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**Academic writing in global open distance learning: Case studies  
of an MBA programme in Ethiopia, Russia and the UK**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement of The Open  
University for the degree of Master of Philosophy

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The Open University  
Faculty of Education and Language Studies

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## **ABSTRACT**

The study was motivated by my own experiences as a speaker of English as a second language (ESL) who has studied and taught high school courses produced in the UK, which Kachru (1988) classifies as the 'inner' circle, to students in the 'outer' circle in Swaziland. The central focus in this study is students' academic writing in English in an open distance Master of Business Administration (MBA) programme provided by the Open University (OU) UK, in different parts of the world to students from diverse cultural, geographical, linguistic and educational backgrounds.

The main focus of this study is students' academic writing in the medium of English in the contexts of Ethiopia, Russia and the United Kingdom. In order to explore students' writing and their experiences of engaging in such writing, I draw on recent studies which view reading, writing, and other aspects of communication as fundamentally social activities. In order to explore their writing in its social context, I draw on a range of data sources: students' written assignments, interviews with students and tutors, pro-formas, and course materials.

The central argument in this thesis is that speakers of English as a foreign language (EFL) and speakers of English as a second language (ESL) studying an open distance course in their diverse local contexts may be disadvantaged in a number of ways; in terms of their resources for writing, their understanding and experience of English, their background knowledge and the inapplicability of course concepts in their contexts. The study also highlights tensions surrounding the provision of UK based courses to students in different parts of the world and acknowledges the difficulties of developing courses which are accessible and relevant to diverse groups.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

Distance education courses designed in countries where English is the first language (EL1) are increasingly made available in countries where English is neither one of the official languages nor the language of educational instruction. Open University (OU) courses are already available in several different parts of the world, and this geographical spread is set to increase with some courses already being presented globally. Making courses available in different parts of the world to diverse groups of students raises a number of issues - pedagogical, cultural and linguistic issues for course development, resources, tuition and assessment.

#### **1.2 Situating the study within the research area**

Writing in higher education has recently become a major focus of educational research. Recent studies of student academic writing such as Street (1984), Lillis (1997), Gee (1998), Ivanic (1998), Lea and Street (1998b), Prior (1998) and Scott (2000) view reading, writing, and other aspects of communication as fundamentally social activities. These studies of academic writing have focused on a number of aspects of academic writing such as identity (Ivanic 1998; Lillis 1999; Scott 1999; Tang and John 1999; Scott 2000); reading and writing strategies (Hoadley-Maidment 1997; Lea and Street 1998b); disciplinary differences (Berkenkotter and Huckin 1995; Lea and Street 1999). In open distance learning, studies have focussed on various issues such as cultural and linguistic issues (Manning and Mayor 1999; Goodman, Lea, McKinney, and Swann 2000; Lea, Goodfellow, Gonzalez, and Mason 2000b; Mayor and Swann 2001).

This study draws on the above existing research in a number of ways: it seeks to explore how students' existing educational and professional experiences impinge on their experiences of engaging in academic writing, as in research on writing and identity; it takes account of work which foregrounds the importance of disciplinary difference, by focusing on student writing in a particular academic discipline; it acknowledges the importance of cultural and linguistic diversity, in the specific context of open and distance learning. However, this study extends current research by explicitly focusing on areas which have previously had limited focus. These include the availability of resources to students in diverse contexts and the ways in which the language of the course materials impact on students' writing in their diverse contexts.

This study contributes to existing research aiming to explore students' writing in the diverse contexts of Ethiopia, Russia and the UK. The study focuses on three key areas in relation to writing: the use of English as a medium of global instruction; access to resources for learning; and writing about reflection for assessment. Focus on English as a medium of global instruction is important because students are studying in diverse local contexts where English might not be the main language of their previous education nor the main language used in their places of employment. These students are studying courses designed predominantly for a UK audience and might have expressions familiar to UK students. The issue of access to resources is essential because students in developing countries might not have access to the same resources as students studying the same course in the UK. Finally, focusing on reflection is of specific interest because students following the courses in this study are required to write about reflection for assessment purposes, which can be highly problematic.

### **1.3 The focus of this study**

I was particularly interested in exploring the themes of English as a global language of instruction because I felt this was relevant to my experience. I was an ESL student who studied courses designed, assessed in the UK (inner circle) and delivered in Swaziland (outer circle). I have also taught these courses to ESL students in Swaziland. In my experience, students studying in ESL contexts were disadvantaged in terms of understanding the language of the course materials, and in terms of not sharing the same cultural background as courses seemed to require. So I was interested to explore whether this would be the case for students following Open University (OU) distance courses. As I read the OU Master of Business Administration (MBA) course materials and writing requirements, I saw that students were required to draw on resources not provided by the institution when writing their assignments. I was interested in exploring students' experiences of writing in English in their different countries and to find out what resources were available to them. During my reading of the writing requirements it was clear that reflection and reflective writing for assessment were regarded as important in the MBA programme. I was interested in exploring students' experiences of reflective writing for assessment bearing in mind the difficulties associated with the notion of reflection (There is a fuller discussion of this in Chapter 2).

This study therefore focuses on three key issues in relation to writing: the use of English as a global language of instruction, access to resources for learning, and writing about reflection for assessment.

### **1.3.1 The use of English as a global language of instruction**

English is the predominant language of most common subjects for the OU global courses. There seems to be an assumption that the use of English for those in other cultural settings outside the UK is unproblematic in terms of reading, writing, and understanding of culture-specific course content, conventions and assessment. This study examines the experiences of students in relation to the use of English as a language of instruction in diverse cultural and geographical contexts.

### **1.3.2 Access to resources for learning**

Access to resources is an important aspect of student learning. Even though students following OU courses are provided with the necessary course materials, there is an assumption that students in the various contexts have access to other resources apart from the provided course materials. This study will focus on the availability of both material and non-material resources which students are sometimes required to draw upon outside the provided course materials.

### **1.3.3 Writing about reflection for assessment**

Reflection on the learning experience in the MBA programme appears to be regarded as the key indication of student's mastery of new concepts resulting in a change of perspective and/or practice which the students have to demonstrate in their written tutor marked assignments (TMAs). Even though this is a gradable aspect of learning, the role of assessment in relation to reflection is not unproblematic. In teacher education and social work education research has shown that tutors play an important role in helping students understand the process of learning from experience (Boud and Knights 1996; Harris 1996;

Bolton 1999). There is little research on reflective learning in business education, in particular in open distance learning. There is little research evidence available which focuses on the experiences of distance education management students in different contexts, and the way in which they reflect upon those experiences for assessment purposes. This study examines the experiences of students writing about reflection as part of their assessment in different contexts.

#### **1.4 Overview of the study**

As mentioned above, this study is concerned with student writing within open distance learning as represented by the UK based OU. Because of its open access policy, the OU enables higher education access to adult students with a wide range of previous educational experiences. The text-based nature of distance learning courses requires students to read and their reading is the basis of their writing for the tutor marked assignments (TMAs). In this context the student-tutor relationship is founded on the exchange of texts which can be subject to different and /or conflicting interpretation by students. Students on global courses may bring different interpretations of reading and writing tasks to their studies from familiar cultural contexts.

