
Bridging the gap.

Report from a project looking at the skills needs of AU students

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Information Services

Background to the Student Skills Development project

Overview

- The Student Skills Development Project was initiated in February and March 2024 to explore, assess and enhance our approach to supporting students' skills development across the University.

Objective

- identify gaps in skills development.
- improve the support systems available to students, with a focus on academic, personal, and professional growth.

Who was involved – data collection and analysis

- **Nia Ellis**, Customer Services and Academic Engagement Manager
- **Non Jones**, Subject Librarian
- **Dr Sioned Llywelyn**, Digital Skills Lead
- **Shân Saunders**, Digital capabilities and skills development coordinator
- **Jia Ping Lee**, Digital capabilities and skills development coordinator
- **Noel Czempik**, Digital Champion

Why now?

Timing:

- Aligning with the University's strategic priorities for upcoming academic year.
- Addressing emerging skills gaps due to changes in the job market and technological developments
- Responding to current climate by ensuring that Information Services are meeting the identified needs of students and staff effectively

Student Expectations:

- Responding to growing student demand for enhanced skills support.
- Growing need for relevant, real-world skills development.

Institutional Priorities:

- Preparing students for future challenges and ensuring long-term success.
- Alignment with University's strategic goals on student success, academic performance and employability.
- Responding to industry feedback on the need for graduates with stronger practical and soft skills.

Current Support for Skills: Existing Initiatives

AberSkills [AberSkills : Aberystwyth University](#)

- Updated, enhanced and relaunched in August 2023
- Home of skills development at AU - one point of referral for skills advice, guidance and information
- [What skills do I have?](#) – a direct result from the skills project.
 - Handy checklist students can use to identify what skills set they currently have and what they should focus on to develop and improve.

Workshops:

- Regular sessions on academic writing, research, digital and information skills and employability.

Online Resources:

- Comprehensive digital repository of workshop teaching materials, including recordings, presentations, and helpful resources, accessed via the [SgiliauAber/ AberSkills Blackboard Learn Ultra](#) organisation. Access is available to all students.

One-to-One Support:

- Personalised support from various staff members (e.g., Subject Librarians, Career Consultants, Maths and Stats tutors, Mental Health Specialist) for skills development.

Feedback Gathering Approach

Overview of Feedback Process

A multi-faceted approach was taken to gather comprehensive feedback from both students and staff.

Key Components:

Semi-Structured interviews:

- Conducted with a diverse group of staff and students.
- Allowed for in-depth discussions on experiences, challenges, and suggestions.

Quick-Fire interviews:

- Targeted students on campus
- Focused on immediate, candid responses regarding their experiences with skills support.

Methodology used: Semi-Structured Interview

STAFF

Interview Questions

1. What lack of skills is most evident in students' academic work?
2. Which skills should be centrally supported? And which ones should be supported by the department?
3. Do you have a hub/site for skills resources?
4. Are you aware of the different central resources available?
5. How should we combine knowledge held by academic staff and the more generic content from professional departments?
6. What do you think the skills of the future will be?
7. Incentivisation scheme

Methodology used: Semi-Structured Interview

STAFF

Participants:

- 6 staff members involved with skills delivery from departments across all three faculties.

Format:

- Hour-long semi-structured interviews.

Purpose:

- To gain detailed insights from academic staff into the perceptions of current skills support.

Methodology used: Semi-Structured Interview

STUDENTS

Students were asked the following questions:

1. General skills

1. What are skills?
2. What skills do you need when you come to university?
3. What would be the motivation to attract students to attend skills workshops?

2. Skills Support

1. Who or where would you go for skills help? What would be the best/easiest way to access this support?
2. Do you need more help with skills on your course? What would this support be and how would it best be offered?

3. Resources - awareness

1. Are you aware of the different resources available to help you with your skills?

4. Resources - use

1. How much use do you make of the skills workshops that are available?
2. Where or how have you heard about them?
3. If you do not attend skills workshops, is there a specific reason or reasons you do not?

