

# ASPIRE: A CROSS-INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH TO EMBEDDING EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS AT UWS



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## SUMMARY

ASPIRE is a set of core modules introduced to enhance the academic, personal and professional development of students at UWS. Integrated into multiple degree programmes ASPIRE is delivered via a cross-institutional approach and provides students the chance to take part in a range of activities to enhance and develop their skills and employability. A core part of the University's Strategy 2025 ASPIRE aims to support our students to become world-ready graduates with the skills, mindset and confidence to succeed and thrive, professionally and personally, in a rapidly changing world.

Implemented into the curriculum in September 2022 ASPIRE gives students the chance to shape their own skills development in areas such as team work, communication, entrepreneurship, career management and digital skills, with a strong focus on reflection, goal setting and action planning.

The ASPIRE curriculum is designed to enhance student success and the transition into, through and beyond university.

## CONTEXT



In February 2020, the University of the West of Scotland adopted the [UWS Strategy 2025](#) shaping the distinctive course of the next five years of our activity, including shaping the direction for Learning and Teaching with the commitment to: *“develop UWS graduates as the leaders of tomorrow. All students will be supported to gain world-ready meta-skills...”*.

To realise that ambition, the Learning and Teaching Thematic Plan contains a key objective:

“Develop a suite of core and common modules across all programmes that develop students’ 21st-century skills and attributes and complement the theory and knowledge-based modules.”

Alongside the Learning and Teaching Thematic Plan, [UWS Curriculum Framework](#) (2022) expanded on this commitment. Each programme will contain a set of common “Personal, Professional and Academic Development Modules”. These modules should be central to supporting student success, wellbeing, and employability at levels 7, 8, 9.

The [ASPIRE module](#) was developed as a direct response to this commitment and was formally approved in July 2022. Delivery was implemented across 22 programmes, across three schools (Education and Social Sciences, Business and Creative Industries and Computing, Engineering and Physical Sciences), at [SCQF level 7](#) during academic year 2022/23. Roughly 600 students are taking the module in the pilot year and is undergoing evaluation with a view to rolling out to all programmes in 2023/24. At the same time, development of SCQF level 8 and 9 modules are at the design stage with students currently sitting the level 7 module due to take part in level 8 ASPIRE in 2023/24.



ASPIRE is a suite of core modules across all academic programmes delivered at levels 7-9 – each module will comprise 20 credits and run throughout terms 1 and 2 of the academic year. The aim of the module is to support students in their Academic, Professional and Personal Development (APPD).

The ASPIRE module prepares students to make the most of their experience at UWS. Students will have the chance to explore their aspirations for university study and think about how their degree connects to other aspects of their personal and professional life. This module is an opportunity to gain confidence developing the skills, knowledge and personal qualities that will prepare our students for life and work in the 21st century.

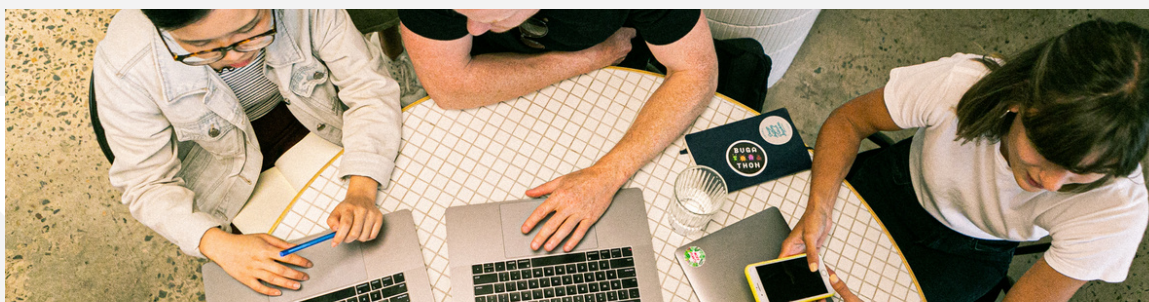
This module is delivered over two terms. In term one, students will begin by focusing on core Academic, Professional and Personal skills and attributes. They will also have regular supported reflection sessions with their ASPIRE Advisor (originally lecturers from academic schools at UWS with new Advisors recruited specifically for the role starting in early 2023). By the end of term one students will have created an action plan including key areas they would like to focus on relating to their APPD in the next term and the future. Work on the module becomes increasingly student-centred, as students increasingly direct their learning in relation to their aspirations, needs and interests.

