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Breaking down barriers: creating a community of learning development at the University of St Andrews

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Presentation abstract

This presentation outlined a collaboration that delivered an integrated in-sessional academic and learning development provision for students at the University of St Andrews. Staff from the student learning development team in the Centre for Educational Enhancement and Development, and the Academic English Service, situated in the International Education Institute, partnered to bring previously segregated provisions together for the academic year 2023/24.

Historically, both units have provided separate in-sessional one-to-one tutorials dictated by students' first language or stage of study, but with overlap in some skills areas such as writing development. Each service had different parameters in terms of who could access the tutorials and how often they could do so. Due to the restrictions of each provision, and the siloed nature of the services (Ding and Bruce, 2017), we identified that students were often not accessing the most appropriate form of tutorial, and that some tutorials were not being used to best effect.

The provision has been reimagined to proffer a new Academic Development Community with the aim of creating a more effective and inclusive resource (Bakogiannis and Papavasiliou, 2023). This presentation unpicks motivations for pursuing a unified service and reflects on the changes made. The session shared the results of qualitative and quantitative student feedback on the newly aligned provision, and the perceptions of focus group participants on the unified service and relationship with contributing units. Combining the feedback collected thus far with our own professional reflections, we

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explored the outcomes of these changes as well as the challenges encountered in our collaborative approach. We concluded by sharing the future directions of this collaboration.

Keywords: community; study skills; English for academic purposes; collaboration; tutorials.

Community response

The presentation on the collaboration to deliver an integrated in-sessional academic and learning development provision at the University of St Andrews had certainly made an impact on the attendees. The unified approach demonstrated a significant shift towards inclusivity and efficiency in academic support services, highlighting the potential benefits of such integrations. The session underscored the importance of breaking down silos within educational institutions. Historically, segregated provisions meant that students might not have accessed the most appropriate resources for their needs. The move towards a unified Academic Development Community aligns with contemporary educational practices that advocate for holistic and student-centred support. This has a potential to inspire other institutions to reconsider the structure of support services they have and explore similar integrations that could enhance student outcomes.

An insightful idea from the session was the emphasis on qualitative and quantitative student feedback. This dual approach ensures that the voices of the students are heard and that there is data to back up the effectiveness of the new provision, particularly as quantitative data is often scarce in this type of research. Combining the two certainly provides a clearer picture of student feedback.

Some interesting takeaways from students include positives and negatives, and it is nice to see researchers considering both sides of the coin. Learners showed clear preference for one-to-one sessions, 'one-stop shop' website, and the utilisation of tutors, whereas metacognitive strategies and content help was not perceived so favourably.

The presentation was a catalyst for rethinking how support services can be delivered in a more integrated and student-centred manner. The insights and questions that emerged from the discussion will undoubtedly influence the practice and research moving forward. I

look forward to seeing the continued evolution of this initiative and its impact on the students at the University of St Andrews.

Next steps and additional questions

Suggestions and recommendations for the presenters:

- A link or a document which could be shared on the process, challenges, and successes of this integration with other institutions. This could serve as a valuable resource for others looking to undertake similar initiatives. Or even general recommendations we could perhaps add to this submission?
- Conduct longitudinal studies to track the long-term impact of the integrated provision on student success and satisfaction. This could provide robust evidence of the benefits of such integrations, particularly as there were some mixed results reported. Are there any direct quotes available we could include in this submission?

Authors' reflection

Having the opportunity to share our journey so far with the broader community was a thought-provoking experience. We are particularly grateful to our colleagues in the sector who shared their insights and recommendations from the literature to help us further enhance our provision. As a follow-up to this dynamic exchange, we would like to share more feedback from our learners. As highlighted in our presentation, our students rate our one-to-one sessions very highly (Figure 1 and Figure 2, Table 1).

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**Figure 1. Responses from the 2023/2024 AY to 'How would you rate your
appointment today?' for the AES one-to-one appointments.**