Methodology used: Semi-Structured Interview

STUDENTS

Participants:

- 11 students volunteered to take part
 - 6 Undergraduate students.
 - 5 Postgraduate students.
 - Recruited through a central call (e.g. via email, Weekly Bulletin and IS social media) to volunteer to participate in this study.
 - Representation from the following departments: Psychology, History and Welsh History, Geography and Earth Sciences, ABS, Geography and Earth Sciences, Modern Languages, School of Art, Theatre, Film and Television Studies.

Format:

- 30-minute semi-structured interviews.

Purpose:

- To gain detailed insights from students into the perceptions of current skills support offered by AU.

Methodology used: Quick-fire interview

STUDENTS

Students were approached across the campus and asked 3 questions:

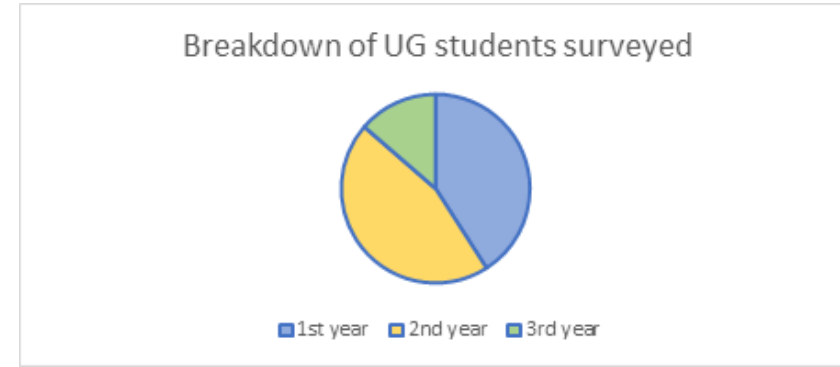
1. What skills do you need additional support with for your academic work?
2. Where would you usually go for help with these skills?
3. Are you aware of the central skills support and workshops?
 - Why don't you use central support or attend workshops?

Methodology used: Quick-fire interview

STUDENTS

Participants:

- Total of 23 students were approached informally on campus.
 - 21 undergraduate students
 - 2 Postgraduate students (Masters and MPhil degree)
 - 17 subject areas were covered mostly within FELS and FBAPS



Questions:

- Focused on their immediate needs, challenges, and suggestions for improvement.

Purpose:

- To gather quick, broad feedback from a larger, more diverse group of students.
- Captured spontaneous and honest feedback.



Analysing the data

- The **affinity mapping** technique was adopted to analyse the data collected from all interviews.
- Categorised the vast amount of information into **coherent themes**.
- Highlighting **commonalities and differences** in perceptions across the participant spectrum.



Engagement with Directors of Learning and Teaching and Staff Interviewees

Purpose of Meeting:

- To share report and findings.
- To align the project with the broader educational strategy.
- To gather insights from leaders responsible for curriculum and student support.

Key Topics Discussed:

- Current strategies in place for skills development.
- Challenges faced in embedding skills into the curriculum.
- The need for academic staff to collaborate across departments to provide shared access to skills support and resources.
- Opportunities for enhancing skills support at both departmental and university levels.

Key questions



Staff

What lack of skills is most evident in students' academic work?

What do you think skills of the future will be?



Students

Skills for transitioning to University – assumptions on level of competence.

