

Section 2:

English language on pre-sessional and pathway programmes



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This section offers an overview of the role of pre-sessional English and pathway programmes, highlighting their value in supporting student success and course completion and outlining considerations for good practice in this area.

2.1 The benefits of pre-sessional and pathway programmes

Good quality and well-run pre-sessional and pathway programmes are a key element of good practice in English language provision. They have a number of benefits to students and institutions in terms of maintaining standards and contributing to academic success. Pre-sessional English programmes enable students whose English proficiency falls below the requirement for their chosen degree programme to further develop their language to meet the requirement. They are also occasionally taken by students who have met their English language requirements and want to have more time to acclimate to UK academic cultures. Programmes tend to run in the summer before the start of the academic year and focus on developing academic skills and knowledge of life in the UK, as well as the ability to use English in different academic contexts. Successful completion of programme assessments can be used as evidence of **English language proficiency** for admissions and Student visas, allowing applicants to progress onto their chosen degrees.

Pathway programmes – particularly in the form of International Foundation Programmes (IFPs) – typically last up to one academic year and are delivered by specialist departments or in partnership with private providers. Pathway programmes are designed for international students who have not yet met the academic and/or English language requirements for entry onto their chosen degrees. Unlike pre-sessional English, pathway programmes develop students' knowledge of their academic **subject area** as well as academic English and study skills.

Pre-sessional English programmes and academic English courses on pathway programmes are taught by specialists in EAP, who often possess postgraduate qualifications in the teaching of English language, and/or may hold specialist EAP teaching accreditation, such as the **BALEAP TEAP (Teaching English for Academic Purposes)** qualification. These qualifications provide assurance of quality and good practice on such provisions.

Pre-sessional English and pathway programmes support transition into higher education by familiarising students with UK higher education expectations, teaching styles and assessment methods, developing their **intercultural competence** to support adaptation to new academic and cultural environments. There are financial barriers to pre-sessional and pathway provision and these programmes are not suitable for all students. However, when students do choose pre-sessionals or pathways as a means of meeting their entry requirements, institutions report that such provision does 'close the gap' with direct entry students, supporting successful **degree outcomes**. Institutions also report that pre-sessional programmes contribute to good satisfaction and degree completion rates, the latter of direct relevance to the BCA completion metric.

Given the ubiquity of these types of provision, and in order to maximise their benefits, it is essential that institutions give due consideration to good practice and **quality assurance** in this area.

Case study

A nine-year study of outcomes and engagement following over 8000 pre-sessional alumni at a large institution in the UK showed that pre-sessional alumni had equivalent postgraduate degree outcomes to other international students, and were six times more likely to complete their studies.

A further five-year study of pre-sessional English students who progressed to MSc courses at a Scottish university showed that their attainment was consistently higher than international students who did not undertake a pre-sessional English programme.

Such reports are in line with the results of **major study** into the academic outcomes of international students in Canadian public sector higher education institutions who attended EAP programmes, compared with those who did not attend the programmes. The researchers found that graduates of EAP programmes enjoyed higher GPAs and **retention rates** than their peers who entered directly. The Canadian study dispelled any myths that students on EAP programmes underperform their direct-entry counterparts. On the contrary, the study strongly suggested that targeted EAP input, such as on pre-sessional English and pathway programmes, can level the playing field and provide an equitable path to academic success for international students.

The benefits of pre-sessional and pathway programmes - takeaways

Pre-sessional English programmes help international students meet English language requirements and prepare for academic life in the UK.

Pathway programmes (e.g., International Foundation Programmes) support students who have not yet met academic or language entry requirements, offering EAP skills development as well as learning in other subjects.

Both types of programmes foster **intercultural competence** to ease students' adaptation to new academic and cultural environments.

English instruction is delivered by qualified EAP specialists, often with postgraduate credentials and/or BALEAP **TEAP** accreditation.

Institutions report that pathway programmes can increase retention and course completion.

