



Co-creating and researching the appropriacy of a module of study for a community of higher-level students

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Presentation abstract

Academic Expression and Critical Thinking (AECT) is a module on our International Foundation programme at Kings College London (KCL) that supports high-level English for Academic Purposes (EAP) students with International English Language Testing System (IELTS) scores of 7 and above. The module is designed to have less focus on language than general EAP, and greater focus on critical thinking and academic literacy. However, these students may have 'spikey' profiles (i.e., with varied proficiency across language skills) and come from varied educational backgrounds. Consequently, AECT poses provision-, assessment-, and delivery-related challenges. This involves supporting students in attaining grades to progress, avoiding penalising students with greater level of difficulty of content, and maintaining student motivation. It also aims to build students' socialisation and 'readiness for classroom study' as they adapt to post-pandemic life (compare 'academic culture acclimatization' Bhowmik and Kim, 2018, p.498). This provision aims to engage students in 'critical needs analysis' (Benesch, 1996, p.723) and create opportunities for student voice in module design (Bhowmik and Kim, 2018). As a piece of action research, changes in delivery and assessment on the module were investigated and analysed through several feedback activities over the year, including student- and tutor-facing surveys as well as focus groups with current AECT students. Presenting this work for discussion at the 2025 ALDinHE Conference has helped guide and inform continued work on developing AECT. This will include engaging the 2025/26 cohort in similar research activities and conducting assessment-related action research.

Keywords: academic literacy; foundation programmes; assessment; motivation; module design.

Community response

Several interesting suggestions were made by the attendees in relation to developing the AECT module. These included organising 'assessment days' for students' summative oral assignments. This was described as a kind of problem-based learning context, where learners are given a problem and access to resources to research briefly. Students would then engage in the group or seminar discussion element of the assessment. This would have the dual advantages of being able to assess learners' critical thinking and academic discussion skills in an authentic task and logistically it would be possible to run through a number of assessments during the day. In addition, there remains a need for alternative assessments for students unable to engage in summative oral assessments or group work, so it would be interesting also to see how this would be managed through AECT.

Attendees also noted that the efforts to align formative and summative written assessment in terms of topic seem worthwhile, and allow for better scaffolding of the task while also adding enough variety to maintain student interest and motivation. Depth of engagement with the topic should also see an improvement through this integration.

To enhance co-creation, the possibility for engaging former Kings International Foundation (KIF) AECT students in the development of further resources was also mentioned. This could be particularly helpful where students working at higher levels are able to reflect on the ways that the AECT module proved beneficial for their ongoing personal development, and indeed graduates reflecting on the benefits of their training for employment.

Figure 1. Integration of portfolio-style tasks and assessment alignment.