This study draws on recent studies of student academic writing by Street (1984), Barton and Hamilton (1998), and Gee (1998) which view reading, writing, and other aspects of communication as fundamentally social activities. Lea and Street (1998a) and Prior (1998) acknowledge that these theories are rooted in specific cultural traditions and ways of constructing knowledge, which are also embedded in relations of power (see also Jones, Turner, and Street 1999; Canagarajah 2001). Recent studies have shown a range of conflicting literacy practices in both face-to-face settings and distance learning such as: different expectations between students and tutors, the problematic nature of academic

conventions students encounter because of not being socialised into the discourse practices of formal institutions; and issues of student identity i.e. who you are allowed to be and what you can say in your writing (Ivanic 1998; Lea and Street 1998b; Lillis 1999; Goodman et al. 2000).

Although the OU courses are indeed delivered globally, the students are studying in diverse local contexts. When students with their own cultural and linguistic assumptions and understandings of knowledge and assessment engage in a course based on different assumptions and understandings of knowledge and assessment, this may result in misunderstanding. The study also suggests that access to resources can be problematic for open distance learners in the diverse contexts. Finally, it highlights the problematic issue of students writing about reflection for assessment.

### **1.5 The Open University MBA programme**

The study focuses on the Master of Business Administration (MBA) programme which is offered in two stages by the Open University Business School (OUBS). The first stage provides two alternative entry routes: an 'open access' route and a 'fast track' route. In the open access route, students can take the *Professional Certificate in Management* and *Professional Diploma in Management*. These two courses afford students entry to Stage 2 of the MBA. This route is regarded as the open access entry because students do not need any prior academic qualification. The fast track entry is for students who already have a first degree: The fast track course is a single course which runs for nine months, '*Foundations of Senior Management*.' This route is equivalent to the Certificate and Diploma courses. Further specifications for the fast track course are that students should be aged over 27 and have significant management experience.

For this study the focus will be on both these courses. The *Foundations of Senior Management* course as it is delivered in Russia (BZR800)<sup>1</sup> and the UK (B800)<sup>2</sup> and the *Strategy* course as it is delivered in Ethiopia (BZA 820)<sup>3</sup>, Russia (BZR820)<sup>4</sup> and the UK (B820)<sup>5</sup>. The routes followed by students at stage 1 differ between students in the same context and also between the different contexts. (Details of students' routes are discussed in Chapter 5).

## **1.6 Outline of thesis**

### **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Chapter 2: Literature review**

This chapter summarises the related research through a review of the literature in the focus areas of the study which are: English as a global language of instruction, access to resources and academic writing and writing reflection for assessment. The chapter situates this study in the context of the reviewed studies.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The chapter provides a view of the quantitative and qualitative methodologies used, presenting details of the case study method. It draws attention to methodological problems in the study in relation to access to research sites and data collection. The chapter then shows how the methodology is used in the examination of the data.

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<sup>1</sup> BZR800= *Foundations of Senior Management* course code for Russia

<sup>2</sup> B800= *Foundations of Senior Management* course code for UK

<sup>3</sup> BZA820 = *Strategy* course code for Ethiopia

<sup>4</sup> BZR820 = *Strategy* course code for Russia

<sup>5</sup> B820 = *Strategy* course code for UK



## **Chapter 4: Academic reading and writing in English**

This chapter examines what the MBA courses say about the use of English language. This is then followed by profiles of students, highlighting issues relating to their experiences of reading and writing in English. An analysis of errors in students' TMAs is presented. Finally the chapter presents the tutors' perspectives on the use of English in the course.

## **Chapter 5: Resources for learning: the *Strategy* course**

This chapter begins with an overview of the resource requirements for writing on the *Strategy* course, resources provided by the course and additional resources available to students. The chapter then provides profiles of students from Ethiopia, Russia and the UK which give details of their experiences of access to both material and non-material resources and the way those are used in their writing. The chapter concludes with tutors' perspectives on the issue of access to resources.

## **Chapter 6: Writing about reflection for assessment**

This chapter begins with an overview of reflection and learning in the OUBS context, then goes on to present profiles of students' experiences of writing about reflection for assessment in the *Foundations of Senior Management* course.

## **Chapter 7: Conclusion**

This chapter discusses the main contributions of this study. It provides an overview of the limitations of the study as a whole and identifies the scope for future research in the field. The chapter concludes with implications for course design.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to present a review of the literature which informs this study. I outline key areas which are particularly relevant to my study organised under the following headings: 2.2, English as a global language 2.3, sources and resources for academic writing and 2.4, reflection and reflective writing in academic writing. In exploring these key areas I focus in particular on their relevance for writing for assessment in diverse local contexts. In section 2.5 I review literature specific to the OUBS. In the final section 2.6, I summarise how the literature reviewed relates to my study.

#### **2.2 English as a global language**

English has attained a global status as it has been taken up by other countries around the world and given a special place within their communities. According to Crystal, more than 700 million in the world speak English, 50% of whom are non-native speakers (Crystal 1997). English has become a lingua franca of international academics and business communities. A vast range of academic books, journals and other resources are available in English. The increase in the use and learning of English around the globe does not come with a universal culture, as the other languages the English language comes into contact with influence it (Graddol 1996). English is increasingly important in educational contexts because many nations have made English their official or main language for educational purposes.

Kachru (1988) provides a useful classification of the different contexts of English usage:

- The 'inner circle' where English is the mother tongue or first language such as UK, USA and Australia.
- The 'outer or extended circle' where English has become the country's 'second language' for official purposes and is used as the medium of instruction for educational purposes e.g. Nigeria, Singapore, India and many more.
- The 'expanding circle' referring to those nations which acknowledge the importance of English as an international language but do not use it for official purposes. English in these areas has a foreign language status in school, and is not the medium of instruction. These areas include Greece, Russia, China, and Japan.

This classification provides a useful basis for my definition of 'global' in relation to areas of my interest in academic writing. Institutions of higher learning in the inner circle have in recent years seen an increase in the number of students from both the outer and expanding circles registering for study (Angelova and Riazantseva 1999; Jones 1999). In most cases these students study in face-to-face situations and sometimes have English language support programmes offered by the institutions. They may also have the additional benefit of tutor support while writing their assignments. This is a common example of a situation which constitutes the global aspect of academic writing. However, my definition of 'global' for the purposes of this study, relates to distance delivered courses and as such, I define it as the delivery of text-based distance courses in English which are designed in the 'inner circle' and delivered in the inner, outer and expanding circles. Using Kachru's circles, countries in this study in the inner circle are the UK and in the expanding circle Ethiopia and Russia. I am specifically focusing on one Open University course, which is offered in various parts of the world both to students whose first language is English and to those for whom English is a second or foreign language.

