



From the margins to the core: Implementing an inclusive academic community for empowered learning

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ABSTRACT

In higher education (HE), learning development and in-session provision have traditionally existed at the margins, often treated as supplementary rather than integral to institutional priorities. However, as student demographics and academic demands evolve, the need for a more inclusive, integrated approach to student support becomes increasingly pressing. This reflective analysis explores the collaboration between two services situated within the third space (Whitchurch, 2018): academic skills provision offered by the Centre for Educational Enhancement and Development (CEED) and Academic English Services (AES) provided by the International Education Institute (IE). Through this partnership, we sought to challenge entrenched othering structures that distinguish international from home students and reinforce the problematic dichotomy between native and non-native English speakers. Drawing from practitioner-based enquiry, we outline the steps taken to integrate these services and develop a student-centred provision that fosters autonomy and inclusivity. Our approach intentionally moves beyond problematising existing labels, instead focusing on dismantling institutional barriers that have historically segregated academic and language support. By aligning pedagogical and operational strategies, we created a unified framework that allows all learners to access tailored support without being restricted by linguistic or institutional classifications. This reflective analysis critically examines the early stages of our collaboration, drawing from qualitative and quantitative data to evaluate its impact. We unpick the successes and challenges encountered in navigating institutional constraints, streamlining service provision, and fostering a more cohesive learning development community. Our findings contribute to ongoing discussions on cross-departmental collaborations and provide a potential blueprint for integrating academic and language development within the third space. Ultimately, we advocate for a model that prioritises learner agency, challenges deficit-based perspectives, and repositions academic development as a core function within HE institutions.

Keywords: third space, academic literacies, inclusive learning, academic development, student agency, collaborative provision

Introduction

In higher education (HE), the landscape of learning development and in-session provision has traditionally existed on the periphery of institutional priorities. These units, often regarded as separate from the core functions of teaching and research, play a vital role in supporting student success by offering tailored services for both academic and personal development. However, as the student body diversifies and the demands of academia evolve, the need for more integrated and inclusive approaches to support and development has become increasingly pressing.

In this context, the concept of the third space (Whitchurch, 2018) emerges as a useful framework for understanding how academic development and in-sessional provision can cross the traditional boundaries between academic and professional spheres. The third space is liminal, where the roles of educators, administrators, and support staff intersect. This allows for collaborative and interdisciplinary practices that challenge conventional hierarchies and silos within HE institutions. The third space facilitates innovation by promoting collaboration between stakeholders united by a shared goal: enhancing the student experience and fostering a more inclusive, supportive learning environment. However, the practicalities of these collaborations are often complex and riddled with institutional barriers (Whitchurch, 2018). This reflective analysis is situated within this context as both services are situated within the periphery and are designed to enhance learning development across disciplines and levels of studies. Thus, our respective provisions intersect, allowing for the cross-disciplinary collaboration that Whitchurch (2018) identifies.

This paper aims to trace the journey and reinvention of two services situated in the third space: academic skills, provided by the Centre for Educational Enhancement and Development (CEED), and the Academic English Service, provided by the International Education Institute (IE), striving to offer a comprehensive and meaningful development programme to all learners. Thus, in the summer of 2023, practitioners from CEED and IE united in a significant effort to review their services and explore potential areas for meaningful collaboration. We conceptualised our venture as a process where HE staff engage in learning, teaching, and research, deliberately collaborating to share practices, learn from each other and ultimately work together (Eddy, 2010; Pham & Tanner, 2015) to identify overlapping and unique aspects of provisions. The main aim was to collaboratively redesign a student-centred programme that addresses the specific challenges students face at our home institution.

The following goals underpinned our collaborative journey. Firstly, accessing our services needed to be streamlined while ensuring this was more than a tokenistic integration and secondly, offering a comprehensive and inclusive provision that enables all students, regardless of their first language, to benefit from the necessary support to succeed in their HE journey. Thirdly, by emphasising differences in disciplinary discourse (Hyland, 2011) among all students, we sought to move away from deficit perspectives (Murray, 2016) and reduce any potential stigma associated with utilising our services. Reducing stigma is a key part of our mission to make all students feel understood and supported. From a professional perspective, we aimed to explore opportunities to exchange knowledge and expertise (Veles, 2022).

This reflective analysis examines the early stages of our ongoing collaborative journey by unpicking the specific steps taken to address those goals. To assess the collaboration up until this point, we generated both quantitative and qualitative data, in the form of questionnaires and focus groups. Thus, this paper aims to provide a new perspective on cross-departmental collaborations while suggesting a potential blueprint for joint ventures among provisions traditionally situated in the third space.

Understanding the landscape

Tibbets and Chapman (2023) provide an extensive and timely overview of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) provision throughout the year, referred to as in-sessional English for Academic Purposes (ISEAP) in the current UK higher education landscape. They identify how IESAP provision plays a vital yet inconsistent role. Its prominence is largely tied to the presence of international students, with universities aiming to meet the diverse linguistic and academic literacy needs of this heterogeneous group (Tibbets & Chapman, 2023). While many institutions offer ISEAP, its scope, quality, and accessibility vary widely due to the lack of a central regulatory framework. Unlike countries like Australia, where national standards mandate specific

English language support across the student lifecycle, the UK leaves such decisions to individual institutions (Tibbets & Chapman, 2023). This regulatory gap has significant implications. In many UK institutions, EAP support is often viewed as a supplementary service, commonly framed within a deficit discourse. This model focuses primarily on addressing the perceived shortcomings of non-native English speakers rather than integrating language support as an inclusive and essential aspect of academic development for all students. Such positioning has been criticised for perpetuating the marginalisation of these services (Turner, 2011), as they remain under-resourced and optional, with limited reach beyond international students.

