
Research Article

The impact of academic success tutors and coaches on first-year student outcomes

Sibel Kaya,^{1,*} Kathryn Nethercott,² Steve Briggs,¹ Julie Brunton,¹ Lindsey Smith,¹
John Reynolds,¹ Annie Danbury,¹ Fiona Factor,² Caroline Reid³

¹ University of Bedfordshire, Luton, UK

² Freelance consultant, UK

³ Health and allied health consultant, UK

* Correspondence: sibel.kaya@beds.ac.uk

Submission date: 15 May 2025; Acceptance date: 20 October 2025; Publication date: 22 January 2026

How to cite

Kaya, S., Nethercott, K., Briggs, S., Brunton, J., Smith, L., Reynolds, J., Danbury, A., Factor, F. and Reid, C. (2026) 'The impact of academic success tutors and coaches on first-year student outcomes'. *London Review of Education*, 24 (1), 1. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.24.1.01>.

Peer review

This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-anonymous peer-review process, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

Copyright

2026, Sibel Kaya, Kathryn Nethercott, Steve Briggs, Julie Brunton, Lindsey Smith, John Reynolds and Annie Danbury. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence (CC BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.24.1.01>.

Open access

London Review of Education is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

Abstract

This article presents findings from the evaluation of the academic success tutors/coaches (AST/C) initiative in the 2023/24 academic year at a widening participation university in England. Aimed at improving student continuation in target areas, the AST/Cs were deployed across faculties to provide extra support, acting as a bridge between academic staff and foundation or first-year students. The article encompasses a multi-faceted analysis, including comparisons with data from previous years. It seeks to understand the initiative's influence on student outcomes and experiences. Quantitative data from assessment results in the 2023/24 academic year were compared with those from the previous two years. Descriptive statistics and Chi-square test were used to examine first-assessment pass rates, resit occurrences and student withdrawals across faculties. In parallel, qualitative data were collected through an online survey with 112 students, interviews with 15 students and focus groups with 10 tutors/coaches. These data explored

the effectiveness of the AST/C intervention and provided detailed accounts of support experiences. Overall, the AST/C intervention improved pass rates and reduced resit rates compared with the previous two years in all but one faculty. In terms of withdrawals, there was a decrease in all the target faculties. Feedback from both students and tutors/coaches provided additional evidence of the intervention's positive impact. Limitations were acknowledged, and considerations for future improvements were discussed.

Keywords academic success tutors; academic success coaches; higher education; student outcomes; continuation

Introduction

The Office for Students (OfS), which is the regulator for the higher education sector in England, has set a continuation threshold of 80 per cent for full-time first-degree students. This means that at least 80 per cent of students should continue their studies beyond their first year (OfS, 2022). With the aim of increasing their continuation rates, universities are implementing various strategies to support at-risk students through Access and Participation Plans (APPs) (OfS, 2023). These efforts aim to address inequalities, widen participation in higher education and support at-risk students throughout and beyond their studies (Tatsi and Raybould, 2024). However, the effectiveness of these interventions remains uncertain, with some programmes showing limited success in improving student outcomes (Dobele et al., 2013). A review by Transforming Access and Student Outcomes (TASO, n.d.) showed that mentoring, counselling, coaching, student support and financial support programmes have positive impacts on both student outcomes and attitudes. Butcher et al. (2012) suggest that to improve outcomes, universities may need to consider more differentiated and targeted approaches and student-centred measures of success. In recent years, targeted coaching and tutoring support have emerged as a powerful tool to provide academic and personal support to students who are identified as being at risk of dropping out (i.e., Alzen et al., 2021; Canaan et al., 2023; Capstick et al., 2019).

Tutoring and coaching as an intervention

Tutors and coaches are typically individuals or groups with expertise and experience in a specific area. Tutoring and coaching relationships primarily aim to address individual or learning-related challenges and performance improvement (Irby et al., 2018), and these relationships usually end when issues are resolved. Tutoring tends to focus more on achieving specific teaching objectives, whereas coaching usually focuses on individual goals (Irby, 2012). The academic tutoring and coaching intervention employed in the current article incorporates elements of counselling and advising, as outlined in Alzen et al.'s (2021) research. This model emphasises a collaborative approach to goal setting between tutors/coaches and students, fostering relationship-building, boosting motivation and self-confidence and supporting the development of key academic skills. To better meet the varying needs of diverse student populations, higher education institutions are increasingly turning to academic tutoring and coaching. Most higher education institutions established academic support programmes to improve student outcomes and retention (King et al., 2025; Robinson, 2015). Studies have demonstrated that students who receive academic tutoring and coaching tend to have improved academic outcomes and are more likely to continue their education (Alzen et al., 2021; Bettinger and Baker, 2014; Canaan et al., 2023; Capstick et al., 2019; Cooper, 2010; Reinheimer and McKenzie, 2011). Furthermore, tutoring can help students strengthen their study and organisational skills (Howlett et al., 2021).

Given the recent emergence of academic tutoring and coaching, there is limited research exploring their impact and practical application. Moreover, the diversity of tutoring and coaching approaches further restricts the depth of research in specific contexts (Alzen et al., 2021; Capstick et al., 2019; Robinson, 2015). Researchers (Bettinger and Baker, 2014; Capstick et al., 2019; Howlett et al., 2021) have advocated for more empirical research to investigate the impact of academic tutoring and coaching on

student achievement. Furthermore, much of the empirical research on academic tutoring and coaching is from the US, and the UK-based evidence needs further scrutiny (TASO, n.d.).