2.2 Factors in the success of EAP programmes

EAP tuition on pre-sessional English and pathway programmes produces good outcomes when **course design** is grounded in good practice, involving well-established principles so that provision is pedagogically sound and student-centered. These principles include:

- The use of **needs analysis** to inform course design and align learning to the requirements of students' destination programmes.
- Clear and measurable learning outcomes to outline what students are expected to achieve by the end of the course.
- Explicit input on academic skills, including **critical thinking**, time management and independent research to foster **learner autonomy** and support transition.
- Use of **Assessment for Learning** principles, focused on support for learning with an emphasis on formative and diagnostic methods.
- An iterative approach to course development, allowing for continuous refinement based on stakeholder feedback and evolving student needs.
- Offering EAP courses in-person, online, hybrid, and in asynchronous formats to enhance **accessibility**, allowing learners with diverse needs to participate.
- Opportunities for students to develop knowledge of the language and communication expectations on their destination degree programmes.
- Teaching informed by a range of pedagogic approaches, underpinned by up-to-date theories of language acquisition and academic literacy development.

Case study

Pre-sessional English and pathway programmes can directly meet student needs by offering **English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP)**, which differs from **English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP)**. **EGAP** focuses on generic academic skills such as essay writing, referencing and critical reading, usually taught in a decontextualised way. **ESAP**, by contrast, recognises that each academic **discipline** uses distinct communicative practices (Hyland, 2016). This form of instruction integrates language learning with subject matter (e.g., Bond & Campbell, 2019), allowing students to develop linguistic competence alongside an understanding of disciplinary expectations.

At one large university in central Scotland, an ESAP model is used on pre-sessional programmes, with students placed into one of seven specialist courses aligned to their destination subjects. 'Genre-based' approaches support learners in understanding the structure, purpose and linguistic features of different types of academic texts (e.g., Swales, 1990; Hyland, 2004; Paltridge, 2001), enabling them to produce writing that meets disciplinary requirements. This builds confidence and supports students' transition into their fields of study. While learning is contextualised for each specialism, parity is maintained through aligned assessments, learning outcomes and marking rubrics.

Where specialist ESAP courses are not feasible due to resourcing constraints or student numbers, discipline relevance can still be incorporated into EGAP by giving students choices that link tasks – such as research essays – to their chosen degree programmes. 'Skills-based' approaches, including note-taking, summarising, and referencing, can be embedded across both specific and generic pathways.

Comments from interviews with students who participated in pre-sessional English and pathway programmes indicate that these provisions provide a rich and relevant learning experience. One student explained that his pre-sessional course,

“established a solid foundation of essay writing... taught me how to check the academic materials, how to establish the essay structure and how to quote the materials correctly.” Another student stated that the EAP assessments on her pre-sessional course were highly transferable, “It covers three basic assignments... you need to discuss with other students... write at least two different essays... [and] give a presentation.”

Factors in the success of EAP programmes - takeaways

Good practice in effective course design in EAP relies on clear principles such as needs analysis, learning outcomes, alignment with students' academic goals, input on academic skills, assessment for learning approaches, and a range of modes of delivery.

Discipline-specific learning (ESAP) enhances relevance by teaching the language and communication conventions of particular subject areas, whereas EGAP focuses on more general academic skills.

Student feedback highlights that EAP programmes provide richer, more relevant preparation compared with generic test-focused courses.

2.3 Quality assurance and enhancement in EAP assessment

On pre-sessional English and pathway programmes, student success, institutional credibility and compliance with regulatory requirements depend on high-quality, robust assessment procedures.

Key considerations for good practice:

Using a variety of assessment types to monitor learning, provide feedback and measure achievement.

Using authentic assessments that closely reflect future academic contexts, helping students transfer skills effectively.

Providing inclusive assessment strategies so that all students, regardless of background or ability, can participate equitably.

Providing timely, constructive and actionable feedback to help students understand their progress and areas for development.

Fostering students' ability to develop academic skills through planning, drafting and revising their work.

Incorporating AI literacy training in assessment preparation. These technologies are becoming integral to academic and professional communication and by teaching students how to critically and ethically engage with Generative AI tools, educators help them enhance their writing and explore ideas while maintaining academic integrity. Most **higher education providers** have student and staff guidance on the use of Generative AI.

Good practice in assessment should be supported through rigorous internal quality processes, often drawing on the wider institution's quality regulations and frameworks. These processes are essential for maintaining consistency and fairness across assessments. Key considerations include the following:

Key considerations for internal quality assurance

Standardisation of marking criteria through clear, shared rubrics to ensure that all markers interpret and apply standards uniformly.

