



REFLECTIVE CASE STUDY

Balancing Continuity and Change: A Reflective Case Study of EAP Working Group Reform

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ABSTRACT

This case study examines a major restructuring of faculty working groups within a university's English for Academic Purposes (EAP) foundation programme in Kazakhstan. The initiative targeted areas with potential for enhancement within faculty service teams, such as classroom material development and assessment. Based on longstanding collegial feedback alongside the author's own critical reflection from a leadership standpoint, the focal points for reform included prolonged tenure within specific roles, varying levels of productivity, and a peer review process that was occasionally influenced by a desire to maintain strong collegial bonds. Drawing on principles of experiential learning and collaborative professional development, a three-stage reform was implemented: annual rotation across teams, reorganization to prioritize urgent tasks, and the creation of an independent piloting group to strengthen quality assurance. Evidence gathered through the author's critical reflection indicates that these changes initially enhanced faculty morale, broadened professional expertise, and improved the reliability of teaching and assessment materials. A longer-term critical evaluation of the initiative revealed some drawbacks. These include change fatigue among some faculty members, as well as a communication system with room for improvement. A critical reflection highlights the balance between continuity and rotation, and between collegiality and accountability. The study argues that structured role mobility and blind peer evaluation mechanisms can strengthen institutional resilience and overall quality in EAP contexts. However, it also warns of the potential risks associated with sharing out positions of responsibility too broadly and too quickly. These findings offer transferable insights for EAP programme leaders seeking to optimize faculty development and ensure sustainable, high-quality curriculum delivery.



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1. Introduction

1.1 Context

Challenges related to the management of teacher service groups that are at the heart of this study are explored through the lens of EAP teachers at a national university in Kazakhstan's capital Astana. These educators are mostly expatriates from a range of countries, though mostly the US and UK, and with educational backgrounds in either pedagogy or linguistics. They deliver the university's foundation programme, which ensures that incoming students are equipped with the soft skills required to subsequently succeed in their undergraduate bachelor programmes. The English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) status of the university makes the EAP subject pivotal. Despite this, recent budgetary constraints have created a scenario in which university faculty are increasingly being asked to adapt and innovate accordingly. This creates a potential tension between the need to economise without compromising on quality. While austerity in the tertiary education sector is not a new phenomenon (Tight, 2019), recent global events, including conflict in Europe (Harding, 2026) and the increasing politicization of university courses (Speri, 2026), have acted as a catalyst. This is particularly concerning for EAP, as it can be portrayed as a marginalised subject that is especially vulnerable to funding cuts which inevitably raises job security anxiety for teachers (Le Roux & Breen, 2024). That is to say, EAP's seemingly peripheral status (Ding & Bruce, 2017) makes it particularly vulnerable to downsizing and cutbacks as it can sometimes be perceived as 'extra' (supplementary) in contrast with content-heavy and discipline-specific subjects.

This current period of cost optimization has called for a rethink of how teachers carry out their service contributions to the programme outside of their frontline classroom teaching duties. Common examples of this service work include developing (updating) classroom material, redesigning assessment in response to emerging challenges and providing additional student support hours. Within EAP, such service-related work is often rendered less visible, or secondary to frontline teaching, despite its centrality to programme quality and institutional functioning (Fanghanel, 2011). This invisibility becomes particularly acute during periods of fiscal constraint, when service expectations intensify without corresponding recognition or resourcing. In this bid to 'do more with less' teachers are consequently expected to broaden their skill base, so that they can be more flexible in their variety of service contributions. At the university in focus, this service is carried out via specialized working groups. These teams have evolved over the years, but they have included the Academic Learning Centre (ALC) for extra student support, Assessment, Materials, Continual Professional Development (CPD) and Technology-Enhanced Learning (TEL) teams. These groups can be understood through the lens of practice communities (Wenger, 1998), in which teachers come together and learn from each other according to their group's niche focus. The key difference being that collaboration centres not only on professional learning (Acuyo, 2022), but on shared contribution to the foundation programme. Every team has a lead position that coordinates its members. In the Materials team, for instance, examples include assigning specific lessons to group members for review. The designated teachers walk through the particular lesson and update content, whether

reading or audio for example, and subsequently create classroom activities in line with this updated material. Alternatively, in the ALC, the lead assigns specific times to members, during which they should make themselves available to students in need of additional support. They might also coordinate the delivery of supplementary support courses on advanced grammar or paraphrasing strategies for example.

