

The Block Embedding Skills (BES) Model: Embedding Academic Skills into Student's Learning Journey within Block Teaching

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Abstract

The University's shift from a semesterised structure to block teaching prompted a fundamental rethinking of academic skills support. Previously, the Academic Skills team provided generic workshops and ad-hoc in-course sessions throughout the academic year. To better support students' learning within the University's new block model, the team adopted an embedded approach that aligns academic skills provision with the student learning journey. Previous research demonstrates that embedding academic skills within disciplinary courses enhances student engagement, improves the relevance of support, and promotes equity of access—particularly for students who may not proactively seek help, including those from underrepresented backgrounds. Informed by data from one-to-one tutorials, previous support requests, and course documentation, the team mapped assessment types and deadlines to identify key intervention points. Collaboration with course leaders was central to this process, ensuring that embedded sessions were closely aligned with module content and learning outcomes. This collaborative, embedded approach fostered stronger connections between academic departments and learning development services, contributing to a more cohesive and timely student experience. It enabled broader reach through scheduled workshops and asynchronous resources, while reducing demand for individual tutorials. However, challenges included limited engagement during extended placement periods and disruption caused by staff turnover, which impacted consistency. This approach contributes to the growing scholarship on embedded learning development and responds to a gap in the literature regarding academic support within block teaching models. It also offers a scalable, transferable framework for institutions seeking to adapt academic skills provision to intensive or modular teaching structures.

Keywords: embedded academic skills, block teaching, student support, in-sessional, learning development

Introduction

Traditionally at the research institution University, Academic Skills provision has been the responsibility of the Library and Learning Services, specifically the Academic Skills Advisors (ASAs), who have delivered this through a responsive, request-led ad hoc approach, offered throughout the academic year and often frontloaded during induction. However, this is arguably not the most effective approach, as research has shown that students find retaining indicates that information shared delivered too early within a course can feel overwhelming for students, resulting in short-term skill acquisition and academic skills acquirement is likely to only have short term results, in addition to a lack of meaningful cognitive connections occurring between academic skills and specific course course-specific content (Sweller, 1988; Wingate, 2015). In addition, this ad hoc responsive approach lacks strategic oversight and misses opportunities for collaborative learning and teaching. The subsequent effect can contribute to an increased likeness of attribution (drop-out), feelings of failure, and missed opportunities for early academic intervention.

The University of Suffolk transition to Block Teaching presented both opportunities and challenges in delivering academic skills as well as providing a chance to enhance the support for the student population, which includes a significant proportion of mature and first-generation students. As Weldon & Konjarski's (2024, pp.2-4) note, times of institutional change can offer "opportunities for disruption, change and innovation" therefore offering the chance to address and recreate the design and delivery of academic skills as "a catalyst for ongoing positive change", through examining the pedagogic and operational perspectives.

The characteristics of Block Teaching are intense periods of teaching, followed by assessments of learning at the end of each block. For example, rather than students learning multiple modules at once, they instead are taught one module at a time over a 'block period' (for example 4 weeks), with an assessment week at the end of each block. The benefit of intensive periods of block teaching creates defined timetables of modules and assignments, making the task of mapping skills to students' needs more effective as they can be aligned with specific block assignments and delivered in a timely manner. Therefore, we proposed taking an embedded approach, identifying clear links to academic skills required by mapping out the students' learning journey and co-creating sessions with course leads.

When seeking information to inform our practice regarding the delivery of academic skills and block learning, there appeared to be a lack of relevant literature. However, what was apparent was the need to develop research literature in this area, particularly as Block Teaching is becoming more popular within the UK, specifically within professional discussions among the HE Learning Development community. This paper seeks to reflect on and evaluate the implementation of embedding academic skills within the block approach to inform practice and provide guidance for other practitioners seeking to do the same. The Block Embedding Skills (BES) Model was created to support the embedding of a planning cycle for block teaching and a structured framework that can be adapted to create a similar model at other institutions.

Theoretical Framework

Embedding academic literacies within disciplinary curricula has been widely recognised as more effective than generic provision due to its contextual relevance, improved student engagement, and alignment with subject-specific expectations. This pedagogical shift has been reflected in the broadly studied move from English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) to English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP), with ESAP shown to better meet learners' needs by tailoring instruction to disciplinary conventions (Deng, 2022). This approach aligns with Knowles's (1988) theory of andragogy, which posits that adult learners are motivated by the immediate applicability of knowledge. This concept has been reinforced by subsequent work such as that by Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007), who argue that adults engage more meaningfully with learning when they understand its direct relevance to their academic or professional contexts. Embedding academic skills within disciplinary modules therefore supports such relevance, enabling students to internalise disciplinary ways of thinking and fostering a stronger sense of academic identity (Malone et al., 2020).

