

# KEEPING THE WHEEL TURNING: AN ONGOING CRITICAL REFLECTION ON THE SUMMER PRE-SESSIONAL

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## Abstract

*The Summer Pre-sessional (SPS) can be a difficult place to operate. Intensive working environments; tight turnarounds; unpaid overtime - these realities are revealed in the casual language of recovery that the EAP community instinctively reaches for when describing our signature summer programmes and which provided the initial inspiration for a talk at the 2023 BALEAP Conference: a critical reflection on the SPS. This paper offers an extended and ongoing reflection, incorporating the essential content of that original paper as well as the wider conference tone where uncertainty over the longer-term health of the SPS was evident. It is hoped that, with reflective distance and modest adjustments, some sense of a more hopeful future for the Pre-sessional may emerge, one that recentres community and exercises some quiet resistance to prevailing metrics of success.*

**Keywords:** Pre-sessional, Critical Reflection, Wellbeing, Preferable Future

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## INTRODUCTION

The challenges of the Summer-Pre-sessional (SPS) are hardly breaking news, but worth underlining. High-pressured working conditions; precarious employment contracts; annual 'termination of post' letters; mandated unpaid labour – the SPS, in many ways, catches the uncomfortable excesses of the highly-commercialized university model in distilled microcosm, increasingly subject to the 'doxa of neoliberalism' (Ding, 2022, p. 158). This intense climate finds voice in the casual discourse surrounding the SPS experience; a glance at the BALEAP mailing list around autumn reveals the shared relief of annual

convalescence - a jovial nod to recovery puts a brave mask on a haggard face. It is an anniversary that, frankly, you shouldn't have to put up with. It was these frustrations which acted as the main catalyst behind a paper at the 2023 BALEAP Conference on the uncomfortable conditions of our flagship summer EAP courses. The paper hoped to answer the call to be brave in deconstructing what has become a potentially harmful status quo of the SPS.

While the session itself provoked thoughtful discussion, across the wider conference a sense of some resignation seemed to predominate, the longer-term health of the SPS increasingly in question. Falling student numbers seemed to signal a new status quo, where the SPS stands in the shadow of In-sessional and transnational contexts, and increasingly at the mercy of unpredictable geopolitical whims. Some time on and precarity persists; whether recent modest recovery in summer numbers is the start of a longer trend remains to be seen. As a community, EAP seems somewhat resigned to this uncertainty and the dwindling relevance of the SPS. This seems an unfortunate position not quite in keeping with the principles of critical reflection, to hunt the assumptions that permeate practice and to strive always for better (Brookfield, 2017).

In the spirit of challenging assumptions and inevitabilities, this paper aims, firstly, to report on the essence of the original 2023 paper in an examination of the troubling conditions of SPS. This forms part of an updated reflection on the SPS, incorporating the broader mood of the 2023 Conference and current conditions some time on. Finally, this paper offers for consideration a possible, preferable future for the pre-sessional, one which reasserts community as an essential metric of success and, through modest adjustments, finds moments of resistance in pressured climates. In doing so, the power of critical reflection in offering relief is evident.

## **THE SUMMER-PRE-SESSIONAL**

The pressures of the SPS are well-documented. Billed as intensive programmes, they offer a necessarily rapid and high-stakes induction to academic study. Despite the daunting connotations, there is good news here. Pearson (2020, p.439) highlights the crucial academic acculturation which Pre-sessional courses perform, and notes something nearing consensus that students perceive them to be 'valuable, rewarding and confidence-boosting'. The affective benefits of Pre-sessional study are also clear, such programmes aiding the reduction of language anxiety at the most taxing opening stages of study abroad experiences (Dewaele,

Comanaru & Faraco, 2015). In terms of student progress, the gain, it seems, justifies the strain.

On the educator front, attention has tended to centre on the SPS as one of the fairly limited pathways into EAP for novice entrants (Ding & Bruce, 2017), or the scope of professional development opportunities available to SPS teachers (Beswick, 2019). More recently, scholarly interest has, unsurprisingly, been drawn to the impact of the emergency transition to online modes during the Covid-19 pandemic and the impact on pedagogy as well as teacher identity (Donovan, 2022).

Relatively little by way of scholarly comment, however, is available regarding the conditions of SPS practice: what it is (or can be) like operating in these settings. This seems puzzling given the apparent agreement on the issue. Indeed, so much is revealed in what we say. A glance through mailboxes around the turn of the academic year reveals seemingly widespread convalescence. We routinely describe the relief of “getting through” the summer, of “getting over the line”. The original ‘call for papers’ for the 2023 BALEAP Conference was extended to allow contributors more time to “recover from” the Summer Pre-sessional. Despite the tongue-in-cheek intention, it does beg the question: why do we instinctively reach for the language of endurance and recovery to describe our SPS experience?