Similarly, student learning development is also often positioned outside academic departments and often delivered by a different unit in the periphery from ISEAP. Models of the provision of student learning development differ greatly between institutions, with learning developers situated within central units, such as the library or academic/ learning development units. Others have dedicated learning developers within faculties or sometimes departments. Learning development is generally available to both home and international students, as is the case in our institution. Crucially, it is often the case, however, that whether academic skills support is provided centrally or in a devolved manner, it is often separate from IESAP language support. Thus, students may be forced to look for slightly different provisions in different places.

As highlighted, the IESAP's provision by units in the periphery has been widely contested (Turner, 2011; Wingate, 2015). Specifically, in our context, this labelling of international students is problematic, as the vast majority of this cohort labelled as 'international' speak English as their first language, as they come from the USA. Traditionally, this has led the division to rely on the arbitrary distinction of native and non-native speakers, which, as Tibbets and Chapman (2023) expertly identified, tends to be rooted in a deficit model. Specifically, at our institution, IESAP provision and student learning development have historically been managed by two distinct units: the International Education Institute (IE) and the Centre for Education Enhancement and Development (CEED), respectively. Both provisions offered one-to-one services and workshops. Learners can sign up for all these services. While CEED offered support with general academic skills to all students, IE provision focused on developing Academic English language skills (AES) and was exclusively available to students who speak English as an additional language. While CEED's services would be defined within the umbrella term of learning development, IE's provision would fit under IESAP. However, AES provision can take the form of truly IESAP by being tailored to an academic discipline (Tibbets & Chapman, 2023) or module or being more generic in nature, offering guidance in general academic English language expression and comprehension. Ultimately, both AES and academic skills provision aim to allow learners to navigate their HE journey successfully. Similarly, both provisions are situated at the margins of academia (Ding & Bruce, 2017). In the previous section, the role of the third space in HE has been critically discussed; based on our conceptualisation of the third space, it is possible to see how both provisions are comfortably situated within this space. Although AES sits within an academic unit (IE), this service relies on collegiality to maintain the running of the one-to-one sessions and workshops, as hours are allocated to tutors but not timetabled. In practical terms, this results in challenges in staffing student-facing services. It is also worth highlighting how AES is not income-generating, unlike the rest of the programmes within IE. In a similar vein, hours can be reallocated from AES to other income-generating programmes the department runs, thus reinforcing AES's liminal space within the institution. Although timetabling challenges are not as prominent in CEED, this unit is not income generating, thus depending on budget provisions beyond its direct control. Figure 1 shows the existing provision delivered by both units, before our collaboration.

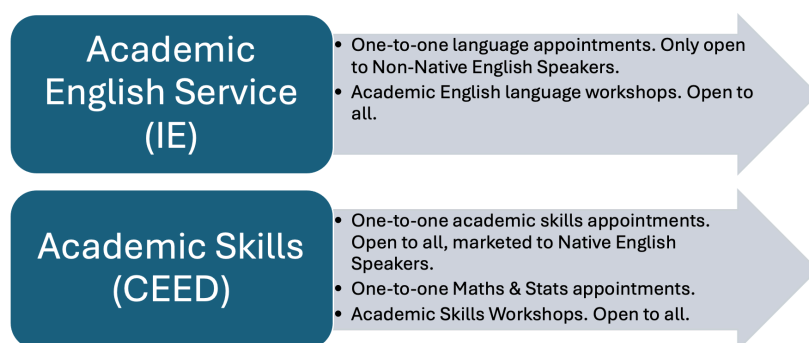


Figure 1 Provision by both IE and CEED pre-collaboration

Language and skills provision before our collaboration

The similarities between AES and study skills provision go beyond their placement within the third space; at their core, both study skills and AES strive to equip learners with the ability to “gain competence in the communicative practices of their chosen disciplines” (Hakim & Wingate, 2024, p. 1), that is, to develop their academic literacies. Through workshops and one-to-one appointments, AES and academic skills significantly contribute to the university by delivering essential IESAP services with varying degrees of specialisation, in line with this type of provision (Tibbets & Chapman, 2023). In the case of AES, a more English-for-general academic purposes approach has characterised the workshops with occasional broad divisions between the disciplinary differences of communicative acts of science and social science fields. However, one-to-one appointments have offered tutors the opportunity to offer a more English-for-specific purposes approach, tailoring the advice to the learner’s discipline, thus enhancing their academic literacies in a more bespoke and meaningful manner.

As highlighted, study, or academic, skill provision has mainly been delivered through workshops and one-to-one appointments. A range of workshops are run centrally and open to all students, with occasional bespoke workshops offered in collaboration with academic schools. The Academic Skills Project, which has now been running for ten years, offers discipline-specific academic skills workshops to undergraduate students in participating schools; it is staffed and run by Postgraduate Research Students / Graduate Teaching Assistants (PGRs/ GTAs) under the oversight of CEED. One-to-ones are bookable appointments on a range of academic literacy topics and include a Mathematical and Statistical (Maths & Stats) support service. Appointments are staffed by trained GTAs under the supervision of a permanent learning developer. These appointments are not discipline-specific.

Once we reviewed our respective broad approaches, we unpacked our practices to explore how our perceived differences and similarities were locally enacted. Specifically, we audited our services in terms of scope and numbers individually. Then we compared notes and noticed overlapping areas as well as the distinctive aspects that each service provided. We routinely met every three weeks to compare notes and explore possibilities within our institution to combine our efforts into a meaningful and accessible learner-centred provision.