Academic success tutors and coaches (AST/C) model

Student support needs within a widening participation university are extensive and diverse. Brinkworth et al. (2009) suggest students find the transition to university a key challenge. Stress experienced in the first year of study is much higher than that experienced prior to starting the higher education journey. Often, this stress is associated with the students' expectations of the university not meeting reality (Krieg, 2013). Further to this, providing additional support in the first year of study is crucial for positive student outcomes, retention and continuation, as well as providing a 'buffer' against the difficult transition to higher education. The support also facilitates academic and social integration into the wider university community (Barefoot, 2000).

The university detailed here is a widening participation institution, with 65 per cent being first-generation students at university, 55 per cent mature students and 57 per cent coming from ethnically diverse backgrounds (University of Bedfordshire, 2025). Due to this, the students enrolled often had high and complex needs, impacting their engagement, continuation and retention. Low levels of retention of students resulted in historical retention rates below the OfS benchmark figure of 80 per cent. Areas of need were identified through a range of metrics, including OfS data, internal retention and continuation data, applicant data, data detailing the numbers of students successfully passing assignments at the first opportunity and those who were required to complete a resit opportunity. The expected results in the identified metrics were evident in three of the four faculty areas, identified as the target areas for support provided by the intervention. To address this issue and to provide further support in all areas, a 15-month programme was introduced for all foundation and first-year students. This included support activities from the point of recruitment, pre-arrival, induction and assessment journey, to supporting students to progress on to the next stage of their study. A significant part of this additional support was the introduction of the academic success tutors and coaches (AST/Cs) in target areas. AST/Cs were deployed to academic areas with retention priorities and those thought to have additional student needs. The areas of need are identified yearly, dependent on various metrics, including continuation data, applicant data and exam board data, which analyse students' first-time pass rates of assessments, as well as the number of resit opportunities provided to students.

The AST/C roles are varied, providing an additional layer of support and a bridge between academic members of staff and foundation and first-year students. AST/Cs work to actively build relationships with the students in order to be approachable and relatable to them. Building positive relationships with students at the start of their academic journey helps students to build higher levels of self-confidence and academic motivation (Yale, 2019). This ensures a smooth transition for the students in their progression into higher education. Additionally, Flett et al. (2019) discuss the importance of creating a learning environment in which the student feels they matter. These strategies can increase student registrations, retention and student outcomes.

The AST/C intervention targeted foundation and first-year students in programmes where institutional retention rates were low. Six academic success tutors and four academic success coaches were appointed to three faculties, initially for 15 months. AST/Cs embedded themselves throughout Welcome Week activities to work with students struggling with registration processes and to start to build relationships with the students. As the academic year progressed, they worked to support the early identification of students who were disengaging (and so at risk of dropout) and then provided targeted one-to-one or small group support and/or arranged a referral to central support services. As such, the AST/Cs have played a 'third space' role, acting as a bridge between faculties and student support teams (King et al., 2025). In addition to this, the AST/Cs take on activities which academic staff or personal academic tutors would not have the time to do. For instance, AST/Cs send mass messages to students reminding them of upcoming assessment submission points. Students who have not submitted their assessment are also identified and contacted within a few days of the assessment deadline. They also advise and support students who require more time through the mitigation process. Academic success tutor responsibilities included additional teaching and teaching-related activities directed by faculties. Academic success coaches did not have such responsibility as it was not required by the faculty.

The AST/Cs kept a record of each interaction with students in Excel format. In these records, they specified the mode of interaction (for example, face-to-face or online), focus of interaction (for example, assessment or engagement), referral or signposting information and a brief description of the interaction. Accordingly, they reached nearly 3,000 students over the course of a single academic year (see Table 1). Some interactions were brief, one-time reminders about upcoming assignments, while others involved sustained support through a series of follow-up meetings.

Table 1. Number of students supported by AST/Cs

Faculty	FY/1st Year n (%)	Other n (%)	Total	Students who had repeated AST/C support (%)	Students supported by AST/C (%)
Faculty A (N = 6,692)	972 (60)	662 (40)	1,634	27	25
Faculty B (N = 3,727)	405 (75)	139 (25)	544	40	15
Faculty C (N = 2,920)	260 (45)	314 (55)	574	27	20

The AST/C intervention focused on the three priority subject areas, corresponding to three faculties out of four, within the university. Collectively, programmes within these areas have, in combination, the largest student numbers and the highest withdrawal rates. These programmes have also been consistently below the OfS continuation threshold of 80 per cent based on internal metrics (four-year aggregate, 2017/18–2020/21).

This initiative aimed to support the transition to university life, fostering the development of academic and social competencies while also supporting retention and active involvement within both the academic and campus communities (Crisp et al., 2017). The main objectives of the AST/C support were to:

- improve the first assessment pass rates
- reduce the number of resits
- reduce withdrawal rates.

Research questions

This research sought to answer the following questions related to a year-long AST/C intervention:

1. What is the effect of AST/Cs on:
 - a. first assessment submission/pass rates?
 - b. number of resits?
 - c. withdrawal rates compared with previous years?
2. What are the perceptions and experiences of students and AST/Cs regarding the intervention?

Methodology

This study sought to establish the influence of the AST/C intervention on retention rates in targeted programmes. It also aimed to capture the perceptions and experiences of tutors, coaches and students during the intervention. It utilised a mixed-method approach where quantitative metrics such as assessment pass rates, resit and withdrawal data were analysed across the university and within programmes in comparison with previous years. Qualitative data, which included student and tutor/coach interviews, explored further insights and experiences regarding the AST/C intervention. The research conforms to BERA's Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) of the Data Protection Act 2018. Ethical approval relating to the protection of anonymity and the management and storage of data was obtained from the university.

Part 1: student submission rates and attainment trends

Design

For quantitative data, the first assessment pass and resit rates, as well as the number of withdrawn students in these programmes, have been reported, along with university-wide metrics, compared with the previous two years. Data from the February and June 2023/24 exam boards have been compared with assessments from the academic years 2021/22 and 2022/23. The average of the two previous years of data was used to remove any potential 'cohort effect'.