Two key theoretical perspectives further underpin this work: the CEM Model for in-session course design by Sloan and Porter (2010) and Wingate's (2018) curriculum-integrated model of academic literacy. The CEM Model, developed at Northumbria University for international postgraduate students in a business course, provides a structured framework that emphasises collaboration between EAP specialists and subject teams. Its three interconnected elements, contextualisation, embedding, and mapping, collectively ensure that academic literacy support is relevant, integrated, and strategically aligned. Contextualisation involves the move from EGAP to ESAP, towards a discipline-focused, transferable academic literacy instruction. Embedding positions the EAP specialist as part of the course team and the support as an integral, timetabled component of the degree programme; while mapping ensures that support is appropriately timed and developed collaboratively with course teams. Even when not implemented in its entirety, the underlying principles of the model have influenced how practitioners conceptualise and design in-session provision, particularly in promoting collaborative, embedded, and timely support (Tibbetts & Chapman, 2023). In addition, Wingate's (2018) curriculum-integrated academic literacy approach, which is grounded in academic literacies theory, advocates for the integration of literacy development within disciplinary curricula rather than offering it as a standalone or remedial activity, highlighting the importance of collaboration between EAP specialists and subject lecturers in supporting students' development of disciplinary literacy and academic identity.

Integrating Embedded Academic Skills and Block

The integration of embedded academic skills within block delivery models creates a more inclusive learning environment by making academic literacy development an integral, timetabled component of the curriculum. This approach removes the remedial stigma often associated with optional or extracurricular academic support (Wingate, 2018) and ensures that all students—rather than only those who self-select into workshops—benefit from explicit skills development. This inclusivity is particularly significant given the increasingly diverse demographics of higher education, which now serve mature learners, part-time students, those with specific learning differences (SpLD), international students, and individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Weldon & Konjarski, 2024). The block model has been shown to

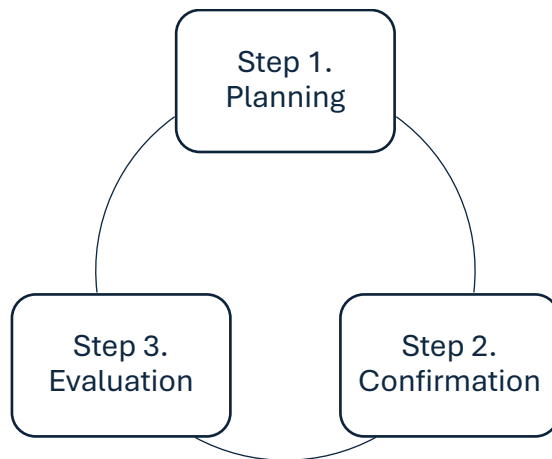
enhance engagement and performance among these cohorts, particularly non-traditional learners (Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021; Harvey, Szalkowicz, & Luckman, 2017). Research indicates that students from non-English-speaking backgrounds and those with lower prior attainment achieve higher marks following the transition to block mode (Loton et al., 2022). The focused, flexible nature of block delivery enables timely, contextualised academic skills instruction—delivered “just in time” for assessments—thus supporting institutional goals of widening participation and fostering equity through early, targeted intervention (Burton & Nesbit, 2008; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002).

Embedding academic skills within block curricula also contributes to student retention and progression, particularly during key transition points such as the first semester (Hebdon, 2015). Evidence from the Foundation Year programme at Royal Holloway, University of London, demonstrates that integrated academic support within interdisciplinary modules can lead to above-average attainment and progression (Wallbank, 2023). The block model’s concentrated structure allows for incremental skill development aligned with assessment timelines and disciplinary content, which increases the perceived relevance of support for students who may not otherwise engage with generic provision (Dennis et al., 2018; Harris & Ashton, 2011). By embedding skills development directly into modules, students have the opportunity to apply learning immediately, strengthening confidence, academic identity, and employability through the acquisition of transferable skills such as critical thinking and research (Malone et al., 2020).

