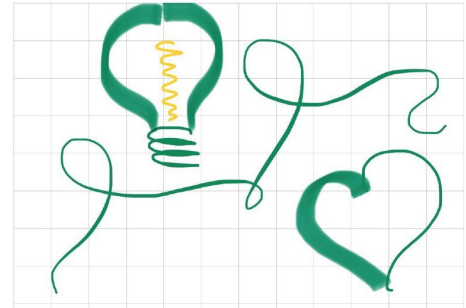




A collaborative approach to promoting and ensuring international students' wellbeing through an academic lens



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Winner of the 2023 BAS Impactful Collaboration award

Resources on [Padlet](#)

1. Motivation for the project

Promoting and ensuring international students' wellbeing is a core strategic goal for UK universities in general. As a member of the University Mental Health Charter, the University of Reading (UoR) takes a multi-faceted, yet whole university approach to addressing practical, emotional, and academic challenges which can affect student identity and self-esteem. This includes skills-based support services, community-building initiatives, welfare and careers counselling.

International students' self-seeking behaviours in accessing such support vary depending on, for example, length of stay, levels of social connectedness, and English language proficiency. Nevertheless, some common barriers to uptake highlighted in the literature are:

- lack of familiarisation if services are atypical in students' home country institutions (Martirosyan et al., 2019)
- international students are more comfortable with seeking help from their cultural peers than university services (Harryba et al., 2012).

This project targeted students holding conditional offers on degree programmes and taking Pre-sessional English (PSE) to meet their English language requirements. The majority progress to postgraduate studies where early weeks can easily entrench traditional study habits at the expense of engaging with the wider university community and support on offer. Furthermore, the International Student Barometer (i-graduate, 2022) reveals that 47% of surveyed participants at UoR do not attend an orientation programme e.g. welcome week hence missing key support information.

PSE is a significant transition tool though, welcoming approximately 250 students annually (post COVID-19) and represents an effective way to promote dialogue on wellbeing through the academic curriculum and engagement with support services. In doing so it aligns course content more closely with the university's priorities, replacing general EAP subject topics.

2. Aims

The project aim was to create a PSE module which:

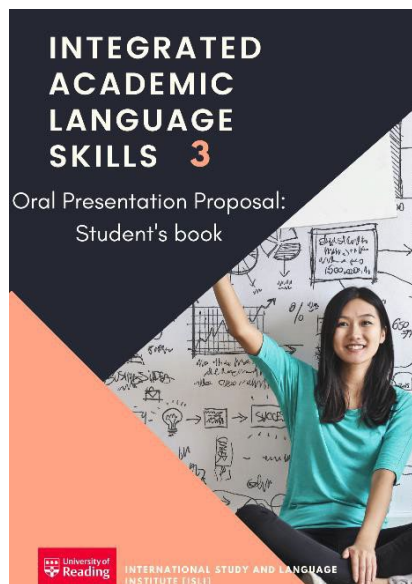
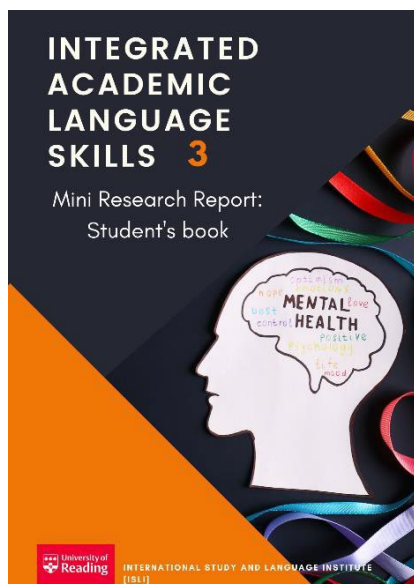
- meets students' academic language and literacy needs whilst equipping them with an understanding of wellbeing issues and knowledge of support services at UoR.

In order to achieve this, we wanted to:

- take a student-centred approach in raising awareness of university support services;
- collaborate with colleagues in these functions to enhance the interface of our own institute (ISLI), and PSE with university support services.