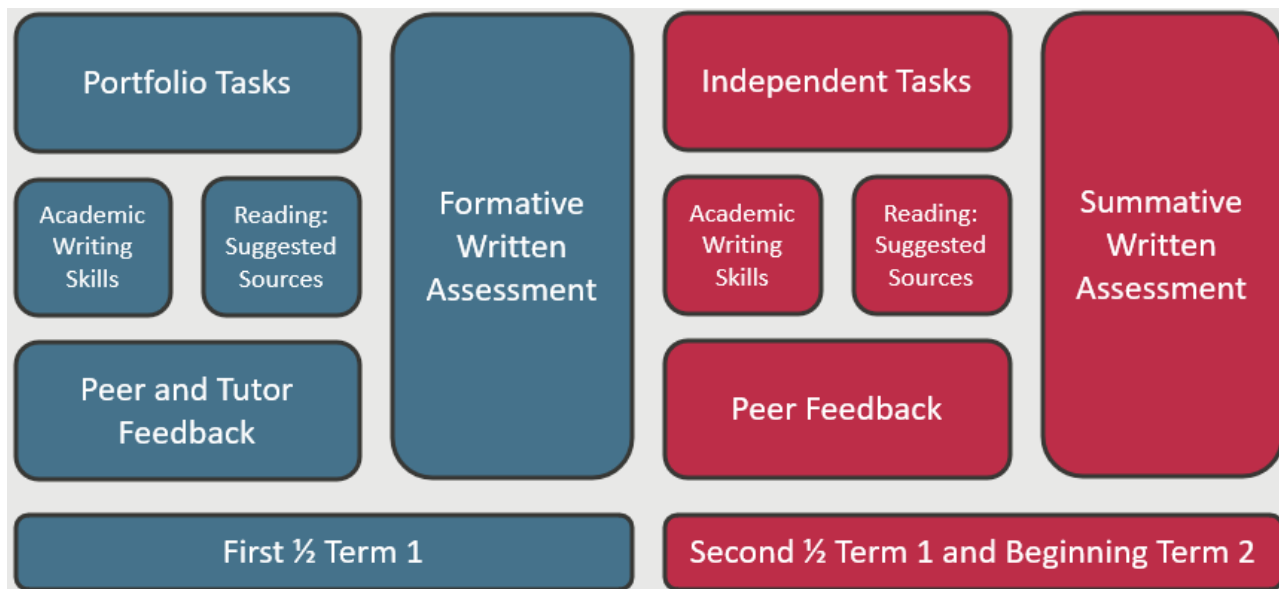


Figure 2. Development of combined Speaking and Listening Test.



Next steps and additional questions

It would be particularly interesting to hear more about what was learned by undergoing this process, reworking the practices for assessments, and improving the module as a whole. Did you face any obstacles in conducting the research? To what extent do you see this model as transferable to similar institutions working with international students? Also, what

additional steps do you see yourselves taking in future, given the action research approach you have adopted?

Authors' reflection

Engaging in this research has been a rewarding process. The growth and development of English for Academic Purposes as a discipline since the turn of the century necessitates an approach to our work that is based on sound and evidence-based principles. As noted by Hyland and Lyons (2002), this encompasses familiarising students with academic literacies required in the higher education context and acknowledging the features specific to their varied disciplinary areas, as well keeping up to date with advances in the field relating to methodology and technology. The almost exponential increase in student numbers on the AECT module over the past six years has made adhering to this principled approach a significant challenge. In interrogating methodically our current practice, and including both student and tutor perspectives on this, it is hoped that we can identify practices that are proving most effective in achieving our aims. Bringing this research to conferences such as ALDinHE, and the subsequent discussion this has generated, will provide useful direction for the continued redevelopment of and research on our work.

A key limitation of the research currently conducted during this redevelopment project has been in recruiting a pool of participants and securing responses to research activities that are truly representative of the cohort. At present, this has not yet been fully achieved: while the number of responses to our surveys is not insignificant, comprising 121 responses from a cohort of around 450 students, the sample size of focus group activities has been minimal ($n=7$). To ensure that our research is principled and supported by a sufficient base of evidence, it is hoped that the initial steps that we have taken can be developed so as to be in a position to contribute to the knowledge base of our field, as detailed in Bruce (2021). In sharing the work we have currently undertaken, we are able to identify what research activities have worked effectively, while taking on board suggestions for refining this further. Suggestions for future research mentioned during the presentation of this paper to colleagues at ALDinHE included engaging with students from previous cohorts who have progressed from the AECT module to undergraduate study. This matches with research being conducted by colleagues within our department, and highlights a key

opportunity to collaborate on improving our practice, both in terms of the research and redevelopment of the module.

Along with identifying areas of overlap with colleagues at King's, since taking part in the ALDinHE Conference in June 2025, further similarities have been identified with work conducted by colleagues in other HE institutions. One example is the development of portfolio-based projects and assessment activities with a focus on developing extracurricular or more technical skills alongside the development of academic literacy currently being conducted and researched at the University of Birmingham (Pullen, Williams and Groves, 2025). Portfolio-based assessment is also being developed across other EAP provision at King's, with the module leaders of the EAP and ESAP (English for Scientific Academic Purposes) seeking to incorporate a process-focused approach to developing students' academic writing skills. This suggests that the current direction we are taking on AECT, in redesigning assessment activities and the content of the module, is a sensible way to develop our work.

The next steps in our work redeveloping the AECT module, together with changes in how assessment is defined at King's more broadly, will involve identifying areas such as those outlined above where there is the possibility of collaboration within our department, the institution and the HE sector more widely. Suggestions arising from feedback on conference presentations such as our ALDinHE session suggest interesting and worthwhile areas for investigation. Chief among these is the possibility of collaborating with former KIF students for additional input into our redevelopment and research processes. This activity could help establish links between the work going on in our foundation course and the undergraduate programmes our students progress to, opening up the potential to inform and improve practice both locally and more generally across the university. Within the AECT module itself, further engagement in researching our student cohort will continue to be refined based on our experience and the perspectives we have gathered from engaging with colleagues from across the sector. Additionally, further development work on the module is planned based on action research into alternative assessment activities and opportunities for involving students in cocreating teaching and learning materials.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the contributors who shared their reflections and enriched our insight into this conference presentation and its impact on the audience.

The authors did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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