1.2 Research Problem

Upon leadership change within the programme in 2023, a number of structural opportunities for enhancement within this working group system were identified. Firstly, many teachers had remained in the same teams performing the same subtasks for extended periods of time. This included the groups' leaders. While this carried its own advantages, it also left room for teachers to diversify their skills. Another challenge stemmed from the consensus that some of these longstanding teams had perceivably been more productive than others, given differences in the nature of their aims. For example, Assessment was widely perceived as a particularly workload-intensive team given the need to refresh exam content on an ongoing basis. CPD team membership, in contrast, was commonly viewed as less intense throughout the year. This is on account of the cyclical nature of the team's role, with activity peaks concentrated at specific points in the academic calendar. This includes organising training initiatives at key stages throughout the year for instance. These differences in the teams' objectives carried the potential to occasionally create tension across teams, as members might compare the seemingly different nature of their contributions to the programme. A final challenge was caused by a strong sense of collegial loyalty between longstanding team members. The desire to maintain team harmony occasionally prioritized consensus over objective feedback during the peer review process. This prioritization of maintaining amicable team relationships therefore carried the risk that tasks might not always be piloted neutrally.

Recognizing the opportunity to enhance student learning, the aforementioned scenario was tackled largely through dialogue. The author of this paper began liaising with both internal colleagues, such as the other Heads of Discipline, but also external figures, including Chairs from the other schools. Based on these consultations, a carefully designed three-stage plan was crafted. Firstly, to promote a culture of rotation between working groups, so that teachers would experience different programme specializations each academic year. Secondly, a recalibration of membership to allocate more teachers to working groups requiring sustained input throughout the year, while reducing (or even bringing to a close) groups that operated on a more cyclical basis. The need to broaden teachers' expertise through professional development and cultivate a more adaptable faculty workforce is becoming increasingly salient as demands on university teachers increase (Burlakova et al., 2019). Lastly, the creation of a new and independent team to pilot output samples from other groups, aimed at objective feedback and quality control, while at the same time reducing the pressure that (even constructive) criticism can place on collegial relationships. This recognizes the value of honest and unbiased feedback in professional learning (Kanuka, 2023).

1.3 Aims

This study aims to critically evaluate the implementation of a three-part intervention designed to revitalise a system of teacher service working groups within a university EAP foundation programme. The three evaluated components are underpinned through the following research questions (RQs):

- RQ1: To what extent has the regular rotation of teachers across working groups contributed to the broadening of skills within the faculty base?
- RQ2: To what extent has the re-sizing (or closing) of working groups, according to their perceived need, enhanced the overall efficiency of the system?
- RQ3: What impact has the newly created independent piloting team had on the quality of working group output?

By addressing these RQs, this case study aims to contribute to ongoing discussions within the EAP community regarding how leadership practices can sustain teacher motivation and enhance programme effectiveness under tightening institutional constraints. Through critical reflection on the author's own leadership decisions, the study seeks to generate transferable insights into how EAP leaders might cultivate adaptive, learning-oriented communities of practice in similar higher education contexts.