## THE POWER OF CRITICAL REFLECTION

We perhaps owe it to ourselves then to cast critical light on this culture of endurance and intensity. Critical reflection is a valuable mechanism for sense making in this regard, albeit one which has become part of a vague orthodoxy in professional discourses. In its loose definition and casual overuse, reflection in some sense has ‘lost its ability to be seen’ (Rodgers, 2002, p. 843). Rather than an instrument of occasional convenience - handy for course evaluation or professional appraisal - Brookfield (2017, p. 79) urges educators to adopt a ‘stance of permanent inquiry’ to illuminate the assumptions and supposed inevitabilities that permeate practice. It is through this recalibration, to see oneself as constituent of complex contextual factors, that avenues to a clearer self-understanding and enhanced agency are possible. Crucially, the aim is not to fix all the problems in one fell swoop (as desirable as that might be), but rather to deconstruct the interplay between context and consciousness that drives practice. By adjusting the focus toward the normative – the what *is* toward the what *ought to be* – ‘disturbingly productive insights’ (Brookfield, 2017, p. 65) are available. Certainly, there appears something disturbing in our collective consciousness regarding the SPS.

So, what are the core assumptions governing our framing of the SPS? An obvious example is the way in which the SPS seems to encapsulate the most uncomfortable excesses of the dominant dogma of neoliberal marketization in higher education (HE) (Murphy, et al., 2021). While hardly revelatory, the particular position of EAP here is worth underlining. As noted by Ding (2022, pp. 158-9), as a field which owes much of its origins to neoliberal education policies, the contemporary scene is of an EAP field 'lacking in autonomy' at once 'essential to a neoliberal university but certainly *not of its essence*' [emphasis added]. Indeed, a near obsession with student numbers and associated frantic recruitment of insecurely employed colleagues seem to reflect an intensely neoliberal undercurrent driving the SPS. Throw in institutional pressures to ensure 'prudent' commercial practices (a disturbing euphemism for minimal hiring of teachers), it is perhaps little wonder that EAP practitioners seem to perceive the SPS in uncertain terms. Wellbeing is a serious issue here. In a sector already racked with dangerous precarity and overwork, another pandemic has been in play. In the 'pressure vessels' and 'anxiety machines' of modern HE, there has been a 70% increase in referrals to counselling and occupational health (Moorish, 2019, p. 14). Unsurprisingly, those on insecure contracts are worst affected, around half reporting poor mental health as a result (Moorish, 2019). While it is unlikely that we have yet fully come to terms with the effects of Covid-19 emergency measures, its contribution to the 'mental wellbeing crisis' in HE is clear (Jayman, Glazzard & Rose, 2022, p. 3).

For those fortunate enough to be permanently employed (how perverse to count that as a fortune), the SPS probably represents the fourth term in the academic year. If spread across Pre- and In-session contexts, opportunities for periods of proper recharge are scarce; the overlap with the school calendar means that opportunities for "summer" breaks are squeezed. Regrettably, the SPS can also be a hotbed of unpaid labour exemplifying the disturbing reality that HE staff regularly work more than two days (50.4 hours) unpaid per week (UCU, 2022). From an organisational perspective, I admit to frequent unpaid weekends and worried nights. And yet I collude in the illusion. When we report on our SPS to wider forums at College or University level, we unconsciously celebrate "our biggest ever" Pre-session, student numbers apparently the key metric of success. We have stumbled into a 'hegemonic trap' of sorts (Duenkel, Pratt & Sullivan, 2014, p. 266), a dangerous precedent existing in the perception that simply because we "got over the line" this constitutes evidence of an ability to go again next year.

### BALEAP 2023

I had arrived at the 2023 Conference armed with a sense of foreboding. Much of that original paper - billed as “part rant” (Donnelly, 2023) - was infused with frustrations that reached crescendo during the 2022 run when exponentially climbing student numbers reached eye-watering levels. My own role has shifted in recent years towards programme coordinating, and the 2022 period left marked disillusionment, gathered over years, about the sustainability of the model. Rather than driving the course in a safe and sustainable fashion, the impression instead is of a runaway programme chasing us in the other direction, toward the recovery suite. With the only limit on student numbers being temporal, and no mechanism to control programme size, the dominant issue had not, until 2023, been scarcity, but rather a scramble around recruitment. Such a model, with uncertainty baked in, is a recipe for accumulated anxiety and annual recuperation.