Regular marker training and calibration sessions using sample student work to build consensus and reduce subjectivity.

Second marking and cross-marking between markers to further mitigate bias and enhance **reliability**.

Moderation activities, such as reviewing a range of marked scripts and adjusting marks where necessary, clearly documenting and justifying decisions and outcomes.

Quality assurance in feedback, e.g. requiring comments to be linked to specific assessment criteria and learning outcomes, balancing observed strengths with areas for improvement.

External Examiners provide an additional layer of quality assurance. These academics from other higher education providers with expertise and recognised professional standing in the delivery of comparable provision play a key role by acting as critical friends and formally verifying that academic standards are upheld, assessments are fair, and learning outcomes are being met. Their oversight ascertains alignment with national and institutional expectations, and helps identify and address any discrepancies in marking.

Further external quality assurance and enhancement opportunities are available to providers through schemes such as the [BAS Accreditation - BALEAP](#), which establishes and maintains sector standards in the delivery of EAP provision through its course accreditation scheme. Accreditation is based on explicit criteria informed by other relevant frameworks which seek to specify qualities and attributes that students are expected to develop during their studies. The Scheme is designed so that the ability to satisfy the criteria will demonstrate a systematic adherence to core expectations and practices within EAP.

Quality assurance and enhancement in EAP assessment - takeaways

High-quality assessment is essential for student success, institutional credibility, and compliance with regulatory requirements in pre-sessional and pathway programmes.

Good practice involves considerations including the use of formative approaches and constructive feedback linked to learning outcomes, **authenticity**, inclusive assessment strategies, and development of AI literacies.

Rigorous internal moderation - including clear rubrics, marker training, second marking and documentation - supports fairness, consistency, and reliability.

External examiners provide independent oversight, verifying fairness, consistency, and alignment with national and institutional standards.

External accreditation schemes such as BALEAP's Accreditation Scheme strengthen quality assurance by **benchmarking** provision against sector standards and promoting continuous enhancement.

2.4 Good practice in course approval and monitoring

Regular and robust course monitoring and approval systems underpin ongoing responsiveness to student needs, maintenance of academic standards, and continuous improvement. Monitoring allows for timely adjustments that enhance learning outcomes and student satisfaction, while approval systems guarantee that all provisions meet institutional and external quality benchmarks before implementation in each new cycle.

Good practice in course approval and monitoring encompasses a range of considerations:

Key considerations in course approval and monitoring:

Engaging and consulting with academic departments, quality assurance teams, marketing teams, and students in the design, approval, and ongoing evaluation of courses.

External benchmarking against national and international standards, including the **Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)**; guidance published by BALEAP and the British Council; the **QAA Quality Code for Higher Education**; and Scottish Credit and Qualifications Authority.

Support and development for teachers, including observation of teaching and opportunities for training and practice sharing.

Transparent documentation and reporting – for example:

- course specifications that are clear, accessible, and compliant with Consumer and Markets Authority (CMA) guidelines,

outlining learning outcomes, assessment strategies, and support systems;

- published assessment criteria which enable students to understand expectations and promote fairness;
- published student performance and feedback metrics.

Accreditation by recognised bodies to assure stakeholders of the quality and consistency of provision. As noted earlier, the [BALEAP Accreditation Scheme](#) is the only UK quality assurance scheme in the UK specifically tailored to EAP provision.

Good practice in course approval and monitoring - takeaways

Robust course approval and monitoring systems are vital to ensure EAP programmes remain responsive to student needs, uphold academic standards and drive continuous improvement.

Good practice involves a number of considerations, including benchmarking against national and international frameworks, regular monitoring and review processes and peer observation of teaching practice.

External accreditation, such as through BALEAP's Accreditation Scheme, provides assurance of quality, supports international recognition and reinforces institutional credibility and student confidence.