Sample

Table 1 shows the number of students supported by AST/Cs in each faculty during the academic year 2023/24, based on the records kept by AST/Cs. Accordingly, 60 per cent of all students supported were foundation year (FY) or first-year undergraduate students. Support was provided individually or in small groups via face-to-face or online meetings, emails, phone calls and text messages. Faculty A has a higher number of supported students. This is due to the high number of total students in that faculty, as well as the small group sessions offered by the tutors. The focus of support included issues such as assessment, study skills, wellbeing, non-engagement and non-attendance.

Overall, 15–25 per cent of the students in these three faculties received support from AST/Cs at least once (see Table 1). Some instances of support were one-off, either due to students' lack of engagement or because their issues were resolved. The proportion of students who received ongoing support from ASTs/Cs is shown in Table 1. Notably, 27–40 per cent of students supported by AST/Cs across faculties received repeated individual support following the initial contact, including at least one face-to-face interaction. The remaining students received support either as a one-off interaction or through group-based sessions. A higher proportion of students in Faculty C received repeated individual support compared with those in other faculties.

Data collection

Data from the exam boards within the academic year, February 2024 semester one assessment results and June 2024 semester two assessment results were used. However, the exam board data only included units presented at the relevant February or June exam boards. Any programmes, courses or students not following a semester model of teaching would not necessarily have been presented at the February or June exam boards and, as such, were not included. Furthermore, assessment data from students who were withdrawn were not included in the data analysis.

Data analysis

Data analysis of the exam board data included analysing and reporting on the descriptive statistics, such as the number of assessment opportunities which students passed on the first attempt and the number of resit opportunities required to complete. The differences in first-time pass rates, resits and withdrawals between 2023/24 and the average of the two previous years were reported. To assess differences, a Chi-square test of significance was conducted on the cross-tabulated data using SPSS 29. Analyses were conducted by faculty and the university as a whole.

Part 2: student and AST/C perceptions and experiences

Design

In order to examine student and AST/C perceptions and experiences, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. Students from the target programmes who received repeated individual support were sent an online anonymous feedback form during the semester. The form aimed to provide quantitative data about student satisfaction with the current support and their preference for future support. In order to capture in-depth personal experiences and perceptions of AST/C support, individual semi-structured interviews with students and focus groups with tutors/coaches were conducted. These provided the basis for qualitative data analysis.

Sample

A total of 112 students (Faculty A: 36, Faculty B: 45, Faculty C: 31) completed the online feedback form. For qualitative data collection, 15 students (Faculty A: 5, Faculty B: 4, Faculty C: 6) were interviewed, and 10 AST/Cs (Faculty A: 3 tutors, Faculty B: 3 tutors, Faculty C: 4 coaches) participated in focus groups designed separately for each faculty.

Data collection

The AST/Cs sent the online Microsoft form to individual students after their face-to-face sessions. The six-point Likert items aimed at gauging students' experiences with academic success tutors. The form also included two items about students' preferences for future support. Relevant literature and intervention reports were reviewed when developing the feedback form. Items were sense-checked by academics outside the research group.

For individual student interviews, students were informed via email and incentivised to participate with the offer of a gift voucher. After their initial expression of interest, details of the project were explained to them verbally and in writing, and they were asked to consent using a form which addressed GDPR issues. Students were subsequently provided with an online link for the interview, arranged according to their convenience. Interview questions were developed by the research group based on the intervention's objectives and the literature and sense-checked by other academics. Interviews were conducted by the first author and analysed by the first and second authors.

Focus groups with AST/Cs were conducted online with the presence of the first and second authors, one of whom acted as the moderator while the other supported the process. The research group informed the focus group design based on research objectives and the literature. Focus groups were conducted for each faculty separately to encourage open discussions about shared experiences. Each focus group began with an introduction to the research, an overview of the process and a review of the ground rules, followed by the collection of informed consent. The moderator then guided the discussion through a structured series of questions, starting with icebreakers and progressing to introductory, content-focused and closing questions. While responses were not given in a fixed order, the moderator ensured that every participant had the opportunity to contribute to each question.

Data analysis

Data from the online student feedback form were analysed descriptively, and responses given to individual items were reported in percentages. Since the study was focused on overall student experiences and perceptions, comparative analyses were not conducted.

All interviews and focus groups were recorded with the consent of participants and later transcribed. The initial transcriptions were reviewed and manually cleaned to correct inaccuracies or misinterpretations. Where necessary, the original recordings were used to clarify ambivalences in responses. Once cleaned, the transcripts were anonymised to protect confidentiality.

Using the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2022), a reflexive theme analysis technique was used. Following the identification of key phrases and terms, the data were examined and reread, codes were created, initial themes were reviewed and final themes were named. NVivo 12, a qualitative analysis application, was utilised to efficiently structure the data.

Findings

Part 1 findings

First-time pass rates and resit rates

As can be seen in Table 2, in two of the three target faculties (Faculty B and Faculty C), a higher proportion of assessment opportunities in semester one in academic year 2023/24 were successfully passed at the first opportunity (+3 per cent and +5 per cent respectively). In addition to this, there were fewer resits when compared with the average of the previous two years (−1.5 per cent and −10 per cent respectively). Faculty A, which saw a 2.5 per cent increase in resit opportunities and a 1.5 per cent decline in first-time pass rates, included a diverse group with high student numbers with varying needs, including academic

skills, language and digital skills, leading to a high number of academic offences using third-party collusion. However, the use of the AST/Cs enabled early identification of the barriers students were facing so that further support could be put in place to overcome these. In Faculty C and across the university as a whole, the differences in pass and resit rates in 2023/24 compared with the two previous years were statistically significant (Chi-square test, $p < 0.01$). In contrast, the differences in Faculties A and B were not statistically significant.