In his model, Kachru uses the terms English as a first language (EL1) English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) to refer to users of English in the inner, outer and expanding circles respectively. The diversity of the students and that of the contexts in which they are studying undoubtedly makes defining them as either EFL or ESL users very difficult. There are difficulties with Kachru's circles; for example they do not seem to account for movement of speakers from one circle to another, such as speakers of English who have moved from the outer circle to the inner circle as is the case with some of the students in this study. In the outer circle itself there are differences in the use of English for educational purposes. Students can be in countries where English is a medium of instruction at all levels of education; in some countries it can be the language of instruction from secondary school onwards. Whilst aware of the controversies surrounding such terms I have decided to use them because Kachru's circles and corresponding labels EL1, EFL and ESL are a useful way of beginning to understand language usage in the different parts of the world in which the students in this study live. Students studying in Ethiopia and Russia do not have English as their first language. English in these contexts is neither the official language nor the medium of instruction for educational purposes. They are therefore EFL speakers in the expanding circle context. Students whose first language is English, such as those in the UK context in this study, are described as speakers of English as a first language or EL1. One student in the UK is described as a speaker of English as a second language or ESL and one student in Ethiopia is defined as a speaker of English as a second language. All students in Russia are described as speakers of English as a foreign language or EFL.

The spread of English as an international language or as a lingua franca or a common language has its strong critics, such as Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas (1996) and Phillipson (1992) who view English as a medium of linguistic imperialism, contributing to the loss of indigenous languages around the world. Others such as Crystal (1999) take a

less hard-line view, pointing out the advantages of a lingua franca while also expressing concern about the loss of linguistic diversity. Pierce (1989), Berns et al. (1998), and Gayol and Schied (2003) see English as the language for development in more neutral terms, suggesting the inevitable spread of English and noting the value English holds for individuals and societies in need of development. The global nature of English therefore includes the fact that it is used, to very different effect, in many local contexts.

Mayor and Swann (2001) highlight the fact that because English has come to function as a global family of languages, it is probably more prone to misunderstanding than any other contemporary language.

Despite the strong criticism of the global domination of the English language there are a number of positive elements brought forth by some of the EFL/ESL users of English around the world. English can be deployed as a weapon of the dispossessed, as was the case in the South African Liberation struggle (Pierce 1989). Gayol and Schied (2003) argue that English is a language of empowerment because it provides access to all the centralized knowledge by Western cultures and it may be used as a mode of encounter and communication among democratic people of different countries. This positive notion of the 'colonised' using English to their own ends was expressed well by a Singaporean student in a discussion of Phillipson's notion of linguistic imperialism:

Although it was definitely unpleasant to be colonized by another country, I have to say that the British in one way or another paved the way for the development of Singapore and have educated us in English and have enabled us to benefit from all its advantages and its standing as a global language.

However, we have not by any means lost our cultural heritage. Multilingualism is prevalent and we are rich in the use of different languages and dialects, which we speak and use whenever the situation calls for it.....

One thing I would like to clarify is that we do not view and value the language in a mercenary sense-we have gone beyond that. We study and use the language because it has developed into a language of our own that is used comfortably among ourselves. (Quoted in Berns et al. 1998:275).

Since English is already the world's lingua franca, Warschauer (2000) accepts that increasingly, EFL/ESL speakers will need to use the language daily for presentation of complex ideas, international collaboration and negotiation, and critical interpretation of rapidly changing information. Of specific relevance to this study, is a study by Friedrich (2003) who examined the attitude of Argentinean MBA students towards English. She surveyed 100 students enrolled in the MBA programme using questionnaires as well as personal observations. Her findings indicate that Argentinean students consider knowledge of a world language to be closely linked to employment. Over 90% of the participants when asked how they saw people who knew English responded that people who knew English had greater employment opportunities. Argentinean students believe that learning English is a way out of the current economic crisis in their country because it is, 'a ticket for mobility to an economically more stable country' (p.180). These findings are similar to those of Barkhuizen (2002a) who conducted a survey of 2825 Xhosa speaking students in the Eastern and Western Cape Provinces. His findings reveal that the students regarded the English language as a offering more employment opportunities. By focussing on the use of English as a language of educational instruction, this research seeks to provide further understanding about the students' experiences of writing in English in diverse contexts.

The positive identification with English is not only prevalent in adult learners but also in parents of younger learners. In a study of parents of children aged between 6 and 15, 76 parents completed questionnaires on their attitude towards their children's use of English in Botswana. The results indicated a positive shift in parents' attitude towards their children using the local variety of English (Aura and Magocha 2000). Likewise, Kamwangamalu (2002) states that in South Africa 'the majority of parents, particularly black parents, want their children to be educated through the medium of English' (p. 16).

Mondiano (1999) also argues that it is logical to assume that many proficient EFL/ESL speakers of English as an International Language believe that the learning of the language is a gateway to a greater cooperation and understanding between peoples from divergent cultural backgrounds, and that this can be supported by promoting forms of the language which function in the international context. As the above studies indicate, many students and parents value the use of English for educational purposes for various reasons.

Likewise many of the students in this study value the use of English for educational purposes, as I discuss in Chapter 4. However, although English is the language chosen by students for educational purposes, they may still face difficulties. Mordaunt (1997), working with a group of black South African and Zimbabwean students studying an OU course, reports that English was the students' second or third language and that it was not a problem while studying the course but it meant that their pace of study was generally slower and many fell behind in their course work. Likewise, Windy (1997) notes that the English language in Ethiopia is a third or fourth language learnt from someone else for whom it was also a second or third language and is potentially a source of difficulty: 'What we consider to be plain English in the UK is anything but this in Ethiopia' (p.3). This study explores difficulties students face with studying in English in Chapters 4 and 5.

While my focus above has been 'English', there is strong research evidence to indicate that there are many different types of English, thus the 'English' that students might bring from diverse cultural and geographical contexts may not be considered 'appropriate' in, for example a UK course (Pierce 1989; Thomas 1996; Schneider 1997; Crystal 1999; McArthur 2002; De Klerk 2003). Some identified ways in which 'Englishes' vary include syntax (Baik 1994; Hsu 1994); lexis and semantics (Kachru 1975; Bamiro 1994; Borbda 1994). However, there is a tendency in educational contexts to still talk in terms of one standard English. In the OUBS course materials, for example, this is indicated by reference to 'proper English' (Course File p.5). The OUBS course instruction that students

have to use 'proper English' seems to suggest that there is one standard English, ignoring the fact that English(es) differs from one context to another. There seems to be an assumption that standard UK English is and should be universal yet the reality might be that what countries regard as standard differs from country to country and is probably determined by the local variety (Thomas 1996; Crystal 1999; McArthur 2002). In this study, while I do not focus on different Englishes, I point to some issues raised by the course requirement to write in 'proper English' (see Chapter 4).

