

Designing an inclusive toolkit to empower Early Career Academics in their educational practice

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Introduction

Early Career Academics (ECAs) occupy a critical yet often uncertain space within Higher Education (HE). While establishing their teaching identities, managing heavy workloads, and negotiating shifting institutional expectations, ECAs must also support increasingly diverse student cohorts, with some struggling with the demands of academic writing. The rapid growth of generative AI technologies has further highlighted these pressures, challenging ECAs to rethink teaching and assessment practices at a moment when institutional clarity was still forming.

This article presents findings from a research project funded through the SEDA Research and Evaluation Small Grants 2024–25 scheme. The project aimed to understand ECAs' experiences of supporting student writing during the transition to AI-enabled learning environments and to suggest ideas to develop an inclusive and adaptable toolkit tailored to ECAs' needs. Grounded in qualitative interviews and focus group data, the study explored ECAs' perspectives on writing development, academic integrity, institutional expectations, and the practical realities of teaching during technological disruption.

Our findings show that while concerns about AI shaped ECAs' immediate challenges, the deeper issues related to communication, student confidence, inclusive practice, and uneven institutional support. These concerns informed three key principles for the development of a sustainable toolkit for ECAs: the centrality of clear and relational communication, the need for genuinely inclusive pedagogies,

and the importance of collective knowledge-building within and across academic communities.

Methodology

The study adopted a two-phase qualitative design informed by three theoretical lenses: communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), infrastructures of care (Stratford et al., 2024), and Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2024). Collectively, these frameworks helped illustrate how ECAs navigate professional learning, relational support, and inclusive pedagogical practice.

Participants and Recruitment

Participants were ECAs from a range of UK universities, including research-intensive, teaching-focused, and post-92 institutions. Eligible participants were those within their first five years of academic appointment, holding teaching responsibilities. Eleven ECAs took part in one-hour semi-structured interviews, with five returning for a follow-up focus group. Recruitment occurred via SEDA, UKCGE, LDHEN, RAISE, and BERA networks and related JISCmail mailing lists.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews (October–December 2024) and a 60-minute focus group (March 2025) were conducted online. The interviews explored challenges in supporting writing, perceptions of generative AI, experiences of academic integrity, existing support structures, and expectations for a potential toolkit. The focus group provided an opportunity for member checking and collaborative refinement of toolkit ideas. Data were transcribed, accuracy-checked, and analysed using an inductive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Four themes emerged, which shaped three pedagogical principles for toolkit development.

Key Themes

1. Student Confidence and Writing Foundations

Across disciplines, ECAs described a pervasive lack of confidence among students regarding academic writing. Many students equated “sounding academic” with using complex vocabulary or formulaic phrasing, sometimes generated by AI tools, without understanding the meaning of those scholarly conventions. Students for whom English was an additional language often felt particularly disadvantaged. AI sometimes strengthened this insecurity, as students compared their writing unfavourably to AI-generated text. ECAs also reported that students struggled not only with writing but with the cognitive processes that precede writing, such as critical thinking, evaluation, synthesis, and paraphrasing. As a result, while occasionally helpful, generative AI can obscure the need to develop the foundational skills needed in an academic setting.

Practice-focused implication:

This points to the importance of writing support that begins with *meaning-making rather than correction*. ECAs may find it helpful to design activities where students explain disciplinary reasoning aloud (or via low-stakes drafts) before attempting polished prose. This gives students the confidence that ideas come first – and language can follow.

2. Academic Integrity and Learning Gains

Concerns around academic integrity increased with the rise of generative AI. ECAs expressed uncertainty about how to distinguish legitimate assistance from inappropriate use, particularly when AI tools could produce superficially polished text that concealed limited understanding. Many ECAs described cases where students unintentionally breached integrity expectations because they misunderstood academic conventions or assumed AI-assisted writing was permissible if the text appeared “original.” AI detection tools were seen as unreliable; instead, ECAs relied on familiarity with learning outcomes and assignment requirements to recognise mismatches. Beyond integrity, ECAs were concerned about learning losses, with over-reliance on AI risking the bypassing of essential developmental processes – particularly in the early years of study or career progression.

Practice-focused implication:

A useful reframing here is to treat integrity as a pedagogical issue, not a policing one. ECAs can position integrity discussions as part of learning – inviting students to analyse examples, discuss grey areas, and reflect on the thinking processes AI cannot perform. This shifts the focus from catching misuse to cultivating understanding.

3. Productivity Pressures and Pedagogical Balancing Acts

ECAs openly acknowledged both the practical benefits and the risks of generative AI. For staff, AI could alleviate cognitive or administrative load. For students, it could provide scaffolded entry points into complex tasks. Yet recognising when AI use was productive versus counterproductive was challenging. Many ECAs felt they needed to quickly acquire AI literacy while simultaneously teaching students to use AI appropriately. Without institutional guidance, this resulted in uneven practice and increased anxiety.

