



How care and collaboration can make a difference: a case study of embedded academic skills provision in Midwifery education

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Abstract

The successful development of academic skills is fundamental in the transition of students into, through, and out of university. Our case study assesses the potential barriers and enabling factors for the success of embedding academic literacies into the undergraduate Midwifery curriculum. A team of Midwifery educators and academic developers co-designed and piloted a new series of academic skills workshops. After a successful evaluation, the provision was rolled out across the programme. This case study provides findings from that latter phase of the project, for which we reviewed the state of the literature on how embedded academic skills support can reduce barriers to success in Midwifery education and conducted focus groups with students. Our findings show that collaboration and compassionate pedagogical approaches are key factors in the successful delivery of embedded provision. The student voice was necessary to surface their needs and expectations with respect to how the development of critical thinking, writing, and reading skills should be embedded within their programme from the start, reflections on the timing of the sessions, and the need to start with an assumption of high diversity of prior knowledge in this domain. This case study shows the benefits of taking an

iterative approach to the design of embedded academic skills provision and the importance of close collaboration between students, Learning Developers, and subject educators. These are necessary factors to ensure a compassionate pedagogical approach to the development of academic skills in Midwifery education.

Keywords: academic skills; learning development; collaboration; midwifery education.

Introduction

Inclusive education practice supports students to develop their academic literacies, such as academic reading, critical thinking, academic writing, and information literacies, not assuming they come with these skills. We know that academic skills are preferably embedded within the students' curriculum, rather than relying on optional and generic support services at the level of the university. However, once the decision is taken to design and deliver such a programme, it is unclear what the potential barriers and enabling factors are for it to successfully contribute to student outcomes.

This case study focuses on the context of undergraduate Midwifery education in a research-intensive university with a diverse student population, both in terms of their ethnicity and their pathways into higher education. Maternity services in the UK are understaffed and recruiting a more ethnically diverse midwifery workforce has been identified as a priority (House of Commons Health and Social Care Committee, 2022). These issues need to be addressed to maintain safety within maternity units, particularly for mothers from ethnic minorities who are at increased risk of poor outcomes and negative experiences (House of Commons Health and Social Care Committee, 2021). To maintain a diverse workforce within UK midwifery, there is a need to ensure that higher education courses avoid exclusionary teaching and assessment practices. In the RePAIR report, students identified academic concerns as the second most common reason for considering leaving a healthcare profession training course like Midwifery. Amongst the issues cited was that the level of academic writing went up a level, which was unexpected and demotivating (NHS Health Education England, 2018).

In response to inequalities in student attainment, we embedded academic skills into the Midwifery curriculum to reduce barriers to success. In this paper, we focus on the development of critical reading and critical writing skills. The Midwifery programme moved

from zero hours to fifteen and a half hours of embedded academic skills workshops across the duration of the programme. After successful evaluation of an initial pilot, the provision was rolled out across the programme. This case study provides findings from that latter phase of the project, for which we reviewed the state of the literature on how embedded academic skills support can reduce barriers to success in Midwifery education and then conducted focus groups with students (Figure 1).

Our findings show that collaboration and compassionate pedagogical approaches are key factors in the successful delivery of embedded provision. The next section presents findings from the literature review. We then present details of our case, followed by the findings from the focus groups. We close with some lessons and recommendations.

Literature review

We conducted a narrative literature review of the Nursing and Midwifery education literature related to student support and retention. Providing support for students' academic skills has been shown to improve retention (e.g. Colalillo, 2007; Ashton-Hay and Doncaster, 2021) and to do so for students from underrepresented groups (Sutherland, Hamilton and Goodman, 2007) and students with specific learning disabilities (Wray et al., 2012). Pendleton, Clews, and Cecile (2022) found that Black, Asian, and minority ethnic students experience inequalities that lead to higher rates of attrition. The literature specifies that support for students can aid retention, but specific details of what works are hard to find. Cameron et al. (2011) suggest that one way to aid retention is through academic support. This is likely to be effective for those with non-traditional qualifications (Bowden, 2008) and older students, who can struggle with academic skills when returning to university after an elongated period away (Carolan-Olah et al., 2014).