### **2.2.1 Writing in English in open distance learning contexts**

Extensive research has been undertaken on students' experience of learning and the contextual nature of this learning (Gibbs 1994; Marton, Hounsell, and Entwistle 1997). Recently there has been a significant focus on one central part of students' learning in higher education: academic writing and indeed the contextual nature of such writing. This study draws upon recent studies of student academic writing (Street 1984; Barton and Hamilton 1998; Gee 1998; Lea and Street 1998b) which view reading, writing, and other aspects of communication as fundamentally social activities. Barton and Hamilton (1998) point out that it is important to consider the social context within which any literacy event is occurring and to realise the specific meanings that are produced for individuals who are engaged in any process of reading and writing (see also Street 1984).

Lea and Street (1998b) emphasised the importance of context in their classification of approaches to academic writing. They identified how in the past, educational research into student learning in higher education tended to fall into two categories: those based on the acquisition of study skills focusing on surface features of language and those concerned with academic socialisation, focusing on students' learning of the textual conventions of



disciplinary written discourses. They point out that more recent research explores the difficulties of academic literacy practices which students face within the university. (Lea 1994; Lillis 1997; Ivanic 1998). Lea and Street suggest a model of 'academic literacies' which 'takes account of the variety of literacy practices that students engage in as part of their studies and acknowledges the different positions and identities that participants in the writing process, both students and tutors, take up as academic writers and readers' (p.159).

A number of studies in academic literacies have explored issues around students' academic writing. Lillis (1997) examined the experiences of mature women and their meaning making in higher education. She focuses on the dominant institutional practices and how they constrain what the students can say in their writing. These women students, whom she describes as non-traditional, come from social groups which had been largely excluded from higher education in the UK. Using a case study approach as a tutor-researcher, her data included: draft essays, final versions of essays and discussions based on the texts produced by participants. Her findings reveal the direct and indirect ways in which academic writing conventions regulate student-writers' voices. In a study of eight EL1 speakers Ivanic (1998) used a case study approach to examine the multiple voices of individual writers and the dimensions on which the writers can differ while still positioned within the academic community. Her major focus was on students' writing in their first language, student identity in their writing in higher education and students writing across the curriculum. The data she collected from the participants included: written assignments for the various courses the students were studying, interviews based on the texts the students had written and analysis of the text using Halliday's functional grammar as an analytic tool with particular focus on the multiple positioning in the essays. Her results indicate that student writers position themselves in multiple ways in their writing to reveal aspects of identity they have intentionally chosen to expose. In both Lillis' and Ivanic's

studies the methodology of 'talk about texts' is used in order to explore students' reasons why they write as they do and what they think about their writing in higher education. Studies in academic literacies have explored the writing experiences of various groups of students such as mature non- traditional students at university (Lillis 1997) school teachers (Scott 2000; Stierer 2000), experienced writers and doctoral students (Berkenkotter and Huckin 1995). Lea (1998) states that 'Academic literacies can be viewed as a mediating domain between adult students' wider cultural worlds and the final pieces of written work that they hand in for assessment' (Lea 1998:156). However, the 'wider cultural worlds' in educational contexts have tended to focus on students from the inner circle. In this study my aim is to explore specific examples of cultural worlds of student academic writing in the expanding circle: Russia and Ethiopia.

A substantial amount of research specifically into the academic writing of EFL/ESL students has been carried out. Studies have focused on a number of issues which include a combination of the following aspects: textual features, students' writing practices, students' interpretations of tasks and the interpretation of feedback. The various specific research areas include the composing process (Zamel 1983; Raimes 1985); pausing in production of text (Spelman Miller 2000); contrastive rhetoric (Connor 1999); analysis of textual features (MacDonald 1992); writing from source text (Campebell 1990; Eisterhold 1990; Connor and Kramer 1995). These studies have revealed the complexities and difficulties EFL/ESL students face when engaged in academic writing. These studies are useful as they show the various areas of research in EFL/ESL writing which help my understanding of writing. I do not use specific approaches to EFL/ESL writing in this study, but do draw on certain key interests: in Chapter 4 and Chapter 6, I focus on the English used in texts; in Chapter 5, I consider particular issues arising from the requirement to use source texts in academic writing.

In this study students are studying in different contexts and therefore engage in different practices of reading and writing within their diverse local contexts in an attempt to make sense of their reading and writing in English. The academic literacies approach adopted in this study which sees writing as a contextualized social practice, is a useful tool for understanding the experiences of students and tutors and for locating that experience in the context of open distance learning, and furthermore, the cultural and contextual components of students' study, reading and writing. The fundamental contextual factors in this study of students' writing are: the linguistic and cultural diversity of students and the contexts in which they are studying; and the availability of resources for academic writing in the diverse contexts.

My focus is on academic writing in the open distance learning context, in particular, distance learning as represented by the Open University. Because of its open access policy, the OU enables higher education access to adult students with a wide range of previous educational experiences. Hoadley-Maidment (1997) examined how OU social science students with no 'A' level qualifications perceived and acquired academic writing skills through essay writing. Her findings indicate that during the first course students regarded academic writing as a challenge. Likewise, students from the nursing profession had difficulty shifting from the prescribed professional writing they had been trained to use to the prescribed academic writing. Lea (1998) investigated how 24 OU students studying different courses at different levels interacted with their course material and the reading and writing strategies they were bringing to both course units and TMAs. Lea's study distinguished two approaches to academic study and essay writing: a 'reformulation' approach, that is, producing TMAs which are close to the original text or a 'challenge' approach, which is, being concerned with how course material relates to the individual's way of interpreting the world embedded in experience. Both Hoadley-Maidment's and Lea's studies have examined students studying in the inner circle context.

Less research has focused on the experiences of students from the expanding circle, studying OU distance courses. A report by Lea et al. (2000b) focusing on the cultural and linguistic differences in tele-learning on a globally delivered OU MA course, indicates that EFL/ESL students tend to get lower marks than their EL1 counterparts. Lea et al. state that, 'non-native speakers will inevitably be disadvantaged in the online discussions since it takes them longer to write and communicate in English' (p. 8). The results also underscore the possibility of EFL/ESL students drawing on diverse experiences of study in their local context, which are not similar to the UK context.

Goodman et al. (2000) examined the teaching and studying of an OU globally delivered English language course in different contexts of the UK and Singapore. Results from this study indicate the likelihood of contradictions in the use of experience and academic requirements. Similarly, instructions on the need to use course texts in assignments can foster lack of originality in students' writing and probably result in what Lea describe as reformulation of course material in tutor marked assignments Lea (1998:164). Though limited, the above studies have indicated a number of issues in globally delivered courses such as: EFL/ESL students' taking longer to write and communicate in English, students' drawing on diverse previous experience of study, and contradictions in the use of experience and academic requirements.

It has been argued that the nature of study in the UK and U.S.A places EFL/ESL students at a disadvantage as students are held to the same inflexible writing standards as those for whom English is a first language (Jones 1999). Hedge (2000) argues that writing is a process which is neither easy nor spontaneous for many second language writers. This study therefore sets out to extend the knowledge base by specifically examining the writing and experiences of students studying an OU Business School (OUBS) masters programme produced in the UK but offered in different cultural contexts: Ethiopia, Russia and UK.