Identifying opportunities for collaboration

Prior to the academic year 2023/2024, CEED offered one-to-one appointments in academic skills designed to support students over occasional challenges faced when studying at university. These were open to all undergraduate and postgraduate taught students, and since COVID had run largely online. Appointments were for up to one hour, and students were allowed up to three on any topic in the first instance. The same format applied to Maths and Stats appointments. Tutors could look at a piece of work 'cold' within the session, but this had to have already been submitted for assessment and received feedback. Historically the relationship between study skills 'essay writing' and the IESAP language support had been complicated as we both offered writing support in a slightly different way, and up to 2023 to slightly different audiences. Study skills 'essay writing' tended to focus on the writing process, macro level structure and feedback literacy; the GTAs staffing the appointments were trained and experienced, but not necessarily academic language experts. GTAs are employed by the university to provide these services. PhD students could not access any of the one-to-one support but did have a dedicated strand of workshops as part of the GRADSkills programme.

AES, on the other hand, offered 30-minute appointments for undergraduate and postgraduate-taught students whose first language was not English. The nature of the sessions was broad but mostly focused on writing skills. The learners traditionally brought an output from their discipline, usually an essay, that would allow more IESAP work. However, this was not a requirement, and queries addressed during these appointments may have encompassed topics that were more suited for an academic skills appointment. Learners were allowed to book an unlimited number of sessions per semester but only one session a week. Doctoral candidates whose first language was not English were assigned an AES tutor for the duration of their doctoral journey and had the opportunity to book one appointment every three weeks. Two key issues were identified with this approach; firstly, it assumed that users of English as a first language (L1) may not require specific support to develop their academic English language skills, while simultaneously accepting that all users of English as an additional language may require this extra support. This broad generalisation failed to include learners who speak English as a first language yet come from non-traditional academic backgrounds. This segregation overlooked how these learners may benefit from AES sessions, while erasing the English language sense of ownership that speakers of English as an additional language may feel after being educated through English, even if this was their additional language. Secondly, the appointments were vague in purpose, potentially leading to crossing boundaries into student services type of support. This, combined with the potentially high number of appointments learners could book, may lead to learner dependency instead of allowing them to develop the necessary tools to navigate HE as independent learners. This links to our critical evaluation of the intersectionality of our provision and problematisation of perceptions of academic literacy provision explored in the following section.

Implementing an inclusive community for empowered learning

Pedagogical considerations

From the outset, our commitment to improving learner experiences drove the integration of services. In terms of theories informing this drive, in this paper, we have positioned our collaboration within the third space and within academic literacies (Wingate, 2015). A key challenge of this liminal space is the perceptions around this type of learning development and IESAP work with Turner (2004; 2011) insightfully

labelling it as ‘Cinderella work,’ invisible and undervalued within the university system. This has clear implications not only for funding but also for the way learners and the wider HE community perceive it. This image problem reinforces this remedial approach, almost as a tokenistic extra, ignoring the importance of understanding the language and conventions of the disciplines to actively participate in the exchange and co-construction of knowledge. Similarly, the binary distinction between international and home students, much like the problematic dichotomy of native and non-native speakers, reinforces othering structures that shape institutional discourse and provisions. These labels not only impose rigid categories but also position certain groups as the default and others as deviations from that norm. Our approach moves beyond merely problematising these labels; it actively dismantles the othering structures that sustain them. By shifting ownership to the learners, we create a space where they determine their own needs, rather than having them prescribed externally. This autonomy is fostered through clear and explicit communication about our role and provision—an ongoing challenge in the liminal space of academic development, where navigating institutional expectations while centring student agency requires constant negotiation.

Practical considerations

In practical terms, after carefully auditing our respective provisions, we identified three broad areas of collaboration: one-to-one appointments, workshops for general academic purposes, and online materials. For the academic year 2023/2024, we prioritised aligning our one-to-one appointments. Figure 2 provides a schematic representation of the new one-to-one provision.

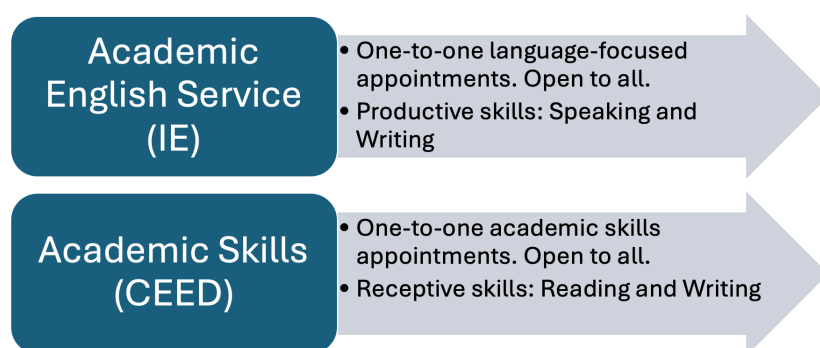


Figure 2 One-to-one provision 2023/2024

As highlighted, we strive for a fully integrated provision that reflects the strengths of our tutors while empowering our learners to access the appointments which address their needs. To achieve this aim, we created the Academic Development Community (ADC). Conceptually, it provides learners with the provision that they need to thrive in their HE journey. In practical terms, this materialised as a one-stop shop that explicitly unpacks our provision, thus making learners’ ownership of their own HE journeys possible (Figure 3).

