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The Future is Connection:

Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

Beyond service delivery: Maintaining a human-centred academic support model

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Universities are redesigning academic support services to improve scale and responsiveness, with an ongoing challenge of maintaining meaningful human connection. This concise paper reports a case study of Academic Assist, a centralised teaching support service introduced after a long-standing hybrid support model. The study examines how course convenors experience Academic Assist, what factors shape engagement, and how responsive support influences teaching confidence and capability. Data are drawn from an anonymous survey of academic staff who served as course convenors in 2025, including both users and non-users of the service. Analysis combines descriptive statistics with thematic analysis of open-text responses. Findings are organised around three dimensions: connection, capability, and accessibility. The paper argues that academic support should be understood not only as a service function but also as a relational educational practice. It concludes by identifying design principles for centralised academic support services that remain relational, visible, trusted and capability-building during organisational change.

Keywords: academic support services, human-centred support, academic professional learning, service redesign, mixed-methods study

Introduction

In increasingly complex and digitally enabled universities, academic support systems are being reshaped by intersecting pressures of digital transformation, workforce change, and financial constraint (Universities Australia, 2025). Across the Australian higher education sector in particular, these pressures have led to the consolidation and downsizing of support structures, often accompanied by a shift towards more centralised service models (Bearman et al., 2024). For academic staff, these changes alter not only how support is accessed, but also how it is experienced, raising a critical question: how can universities maintain meaningful, human-centred support in contexts where interactions risk becoming increasingly transactional?

This paper uses Academic Assist, a newly established centralised teaching support helpdesk service, as a case study to explore how human-centred academic support can sustain capability, connection, and confidence during institutional change. Academic Assist was introduced in 2025 as part of a revised centralised academic support model following a long-standing hybrid support approach. Designed to provide timely, expert, and relationship-based assistance, the service supports academic staff in navigating teaching-related processes, systems, and practices while acting as an entry point to broader learning and teaching support services.

While support service redesign is frequently framed in terms of scalability and efficiency, growing evidence suggests that academics continue to value relational, trust-based forms of support, particularly during periods of organisational change and service reconfiguration (Kligyte, 2021; McDonagh & Sanders, 2025). Extending this body of work, this paper reframes academic support not simply as operational infrastructure, but as a *relational educational practice*. It offers new insight into how connection, trust, and capability can be sustained within centralised models that are often assumed to prioritise transactional efficiency over interpersonal engagement.

By foregrounding the experiences of academic staff, this paper positions academic support as a relational practice shaped by ongoing institutional transformation. It highlights a central challenge for academic development: designing systems that scale effectively while remaining relational, visible, and responsive to academic work.

The Study

Service design and context

Academic Assist is a front-line team of six to seven staff providing support through a web form, centralised phone service and Microsoft Teams bookings. Established during a university-wide restructure that centralised learning design support and reduced faculty-based administrative roles, the service was envisioned as a single point of contact for learning and teaching systems and course administration queries. While operating through helpdesk channels, Academic Assist was designed to function as part of a broader learning and teaching support ecosystem, combining scalable access with collaborative problem-solving, practice-based learning and human connection.

Academic Assist supported more than 900 staff and resolved over 4,500 cases in its first year. High responsiveness (69% of enquiries resolved on the day of receipt and 90% within five days) provides an important backdrop for understanding how academics experienced the benefits and limitations of a centralised support model.

Methodology and method

This study adopts a design-based research methodology, using iterative cycles of co-design, implementation, evaluation and refinement to examine the Academic Assist service within its institutional context (Cela-Ranilla et al., 2025; The Design-Based Research Collective, 2003). The evaluation forms part of an annual quality assurance cycle. In 2025, an extensive co-design process (22 workshops with 48 stakeholders across all faculties and central services) was conducted in a six week sprint to identify support needs and to validate service responsibilities for Academic Assist. In 2026, after the first year of service, the target population comprised all academic staff who convened courses in 2025 (approximately 1,026 individuals), spanning across disciplines and faculty groups as the target users of the service. Participants were identified via the authoritative source of course convenorship to ensure representation of both users and non-users of the service. Ethical approval was obtained from the university's Human Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection (HREC20260354).

