during your first year of study in NUI Galway? (Sample of Additional Comments)**

- "Critical Thinking was my biggest achievement of first year but it was also the most difficult aspect to accomplish."
- "I struggled with exams in theory question, as I found essay type question very hard to follow."
- "Referencing was and still is my biggest struggle, classes in library always clashed with important lectures or tutorials, classes on Saturdays would be better."
- "Prioritising workload was a challenge."
- "Just motivation to study, especially in pre-med when I knew that I didn't need to remember the science modules for the next year."
- "Mainly there is a long period in between realising you need help and finding the right person to ask."
- "Referencing is very hard and not enough help with it I found. Computer skills and assistance with this matter is also lacking, being a mature student I find computers difficult to understand. Meeting deadlines in November was really difficult as it seemed there was a lot of work thrown at us then just whilst trying to prep for exams as well."
- "Overall structure of academic assignments, given very little guidance."
- "Managing time as each module required different workload."
- "The use of grammar and not having very effective proof reading abilities."
- "Secondary school and leaving cert in particular does not prepare you for the type of work that is required at university, I would even go as far as saying it is almost irrelevant. The leaving cert discourages students to think for themselves which is a very important aspect of university."
- "Understanding what was required in academic writing, what an 'A' essay looks like or what an 'A' answer looks like. trying to write something that has never been seen, makes it very difficult to grasp what is being asked."
- "I think everyone should have proper one on one interaction with a mentor for help because most people were very shy to ask for help"
- "There needs to be proper help for writing essays and avoiding plagiarism."
- "the library, I also found that there were no writing support classes for part time students that attend college on saturday, very annoying."
- "Initially I struggled with writing essays. Once i started to go to the academic writing center and taking on board their advice, my grades improved considerably."
- "over all in year one, i made mistakes in which i taught i could manage better both out side and inside academic year"
- "age/mature student"
- "SUMS is a great idea and there are lots of helpful people, but many people doing science do not have the time opportunities that others have as labs coincide. This is a massive problem in 2nd year if you are doing Earth and Ocean Science as there are 3 labs a week, so access to SUMS becomes even more limited"
- "Finding class venues"
- "The layout of assignments"



- "Finding space in the college to work and study."
- "Preparation for exams and not understanding what was expected in the exams was very difficult. Note taking was extremely difficult and I would say that blackboard at the beginning was tricky to understand. The library website is not user friendly either."
- "The department could make more of an effort to get new members of the class to integrate quicker into the class."
- "IT, finding relevant reference information & avoiding plagiarism (knowing what constituted plagiarism)"
- "Certain Maths/economics & The concept of having to Buy a book...Or you Fail that Module is not Right & brings stress levels up and this effects work done"
- "Actually getting around to study and properly attending lectures. Too easy to fall out of the habit when you realise nobody is checking, very, very hard to get back into it."
- "getting assignments in on time when we had a lot to do"
- "With the new layout of learning and there being much more continuous assessment"
- "Settling down to do revision and keeping track of all my notes and lectures as so much is going on."
- "I struggled with getting used to the library."
- "Exam preparation"
- "Meeting deadlines for assignments, trying to work against procrastination."
- "effective reading and note taking."
- "Yes, interpretation of tutors requests for assignments. Majority were clear and understandable. However one was definitely confusing with regards to the content requested and when i gave it in i was totally on the wrong track. My confidence was completely knocked and i feel it affected my further performance in assignments negatively. My problem i know but very distressing in my first year."
- "Focusing in class and studies"
- "Just the calculus, I had never done it before."
- "Asking questions during lectures"

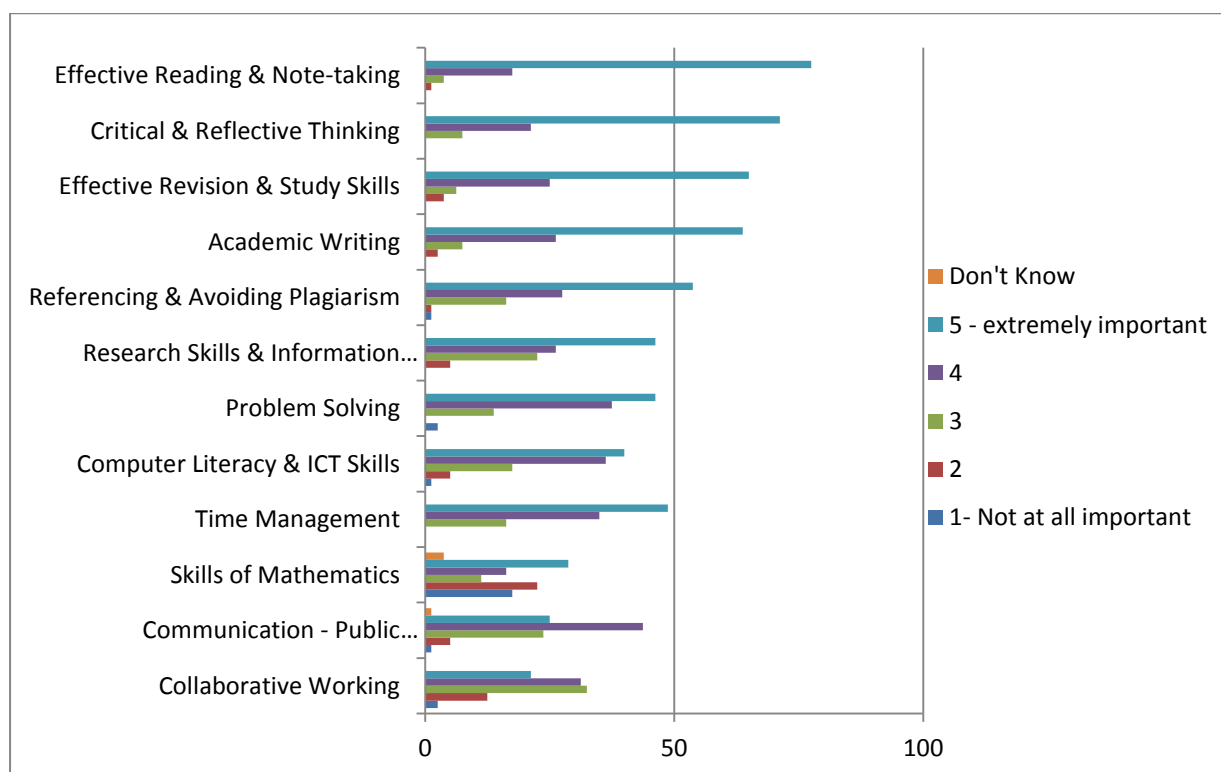
### *Academic Staff Perceptions*

Academic staff were asked how important they felt the various skills were to facilitate academic success and quality and in-depth learning for first year students. Combining the Extremely important and Important rankings, we find that the most important skills according to academic staff are:

1. Effective Reading and Note-taking
2. Critical and Reflective Thinking
3. Effective Revision and Study Skills
4. Academic Writing
5. Time Management

It is note-worthy that two of these are areas where students reported struggling during their first year: Academic Writing and Time Management.

**In your view, how important are each of the following academic skills in relation to facilitating academic success & quality, in-depth learning for first year undergraduate students? (Please rate from 1 to 5, where 1=Not at all important and 5=extremely important)**



#### Other generic academic skills that academic staff feel should be included:

- "Exam preparation. Change of format of assessment in third level assessment."
- "Independent Learning." / "Self-learning"
- "A willingness to be open to new ways of thinking, studying and learning."
- "They need to understand the difference between learning to deepen knowledge (university) and learning to pass exams (leaving cert). This is a fundamental error many make and their shallow first year knowledge then fails to equip them properly for subsequent years. Extremely important."
- "English language competency. Ability to retain information that is only communicated verbally. Taking responsibility for their own learning. Self-directed learning."
- "Listening and learning in Large Groups (Lectures) - extremely important."
- "Within computer literacy, use of spreadsheets for data manipulation and creating graphs is key. Also use of Google Earth. Understanding how to use academic databases e.g. Web of Science also critical."
- "Professional Writing/Communications Skills"
- "Professionalism"
- "Active Participation"
- "independent thinking ability to have an informed opinion of their own confidence and comfort in expressing own opinion"
- "academic writing- the basics. i.e.- sentence construction, homophones and the common mistakes re same (that can have significant implications etc). Sticking to word counts, correct referencing etc."
- "How to read, how to summarise, how to identify the essential in that order"
- "Interpersonal skills, confidence in building professional relationships"
- "Career Guidance and Management skills" / "Career Planning"

- “1. Learning to recognise their own learning styles 2. Effective techniques for memorising essential linguistic materials (vocabulary, irregular verbs etc)”
- “English language skills often very poor - poor grammar, poor vocabulary, also many lack the ability to accurately describe and explain things. Judging by exam scripts there are a number of dyslexic students who are unaware they have dyslexia.”
- “Ability differentiate between thinking and just "memorising", more resilience /frustration tolerance (not giving up on tasks just because there is an obstacle)”
- “Transitioning from rote learning to pass exams to continuous learning and development of critical thinking and analytical capabilities. Most students are only studying to pass exams (having been trained in secondary school to do this as an alternative to learning).”
- “Searching for connections (a) between compartmentalised modules/topics and (b) between those topics and the student's real-world experiences. Importance: 4”

## 6. Academic Skills Support Services at NUI Galway

### Academic Writing Centre

The Academic Writing Centre provides support on academic writing to all students of NUI Galway. It delivers this support through:

- Free one-to-one tutorials (drop-in or appointment) on essay writing (grammar, punctuation, spelling, structure).
- Help with identifying areas for improvement based on completed written work, rough drafts or past assignments.
- Group workshops for undergraduate students.
- Group writing sessions for PhD students.
- An online module on academic writing that improves students' writing through guided writing and editing tasks - AWC Online
- Online resources, including video tutorials & faculty recommendations, via AWC website & Facebook page

<http://www.library.nuigalway.ie/awc/>

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Academic-Writing-Centre-NUI-Galway/251359598231815>

### Location

Floor 2, James Hardiman Library

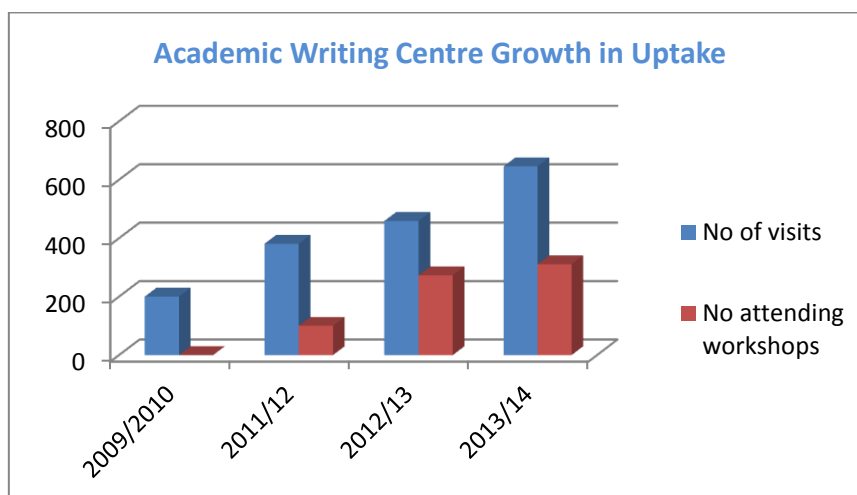
### Opening Hours (Academic Term)

11:00 – 13:00 (Mon – Fri)

18:00 – 21:00 (Mon – Thurs)

Bíonn seirbhís Ghaeilge ar fail Dé Luain (18.00-20.00) agus Dé Máirt (18.00-20.00).

### Take-up



During the 2013/14 academic year, the Academic Writing Centre provided 646 one-to-one sessions, 9 phone consultations, 17 workshops and 5 writing sessions for PhD students. An online module on academic writing (AWC Online) was undertaken by a 175 students as an embedded part of their academic programme. In total, 957 students across all disciplines availed of the services of the Academic Writing Centre. Ref: AWC Annual Report 2013/14. This represents a 31% increase on the

previous year, continuing an upward trend in demand for the services of the Academic Writing Centre since its inception in 2009, as can be seen on the graph above.

