

# Academic Support benchmarking tool

Principle	First steps	Developing	Developed	Refining	Outstanding
<b>Personalised academic and pastoral support for all students</b>	Many students do not have a named point of contact, and do not know how to access academic support. Coverage of available academic support at induction is poor.	Most students have a named point of contact they can contact for academic support, but this may not extend to students on placement, distance learners or postgraduates. Available sources of academic support are introduced at induction, but this remains a first year activity.	All students including PGT and PGR, placement and clinical have a named contact and know where to obtain academic support, although such support is largely reactive and depends on the student's own initiative. Support mechanisms are generic rather than bespoke, although particular support is offered at points of transition where new skills are needed.	Academic support is tailored to students' individual needs and circumstances, with academic support staff proactively recommending development opportunities based on students' skills gaps. Support during transition between years or modes of study (such as going on placement) is well structured and works well.	Proactive, personalised academic support is provided to all students, whatever their circumstances or mode of study. Support is focused on helping students to achieve their personal and life goals, as well as maximising their academic success. Support systems are regularly reviewed by staff and students in partnership, and a continual process of enhancement is informed by sector-leading best practice.
<b>An integrated approach to academic support</b>	Academic support provision is patchy, and each service is delivered in isolation. Students receive inadequate support as staff do not refer them to different services within the institution, and students are often unaware that support exists.	Academic support is delivered by several different departments, and students may be confused as to where to go for help. Students may encounter repetition or conflicting advice as communication between services and departments is poor.	All student-facing departmental staff are aware of the academic support services within the institution, including the students' union, and can signpost students to the correct service for their needs. Services and departments communicate to ensure that the support given is consistent and helpful to the student.	Academic and pastoral support systems are well integrated and offer complementary support to students. The student's named contact is up to date on students' interactions with different services, and their progress and development are tracked holistically throughout their programme. The students' union is actively promoted as a key source of independent advice and advocacy.	Support systems are designed to be student-centred and as accessible as possible. Academic and pastoral support professionals within departments, central services and the students' union proactively communicate to ensure that each student receives the best support possible. Continual engagement with students informs iterative improvements to processes and services.
<b>Coherent institutional policies applied consistently</b>	There is no institutional guidance or policy on academic support, or guidance that does exist is not implemented effectively in the majority of departments.	An institutional policy on academic support provision does exist, but its implementation is patchy. Students may receive differing levels and quality of support depending upon their discipline, level of study or the individual who is their named contact.	An institutional policy on academic support provision is well implemented across the majority of departments. Students in similar circumstances receive comparable levels and quality of academic support regardless of discipline or level of study.	Institutional policies on academic and pastoral support are joined up and implemented across all departments, ensuring a minimum standard of provision as well as allowing for personalisation to meet students' needs. Policies are designed around the needs of students.	A holistic approach is taken at an institutional level to the provision of academic and pastoral support for students, with policies and their successful implementation regularly reviewed by staff and students in partnership. Policies are tailored to suit students' level and mode of study, including students on placement, PGT and PGR.