The 2023 BALEAP Conference seemed infused with uncertainty over the SPS, but of a slightly different flavour. A growing concern for student application numbers was evident. During a panel discussion between centre directors, a sense of foreboding regarding the frailty of the SPS predominated. When asked what kept them up at night a concern over future scarcity of EAP jobs was the unifying theme. This uncertainty carried across the wider conference chatter. When, at the conference outset, the Pre-session had been suggested as a candidate among the ‘things that we cannot bear’ to be consigned to the imagined darkness of EAP’s ‘Room 101’ (BALEAP, 2023), I would probably have struggled to disagree. Intriguingly, there also appeared a lingering restlessness over a tendency towards familiar discussions regarding EAP’s perceived inferiority, disregarded by the disciplines, operating at the fringes of the academy (Ding & Bruce, 2017).

### CIRCUIT BREAKER

Those springtime concerns over dwindling numbers were ultimately borne out with an eventual 2023 programme down more than 50% from the previous year. The familiar recruitment scramble gave way to an inverse concern over whether enough posts could be found for the team of returning SPS colleagues who, essentially, run the programme and to whom any success is owed. However, with some reflective distance, the 2023 period reemerges in memory as a circuit-breaker of sorts against the excesses of a runaway SPS model. Smaller numbers make for more

manageable conditions, and while the latent obsession with population size lingers, an adjusted mindset that reaffirms the value of community is invaluable. Happily, a quiet determination across the organisational team to resist pressures for coldly 'prudent' recruitment allowed retention of a sizeable teaching team, smaller classes and a more favourable ratio of teacher attention. Adjustments to pre-course teacher inductions, incorporating more preparation and thinking time and an additional day dedicated specifically to team building and planning eased the transition into the programme. Crucially, a return to a fully face-to-face SPS for the first time since the pandemic has made it possible to recapture an invaluable and uninhibited sense of place.

As the current programme gathers pace, and student numbers show signs of 'recovery', certain lessons likewise loom. Class sizes matter – if there is any scope to do so, the benefits of resisting pressure for prudent recruitment are real. This seems an obvious point, but the potential impact of quietly creeping group sizes and the *'student-numbers-divided-by-minimum-available-teachers'* model is considerable. Ample room for meaningful feedback and attention is invaluable, for all, and any relief in assessment pinch-points is crucial. The last-minute nature of things can make this tricky, and some slippage is perhaps inevitable, but there is a lot to be said for a class 'cap' of sorts that sits well below the room capacity, a metric which too readily creeps into planning calculations.

Social programme, too, is essential. This has been a lesson hard-learned; as provision largely dried up under emergency pandemic measures, in the initial return to campus we struggled to revive the social components of the programme which perform vital confidence- and community-building functions, offering real anxiety-busting lifelines to students. Happily, the situation is now much improved and agitations around a lack of provision have worked their way through to budget allocations. The social dimension, of course, extends to the teaching team. Again, a simple observation, but from a position where concerns over tumbling student income have provoked nods to 'efficiencies' extending to the induction catering budget, the importance of protecting social moments really cannot be overstated. One initiative, of a sort, that we will trial this year is to invite former SPS students - now approaching the final stages of their 1-year postgraduate programme - to attend and contribute to our staff induction by sharing reflections and insights into their journey and achievements during and since the Pre-sessional. My sense is that we so often spend time, in induction and in-course, discussing the student, the essay, the class that we may lose some sight of the people behind the programme. As well as an important source of developmental feedback, this feels like a happy way to close the circle; these are voices which I am particularly looking forward to.

As things stand then, there seems cause for greater optimism than I could claim at the 2023 Conference. Timing is important and, as Pearson (2020) rightly points out, much of what is reported about the Pre-session can depend on when you ask. While the longer-term health of the SPS remains uncertain, and the wider EAP field - along with its disciplinary cousins - remains entangled in the unpredictable fluctuations of a globalised education market, it would seem sensible to accentuate the positives while there exists scope to do so. Inayatullah (1998, p. 817) reminds that the crux of critical practice is to upset the categorisations and normalised metrics of the present and to evoke other possible futures. It is through these prisms that our 'deepest worldview commitments' are ultimately revealed (Slaughter, 1997, p.6). Modest adjustments that reassert the individual and the community, and quietly push back against prevailing pressures, have shown some promise for the SPS future.

## **CONCLUSION**

An insistence on population size as the key measure of success captures an uncomfortable trajectory on which the Pre-session has resided. The reflective distance gained in an unforeseen but welcome circuit break reveal how modest but meaningful adjustments – some practical, others conceptual – offer promise. While none of these is particularly radical - and local conditions and constraints will vary - there is benefit in quiet resistance where such moments can be found. Some recovery is available here, perceptual if not always concrete. Further still, perhaps an adjustment is possible in the worldview of the EAP community, to resolve to see the SPS as a defining feature of EAP's status as a genuine and distinguished field. As something uniquely, ours, part of EAP's essence, there may be some promise in resisting the temptation to consign the SPS to EAP's 'Room 101'. Amongst the many uncertain fights for a preferable future in academia, this seems a struggle worth having while we can.

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