1. How would you rate your appointment today?
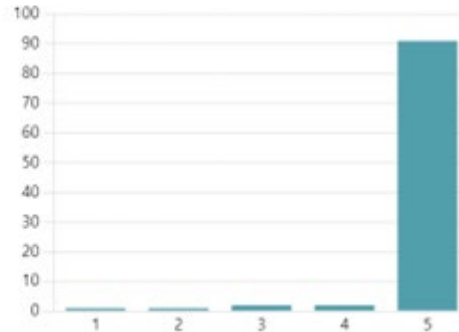
More Details   Insights

4.87
Average Rating

**Figure 2. Responses from the 2023/2024 AY to 'How would you rate your
appointment today?' for the Academic Skills one-to-one appointments.**
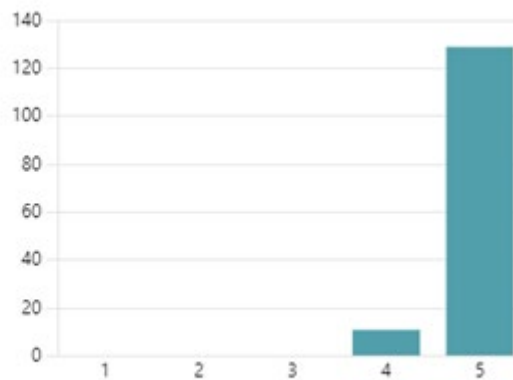
4.92
Average Rating

Table 1. Students' comments from feedback forms 2023/2024.

Comments from feedback forms	
Study Skills appointments	Academic Language appointment
She was really helpful and did an excellent job breaking down and explaining the issues I was confused with. She was extremely kind and helped my confidence with writing my peace! Thank you so much for offering this opportunity and for your caring teaching. [The tutor] provided me extremely helpful and detailed explanation and demonstration of how to read literature effectively and efficiently. The most important thing what she taught me beyond my expectation is 'read to understand' instead of being buried by remembering details, and encouraged me to trust myself in reading and thinking independently and critically. That really helped me realise how to read articles and avoid academic misconduct. Her caring advice and encouragement deeply motivated me to be more confident in academic reading and writing. I learned of many very useful sounding solutions to my study and revision skills and they tailored the resources to me very well! They were also easy to talk to. Thanks!	She was very clear, very helpful, compassionate and explained everything very well where I felt like I learned more about my own writing and this will help me continue to improve. I learnt the actual meaning of the crucial term for my dissertation, which is very helpful. Moreover, [tutor's name] provided me beneficial information. Thanks a lot! I would just like to mention that this is hugely helpful for me and sincerely thank {tutor's name} for her kind efforts in helping me improve language skills. Super nice! The tutor provides me not only correct words check but also give me some useful tips in academic learning.

Interestingly, this was highlighted in the focus groups as learners praised the usefulness and flexibility of appointments. However, we also discovered that our learners much prefer tutors reading their work in advance (Table 2). It was also enlightening to see how learners may need more guidance (Table 2) to take ownership of their appointments and engage in dialogue with their tutors to ensure that the advice provided to them is tailored to their personal needs and circumstances, as that is one of the unique advantages of having a one-to-one session.

Table 2. Students' comments from focus groups 2023/2024.

Quotes from focus groups	
Positively perceived areas	Issues perceived
It felt like a low commitment because a workshop I feel like I have to go every day, or not every day or every session because otherwise it might not be worth it. I wrote this, it's like a one-time thing and to see does it work, does it not? And it's kind of my own choice to go whenever going on (PGT Participant).	But honestly, I didn't feel very satisfied. Because I don't think the teacher read my read my report. Because, you know, we have so been to one-to-one writing, and we have two days before we can handle our report to the teacher. But I don't think he reads it. And he didn't actually… he do not understands what we have to do (PGT Participant).
For the speaking, he asked me some questions about my project. And I think that question may be also asked by the audience when I did the formal presentation. So I think that question has helped me consider what types of question they ask, it is helpful (UG Participant).	A lot of the stuff suggested, I understand would work for neurotypical people, but not really for me, but because that was like a group thing. I understand why it was done that way. But on a one-to-one appointments, it would be nice to have an option where like, the tutor knows that you're neurodivergent and might need some other different types of set of skills (UG Participant).

As we highlighted in our presentation, since we started working on this project, it has been announced that our units are to merge. This makes some of our aims easier to achieve and breaks down some of the institutional and bureaucratic barriers. It also allows us to engage in proper 'rebranding'. Based on learner feedback, we aim to adopt a meaningful name that can become the access point for our collective academic skills, language development, and numeracy support. Therefore, this academic year (2024/2025), we are launching the Learning and Writing Centre, which will house our unified provision of one-to-ones, workshops, and online materials. Our one-stop shop is growing, with our main priority for this academic year being the revision and unification of online materials. In 2025/2026, we will implement a coherent set of workshops for 2025/2026 while exploring further collaborations with Schools.

On a reflective note, we continue to navigate this collaboration by prioritising our learners' needs, carefully assessing our provision in relation to our teams' strengths and keeping the communication channels open with regular meetings and strategic catch-ups. Moving forward, we aim to share our lessons learned with the broader community and explore

different ways in which we can research how our collaboration is impacting the exciting academic journey of our students at St Andrews.

Acknowledgements

References

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Author details

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