<b>Staff support, reward and recognition</b>	There is little or no support for staff undertaking academic support roles, which are often added on to academics' pre-existing workload with no time given to undertake them. Many do not understand the academic support aspect of their role or perceive it as not being their job.	Support and training is available for academic support staff, but takeup is limited or patchy. Staff understand their role but may not feel they are given the time to undertake it adequately. The lack of incentives results in the bulk of academic support work falling upon certain interested or particularly supportive individuals, who often feel that their contribution is not valued as highly by the institution as that of their colleagues focusing on teaching or research.	All student-facing staff are given basic information about the support services available in order to signpost students. Staff providing academic support as one facet of their job, such as personal tutors, are supported to understand their role and the time it takes is factored into their workload allocation model. There may be an award scheme to recognise excellent personal tutors or academic support staff.	All staff in academic support roles are fully trained and supported to confidently deliver the requirements of the role. Staff are given the time they need to fulfil the role as best suits them and their students, and performance in academic support roles is considered during progression and promotion. Awards and/or other forms of reward and recognition are given to exceptional staff.	A comprehensive programme of continuous personal development is available for all staff undertaking academic support roles, and sharing best and innovative practice is encouraged and facilitated by the institution. Academic support roles are valued equally to other teaching and research positions in promotion criteria, and students are given the opportunity to reward or recognise outstanding support staff.
<b>Regular, structured interactions based on mutual expectations</b>	There are no expectations around regularity of contact with academic support staff, or those expectations that are set are not met. Students are expected to proactively seek out academic support whilst being unsure of the support available or its purpose, and many students never access academic support despite potentially benefiting from it.	The institution or department sets minimum expectations around interactions with academic support staff, but these are often not met. Some students benefit from interactions with support staff, whilst others gain little, as the purpose and structure of the meetings is not made clear.	Students are clear about the minimum interactions they can expect from academic support staff, and these minimum contact points are broadly adhered to across the institution. Staff and students are usually clear about the purpose and structure of these interactions. More staff-initiated contact is common in early stages of the programme, but as the student progresses the responsibility to seek out support falls largely on the student.	Regular, structured interactions with academic support staff are embedded in every programme, with the flexibility for students or staff to proactively request additional support. Discussions are useful to the student and interactions with support staff build on those previous to aid students' progress and development.	Students and staff explore their mutual expectations regarding the regularity and form of contact at the beginning of the programme, and at points of transition, and these expectations are regularly reviewed to ensure their appropriateness. Students understand how their support needs will evolve as they progress and how to effectively engage with different types of support. Students and staff actively engage in the interactions, which are perceived as crucial to students' learning and development.
<b>Proactive monitoring of student progression</b>	Academic support staff do not monitor students' progression through their programme of study. There are no systems in place to alert staff to sudden drops in performance or attendance, and these students may drop out without contact from the institution.	Some data on student progression is available to staff, but it is not commonly used for academic support purposes and may be used punitively. Staff are usually alerted to students whose performance or attendance is of high concern, but some students fall through the cracks.	Staff have access to sufficient student data to be able to monitor progression throughout their programme, and are encouraged to use the data for academic support purposes rather than to punish students. Clear drops in performance and/or attendance are picked up and proactively followed up by academic support staff.	Monitoring student progression is a key element of the interactions between students and academic support staff, and students are supported to critically reflect on their performance and progression. Clear drops in performance and/or attendance are proactively followed up by academic support staff as soon as they are identified and additional support is provided to these students. Staff are supported by an institutional commitment to the supportive use of learner analytics data.	Interactions with academic support staff are focused around progression, both within the programme of study but also towards individual students' life goals post-graduation. Students are supported to critically reflect on their higher education experience as a whole and how it has changed and benefited them. Academic support staff act as critical friends, challenging low aspirations and proactively identifying areas for further development.