A mixed-methods approach was used for analysis, combining descriptive statistical techniques for quantitative items with emergent thematic analysis of open-text responses. Generative AI (Microsoft Copilot) was used for the initial coding stage to identify potential patterns and frequency across the open-text responses. The research team subsequently reviewed the proposed codes against the original dataset, refined the coding structure and consolidated the findings into three overarching analytical dimensions. Findings are reported in aggregated and de-identified form to support confidentiality and enable a holistic understanding of how academic staff experience and engage with centralised support in practice.

Survey participants

Data were collected through an anonymous online survey (18–27 items) capturing experiences of access, perceptions of service quality and timeliness, awareness of support offerings, and barriers to engagement. There was a total of 115 respondents, representing an 11% response rate. Representation of the four faculty groups at the University was as follows: Arts, Education and Law (22%), Business (21%), Health (38%) and Science (19%). Users of the service represented 71% of respondents, with non-users at 29%. While this falls below the low-to-modest response rate of 25% (Wu et al., 2022), the profile of respondents spanned an acceptable cross-section of faculty groups across the university and of users and non-users of the service, supporting cautious, preliminary insights to be drawn from the data.

Results and discussion

Findings are organised around three interrelated dimensions: connection, capability, and accessibility. These dimensions show how academics experienced Academic Assist during the transition to a centralised learning and teaching support model, and how centralised services can both enable and constrain human-centred

support. Across the responses, Academic Assist was valued as knowledgeable and responsive, but engagement was shaped by visibility, role clarity and access pathways. Quantitative results are used where they support or extend the thematic analysis. Together, the findings highlight a central design tension: centralisation can support responsiveness at scale, but may disrupt the relational conditions required for trust, collaboration and capability development.

Dimension 1: Connection

Connection reflects how relational engagement shapes trust, collaboration, and perceived compassion within centralised support systems: it emerged as central to academics' evaluation of Academic Assist. Many described positive interactions with staff, highlighting professionalism, responsiveness, helpfulness and targeted support. Comments such as "Academic Assist has been amazingly helpful and prompt," "Best service EVER!!," and "People in Academic Assist are amazing and very supportive" suggest that, when academics connected with staff, the service was experienced as relational and human-centred rather than purely transactional. This was also evident in comments about one-to-one consultations. Respondents valued direct contact, especially for complex or time-sensitive teaching issues. Descriptions of staff as "knowledgeable," "friendly," "very helpful," "extremely helpful and responsive," and "kind and very knowledgeable" indicate that trust was strongly shaped by interpersonal interaction.

However, feelings of connection were uneven. A recurring concern was the loss of locally embedded relationships after the shift from group- or school-based support to a centralised model. Some respondents missed being able to contact known staff who understood their discipline, school, program or course context. Comments such as "Hiding people behind Services@Griffith is the wrong approach and removes the relationship," "I prefer to talk to support staff directly and have someone allocated to our school," and "The new process means that I don't have the same opportunity to build connections with individual people" suggest that centralisation created distance for some academics.

The findings reveal a tension within the centralised model. While many academics valued the responsiveness and expertise of Academic Assist, others perceived a loss of locally embedded relationships and contextual understanding. While the centralised model provides access to expertise, the literature suggests that trust, dialogue, continuity of contact and contextual understanding are critical enablers of engagement and capability development in academic support settings (McDonagh & Sanders, 2025). Academic confidence, however, is not built through access to information alone but through interactions that enable academics to interpret, apply, and adapt advice within their own teaching contexts (Patfield et al., 2025). These findings highlight that centralised models sustain connection only when relational continuity and contextualised engagement are preserved as core design features.

Dimension 2: Capability

Capability highlights how support interactions contribute to collaborative professional learning and confidence-building in digitally complex teaching environments, as evidenced by Academic Assist's help in navigating complex learning and teaching systems, resolving problems, and managing course-related responsibilities. Among the 81 users, 62 reported that responses were "often" or "always" accurate, 51 rated service as "often" or "always" consistent, and 61 were "somewhat satisfied" or "very satisfied" with response times. Qualitative comments showed many sought help with unfamiliar, infrequent, complex, or changing tasks where just-in-time support was needed. This pattern was observed across many systems, such as Canvas, the curriculum management system, Microsoft Teams, and PebblePad, as well as processes such as grade management and assignment mapping.