2. Methodology

This article takes the form of a reflective case study grounded in practitioner-led inquiry (Farrell, 2016). Drawing on the author's critical self-reflection as EAP Head of Discipline, it explores the rationale, implementation, and outcomes of a major restructuring of faculty working groups within a university EAP foundation programme in Kazakhstan. The purpose of this inquiry is not to evaluate success in absolute terms, but rather to theorise professional practice through reflection using personal experience as evidence (Mann & Walsh, 2017) and subsequently identifying lessons that inform other EAP practitioners. The reflective nature of the study means that personal pronouns are used frequently, as a reminder of the method. As a reflective practitioner, the author draws on informal feedback and anecdotal observations from colleagues gathered through everyday professional interaction. The quotes have been gathered from the author's personal notes and diaries as informal observations, rather than through more formal data-collection mechanisms such as interviews or surveys. With ethical conduct in mind, these quotes have been anonymized so as not to identify any individuals. Moreover, the draft paper has been shared with relevant colleagues ahead of publication to allow opportunity for the removal or modification of any information. These comments are used illustratively to illuminate key points, rather than as systematically collected research data.

3. Implemented Initiatives

This section summarizes the critical self-reflection related to the three implemented initiatives: rotation across different working groups (RQ1), recalibration of groups according to their need (RQ2) and the introduction of a new and independent piloting group (RQ3). This reflection is complemented by anecdotal excerpts from colleagues in quotation marks, bracketed after relevant sections.

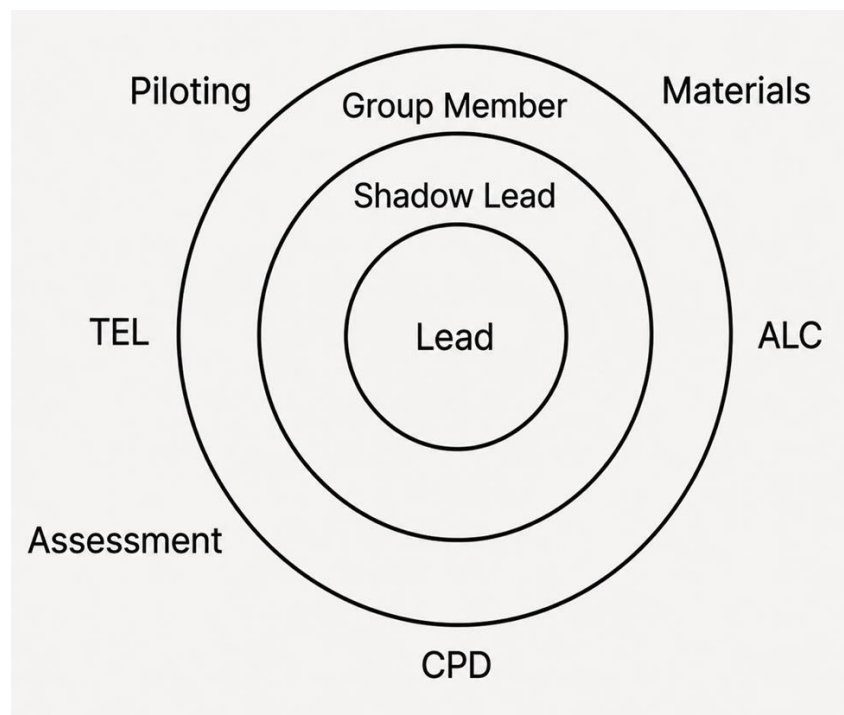


Figure 1: Working Groups Overview

3.1 Rotation Culture Across Groups

The first implemented policy was for team members to rotate across to a different working group each academic year. I informed this decision by conducting ‘Working Group Preferences’ Qualtrics surveys. This gave teachers a platform through which to rank each team in accordance with their own professional priorities. Secondly, I consulted the working group leads to learn their thoughts as to each of their members’ particular strengths. Combined, this insight enabled me to reassign colleagues to new teams based on a compromise of their personal preferences alongside their reported capabilities. Shifting towards discussion, this rotational culture is supported by theories on social and experiential learning that emphasize the value of experience and interaction with others (Kong et al., 2023). Anecdotal reports from the study’s findings suggested that this was largely a welcome shift (“Thanks. I haven’t touched anything on assessment for a long time. Keen to get stuck in!”). This welcoming of new challenges to reduce the risk of professional stagnation is supported by current literature (Wallin et al., 2022). This appeared to impact the programme positively in multiple ways. For

instance, students voiced their satisfaction to me at having more well-rounded teachers, specifically citing examples of increased competence in their teachers' use of educational technology, as well as an ability to explain upcoming assessments more confidently.