<b>Learning to learn effectively</b>	It is assumed that students enter higher education knowing how to learn effectively. Developing study skills such as academic writing, critical analysis and self-reflection is left to students to undertake without support from the institution, except perhaps in extreme, remedial cases.	Students are made aware in some way of what is expected of them as higher education learners, although many concepts may be unexplained or existing knowledge assumed. Academic study skills support is offered at a generic level and students must seek out support themselves.	Students are mostly clear about what is expected of them as higher education learners in terms of time on task, independent study and critical analysis. Academic study skills are covered at a basic level at every induction, and students are informed of the existence of additional support, usually provided centrally.	The institution treats learning to learn effectively as a skill to develop like any other, and students are given comprehensive support to develop as learners. Active steps are taken to encourage students to critically reflect on their own learning, skills gaps and study strategies, and this is embedded in a disciplinary context. Courses are structured so as to build self-efficacy in students and enable them to develop confidence in themselves as learners.	Learning to learn effectively is built into the curriculum of every course, with formative work helping students to develop into self-evaluative practitioners of their discipline or specialism. Every student is given the support they need, considering their background and previous experience of learning, in order to develop into independent, self-directed learners. Students at all levels, including postgraduate and doctoral students, understand the value of life-long learning and proactively strive to continually develop themselves as learners.
<b>Collaborative learning and peer support</b>	There are few opportunities for collaborative learning, and peer support is discouraged or devalued by staff or students.	Most students experience an element of peer interaction or collaborative learning, for example through engaging with seminars or group work. Informal peer support may emerge amongst groups of students but it is not facilitated or encouraged by the institution.	The institution actively facilitates the building of informal peer support networks, for example by running a voluntary mentoring scheme. Collaborative learning is built into the curriculum at least in the first year through group projects or formative peer assessment.	Students regularly talk about their course outside the classroom and are facilitated to do so, for example through academic societies funded by the students' union. Formal peer support structures are in place on many courses, such as a peer assisted study scheme, and student facilitators are trained and supported by the institution.	Students highly value learning from each other, both about course content and about the process of learning, and opportunities to do so are embedded throughout courses. Formal peer support structures are well resourced by the institution and student facilitators are fully trained and supported. The effectiveness of peer support and collaborative learning is regularly evaluated by staff and students in partnership.
<b>Clear, accessible, up to date information</b>	Information about academic support provision is scant or so out of date as to be useless. Staff are poorly informed about the range of provision available within the institution and may not be aware of their role in providing academic support.	Information about academic support provision is largely up to date, but may lack clarity or be difficult to find. Staff who undertake academic support roles are aware of their responsibilities, but other staff may be unclear.	Information about academic support provision is clear and up to date, and students know where to look for the information. Information about academic and pastoral support services is shared with all staff who may need to refer students.	Information about the purpose and provision of both academic and pastoral support is proactively communicated to students and staff, and is clear and easily accessible.	Students and staff fully understand the range of academic support provision and how it helps them to learn more effectively. Academic and pastoral support refer to each other and clearly complement each other in the information provided to staff and students. The clarity and accessibility of the information is regularly reviewed by staff and students in partnership.
<b>Trust, respect, and an effective working relationship</b>	This is an important enabling principle that reflects that good academic support relies heavily on the relationship between staff and students. Because of this reliance on individuals, this principle does not necessarily fit within the benchmarking tool's structure, but all would agree that it is crucial.  The relationship between students and academic support staff should be open, honest and trusting. Staff should be sensitive to the needs of the student and adapt their approach accordingly, taking into account the diversity of the student population and the need for inclusive practice. Staff and students should both strive to build an effective working relationship based on the principle of mutual respect for each other as fellow human beings, as well as students, experts, partners or mentors. This relies upon the institution fostering a culture of trust and mutual respect that is genuinely felt by staff and students. For more information about a culture of partnership between staff and students, see NUS' Manifesto for Partnership.				