Glossary of Terms

Term	Definition
Academic discourses	The specialised ways of using language, communication and reasoning that construct and convey knowledge within academic communities. They reflect the conventions, values and methods of particular disciplines or fields of study.
Academic language and literacy skills	The specialised language abilities and communication practices needed to understand, produce and engage with academic texts and discourse. They include listening, speaking, reading and writing in ways that meet the conventions and expectations of higher education study.
Academic literacies	The range of skills, practices and ways of thinking required to produce and interpret meaning in academic contexts. It recognises that writing, reading and communication are socially situated and shaped by disciplinary, cultural and institutional expectations.
Access and Participation Plan (APP)	A strategic document required by the Office for Students (OfS) in the UK that outlines how higher education providers will improve access, success and progression for students from underrepresented or disadvantaged backgrounds. They set measurable commitments to promote equity and inclusion across the student lifecycle.
Accessibility	The extent to which assessments and learning environments are fair and inclusive for all students, including those with disabilities or diverse backgrounds.
Assessment for learning	A concept fostering an approach to assessment that focuses on support for learning rather than only measurement of learning.
Authenticity	The degree to which a test reflects real-world or academic language use and tasks.
Benchmarking	The practice of comparing practice with that of other higher education providers to assure alignment with sector standards eg entry requirements, tests accepted, mix of in-sessional provision offered.
British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes (BALEAP)	The global forum for EAP professionals, BALEAP is a professional organisation that supports the teaching and research of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in higher education. It provides accreditation, training and resources to promote high standards and good practice in EAP provision.

Basic Compliance Assessment (BCA)	A UK government system that evaluates international student sponsors (such as universities) on key metrics to ensure they effectively manage their students, focusing on low visa refusal rates (maximum 5%), high student enrollment (minimum 95%), and high course completion rates (minimum 90%).
British Universities' International Liaison Association (BUILA)	A professional association representing staff working in international recruitment, partnerships and marketing within UK higher education. It supports good practice, training and collaboration to enhance the UK's global engagement and international student experience.
Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)	An international standard describing language ability across six levels (A1–C2), used to compare qualifications and test results.
Construct validity	The extent to which a test accurately measures the theoretical trait or ability it is intended to assess. It is central to ensuring that test scores genuinely reflect the construct being evaluated rather than unrelated factors.
Course design	The systematic process of planning and organising a course's content, structure, learning activities and assessments to achieve specific educational goals and outcomes.
Critical thinking	The ability to analyse information objectively, evaluate evidence and arguments and make reasoned judgments. It involves questioning assumptions, recognising bias and applying logic to reach well-supported conclusions.
Degree outcomes	The final results achieved by students, typically expressed in degree classifications such as First, Upper Second, Lower Second, or Third Class.
Discipline	A distinct field of academic study or branch of knowledge with its own methods, theories, and conventions. It shapes how knowledge is produced, communicated and evaluated within a specific academic community.
Discourses and genres	Distinct forms and conventions of language use in academic and disciplinary contexts, such as essays, reports or research articles.
Discourse analysis	The study of how language is used in texts and contexts to construct meaning, relationships, and social realities. It examines patterns of communication beyond the sentence level, considering both linguistic features and the surrounding social or cultural context.
English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI)	The use of English to teach academic subjects other than English itself, in contexts where English is not the primary language of the majority of learners.
English for Academic Purposes (EAP)	The teaching and learning of English aimed at developing the language and study skills needed for higher education contexts.

English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP)	Language provision that focuses on communicative practices specific to a discipline.
English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP)	Provision that typically focuses on generic skills such as essay writing or critical reading in a decontextualised manner.
English language proficiency	A person's ability to use English effectively across listening, speaking, reading and writing in academic and everyday contexts.
Fair access	'Fair access' refers to initiatives and policies designed to ensure that students from all backgrounds, particularly those from underrepresented or disadvantaged groups, have equal opportunities to enter and succeed in higher education. It involves removing barriers to equitable participation and promoting diversity and inclusion.
Formative and summative assessments	Formative assessments provide ongoing feedback to support learning; summative assessments evaluate achievement at the end of a course or module.
Higher education providers	Universities and other institutions in the UK that deliver degree-level or equivalent qualifications and are recognised by UK regulatory bodies.
In-sessional English	English language and academic skills support offered during a student's main programme of study to aid success and integration.
Intercultural competence	The ability to communicate effectively and appropriately across cultures by understanding differences, recognising one's own cultural perspective and adapting behaviour with empathy, openness, curiosity and respect for others' values and beliefs.
Learner autonomy	The capacity of students to take responsibility for their own learning by setting goals, making choices, and evaluating their progress. It involves developing independence, self-regulation and the ability to learn beyond formal instruction.
Learning aims	Broad statements that describe the overall intentions or goals of a course or programme - what educators want students to understand, appreciate or achieve by the end of their learning experience.
Learning outcomes	Clear, measurable statements of what learners are expected to know, understand, or be able to do by the end of a course or programme, demonstrating achievement of the learning aims.
Mapping	The process of aligning and comparing English language tests or qualifications against recognised frameworks such as the CEFR or institutional requirements.
Medium of Instruction (MOI)	The language used to teach academic subjects and deliver instruction within an educational setting.