In addition to enhancing inclusion and retention, the integration of academic skills within block delivery may also strengthen institutional collaboration and sustainability, which are key to reducing attrition and supporting long-term student success. Collaborative delivery between academic skills advisors and subject lecturers enhances integration and ensures that support is discipline-relevant (McWilliams & Allan, 2014). Models such as the MBA programme at Edith Cowan University demonstrate how coordinated efforts between academic and professional staff enable scalable, flexible provision (Harris & Ashton, 2011), while the partnership approach at the University of Salford highlights the benefits of co-creation between course leads and academic skills practitioners in delivering timely, tailored support (Smith & Pearson, 2022). Although challenges can arise, such as balancing disciplinary expectations with broader institutional strategies, these can be mitigated through sustained collaboration and shared pedagogical goals (Wallbank, 2023). Such collaboration underpins the co-creation of embedded sessions that not only strengthen students’ sense of belonging and academic self-efficacy (Wingate, 2018) but also establish a more sustainable model of academic development. When academic support is collaboratively designed, contextually relevant, and fully integrated within the curriculum, students are more likely to persist in their studies, contributing to improved completion rates and overall institutional effectiveness (AdvanceHE, 2020).

The Design Process

A cyclical three-step process underpins the design of the Block-embedding skills (BES) model (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Cyclical Three-Step Process

Although presented in 3 steps, this approach should be seen as iterative and flexible so that support remains responsive to the changing needs of students and programmes. The BES model is rooted in the principles of curriculum design and partnership working, emphasising collaboration between academic staff and ASAs to ensure relevance, integration, and sustainability.

Step 1. Planning

The planning stage is foundational, providing the evidence base from which the BES model is shaped. To ensure that the embedded skills provision is genuinely targeted, the team draws on multiple data sources to ensure mapping to identify key points in each course where targeted academic skills support would be most beneficial. This involves analysing records from one-to-one tutorials to identify specific skills requested support with at specific times of the academic year. Workshop requests from course from previous academic years for support are considered, particularly where course leaders have highlighted areas of concern. Course handbooks and programme specifications are reviewed to map assessment types, deadlines, and expected competencies.

This multi-layered analysis enables the potential to construct a visual timeline of each programme, aligning points of high academic demand (for example, the first major written assignment or a group presentation) with embedded skills workshops. Such mapping ensures that support is delivered proactively, at the point of need, rather than reactively after students encounter difficulties. This ensures that delivery is timely and aligned with student needs throughout the block structure.

Step 2. Confirmation

Once an initial plan is drafted, the confirmation stage ensures integration through dialogue and collaboration with course leaders. This is more than a logistical exercise; it represents a process of partnership-building, aligning the expertise of ASAs with disciplinary staff insights. Meetings with course teams provide the opportunity to present the proposed mapping, discuss adjustments, and ensure that embedded sessions are tailored to the pedagogical aims of each module.

The confirmation stage also involves negotiation around timetabling and delivery formats. By embedding skills sessions within core timetabled teaching, the BES model avoids the pitfalls of optional “bolt-on” workshops, which often suffer from low attendance and fail to reach those students most in need. Instead, embedding positions academic skills as an integral component of disciplinary learning, reinforcing the message that such skills are not an “extra” but fundamental to academic success.

This stage also creates space for co-design. For example, course leaders may request that embedded sessions are aligned with specific assessments, or that case studies are drawn from authentic discipline-based materials. Such collaboration enhances relevance and fosters a sense of shared ownership between ASAs and course teams.

Step 3. Evaluation

Evaluation closes the cycle and informs the next round of planning. At the end of each academic year, the embedded model is systematically reviewed by the practitioners. This process involves considering feedback from students and course teams received throughout the academic year. Feedback to review includes students’ anonymous post-workshop feedback gained via surveys (Microsoft forms) and anonymous feedback given during student voice forums via student representatives, offering insight into perceived relevance, clarity, and usefulness of the support. As this information is gained as part of the University’s commitment to working in partnerships with student through gaining their feedback, it is covered by institutional policy. Should more formalised feedback be required such as through student focus groups, considerations must be given to gaining ethical approval and compensating students for their time.

Staff reflections are equally important, highlighting how well the embedded sessions aligned with assessments and whether they supported student performance.

It is important to consider thought that the evaluation stage is not limited to immediate outcomes but longer-term development should be considered, for example, whether students show increased confidence in tackling independent assignments later in the course.