In Ethiopia and Russia English is not the language of educational instruction for educational purposes. It is also not the language commonly used in the work place and in other social contexts.

### **2.3 Sources and resources**

The availability of material resources to outer and expanding circle scholars and the ways these impact on academic writing of multilingual scholars has only recently been a subject of growing research such as Gibbs (1995a) Canagarajah (1996) . However, no research has examined the availability of resources to students studying distance courses designed in the inner circle and delivered in the outer and expanding circles. This study examines students' writing and the resources they draw upon when writing their assignments in their diverse local contexts. There seems to be an assumption that distant learners in all contexts have access to the necessary resources for the course because they are provided with the course materials. Some requirements for the assignments however, require students to go beyond the material resources provided by the course and require access to other important resources which some students do not have.

I have used the term resources to refer to any source which students can draw on when writing their assignments. These resources can be material resources such as books, journals, newspapers, reports, online articles, FirstClass conferencing and other non-material resources such as previous educational and professional experience, other students and background knowledge relevant to course content. The resources may be used as cited sources in students' assignments.

### **2.3.1 The importance of resources for writing**

Books, journals, newspapers, magazines and Internet access are essential sources of information and are an important part of learning, especially for students in higher education. Each of the aforementioned sources contribute to shape what people know about the world around them in different ways. However, around the world, the availability of resources is not evenly spread, and there are huge inequalities in terms of access, production and use.

Writing about accessibility to public information, Wresch (1996) notes that even with the advance of digital technology, traditional sources of information such as books, newspapers, television, movies and radio are still important for educational purposes. Even though Wresch is writing about books in general, not just academic books, he states that books are critical resources for information, but some countries especially in the developing world have virtually no publishing industry: 'the entire continent of Africa, for, example, produces just 2 percent of the world's book titles' (p.8). Although access to books does not depend on whether a country produces books or not, one can assume that book production can in a way contribute towards the availability, affordability and access to the produced books in the country or the region. According to Bowker more than 650,000 books were published worldwide. Bowker argues that the number of these titles might mean that the world is saturated with books, yet the reality is that only some parts of the world are awash with books while other parts do not have many books (cited in Wresch 1996).

In the academic context, there is strong evidence of the disparity in the availability of resources between the inner circle and the outer and expanding circles. UNDP (1999) reports that a US medical library subscribes to around 5,000 journals but the Nairobi University Medical School Library, which for a long time has been regarded as a flagship centre in East Africa, now receives just 20 journals compared with 300 a decade ago. In Brazzaville, Congo, the university has only 40 medical books and a dozen journals, all from before 1993. Gibbs (1995a) interviewed 40 scientists from 18 countries eliciting their views on why the flow of scientific information from the rich countries to Africa and other parts of the developing world has dried up. Many of the scientists believed that a combination of poverty, cultural differences and subtle prejudice against the third world shut them out of major journals, important conferences and critical databases. Gibbs also describes the plight faced by researchers at Addis Ababa University:

Shelves that just six years ago were filled with the latest issues of more than 1,200 academic journals lie barren. The elimination of its foreign currency budget in 1989 forced the library to cancel about 90 percent of its subscriptions, severing the conduit that conveyed news of discovery to scientists in the Ethiopian capital (p.8).

A survey of 31 libraries in 13 African countries by the American Association for the advancement of Science, reported in Gibbs, found that none of the libraries had a viable serials collection and that eight of the libraries depended on donations for foreign subscriptions. Correspondingly, Belay (2000), describing the challenges faced by agricultural training institutions in Ethiopia, stresses that most institutions face a serious shortage or an absolute lack of supplies and facilities required for adequate teaching: 'at present, most books and periodicals available in these institutions are very old, outdated, and of very limited relevance to the courses being taught' (p. 181). Belay also observes that there is a 'near non-availability of publications focussing on Ethiopia in all the institutions' (p.182). This he says has led to the use of limited western textbooks resulting in students not being exposed to the agricultural realities of their country and having little comprehension of the root causes of its problems.

The shortages described above suggest that students following open distance learning courses in various parts of the world will inevitably have limited or no access to some key resources while studying. Issues of resources in everyday use are significant as they can contribute to understandings about resources available in different contexts. The discussions and observations discussed in this section provide a useful background for my study. The availability of material resources for academic writing such as books, and journals to students who are required in the OUBS course to carry out research as part of their written assignments is discussed in Chapter 5.

Newspapers are a major source of public information, and as indicated in Chapter 5, are a useful resource for study. But as with every other form of information, production and access are uneven across geographical contexts. Wresch (1996) reports that Ethiopia sells 1 newspaper each day for every 1,000 people in the country and that only twice as many people watch TV (2 per 1,000). On the other hand, in the United States 1 person in 4 reads a daily newspaper. He also observes that in some areas, newspapers can be expensive, often far more as a percentage of a daily wage than they would be in the U.S. The U.S. Census 1993 in Wresch provides newspaper circulation figures for some countries around the world per 1,000 population (see Table 2.1). Despite their obvious limitations, newspaper circulation figures can be regarded as giving some indication of comparative levels of readership.

Television is an important source of information even though it is not always easily accessible in parts of the world. The problem with television is that not only do you need to have the TV itself but you also need to have an electricity supply. According to Wresch, this may not be a problem in the US and most developed countries but it is a problem in some countries, 'In the US we have 850 TV sets per 1,000 population, but it is a problem in countries such as Bangladesh (5 TVs per 1,000) and Kenya (9 TVs per 1,000)' (p.8)



As with other forms of information, electronic communication technology is not evenly spread around the world: there are vast inequalities in terms of access and use.

Although it is difficult to get precise statistics on Internet use, it is possible to find some broad pointers such as Internet users worldwide and the languages being used by them.

UNDP (2001) gives the figures of Internet users by regions. These figures are useful for comparing levels of access (see Table 2.2).

Table 2.1: Newspaper circulation in the world per 1,000 population.