# Academic Support benchmarking tool

This benchmarking tool produced by NUS aims to improve the provision of academic support on higher education courses. It can be used by course leaders, heads of administration, students' unions or course representatives to benchmark practice within higher education providers against ten principles of effective academic support provision.

These principles have been drafted by a group of elected student officers from across the UK and represent a view on what good academic support looks like to students. The tool also incorporates recent literature on academic support and learning to learn, and we are grateful to colleagues at AMOSSHE and delegates at the Centre for Recording Achievement seminar on personal tutoring for their expert insight.

## What do we mean by academic support?

Academic support is often perceived very narrowly, or alternatively so broadly as to blur its boundaries with every possible aspect of the curriculum. NUS has consciously chosen to define academic support more broadly than as a personal tutoring system, recognising both that there are myriad ways to provide this support across diverse institutions, and that academic support cannot be the responsibility of only one person in a student's academic world.

Academic support is about helping students to develop the skills they need to succeed, to grow as learners, to critically monitor their development and progression, and to become a part of their disciplinary community of practice. It incorporates staff guidance, peer support and fostering self-reflective capabilities within students themselves. Effective academic support relies not just on the relationship between a student and their tutor, but on the institutional structures, processes and policies that support and facilitate this relationship. We also believe that a close relationship between academic and pastoral support is not just desirable but necessary: because of this, although this resource is focused on academic support, it is not possible to reach the higher levels of practice without applying the same principles to pastoral support provision.

## How to use the tool

You can use the tool at a course, departmental, faculty or whole institution level. Read each of the principles, and decide which of the boxes best describes where you think your institution is. Some of the principles have different aspects of practice associated with them: you may wish to take an average of the scores for each principle, or treat each aspect of practice separately.

Once you've mapped out your current level, you may wish to choose a couple of priority areas to work towards achieving the next level. The tool is a good starting point for discussions between staff and students about how you can work together to improve learning resources.

You could also share practice with other willing departments, institutions or unions, perhaps on a regional basis or by mission group. You can learn from institutions that benchmark themselves higher than yours: what good practice could you borrow and adapt? If they've recently made changes, what were the challenges they faced?

## Things to bear in mind

- Each of the "outstanding" practices involve staff and students working in partnership. This partnership needs to be meaningful in order to work, which means that both groups must listen and be willing to compromise. Have honest conversations about what is and isn't possible.
- Make sure you are including the right people in your conversations: academic staff have control over some aspects of academic support, whilst much control is held by departmental or central administrative staff. Some practices are easily changed locally, whilst others require a more whole-institution approach.
- You may not be able to achieve "outstanding" in everything at once. Decide where best to target your resources: do you want to work hard to get one particular area to "outstanding", or do you want to spend that time getting three or four areas up one level from their current position? Are there specific departments you want to work with, or is a central minimum standard what is required?
- You may disagree with some of the levels in the benchmarking tool – and that's OK! The tool was created collaboratively by student officers, based on principles put together from research into what students value in terms of academic support provision. This doesn't mean it will work at every institution. Feel free to tweak it or build on it to make it more relevant to the context of your institution. You could use it to start a conversation between staff and students – what can you take from the tool and use to enhance the academic support provision at your institution?

## 10

### Ten Principles of Effective Academic Support

- 1 Personalised academic and pastoral support for all students**  
The principle that all students have access to high quality academic and pastoral support, tailored to their level and location of study, particularly at points of transition.
- 2 A joined-up approach to academic support**  
The principle that all support services and staff work together to ensure a holistic experience for the student.
- 3 Coherent institutional policies applied consistently**  
The principle that coherent institution-wide policies should be consistently implemented across schools and departments, allowing for the flexibility of innovation, enhancement and review in partnership with students.
- 4 Staff support, reward and recognition**  
The principle that staff offering academic support to students should be fully supported, trained and developed by the institution, and rewarded and recognised for their contribution.
- 5 Regular, structured interactions based on mutual expectations**  
The principle that staff and students will establish mutual expectations regarding the frequency of contact, but that interactions with academic support staff will be regular and structured.
- 6 Proactive monitoring of student progression**  
The principle that students' progress will be monitored throughout their programme, and that academic support staff will proactively provide advice and guidance to help students' development towards their chosen goals.
- 7 Learning to learn effectively**  
The principle that academic support should enable students to learn to learn effectively through gaining an understanding of what critical engagement with knowledge looks like in a disciplinary context.
- 8 Collaborative learning and peer support**  
The principle that all students should have access to formal or informal peer support and collaborative learning.
- 9 Clear, accessible, up to date information**  
The principle that all students and support staff should receive clear, accessible, up to date information about academic support provision at appropriate times and in an appropriate format.
- 10 Trust, respect, and an effective working relationship**  
The principle that academic support staff and students will strive to develop an effective working relationship based on mutual trust and respect.