Wingate (2006) argues that separate study skills courses are more likely to be attended by those who need them least as they are most able to attend and therefore this approach increases inequality. Wray et al. (2013) showed that embedding the sessions into the curriculum led to resource savings for the institution and improved retention rates for students with specific learning difficulties. The academic literacies literature — as reviewed in Hilsdon, Malone, and Syska (2019) — suggests that the development of students' skills in critical reading and writing needs to be embedded at the subject level, as the discourse and expectations of disciplines differ. Generic study skills support does not consider the

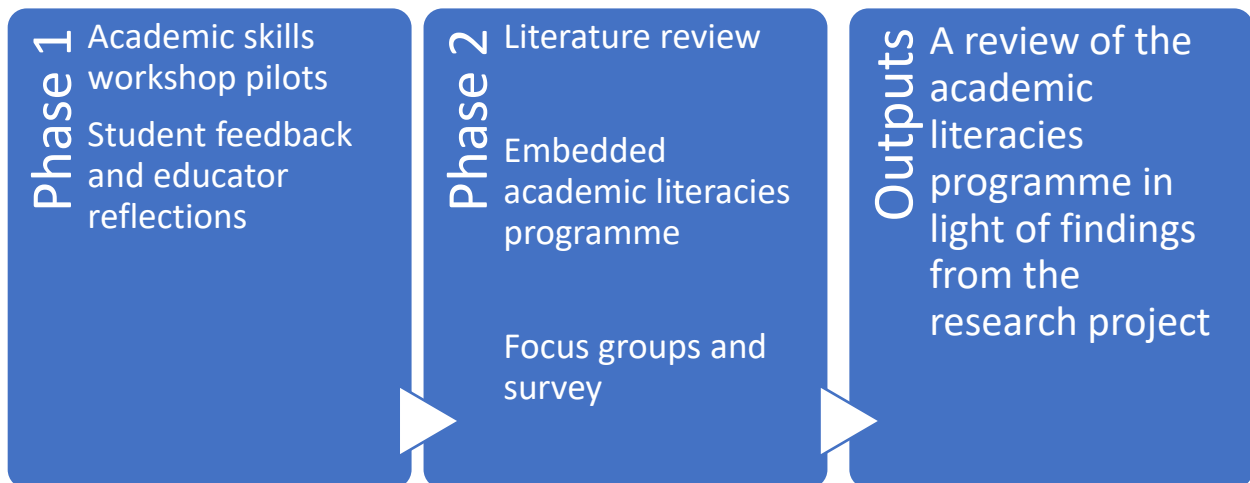
disciplinary context in which students are learning and the expectations they need to meet, which makes it less relevant to students and therefore reduces their engagement. In Nursing or Midwifery, students transition to higher education through a variety of entry points (Cassar et al., 2012) and students may see additional support as both an admission of failure and an extra time burden (Poorman, Webb and Mastorovich, 2002).

Those academic skills listed as necessary for Nursing and Midwifery by Scullion and Guest (2007, pp.5–6) include motivational and organisational skills, information technology and library searching, an ability to reflect on practice, searching for and using evidence, and being able to critically analyse research. Critical thinking is an essential skill within Midwifery to be able to appraise literature and provide evidence-based, contextualised decision making (Carter, Creedy and Sidebotham, 2018). This contextual element is very specific to Midwifery practice. As Carter et al. point out:

A high level of cognitive skill is required to balance the philosophical underpinnings of Midwifery care and its holistic nature, whilst applying contextualised evidence and honouring the woman's own preferences and choices (2018, p.115).

A close partnership with Learning Development experts can develop subject educators' pedagogical understanding of how to design and deliver the sessions (Thies and Rosario, 2019). Learning Development experts explain and model the value of a compassionate pedagogical approach, so students know in those sessions that their educators 'see them for who they are' (Airth et al., n.d.) and avoid communicating to students 'that they are lacking... and that they have to "catch up"' (Smit, 2012, p.373). A compassionate approach creates 'educational spaces wherein the learner feels seen as an individual and cared for, and in turn enacts care for others' (Greer, 2023, p.1). When the learning community takes collective responsibility for developing critical thinking, this avoids individual feelings of failure (hooks, 2009). A collaborative and compassionate approach also highlights the importance of empathy with the students and involves them as partners in curriculum co-design, as advocated by the Royal College of Midwifery (The Royal College of Midwives, 2023).

