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## **Into the Inner Circle: a case study of embedding academic skills into PGT provision**

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### ***Presentation abstract***

This presentation aims to outline and discuss the embedded academic skills and EAP provision in the Education department at a Russell Group university. This department has large numbers of taught postgraduate (PGT) students from overseas, with limited experience of the requirements of academic study at PGT level. Since 2020, these students have received bespoke academic skills provision; this presentation will explore how this provision has adapted to student needs and how teaching staff have also adjusted.

The provision is taught by a small team of academic skills lecturers working primarily in a single department and initially followed what Fenton-Smith and Humphreys call an 'adjunct-strong' (2015, p.42) model, with general academic skills topics aimed at a specific group of students but not explicitly targeted at course or assessment needs. This approach proved successful in terms of attendance, engagement, and student satisfaction. However, in 2024 a decision was made by senior staff to provide embedded provision following the Contextualisation, Embedding, Mapping model (Sloan and Porter, 2010; Alexander et al., 2017) as well as the adjunct provision. This required a lot of adjustment and new materials, but it also led to closer collaboration with module and programme leaders and led to greater integration of the academic skills staff into the department.

This paper will evaluate the success of this embedded provision using three metrics: student engagement, student satisfaction, and the responses of skills tutors and academic staff. It will also consider the relationship between the embedded and adjunct provision: how our adjunct provision became more embedded alongside the explicitly embedded

sessions. It will conclude with advice and recommendations about how to successfully embed academic support – and academic skills staff – into PGT programmes.

Ethical guidelines will be followed when seeking feedback from students and colleagues.

**Keywords:** embedded provision; academic skills; postgraduate students; adjunct model; collaboration.

### ***Community response***

This presentation offers an honest, detailed account of evolving academic skills provision within a PGT context at a Russell Group university. His reflective case study traces the journey from a strong adjunct model toward a more embedded approach using the CEM model, highlighting both the pedagogical value and the institutional challenges of this transition. It is heartening to see the emphasis on collaboration with programme leads, student engagement, and responsiveness to evolving departmental needs in uncertain times for HE.

Paula, a practitioner in a similar context, explained what resonated with her most was the thoughtful attention given to the tensions between adjunct and embedded provision, and the strategic use of both to meet learners where they are. It is also worth noting how this presentation is a powerful reminder that true integration takes time, trust, and a willingness to shift the narrative from 'fixing' students to supporting the whole cohort. His reflections on departmental belonging and the subtle shifts in identity for learning developers embedded in academic teams are thought-provoking. This type of provision is not simply based on delivery models, but rather on relational models: that is where its quiet power lies.

### **Next steps and additional questions**

This presentation offered an insightful reflection on the strong adjunct model evolving into a blended embedded approach. What helped shift departmental culture to make this possible, and what advice would you give to others navigating that kind of shift?

Concerns around the potential oversaturation of EAP/skills support were mentioned. How do you envision maintaining depth and value in provision while managing volume and visibility across programmes?

### ***Author's reflection***

I was very happy with the quality of the discussion and the reflection among the group – clearly I had hit on some relevant and important topics for this cohort of teachers. It was good to hear about the different perspectives, experiences, and journeys of such a wide group of participants. Many participants asked probing and deep questions, touching on the sometimes difficult relationship between academic skills and subject lecturers, as well as the different models of skills provision and their respective benefits and drawbacks. I was also pleased that the group could share some funny questions and stories to bring levity to what can be a frustrating topic, particularly in light of the financial challenges facing many UK institutions.

Considering the shift in departmental culture, I think it was a multi-directional interaction between my efforts to build relationships, the welcoming and supportive attitudes of key staff, and the benefits to students of the skills provision. Successful skills integration often requires a balance between satisfying the needs of both staff and students, and this remains a tension for academic skills staff: who are our primary customers, staff or students?

Issues around potential saturation of EAP provision were also identified, as the embedded academic skills provision was taught alongside a regular 'adjunct-strong' course. This speaks to the tension between academics and senior management: the decision to introduce embedded sessions ultimately came from management, and it could be argued that this was more due to a timetabling/operational need than based on requests from staff and students. Ultimately this has shown strong results, but it is an interesting insight into the limited role that skills staff sometimes have in planning their own courses.

Overall, this presentation and the subsequent discussion allowed a group of learning developers to discuss some of the tensions and challenges that we face, as well as to

share our own experiences of how we have built relationships and sustained them through change.

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