
Mainstreaming academic skills support in Science courses

“We took the view that no-one is a native speaker of academic English and even home students may need support to learn the conventions and language of their academic subject”.

Area of Focus Contextualised English for Academic Purposes (EAP) support embedded into core Science modules.

Context Traditionally in higher education, support with academic language and skills has been provided in the form of classes offered, outside the core curriculum, to international students only. Colleagues teaching on a range of courses in the School of Science and Technology wanted to address low engagement with these English for Academic Purposes (EAP) sessions; however, they had also noticed that many home students struggled with the same issues as international students did. The School aimed to support both learning and integration by addressing the needs of both groups together.

Approach ‘Bolt-on’ study skills courses or workshops may be ineffective because learning how to study meaningfully in higher education cannot be separated from subject content and the process of deep learning. Recognising the need to work more closely with Nottingham Language Centre (NLC), certain course teams in SST invited NLC tutors to begin co-developing and/or co-delivering discipline-specific sessions on academic writing and research skills. The aim is to promote complementary support initiatives embedded at module level which provide a seamless experience.

Interventions EAP practitioners raised awareness of the services they could provide through references in staff development sessions, departmental planning meetings, and the school’s Success for All working group. Contact was established with willing tutors, who discussed the aims of their module and shared documentation such as assessment briefs and grading matrices. Two EAP practitioners garnered interest from tutors on 24 modules, largely in Biosciences and Computing & Technology.

They then devised sessions together which repurposed these materials, scaffolding them for easier access by students whose first language is other than English, or for ‘text-averse’ students who may not have much experience of academic texts and higher education terminology.

Initial Outcomes Some sessions have been delivered in partnership between the Engineering department and NLC colleagues. These have received extremely positive feedback from both tutors and students. Contextualising and embedding this support ensures that support is timely and reduces the cognitive load on already stretched students by introducing or revisiting texts used elsewhere in the module.

This embedded approach also relieves some of the stigma sometimes associated with accessing support services in a ‘bolt-on’ approach. The relevant EAP practitioner is now viewed as part of the teaching team by students and staff. EAP tutors have used these sessions to raise students’ familiarity with STEM specialist language, scientific learning styles, and what the scientific community accepts as evidence.

Challenges and next steps

This pilot required negotiation of a paradigm shift for NLC, whose remit to date had been the support of international students only. While managers were convinced of the advantages of appealing to all students (in terms both of facilitating integration and addressing common needs), the popularity of the intervention may stretch resources in future.

It has also been new experience for EAP non-science specialists, who have taken the opportunity to understand (or at least ask pertinent questions about) a range of scientific sources. They report that some students were initially sceptical as to how a non-scientist could provide meaningful support. These concerns were largely quelled through diligent preparation, and concessions to students' expertise where appropriate. Some problems arose when crucial materials were not supplied to EAP staff in enough time to prepare meaningfully. Reflecting on this need, the Course Leader has put plans in place to systematise access to subject knowledge and materials for EAP tutors in the coming year.

The intervention has received positive feedback from subject tutors, EAP tutors, and students.

Contact details

Jo Hartley, Principal Lecturer, School of Science and Technology

joanna.hartley@ntu.ac.uk