Figure 1. Overview of the case study.



The case

The BSc Midwifery programme with registration as a midwife is taught over three years. It is a unique programme that balances a 50/50 split of academic learning with simulation and clinical practice. Over the programme, students will complete 2,300 hours in practice. Within each academic year, students are required to complete 120 academic credits, comprised of four core modules each year (with an additional optional module in the first and second years). Assessments across the year are a variety of multiple-choice question exams (MCQs), observed structured clinical examination (O.S.C.E.), and written academic assessments. Written assessments and essay-style assignments move from level four pieces of work in the first year through to level six in the third year, with the clear expectation of demonstrated academic learning and progression during each year, through the development of critical review, appraisal, and synthesis of Midwifery research papers.

To support students in their development of these subject-specific academic skills, we integrated academic skills support into a specific third-year module and its assessment. The sessions were developed and delivered in collaboration between the module lead and the Learning Developer. The cohort size was approximately 80 and full attendance was expected. The critical reading session included a discussion on the meanings of critical thinking and an exercise in effective note-making. The critical writing sessions covered the distinction between descriptive and analytical writing (LearnHigher, 2012), a guided marking exercise, structuring paragraphs, and synthesis (Wallace and Wray, 2016; Ghorbannejad, 2023). Students also had time to ask assessment-related questions to

demystify the marking rubric. The module lead was in the room, ensuring that the definitions of critical thinking were appropriate to their expectations. The pedagogical approach was rooted in compassionate approaches as detailed above, with a focus on dialogue about expectations and group exercises with plenty of support (e.g. Haberstroh and Arias, 2023).

After a successful internal service evaluation of this pilot including end-of-session surveys from students, formal and informal feedback, as well as reflections from Midwifery educators on student learning, we expanded the offering with one workshop for first and second years, each in the same academic year. For the following academic year we added further sessions to the second-year curriculum. The phased approach (see Figure 1 above) allowed us to be iterative and reflective and thus scale the project up progressively, gradually increasing the input from the students' voice. In the second phase of the project, we applied for research ethics and conducted focus groups. Students were recruited for participation through student representatives, the student inclusion officers, and faculty disability lead as well as adverts posted on their cohort pages. Remuneration for their time for the focus groups was twenty pounds in online vouchers.

Whilst we initially expected to get a group of students involved from each of the year cohorts, student participation in focus groups was very limited, despite many attempts to promote this opportunity and financial compensation. We reflect on this issue at the end of this paper. We conducted four small focus groups of two participants and one interview, making a total of nine participants between August and November 2023. For the summer 2023 focus groups (end of the academic year), two had completed their third year of study and three had completed their first year of study. For the autumn 2023 groups (beginning of the academic year), three were at the beginning of the third year and the last was at the beginning of her first year. There was also an opportunity for students to feed into this project by completing a short survey with open-ended questions (five respondents), which we included in the analysis.

A thematic analysis was conducted on the transcripts. Most of the feedback was concerned with the effectiveness of the support that they received but the focus group discussions also gave room for them to discuss any other aspects of the academic teaching and assessment of the course. Our findings are organised along three themes and foreground the student voice and their reflections on their experiences with academic skills sessions. This allows us to identify the characteristics of academic skills support

which they found most supportive for their learning as well as some of the barriers which they identified.

Findings from focus groups

Demand for subject-specific academic skills

Students sought support for study skills in a variety of ways, for instance two students with prior Arts degrees had used generic study skills services from the library to refresh their skills and adjust to scientific writing. Other students did not know how to access these services or did not think to look for them, supporting Wingate's (2006) findings that students who accessed these services needed them the least. A few students, however, felt that subject-specific advice was better. One highlighted an optional module on searching for Midwifery evidence and the advantage it gave her when approaching her dissertation. Another student who had not done this module felt it should have been compulsory.