Table 2. Semester 1 first-time pass rates and resits in target faculties

Faculty	% Pass ¹ 21/22 (n)	% Pass ¹ 22/23 (n)	% Pass ¹ 23/24 (n)	Diff compared to 21/22 and 22/23 (%)	% Resits ² 21/22 (n)	% Resits ² 22/23 (n)	% Resits ² 23/24 (n)	Diff compared to 21/22 and 22/23 (%)
Faculty A	55 (1,292)	54 (1,465)	53 (750)	-1.5	44 (1,045)	45 (1,212)	47 (669)	+2.5
Faculty B	66 (923)	66 (1,099)	69 (986)	+3	32 (450)	31 (518)	30 (434)	-1.5
Faculty C	58 (1,193)	66 (1,387)	73 (884)	+5 *	39 (807)	32 (671)	24 (291)	-10 *
Whole univ.	58 (4,385)	61 (4,576)	65 (3,168)	+5.5 *	40 (3,061)	37 (2,741)	34 (1,651)	-4.5 *

Notes: ¹ First-time pass rates excluded withdrawn students; ² Resits included non-submission, excluded withdrawn students.
* Statistically significant difference according to the Chi-square test ($p < 0.01$).

These positive results were further replicated in the semester two exam board data. Faculty B and Faculty C continued to improve their pass rates (+5.5 per cent and +11.5 per cent respectively) and resit rates (-4 per cent and -8.5 per cent respectively). These changes were statistically significant, as indicated by the Chi-square test of the cross-tabulation ($p < 0.01$). Where no improvement was seen in Faculty A in the semester one exam boards, there was no change in the semester two exam boards (Table 3). However, the barriers to learning within this cohort in semester one continued, and the AST/Cs were able to provide additional support to overcome these barriers to increase the levels of first-time pass rate and decrease the resit opportunities throughout semester two.

Table 3. Semester 2 first-time pass rates and resits in target faculties

Faculty	% Pass ¹ 21/22 (n)	% Pass ¹ 22/23 (n)	% Pass ¹ 23/24 (n)	Diff compared to 21/22 and 22/23 (%)	% Resits ² 21/22 (n)	% Resits ² 22/23 (n)	% Resits ² 23/24 (n)	Diff compared to 21/22 and 22/23
Faculty A	50.7 (1,973)	49 (1,385)	50 (879)	No change	48 (1,867)	50 (1,420)	49 (859)	No change
Faculty B	70 (1,053)	61 (1,047)	71 (1,101)	+5.5 *	28 (421)	36 (615)	28 (430)	-4.0 *
Faculty C	59 (1,281)	70 (1,160)	76 (780)	+11.5 *	37 (814)	28 (462)	24 (242)	-8.5 *
Whole univ.	57 (5,016)	58 (4,167)	63 (3,354)	+5.5 *	41 (3,640)	40 (2,895)	36 (1,186)	-4.5 *

Notes: ¹ First-time pass rates excluded withdrawn students; ² Resits included non-submission, excluded withdrawn students.
* Statistically significant difference according to the Chi-square test ($p < 0.01$).

Student withdrawals

During academic year 2023/24, all target faculties saw a decrease in the number of students withdrawing from their studies, with only a few students withdrawing in 2023/24 (Table 4). In total, 108 fewer students withdrew in 2023/24, during which AST/C intervention took place, compared with the previous two years.

Table 4. Student withdrawals in 2023/24 compared with the previous two years*

Faculty	21/22	22/23	23/24	Diff compared to 21/22 and 22/23
Faculty A	46	44	5	−40
Faculty B	25	42	10	−23
Faculty C	54	41	5	−43
Whole univ.	160	160	52	−108

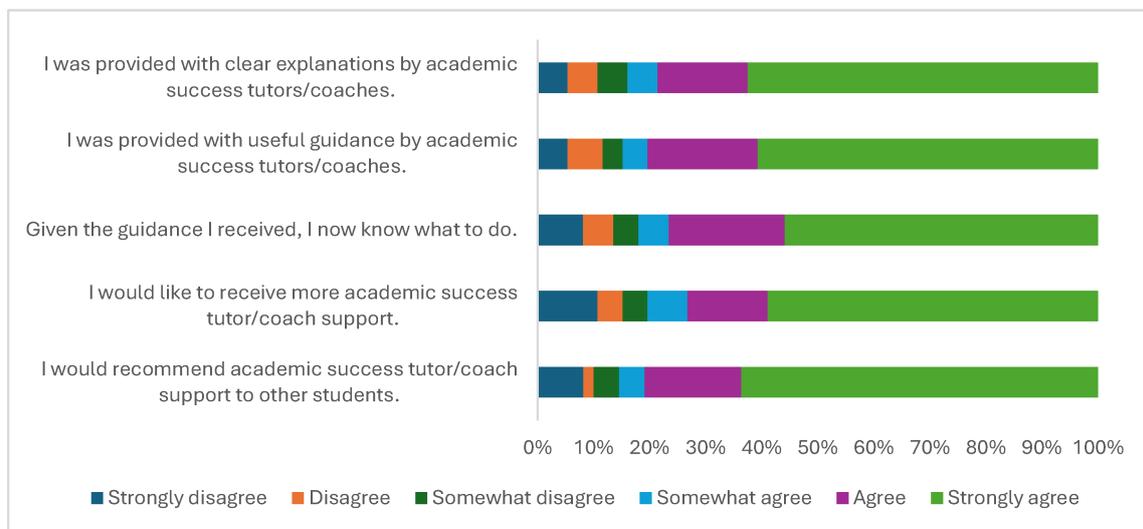
Notes: * Withdrawal reasons included personal issues, transfer to another university, wrong programme choice and financial reasons.