### **Feedback**

The AWC is highly valued by the students who use it, with 58% finding a session with the AWC met their expectations and 36% saying the session exceeded their expectations. 81% of AWC users strongly agree that the service is valuable, while a further 16% agree that it is valuable.

- "It is a friendly environment and you don't feel to be judged. It gives great feedback on your work (so you can improve) your writing skills. They pick up mistakes you hadn't noticed. You are encouraged to think about your essay overall."
- "I was very nervous, but now I feel much better."

(Ref: AWC Annual Report 2013/14)

### **Funding**

The Academic Writing Centre was allocated an annual budget of €28,800 in 2013/14. This budget is used exclusively to employ the manager of the AWC and to fund tutor hours (778.5 hours in 13/14). All non-pay purchasing is funded from the Library's non-pay account. For the last two years, the Centre has bid for and received additional funding from other sources:

<b>2013/14 Additional Funding</b>		<b>2012/13 Additional Funding</b>	
Disability Support Service	€5,200	Disability Support Service	€1,202
Student Project Fund	€12,000	Explore	€1,000

(Ref: AWC Annual Report 2013/14 and Annual Report 2012/13)

### **Information Skills Support**

Navigating your way through the wealth of information available on a particular topic can be a daunting task. The library's subject support teams provide support, help and training to enable students to build their skills in finding, evaluating and using information.

As well as being available for one-to-one enquiries and consultations, the subject support teams provide training sessions as an embedded part of academic programmes or as open, drop-in sessions. Online training tutorials and guides to information seeking are also available via the Library website, including an online self-directed module Information Skills Online.

Contact details for the Library's team supporting specific subject areas can be found at:

<http://www.library.nuigalway.ie/support/subjectsupport>.

The programme of open training events available is at:

<http://www.library.nuigalway.ie/support/training/>

Online tutorials and guides are available at:

<http://www.library.nuigalway.ie/support/training/self-directedonlinelearning/>

### **Location**

The subject teams are located in various subject offices throughout the James Hardiman Library. See the Subject support pages of the Library website for details.

<http://www.library.nuigalway.ie/support/subjectsupport>.

### **Opening Hours**

Subject Support Offices: 09:00 – 17:00 (Mon-Fri)  
Library & IT Support Desk: 08.30 – 22.00 (Mon-Fri)  
08.30 – 13.00 (Sat)

### **Take-up**

During the 2013/14 academic year a total of 8,937 students attended information skills workshops or training sessions provided by Library staff. This represents a 69% increase in the numbers reached since 2009/10. In addition to this, students availed of one-to-one support from the Library's subject support teams on a daily basis.



### **Feedback**

Feedback from students who attended information skills workshops was extremely positive. 57% agreed that the session met their expectations, while 30% strongly agreed. Over 90% felt confident that they would be able to use the skills learned during the workshop they attended.

- "I found the training very useful and beneficial to my course. When I first went in, it was quite intimidating but this was not the case by the end of the tour and training. Thank you"
- "I wasn't expecting it to be so helpful."

(Ref: Library Training Annual Report 2013/14)

### **Funding**

Information Skills support does not attract specific funding. It is delivered to undergraduate and taught postgraduate students by the Library's Subject Support Teams. These teams consist of 5.1 FTE Subject Librarians (Assistant Librarian Grade) and 5 FTE Information Assistants (Senior Library Assistant Grade). These staff also have responsibility for collection development in their subject areas, however the majority of their time is spent designing and delivering information skills workshops and meeting with students one-to-one to support their information skills development.

### **Skills4Study Campus**

Skills4StudyCampus is an interactive e-learning resource for students, focusing on core study skills needed for university success. Each lesson features a range of interactive materials to help students learn, develop and accelerate their study skills. Skills4StudyCampus has been designed to support the needs of students across all departments and subjects. Modules include: Getting ready for

academic study, Reading and note-making, Critical thinking skills, Writing skills, Referencing and understanding plagiarism, Groupwork and presentations, Exam skills, Projects, dissertations and reports, Employability and personal development, Confidence with numbers, Time management.

### ***Location***

Skills4Study Campus is an online learning module available via Blackboard module: TLC100 – The Learning Centre. First year students are automatically enrolled on this module, while all staff and students can self-enroll. This module contains information about some of the academic skills supports offered by NUI Galway and a link to Skills4Study Campus is available under Study Skills.

### ***Opening Hours***

This service is available online, 24/7/365.

### ***Take Up***

During 2013/14, 2621 students accessed the online study skills resource - Skills4Study Campus. During that time 12,177 pages of content were viewed by NUI Galway Students. The most popular modules were: Getting Ready for Academic Study, Reading and Note-taking and Critical Thinking Skills.

### ***Feedback***

No feedback is sought from students about Skills4Study Campus. However, the average length of time students stay using the resource once they login is 44 minutes. This is extremely high and a good indicator that students are finding the resource valuable. The publisher of Skills4Study campus has indicated that use of this resource at NUI Galway is significantly higher and user sessions are longer than at other subscribing universities.

### ***Funding***

Skills4Study was originally funded by the Registrar's Office through a joint initiative of the Library and CELT. The resource has been fully funded by the Disability Support Office since 2013. The total annual cost for the three years from 2014/15 to 2016/17 will be €11,070 per annum (including VAT). A new module on Research Principles, which includes information skills and research methodologies, is currently on trial. This will increase the price if taken on as well.

## **Online Computer Training Module**

ICT skills are becoming more and more important, not least in the education sector. With requirements for word processing, data analysis and creative presentation now a core part of academic courses across the board at NUI Galway, it is critical that students should have a solid grounding in the use of computer applications.

### ***Location***

A computer training module was available online via Blackboard up to Summer 2014. This module offered ECDL (European Computer Driving Licence) preparation courses. The ECDL courses were run at "Core" and "Advanced" levels and were free for all students and staff of NUI Galway. However, students were expected to pay an exam fee to sit the ECDL exams and to gain certification.

### ***Take Up***

No statistics are available, but the take up was reported as being low in recent years.

### ***Funding***

The license for the online learning modules costs €7,000 per annum. Up to three years ago, the license fee was funded by ISS, while staff from the College of Arts looked after the Blackboard course within which the modules were delivered and managed the ECDL centre, including running ECDL exams. For the last three years the license fee has been paid by the College of Arts. During Summer 2014, it was decided that given the low number of students finishing ECDL and being awarded the certificate, the cost and staff time involved was not justified. This skill support is therefore no longer available to students.

### ***S.U.M.S. (Support for Undergraduate Maths Students)***

A large number of academic courses offered at NUI Galway involve some level of mathematics, whether it is the main focus of the course, or a secondary skill. In either event, it is important for students to have specialized support available to assist with difficulties, where they may not feel comfortable approaching a lecturer directly. The SUMS initiative, run by the Mathematics department of NUI Galway, offers this support, with tutors available at designated times, who specialize in the more troublesome areas of mathematics.

SUMS offers mathematics support to students across all colleges and courses, as well as to students engaged in Access/Foundation courses, by offering:

- Dedicated drop-in centre, staffed by friendly and supportive tutors.
- One-to-one or group-tuition as required.
- Supervised study.
- Access to relevant textbooks.
- PC access and printing/photocopying facilities.

### ***Location***

Áras De Brún, Room C116 – Ground Floor

### ***Opening Hours (Academic Term)***

14:00 - 17:00 (Mon- Fri)

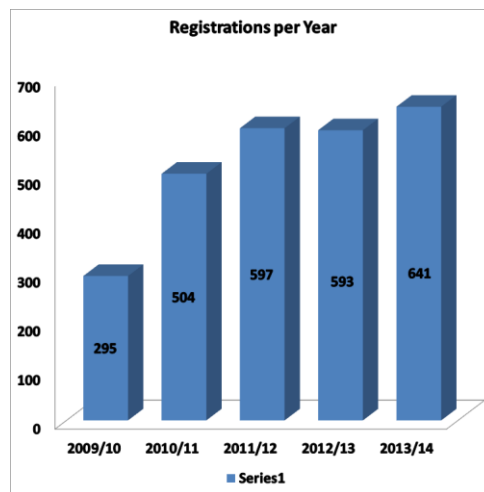
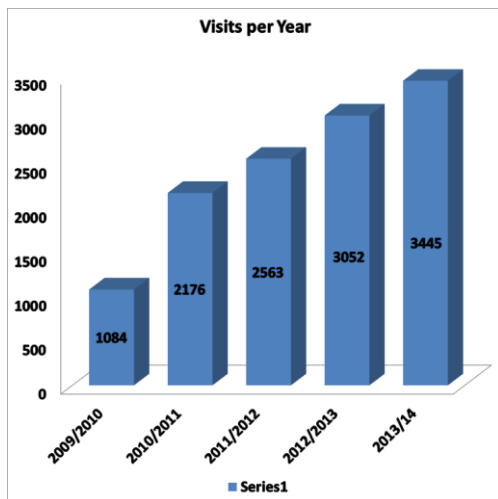
Friday afternoons are specially dedicated to students taking Access/Foundation courses and Mature students, although these students are also welcome to attend the centre at any time.

More detailed information about timetabling and tutors on duty can be found on the SUMS website: <http://www.maths.nuigalway.ie/sums/>

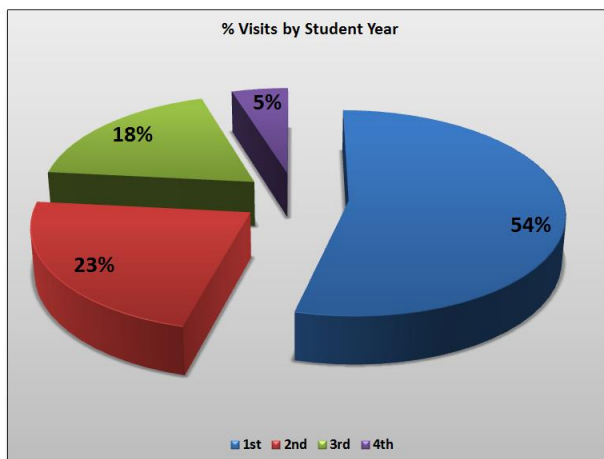
### ***Take up***

Attendance at SUMS has increased by 13%, from 3052 visits in 2012/13 to 3445 visits in 2013/14. The year on year growth of attendance at SUMS is illustrated below.





A total of 641 distinct students attended SUMS this year compared with 593 distinct students in 2012/13. The year on year variation in this figure is illustrated below, with 54% of all attendees coming from the first year undergraduate population.



(Ref: SUMS End of Year Report 2013/14)

### Feedback

Student feedback via a survey carried out by SUMS indicates an extremely positive attitude from students towards SUMS and the service it provides. With respect to the adequacy of the opening hours of SUMS, the response is a little more lukewarm than other aspects of the service. This is not surprising since the continued growth in the number of students using SUMS means that the centre can be overcrowded particularly around exam time.

Some sample comments from the survey:

- "The room can get very overcrowded. The work the tutors do is exceptional. Without their assistance I would not be getting such good grades. Excellent work guys!"
- "SUMS was absolutely brilliant. I'm just finished my degree now and would have been lost without it. I hope it stays open for other students in the upcoming years."
- "More space required."
- "I was actually helped in SUMS by fellow students (from the same module, course, etc) who happened to be there at the same time, so I think this is also a valuable part of SUMS."

- "SUMS is a great asset to NUIG! The tutors are AWESOME! Thank you SUMS for all your assistance for the past 3 years, I'll see you in January!"
- "Would like it to be open evenings or Saturdays."
- "I was almost giving up my course till I went to SUMS. I have gone from having no confidence in maths to enjoying maths and have passed on this to my two sons in secondary school."
- "The timetable for the tutors that I needed often clashed with the lecture that also covered the material."
- "SUMS = magnificent service. Room is small, grungy & no longer fit for purpose-with NUIG building endlessly for the past 5 years a decent room about 3 times the size of the current one is now required. Give SUMS bigger budget please please these people need to be decently resourced and make it a 9 to 5 service too."

Ref: SUMS End of Year Report 2013/14

### **Funding**

No funding information was supplied.