Practice-focused implication:

Here, a shift toward co-learning can reduce pressure. Rather than needing to be AI experts, ECAs can frame AI exploration as a shared endeavour – modelling curiosity, critical thinking, and transparency. This approach normalises uncertainty and encourages students to think critically with (and about) AI rather than treat it as a shortcut.

4. Professional Expectations and the Need for Support

A significant misalignment emerged between institutional expectations of student readiness and students’ actual capabilities. ECAs repeatedly described feeling unprepared to teach academic writing and were unsure where responsibility for writing development lay. Institutional support was inconsistent, with many ECAs unaware of or unconfident in accessing Learning Development or Academic Development services. Informal communities of practice – peer mentoring, hallway conversations, WhatsApp groups – often served as the primary source of guidance.

Practice-focused implication:

What emerges is a need to transform institutional frustration into actionable coordination. Even simple mechanisms – clearer referral pathways, shared writing resources, or cross-team induction briefings – can reduce ambiguity and help ECAs understand how their role fits within broader support structures.

Principles for Action

The above themes revealed that ECAs need more than information. ECAs need relational, contextual, and adaptable resources that acknowledge the complex realities of teaching writing. Three principles emerged as essential foundations for the toolkit.

Principle 1: Communication as a Pedagogical Anchor

Clear communication is essential for supporting writing development and academic integrity. The study found that mismatches between student and staff expectations often stemmed from implicit or assumed disciplinary norms.

ECAs need support to:

- articulate writing expectations clearly and consistently
- create opportunities for dialogue about writing approaches and integrity
- demystify academic conventions, especially for diverse student cohorts
- move away from reactive policing toward proactive, relational engagement

The toolkit should therefore include templates, dialogue prompts, exemplar briefing materials, and discussion activities that help ECAs develop shared understandings within their classrooms.

Principle 2: Inclusive Pedagogical Practice

Inclusive practice must be embedded from the outset, not retrofitted. Students' varied linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds often influence their approach to writing more than technical skills gaps.

The toolkit should embed Universal Design for Learning by offering:

- multiple representational formats for writing support materials
- accessible, modular activities that can be adapted for different learning needs
- guidance on surfacing the hidden curriculum of academic writing
- resources that build confidence and validate diverse writing identities

This approach encourages belonging and reduces the risk that students turn to AI out of fear or perceived inadequacy.

Principle 3: Collective Knowledge and Institutional Connectedness

The most resilient ECAs were those with access to collaborative networks. The toolkit should therefore act as both a resource repository and a catalyst for community-building, connecting ECAs with Learning Developers, Academic Developers, and peers.

Suggested components include:

- OER-style lesson plans that are adaptable across disciplines
- activities co-designed with students to reflect authentic needs
- professional dialogue guides for cross-team communication
- reflective tools that support ECAs' pedagogical growth

Importantly, the toolkit should recognise ECAs as knowledge-creators, not just recipients of guidance.

The Toolkit: What ECAs asked for and how it works

Based on participant insights, the toolkit should be:

- **digital-first but printable**, allowing personalisation and flexible use
- **customisable**, with editable templates and modular lessons
- **interactive**, featuring multimedia demonstrations and annotated examples
- **aligned with ethical pedagogies**, including explicit discussion of AI's global implications
- **student-informed**, with co-created advice and case studies
- **rooted in reflective practice**, enabling staff to chart their developing confidence

Furthermore, resources may include:

- Short workshop plans
- Writing exercise banks
- Integrity conversation starters
- Assignment brief deconstruction activities
- AI decision-making flowcharts
- Inclusive language and feedback guides

Conclusion

While generative AI may seem like a harbinger of entirely new challenges in HE, it has merely made longstanding tensions more visible. Our study has shown that ECAs struggle not so much with technology itself, but with navigating unclear ownership of writing development, including inconsistent institutional guidance and students' uncertainty about what written assignments are for. AI amplified these conditions because it exposed how often writing expectations remain implicit. The proposed toolkit, therefore, matters less as a collection of resources and more as a structured conversation starter about academic writing. Its purpose is to help ECAs shift from policing outputs and detecting misuse to supporting thinking and making disciplinary meaning explicit. In practice, this means designing teaching that privileges dialogue and shared interpretation, trial and error approaches refocused on the writing process rather than output, and developmental feedback before assessment judgment.

For academic developers, the implication is equally significant. Support for ECAs should not rely solely on workshops about tools or regulations. What is required is guidance around relational pedagogies to help new academics learn how to talk with students about writing, including feelings of uncertainty, stuckness, emotional responses to writing, and the hard work and frustration that come with it. When this is absent, AI becomes a logical shortcut; when it is present, AI can turn into another object of critical engagement, deepening rather than replacing the writing experience. We thus encourage seeing the toolkit not as a solution to AI disruption but a mechanism for re/building pedagogical confidence among ECAs, positioning them as facilitators of intellectual development (not frontline enforcers of academic integrity) who can make learning through writing visible enough that students no longer need to outsource thinking in the first place. Simply put, the most effective response to AI is better teaching.

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