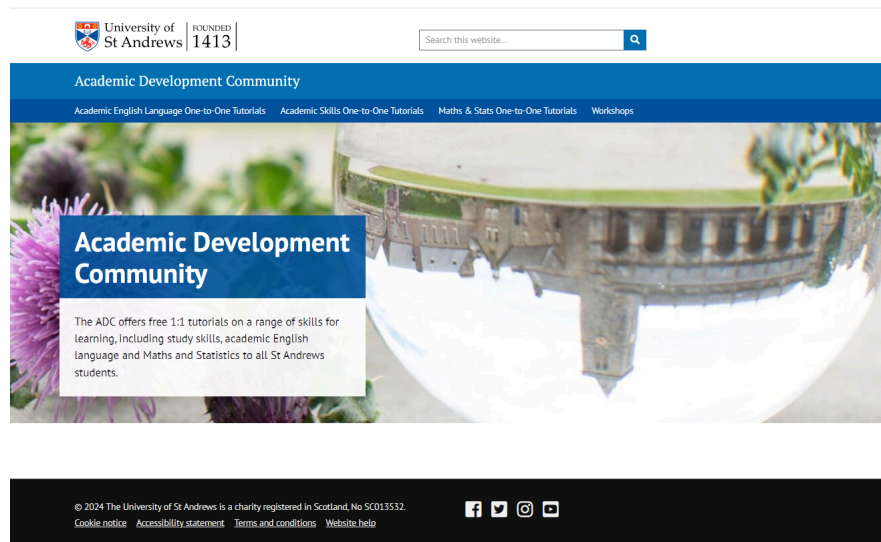


Figure 3 Academic Development Community Web Page (2023/2024)

Firstly, to empower our learners to make an informed choice, the boundaries of the different one-to-one services covered by the ADC were explicitly communicated. While aiming to avoid a fragmented approach to knowledge but still playing to our team's strength, the study skills appointment covered receptive skills, listening and reading, along with macro-structure writing areas and learning strategies such as time management. The AES appointments focused on productive skills, writing and speaking, along with specific language and pronunciation issues. To enhance the focus of the productive appointments, learners were encouraged to submit a section of their written work up to two working days before their appointment. For speaking appointments, they were encouraged to bring a presentation or topic for discussion. These boundaries were clearly communicated to our learners through the ADC (Figures 4 and 5). This is a direct response to the challenges of teaching academic literacies within the third space (Tuck, 2018). Through a clear itemisation of our scope, we aim to contribute to the professionalisation of the service by clearly communicating how our team's expertise shapes learners' engagement with disciplinary discourse and their ability to engage with academic practices while placing the learners at the core of the decision-making process. This approach, in its essence, aligns with enacting a Pedagogy of Kindness (PoK) by "promoting agential learning" (Creely, 2025, p. 86), allowing learners to make informed decisions when selecting and identifying the right type of provision for them.

From the margins to the core: Implementing an inclusive academic community for empowered learning

Overview of the sessions

One-to-one appointments are free, online 60-minute sessions with an academic skills tutor designed to provide detailed and focused assistance with study skills.

Our primary aim is to help students over **occasional challenges**—please note, we do not offer routine tutoring services.

Sessions generally take place during office hours, which are 0900-1700, Monday-Friday. We do not offer appointments over the weekend.

Who will be my tutor?

Experienced postgraduate (PhD) tutors. Tutors are likely to be from a different discipline from your own but can help you develop effective study strategies and enhance your approach to your academic work.

If you are a current PhD student and would rather not meet with a postgraduate tutor, please contact ceedtutors@st-andrews.ac.uk to book an appointment with one of our Student Development team.

What can we help with?

Study Skills sessions are designed to provide you with personalised support and strategies to become independent in your studies. We can cover the following topics within a Study Skills appointment:

- Essay research, planning and writing
- Reading for comprehension
- Note-making (for reading and/or lectures)
- Studying for exams
- Lab report writing
- Citing and referencing
- Time management
- Dissertation research, project management and planning
- Reflective writing

Figure 4 Study Skills one-to-one appointment information for learners

What we can help with

You can use your appointment to get help with

- Grammar
- Coherence and Cohesion
- Sentence length and structure
- Punctuation and spelling
- Academic register and vocabulary
- The overall structure of an essay, report or thesis chapters
- Referencing, both within the text and in a bibliography
- Good Academic Practice
- Understanding Plagiarism

What we can't help with

Please note we cannot help with

- Generating ideas and content and ideas. Please discuss this with your supervisor or course tutors.
- Anything other than academic work. We are happy to help with journal articles but not CVs, for example.
- Proofreading your work. **This is not a proofreading service;** it is a learning opportunity to help you better understand your mistakes and how to address them.

Who will be my tutor?

Our tutors are highly qualified and experienced language teachers who can help you with the linguistic and general academic aspects of your presentation. However, they will not be able to assist with content questions. Our tutors have a wide range of teaching commitments, so you may not be able to see the same tutor at all your appointments.