In addition, evaluation is responsive to external factors, such as changes in assessment design, course restructuring, or institutional priorities. This ensures that the BES model remains dynamic rather than static, able to evolve in line with broader pedagogical shifts. The iterative cycle positions evaluation not as an endpoint but as a springboard for refinement, feeding directly back into the planning stage for the following academic year.

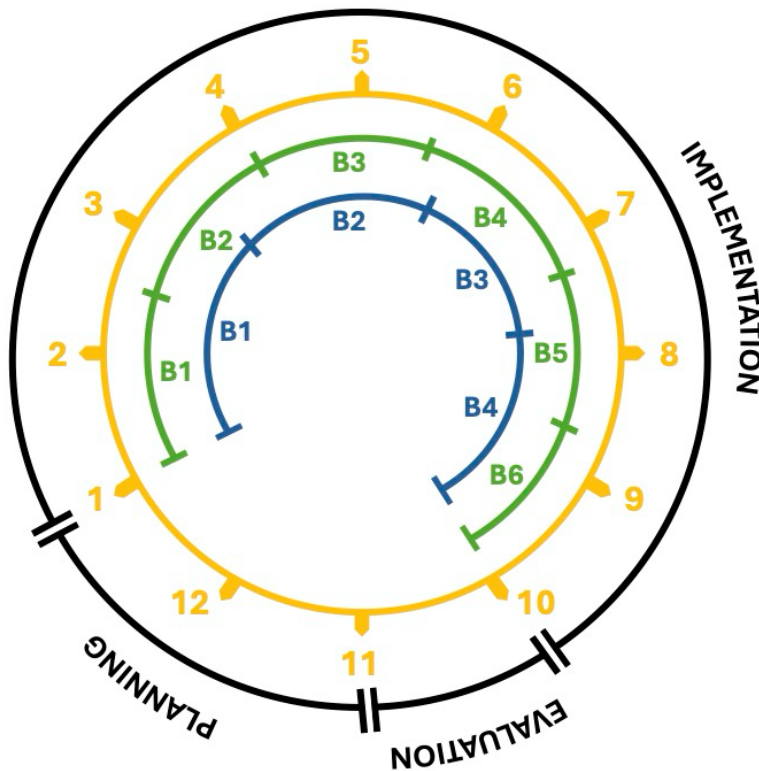
Reflections on Practice

The BES Model Planning Cycle

The BES Model Planning Cycle is represented in a cyclical framework that reflects the flexibility required to work across different course structures and modes of delivery. It accommodates variations such as multiple cohort start dates and block delivery formats, recognising that some courses are structured around longer blocks while others operate within shorter blocks. To ensure adaptability, the sample model represents months numerically from one to twelve, where ‘1’ refers to the first month of delivery rather than a fixed point in the

calendar year. Within this structure, both four-block and six-block models are illustrated, as these are the models most commonly used at the institution (see Figure 2). This flexible and transferable framework enables targeted planning and sequencing of academic skills provision, ensuring that support is both relevant and timely.

Figure 2. The BES Model Planning Cycle



Impact and Effective Practices

The success of this embedded approach was evident in multiple areas. Collaboration with course teams and, in some courses, university services such as Careers, Employability, and Enterprise, resulted in a more holistic support system. This interdisciplinary approach ensured timely and targeted interventions, which course teams reported as leading to improved student outcomes. Notably, there was a reduction in the number of one-to-one appointments where students raised recurring assignment-related questions. For example, data from the 2023/24 and 2024/25 academic years show a 50% reduction in tutorials, falling from 2,005 tutorials in 2023/24 to 967 in 2024/25. This decline reflects the increased effectiveness of timely academic skills workshops, as evidenced by a noticeable drop in repeat assignment-related queries from specific courses, particularly in the period leading up to assignment deadlines.

Student feedback, collected through post-workshop surveys and Student Voice Forums, further reinforces the positive impact of the model. Students reported feeling more confident in applying academic skills and better equipped to meet assessment requirements. For example, one student wrote: “I feel more confident with the structure of my assignment and how to implement critical and reflective writing,” while another said, “I will restructure my

presentation before submitting as it has some common mistakes that were highlighted during class”.