Central to their argument about subject specificity was the utility of some academic skills to their Midwifery practice. This quote demonstrates why they felt critical reading skills were important:

We'll be applying for jobs like next year, and I think given our profession, it's really important for us to be able to take those critical skills into the workplace because we'll read stuff all the time and we'll need to be able to kind of make a decision there and then.

One student described how being able to access and critically assess new research would give her more 'credibility when talking with women' and one described how she learned more when taught by a research midwife as she got 'insight into how her brain worked'. Aside from critical reading, students also appreciated learning to explain Midwifery evidence succinctly, recognising its potential usefulness when talking to service users. These skills were developed further through the critical writing sessions.

We looked at the difference between descriptive writing and critical analysis... That's been really useful because instead of explaining things, I'm thinking 'so what?'

Participants provided insights into favourable ways to teach academic skills. They clearly preferred learning to critically read Midwifery evidence by discussing papers in small groups, where a Research Midwife could drop in to offer support. They also felt their critical writing would benefit from having space to critically assess each other's work or exemplar essays together, and one survey respondent felt it would have been beneficial to have more than one opportunity to receive detailed feedback on written assessments.

The need for the approach to academic skills to be tailored to students' prior learning

Participants highlighted how their educational pathways affected their approach to the academic aspects of their Midwifery degree. Whilst most of the study participants had prior degrees, it was recognised that others came from less academic routes with little experience of writing essays and other academic skills. One participant pointed out that 'they should assume that everybody doesn't know anything because I don't have a previous degree'. However, students confident in academic writing still found that they could not always lean on their prior experience. Those with Arts degrees found the style of writing expected of them quite different. One participant had had to learn to be 'a bit more concise... it's like a bad trait of mine that I've taken from doing an Arts degree'. Another student with a prior Arts degree appreciated sessions that taught her to search for and evaluate the quality of research papers, as she had no experience of these skills. Others felt that they had forgotten how to write academically after having a significant gap between this and their first degree. Participants therefore felt that all students should be treated as novices to academic writing. There was, however, a survey respondent who had felt that covering basic academic skills was a waste of her time.

One way in which students were supported in academic skills development was through prescriptive rubrics for writing assessments. These received mixed reactions, with one student expressing surprise that such detailed support could be given, whilst another doing her first degree saw them as very helpful. However, one dyslexic student noted ways in which she struggled with them:

I think [rubrics are hard to use] because it's so dense with information. And they make them really small, but also I can't see how style, you know, can be conceptualised as a mark, particularly as a dyslexic.

The difficulty of understanding expectations such as ‘clear and fluent style’ was not specific to dyslexic students and presented issues for students who felt they had followed the rubric closely but not achieved their expected grade. This caused confusion and disappointment, particularly for less academic students who compared themselves to their higher attaining peers. One participant commented that ‘I have a lot of feelings that I’m not good enough for [the Higher Education Institution]’. Another said, ‘sometimes when I hear people talk about how they prepare and work, it’s like they speak a different language that I just can’t access’.

Aside from demonstrating the need for clear guidance to support less academically experienced students, the above quote highlights the importance of considering how neurodivergent students access learning materials. One dyslexic student noted that some university software did not allow her to adjust the background colour to reduce her visual stress whilst reading. Another dyslexic and ADHD student appreciated the embedded academic skills support, noting that they found it too difficult to seek out support for themselves.

The need for the approach to academic skills to be aligned to the structure of the Midwifery programme

Many comments made by the participants referred to how academic skills sessions were timed within the course. It was commonly acknowledged that having the sessions from the start of the course would be helpful as it would help students get the most from the course, particularly with respect to where to access relevant literature. Yet there was concern that extra sessions at the beginning of the course would be too overwhelming. Students therefore wanted sessions prior to their first written assessments so they could put their learning to use, but not so early that it increased the stress of adjusting to the new course.

Participants also expressed concern about adjusting to the different levels expected of them each year:

It would have been really helpful to have more of this academic literacy built in from the get-go. Particularly from year one into year two, because it goes up a step obviously. And obviously what worked in first year didn’t work in second year.

Some participants therefore wished to revisit the same academic skills each year with an explicit focus on how expectations had changed. Whilst students felt that lecturers tried to

make their expectations clear, some students expressed concern that it was important that the writing guidance was consistent across each module and that essay feedback referred directly to this guidance so that students clearly understood why their grades were given and how they might improve them.