Guidelines for appointments

To ensure the smooth running of the service, please remember that

- **You can only book 6 appointments per semester.** This allocation includes any Good Academic Practice appointments you may book.
- **Foundation students can only book 2 appointments per semester**
- Appointments are individual and non-transferable. Please make sure you cancel your appointment if you can no longer attend.
- Appointments are subject to availability, and priority is given to students who use English as a second language.
- You can only book one appointment at a time. Please only book one appointment per week.
- If you are more than 10 minutes late, your appointment will be cancelled, and you won't be able to make an appointment until the following month.
- Shortly after you book your appointment, you will receive an email with a calendar appointment to let you join the online meeting in which your appointment will take place. This email will include how to submit your work in advance. **Please allow 48 working hours so that our tutors can give meaningful feedback on your work.**

Figure 5 AES one-to-one appointment information for learners

Secondly, the arbitrary distinction between L1 English users and users of English as an additional language was removed. This meant moving away from a deficit perspective approach to provision (Murray, 2016) while acknowledging the need to provide learners with comprehensive and tailored input to allow them to develop the necessary knowledge to navigate their HE journey successfully. By removing this distinction, learners can access the services that best suit their needs rather than restricting access based on assumptions made based on their Academic English competence in relation to the contentious native-speaker vs non-native speaker dichotomy. In practical terms, all one-to-one appointments were now

open to all learners. By removing this division between the so-called native and non-native English speakers, our learners' intricate stories and identities are recognised. Thus, in line with our pedagogical underpinnings, power relations were shifted by allowing learners to identify and access the service they needed rather than passively being guided by institutional practices, constraints or assumptions.

To gain institutional buy-in to implement this change, in semester 1, a triage system was established where users of English as L1 needed to be referred to the AES appointments by study skills tutors. This was mostly a response to concerns related to service capability. However, this extra step was swiftly removed from semester two based on usage numbers. Our experience of opening the services to all learners has not strained the one-to-one appointments. However, study-skills appointments are marketed for occasional issues learners encounter, and AES appointments are capped at six per semester at all study levels. If a learner requires further linguistic support, we provide further appointments based on their needs. This new approach addressed the key issues identified prior to our collaboration while strengthening an inclusive and student-centred provision.

Both units delivered these appointments online since the COVID-19 pandemic. We have maintained our sessions online to allow distance learners to benefit from this provision while fostering a life-work balance with our learners who commute or have other responsibilities beyond their HE studies. However, in-person appointments are still available on request for study skills. This links once again with the ethos underpinning our collaboration, which lies in facilitating the navigation of the services offered at our institution while removing systemic barriers.

Assessing our approach

As our reflective analysis shows, pedagogical and practical considerations informed our conscious efforts to build an inclusive academic community that successfully and transparently informs learners of the services available to them while empowering them to choose what best addresses their needs. Our key aim is to evaluate our services' impact on our student community. Thus, we draw from qualitative and quantitative instruments to generate preliminary data to assess and inform our practice.

Firstly, we implemented a quick feedback form that requires learners to rate their appointments from one (lowest) to five (highest) stars via Microsoft Forms, automatically emailed to users after their appointment. For Study Skills, the form was distributed through Teams chat by the tutors at the end of each appointment. An automatic follow up has subsequently been introduced. Responses provided are entirely anonymous. The University Teaching and Research Ethics Committee guidance states that individuals do not need additional ethics to publish the results of a service evaluation. This service evaluation feedback includes the above-mentioned quantitative data generated through the Likert scale. Furthermore, users were allowed to identify the tutor they had the session with and add any further comments related to the session. The primary rationale underpinning the identification of the tutor who delivered the session was to share feedback with them. Learners are made aware that feedback may be shared with tutors and used for promotional purposes when completing the evaluation forms. Although users left feedback anonymously, time stamps could potentially allow us to trace the learner if necessary. This was necessary in one case when a learner experienced difficulties uploading the document before their session. This allowed us to reach out and explain how to use the system moving forward. However, ensuring that we could retrieve who left the feedback was originally designed as a safeguarding mechanism for our tutors. This form of feedback generation can be extremely problematic, causing unnecessary distress to practitioners in HE (Heffernan, 2022; Lakeman et al., 2021), so by implementing this approach while screening the feedback, it

was possible to ensure that only relevant comments were filtered to tutors. It is, nevertheless, worth noting that this approach to generating feedback for evaluating the service has been extremely positive, and no problematic instances have been identified. As can be seen in the next section, feedback has been consistently favourable, and when tutors are mentioned, it is in an overwhelmingly positive light. It is possible to hypothesise that this may be facilitated by the specific focus of the question on the appointment itself rather than the tutor. This, in turn, directs the respondents’ attention to the service rather than the individual tutor. The primary goal of our feedback form is to evaluate the service itself to better tailor our provision to the learners in our institution.

Secondly, in semester two, we conducted a focus group to understand learners’ experiences of the service better. This allowed us to generate further qualitative data to deepen our understanding of the services provided within our academic development community. Ethical approval was obtained to audit our services and share our results with the wider educational community. In our analysis, we combined the qualitative data, generated from the open-ended prompt in the quick feedback form, and the transcription from the focus group. This data was coded following Braun and Clarke’s (2016) steps to thematic analysis. Due to the open nature of this inquiry, a deductive approach was followed to generate the themes and codes (Table 1).

Thirdly, we engaged in reflective practice to critically evaluate our steps to locally enact our collaboration while navigating our unique challenges within the third space.

Table 1 Themes and codes generated

Theme	Codes	Source of data
Positive	Tutor	Questionnaire & focus group
	Specific advice	
	Kindness	
	Feedback	Questionnaire
	Extra resources	Questionnaire
	Mode of delivery	Questionnaire
Suggestions	Promotion	Questionnaire & focus group
	Further services	Focus group
Negative	Lack of familiarity with submission	Questionnaire & focus group
	Technology	Questionnaire
	Mode of delivery	Focus group

What do our learners say?