Part 2 findings

Online student feedback

Student feedback received via the online feedback form was overwhelmingly positive. Figure 1 shows the responses to individual items. Accordingly, at least 75 per cent (84/112) of the respondents indicated agreement or strong agreement across all five items. Overall, the support of AST/Cs is appreciated by the students. Approximately 81 per cent of the students agreed that they were provided with useful guidance and that they would recommend this support to other students. However, 20 per cent of students indicated that they did not wish to receive further support. It would be valuable to explore whether this is due to dissatisfaction with the support provided or simply because their needs were met through a one-time intervention.

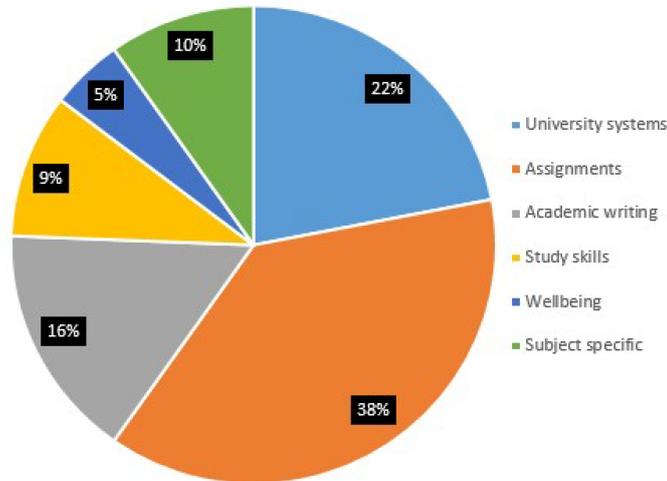
Figure 1. Student satisfaction



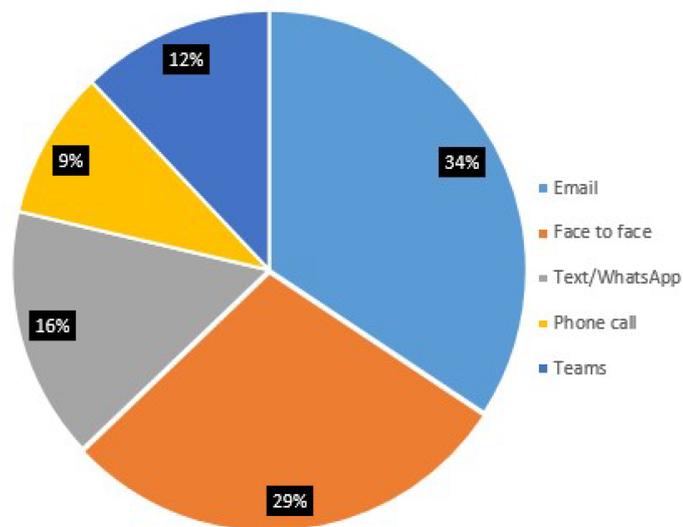
When students were asked about the areas of further support, more than one-third of the responses included assignments, followed by support on university systems, such as information about their programme or how to access resources (see Figure 2). This suggests that administrative clarity plays a significant role in students' overall experience. A quarter of the reported support needs were related to academic writing and study skills. Among subject-specific requests, the majority focused on maths and statistics. In terms of the preferred mode of future communication, they expressed a preference for email and face-to-face meetings (see Figure 3). This suggests that students value both the convenience of digital communication and the personal connection offered by in-person interactions.

Figure 2. Preference for AST/C support area

If you would like to receive more support, which area of support are you specifically seeking assistance in?

**Figure 3. Preference for type of contact with AST/Cs**

If you would like to receive more support, which type of contact would you prefer?



Student interviews

Based on the analysis of student interviews, two broad themes emerged: students' first impressions and experiences and how students benefited from AST/C support. Each theme had sub-themes, which are described in the following sections.

Initial impressions and experiences. Most students found AST/Cs to be friendly, approachable and helpful. They appreciated the AST/Cs' willingness to answer questions, explain concepts and provide additional support. Many students felt relieved to have someone to turn to for guidance and praised AST/Cs' clear communication and availability: 'She was so sweet, so helpful. She gave me the printouts of the assessment questions and broke everything down for me step by step. I was really relieved. ... I think my first impression was just disbelief, that she was really nice and friendly' (S1).

Some students were initially unsure or nervous about meeting AST/Cs but were pleasantly surprised by their proactive and supportive approach. AST/Cs were seen as empathetic and compassionate, as one student highlighted: 'Honestly, I didn't even know what the role of a tutor was, but the tutor's ambition to help, to give advice, to remind us what awaits us, to repeat endlessly was amazing' (S3).

How students benefited from AST/C support. Students received academic and personal support from AST/Cs that helped them succeed and feel more confident in their abilities. Students also sought help to navigate the university systems. One of the main domains of support was academic. Students received guidance on coursework challenges such as assignments and presentations; specific academic skills such as reading comprehension and referencing; learning strategies such as time management and critical thinking; and subject-specific support such as maths support. As one student described: 'We had a presentation, and I've never presented in uni since I came. So, I needed a lot of help. I obviously had a lot of questions to ask. She was really helpful in guiding me through the presentation, and she would give me pointers that could make my presentation better. I took note of them, and on the actual presentation day, she was really supportive' (S11).

The second domain of support was wellbeing. Students received guidance to overcome their anxieties and challenges and to build their confidence. AST/Cs provided strategies for reducing stress. Guidance was extended to personal matters such as managing learning difficulties. During their interactions with AST/Cs, students felt encouraged and motivated to trust their abilities and persevere through challenges: 'She also helped me with my mental health as well, because I struggle with mental health issues, and she helped me with steps to go through that and how to get past that to be able to start the work. And she helped me with my sleep because I wasn't getting great sleep' (S6).