### **ComputerDISC**

ComputerDISC (**Computer** Programming **Drop-In** Support **Centre**) is a resource for all NUI Galway students that study any computer programming. The purpose of ComputerDISC, which opened in November 2010, is to provide support to students with their self-directed learning in computing topics at all years and levels. It is designed to complement the lectures, tutorials, labs and other supports that are currently available to students. ComputerDISC is staffed by a Lab Manager and four experienced tutors with a wide range of programming skills. A dedicated room has been designed and fitted out in a prominent location in the IT Building offering the following facilities:

- Desk space with desktop PCs
- Desk space for people to sit with their own laptops or work on paper
- Round tables for group discussions and tutorials
- Whiteboards, one that is electronic and one regular whiteboard
- A data projector, printer, scanner and photocopier
- Programming books for reference

### **Location**

Room 205, Information Technology Building

### **Opening Hours (Academic Term)**

14:00 – 18:00 (Mon – Fri)

### **Take up**

The total number of new registered students in 2013/14 was 168. These registered users were broken up into 23% female students and 77% male students. 17 percent of the new registered visitors were mature students, 6 percent were registered with the Access Office and 5 percent of visitors were registered with the Disability Office. The total number of visits to ComputerDISC in 2013/14 was 1066

(Ref: ComputerDISC Annual Report 2013/14)

### **Feedback**

Student feedback via a survey run by ComputerDISC was extremely positive, with 93% of students finding the knowledge of the tutors Excellent or Good and 83% finding the tutors' ability to explain concepts Excellent or Good. Some comments from that survey:

- "The willingness of the tutors to help."
- "Friendly helpful staff and a really nice atmosphere to the place."
- "the lads are brill at problem solving and showing usrs how to search for answers themselves"
- "Very good experience I found the tutors approachable and helpful."
- "The tutors went above and beyond in helping me"
- "I found it really helpful and wish I was aware of it earlier. I feel I could have really benefited from more time spent there."
- "Staff were excellent but more needed. Demand was high"
- "The only negative experience I've had was entering the room wanting to learn something in particular only for there to be no free spaces left and having to return at a time that wouldn't particularly suit me."
- "negative experiences is when there is no pc or tutor free to assist"

(Ref: ComputerDISC Annual Report 2013/14)

### **Funding**

No funding information was supplied.

### **Disability Support Service**

NUI Galway positively values the participation of students who have a disability, illness or specific learning difficulty and promotes a university experience of the highest quality for all students. The Disability Support Service promotes inclusive practices throughout the campus community and are committed to the provision of an equitable learning environment that will enable all students to become independent learners and highly skilled graduates.

The shared vision of Student Services which inspires the actions of the Disability Support Service is: 'Every NUI Galway student will be supported to actively engage with the university experience to maximise their potential for learning and leadership for life and work.'

### **Services Provided**

(Note that most of these services and training are available to all NUI Galway students, only those flagged with 'Registered Students only' are restricted to those registered with the Disability Support Service)

- Learning Support Tutors (Registered students only)
- Assistive Technology (Registered students only)
- Mind-Genius (mind-mapping software)
- Read/Write Gold (literacy): reads on-screen text, convert text to mp3, highlights "confusable" words, spelling & grammar, gives words in context.
- Time management training
- Proof-reading training
- Group Work training

- Smart pens

(Ref: Interview with Disability Support Officer)

### ***Location***

Room 216, Áras Uí Chathail

### ***Opening Hours***

09:30 – 12:30 & 14:30 – 16:00 (Mon-Fri)

### ***Take up***

Currently, the Disability Support Service provides support to 492 students who are registered with the service. The Disability Support Service report that the lack of a designated training space is a challenge for them in delivering their services. The lack of continuity of service this causes results in poor uptake of their training courses.

### ***Discipline Specific Supports***

In addition to the academic supports outlined above, NUI Galway also offers some discipline-specific supports to assist students of various courses of study in their development of the necessary tools to succeed in their specific field.

Some examples are briefly outlined below:

### ***Skills to Succeed***

As part of the B.Comm. and B.Comm. Accounting, students have the opportunity to undertake this module, focusing on work/life skills such as writing and presenting, planning, research skills etc. The module is based on 100% continuous assessment and is worth 5 ECTS.

### ***CÉIM at NUI Galway***

CÉIM is an academic peer-led support scheme for 1st year Engineering students. Groups of 1st years meet with trained 2nd year Student Leaders to learn from each other for one hour once a week. Sessions are student led and are about working in small groups to gain a greater understanding of coursework, prepare for exams, develop new skills and become successful university students. Sessions are about collaborative learning and are not like a lecture or a tutorial.

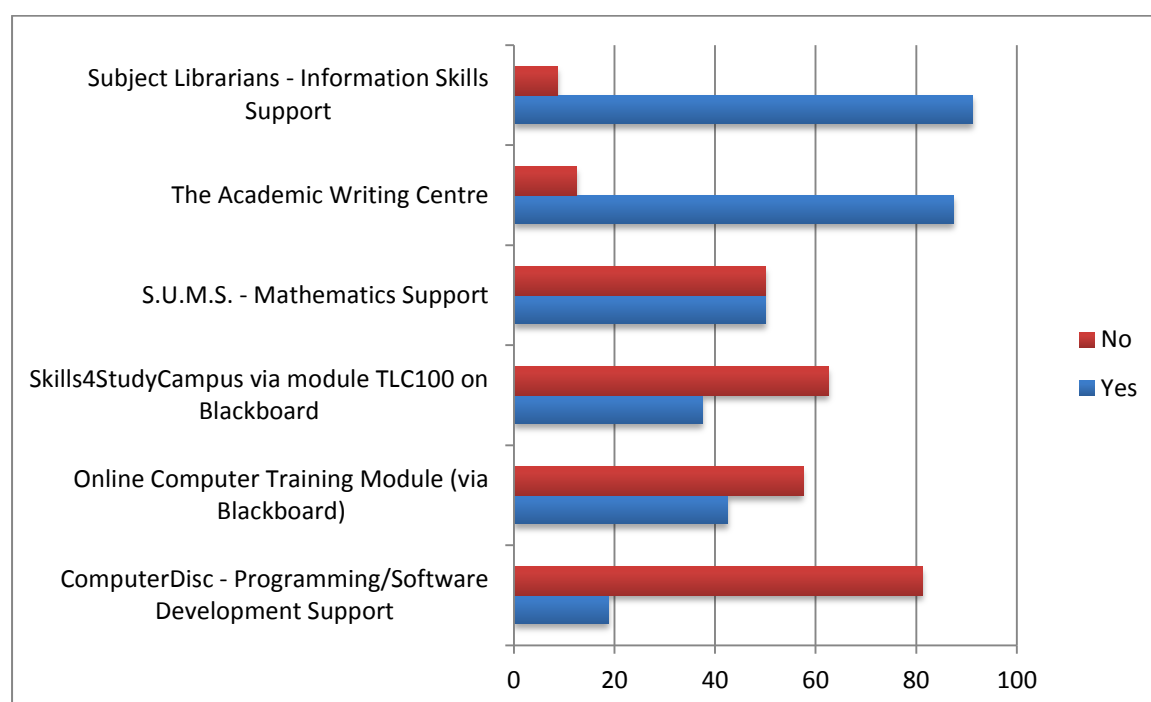
## 7. Academic Staff and Student Views on Academic Skills Support Services at NUI Galway

### Awareness of Supports Available

Awareness of the academic skills supports available are disappointingly low amongst academic staff and while somewhat better amongst the student population, there are still many students who are not aware of the supports available to them.

### Academic Staff Awareness

**Up to this point, were you aware of the following Academic Skills Support services offered by the University to its students?**



**Please add other academic skills support services, not already listed, that you are aware of in NUI Galway:**

- "Disability Office"
- "Discussion in groups...very important for learning and increasing used in interviews for jobs."
- "Careers Service dept."
- "Some departments and schools are involved in intensive induction programmes with first years."
- "Support for students with dyslexia and other learning disabilities."
- "LARK" – The Library's online Information Skills module  
<http://vmserver83.nuigalway.ie/LARK/LARK/>
- "Dont know of others, but would like to see independent evaluation of existing skills support services in terms of their cost-benefit to the university and to students."

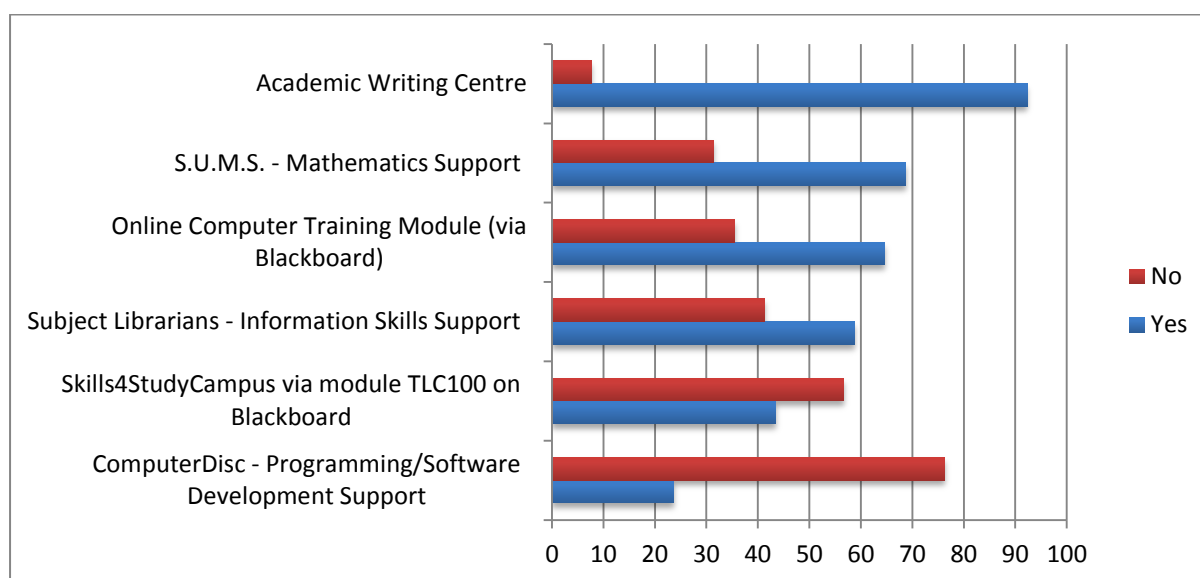
### Academic Staff Comments re Awareness:

- "I think awareness among academic community is important so that we can reinforce the value of these supports to our students. "

- “Constant updates in relation to training events being run in the college would be very helpful (marked as important on outlook). More media coverage of support services (posters etc. around campus) may also keep these supports at the front of our minds. Additionally for those students who may not feel comfortable coming to lecturers for help would also be able to access this information. “
- “All academic staff need reminding of these supports annually as supports change, lecturers change and it's good to be up to date to give relevant advice to students who need further supports.”
- “An email to academics at least once a term outlining the supports available and reminding them to refer students would be useful. It may already happen and I might have overlooked it! I find our subject librarians excellent.”