Quantitative data

Forty-six learners completed the feedback form for the study skills appointment from 214 delivered appointments. Of the respondents, 4.3% rated the study skills appointments 4/5, with the remaining 95.7% rating appointments 5/5 during academic year 2023/24. Of these respondents, 72 % left a follow-up comment. For the Academic English Language appointments, 94% of the respondents rated the service ‘5’, with only 2% rating their appointment ‘2’ or below, thus showing that learners are overall satisfied with the

provision. The self-selected sample included 100 responses out of the 241 appointments delivered. The overwhelmingly positive ratings suggest that students not only valued the service but also found it met their expectations. This is significant considering the traditionally marginalised position of IESAP and academic skills provision in HE (Turner, 2011). Of these 100 respondents, 57% left a follow-up comment, the analyses of which are reported in the next section.

Qualitative data

In this section, we presented the qualitative data generated via the questionnaire and the focus group conducted in semester two. Three students attended the focus group: one undergraduate student who uses English as a first language, one postgraduate taught student, and one post-graduate researcher, both of whom use English as an additional language. In order to ethically engage with the data generated, it is important to consider how these participants are not representative of the whole student population but rather able to further inform our research through their unique personal experiences and academic journeys, in line with the qualitative nature of the data presented in this section.

The 57 entries received from the questionnaire and the 34 quotes from the focus group were thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2016), generating three overarching themes: negative, suggestions, and positive. Within these themes, ten codes were generated to allow for a refined exploration of the data (Table 2).

Table 2 Qualitative data analysed following thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2016).

Theme	Codes	Selected Participants' quotes
Positive	Tutor	I'm always in good hands with [tutor's name]. She's an amazing tutor (Questionnaire, appointment rated as 5)
		It's very helpful, and the tutor is really nice (Questionnaire, appointment rated as '5')
		Great tutorial with a great tutor! (Questionnaire, appointment rated as '5')
	Specific advice	She's amazing. Precise advice (Questionnaire, appointment rated as '5')
		It was pretty good. The tutor gave me many suggestions in detail to precisely distinguish differences between different words (Questionnaire, appointment rated as '5')
		I am grateful to the teacher because she helped me to identify my mistakes and prepare for the presentation. After the meeting, I have very, very positive impressions, because in addition to the purpose of the meeting, there were also pleasant feelings (Questionnaire, appointment rated as '5')
	Kindness	Great experience. [Tutor's name] was very helpful and kind! (Questionnaire, appointment rated as '5')
		I would just like to sincerely thank my tutor for her very kind support with sessions and instructions (Questionnaire, appointment rated as '5')
		The tutorial was amazing overall. [Tutor's name] answered all of my questions and doubts and even gave me some tips and recommendations for my dissertation. She was kind and friendly, yet always professional. I would definitely recommend [tutor's name] to any student who needs support with academic English. She was very helpful (Questionnaire, appointment rated as '5')
	Feedback	Very clear and good quality feedback. I really appreciated the session! (Questionnaire, appointment rated as '5')

		[Tutor's name] always provides constructive feedback, both written and oral (Questionnaire, appointment rated as '5')
	Extra resources	The session was very helpful and the extra resources provided will help a lot. Thank you (Questionnaire, appointment rated as '5') She is truly amazing and provides the most informative materials, which help me significantly (Questionnaire, appointment rated as '5')
	Mode of delivery	AES tutorial as invaluable. Please advertise them more because many students are not aware of their existence. I also hope you will keep them online as I'm distance learning. Thanks a lot for this service! (Questionnaire, appointment rated as '5')
Suggestions	Promotion	AES tutorial was invaluable. Please advertise them more because many students are not aware of their existence. I also hope you will keep them online as I'm distance learning. Thanks a lot for this service! (Questionnaire, appointment rated as '5')
	Further services	Yeah, I just, I really want a course that can handle I will read maybe every evening or every afternoon, I can turn the English course and learn some things because my friends learn as a foreign language like Chinese or Spanish in your school. But for English, we don't have the English classes and just what I really want (PGR participant, focus group)
		English courses are very helpful, I would also pay for that (PGT participant, focus group)
Negative		And like if the school could provide some class about electrician, or physics circles on our computer science about some software is really helpful. Because that's just technical [...] (PGR participant, focus group)
	Specific advice	And with the time management, it felt like a bit of like, too general of an advice. But that also could be because I had ADHD so it's not as I guess, yeah (UG participant, focus group)
	Lack of familiarity with submission	I thought AES require students have to submit the work, which is going to talk about during the meeting. That the tutor would look before meeting. This time I submitted, but I did think tutor look before and met the trouble to share their screen so took some time on it (Questionnaire, appointment rated as 2)
		But honestly, I didn't feel very satisfied. Because I don't think the teacher really read my report. Because, you know, we have so been to one writing, and we have two days before we can handle our report to the teacher. But I don't think he resides. And he didn't actually he do not understands when we have to do (PGT participant, focus group)
	Technology	Unfortunately, the tutor didn't turn up for the appointment. I'm sure that there must have been some misunderstanding (Questionnaire, appointment rated as '1')
		The tutor was not able to find my uploaded document in the submission point (Questionnaire, appointment rated as '5')
	Mode of delivery	In person (PGR participant, focus group)
		If it's about English, I also prefer just talk face by face (PGT participant, focus group)
		I can definitely say I prefer everything to be in person after doing one year during COVID (PGT participant)