Preferred source of support for skills

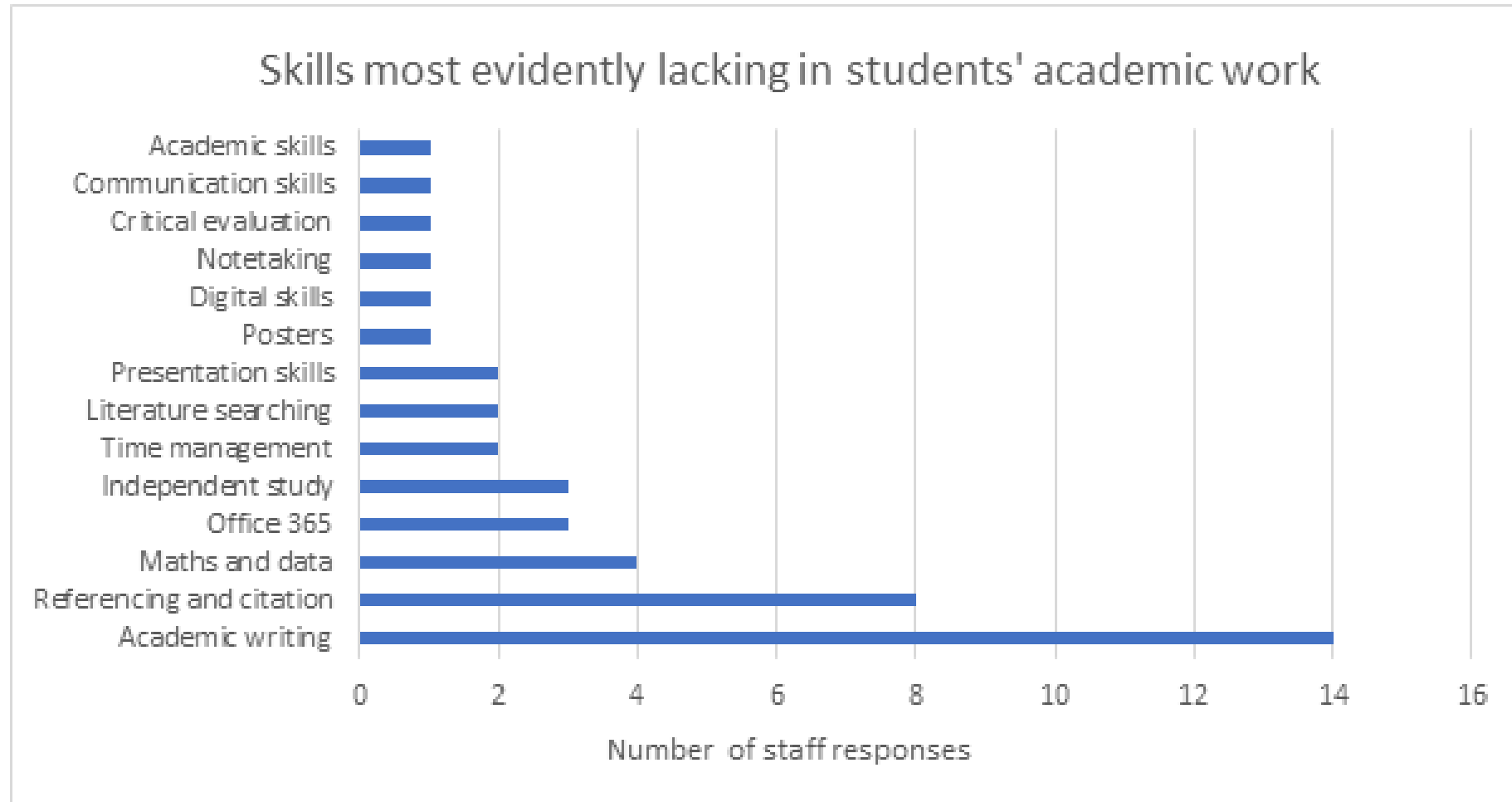


