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## **Designing an inclusive toolkit to empower early career academics in their educational practice**

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### ***Presentation abstract***

Early career academics (ECAs) face substantial pressures in establishing their academic careers, often prioritising research outputs over teaching. While much focus has been placed on supporting ECAs' research-related development, less attention has been given to enhancing their teaching practices, particularly in supporting student writing. The expertise required to teach and support student writing only compounds the difficulty of this situation, especially if learning development support is not available to students. This presentation reported on the findings of a SEDA-funded project that responded to calls to equip ECAs with the skills needed to foster confidence and self-efficacy across multiple academic activities (Dore and Richards, 2022). The project contributes to ongoing discussions about the role of ECAs in supporting student learning alongside learning development while ensuring their own professional development and wellbeing.

Focusing specifically on writing support within the context of generative AI – a growing challenge in higher education – we have been working on developing a practical toolkit for ECAs to better support students in academic writing while addressing issues of AI integrity. Exploring ECAs' needs and perspectives through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions has informed our understanding of what such a toolkit might look like and how generalisable and transferable it might be. During the session, we shared our observations, designs and hopes for this toolkit, which aims to assist ECAs in balancing student support with their own wellbeing, thereby protecting them from overwork and

enhancing their teaching practice. While outlining the methodology, anticipated outcomes, and potential impact of the toolkit on ECAs' teaching practices and wellbeing, we also explored the broader implications for the role of early career academics in higher education teaching and learning.

**Keywords:** early career academics; early career researchers; writing; generative AI; toolkit.

## ***Community response***

The session highlighted the pressing realities for early career academics (ECAs), who must juggle the dual pressures of producing research while also delivering effective teaching. The emphasis on academic writing support, particularly in light of the challenges posed by generative AI, felt highly relevant and timely. The introduction of a toolkit appears to be a practical and much-needed step in equipping ECAs with the resources to manage teaching responsibilities while safeguarding their wellbeing.

The focus on preventing overwork and building ECAs' confidence as educators was especially compelling. In many institutions, professional development for early career staff is disproportionately directed toward research, leaving pedagogical growth – particularly in areas like student writing – less supported. Positioning the toolkit as inclusive and sustainable fills this gap and connects the fields of learning development and academic career progression.

Looking ahead, piloting this toolkit across varied contexts, combined with continuous feedback from users, could refine its content and help cultivate a supportive professional network among ECAs. Such collective engagement would increase its overall effectiveness while simultaneously strengthening ECAs' professional identity and wellbeing.

In essence, the project recognises ECAs not only as developing researchers but also as capable educators whose growth has a positive ripple effect across the higher education community.

## **Next steps and additional questions**

Can this toolkit be adapted for senior lecturers too? There is a strong sense that the problems with supporting student writing go beyond ECAs.

## ***Authors' reflection***

The centrality of writing to academic life, whether that of a student or a member of staff, might seem recently to have been somewhat in doubt, a position usurped by the allure of generative AI, and a task on its way to becoming a relic of the past, not actively surviving into the future. Yet this is at odds with the thoughts and intentions of the participants in the session, who recognised the challenges that generative AI poses to student writing, whilst also looking for ways to continue supporting it. Doing so through the development and support of their own writing was a welcome approach, and indeed, the group was lively and engaged, particularly when the conversation turned to confidence.

Once thoughts and ideas are committed to paper in writing, they can be examined, challenged, quoted and questioned. Even if someone were to feel confident in those thoughts and ideas, releasing them into the public realm to be considered or contested by others requires another level of confidence again. Having to manage this ourselves and then also encourage students to do the same can feel daunting, and this seems to be why the idea of a toolkit was met with such enthusiasm by delegates – it provides a structure, guidance, and perhaps even legitimacy to the act of writing.

It is understandable why learning developers might want such a toolkit to be adapted for more experienced teachers; years in the classroom do not necessarily translate to an ability to support student writing, and everyone should feel confident in writing. However, we chose to focus on ECAs because they have a unique set of challenges that are known to impact their wellbeing. While a writing toolkit could indeed be adapted for different audiences, we would not want to diminish the importance of supporting this particular sector of the academic population.

Our next step is to publish a research paper that proposes a range of tools for the ECA toolkit.

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

## **References**

Dore, E. and Richards, A. (2022) 'Empowering early career academics to overcome low confidence', *International Journal for Academic Development*, 29(1), pp.75-87.  
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