3. Development

The block intensive module comprises approx. 100 hours of study in a blended approach. It sits within a suite of PSE modules studied consecutively. The module was designed as two smaller study units interconnecting the theme of student personal and academic wellbeing, delivered on alternating days of the week.



Unit A-Mini Research Report: Develop students' understanding of mental health and self-efficacy through an academic lens with selected source texts and own small scale investigation into the perceptions and behaviours of their peers on a sub-topic below:

[\[Assessment Briefs\]](#)

- mindfulness [courses also offered by The Chaplaincy at UoR, hence connecting to Unit B]
- self-efficacy in academic life
- mental health and technology.

Unit B-Oral Presentation Proposal: Develop students’ critical awareness of services which support personal and academic development at UoR through an evaluative presentation [[Assessment Briefs](#)]

To achieve this, students require accessible information on the support service. The opportunity to meet representatives and ask questions in real-time is optimal. However, engaging the participation of colleagues presents challenges. Pre-sessional English typically runs during the summer vacation; staff take leave and services are reduced. In addition, the rotation of roles has previously inhibited less sought collaborations e.g., the Student Union full-time officers’ new term coincides with the start of PSE. Sudden unavailability can also hamper high-stakes PSE assessment, where collaborators are unable to attend scheduled events. To overcome this and ensure parity for distance learners, the key interview resources with support service representatives were recorded in the Spring term. In total 8 curated interviews were produced [[Video resources](#)]

The library and Sports park were excluded to avoid repetition since input features elsewhere in the programme.

Service	Focus
1. Careers	Professional support
2. The Chaplaincy	Faith and personal development
3. The Academic English Programme	Specialised language and skills-based academic support
4. International Student Advisory Service	Cultural events and community building initiatives, practical support
5. Life Tools Programme	Personal and academic support
6. Reading University Student’s Union/General	Cultural events and community building initiatives, personal and academic support
7. Reading University Student’s Union/Welfare	Welfare, incl. healthy peer relationships
8. Self-access resource centre (SACLL)	Specialised academic support

We were aware that unfamiliarity with such services or the concept of critical evaluation could impede understanding. Therefore we:

- developed tasks on a journal article about international students’ perceptions of support services (Roberts and Dunworth, 2012) [[T & L material](#)]

- included two services, The Chaplaincy and SACLL, as models with tasks practising the steps students would need to apply to their own presentation.

4. Impact

3.1 Embedding wellbeing into the curriculum through exploratory tasks has resulted in greater visibility of students’:

- perceptions and behaviours regarding their wellbeing [[research report](#)]
- awareness of support services. Many teams demonstrated a complete understanding through available resources [[student presentations](#)] and one group engaged further with a creation to meet their suggestions for the service. This was highly commended by the service representative [[student creation & response](#)].

3.2 The collaboration has been mutually beneficial and enhanced the interface of PSE with the wider university community:

- The Life Tools representative requested that the video resource be shared more widely to help promote their support [[mutual benefits](#)]
- New exchanges have been forged between PSE and support services. There is greater recognition of the PSE cohort, initially in cross promoting events [[on-going collaboration](#)], but also on-going collaboration between the International Student Experience Manager and PSE staff in tailoring events to the needs of this cohort.

3.3 The project has been disseminated at university level through the **Committee on Student Experience and Development** to showcase development of students’ resilience skills.

5. Reflection

There could be no clearer demonstration of the collegial relationships between the Pre-sessional programme and our support services than the 8 video interviews, produced solely with the limited resources and expertise of teachers, but nevertheless capture a key orientation to each service. The approach puts the module on a sustainable footing with the resources valid for approximately 3 years and refreshed when roles and provision evolve.

The collaboration has forged new connections with colleagues in 6 non-academic roles with cross-promotional benefits. A relatively smooth module roll out in 2022 now allows for future exploration of:

- the extent to which there is a positive shift in students’ help seeking behaviours due to early familiarisation with support.

- how student evaluations of the service could be conveyed to services and influence enhancements
- where students differ in their interpretations of support. A few students showed a misunderstanding of the service, and this is useful in determining barriers to take up.

References

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