Despite the overwhelmingly positive responses, particularly in terms of the tutors' approaches and expertise, a few areas for improvement were noted in the suggestions and negative feedback. The qualitative data highlighted a strong preference for discipline-specific support, reinforcing prior critiques of generic academic skills models (Wingate, 2015; Wingate & Tribble, 2012). This finding suggests that in future

iterations, embedding academic literacies within subject-specific curricula could further enhance student engagement (Adams et al., 2016; Maldoni & Lear, 2016; Wiles et al., 2016). Specifically, some participants expressed dissatisfaction with the specificity of the advice provided. This was the case for genres within the disciplines and also in relation to time management, which was described as not targeted enough to non-neurotypical learners. This may point to the need for a more nuanced understanding of individual student needs. However, it also highlights that closer collaboration with student services and the disability team in terms of raising both students' and tutors' awareness of different support and strategies may be a further avenue for collaboration. In the former case of specificity within disciplinary discourses, there is space for co-creation within the sessions by highlighting the tutor's expertise in language and the learners' expertise in the subject. By explicitly reinforcing everyone's expertise in the tutorial space, participants may build on each other's knowledge to uncover unique disciplinary procedures. In the specific case mentioned above, this could be a great opportunity to research similar examples of reports within the disciplines and guide learners through genre analysis to develop their understanding of key textual features (Swales, 1990).

Similarly, issues regarding the submission process and tutor preparedness emerged in a small number of responses, indicating potential miscommunication or unclear expectations surrounding the submission and review of materials prior to appointments. As stated in the ADC webpage and guidelines, submitting the work in advance is an optional feature to accommodate learners' and, especially, tutors' preferences, as it can be cognitively demanding to unpick a text encountered for the first time. Both AES tutors and Academic skills tutors are paid for preparing for the tutorials, but it is up to the discretion of the tutor how to use that time. We root this approach in inclusive practice; we do not enforce one option over the other. Further stressing the voluntary nature of this approach may help avoid discomfort in the future.

The mode of delivery also attracted divergent opinions, with some students preferring in-person interactions, particularly for language-focused tutorials. Others, particularly distance learners, valued the flexibility of online sessions and advocated for their continued availability. This suggests that a dual provision offered both online and in-person may be a suitable option for learners. This echoes learners' preferences for provision in the post-covid era (Mehta et al., 2024). However, staff, particularly from the AES team, highly value the flexibility of scheduling the sessions online. This also alleviated the pressure of the physical space as tutorial rooms are scarce. In the case of Study Skill appointments, learners are given the option to have a face-to-face tutorial. Our data suggests that this mode is less popular than the online one.

The positive feedback gathered through the questionnaires highlights key elements contributing to the perceived success of the service, with several recurring themes emerging across participant responses. Tutors were frequently commended for their expertise and supportive demeanour, as reflected in phrases like "in good hands" and "amazing tutor". These comments underscore the importance of individualised attention and professionalism in fostering positive learning experiences. However, the vague nature of some of the praise received makes it challenging to isolate specific practices that can be further implemented across the service or used to inform the tutor's continuous professional development sessions or initial training. This is also the case with the consistent references to kindness and professionalism, highlighting the role of interpersonal dynamics in these interactions. This approach resonates once again with a PoK by intentionally creating spaces where students are seen and listened to as opposed to perceived through a deficit lens, inviting suspicion and distrust and often resulting in a combative environment (Denial, 2019). In these sessions, learners are invited to reflect and grow from their mistakes while being placed at the centre of their learning experience (Creely, 2025)

Similarly, specific advice was also prominent, with participants praising the tutors' ability to provide precise and tailored feedback, such as distinguishing between different word choices or helping with specific academic tasks like presentations. This more tangible enactment of what makes a one-to-one appointment successful links once again with the idea of academic communication and conventions being made explicit while actively building onto students' current outputs. In this case, we observe a clearer recognition of the intellectual labour involved, as learners directly benefit from the expert advice of the tutor, aligning with Tuck's (2018) critique of how academic labour is often dichotomised—emotional labour and intellectual labour—with the former frequently being under-recognised. The learners' satisfaction with structured feedback and the provision of additional resources reinforce this idea of tangible actions that speak to learners' current location and destination within their HE journey. However, while these practical actions are recognised, the supportive, emotional undertones that underpin the feedback process are essential for the learners even if they may remain underappreciated by institutions, continuing to marginalise the broader scope of labour involved in student development.

What do we say?

We perceived our revised approach to be highly successful, as it was consistently validated by the positive feedback we received from students. From the outset, we purposefully aimed to prioritise the learners' needs and their ownership of the HE journey. Sharing the common goal of developing an integrated and comprehensive provision for our learners was a fundamental pillar in successfully establishing the ADC. Additionally, leveraging our respective teams' skills and expertise allowed us to create a coherent distribution of services, which we could then clearly communicate to students. This clarity facilitated learners in finding the right support, contributing to an overall satisfactory experience. Pedagogical alignment and an awareness of our respective positionalities further strengthened the partnership, ensuring the process was both collaborative and effective. As explored in the previous section, the feedback gathered through these mechanisms has aligned with our perception of the successful integration of our services.

Lessons learned and next steps

To conclude this reflective analysis, we have divided this final section into two areas. Firstly, a set of recommendations for practitioners within the third space aiming to explore synergies within their institutions is presented. Secondly, we unpick our own roadmap for the upcoming academic years based on the analysis and recommendations proposed in this paper by specifically unpicking how our journey informs our next steps.

Try this at home!