The implementation of the BES model highlighted some effective practices that contributed to its success and sustainability. One key strength of the approach was **whole-course planning**. By mapping support needs across the full duration of a programme (e.g., three years for most UG degrees and one to two years for PGT courses) the team (Academic Skill Advisors, Librarians, Digital Skills Advisors and Course Leads) were able to design a coherent skills development journey for each specific course. For UG courses, this commonly resulted in higher support needed during the first year, with more frequent, scaffolded workshops designed to help students transition into higher education expectations and develop the basic academic skills; with less frequent but more advanced academic skills workshops for second year students. While during the final UG year, fewer workshops were required, with a shift towards supporting advanced skills and preparing students for assessments that demand greater criticality and independence, such as dissertations and final projects. In PGT courses, support was typically effective by providing one workshop or ‘touch point’ per module, with content mapped directly to key assessment requirements.

Another effective practice was the **lecturers presence** during the workshops, or a co-teaching approach. This enabled any assignment or content-specific questions to be addressed immediately and reinforced the relevance and applicability of academic skills in the disciplinary context. For example, a workshop would be divided into two parts, one in which the lecturer presents the assignment requirements and the second in which the ASAs covers key skills for that assignment. This partnership not only created a cohesive and responsive learning environment but also clarified roles for students, showing which queries could be directed to lecturers versus ASAs.

Finally, strategic engagement **with institutional timetabling processes** was a critical factor in ensuring successful integration. Early discussions with course teams as well as involvement of ASAs in course planning, revalidation, and course design meetings, allowed for skills support to be embedded into module structures before timetables were finalised. This required careful consideration, as planning too early risked misalignments from later course design changes, whereas late planning could result in support being overlooked.

Limitations and Lessons Learned

Despite these successes, the implementation of the embedded model also surfaced challenges that offer important lessons for development. A recurring issue was **staffing changes within course teams**, particularly when course leaders changed mid-year. This often-caused confusion about previously agreed workshop schedules and required additional administrative effort to maintain continuity, emphasising the importance of ongoing communication and regular check-ins with module leads before each workshop.

In some cases, a **lack of communication and coordination between course teams** required ASAs to meet separately with multiple module leaders to agree on the embedded plan. This fragmented approach reduced efficiency and highlighted the need for stronger internal coordination mechanisms within course teams. One strategy introduced was a shared online spreadsheet where academic skills support requests were documented in order for the module

leads of a courses to add and view the details of planned support. However, this still required significant follow-up and admin maintenance, therefore coordinating directly with course leaders has proven to be more effective.

Another limitation was **misconceptions about the purpose of embedding**. Some courses, especially during the first stages of the shift to this embedded approach, requested a large portion of workshops to be frontloaded and be delivered during induction week or the first week of the course, treating it as a one-off intervention rather than integrated, ongoing support. This demonstrated the importance of having conversations with course teams to help them understand the value of progressive skills development throughout the student journey, as well as the importance of academic skills delivery at key points to provide the students with timely support. Workshops need to be delivered, not too early or too late, once the assignment specifications have been provided by the course teams and ideally before they have already completed their assignment, this is commonly during the first two weeks of a block.

Discussion

The implementation of the BES model demonstrates both the practical benefits and challenges of embedding academic skills within block teaching, providing practitioner insight that complements and extends findings from previous literature. Across engagement, collaboration, and retention, the model illustrates how strategically timed, contextually relevant support can enhance student experiences, while highlighting areas that require careful planning and coordination.

Enhancing Student Engagement through Timetabled and Flexible Embedded Academic Skills

Mapping the student learning journey and embedding academic skills at key points within block delivery led to increased engagement, as evidenced by higher attendance at workshops and reduced demand for one-to-one tutorials. These findings align with McWilliams and Allan (2014), who highlighted that discipline-specific, embedded academic support fosters deeper learning and engagement. The observed 50% reduction in one-to-one tutorials between academic years confirms that scheduled, timetabled workshops can meet recurring student needs more efficiently, supporting Wingate's (2018) argument that embedded literacy instruction normalises skills development and reduces the remedial stigma associated with optional workshops.

Flexibility in delivery—through virtual workshops, asynchronous materials, and timing adjustments to accommodate placement schedules—further reinforced engagement. This reflects broader findings on inclusive pedagogical practices (Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021; Smith & Pearson, 2022), demonstrating that accessibility and adaptability are crucial for meeting diverse student needs. The BES model extends these insights by illustrating how flexibility can be operationalised within block to maintain engagement even when students are off-campus.