### Student Awareness

**Up to this point, were you aware of the following Academic Skills Support services offered by the University to its students?**



### Student Comments re Awareness:

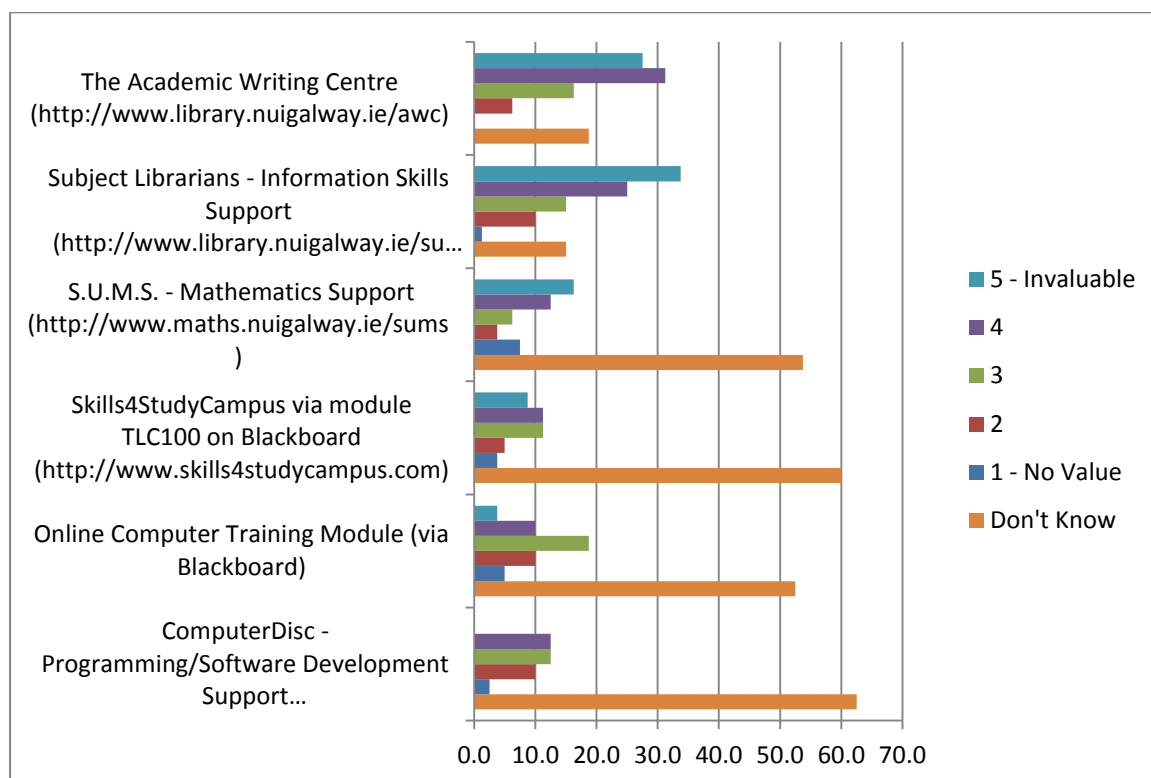
- Didn't realize subject librarians existed, mostly because I tend to buy books I think.
- Never heard of "computerdisc", could have proved handy in 2nd year physics
- I was aware of the Skills4Study site on Blackboard but was unable to access it. I find that there are suggestions for these areas but it is difficult to find them or to access them.
- SUMS and DISC are only available for students doing Maths and IT subjects. I would definitely like to access maths support, to enable me to reach a higher level, but not undergrad level, just to refresh areas relevant to me that I struggled with at school level, which are relevant to my subjects, like Algebra and graphs etc. This isn't possible.

## Perceived Value of Academic Skills Supports Available

The level of 'don't know' responses from academic staff when asked about the value of the supports available, reinforces the message from the previous question that there is insufficient awareness amongst academics about the supports available. It is interesting that the support most valued by academic staff (the Subject Librarians) is so little known about by their students.

### Academic Staff Perception of Value

**In relation to the students that you teach as an NUI Galway lecturer, what value do you place on each of the following support services? (Please rate from 1 to 5, where 1=No Value and 5=Invaluable)**



### Academic Staff Comments on the value of academic skills supports in NUI Galway

- "We need more highly trained subject librarians who can help students learn how to do proper research for course assignments. Moreover, these subject librarians need to be integrated into the current curriculum in instructional roles."
- "The subject librarians are invaluable, but I think we need a more concerted first year programme teaching skills that appear to have been lost."
- "Training in excel or use of other spreadsheets would be essential "
- "Academic skills support is vital to the students. We see a lot of students with dyslexia who receive support which makes a huge difference to their performance. "
- "Independent and original thinking is the biggest challenge for first years: they have been told what to think by others for their leaving cert prep and appear shocked at times when expected to express what they themselves think; European, Canadian and US students have no problem in this area."
- "In 2013/14 we began a collaborative module with AWC for 1st year students, who found it of great value"

- "Students need to be informed by challenges they face in 20-30 years. Various on line reports on The World in 2050 are sobering for Europe. The opportunity to study in University is the time for students to prepare for this challenge. "
- "I think that first years should have an intensive induction, and it should be compulsory. "
- "Support in stress management for students is also beneficial but is perhaps already covered in time management. "
- "These supports are commendable initiatives and I have heard some success stories from those I know of. However, because they detached from core academic activity, I fear that their services and the skills they promote will be seen by students as optional extras. What we need is a deep cultural change in the university's expectations of students and the support we give them. I feel that it can't be done with add-ons."
- "Many of our students either don't know about these resources or don't think they necessarily are for them. I think most would find them extremely valuable."
- "In fact I do not know which students I teach do use these supports and I would also need to investigate what is taught (sic) in them to judge properly"
- "Our students are adult learners, many of which have been out of education for many years and therefore lack the very basic skills. Often the curriculum, and nature of the way the programme is structured means that sufficient time cannot always be allocated to these basics to the detriment of the students academic ability."
- "not being aware of them not possible to rate them"
- "They are all good. Different students require different support so I encourage as wide a range as possible."
- "The supports are essential for students at all levels. The support around academic writing is very strong. There could be more support around other academic skills such as presentation and public speaking which a lot of students struggle with. Academics need to encourage students to use the services more."
- "It is invaluable that these supports are available to students as they are often core skills for their progress in the course but in an already overcrowded curriculum there is often not time to schedule these. As not all students need support for these skills it is great to have a place to send students to access this support and in itself is often a first lesson for students in identifying their needs and taking responsibility to take action."
- "All of the above are exceptionally important and valuable, however 1st year students will not avail of such services unless they are made a compulsory part of their first college year."
- "I advise students of these services but do not here if they are worthwhile."
- "We incorporated an AWC component into EOS104 module in 2013/14 and are running it again this year - we think it has improved student writing skills and they seem to find it useful too."
- "Each of the supports are highly valuable. The problem is that the students most in need of them are often the students that do not make use of them....."
- "The advice of the librarians can be very hit-and-miss. Some students find them unapproachable"
- "These skills supports don't seem to be mainstreamed as generic 5 ECTS modules across all of 1st year. This would make them more visible / relevant."
- "SUMS (their Numeracy Diagnostic Test) has been a game changer, for identifying and tackling the often appalling maths skills in a fair proportion of incoming science students."
- "Where is evidence they are needed and are meeting a need"



### Student Perception of Value

The supports most sought by students (combining scores of 5 and 4) were:

- Referencing and Avoiding Plagiarism
- Academic Writing
- Research Skills and Information Literacy
- Communication – Public Speaking/Presentations
- Effective Revision and Study Skills

**In relation to your own studies, would you have valued support in the following skills areas during your first year? (Please rate from 1 to 5, where 1=Not at all and 5=Definitely)**



### Student Comments on the value of academic skills supports in NUI Galway

- "it was helpful and helped me articulate myself better in exams"
- "The staff at TLC are so lovely and welcoming and are very helpful. They make you feel very comfortable in your writing."
- I attended the academic writing centre but they wouldn't look at an essay that was already written and not at an overall essay, only sections or grammar of an essay in preparation. I should be able to go to the AWC and say what I would like help with, even if it is time limited, rather than having to fit into a prescribed list of things they will help with. I wanted to improve

from B to A grade, and this seemed to be something they were not interested in. The response was, B is really good- but where do I go to aim for excellence then?"

- "The Academic Writing Centre is well known but there is mixed feedback from other students. My impression is that your essay can be looked over but there is little help for follow up in explanations."
- "The academic writing centre were excellent last year. Always friendly and approachable. Learnt so much over the year."
- "Really meant to go to the academic writing centre but never got around to it."
- "The Academic Writing Centre was very helpful and I gained a lot from it. Would recommend it to everyone."
- "I found SUMS a huge help through first year."
- "SUMS is very helpful."
- "Sums is essential!"
- "The knowledge of the tutors in sums wasn't always up to the standard needed at times."
- "A valuable resource."
- "It has provided me with the help that I required, when I needed it."
- "Very helpful and great at responding to emails"
- "Very good support and information"
- "Needs to improve rapidly!"
- "They are good, but could do with a little more work."
- "Nope...The Staff are Great & make a point to help in which ever way they can, with your question[s]. Fair/play, Good Job"
- "Not enough staff."
- "without them a lot of people would be lost and its a comfort to know that if anything goes wrong that the academic skills support are there."
- "Good....but could improve."
- "When accessible excellent"
- "Any experience I have had with this service has been great in my 1st year! Not as orientated to people in the years above!"
- "great service, a lot of good time slots for students"
- "it is great to know it is there"
- "It is readily available which I think is important for new students looking for help."

**Please add other academic skills supports that you would value at NUI Galway:**

- "How to structure answers to exams."
- "Just help with presenting in front of people whether it be peers or professors. I find this nerve wrecking and found it difficult to deal with in my first year. Any advice with presenting materials for projects would have been greatly appreciated but was not available."
- "Language. I do spanish and there is a definite lack of linking students with native speakers. Although apparently there is plenty of native speakers willing to tutor"
- "Language tutoring for language beginners"
- "A proper intro to Blackboard"
- "Public speaking"
- "online support for students living a long distance from campus"
- "Language Skills Support; Mental Health support; Stress support; Plagiarism Support and Writing Essays"

- "Week prior to start of academic year proved valuable. Useful (mostly) information provided but possibly had a bit of overload."
- "Work etiquette or 'how to survive in the workplace' something like that."
- "Public speaking workshops. I feel everyone that would attend would be equally shy and nervous about the whole ordeal that it becomes."
- "It seems pretty well covered."
- "Some service to show you where you are going wrong in relation to assignments."
- "Rather than having to contact course directors or lecturers with any queries, if there was a board of postgraduate or qualified students who students felt they could approach."
- "Economics"
- "to improve lab skills"
- "It would be helpful if we got more feedback from our school and our own teachers as part of our education. During these few years in medicine we have completed a number of written assignments, for example, yet I still have no idea how I did because we have not received any feedback, not even a grade."
- "I would value a place where students themselves from their subjects could have study groups in which they would talk and learn from each other."
- "The student support class I attended one evening at 7/7.30 was very helpful.; I work 8.30 am to 6.00 pm and live an hour from galway so find it hard to attend daytime classes for help."
- "One for projects such as team/collaborative assignments and how to deal with difficult situations that occur during it such as someone not pulling their weight in the group!"
- "Exam Preparation"
- "the tutorials"
- "For geography field work presentations - IT skills need to be on a very high level therefor i think a class included in the module addressing IT skills and how to use different applications would've been helpful"
- "There needs to be more one on one or tutorials in medicine especially in the early years. In a class of 240 people get lost very easy when we only have lectures. Tutorials work very well because the prospect of getting asked a question forces people to listen."
- "specific citing and referencing classes would be very helpful."

#### **Academic Staff Comments on Additional Supports that would benefit first year students:**

- "A computer processing course. I am shocked at the number of my students who cannot type or use a word processor; A library research course; A course on academic integrity and referencing (this could be incorporated into the library research course); Academic writing course; Actually if you had a 4 week IT course you could cover presentation, library and online search skills, academic writing and academic integrity."
- "Mentoring system."
- "a strong message about the expectations the university has of them...one often feels that the expectations of Disciplines is low...highly motivated students who always participate and contribute see class mates getting more and more chances and not getting sanctioned for non-participation; my American students are shocked by this: they have told me, if they miss more than three lectures they are not allowed to do the exam"
- "I think a course exploring how university learning differs from school learning would be useful. For example, about how students need to become independent learners, deep learners, and

see learning as something more than a tool to pass exams. Many are still 'waiting to be taught' rather than seizing the opportunities that are being afforded them (in terms of the library, online facilities, access to computing etc)."

