

Developing a Learning Support Framework for Postgraduate Entrance Examination English Elective Courses: A Perspective From Chinese Application-Oriented Universities

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Postgraduate entrance examination English elective courses play an important role in supporting students' preparation for postgraduate study in China, yet existing support often remains concentrated on classroom instruction and individual learning. This paper develops a learning support framework for such courses from the perspective of Chinese application-oriented universities. Drawing on research on learning support, blended learning, learning communities, and residential education, the framework integrates instructional and digital support, social and peer support, and organizational support. By connecting classroom teaching, digital resources, peer interaction, and the residential college context, the framework provides a conceptual basis for more continuous and responsive learning support. Future research may examine its implementation and effectiveness in different institutional settings.

Keywords: postgraduate entrance examination English, learning support framework, blended learning, learning communities

Introduction

The expansion of postgraduate education in China has increased demand for postgraduate entrance examination preparation. As English remains an important admission subject, many universities have introduced postgraduate entrance examination English elective courses within the College English curriculum. These courses provide students with targeted support in language knowledge, examination strategies, and test-related practice. However, preparation for the examination usually extends over a relatively long period, during which students may require continued guidance, timely feedback, appropriate learning resources, and opportunities for interaction beyond scheduled classroom instruction.

This need is particularly relevant in Chinese application-oriented universities, where students may differ in English proficiency, learning backgrounds, preparation strategies, and postgraduate aspirations. A largely uniform course arrangement may therefore be insufficient to respond to such diverse learning needs. In addition, although digital platforms can extend learning beyond the classroom, access to online materials alone does not necessarily constitute effective learning support. More attention is needed to how digital resources, teacher guidance, peer interaction, and institutional support can be connected throughout the preparation process.

Research on blended learning and learning communities provides useful perspectives for addressing these concerns. Blended learning can extend opportunities for learning, interaction, and feedback, while learning communities can strengthen peer support and sustained participation. Nevertheless, comparatively limited attention has been given to how these approaches can be integrated to support postgraduate entrance examination English elective courses, particularly in application-oriented universities. This paper therefore develops a learning support framework for such courses from the perspective of Chinese application-oriented universities. By integrating blended learning, learning communities, and the residential college context, the framework considers how instructional, social, and organizational forms of support can be coordinated to provide more continuous and responsive support throughout the examination preparation process.

Review of Literature

Theoretical Perspectives on Learning Support in Higher Education

Learning support in higher education extends beyond supplementary materials or assistance with academic difficulties. It also concerns the instructional, relational, and institutional conditions through which students participate in learning. Kahu and Nelson (2018) conceptualized student engagement as developing at the interface between students and institutions, highlighting the interaction between individual characteristics and educational conditions. From this perspective, learning support involves not only access to resources but also opportunities for guidance, feedback, interaction, and participation.

Recent research has further emphasized these interconnected dimensions. In a systematic review of student engagement in blended higher education, Wang et al. (2026) identified individual, instructional, interactional, and learning-environment factors associated with engagement. Learning support, feedback, course delivery, and learning materials were prominent instructional factors, while teacher and peer interaction constituted an important relational dimension. These findings support a view of learning support as a coordinated learning environment rather than a single instructional intervention.

Blended Learning and Learning Communities for Continuous Learning Support

Blended learning provides an important basis for extending support beyond conventional classroom boundaries. Garrison and Kanuka (2004) argued that blended learning involves the purposeful integration of face-to-face and online learning rather than the simple addition of technology to traditional teaching. Its educational value therefore depends on how learning activities, resources, and interaction are organized into a coherent process.

Recent language-education research has further highlighted the conditions required for such integration. Li and Yoon (2024) showed that blended language learning involves not only classroom pedagogy but also policy alignment, human resources, digital learning materials, and professional development. In a Chinese tertiary EFL context, He et al. (2024) found that learner agency in peer-review activities involved both self-regulated learning and reciprocal peer interaction, with teacher instruction serving as an important contextual affordance. Liu et al. (2026) similarly emphasized learner, instructor, technological, and contextual factors in technology-enhanced College English learning in China. Together, these studies suggest that blended learning can support continuity when digital resources, classroom teaching, teacher guidance, and learner interaction are meaningfully connected.

Learning communities add a complementary social dimension. Zhao and Kuh (2004) linked participation in learning communities with student engagement and educational outcomes, while more recent research has

emphasized peer relationships and students' sense of connection to their learning environments. Dias-Broens et al. (2024), in a systematic review, showed that sense of belonging in higher education is shaped by particular student and institutional contexts. Ramsey et al. (2025) further found that linked-course learning communities increased repeated peer connections and supported indicators of persistence and academic progress.

Residential colleges may provide an institutional setting in which such academic and social interaction continues beyond formal course hours. Cheng (2026), examining residential education in Hong Kong, emphasized that student residences need to be intentionally organized if they are to function as educational environments. This perspective suggests that residential college-based learning communities can provide additional opportunities for peer study, mentoring, teacher-student communication, and other forms of academic support.