Several students reported that they received guidance on university systems and resources. They received help on contacting appropriate support services and technical assistance in using the university's virtual learning environment (VLE), online resources and software: 'I missed the whole induction for the new students. So, I didn't really know how to navigate. She went through the VLE with me. How to get to know all the channels, and from there, I said I don't know what to do with my assignments, and she recommended Learning Development, and immediately she sent an email to them. She also sent an email to the library people to help me make an appointment. ... She went through everything' (S9).

AST/Cs focus group

Focus groups with AST/Cs revealed four broad themes: common student issues, how student issues are addressed, collaboration with other staff and challenges of the role. Similar to student interviews, general themes consisted of sub-themes.

Common student issues. AST/Cs reported several challenges faced by students, including difficulties with academic skills such as understanding assignment briefs, managing time effectively and navigating university systems. Many students did not understand what was expected of them regarding assessments and independent learning despite being informed during lectures and via online materials. As one tutor pointed out: 'I think the understanding of the assignment brief was definitely one of them (student issue). English is not their first language, so they did struggle with that' (T1).

Many students, particularly those with mental health needs or learning differences, were reluctant to seek support services without encouragement, as many students needed emotional reassurance before engaging with academic or institutional support, as highlighted by the following quote: 'They just wanted someone to understand their problem and just give them a pat on the back. ... They're just not referring themselves to the university services without a little push' (T2).

A lack of motivation and low self-esteem were also prevalent, with students often feeling overwhelmed by their workload and external pressures. As one coach highlighted: 'You had to unpick that outside factor first and let them talk that off before you could look at what they were actually struggling with' (T6).

How student issues are addressed. AST/Cs addressed student issues through a variety of personalised and proactive strategies, focusing on academic and pastoral support. They offered whole-class and individual support based on needs. Whole-class sessions addressed group needs, while individual appointments offered personalised support. For individual meetings, regular drop-ins and online meetings (via platforms such as Teams) offered students an accessible way to seek feedback,

share work and ask questions. They also engaged with students during lectures and informally during breaks, making themselves approachable and encouraging students to seek help.

In terms of the type of support, AST/Cs provided time management, organisational, emotional and targeted skill support. They provided time management templates, individual learning plans and strategies for breaking down tasks into manageable parts to help students structure their workload and avoid becoming overwhelmed. They provided encouragement, fostering students' confidence and belief in their abilities. AST/Cs also provided support on specific skills, such as reflective writing and digital literacy, to improve students' assignments and academic skills: 'Following on from the feedback they had on their assessments, saying their arguments are really weak, ambiguous and generic. One of the classes looked at strategies for reflective writing. So, there was a huge improvement then in the next submission for the reflective report' (T3).

Finally, AST/Cs acted as intermediaries between students and lecturers, clarifying feedback, facilitating communication and advocating for students who were too intimidated to reach out to their lecturers. As one tutor explained: 'To emphasise being a go between them and the tutor, I think for a lot of students, they are very intimidated to contact the doctor or the professor' (T8). They also connected students to formal support services, such as mental health resources and money advice, recognising how external challenges impacted academic performance.

Collaboration with other staff. AST/Cs regularly shared student progress and needs with lecturers and support staff to coordinate efforts. Examples include monitoring attendance, addressing submission issues and developing targeted interventions. Scheduled meetings with programme teams, admin staff and support services facilitated efficient communication, allowed tutors to share insights and fostered stronger relationships with academic staff. For example, one tutor shared: 'The lecturer would often share the lists with me. When the numbers start to go down and in terms of the number of students that had logged on to the portal, I would chase the students' (T2).

Collaborations sometimes occurred in the form of jointly organised workshops or events. These activities aimed to enrich the support offered to students, as exemplified here: 'We decided on a maths workshop run by the Learning Development team. It was really great, you know, math can be fun. Who knew?' (T3).

AST/Cs worked with lecturers and support teams to address challenges such as unclear assignment briefs or individual student issues. These collaborations often led to proactive solutions, such as revising teaching and assessment strategies or mitigating student challenges. In an example of collaboration on student issues, a tutor described: 'A student wouldn't turn up for lectures and wasn't submitting. So, I actually went with his tutor to the accommodations for a welfare check, sat him down and had a chat with him. Sometimes you have to play Mommy and Daddy with these students, especially the younger ones, and I think he needed that' (T4).

Challenges of the role. AST/Cs reported a range of challenges affecting their ability to support students effectively. One of them was the unclear role expectations. At the beginning of the programme, tutors were unsure about their specific role and how it fits within the university and faculty structure: 'When we first started, we were a bit up in the air as to what we are actually doing, how they want us to do it ... I think once we started to navigate how this role suits our attributes best, it started to flow a bit better' (T5).

Administrative tasks, including tracking student progress and data entry, were time-consuming and often hindered direct student engagement. As one tutor stated: 'Those, particularly around the times when it's busy assessment time, as you'll see multiple students or multiple groups, keeping a record of everything was a challenge' (T9). Tutors and coaches also spent a considerable amount of time chasing students who were not engaging, which caused frustration: 'Some just don't get back to you no matter what platform you try to use to get in touch with them. And you get to a certain point, there's not much you can do' (T4).

Finally, addressing diverse student needs, such as mental health, digital literacy and language barriers, was challenging, requiring additional collaboration and targeted interventions: 'We've noticed in semester one that there are so many (issues) to do with digital skills, but also language barriers. So, we had to put the right interventions in place ... also, the students had additional support from several departments' (T10).

Discussion

Overall, the AST/C intervention improved pass and resit rates compared with the previous two years in all but one faculty. Faculty A saw mixed results, necessitating ongoing support for those students in the following semesters. In terms of withdrawals, there was a decrease in all faculties during the intervention period, with the most significant decreases in the targeted faculties (A, B and C). Despite mixed results in pass and resit numbers in Faculty A, a sharp decrease in withdrawals compared with previous years highlights the efficacy of early intervention and sustained academic support in helping at-risk students. The positive impacts on student outcomes and withdrawals confirm the existing literature (Alzen et al., 2021; Bettinger and Baker, 2014; Canaan et al., 2023; Capstick et al., 2019). These results are important as they ultimately improve continuation, which was one of the main objectives of the intervention.