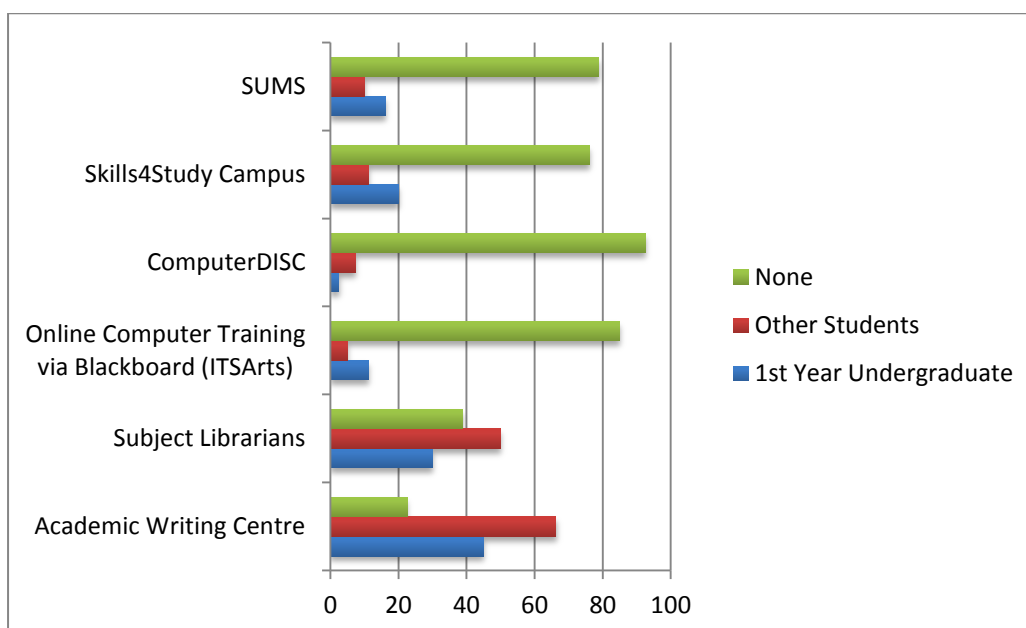
- "Some tester sessions/group sessions early on (e.g. in induction week) might help students engage with services/see benefit early on."
- "Include a question on support services in student feedback."
- "Each 1st year student would benefit enormously from a compulsory small class face-to-face tutorial style module in 3rd level study skills. This is aspirational, as I realise resources do not permit this at present, however NUIG should put a plan in place to provide this for the future. Most entering students do not have sufficient independent learning experience to successfully independently follow an online module and apply its content to their own circumstances. Moreover many are reluctant to seek support voluntarily and may only do so when problems arise, rather than viewing the supports as a means of ongoing development. In addition many are unaware that their academic skills need improvement. A module with student-staff contact will enable staff to help students be aware of, and identify, their own academic strengths and weaknesses and which steps to take to improve them."
- "Some kind of a maths based project related to their everyday lives that would run all through first year and be good fun to do while teaching them better maths skills."
- "Its all about communication. If we teach them how to communicate at multiple levels then we are off to a good start."
- "Much more should be done to educate students about finding appropriate, peer-reviewed secondary sources for their research (i.e. beyond google searching which they mostly rely on!). Most students don't seem to understand what constitutes a 'good' source. Also, they don't know how to properly interact with sources and often end up plagiarising (intentionally or unintentionally) as a result."
- "A consistent approach to plagiarism (submission through Turnitin), referencing (one system like Harvard) and research across disciplines so that they are building on skills introduced during first year."
- "Maybe some programmes about the value of sleep where they can become involved in a sleep/diet/exercise research programme where e.g. they do as they like for a couple of weeks but note how tired they feel at different times, how difficult it is to get up etc, then follow a proper sleep/diet/exercise regime for a couple of weeks and note the results. I think it would make them more conscious of how lack of sleep affects their ability to study."
- "I think that some of these supports are more relevant to older students than to first years eg. academic writing. I think students at all stages should be encouraged to avail of the supports."

## Referral and Uptake

Given the extent to which academic staff and students feel that support is needed by 1<sup>st</sup> year students, it is very surprising to see the low levels of referral to the available supports by academic staff and the low level of take-up by student respondents.

## Academic Staff Responses

**Have you previously advised your students to avail of any of the listed academic skills supports?**

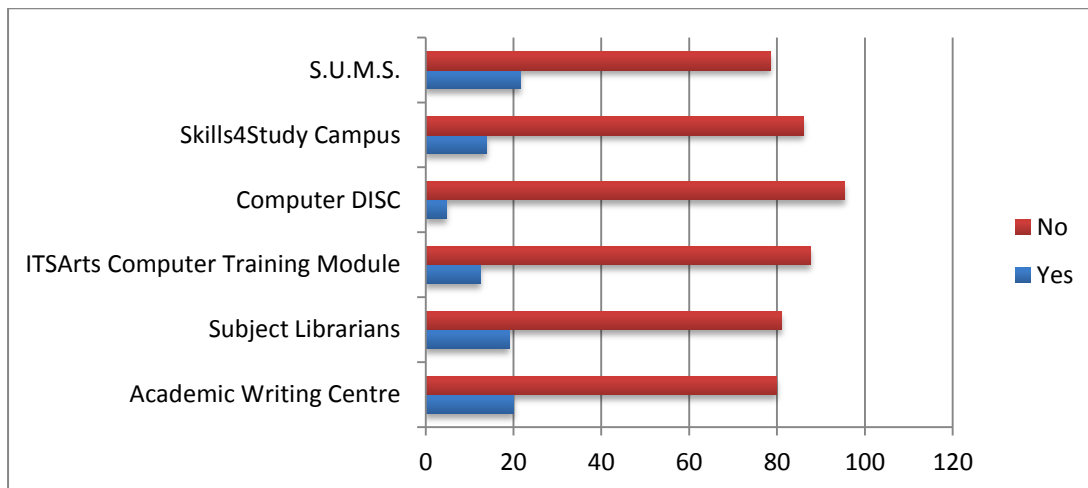


**Have you been/are you currently involved in the delivery/organisation of any other academic skills supports (not listed above) to first year students? Please provide details of that support.**

- "Orientation day including overview of academic standards; outreach sessions mid year of First Year"
- "Bespoke supports available via blackboard for particular modules I am teaching on such as recorded tutorials using Kaltura."
- "Well, I try to make writing, mathematics IT etc pervasive in my teaching."
- "Yes, I try to explain and provide to academic writing and referencing."
- "Several years ago I assisted my PhD student to prepare specific 1st year Biology study skills which she delivered (funding for this was provided by the College office). Two years ago I prepared and gave 6 sessions focussed on study and exam skills for first year Botany and Plant Science. Both of these were poorly attended. The intention was that they would specifically assist those students that were struggling but they are invariably attended by the stronger students in the class."
- "Career management activities with 3rd year students; I don't have significant engagement with first year."
- "Yes - first year induction. I also do study skills in class."
- "I run a short series (4 hrs) of tutorials in zoology (part of BO101) to support the 1st year lectures (18hrs) and pracs. These focus on learning techniques and study skills rather than revision of the material."
- "As noted above we have incorporated an AWC component into our 1st year module (EOS104)"
- "Provided extra tutorial in 12-13 as part of Croke Park Hour."
- "I teach the module PI1101: Critical Thinking and Persuasive Writing, which is compulsory for 1st year philosophers but not currently available to other students."

### *Student Responses*

**Did you avail of any of the following Academic Skills Supports during your first year of study?**



### Student Comments:

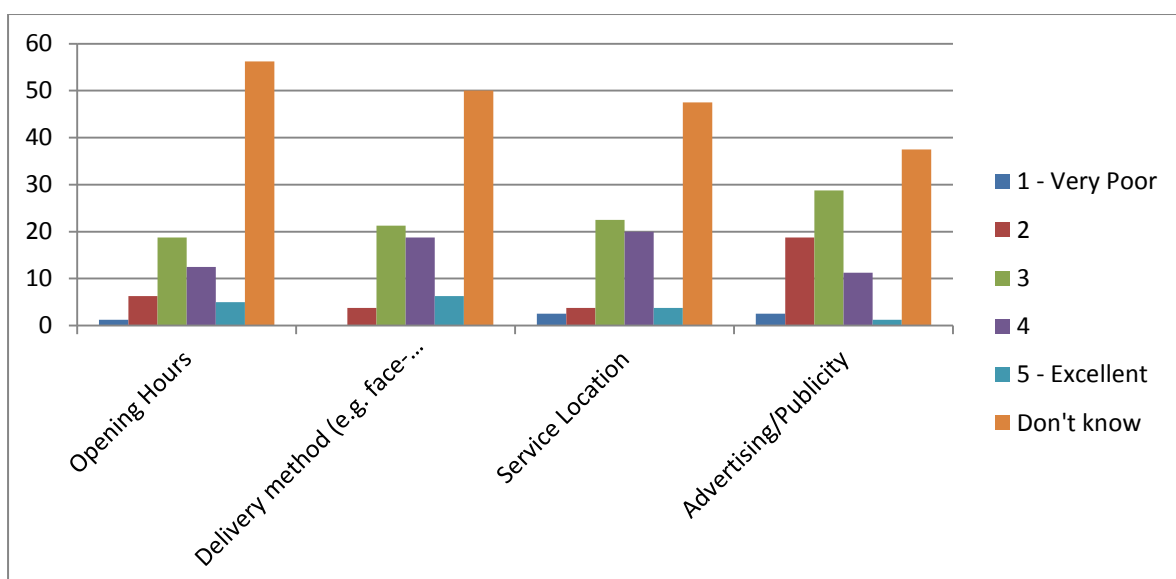
- “only to say, I knew most services where there, but learning from my mistakes will try to use them more readily in year 2”
- “first years need advice on how to make use of the services that are available.”

### Accessibility of Supports

One explanation for the low referral and uptake levels shown above may be the low level of awareness amongst academic staff about the services available as indicated by the level of ‘don’t know’ answers to the questions outlined below. Advertising and Publicity are highlighted by staff and students as perhaps needing improvement. Further explanation of the low uptake by students may be the limited opening hours of the various services, the limited size and space available for the services and a sense that the services are ‘invisible’ or aimed at someone other than themselves.

### Academic Staff Responses

In relation to each of the following factors, how do you rate the accessibility of NUI Galway academic skills supports, for 1st year undergraduate students? (Please rate from 1 to 5, where 1=Very Poor and 5=Excellent)