Needs analysis	The process of identifying learners' language, academic and professional requirements to design courses or materials that effectively meet their specific learning goals and contexts.
Overseas-domiciled students	Students whose permanent residence is outside the UK prior to beginning their studies at a UK institution.
Pathway programmes	Structured preparatory courses that combine academic subjects and English language development to support entry into UK degree programmes.
Practitioner in EAP	A professional who applies theory, pedagogy, and research to support students' development of academic English and study skills. They combine practical classroom expertise with reflective and evidence-informed practice to enhance learning outcomes.
Predictive validity	How well test scores forecast future performance, such as success in academic study.
Pre-sessional English	Short, intensive courses taken before the start of a degree to help students meet required English language levels and prepare for academic study.
Process and product in EAP assessment	Evaluation of both how students develop their academic skills (the process) and the final outcomes they produce (the product). This dual focus supports deeper learning, promotes academic integrity and helps identify and assist students who need support before high-stakes assessments.
Progression rate	The proportion of students who successfully move from one stage of study to the next within their programme.
Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)	The independent body that monitors and advises on standards and quality in UK higher education. It works with universities and colleges to ensure students receive a high-quality academic experience and that qualifications meet national expectations.
Quality assurance	The processes and systems used to ensure that academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities are consistently maintained and meet agreed expectations.
Quality enhancement	The continuous improvement of learning and teaching, using evidence and feedback to innovate and raise standards beyond baseline requirements.
Reliability	The consistency and stability of test results across different times, versions or assessors.
Retention rate	The percentage of students who continue their studies rather than withdrawing before completion.

Scaffolding	The temporary support and guidance provided by a teacher to help learners perform tasks or understand concepts they could not manage independently. As learners gain confidence and ability, this support is gradually reduced to promote autonomy and mastery.
Secure English Language Test (SELT)	An approved English language exam required by the UK Home Office for certain visa and immigration applications. It is conducted under strict security conditions to ensure the reliability and authenticity of test results.
Subject area	A specific domain of study or teaching that falls within a broader academic discipline. It represents a focused field of knowledge, such as economics within the discipline of social sciences or linguistics within the discipline of humanities.
Teaching English for Academic Purposes (TEAP) qualification	A professional certification that recognises teachers' expertise in delivering English for Academic Purposes in higher education contexts. It assesses knowledge, skills and reflective practice specific to supporting students' academic language development.
Test security	Measures taken to protect test content and administration from misuse, fraud or compromise, ensuring results remain trustworthy.
UK-domiciled students	Students whose main residence is within the UK before starting higher education study.
UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI)	A division of the UK Home Office responsible for managing the country's visa system, immigration control and citizenship applications. It sets and enforces the rules for individuals seeking to study, work or live in the UK.
Universities UK International (UUKi)	The international arm of Universities UK, representing and supporting UK universities' global engagement. It works to enhance the UK's international education profile through policy advocacy, partnerships, and research on international mobility and collaboration.
Validity	The extent to which a test accurately measures what it is intended to measure.
Validation	The process of gathering evidence to confirm that a test or qualification is appropriate, fair and effective for its intended purpose.
Virtual learning environment (VLE)	An online platform that supports teaching and learning by providing access to course materials, communication tools, assessments and collaborative activities in a digital space.
Washback	The influence that testing has on teaching and learning, which can be either positive (improving learning) or negative (narrowing focus).