Group sessions with their ASPIRE Advisor will guide their engagement with a range of learning activities aimed to support them in making the most of their learning experience and in building a network to help them to progress and succeed. Students will learn to use goal-setting and action-planning strategies.

ASPIRE takes a cross-institutional approach to module design involving academic schools, Learning Transformation and Student Services. Through the module students will be introduced to the wide range of student services available to them including Academic Skills, Careers and Employability, and Wellbeing support.

By the end of this module, students will have produced an e-portfolio, which will be used to record and document engagement with the module and their reflective journey, demonstrating their development. The module will:

- Create the space for students to explore what they want to achieve while they are a UWS student.
- Give students opportunities to engage in activities that will help them to progress and succeed while at UWS.
- Help students to build a supportive network and become part of the UWS community.
- Promote awareness of how others at UWS can help them in their journey.



## Module learning outcomes

On successful completion of this module the student will be able to:

- L1. Identify personal values, motivations, and ambitions
- L2. Develop an action plan to support progression and success
- L3. Select evidence to demonstrate progress against their action plan
- L4. Reflect on engagement in a range of learning experiences
- L5. Work autonomously and with others in ways that respect diversity and the value of collaboration



# METHODOLOGY AND IMPLEMENTATION

## Module underpinnings

Underpinning the Level 7 ASPIRE module are five pillars which can be articulated and contextualised in ways that make them sustainable across the academic, professional and personal development (APPD) modules at level 7, 8 and 9. These five pillars, inform the approach to curriculum at Level 7 comprising three strands, namely: core content, supported personal reflection, and self-directed activity.

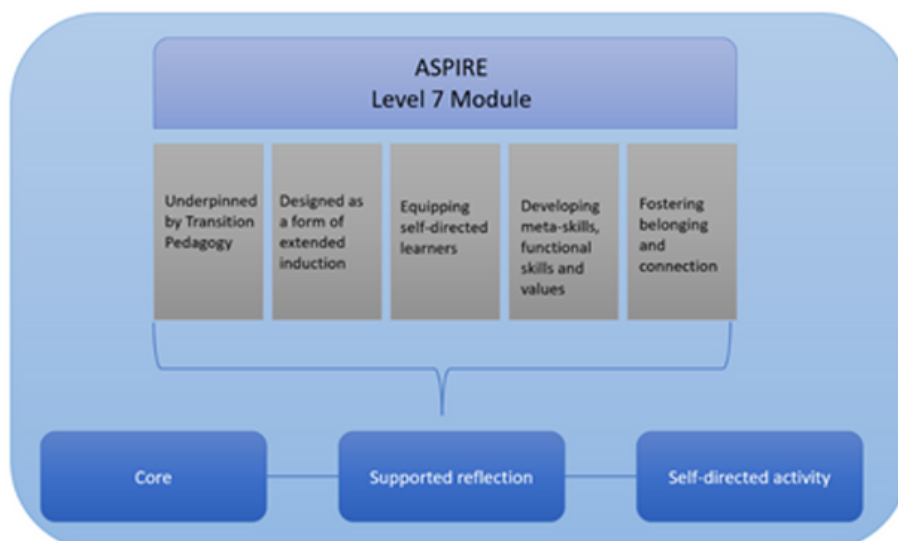


Figure 1: Table1: ASPIRE Level 7 – Module structure

### **Pillar 1: Underpinned by Transition Pedagogy**

As UWS students transition into, through and beyond their university studies they experience multiple and concurrent transitions therefore a transition pedagogy (Nelson, Creagh, Kift & Clarke, 2014), supporting students to navigate transition, will underpin APPD.

Specifically relevant to the development of Level 7 curriculum is a focus on supporting transitions into and through initial experiences at university, and the foundations of what is needed to thrive at UWS and beyond. Four first year experience strategies at a programme level - from Nelson et al.'s (2014) Transition Pedagogy - are core to APPD:

- Curriculum that engages students in learning
- Proactive and timely access to learning and life support
- Intentionally fostering a sense of belonging
- Sustainable Academic-Professional partnerships

### **Pillar 2: Designed as a form of extended and scaffolded induction**

This will vary across levels of study, but the Level 7 APPD curriculum is designed, in part, as a form of extended induction to UWS. The planning of content, activities, nature of engagement and contact is shaped by a recognition that our students arrive at UWS 'with a spectrum of preparedness' (Hughes, 2020) and that APPD will support student transitions into university in a timely and relevant manner; with initially greater scaffolding, core content and contact before progressing into more self-directed and flexible engagement that is increasingly student-led.