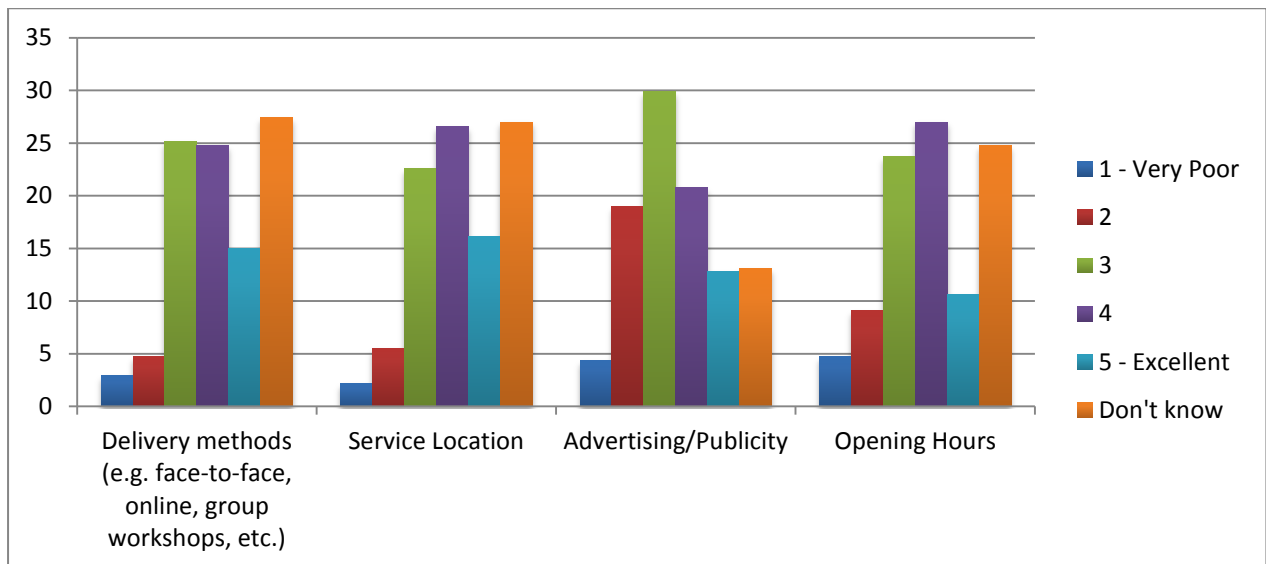


### **Other factors staff feel impact on the accessibility of academic skills support services:**

- "The opening hours (i.e., afternoons) of, say, SUMS, does not suit many students, but particularly mature students."
- "Our students are part time distance students, so services need to be flexible, online or via telephone, outside of usual hours."
- "It is difficult to motivate our students to go to the academic writing centre."
- "Again, location is a barrier, given where we are situated."
- "Online is useful as it means students can access at any time and doesn't involve timetable clashes etc. However, it puts another distance between the University and the students i.e. the students can do from anywhere at anytime (i.e. they don't actually have to come to the University and this in combination with non-attendance of lectures means that the only time many 1st year students attend is their lab classes which are compulsory) this reduces interaction with other students and opportunities for peer learning."
- "As a part time course, many students only travel to campus on Saturday or evenings when direct, face-to-face academic support is not always available."
- "I don't know anything about how these are advertised to students. This is one of NUI Galway's weaknesses. It would be really useful if information that is supplied to students could be copied to academic staff. Then we would be in a better position to field their questions (which often come our way at the end of lectures etc) and give them decent advice."
- "Limited reflection and awareness by students of their own individual academic strengths and weaknesses will limit them accessing these services. - Strong impact."
- "Not sure how 1st year students are introduced to these - are support service personnel able to come along at the start of term to describe the supports available?"
- "Students on An Cheathrú Rua campus can't avail of on-campus academic skills because they are based in an Cheathrú Rua. I will certainly encourage them to study Blackboard options. Would it be possible to access some of these supports after 5pm and through the medium of Irish?"
- "On a somewhat related note, I have heard first-hand that students don't use SUMS because it's too far away (from the engineering building)"
- "The Academic Writing Centre is great. It should be provided with more resources. We should have a proper way to assess literacy disability at the University. Some 25% of the cohort are affected in various ways. The system does not adequately support bilingual students with literacy challenges. In a purportedly bilingual University, this is an anomaly."
- "The supports are important but often not used fully by the students most needing to do so. Many would likely only use the supports if they gained specific credit for them within their course. Attendance/engagement is lower than it should be on a needs basis. However, the supports are highly valuable for those students that are making use of them."
- "Time tabling is an issue - it would be great if there were weekend workshop opportunities, so that they would not collide with time tables."

### ***Student Responses***

**In relation to each of the following factors, how do you rate the accessibility of the Academic Skills Supports provided by the University for its students? (Please rate from 1 to 5, where 1=Very Poor and 5=Excellent)**



### Student comments on the accessibility of academic skills support services:

#### Service Location

- "I could not use any of the valuable supports as I live in Dublin if classes would happen in Maynooth I would definitely use it."
- "DISC is in a small room and gets crowded with 6 or 7 people there."
- "SUMS is tucked away in Arus De Brun in a really small room. SUMS needs a much bigger area. I really struggled at Maths but SUMS got me through no doubt. SUMS needs at a minimum a large main classroom and several small offices also for one-to-one problem solving. SUMS is vital - give them more resources."
- "location; it would also be great if the exams were hosted in maynooth."
- "I would like to see a complete floor provided to students to learn or improve upon their writing skills."

#### Opening Hours

- "A less confusing set up of Academic writing timetable, which usually hits during module classes"
- "The same with AW, which only fits 1 or 2 people. AWC times are very limited and the waiting times for appointments is long."
- "There should be more people available for the academy writing service as it was popular and when ever I could go it was full and there was a long queue."
- "The opening hours of both DISC and SUMS clashed with many of my lectures and tutorials and as a result, it was difficult to seek help when I needed it."
- "disc for example is great but the hours of tutors for certain IT modules is small and i have often waited and had to leave to go to a class „perhaps an appointment service ??"
- "A bit of time flexibility with SUMS would be useful for future students..."
- "my timetable was structured so i often had free time before 12p.m. but sums was not open until afternoon when I was busy."
- "The opening hours of both DISC and SUMS clashed with many of my lectures and tutorials and as a result, it was difficult to seek help when I needed it."



- "SUM's opened at times when i had lectures and it was therefore very difficult to even consider going to them even though they would have been a massive help to me."
- "As a part time degree student and working full time I was unable to avail of the course which was run in August and there were no alternative times\one day\weekend course."
- "On a whole I think the main problem is opening hours. For example the library isn't open long enough, some of us don't have the facilities to study at home, and therefore need the library constantly."
- "When most needed it was the busiest time,so I couldn't avail of supports."
- "timing of some support groups can be an issue"
- "Time allocated; Availability to full time working mature students; Content when accessible to me"
- "It's opening Times & booking a space on a certain date can be quite ruffling of your wits and getting confirmation of date also."
- "Time."
- "Having drop in services means that you may not receive help/support when you have the available time."
- "Duration of each workshop"
- "opening hours 1"
- "open at weekends! as only there on Saturdays as i live in Dublin!"
- "As I said earlier there are no classes in the library on Saturday after class but I would definitely participate"

### **Advertising/Publicity/Visibility**

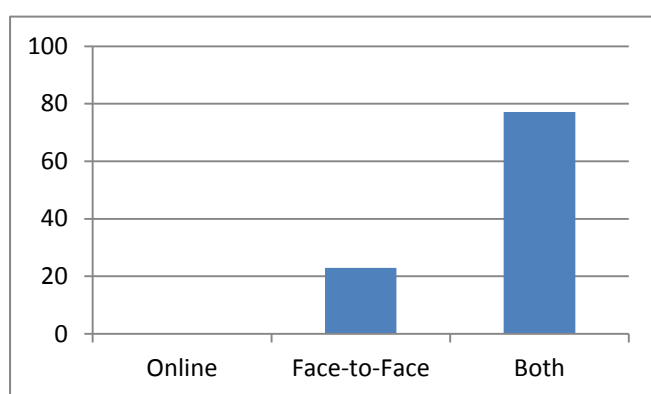
- "If a student is shy they can find it hard to sign up for such workshops"
- "I think all of the skills support services are not visible or easy to access. Initially you have access the nuig website for information and it is not always obvious."
- "lack of detail on what the supports offer."
- "If someone came to a lecture to 'advertise' or give a small talk about the service, what it does and who it's aimed at, it might feel more like 'hey this is actually available for me too'. Even though you see posters etc on campus, it doesn't always feel like the service is aimed at me."
- "They could send emails more regularly to remind people of their services provided as people may forget that this service is available in times of panic!"
- "Generally they all really do make a great effort to get their message out that they exist and want to help all students."
- "I think all of the academic skills supports are invisible when moving around the university. They appear difficult to access. I know this may not be directly relevant but I think it still relates to access to university services. The university is such a large campus and access to people is greatly reduced. As students we register on line and access most information and services on the computer. I think the library is really impersonal and the new reception area is very cold and off-putting. The university as a whole is using more and more computers facilities which I understand may be more efficient but computers are not flexible or always able to answer a question directly. The library and academic skills support services should be more personal and tangible especially for first years. Sometimes talking to a person makes the problem easier to solve. The library reception in 2012/13 had a warmer atmosphere and the staff were easier to access. The ISS in the new reception is a joke. The library staff have very helpful but some technical problems are for ISS and not them."

- "There should be more interesting ads about skill support to introduce the advance of Academic Skill Support."
- "I do get emails and I appreciate them but the info does not coalesce with what I am doing. I get emails on classes for full time students. I am part-time and I would love to receive info regarding my course."

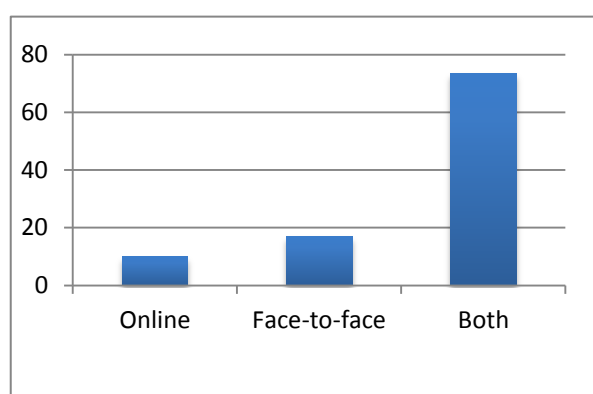
## Modes of Service Delivery

Responses from both staff and students indicate a need for variety and flexibility in how skills support is delivered, i.e. both online and face-to-face, in group workshops and one-to-one and embedded in academic programmes as well as available as open, generic services available to all.

### *Preferences in terms of online vs. face-to-face delivery of support:*

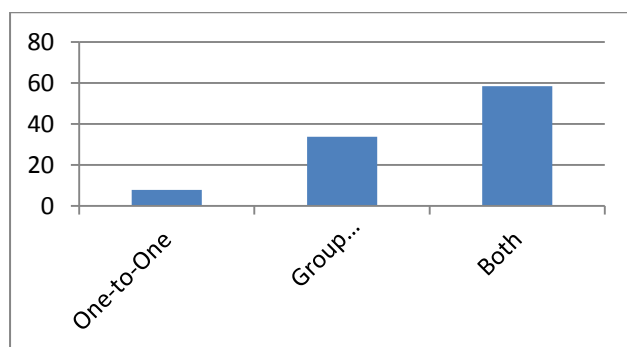


Academic Staff Response

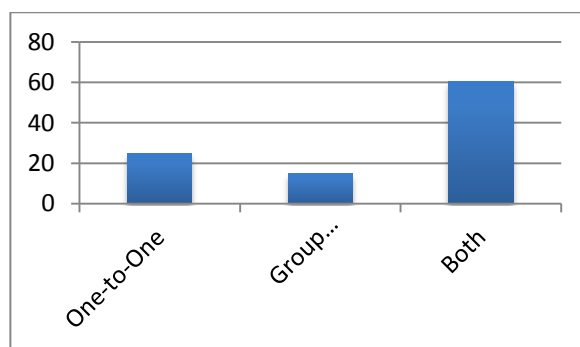


Student Response

### *Preferences in terms of one-to-one support or via group tutorials/workshops:*

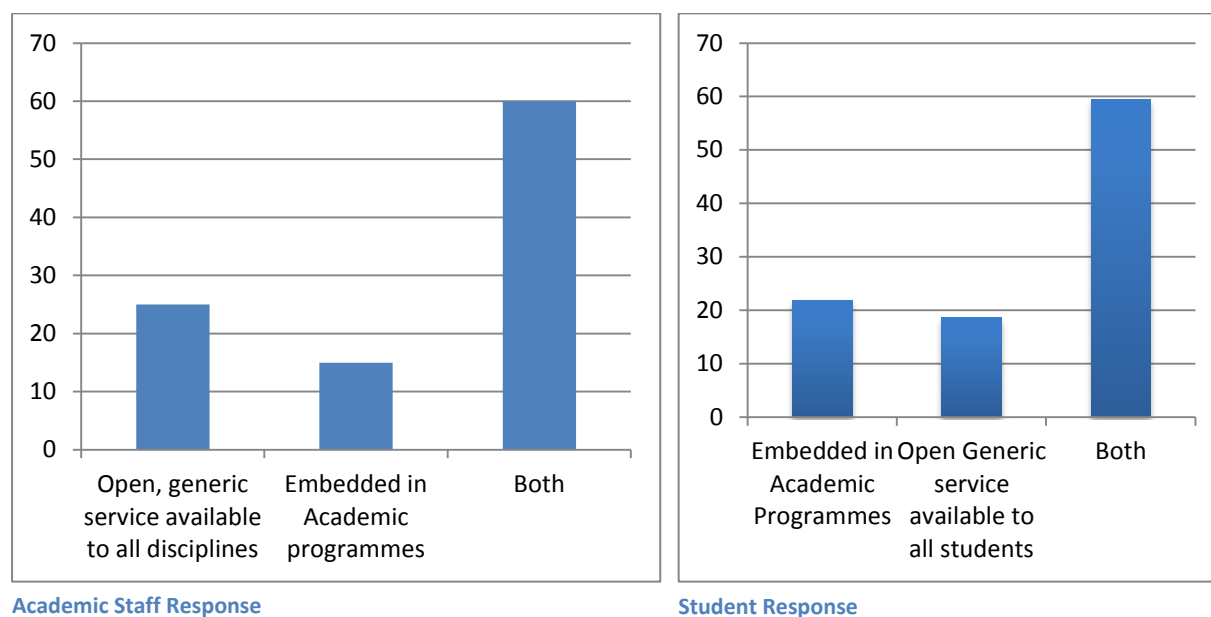


Academic Staff Response



Student Response

*Preferences in terms of open, generic support or embedded in academic programmes:*