The data suggest Academic Assist may contribute to capability in two ways: by enabling academics to complete immediate teaching and administrative tasks, and by building confidence in learning and teaching systems. Among users, 36 reported increased confidence, 32 did not, and 13 selected "not applicable." Some academics were already confident system users, while others sought resolution of specific issues rather than broader development. Several comments also indicated a preference for direct assistance over referral to self-help resources; one respondent noted that being told to "do a module" or "read this self help guide" was frustrating when they had already tried to resolve the issue themselves. This mixed result highlights a tension

between service provision and capability development. While academics valued timely assistance, some expressed frustration when support shifted from direct problem-solving to self-directed learning resources.

Capability, therefore, is not only about building individual knowledge. In this dataset, it is closely tied to academics' need for timely, expert and practical support that enables them to navigate increasingly complex teaching technologies, institutional processes and administrative requirements. This finding aligns with research demonstrating that academic capability is strengthened through contextualised, point-of-need guidance embedded within professional practice rather than through access to information alone (Patfield et al., 2025). In digitally complex higher education environments, support interactions increasingly serve both operational and developmental functions, helping academics interpret, apply and adapt institutional and technological requirements in context (Clarke et al., 2025; Watermeyer et al., 2022). Together, these findings indicate that capability is developed through relational, context-sensitive interaction that enables collaborative sense-making in practice.

Dimension 3: Accessibility

Accessibility reveals how system design both enables and constrains engagement with centralised support. While most users reported that Academic Assist was easy to access and navigate, visibility and role clarity emerged as significant barriers to engagement, particularly among non-users. Among non-users, 16 of 33 were unaware the service existed and 13 were uncertain about what it could help with. With users, multiple channels were a clear strength. Of the 81 users, 52 had used the web form, 45 had used bookings, and 42 had used phone support. Most used more than one channel, suggesting academics value flexible access options.

However, the findings suggest that access depended as much on visibility and role clarity as on the availability of support channels. Some respondents found Academic Assist difficult to locate, remember or distinguish from other services, noting "Difficulty finding Academic Assist," and that it was "easy to use once I found the right site" but "hard to find the site again." Comments about the confusion of knowing "who to go to" and wanting a simple "who do I call" guide suggest that access depends not only on available channels, but on clear signposting within the broader support ecosystem.

Access was also shaped by expectations of immediacy. Several respondents noted that teaching issues often require urgent support, and that bookings or web forms may not suit time-sensitive problems. Preference for phone, Teams or email contact suggests academics experience access as both logistical and relational: they need to know where to go and trust that the pathway will quickly connect them to someone able to help.

Overall, accessibility involves visibility, clarity, immediacy and simple pathways. While Academic Assist offers multiple channels, confident use depends on clear signposting, role clarity, reduced friction and pathways that reflect the realities of teaching work. These findings align with research suggesting that engagement with centralised support services is influenced not only by the availability of support but also by academics' understanding of where expertise resides, how support functions connect, and the ease with which guidance can be accessed and applied in practice (Peters et al., 2022). They also highlight the need to improve the visibility of Academic Assist and more clearly communicate the role of the central learning and teaching unit within the broader support ecosystem, as organisational understanding, stakeholder engagement and recognition of support functions are important enablers of service uptake and educational change (Kligyte, 2021; Tay et al., 2023). Accessibility emerges not simply as a technical issue of channels, but as a relational condition shaped by visibility, clarity, and trust in support pathways.

Conclusion

This case study contributes evidence about how human-centred academic support can strengthen capability, improve access to expertise, and sustain meaningful professional relationships within large, digitally enabled institutions. In doing so, the study speaks directly to the challenge of sustaining connection, collaboration, and compassion within digitally mediated academic support systems. The findings position academic support as a relational educational practice rather than a purely transactional service function. They identify four transferable design principles for centralised academic support: preserve relational continuity through

personalised and context-aware interactions; make support visible through clear signposting and role clarity; provide flexible, multi-channel access aligned with the realities of academic work; and use support interactions to build capability, rather than only resolve immediate issues. Together, these principles show how services can operate at scale while preserving the connection, trust and collaboration that enable academics to feel supported, confident and capable in their teaching practice.

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