Although previous research has examined learning support, blended learning, learning communities, and residential education, comparatively limited attention has been given to their integration within postgraduate entrance examination English elective courses, particularly in Chinese application-oriented universities. Accordingly, this paper brings together instructional and digital support through blended learning, social and peer support through learning communities, and organizational support through the residential college context as the conceptual basis for the learning support framework developed in the following section.

Developing a Learning Support Framework for Postgraduate Entrance Examination English Elective Courses

From Fragmented Support to an Integrated Framework

Postgraduate entrance examination English elective courses within the College English curriculum combine formal instruction with extensive independent preparation. Classroom teaching can provide guidance in language knowledge, examination strategies, and task practice, but scheduled class time alone may not ensure continuity of support. Students may also need access to learning resources, feedback, peer interaction, and opportunities to adjust their learning strategies. These needs are particularly relevant in application-oriented universities, where students may differ in English proficiency, learning experiences, and postgraduate aspirations.

The framework proposed in this paper therefore coordinates support across learning settings through three interrelated dimensions: instructional and digital support, social and peer support, and organizational support. These dimensions are associated respectively with blended learning, learning communities, and the residential college context, connecting classroom instruction, digital learning, peer interaction, and institutional resources throughout the preparation process.

For application-oriented universities, the value of such coordination lies in its capacity to accommodate learner diversity without separating students into entirely different course structures. Common course objectives can be maintained, while digital resources, peer support, and residential college-based activities provide additional pathways for students requiring different forms and levels of assistance. The framework therefore emphasizes flexible support around a shared course structure rather than a uniform approach to examination preparation.

Three Dimensions of Learning Support

The first dimension is instructional and digital support through blended learning. Because postgraduate entrance examination English preparation involves vocabulary, reading, writing, translation, and examination

strategies, classroom time alone may be insufficient for sustained practice and feedback. Blended learning can extend academic support by connecting face-to-face teaching with digital resources and activities. Online platforms may provide learning materials, practice tasks, learning records, and feedback, while classroom sessions can focus on explanation, strategy guidance, and targeted support.

The value of blended learning lies not simply in providing additional online materials but in establishing continuity between online and classroom learning. Digital tasks can be aligned with course objectives and linked to subsequent discussion or feedback. Students may complete reading, writing, or translation tasks independently and then examine difficulties and strategies in class. Blended learning is therefore conceptualized as a structure for continuous instructional support rather than merely as a combination of online and face-to-face delivery.

The second dimension is social and peer support through learning communities. Examination preparation is often highly individualized, which may limit opportunities for students to discuss difficulties and learn from one another. Learning communities can complement formal instruction through peer study groups, collaborative tasks, strategy sharing, and peer feedback.

Such interaction allows students with different learning experiences to exchange strategies, review language tasks, and discuss study plans. It can also encourage reflection on their own learning processes. Peer support, however, should remain aligned with course objectives and teacher guidance; learning communities are intended to extend rather than replace formal academic support.

The third dimension is organizational support through the residential college context. Sustained academic and peer support also requires an organizational setting that enables regular participation beyond classroom hours. When intentionally connected with course learning, residential colleges can provide opportunities for peer study, mentoring, academic consultation, workshops, and teacher-student communication.

These arrangements can respond flexibly to different learning needs. Students requiring further consolidation may participate in guided or peer-assisted study, while others may undertake more advanced language tasks. The residential college is therefore not a separate instructional system but an organizational context through which academic and social support can continue beyond the formal course.

Coordinating Support Across the Preparation Process

The three dimensions are intended to operate in coordination. Instructional and digital support provides resources, feedback, and academic guidance; social and peer support creates opportunities for interaction and shared learning; and organizational support provides conditions for sustaining these activities across settings. Their contribution depends on the connections established among them rather than on any single component.

Coordination also involves the movement of learning information across settings. Difficulties identified through digital practice can inform subsequent classroom guidance, while recurring problems can be discussed in peer study groups or residential college-based consultations. Feedback from teachers, peers, and mentors can then be incorporated into students' individual learning plans and later learning activities. In this way, support is connected across classroom, digital, peer, and residential settings rather than remaining confined to a single learning environment.

The relative emphasis of support may also change during the preparation process. At an earlier stage, support can focus on identifying learning needs, consolidating essential language knowledge, and establishing learning routines. As preparation progresses, digital practice, classroom guidance, peer discussion, and feedback can be increasingly connected to examination-related tasks. Closer to the examination, timed practice and strategy

review may receive greater attention, while teacher and peer support can continue to assist students in analysing difficulties and adjusting their preparation.

The framework thus conceptualizes learning support as a continuous and coordinated process. Classroom teaching provides academic direction, blended learning extends resources and feedback, learning communities facilitate peer interaction, and the residential college context supports continuity beyond the classroom. Together, these elements provide a coherent framework for responding to students' preparation needs and differences in their learning processes.

Conclusion

This paper developed a learning support framework for postgraduate entrance examination English elective courses in Chinese application-oriented universities. By integrating instructional and digital support, social and peer support, and organizational support, the framework offers a more coordinated approach to extending learning beyond scheduled classroom instruction. It highlights the potential of connecting blended learning, learning communities, and the residential college context to address students' diverse and sustained preparation needs. Future research may examine the implementation and adaptation of the framework in different institutional settings and assess its contribution to students' learning and examination preparation.

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