Quick fire interviews

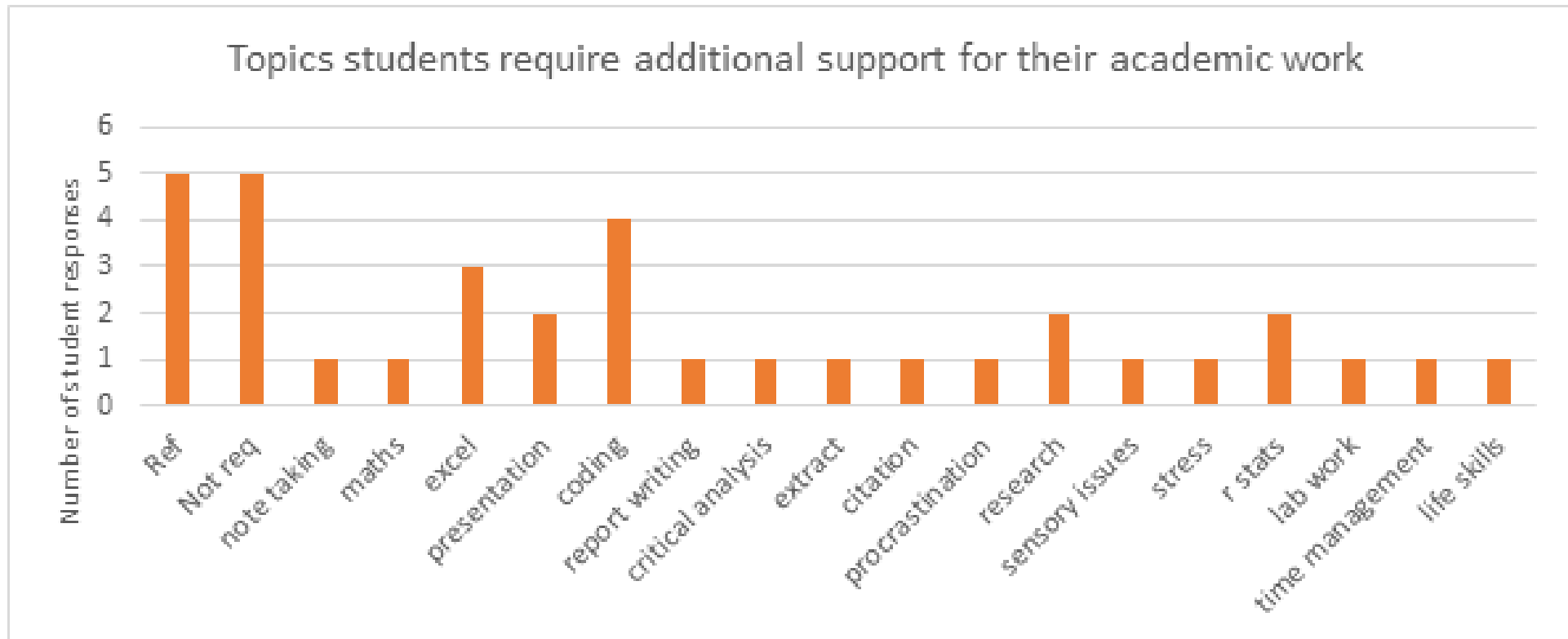
Additional support – topics

Source of support