### **Pillar 3: Equipping self-directed learners**

Recognising the diversity within our student body, central to APPD at Level 7 is equipping students with approaches that support discovery of self, self-reflection, decision-making and informed choice, and perspective-taking on experience, including navigating challenge. Therefore, this curriculum not only recognises the importance of student agency but explicitly and proactively equips and empowers that agency through scaffolding all students to become increasingly self-directed in exploring, identifying, choosing, and reflecting on their development needs and interests to support them to thrive at UWS. As the Level 7 module progresses it becomes increasingly student-led. This provides the foundation for Levels 8 and 9 of APPD where students pursue increasingly self-directed and personalised routes.

**Pillar 4: Developing meta-skills, functional skills and values**

Within the APPD Curriculum will sit a core framework incorporating meta-skills, functional skills, and values.

Meta-skills: Our UWS Strategy 2025 is committed to developing students and graduates with meta-skills, which can be defined as higher-order skills supporting individuals to adapt and thrive across different contexts for example, creativity or leadership. (Skills Development Scotland, 2022)

Functional skills: Comprise more specific learned abilities related to contexts, roles, and tasks, for example academic referencing or note-taking, or skills directly linked and contextualised within their subject of study, anticipated professional membership or future field of employment.

Values: In addition to the skills focus within APPD, students will be encouraged to reflect on their own personal values and consider the ways in which they align with or adopt the values of different communities to which they join or ASPIRE to join for example UWS community values or professional values.



The APPD framework, will be used by students to support discussions, exploration, alignment, evidencing and reflection on experience, learning and development throughout APPD. The core framework will be aligned with the UWS Graduate Attributes (2018) - defined as “the skills, personal qualities and understanding to be developed through your university experience that will prepare for life and work in the 21st century” - and can also be mapped onto other frameworks such as the Skills Development Scotland Meta-Skills Framework.

**Pillar 5: Fostering belonging and connection**

APPD will both provide opportunities to foster a sense of belonging through the experience of this curriculum, as well as supporting students to identify communities to which they belong (within and outwith UWS). Enabling students to consider how they become a member of a community or indeed recognise those to which they belong includes - connection to their programme of study, the broader UWS community and groups within, communities of which UWS is part, career and professional belonging, and reflection on connections to groups, organisations, and networks beyond university. A sense of belonging is identified as critical in supporting a perceived sense of integration associated with student persistence at University (Tinto, 1993), and exploring multiple dimensions of belonging identified as particularly critical for widening access contexts and diverse student groups (Thomas, 2012).

## Level 7 module structure

The module at level 7 is designed to incorporate three strands -the core, supported personal reflection, and self-directed activity – delivered across the academic year. The core includes asynchronous content created by Academic Skills, Careers and Wellbeing teams. With relation to careers and employability, the Careers Service designed sessions around self-awareness and graduate labour markets, helping raise awareness and increase engagement in careers management and employability at scale and early in the student journey. The third strand of the level 7 module, taken in term 2, allows students the chance to choose from a selection of meta-skills sessions, with choices being informed by their reflections from term 1. This includes sessions on skills such as communication, leadership and enterprise/innovation, while also giving the opportunity to take sessions on developing career management skills, wellbeing and academic skills. Throughout this time students undertake supported reflection with their ASPIRE advisers.

## Level 7 module evolution and implementation

The University committed to including common APPD modules in all undergraduate modules due to the increased need for the University to support students to develop skills and attributes required by industry and society. The modules were to take a holistic view of the skills and attributes needed in their academic, professional and personal development. The modules were also designed to allow students to bring in other learning and development. This could include learning and development from a part-time job, extra-curricular activities including involvement in clubs and societies, and other relevant or prior activities.



Piloted in 2022/23 across 22 programmes the module is being constantly evaluated to shape the delivery across all programmes at level 7 in 2023/24.

## Assessment

·A formative action plan

Students receive feedback on the action plan, but this is not graded. The action plan assessment allows students to record and reflect on their motivations, values, goals, ambitions and the action they plan to take to achieve their goals.

·Summative e-portfolio

The e-portfolio, using the [PebblePad](#) platform, makes up 100% of the assessment for the module. It will contain artifacts relating to the action plan and demonstrating the students' academic, professional and personal development.