**Academic Staff comments relating to modes of delivery of support services:**

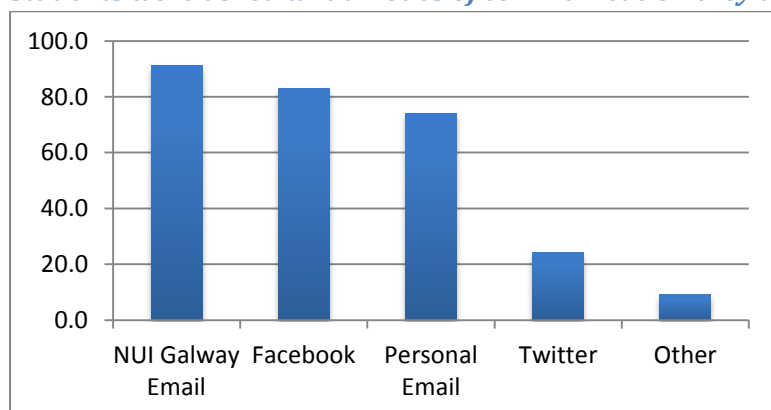
- "Is there a way of making it compulsory for students to attend a group subject specific workshop on a pass/fail basis. It was required by many courses when I worked at Glasgow University. Students were also required to take an IT course."
- "My experience in 3rd year is that academics have to be integrally involved in delivery of academic supports."
- "As the skills required in Law will differ dramatically from those required in Science I think that academic skills should be targeted compulsory modules."
- "You have to deliver these services in a range of ways, because not all learners respond to the same teaching methods."
- "In business and economics, students do not get enough practice for their writing and presenting skills. The training is necessary but not sufficient without the opportunities to practice."
- "Many students arrive without basic skills we all had on leaving secondary school, with help most of them catch up in first year but many struggle throughout their degree. Would like to see some kind of matriculation exam for all students planning to enter science followed by a summer school programme prior to first year entry AND between 1st and second year (when they've had a chance to grasp how many skills they are missing) to assess student's basic skills and address the deficits."
- "It is essential for all departments to embed such supports into their modules or the students should undertake a general skills development module as part of their first year teaching."
- "Make 1 stand alone 5 ECTS module"
- "If they are not embedded in academic programmes, it is a waste of time."
- "The University is doing a good job. Areas of weakness can continue to be addressed. The bilingual issue highlighted above is serious and ongoing."
- "I would like to see ALL first year undergraduates assessed for dyslexia, and possibly for discalculia though I understand that is much rarer."

- “We ought to reserve part of our first year programmes (say the equivalent of 20 ECTS) for the teaching of generic skills -- irrespective of subject area.”
- “General Academic working skills can not replace discipline related modules, since the requirements of the latter can be very specific.”
- “Evaluate their relevance/efficacy. If there is insufficient content in these to make stand alone 5 ECTS modules, then bundle all into one 5 ECT module and deliver it generically across all 1st year courses.”

#### **Student Comments relating to modes of delivery of support services:**

- “Also i came through the Access route and this was invaluable, noticed a lot of first years did not have academic experience , i think there should be a compulsory class as everyone struggled as to what is expected and most subjects require some writing”
- “It seems an add-on service at present, that has little to do with the academic departments and the undergrad courses. It would be good if it also offered more general help in maths and computing, for those who don't have high skills in this area.; I think the whole service needs to be invested in and either be the main area for academic support and used by the academic departments or it should just be a drop in for general matters, perhaps part of the careers dept. At present it is a mish-mash, and not really either.”
- “I attended one session face to face and two in group sessions. The face to face while very good it was relatively short due to some other student seeking help. Overall you run a good show.”
- “There doesn't seem to be much connection between the School of Medicine and the academic skills support services.”
- “I think those working in academic support need more training about how to give the support to students, its very hit and miss re the quality. The support services should be informed about assignments that have been given by lecturers and lecturers should liaise with them, so that the support is relevant to the course. The lecturers also decline to give academic support in lectures, eg writing skills or weekly assignment support, and instead rely on AWC or DISC to do this for them. So the end result is not great.”
- “support from the start of the college year would be helpful. unfortunately could not attend session during the summer which I would have liked to attend.”

#### ***Students were asked what modes of communication they use regularly:***



## 8. Improving Uptake and Engagement

The top five skills that students and academic staff agree are lacking in incoming first year students are:

- Referencing and Avoiding Plagiarism
- Academic Writing
- Communication – Public Speaking/Presentation
- Research Skills and Information Literacy
- Critical and Reflective Thinking

Students seem to believe that their Research Skills and Information Literacy and Critical and Reflective Thinking improve over first year, while their mathematics and time management skills become a cause for concern. Students report struggling most in first year with:

- Communication – Public Speaking/Presentation
- Referencing and Avoiding Plagiarism
- Academic Writing
- Skills of Mathematics
- Time management – including motivation and focus
- Understanding what's expected in an assignment or exam
- IT or Blackboard difficulties

In terms of supports available in NUI Galway for these key skills, the Academic Writing Centre and Subject Librarian team provide support and workshops/training on academic writing, referencing and avoiding plagiarism and research skills and information literacy, and SUMS supports mathematics skills. Skills4Study Campus provides online guidance on critical and reflective thinking, presentations and time management, but other than the guidance of the lecturers there is no face-to-face support available for these areas. Ensuring students have a good understanding of what's expected of them in a given assignment or exam falls under the responsibility of individual academic staff. Since the withdrawal of funding for the online computer training modules in Summer 2014 there is in fact no support for general IT skills and any introductions to Blackboard are provided by academic staff themselves, as there are no general workshops or supports available for students on using Blackboard.

Awareness of the existence of the skills supports available is disappointingly low amongst academic staff respondents. Even where there is good awareness of the support (academic writing centre and subject librarian teams) a disappointing number of academic staff report never having referred a student to these services.

Students seem to have better awareness of the services available to them. It is interesting however that they have less awareness of the subject librarian support available than some of the other supports – despite the fact that this is a service their lecturers are most familiar with! Perhaps lecturers assume that students know about the role of a subject librarian and therefore are not bringing it to the attention of their students. It is disappointing that more than half the students who responded were not aware of Skills4Study Campus, which is of relevance to all disciplines and is accessible from anywhere at any time. Given that over 60% of academic staff were not familiar with this support, it is probably not surprising however. Also unsurprising given the low levels of awareness is the low level of uptake by first year students of the supports available. The most used

supports reported by the student respondents were SUMS (21.5% of respondents), the AWC (20% of respondents) and the Subject Librarian team (18% of respondents).

The responses generally show a great need to improve the information available to staff and students about the skills support services available.

In terms of accessibility of the support services, the lowest ratings were given by both staff and students to Advertising/Publicity. This is reflected of course in the low levels of awareness of the services available. It is clear that significant improvement needs to be made in how staff and students are made aware of the supports available. Opening hours seems to be a particular problem also: Science students report clashes between lab times and SUMS opening hours and part-time and off-campus students have particular issues with lack of availability of support services at weekends and evenings.

Several respondents, both staff and students, mentioned that students who participated in the Access programme or were registered with the Disability Support Service were given the support and opportunity to develop skills that directly and clearly benefitted their academic engagement and achievement. It was noted by both a student and a staff member that this type of support would be invaluable to all students. It was also noted by academic staff however, that when skills support sessions or tutorials are made available to students, with a view to assisting weaker students, it tended to be the better and more motivated students who attended and availed of the opportunity to improve. There may be an issue of motivation as well as lack of awareness at play here. This is backed up by the higher number of students reporting awareness of the support services available compared to the numbers taking up those services.

**Academic staff were asked to provide any suggestions they may have, to improve the level of uptake and engagement with academic skills supports, among first year NUI Galway undergraduate students:**

- "practical exercises built into existing modules"
- "Make it compulsory. I'm not sure if the lack of uptake from our students is due to a lack of self-awareness, embarrassment or laziness."
- "I would highly recommend organising some sessions as Gaeilge on an Cheathrú Rua Campus where we have almost 100 students."
- "I would happily publicize them during my lectures, but would like to know exactly what it is about first as some might be less relevant than others"
- "While not ideal, out of hours services would benefit our student cohort significantly."
- "Simplify the objectives, interest the students, keep the standards of clarity and intellectual honesty"
- "More information for academic staff and students on these supports."
- "apply ECTS"
- "Embed them in academic modules"
- "Make it compulsory, at a pass/fail rate but necessary for progression from first year to second year."
- "Increase your communication with academics delivering the formal 1st year modules, because we probably have more contact with 1st year students than anyone else"
- "Involve second and third year students who have used the services in promoting and encouraging use of service (e.g. coming to lectures to speak about it briefly); Offer specific

information/support session for tutors/co-ordinators of first year programmes on how the academic support benefits students/how best to enable student engagement.”

- “Include the details of support services on a flyer in the registration pack for first year students.”
- “I would love to see a writing module as part of the first year curriculum... very labour intensive and expensive!”
- “Create a first year, dedicated programme (+ 1 of currently 4 subjects in Arts).”
- “Activities to encourage students to reflect on their own individual academic strengths and weaknesses. Activities to demonstrate to student the academic learning skills that are required of 1st year University students.”
- “Could you run a training day for academic staff that takes us through the various support types?”
- “appeal to them at their level using apps and facebook. Many of them are shy, lack confidence and do not realise that they can ask for help without being judged. Make it an adventure for them!”
- “Make completion of a certain number of academic skills courses a required part of first year programmes (perhaps on a pass/fail basis). Students are more likely to do something that is required than something that is optional.”
- “E-mailing all students informing them of these services, also using Facebook and getting the SU involved.”
- “If these skills are required in their academic programmes, it will improve uptake and engagement.”
- “Provision of leaders among more advanced undergrad students to mentor first years.”
- “There should be a compulsory module covering reading comprehension, critical thinking, English grammar and essay composition integrated into the 1BA1 programme.”
- “The two biggest factors are: 1. The nature of The Leaving Certificate and the fact that it does not prepare students for autonomous learning, and 2. The fact that we have students entering with 300 points and the expectation that they will be able to cope with an Honours Degree Programme.”
- “I think there may need to be greater association with taught modules.”
- “To provide lecturers with more information on these services, so that they will be more inclined to recommend them to students.”
- “I think the students will more likely engage if the supports are made compulsory, given credit, and embedded within the curriculum.”
- “Circulating a timetable of supports in advance, liaising directly with disciplines once a term (either at the School meeting or by email) informing and reminding them of services available. Having a contact point in each School to take responsibility as liaison person (the Associate Head for Teaching and Learning possibly).”
- “The SUMS Numeracy Diagnostic Test approach works because it is embedded in the programme (mandatory) and persistent - every participating student must keep re-attempting the test until they finally pass the threshold. Some other supports should take this approach as well.”

**Please provide any comments you feel relevant, about the delivery of academic skills supports to first year NUI Galway undergraduate students:**

- “Challenging!!!”

- "I co-ordinate a first year programme and at times do not realise what provisions are in place for my students. Perhaps a list of support services or a central repository of information would be useful to both them and me."
- "Maybe some training/ pointers for teaching staff?"
- "There must be a strong message about taking responsibility for one's own learning; they could be helped to discover the joy of self motivated learning rather than what many expect: to be 'taught' without any effort on their part."
- "It seems quite ad hoc and having sent some students to some of the various programmes they were too generic and at times not appropriate at least for the discipline I teach in."
- "I know very little about it: this in itself is a comment!"
- "When group support skills are due to be delivered e mail academic staff so they can also alert certain students."
- "Face to face delivery is critically important."
- "Need to shout loudly at Dept of Education to point out what the students aren't learning in secondary school that they should be. Maths is a particular weakness."
- "We should find ways to integrate librarians into the classroom on a regular basis so that they become familiar faces for the students and can advertise the full range of library services to them."
- "There should be piloting of initiatives with first (and other undergraduate) lecturers."
- "SO much of the First Semester is taken up with Registration issues that we can be in week 6 before we become aware of a student's lack of core skills."