Our collaborative journey has highlighted key insights that may be valuable for HE practitioners, particularly those working within academic development and language support. The following lessons can inform similar cross-departmental initiatives aiming to integrate services and dismantle institutional silos:

- **Challenging othering structures requires institutional buy-in:** While removing distinctions between home and international students or native and non-native speakers is pedagogically sound, gaining institutional support is crucial for sustainability. Our experience suggests that small, data-driven changes, such as the removal of referral processes, can gradually shift institutional mindsets.

- **Learner agency must be explicitly built into service design:** Autonomy cannot be assumed; it must be actively fostered through clear communication. The ADC model proved effective in allowing students to navigate services independently, but its success hinged on transparent, student-facing resources that clarified their choices.
- **Interdisciplinary collaboration strengthens provision but requires continuous negotiation:** While the merging of AES and academic skills provision resulted in a more integrated student experience, ongoing negotiation was necessary to align pedagogical approaches, tutor expertise, and service expectations. Practitioners must be prepared to compromise and adapt in response to evolving institutional and student needs. For us, this translated into monthly meetings allowing us to track progress, share experiences and address queries raised by our learners or the team of teachers and tutors. Clear and transparent communication allowed us to address any issues smoothly while ensuring a common response from the newly merged services.
- **Practical implementation matters as much as theoretical framing:** The success of our model was not only grounded in theoretical frameworks (third space, academic literacies) but also in practical decisions—from triaging appointments to structuring feedback mechanisms. Without careful operational planning, well-intended pedagogical innovations can fail at the implementation stage.
- **Institutional visibility is key for uptake and perceived legitimacy:** Services operating within the third space often face an ‘invisibility’ problem (Tuck, 2018; Turner, 2011). By actively marketing the ADC and, later, the Learning and Writing Centre (LWC), we were able to reposition academic and language support as integral rather than remedial within the student experience.

These reflections offer broader implications for HE institutions seeking to create more inclusive, student-centred academic support services. By critically examining both pedagogical and operational aspects of our journey, we hope to provide an inspiring blueprint for fostering interdisciplinary collaboration in HE.

Onwards and upwards: What is next?

As we have indicated in further dissemination of our work (Harris & Villegas, 2024), from the summer of 2024, CEED and IE are a single unit, under the International Education and Lifelong Learning Institute (IELLI). In practical terms, this has removed some of the administrative barriers and facilitated streamlining the provision's operation; as Veles (2022) notes, collective learning and interaction lead to personal, professional and organisational developments. Our case study exemplifies those developments as our units come together as one, our professional responsibilities and identities grow, and we collaboratively explore research outputs as a way to contribute to the larger HE community.

Beyond the logistical adjustments, which primarily focused on streamlining the access points for students, one of the most significant outcomes of this merger has been the broadening of our service provision. We are excited to now offer academic and language development appointments to all students, irrespective of their stage of study or linguistic background. This inclusive approach addresses long-standing gaps in support, particularly for students who may not have traditionally been considered in need of language development yet can still benefit from focused academic language guidance. At our institution we have had a budget over the last decade to employ PGRs/GTAs to deliver our Study Skills appointments, as an alternative to having salaried staff delivering the bulk of the one-to-one tutorials; we are cognisant that not

all other institutions will utilise this model. While this does have casual salary budget implications, and possibly time implications in terms of initial training, the model of near-peer learning has worked well for us and provided valuable opportunities for the PhD students. Although our budget is protected at the moment, we ensure that we also have salaried staff who are able to take these tutorials and maintain open discussion about the staffing of the service with our Institute Director should this change in the future.

To facilitate the integration of our services and present a recognisable common service, we have launched the Learning and Writing Center (LWC), which substitutes the ADC. The LWC (Figure 5) is underpinned by the same principles of empowering the learners to choose the right provision for them by being a comprehensive one-stop-shop explicitly stating the options available to learners. It integrates our one-to-one appointments even further while maintaining their identity. Our provision of workshops and online materials are also accessible through this hub. As we aim to support our learners further, we have linked resources to the library and added a specific information section aimed at staff. By explicitly unpacking our provision, we aim to show all members of our community how the LWC fits into the learners' academic and learning experiences.



Figure 6 Learning and Writing Centre (AY2024/2025) one-stop-hub

During the academic year 2024/2025, we prioritised launching our combined online resources. This new learning hub attached to the LWC has allowed us to revise, update, and create bespoke resources to support our learners in their journey. We have purposefully followed key principles of good practice in online learning (Nilson & Goodson, 2018) while ensuring that the materials are meaningful for our learners. Our aim for 2025/2026 is to have a fully integrated workshop suite that draws from the different expertise the staff brings to the LWC. Similarly, throughout the co-creation process of the LWC, we aim to bring together learning tutors and EAP academics to collaborate further. To achieve that, we have taken conscious steps such as having meetings together or making the training resources available to all tutors so that there is a clear overview of how the learning appointments and the academic English appointments work at the LWC. A shared online space with everyone involved in the LWC has helped streamline communication and foster a sense of togetherness. The areas covered in the LWC intrinsically overlap, and boundaries are

blurred; we aim to embrace that overlap by conceptualising the academic journey of our learners as a process that we can contribute to by bringing our unique expertise to one place, the LWC.

Based on the data generated to evaluate the ADC community, we have organised several launch events to ensure learners and staff are aware of what we do. Similarly, our web page has been revised to include more keywords and filters that can help our learners navigate the LWC and identify the service for them. An effort to promote our services through leaflets and university screens has been made to increase the visibility of the LWC. As we continue to further integrate our provision, we are keen to gain further insight into learners' and tutors' experiences while we strive to offer a service which strives to reclaim its central role in empowering learners to succeed as part of an inclusive academic community.

Biographies

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