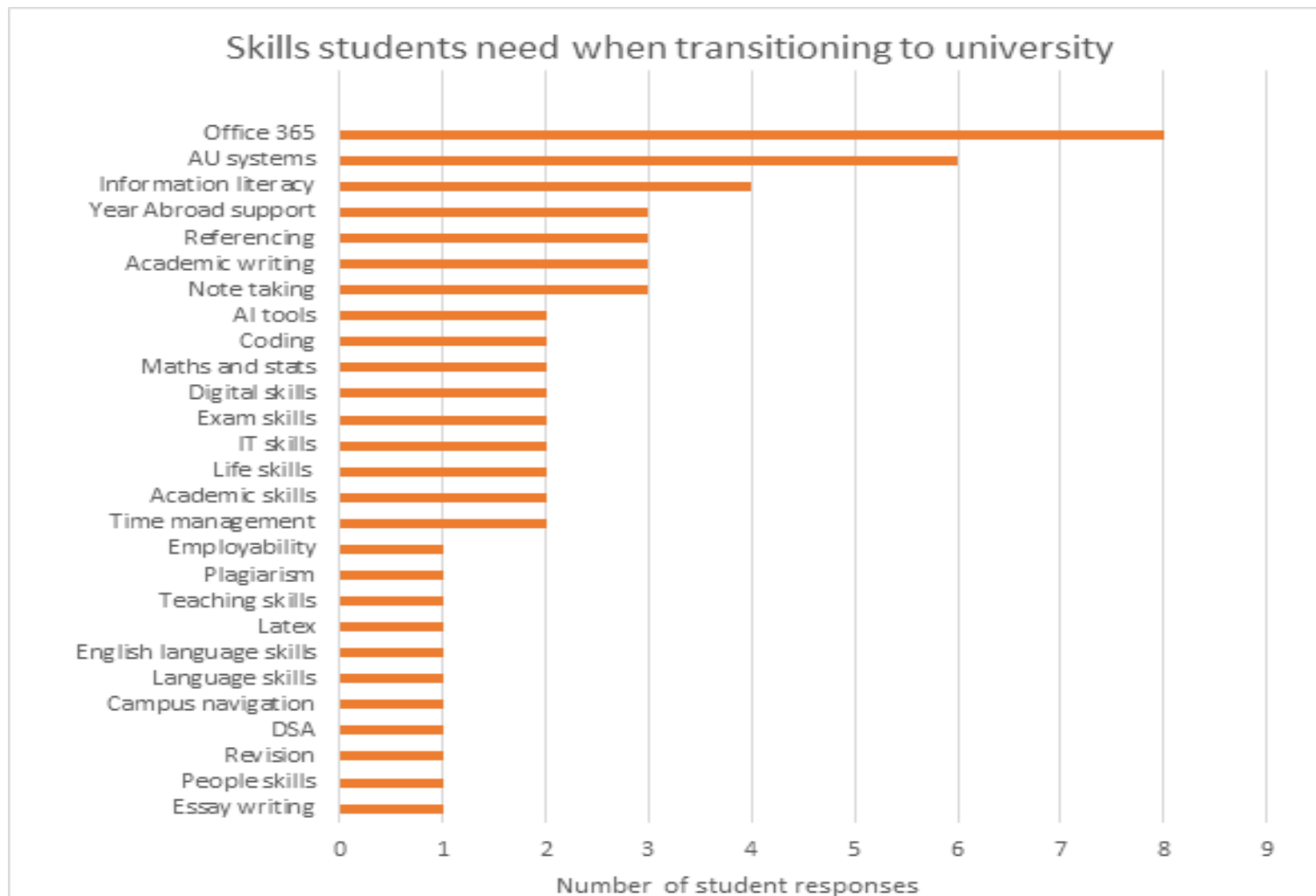
Skills that students need – staff response