The overall feedback from students and AST/Cs suggests that the AST/C programme provided valuable support, particularly in helping students navigate academic challenges and personal issues. The combination of academic and wellbeing support was appreciated by students and enhanced their overall university experience. These findings echoed students' views observed in other tutoring research (Canaan et al., 2023; Guerra-Martín et al., 2017). Students requested more assistance with assignments and understanding university systems via emails or face-to-face meetings. Students reported that they would recommend the AST/C support to their peers.

According to AST/C accounts, students faced several challenges, including difficulty understanding assignment briefs, time management and navigating university systems. Some students were also struggling with low motivation and self-esteem due to mental health needs or learning differences. To address these issues, AST/Cs provided personalised academic and emotional support, including time management, skill development and encouragement. They also acted as intermediaries between students and lecturers, facilitating communication and connecting students to additional resources such as mental health services. While AST/Cs eventually found their footing, early role ambiguity, the demands of administrative tasks and student engagement issues posed significant hurdles. The collaboration between AST/Cs, academic staff and other support services appeared to be a key factor in effectively addressing diverse student needs.

This research demonstrated a data-informed and proactive intervention aimed at identifying at-risk students early and offering them support to remain enrolled and engaged in their studies. It also showcased how AST/C-type roles, which are becoming increasingly common in the higher education sector, can be operationalised. More broadly, the emergence of the AST/C role is a clear expansion of the growing range associated with the 'third space' of higher education because these transcend the traditional academic and professional services dichotomy (see Whitchurch, 2013).

In line with King et al. (2025), other higher education institutions within the UK may be exploring the viability of introducing faculty-based skills support teams. It is anticipated that the findings from this study will have some generalisability in terms of understanding 'what works' and how best to frame such targeted support. Early intervention systems designed to support student retention are increasingly being adopted across the higher education sector (Hill et al., 2025; Lin et al., 2023). However, institution-specific contextual factors would always need to be considered. Our approach to analysing the impact of such support on specific student outcomes should be more readily transferable to other contexts.

In the second year of the intervention, a community of practice model is being implemented, involving AST/Cs, the central learning development team and professional support services. This collaborative approach aims to clarify roles, responsibilities and referral mechanisms in student support, promote consistent communication with both academic staff and students, and foster a more holistic strategy for supporting at-risk students.

In the second year, AST/Cs also began utilising learning analytics to monitor student engagement, including attendance and engagement with resources. In this system, students are monitored using a range of indicators that go beyond traditional academic metrics. Data are reviewed regularly, and students identified as having low or no engagement receive personalised emails along with offers of support. Those who respond are invited to one-to-one meetings with AST/Cs, where they can discuss their circumstances and, if appropriate, are referred or signposted to relevant university services. AST/Cs can track students' progress through the system and intervene when appropriate. One English university implementing this type of intervention reported positive outcomes, including increased referrals to support services, improved student retention, a reduction in academic concerns and favourable feedback

from both students and staff (Hill et al., 2025). This platform enables the collection of data on the type, medium and frequency of personalised support provided to students, as well as referrals to other services. By using this data, future research on this intervention will focus on evaluating the effectiveness of various support types on student outcomes and examining how different student groups benefit from the support offered.

Limitations

Although the current article provides evidence that AST/C intervention improves student outcomes at a widening participation university, the generalisability of the results is limited. Differential impacts of this intervention on faculties (i.e., Faculty A and Faculty C) indicate that there might be different needs among students even within the same institutions, and further tailoring of the tutoring and coaching initiatives is needed to meet these needs. To better understand the impacts on specific groups of students, quasi-experimental and longitudinal studies are recommended. Further, the findings from this study are related mostly to foundation and first-year students, due to the continuation requirement set by the OfS. Other research has shown the particular importance of tutoring and coaching support during later years of the university journey (Guerra-Martín et al., 2017; Lehan et al., 2020) and the impact of these interventions in the long term (Canaan et al., 2023).

Students who completed the online questionnaire may not be representative of the targeted faculties. Given the positive results, only those who were satisfied with the AST/C support may have responded. Similarly, students who participated in the interviews were typically among the satisfied students. The experiences of unsatisfied or struggling students remain to be discovered and would be difficult to access, as they did not respond to invitations to participate, despite the offer of financial incentives. It should be recognised that there will always be challenges associated with recruiting non-engaging students in a research initiative of this nature. If such individuals are electing not to engage with proactive support outreach via an AST/C, it would be highly unlikely that they would opt to respond to a research study invitation. As such, attempting to collect such data via questionnaires, interviews or focus groups will be problematic. A practical strategy for obtaining such insights might be through a more direct approach of phoning potential participants and inviting them to immediately share their experiences. Such an approach would have issues around self-selection (i.e., who answers the phone) but may offer some additional insights.

Conclusion

The findings of the first-year AST/C initiative are promising. The intervention appears to be positively impacting student success, as evidenced by improved pass rates and reduced resits and withdrawals in targeted faculties. Positive student and tutor/coach feedback further reinforces this notion. To gain a better understanding of what makes the intervention successful, future research should investigate the underlying mechanisms at play. Furthermore, researchers should assess the programme's long-term effects on student achievement and consider broadening its scope to cater to a more diverse student body. By delving deeper into the intervention's effectiveness and refining its approach, the AST/C can continue to be a valuable tool for supporting student transition, academic achievement and overall university experience.

Funding

This research was funded by the University of Bedfordshire.