## 9. Best Practice in Academic Skills Support

In reviewing best practice elsewhere one of the stand-out features in those universities that have won awards or recognition for their approach to supporting students' academic skills seems to be a coordinated approach. There are differences of course in terms of the resources invested by the universities in the area of Academic Skills Supports and it is quite common in the UK for staff to be employed as study advisors or learning advisors with a role in helping students with all aspects of academic skills. It seems however, that even without additional resources or staffing, success and impact can be achieved by delivering a more coherent and coordinated suite of academic skills support to students and a central, single location that students can easily find.

### University of Limerick – First Seven Weeks Initiative

The University of Limerick offers its students a variety of academic skills supports, both generic and subject specific. These are co-ordinated and publicised centrally through the Universities Centre for Teaching & Learning. One of the major annual initiatives run by U.L. is the First Seven Weeks programme. This specifically targets incoming first year students to facilitate an easy transition and to raise awareness of the steps they can take, and supports they can avail of, in order to make the best possible start at third level.

The **First Seven Weeks** is an initiative designed to provide strong, enhanced and targeted support to students during the very early weeks of their time as UL students (<http://www3.ul.ie/ctl/first-7-weeks>). Recognising that successful early adjustment is linked to subsequent success, a range of information is provided. Each of the first seven weeks has its own theme, designed to focus students' attention on various issues that are known to be important for settling in and thriving as a higher education student. During the course of the programme, various academic skills supports are highlighted and addressed so that students have the tools and services necessary to make the best possible academic start at university. Supports highlighted as part of the programme include:

- Settling in, finding your way around, including a simple, timetable-based approach to time management (Week 1)
- Focus on Study Skills and effective Time Management (Week 2)
- Promotion of the Advisor Role, all first year students are assigned a Learning Advisor (Week 3)
- Focus on Health and Wellbeing, including stress management (Week 4)
- Information around various Learning Support Centres, both generic and subject specific (Week 5)
- Focus on Career development, civic engagement and volunteering (Week 6)
- Emphasis on the importance of Critical Thinking for academic success (Week 7)

The initiative is publicised through social media communication channels, facebook and twitter, as well as providing a “pop-up” physical hub for students to drop in at any time during the first seven weeks of their studies.

When contacted, the Centre for Teaching and Learning declined to provide any summary statistics related to attendance/uptake or any correlation between this and academic performance in the early stages of third level education.

The First Seven Weeks programme does not involve the hiring of additional staff, current academic staff are assigned the role of learning advisor to students within their academic programmes. The key to the success of the programme is the coordinated fashion that information about all the various supports available is sent out to first year students on a gradual, need-to-know basis throughout their first seven weeks of University. It also provides them with one central hub to come back to, to refresh their memories about a certain area later in the academic year.

### **University of Leeds – Skills@Library**

The University of Leeds is another example of co-ordinated provision of academic skills supports, with a centralised hub for the purpose of publicity and awareness. The Skills@Library initiative is a department within the University's library, specialising in the provision of supports for students through a variety of media including face-to-face and virtual workshops, presentations and tutorials (<http://library.leeds.ac.uk/skills>).

**Skills@Library** provides academic skills teaching and e-learning support, so that students can effectively find, use, apply and present the information they need. They offer a range of services to support academic skills development:

#### **Workshop Programme**

Skills@Library runs a workshop programme, covering various themes including academic writing, reading, finding information and presentation skills.

#### **1-to-1 Support**

1-to-1 support on general academic study skills is available from Learning Advisors. The Learning Advisors help to support academic study and offer advice to help find, evaluate and manage information for essays, dissertations or literature reviews. They can also advise on referencing work correctly. One-to-one advice is also available on mathematics.

#### **Online tutorials**

These tutorials and resources are designed to give students an overview of the core skills for successful study. Topics include:

- Finding and evaluating academic information
- Writing Skills
- Understanding assessment criteria
- Interpreting your assignment
- Reading and note-taking
- Referencing and avoiding plagiarism
- Presentation and communication skills
- Mathematics skills
- Group work

## Teaching in the curriculum

In partnership with academic staff, Skills@Library Learning Advisors design, develop and deliver discipline-specific, curriculum-based academic skills activities.

Skills@Library offers a social media presence through Twitter and Youtube, and a central online hub containing many video tutorials to assist students and staff alike with various tools for productivity, efficiency and academic success. It also provides one central space where all skills support is provided, making it easier for students to know where to go to get help. It is important to note that Skills@Library was created by combining an existing Study Advice service with a staff of study advisors with the library's learning support team.

## University of Manchester – My Learning Essentials

My Learning Essentials is a comprehensive programme of online resources, workshops and drop-ins designed to support students in their personal and professional development. The My Learning Essentials programme is run by The University of Manchester Library in collaboration with other services across campus.

(<http://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/academicsupport/mylearningessentials/>)

Topics of workshops and online resources include:

- Assignments
- Being critical: thinking, reading and writing critically
- My future
- Organising
- Planning
- Presentations
- Referencing
- Research skills
- Searching
- Self-awareness
- Study strategies
- Wellbeing
- Writing

All workshops and drop-in sessions take place within the Library's Learning Commons building, so once again students are very clear on where to go to get help. The service is coordinated by the library's Learning Support team, but draws on staff from throughout the University to deliver workshops, e.g. Career support service, counselling service, academic disciplines, etc. The Library employed an e-learning specialist to assist with the development of the online resources that form part of the service.

## 10. Conclusion and Recommendations

It is clear that the supports for academic skills being provided within NUI Galway are valued by the students who avail of them and by academic staff, who believe that they can have a big impact on first year student engagement and retention. However, they are not as widely known as one would expect and hope. Even when they are known, it seems students are not always motivated to avail of the supports, despite the fact that for most of the areas where students report having struggled in first year, there is a support available. Perhaps this is a reflection of the lack of independent learning skills mentioned by academic staff. Several academic staff comments recommended that any study skills workshops needed to be compulsory to ensure all students availed of them.

There are many approaches that could be taken to improve the engagement of students with their academic skills and their awareness of what's available to them. Some of these are simple and not very costly, others are more radical and would have resource implications.

1. Best practice elsewhere indicates that a coordinated approach to the delivery and promotion of academic skills support services would increase visibility and impact of the skills support services. An immediate benefit could be gained by a centralised, multi-pronged approach to publicity. The following recommendations could be carried out by the individual support services, however they will have much greater impact if carried out in a coordinated fashion.
2. A single brochure (print and online) should be developed highlighting all of the academic skill supports available for students. This could be sent out to incoming students with their Welcome packs and could be made widely available during Orientation Week. Its content could also be easily made available via the Learning Centre module on Blackboard. Such a brochure would also form a useful marketing tool in attracting students to NUI Galway, as it will make clear to prospective students the level of support that will be available to them.
3. A significant improvement in awareness could be achieved by ensuring that all academic staff are aware of the supports available. The brochure mentioned above would be one way of spreading this information. It may also be useful for all the support services to present their services to School meetings to ensure staff have an opportunity to ask questions about what exactly the service offers. Alternatively, as suggested by some academic staff in their comments, annual training or workshops for academic staff could bring to their attention the support services available for students. Either of these fora would provide academic staff with the opportunity to provide feedback and suggestions to the skills support services in relation to core issues that staff are seeing regularly that the support service might be able to address, and vice versa.
4. The delivery of academic skills workshops as an embedded and compulsory part of the academic curriculum would ensure wider take-up by less motivated students and those that really need help with these skills. All academic schools should consider embedding core skills workshops within their programmes. As well as bringing the skills to the students in a more integrated fashion, such integration would enable the staff of each support service to become more familiar with what's expected of the students in particular disciplines, and so would enhance the help and support they provide to students by making it more relevant. Embedding core skills teaching within the discipline would also mean that the skills could be assessed and students could be given the chance to integrate those skills with their discipline knowledge.

5. Posters or information kiosks making flyers and brochures available around the campus could be used to advertise the supports available. This was suggested by students both in the survey and in conversations with the Students Union. In particular, it was felt that students of particular disciplines weren't sure if particular services were available to them or were primarily aimed at other disciplines (e.g. Science students felt that the Academic Writing Centre was for Arts students only).
6. Considering the modes of communication that students reported using, there is scope for publicity of support services through social media, e.g. Facebook and Twitter. This could be an ongoing method of providing information about services as well as tips and information on academic skills. It would also be a way of getting real-time feedback from students in relation to the support they need. This method would be especially useful for off-campus and part-time students.
7. The weekly email that all students receive from the Students' Union could be used as an effective mechanism to share information with students about the supports available or to send out useful information or tips relevant to the time of year, such as 'preparing for exams' in the run up to exams, or 'citing and referencing' at the time when assignments are due.
8. The Students Union diary should also be used as a means of publicising the support services available and could be used to include a dedicated section on academic skills and supports information.
9. One risk of increasing awareness of these services is that it will undoubtedly increase the demand for those services. While the details of funding were not available from all services, it is clear from the tutor hours delivered that each of the services is run on a shoe-string. Over-crowding and insufficient or unsuitable time-slots were mentioned by students in relation to the services. Increasing awareness and demand for the services will only exacerbate these issues. In order to be able to provide this support to a greater proportion of the student body, it is clear that additional resources in terms of tutor hours would be needed.
10. Opening hours were a cause of many comments from students (and indeed academic staff). In particular SUMS' afternoon only opening hours are reported as being problematic, given most science students have labs in the afternoons. Ideally additional resources would be made available to increase the opening hours to include morning and some evening sessions. If additional resources are not available, perhaps the hours could be changed about to switch some tutor hours to mornings or evenings a few times a week. There was demand for all the supports in the evenings and weekends from part-time and distance learners. Once again this has resource implications in terms of tutor hours, but is something all of the services should consider.
11. Academic staff and students were in agreement on the most important academic skills that all first year students need. Many comments from academics and indeed from students indicated a desire to have a compulsory module in first year that would deliver these skills and abilities to students. The newly introduced First Year Orientation week may be an opportunity to do just that, by means of an intensive, week-long module covering the main academic skills. Such a module could include setting out what's expected of them at 3<sup>rd</sup> level in terms of critical thinking and independent learning. It would introduce students to the core skills essential for success at 3<sup>rd</sup> level: Research skills and information literacy, referencing and avoiding plagiarism, academic writing, communication in terms of public

speaking and presentations, and time management. Once again there would be resource implications for such a scheme as ideally it would be tutor-led with students working in small groups, so as to get the chance to learn and indeed practice the skills they will need to succeed in first year.

12. Skills4Study Campus should continue to be funded and indeed should be more widely promoted. Ideally if resources were available, some tutor support and possibly workshops would be made available for the more generic study skills it provides. These are not currently covered by any of the support services – e.g. revision, note-taking, critical thinking, presentation, groupwork, exam skills, time management.
13. The current lack of any support for IT skills development is unfortunate. While this was not an area that the majority of students reported having problems, those without IT skills are clearly at a big disadvantage in keeping up with what's expected of them. Opportunities should be available to students during orientation week to gain basic IT skills if they don't already have them. Ideally, funding should be found to make the ECDL online modules available once again via Blackboard. Wider promotion of the modules should improve the level of uptake if they were reinstated.
14. The various services are currently delivered in different locations across the campus and according to the students lack visibility. These factors no doubt impact on the level of awareness of the services. It may increase the visibility of the services and emphasise the message that they are services for all students and not just for specific disciplines if the services were delivered from one central location. Any transformation of the library building is hoped to include improved training facilities, if the funding is made available for the transformation, this could be an ideal location for a single, coordinated Academic Skills Support Centre.

By improving the delivery and awareness of the academic skills supports available we can meet the goal set out in the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy 2012-2014 of encouraging active learning, building student confidence and allowing each student to flourish academically. This will in turn increase student engagement and increase retention levels. By enhancing the supports available to students and increasing their uptake of those supports, we can also improve the attributes and competencies of NUI Galway graduates, increasing their employability.