Skills that students need – students' response

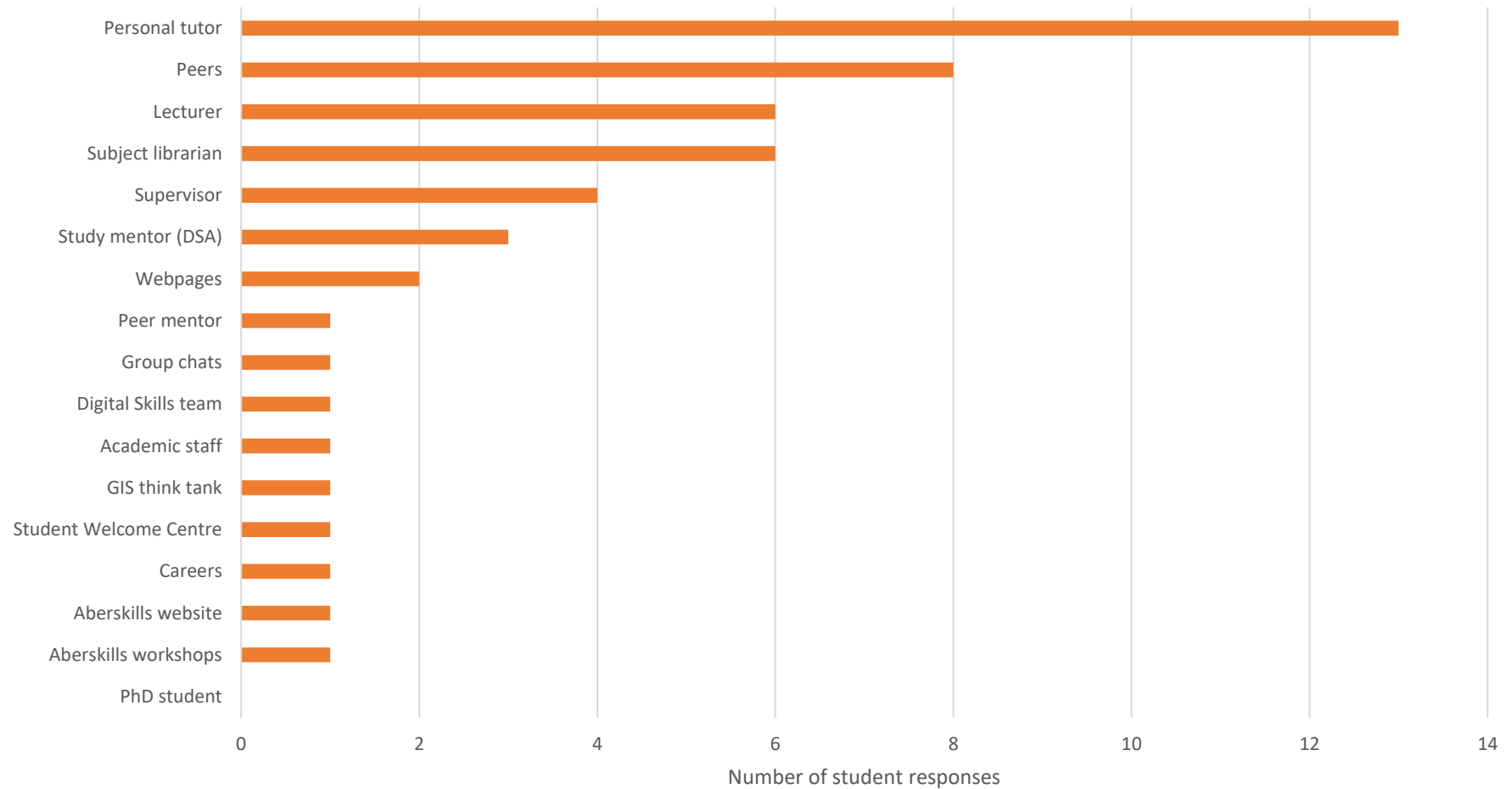


What skills do you need when transitioning to University? – students' response

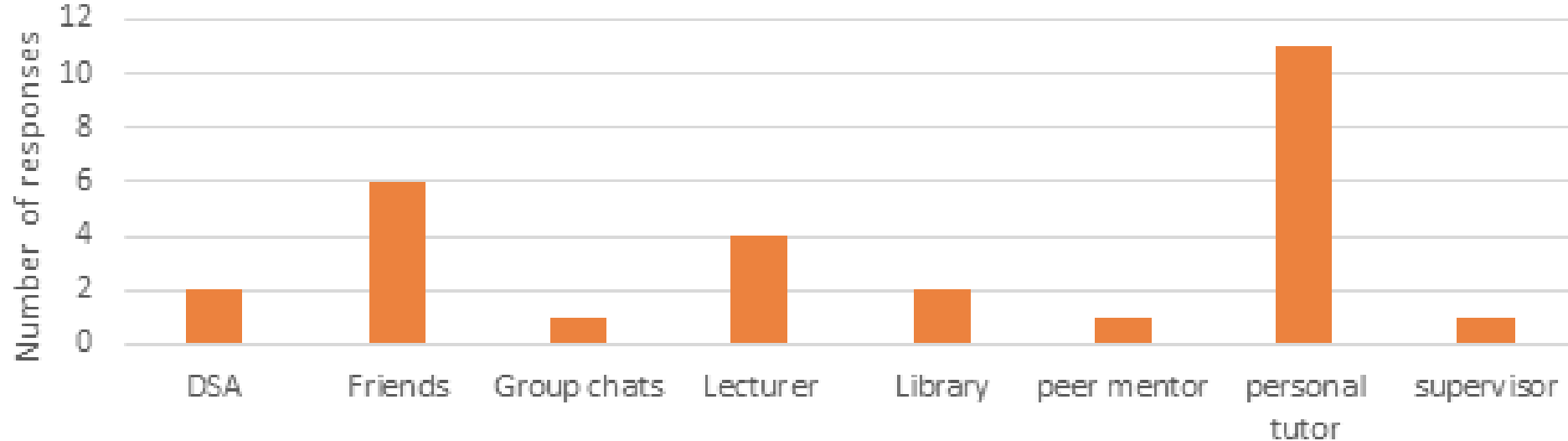


Student semi-structured interviews

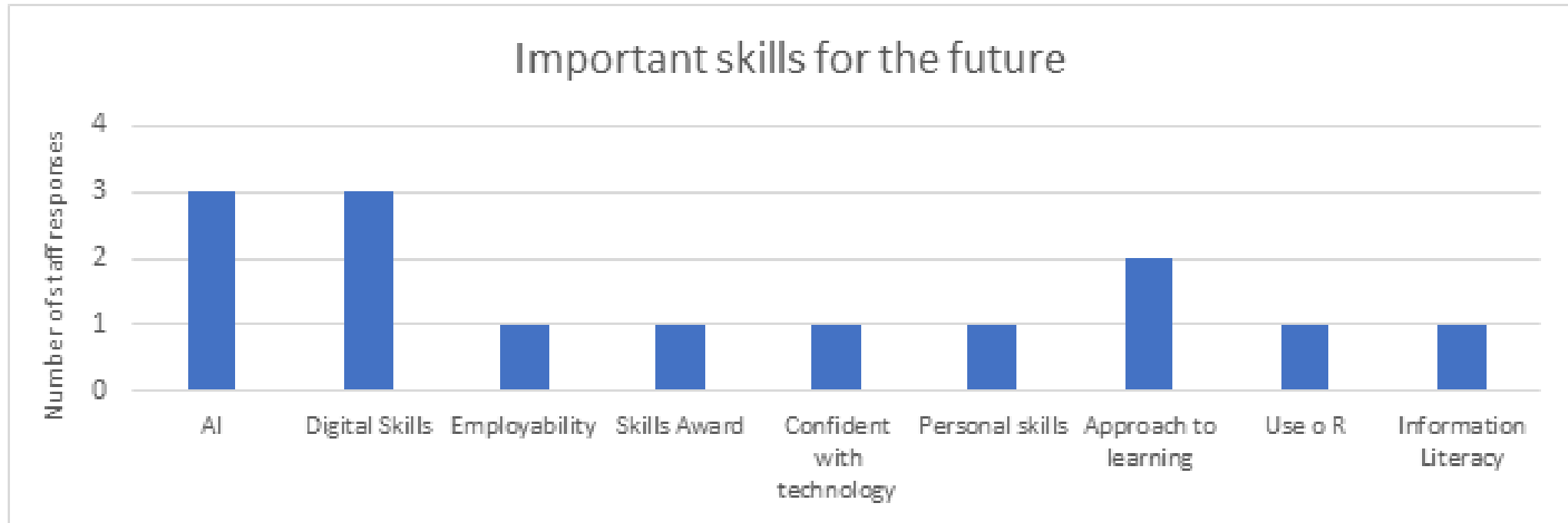
Preferred source of support for skills



Quick fire interviews: Where would you usually go to for help with these skills?



Skills for the future – staff response



Key findings

Staff's Perspective:

Recognition of the need to integrate skills development more effectively into the curriculum.
Skills support lacks coordination
Working in silos means that staff are not aware of resources and best practice in other departments (academic and professional)
Challenges in addressing the diverse needs of students.
Support for increased collaboration between academic and support departments.
Staff also need support to develop skills especially in rapidly changing fields such as AI.
How do we get support to the low-achieving students rather than the high-achievers?

Students' Perspective:

Need for more practical, hands-on skill-building workshops.
Desire for more personalised support, especially in academic, digital and information literacy, career planning, wellbeing and life skills.
Mixed awareness of existing support resources.
Staff need to be more aware of students' lack of IT skills
Students need better signposting to support.

Recommendations

- Collaborate across departments to provide shared access to skills support and resources
- Ensure consistent academic skills support in both Welsh and English.
- Improve communication in order to raise awareness of support amongst both students and staff
- Provide a link in Blackboard Ultra to AberSkills
- Utilise the AberSkills Hub in the Hugh Owen Library to host drop-in sessions for students
- Promote MS Office support available to students and also free MS Office for students



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