Acknowledgements

We wish to express our sincere gratitude to the academic success tutors and coaches involved in this intervention for their invaluable support and insights during its implementation. We also extend our thanks to the students who contributed thoughtful feedback and recommendations to enhance the intervention.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The authors declare that research ethics approval for this article was provided by the University of Bedfordshire, Luton.

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

References

- Alzen, J. L., Burkhardt, A., Diaz-Bilello, E., Elder, E., Sepulveda, A., Blankenheim, A., and Board, L. (2021). Academic coaching and its relationship to student performance, retention, and credit completion. *Innovative Higher Education*, 46, 539–63. [CrossRef]
- Barefoot, B. O. (2000). The first-year experience: Are we making it any better? *About Campus*, 4(6), 12–18. [CrossRef]
- Bettinger, E., and Baker, R. (2014). The effects of student coaching: An evaluation of a randomized experiment in student advising. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 36(1), 3–19. [CrossRef]
- Braun, V., and Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. Sage Publications.
- Brinkworth, R., McCann, B., Matthews, C., and Nordström, K. (2009). First year expectations and experiences: Student and teacher perspectives. *Higher Education*, 58, 157–73. [CrossRef]
- Butcher, J., Corfield, R., and Rose-Adams, J. (2012). Contextualised approaches to widening participation: A comparative case study of two UK universities. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 13(1), 51–70. [CrossRef]
- Canaan, S., Fischer, S., Mouganie, P., and Schnorr, G. C. (2023). *Keep me in, coach: The short- and long-term effects of targeted academic coaching* (No. 60). Paper Series.
- Capstick, M. K., Harrell-Williams, L. M., Cockrum, C. D., and West, S. L. (2019). Exploring the effectiveness of academic coaching for academically at-risk college students. *Innovative Higher Education*, 44, 219–231. [CrossRef]
- Cooper, E. (2010). Tutoring center effectiveness: The effect of drop-in tutoring. *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, 40(2), 21–34. [CrossRef]
- Crisp, G., Baker, V. L., Griffin, K. A., Lunsford, L. G., and Pifer, M. J. (2017). *Mentoring undergraduate students: ASHE Higher Education Report*, 43(1). John Wiley and Sons.
- Dobebe, A. R., Gangemi, M., Kopanidis, F., and Thomas, S. (2013). At risk policy and early intervention programmes for underperforming students: Ensuring success? *Education+ Training*, 55(1), 69–82. [CrossRef]
- Flett, G., Khan, A., and Su, C. (2019). Mattering and psychological well-being in college and university students: Review and recommendations for campus-based initiatives. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 17, 667–80. [CrossRef]
- Guerra-Martín, M. D., Lima-Serrano, M., and Lima-Rodríguez, J. S. (2017). Effectiveness of tutoring to improve academic performance in nursing students at the University of Seville. *Journal of New Approaches in Educational Research*, 6(2), 93–102. [CrossRef]
- Hill, R., Randlesome, L., and Lewis, R. (2025, July 9). A proactive approach to retaining nursing students. *Times Higher Education*. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/proactive-approach-retaining-nursing-students>.
- Howlett, M. A., McWilliams, M. A., Rademacher, K., O'Neill, J. C., Maitland, T. L., Abels, K., Demetriou, C., and Panter, A. T. (2021). Investigating the effects of academic coaching on college students' metacognition. *Innovative Higher Education*, 46, 189–204. [CrossRef]

- Irby, B. J. (2012). Editor's overview: Mentoring, tutoring, and coaching. *Mentoring and Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 20(3), 297–301. [CrossRef]
- Irby, B. J., Boswell, J., Jeong, S., and Pugliese, E. (2018). Editor's overview: Tutoring and coaching. *Mentoring and Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 26(3), 245–8. [CrossRef]
- King, N., Johnson, J., Jordan, H., and Lyons, H. (2025). Bridging the gap: A new approach to student academic support at the University of Exeter. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, 33, 1–11.
- Krieg, D. (2013). High expectations for higher education? Perceptions of college and experiences of stress prior to and through the college career. *College Student Journal*, 47(4), 635–43.
- Lehan, T., Shriner, M., and Shriner, B. (2020). It's complicated: The relationship between participation in academic coaching and program completion in online graduate students. *Online Learning*, 24(3), 19–34.
- Lin, Y., Fay, M. P., and Fink, J. (2023). Stratified trajectories: Charting equity gaps in program pathways among community college students. *Research in Higher Education*, 64(4), 547–73. [CrossRef]
- Office for Students (OfS). (2022). Setting numerical thresholds for condition B3. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/setting-numerical-thresholds-for-condition-b3/>.
- Office for Students (OfS). (2023). Access and participation plans. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-providers/equality-of-opportunity/access-and-participation-plans>.
- Reinheimer, D., and McKenzie, K. (2011). The impact of tutoring on the academic success of undeclared students. *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, 41(2), 22–36. [CrossRef]
- Robinson, C. E. (2015). *Academic/success coaching: A description of an emerging field in higher education* [Doctoral dissertation, University of South Carolina, Columbia]. <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/3148>.
- Tatsi, E., and Raybould, S. (2024). Equity, equality, diversity and inclusion: Bridging gaps in access and participation. *New Vistas*, 10(1). [CrossRef]
- Transforming Access and Student Outcomes (TASO). (n.d.). Mentoring, counselling, coaching and role models (post-entry). <https://taso.org.uk/intervention/mentoring-counselling-role-models-post-entry/>.
- University of Bedfordshire. (2025). Our university. <https://www.beds.ac.uk/about-us/our-university/>.
- Whitchurch, C. (2013). *The rise of third space professionals*. Routledge.
- Yale, A. T. (2019). The personal tutor–student relationship: Student expectations and experiences of personal tutoring in higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 43(4), 533–44. [CrossRef]