A notable challenge that I encountered along the way was balancing the experiential benefits of this rotation with the risk of disrupting continuity. A small number of teachers approached me with specific reasons as to why they should not immediately rotate into another group. For example, some very niche subtasks were tied to individuals with corresponding specialist skills, which few other colleagues shared (at the time). Examples included complex grade sheet formulas, by individuals with IT backgrounds. Also, the ability to communicate with local partners, by individuals who spoke the local Kazakh and Russian languages. Reflecting on this, I decided to make exceptions to the rotation rule during the first year of implementation based on these few individual requests. I also formally appointed teachers to shadow these individuals with specialist skills, in line with current literature (Hanuscin et al., 2021), so that they could in turn acquire these skills and take over the role in the subsequent year. This need to balance change with continuity extended to the working group leadership positions. I formally appointed 'shadow lead' positions for the first academic year, with the intention that these vice-captains would eventually rotate into the full leadership position in the subsequent year (Figure 1). The time spent collaborating closely with the lead during the shadowing phase would leave ample opportunity for experiential learning according to studies (Rodriguez et al., 2024), before subsequently rotating into the lead position. This balanced quality control of each team's output with the professional development benefits of role rotation.

On the whole, my initiative to rotate colleagues across different groups has had a significantly positive impact in the short-term. Firstly, it has improved morale ("it's been great to add more feathers to my cap by changing teams"). The rotation of leadership roles in particular has provided a timely opportunity for colleagues to volunteer for additional responsibility that can subsequently be highlighted in their faculty appraisal. More importantly, it has gradually up-skilled our faculty base through more diverse social learning (Benbow et al., 2020), as group rotation has facilitated discussion between more teachers. That is to say, the new groups have given faculty new, authentic reasons to collaborate with each other, whether over the development of a new assessment or the organization of a future training event, for example. Another key benefit of this is that processes are no longer tied to individuals. If a colleague leaves or falls ill, we no longer face an alarming situation in which we have 'lost our Excel person', for instance. The programme is better shielded from unpredictable events as a result. The COVID-19 emergency remote teaching serves as a recent reminder of the need for universities to proactively invest in their teachers' professional development.

Despite these arguments for reform, very recent anecdotal reports at the time of writing have pointed towards potential rotation fatigue from some faculty. This is seemingly linked to the sense of constant change that many teachers perceive to be in ("we're always playing catch up"). The consensus seems to be that there is always a new disruption to how education,

including EAP, is delivered. This can lead to a repeated 'false peak' sensation among some teachers, whereby they work hard to up-skill themselves in a particular area only to then be told that there is another new disruptor that requires (re)training. A specific example can be seen in the form of the COVID-19-related emergency remote teaching affecting the early 2020s, which represented a seminal shift in how EAP programmes have since been delivered in a more flexible combination of offline and online mediums. The phenomenon of AI in education (Acuyo Cespedes & Tursunkhanova, 2026) represents a more recent (mid 2020s) example. By rotating teachers across different working groups and thus creating more well-rounded faculty, universities will be better prepared to face future disruptions to education.

3.2 Working Group Restructure

The second change that I instigated was to condense the number of working groups and resize them in accordance with the programme's up-to-date operational needs. I instigated this in response to collegial consensus that the overall organisation of the working groups was increasingly perceived as out-of-date in a post-pandemic context ("this is just a hangover from online teaching"). At the end of 2023 I conducted a thorough needs analysis, in order to develop the overall efficiency of the teams. The results strongly indicated a collegial thirst for working group restructure. For instance, I met with the team leads ("we need fresh blood in the team") and used a training event to listen to collegial opinions about this through informal discussion in between sessions ("I would welcome a much-needed change to the teams"). This need for reform aligns with recent literature that highlights the profoundly negative learning impact that COVID-19 had on students in Kazakhstan (Courtney et al., 2025). Studies such as this underline a need for the revision of EAP courses to accommodate for the learning loss that many of the incoming students faced throughout the pandemic, for instance. This, alongside the more recent AI-related difficulties connected to plagiarism, suggested a need to go beyond minor cosmetic changes in how the EAP programme was delivered, in order to better-support students in an evolved educational landscape. The restructuring of working groups, in order to facilitate new and more efficient faculty contributions, was a key response to the emerging challenges faced by our students.