<b>Country</b>	<b>Newspaper circulation</b>
Algeria	51
Bulgaria	451
Cuba	124
<b>Ethiopia</b>	<b>1</b>
Hong Kong	632
India	26
Israel	261
Japan	587
Kenya	15
Mexico	127
Norway	614
<b>Soviet Union</b>	<b>482</b>
<b>United Kingdom</b>	<b>395</b>
United States	250
Zimbabwe	21

(Wresch, 1996 p.33) (My emphasis showing countries in my study)

Table 2.2: Internet users by regions

<b>Region</b>	<b>Percentage of population</b>
United States	54.3%
High Income OECD (Excluding US)	28.2%
Eastern Europe and CIS	3.9%
Latin America and the Caribbean	3.2%
East Asia and the Pacific	2.3%
Arab States	0.6%
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.4%
South Asia	0.4%

(United Nations Development Programme, 2001)

The above table on Internet use in various regions of the world indicates that developing countries and Eastern Europe have limited access to the Internet and thus suggests that students in these countries might not have the Internet as resource during the course of their study. According to UNDP (1999) the global gap between 'haves' and 'have-nots', between 'know' and 'know-nots' is widening with the rules of globalisation and new technologies. 'These rules have seen the tightening of intellectual property rights keeping developing countries out of the knowledge sector' (p.57). According to the 1999 report, in South Africa, the best-connected African country, many hospitals and about 75% of schools had no telephone line. Even at the university level, where there is connection, up to 1,000 people may depend on just one terminal (p 59). Correspondingly UNDP (2001) reports that in Africa just one in 118 people has Internet access and e-commerce outside South Africa is virtually non-existent. In an annual study by an Internet research group on the face of the web Ipsos-Reid (2001) reports that awareness of the Internet is nearly universal in developed countries, but at least one in four people in urban areas of China, India, Russia and the rest of the developing world have yet to hear of the Internet. The lack of and access to resources in developing countries can be worsened by local political problems. Canagarajah (2002a; 2002b) describes how conflict in Sri Lanka between the Tamil and Sinhalese populations was a source of problems for academics in Sri Lanka,

Communication facilities such as telephones, telegrams, fax and electronic mail were not available because of power cuts. For the same reason computer facilities were not accessible. Mass media such as radio and television did not function normally (p8).

Electronic communication is an essential aspect of the OUBS MBA course as students are required to do Internet research and to use FirstClass conferencing to discuss with other students and tutors. It can be expected that there might be difficulties in some contexts and this is discussed in Chapter 5.

This section has outlined the discrepancies in the availability of material resources in various parts of the world. Access to material resources is an essential part of studying. The shortages described above indicate that some students following open distant learning courses in various parts of the world will inevitably have limited or no access to some of the key material resources while studying.

As well as the more obvious material resources, there are 'non-material' resources which students can draw upon when studying, such as previous experience, familiarity with course content, cultural background and opportunities for interaction with other students. Ramanathan and Atkinson (1999b) in a study of 10 EL1 writing text books used in American universities, focused on giving students a familiar and unfamiliar topic to read and write a short essay. They argue that the more important aspect of critical thinking assessment concerns factors related to culture, prior knowledge and assumptions. The study showed that content familiarity strongly shapes both range and depth of argument. Another study by Ramanathan and Kaplan (1996a) of 12 composition texts looked at how American freshmen are inducted into critical thinking practice. They found that topics for discussion and writing were limited to a range of matters of public controversy. Although these issues were in the forefront in the public domain in the United States and other Western countries, they were not yet widely discussed in Japan. Their results show that when a university student enters a university writing class in the United States along with students who are well versed in American and Western issues of the day, their lack of familiarity with these issues may often disadvantage them.

Similarly, Stapleton (2001) studied 45 Japanese undergraduate students' writing samples from responses to two short provocative essays, one on a topic familiar to the majority of Japanese students, the other considered unfamiliar. The essays were assessed for elements of critical thinking taken from a review of EL1 and ESL writing textbooks. The study showed that students wrote better arguments on a familiar topic than they did with the unfamiliar topic.

Lack of experience of UK education may be a problem for EFL/ESL students as Cook (2001) observes that:

Tutors find that when they go out to Ethiopia their students are demanding. They want to have the tutor 24 hours a day (p.4).

This demand by the students could possibly be a result of students' lack of experience of UK education hence studying with the OUBS is new ground for them, therefore, they do not know what the expectations are in relation to their previous education and previous writing and assessment. The issue of prior experience is a focus of this study as participants from Ethiopia and Russia are not familiar with UK education and the wider UK context and might not be familiar with local examples used in the course.

Importing English for specific purposes (ESP) and English for academic purposes (EAP) textbooks and printed materials, their adoption and possible adaptation in various EFL/ESL contexts has already become a subject of an ongoing debate in recent literature.

Canagarajah (1993b) questions the fact that textbook materials produced according to local teaching conditions can be marketed in periphery communities without needing to be adapted for periphery conditions. He also notes that EL1 teachers are sent from the inner circle to practice their expertise gained at home with little consideration for the needs of the local community. Sonaiya (2002) with special reference to Nigeria also raises the

question of the appropriateness of the cultural content of educational materials that are alleged to be suitable for global dissemination.

Yakhontova (2001) examined students' experience of using USA based EAP textbooks in a Ukraine university. Yakhontova used questionnaires to ask students about their opinion of the USA based textbook, such as relevance of the textbook to the learners' needs, its cultural appropriateness and the degree of possible ethnocentricity. A majority of the students found the book culturally suitable but there were resistant voices expressing the view that the book was culturally unsuitable and that some American customs were not understandable to Ukrainian students. Students approved of the non-ethnocentric character of the book, which often used examples related to different cultural environments.

However, they were surprised not to find anything relevant to the cultures of their part of the world with the exception of one sentence devoted to the Russian language.

Yakhontova argues that, 'in the spirit of their national educational traditions, Ukrainians would always expect a textbook to provide considerable amounts of new information that would widen the erudition of its reader' (p. 405). This suggests that there may be a need for alternative versions designed for EFL/ESL speakers living outside Anglophone environments, educated within different intellectual traditions and yet willing to master academic English for the purposes of international scientific communication. Sower (1999) emphasizes that, 'for someone who has never been to Japan or worked with Japanese students, some introduction [about Japanese culture] is not important but necessary' (p.738). In the same way, Ramanathan and Kaplan (1996a) stress that knowledge about a learner's culture can be used to anticipate certain behaviour and avoid areas of sensitivity, in that way improving teaching effectiveness.



The issue of familiarity with course content and cultural background is of particular interest in this study because the students come from diverse cultural backgrounds. 'Non-material' resources can be difficult to explore but aspects such as background knowledge and contact with other students are discussed in students' profiles in Chapter 5. Even when students do have access to material resources some materials may be 'inaccessible' in terms of understanding because of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. There is a Fuller discussion in Chapter 5.

## **2.4 Reflection**

In this section I discuss the notion of reflection because it is a particular aspect of the writing requirements in the OUBS MBA course. Reflection and writing about reflection is central to the OUBS MBA programme in that students are expected not only to reflect about their learning but also to write about their reflection for the purposes of assessment. Reflection in the OUBS context appears to be regarded as the key indication of a student's mastery of new concepts, resulting in a change of perspective and/or practice which the students have to demonstrate in tutor marked assignments. This is further discussed in Chapter 6.

'Reflective practice' has become a common paradigm in a number of academic departments which offer professional education and have a practical element as part of their training programme. The implementation of reflection as part of professional training however, has not been unproblematic. Despite discussions on reflective practice there is still a clear lack of agreement on the notion of reflection itself, the phases and elements required for successful reflection and the problems and the effect of assessing reflection in writing.