Lessons and recommendations

Three main lessons can be drawn from the analysis of the students' contributions. First, they highlighted that academic skills support needs to be relevant to their assessment as well as their programme learning outcomes and the skills of their profession, in this case critical thinking for Midwifery. They were critical of sessions where expectations for assessments were not directly linked to the academic skill that was being developed. In their discussion, they connected issues with skills support with their experience of assessment and feedback. Second, they were very aware of the diversity of needs within their student body and critical of any assumptions of prior knowledge in academic reading and writing skills. They were motivated to further hone and develop their academic writing and reading skills as part of their development as critical Midwifery practitioners. Third, they reflected on the importance of the timing of the sessions. Considering their demand for more academic skills support in the first year and in the context of the complex curriculum which alternates academic and clinical practice, it will be important to further work together with first-year students and educators to consider how these skills can accompany students in their first assignment. It should be noted that engaging the students on an 'ad-hoc' basis with compensation through vouchers did not lead to desired levels of student engagement. The relatively low number of participants therefore represents a limitation of this study.

This case study has also showcased the benefits of taking an iterative and collaborative approach. We were able to start small, trialling and evaluating individual sessions and hearing the students' experience and voice before making further changes. The benefits are that we now have a better understanding of what the students want to learn, the challenges that they have faced, and the clear value they see in an embedded approach from the start. Further reflection is needed in how to facilitate this in an environment with very diverse prior knowledge of academic reading and writing.

The partnership between subject educators and the learning and academic development team permitted the design of sessions that would be pertinent to students' needs and provided an opportunity to develop subject educators in the pedagogies of academic literacies and compassionate pedagogies, so they could confidently deliver the sessions themselves. Moving the academic skills project forward required the presence of the student voice. One lesson we will implement in future projects came from a suggestion from a focus group, namely to create a formal student advisor role for the programme, as students would like to be formally recognised for their work in co-production beyond monetary remuneration.

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Appendix

Introduction and warm up (15–20 min)

First 10 min: introduction — explanation of the rationale and ground rules.

- Consent for recording.

Warm up/starting point (5–10 min): overview of their experience on the programme — what did they enjoy in the past academic year, what did they find most challenging (when it comes to preparing for specific assessments)?

Group discussion (40 min — approx 10 per topic)

1 — Overview of their experience of the academic skills sessions

- One learning point that they recall.
- Their ability to feed this forward into their learning.
- One challenge/issue they struggled with during or after the session.
- Did they feel that the session and the facilitator was including them or making them feel they belonged and to what extent were they able to ask questions/were they able to understand responses to questions and apply them to their learning?
- For cohort 2020 — which session did they find most useful and why?

2 — Academic reading/critical reading

- To what extent is this a challenge and can they explain this further?
- To what extent are expectations clear; what makes meeting these expectations difficult for them?
- To what extent have they been able to apply resources from the academic skills sessions (specific reading session for cohort 2020; some extracts of the sessions for cohorts 2021/22) to their own learning? If not, why not?

3 — Academic writing/critical writing

- To what extent is this a challenge and can they explain this further?
- To what extent are expectations clear; what makes meeting these expectations difficult for them?

- To what extent have they been able to apply resources from the academic skills sessions (two specific writing sessions for cohort 2020; some extracts of the sessions for cohorts 2021/22) to their own learning? If not, why not?

4 — Looking ahead

4a (for cohort that started in 2020) in the future, how could the academic writing and reading support be improved? Explain rationale.

4b (for cohorts that started in 2021 and 2022) what would be their priorities for the next academic year in terms of developing their academic literacies and what kind of support would be helpful?

To what extent would you like to have been consulted on the content of the course?

Talking points:

- Entry points and prior experience preparing
- What is meant by level four, five, and six, etc.? What are the differences?
- Barriers and facilitators for online vs in person?
- Barriers and facilitators of having the session as part of a day with other activities.
- Did sessions give enough time to the right activities?
- What other support needed?
 - o E.g. Signposting and feed-forward, and digital prompts? (ask Claire)

Conclusion (5 min)