A prominent restructuring example concerned the TEL team. Upon returning to face-to-face teaching after the pandemic, this working group was mostly required for short intensive periods at the beginning of each academic year to set up the Moodle learner management system and Google Drive cloud environments. This created a potential to apply this teams' highly skilled members to other tasks throughout the year. Similarly, the CPD team worked diligently to prepare training sessions that were held mostly at the beginning and end of each academic year. Again, this created a potential opportunity to re-employ its members to satisfy other operational needs outside of these peak periods. Upon reflection, I determined that operating these teams year-round during the COVID-19 online period made sense at the time. The rationale being that teachers needed additional technological support and training, in order to operate effectively online (Winter et al., 2021). However, given that our unit had returned to full face-to-face operations for the 2024-25 academic year, I determined that an overhaul was

due. By closing the TEL team and significantly reducing the size of the CPD team, I was able to reassign these highly valued individuals to the perceivably understaffed Assessment and Materials groups. This paved the way for substantial and timely curriculum improvements (Angulo Villanueva et al., 2024). Examples included making time for the creation of new assessments in response to AI-plagiarism concerns as well as updating our course learning outcomes; both of which would not have been possible without the reallocated team members.

Another example of a way in which I adapted the working group culture to prioritize critical tasks was by introducing a flexible work policy across the teams. Recognizing that we still needed colleagues to provide technical and CPD service (albeit in a reduced capacity) for example, I planned for a few individuals to be given temporary relief from their newly-assigned working groups. This freed them up to attend to these short-term requirements. The initial praise of this flexible working policy from colleagues drove my decision to double down and expand it. I therefore instructed working group leads to approve the splitting of certain teachers' input across multiple teams. This added flexibility and satisfied individuals who wanted broader experience across multiple teams for instance ("happy to plan reading groups for CPD when Assessment is less busy"). It also temporarily alleviated team leaders at times when they were under acute pressure. Examples of this newly implemented mobility include the ALC team 'loaning' members to the Assessment team just before busy exam review periods. This flexibility not only helped the unit cope in times of intense workload pressure, but the multi-team exposure also catered to collegial yearning for greater professional development diversity (Acuyo Cespedes, 2025).

Upon reflection, I have developed a working group scenario which is perceived by colleagues as both structurally more productive ("we're getting a lot more done now for next semester") and conducive for improving faculty morale ("I've experienced our programme from a different angle"). The tangible achievements this has produced in terms of a more up-to-date curriculum and a perceived reduction of the silo effect across teams has been reported back to me via team meetings, for example. Lastly, the Heads of Discipline from other subjects have voiced their support of my initiatives and consequently implemented similar elements within their own subject teams. A memorable example came when the Head of Discipline from another subject introduced team leads with a one-year rotation period for the very first time. Prior to this, their service teams had operated without a single person in a formal leadership position. Despite these signs of encouragement, more recent reflection has started to draw on some of the criticism, albeit light at this stage, of the fatigue that continuous rotation can have on EAP faculty. It will be telling to see whether this rotation fatigue appears among faculty in the other subject.

3.3 Independent Piloting Team

My third implementation was to create a new working group that would trial the products of the other teams independently (Figure 1). This was in response to a number of reports from team leads that peer review (constructive critique) within working groups was

sometimes hedged to safeguard working relationships. Upon further investigation, I learned that this likely stemmed from the close proximity in which team members collaborated (“I don’t want it to be awkward with my office mate”). This occasionally resulted in output that could have perhaps benefitted from more direct collegial feedback. This convinced me that the (understandably) cautious approach to constructively critique collegial work should be addressed for the benefit of the overall programme.