Strengthening Collaboration between Academic Skills Advisors and Course Teams

The BES model confirmed the importance of strong collaboration between ASAs and course teams, as noted in previous literature (Harris & Ashton, 2011; Wallbank, 2023). Co-planning

and co-teaching workshops allowed academic skills content to be directly aligned with assessments, enhancing relevance and immediate applicability for students, yet another finding consistent with Wingate's (2018) findings. Another relevant outcome of this collaboration was the development of mutual understanding and professional appreciation between ASAs and lecturers, creating a shared pedagogical space for innovation and responsiveness. However, challenges were observed when communication and coordination were weak or disrupted, for example with staff turnover. These findings extend previous research by illustrating how lapses in internal communication can reduce the effectiveness of embedded support, emphasising the need for structured, ongoing collaboration and strategic planning between academic and support staff (Tibbetts & Chapman, 2023). The use of shared documentation and regular check-ins emerged as practical solutions, highlighting actionable strategies for sustaining collaborative practice over time.

Improving Retention and Attainment through Contextualised and Targeted Academic Skills Support

The BES model contributed to early intervention and targeted support, particularly for students with Specific Learning Differences (SpLDs) or those requiring English for Academic Purposes (EAP) support. Aligning academic skills delivery with module-specific assessments improved perceived relevance, confidence, and self-efficacy, echoing the benefits identified in prior studies linking contextualised support to student progression and retention (Burton & Nesbit, 2008; Loton et al., 2022; Wallbank, 2023). Feedback indicated that students valued the structured, scaffolded and timely approach to the learning and teaching of academic skills, which contrasted with earlier generic provision and supported the University's inclusivity and Access and Participation Plan (APP) goals.

The results provide empirical evidence for claims in the literature regarding the benefits of timetabled, embedded academic support. While retention and attainment improvements were observed, the data also highlight the complexity of attribution: improvements are likely the result of multiple interrelated factors, including engagement, collaboration, and context-specific relevance. Importantly, the BES model demonstrates how embedding skills within block can create a coherent, institutionally scalable framework that combines these factors to support student success.

Limitations and Implications

Despite clear benefits, challenges related to staffing changes, placement weeks, and initial misconceptions about embedding highlight that the model's success depends on careful planning, flexibility, and clear communication. These findings contribute to the literature by illustrating the practical considerations of implementing embedded support in real-world block contexts. Future adaptations of the BES model should maintain its flexible, cyclical planning approach while ensuring strategic coordination with course teams to mitigate disruptions and preserve the integrity of progressive skills development.

Future considerations for the BES model approach

As the Block model for learning and teaching grows, it inevitably will be adapted to suit delivery modes at various institutions. The BES model can be adapted easily to different modes

of Block, as seen in Figure 2 which demonstrates Block delivery in both a four block and six block mode.

Other future considerations that may impact the implementation of embedding academic skills are the changing of course frameworks and/or requirements from external stakeholders, for example the requirement of additional teaching or placement hours by regulatory bodies such as the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC).

Implications for Practice

Collaborative approach with course leaders ensures alignment with course content and outcomes, fostering stronger ties between academic and support staff (Murray & Nallaya, 2016). Academic skills are co-planned with academic staff to align with the student learning journey across teaching blocks.

Skill alignment identified key stages and integrated with assignments and study levels, enhancing relevance and application for students. Disciplinary relevance workshops ensure students better understand academic skills when these are clearly connected to their specific discipline (Tibbetts & Chapman, 2023).

The model addresses a research gap on embedding academic skills in block teaching and provides a framework transferable to other institutions. The model is iterative and responsive, evolving with course structures and student needs, maintaining relevance and effectiveness.

Conclusions

The embedded approach has demonstrated clear benefits: delivering timely and targeted support, broadening student reach through scheduled in-course workshops and asynchronous resources and improving operational efficiency by reducing demand for one-to-one tutorials. However, limitations were also encountered, particularly in courses involving extended placement periods and during staff transitions, which occasionally disrupted continuity and communication.

This model contributes to scholarship by addressing the gap in the literature on embedding academic skills within a block teaching model. Practically, it offers a transferable framework for institutions seeking to align academic skills support with block delivery or enhance their embedded provision more broadly.

Close collaboration with course leaders was crucial to ensure alignment with course content and learning outcomes. This partnership fosters stronger connections between subject lecturers and learning services, resulting in a more cohesive and integrated learning experience (Murray & Nallaya, 2016).

The iterative process allowed the model to remain responsive, relevant, and closely aligned with evolving course structures and student needs. Evaluation for improvement is needed after every academic year, as well as to adapt and factor in any changes in courses (e.g., assessment changes, revalidations). As well as to assess what has worked and what could be improved from student and lecturers' feedback.

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