### 2.4.1 Defining reflection

The concept of reflection which was influentially outlined by John Dewey encompasses emotions, passions, intuitions and logical thinking (Dewey 1933; Stanely 1998). Dewey characterised reflection as consisting of the following phases: suggestions, problem, hypothesis, reasoning and testing (Dewey 1933). Various attempts at unpacking and defining the notion of reflection in relation to learning have been made, following studies which examined reflection as a means of learning. Van Manen (1995) states that 'the concept of reflection is challenging and may refer to a complex array of cognitively and philosophically distinct methods and attitudes,' (p. 33). Reflective learning has been defined as:

The *process* of creating and clarifying the meaning of experience (present and past) in terms of self (self in relation to self and self in relation to the world). The outcome of the process is a changed conceptual perspective. The experience is explored and examined to create meaning which focuses around or embodies a concern of central importance. (Boyd and Fales 1983:101)

They state that with reflective learning, the self is basically the source of learning, thus reflective learning is reflective because it involves much self- reflection on the part of the practitioner. However, they also stress the fact that even with the individual as a basis for reflective learning there are common elements that can be identified in the process of reflection in different individuals. Boyd and Fales (1983) in their study of identifiable commonalities of the process of reflection report that the counsellors who participated in their study went through five phases of reflection which were: defining reflection, being more aware of reflection, controlling the process, facilitating the process for others and utilizing the concept as a new perspective. Bright (1996) argues that there are three linked stages in the process of reflection: firstly the understanding of the process at an intellectual level distanced from the realm of practice; secondly, the application of this theoretical process to the restrictions and demands of practice; thirdly, the recognition and evaluation of the outcomes of implementation for either further implication or adoption or rejection.



Reporting on a study of the development of six experienced teachers, Stanely (1998) proposes the following sequence for the development of reflective practice: engaging with reflection, thinking reflectively, using reflection, sustaining reflection and practicing reflection.

As Bengtsson (1995) points out, under the term reflection different ideas on the nature of reflection are hidden with its implication for both the teaching profession and teacher education. He suggests that this is apparent because the number of different expressions on reflection indicate that the concept is understood in different ways. He gives examples of expressions such as, reflective practice, reflective teaching, reflective thinking, and the teacher as professional.

Kullman (1998) identifies open-mindedness, responsibility and wholeheartedness as key elements to facilitate reflective action. He further points out that reflection among student teachers leads to greater awareness of what constitutes appropriate pedagogic practice thus laying the foundation of an ongoing process of development throughout their teaching career.

Elements of reflective practice as expressed by Argyris and Schön in (Bright 1996) require a genuinely critical, unquestioning orientation and a deep commitment to the discovery and analysis of positive and negative information in relation to the quality and status of a professional's intended action.

Most of the available literature on reflective learning tends to focus on subjects like social work and education which have a strong practical element in them such as Boyd and Fales (1983), Schön (1983) and Liou (2001). According to Bright (1996) reflective practice has increasingly been adopted by academic departments within initial or post –initial training in teaching, nursing, police, counseling, social service and clinical pharmacy professions. Bright further maintains that the implementation of reflective practice in these professions has not been unproblematic because it ‘represents an anomaly given the problematic nature of its theory and implementation’ (p163).

Bright (1996) expresses the view that reflective practice has been clearly simplified because it involves ‘closed’ specific skills yet at the same time it can be said to be extremely ‘open’ in its application in the sense that it can be used to investigate any area of professional action. Bright explains that such ‘openness’ can result in surface-level reflective practice being mistaken for commitment to the full reflective process, which in turn can lead to the adoption of existing professional practice rather than changing it. The presence of self-deception and the ability to deceive others highlights the need to distinguish between what people say and their behaviour, that is, what they do rather than what they say they do (Argyris and Schön, in Bright 1996). The idea of deceit in relation to reflection indicates how problematic identifying, promoting and assessing reflection can be. Scott (2000) in a study of teachers’ reflective writing in the PGCE course highlights the tension in postgraduate teachers’ writing, in particular where they locate themselves in relation to theory. Hoadley-Maidment (1997) in a study of nursing students following an OU course found that students from the nursing profession had difficulty shifting from the prescribed professional writing they had been trained to use to the prescribed academic writing.

Acknowledging that there are different conceptualisations of reflection in different areas of education and professional training was an important starting point when considering reflection, and in particular writing about reflection for assessment, in the specific context of business studies. As will be discussed in later chapters, the OUBS whose courses are a focus of this study seems to regard reflection as the ability to change one's way of doing things after learning new concepts. In most cases this new learning results in change beliefs and practices. Students are expected to represent such change in their writing if their writing is to be considered successful. Examining the extent to which students manage to represent in their writing the specific kind of reflection that the OUBS require will be a focus of my analysis of students' writing about reflection for assessment in Chapter 6.

#### **2.4.2 Functions of reflection**

On the different functions and importance of reflective learning, Vygotsky (cited in Reiman 1999) maintained 'the development of conscious awareness and reflection (inner speech) through the use of written language propels thinking forward toward conceptual understanding' (p.599). Development entails change and without reflection meaningful change is very difficult yet change is a vital function of reflection (Wallace 1991). Reflective practice aims to increase the level of competence that already exists in a practitioner not to raise it from incompetence to one of competence (Bright 1996). The purpose of reflecting in the opinion of Loughran (1996) is to identify a problem and work toward a better understanding of the problem and ways of solving it. Loughran seems to suggest that in order for reflection to take place there has to be a problem or puzzling situation that must be solved or understood. This suggestion overlooks the fact that reflection stands to help the individual to learn from experience because of the meaningful nature of the inquiry into that experience. Bright (1996) emphasizes that

reflective practice is essential in ongoing action, as it is 'the process which underlies all forms of high professional competence, irrespective of the field in which it occurs' (p.167).

The various views on the purposes of reflection and the use of using written language for reflection are important to this study as students following the MBA course are required to write about reflection which is then assessed. Wallace's (1991) idea that meaningful reflection leads to change is of particular relevance to this study as the key element of reflection in the OUBS is that reflection should lead to change of practice and/or thinking and is an assessed element of students' writing.

### **2.4.3 Experiential learning**

Kolb (1984) has been influential in developing a model for experiential learning in which he proposes that learning should be viewed as a cyclical process, where experience is acted upon through reflection leading to conceptualization followed by experimentation, followed by further experience and reflection (see Chapter 6 Fig 1). Kolb's main concern is on reflection for learning (past experiences) which is expected to influence or inform future actions but not usually those actions still in progress.

Mezirow (cited in Boud and Knights 1996) defines experiential learning as learning in which the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied. Boud and Knights also indicate one difficulty with experiential learning models namely that it does not discuss the nature of reflection and the elements of reflection itself. They point out that reflection is the key process to experiential learning yet it is the very skill of experiential learning in which people tend to be most deficient and there are barriers to reflection. Boyd and Fales (1983) note that research on learning from experience has focused primarily on the results of experiential learning instead of the process of learning from

experience itself. Experience can be loaded with many meanings, which can sometimes be conflictual and contradictory (Johnston and Usher 1997). Learning from experience therefore is not unproblematic because not all experience can be a basis from which learning can be derived. This makes the assessment of learning from experience difficult.