After consulting senior colleagues, I hand-picked three individuals to form an independently operated Piloting group. These members were chosen both for their overall teaching experience, as well as their ability to clearly articulate feedback in detail and with a confident accompanying rationale (Fernández & Berwick, 2022). I developed a structure whereby the Assessment and Materials leads would collect initial drafts of work from their team members and submit these to the Piloting group for blind review. Following deep reflection on collegial feedback three months after implementation, I determined that this initiative had largely been a success on two accounts. Firstly, the separation between original production and review stages across two separate teams permitted more meaningful ‘first-glance’ suggestions for improvement with less risk to workplace relationships (“my sole purpose is to give feedback, so I’m sure they’ll take it”). Secondly, the blind element of the feedback mechanism emboldened reviewers to provide a truthful evaluation (“don’t need to worry about bumping into them in the corridor”). The importance of thoroughly piloted material in course design for EAP specifically (Karakaş, 2024) underlines the value of an independent piloting body in cases where institutional conditions, such as faculty size or workload, permit this. Despite the overall success of the new mechanism, the challenge of increased workload was voiced in team meetings. This influenced my decision to subsequently reduce the number of piloted products. In parallel with the group rotation fatigue described in section 3.1, this highlights a need for balance between continuity and reform. While few teachers are likely to disagree with more piloting on principle, this strive towards greater quality control needs to be balanced against realistic workload capacities.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the ambitious initiative to reinvent the working groups evaluated in this study has directly influenced rotational mobility among teams. This has in turn created a broader skill base among faculty and optimized group structure to enable a more efficient use of faculty service hours. The reform has also enhanced peer-review quality assurance to gradually reap the benefits of more rigorous quality control. The timing of this initiative is a particularly salient point. The concerns that prompted it were in part caused by the recent COVID-19’s work-from-home mandate. This unsettling emergency remote teaching scenario evidently prompted universities to understandably prioritize technological competence and ‘getting the job done,’ at the potential expense of broadening teachers’ professional development and optimizing productivity. This uncertainty has been exacerbated by recent funding constraints specific to EAP, as well as technological advances in the form of AI-powered

large language models. The three-part initiative evaluated in this study showcases one institution's response to this challenging climate. The international characteristics of the university in focus means that these single case study findings can be made applicable to a range of other institutions subject to adaptation to their own local conditions. Larger institutions with more experienced faculty, for instance, are likely to benefit from swifter and wider adaptation to working groups in line with the collective expertise on offer. Smaller universities with less faculty diversity should in turn moderate changes in a more incremental fashion, as to avoid overloading their teachers. This final part is particularly important, given the discrete (but growing) signs of 'change fatigue' among some faculty. While institutions may not know the exact nature of the next "COVID-19" or "AI" like disruptive event, it is almost a certainty that it will come. Teachers' workload and overall wellbeing should therefore be taken into account when planning for future programme enhancements.

This study was limited in some part by the relatively short time period in between the implementation of the aforementioned initiatives and the subsequent reflection period. While short-term reflections provide valuable insight, this leaves room for future studies to cover the longer-term impact of working group reform. Another limitation can be taken from the investigation's focus on a single case study institution. By branching out to multiple institutions, future studies have the potential to make their contributions applicable to an even broader range of readers and even allow for comparative analysis.

Conflict of Interest Statement:

The author declares no conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise, related to this research.

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Ethical Statement:

This study was conducted as a practitioner-led reflective case study and adheres to the ethical standards for practitioner inquiry. All data, including anecdotal observations and informal professional feedback, have been fully anonymized to protect the identity and reputation of all individuals. While the observations were gathered through everyday professional interactions rather than formal research instruments, a process of peer checking was employed to ensure voluntary and informed consent.

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