## **Labour Market Information**

The UWS Strategy 2025 has a commitment to “...develop UWS graduates as the leaders of tomorrow. All students will be supported to gain world-ready meta-skills...”. To address this commitment the ASPIRE module set out to support the development of students’ 21st century skills and attributes in line with UWS’s own [Graduate Attributes](#).

In influencing the design of the module and our approach to skills development a wide range of labour market resources were consulted. A recent report focusing on student and graduate skills (QAA, Focus on Graduate Skills, 2019) highlighted low confidence in the skills needed for a chosen career, lack of understanding of employer expectations and issues in being able to evidence the skills they had developed. This report also highlighted the need for more skills development opportunities. In addition, a recent survey carried out by Handshake, ISE, AGCAS and WonkHE ([Careers 2032](#)) highlighted the lack of student confidence in skills articulation and their preparedness for a graduate job.

In thinking about how to address these issues within ASPIRE cognisance of the results of the [ISE Student Development Survey](#) (2021) allowed identification of some of the key skills that graduate employers both demand and in which they report gaps. This includes skills such as career management, leadership, self-awareness, emotional intelligence and commercial awareness.

However, to provide a framework on which to base the design of the module and address the development of ‘world-ready meta skills’ we have aligned the module content, in particular the self-directed activity in Strand 3, with the Skills 4.0 model of meta-skills ([Skills Development Scotland](#)). Defined as ‘higher order skills supporting individuals to adapt and thrive across different contexts’ we identified a range of skills sessions (including many of the key areas of development as highlighted by industry in the ISE survey) that aligned with the three overarching skills areas identified in the model: Self-management, Social Intelligence and Innovation. All the skills sessions available for students to choose from align with at least one of the 4 noted meta-skills under each of the overarching headings.

As the module develops, we will continue to monitor key graduate labour market information and build communications with sector bodies, industry and employers in keeping the module content relevant and up-to-date.

It should be noted that ASPIRE is not designed to replace or compete with existing employability activities contained within specific programmes – this includes professional practice modules, work-based and work-related learning, or embedded careers education within the curriculum. Instead, it should run concurrently alongside these with the potential to provide an enhanced personalised experience for the students and to make the most of these other activities. As the module evolves there may be scope to see more integration of these employability activities with ASPIRE.

## ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION

The module is being and will be evaluated in a range of ways. A student feedback survey was sent out at the end of week 8. Students were asked how they were settling in and what they liked and did not like about the module so far, along with what they wanted less of and more of in the module. The schools ran SSLG (Student Staff Liaison Groups) at the end of term one and feedback on ASPIRE was gathered by schools' colleagues. The marketing and communications team also gathered feedback from students at the end of term one with the view to identifying module 'champions' and to gather student testimonies. Towards the end of the module, standard university MEQs (Module Evaluation Questionnaires) will be used to gather student feedback. Furthermore, focus groups with students are planned for later in this term to gather more in-depth feedback.

As well as student feedback, staff feedback has been and will be gathered. A survey was sent to ASPIRE Advisors at the end of term one to gather similar feedback to that gathered from students. Colleagues were asked how the module delivery was going, what they liked and did not like about the module so far, along with what they wanted less of and more of in the module. Staff feedback is also collected through the APPD working group, boards and other meetings with colleagues. For the development of the Level 7 module and the design and development of the Level 8 and 9 APPD modules, two design days were held in November for colleagues across the university. An additional consultation meeting was held for Programme Leaders in December.

## REFLECTION AND NEXT STEPS

The feedback on the module so far has been mixed. The most notable comments from student relate to the delivery of the module. Some students would like the module to be entirely online, others requested more in-person and on-campus sessions and others wanted more synchronous content (either online or on campus). This feedback mirrors feedback received on a range of modules from across the university.

The other area students commented on was the links between the module and their other modules and/or degree programme. This is an area of feedback that was addressed for term two and will also be addressed in the delivery of the 2023/24 module. To address the feedback directly in term two, ASPIRE Advisors were given more control over the topic of the group project to allow them to further contextualise the academic, professional and personal development activities within the subject area.

The next steps are to complete the evaluation of the pilot module and implement any required changes before the 2023/24 delivery. Additionally, the development of the level 8 and 9 modules is in progress with the students currently taking the level 7 module due to take the Level 8 module in the 2023/24 academic year.

## REFERENCES AND HYPERLINKS

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Supporting Documents

[UWS Strategy 2025](#)

[UWS Curriculum Framework](#)

[UWS Graduate Attributes](#)

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