#### **2.4.4 Reflection and assessment**

Since reflection has been incorporated in a number of academic disciplines in higher education which aim to promote reflection amongst developing professionals (see Boyd and Fales 1983; Harris 1996; Moffat 1996; Bolton 1999; Liou 2001) it has become a gradable aspect of learning. However, the role of assessment in relation to reflective activity is not unproblematic. Boud and Knights (1996) identify three issues of concern with the assessment of reflective activity. The first is the problem of what evidence students should provide to indicate that they have been reflecting. Secondly, the fact that reflection is a very individual activity based on the experience of the learner. Boud and Knights acknowledge that the students are 'capable of producing qualitative differences in different examples of reflection' (p.31) hence they argue that it is unsuitable to grade reflection in a way which suggests that one student's reflection is of more value than another's. Thirdly, they point to the danger that assessment might lead to students trying to impress the assessor and gain higher marks for giving the correct or expected response in which case students are most unlikely to focus on the key aspects of reflection. Sumsion and Fleet (1996) draw attention to the difficulties involved in distinguishing between reflection and mastery of a reflective writing genre. They point out that some reflective student teachers might not write in a style which is generally recognized as reflective. On the other hand, students with effective writing skills may be able to appear to write reflectively without engaging in reflection. The results of their study demonstrate that there was a positive relationship between grades for writing and reflection ratings for

students who did well academically. Stierer (2000) in his study of teachers' reflective writing in a postgraduate continuing professional development course found that one of his participants viewed the requirement to demonstrate reflection 'as a specific variety of writing at which he needed to become proficient, rather than as an opportunity to present in writing a beneficial professional process he had undertaken.'(p.210). His other findings show that participants did not view reflective writing as a way of consolidating learning but as an exclusively pragmatic exercise. They did not consider the reflective writing style of writing as a more genuine way of representing their developing professional knowledge but just a means of convincing the tutor that they were acquiring appropriate knowledge and understanding as well as the ability to apply that knowledge and understanding appropriately. Also, participants' writing about their reflection did not necessarily represent an experience that had transformed their professional knowledge.

The issues raised in the literature attest to the fact that reflection is not only problematic as a notion but also problematic when incorporated as part of assessment which determines the progression of students towards achieving academic qualification. To date the literature on reflective learning reveals that not much has been done specifically on reflective learning in open distance business education.

There is little research evidence available which concentrates on the types of experiences distance education management students have and the way in which they reflect upon those experiences for assessment purposes. As I discuss in Chapter 6 there is evidence that expectations about students' reflection and reflective writing can be problematic. There are problematic issues related to reflection for assessment, such as the view that some professionals learn from every experience, others learn from selective experiences which have particular characteristics or features and the fact that not all experience is a basis for learning. These form the basis of my research on the use of experience and reflection for

assessment in academic writing. This study hopes to contribute by focusing on diverse students' reflective writing for assessment in an open distance delivered MBA course.

## **2.5 Distance learning with OUBS**

Some research has been carried out exploring issues of teaching and learning specifically in the OUBS context. As mentioned earlier, the OUBS delivers courses in different parts of Africa, Asia and Europe and has a Learning Services Unit (LSU), which is responsible for the administration of the overseas schemes. Green of the OUBS (LSU), quoted in Cook (2001) explains that:

We rely on electronic conferencing and Internet access and there are major problems with students not having access to this in Ethiopia. What usually happens is that a group of students will communicate with the tutor through one individual (p.4).

He points to the problems encountered when dealing with developing countries like Ethiopia, where the OUBS established a programme in 1992 with international development funding, commenting that 'there were acute problems caused by poor infrastructure and lack of equipment' (p.4). Even though there are problems directly related to the delivery of the courses there is seemingly no attempt to provide a solution for affected students. Talking about current issues in the course delivery in Russia, Green stated that the electronic submission of assignments will become the norm for Russian students in the future.

Few studies have been carried out on the OUBS delivery of course in diverse geographical, cultural and linguistics contexts. The few reports often reflect the experiences of tutors who have taught some of the OUBS globally delivered courses. Mordaunt (1997) relating her experience of teaching a group of black South African and Zimbabwean students

observed that communication media were simply not as reliable as she was accustomed to.

According to Mordaunt, this is how extreme the problems were:

Many students had no access to electronic communications of any kind whatsoever- no telephone, never mind anything sophisticated. Others of course, particularly in Harare had much more privileged one to one communication with their tutors via e-mail and the usual means. (p.4)

Paton (1997) highlights the fact that OUBS course content does not adequately acknowledge the issues faced by students nor does it include enough concepts that usefully capture and highlight important aspects of their situation. Paton lists the assumptions underlying the course material as: educational background, previous knowledge and understanding metaphors, analogy, and parables. Kingsley (1997) also advocates that OUBS course writers should provide a suitable description of events and not assume that the reader will have heard about them. Thorne (1997) talking specifically of the MBA context acknowledges that there are significant differences in cultures between UK and non-UK participants. She argues that OU courses will only be successful if these differences are explicitly recognised and appropriate adaptations are made. She further notes that differences in management culture makes it difficult for non-UK students to apply course concepts. The OUBS (LSU) says,

We are committed to developing an international network of partnerships, which take into account national cultures and differences. We would always want to 'act global but think local.' (Cook 2001: 4)

It seems that the OUBS in 'acting globally' makes courses available to linguistically and culturally diverse groups in different geographical locations and in 'thinking locally' provides course material with content that remains 'local' to UK/Europe. Le Mare and Tuffs (in Manning and Mayor 1999) list some of the linguistic and cultural barriers for students who are EFL/ESL speakers who are educated outside the UK following OU courses as follows:



- Lack of familiarity with Anglo-Saxon academic writing and the particular informal genre of OU texts.
- May in any case be influenced by what is considered 'correct' academic style in their first language/ language education.
- May have unclear perceptions of the academic task.
- May have learned to approach the subject differently or to reason differently.
- May lack the particular English vocabulary of the subject under discussion.
- May not recognise or understand the British cultural context.
- For some students formal academic language may pose far less a hurdle than British colloquial language.
- The very concept/ idea of an essay, and meeting deadlines may be aspects of study that students have not encountered before (p.4).

Manning and Mayor (1999) state that no matter what their background the OU expects students to study in the same OU way. Certain problems with the delivery of OU courses to diverse groups of students in diverse contexts have already been identified: my aim therefore is to explore some of these further. I explore these by using a number of data sources such as: semi-structured interviews with students and tutors, written assignments, pro-forma, and course materials.

## 2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has considered literature which is of direct relevance to this study. I have considered the role of English as a global language, in particular the importance attached by EFL/ESL speakers to being educated in English in countries where English is not the main or official language. It has also raised the issue of how the requirements for use of proper English may be problematic to students studying in diverse contexts with different experiences of English. Students might bring to their writing the use of local English which can be problematic for assessment purposes. (In Chapter 4, I explore students' academic writing in English in the diverse contexts of Ethiopia, Russia and the UK.)

The chapter also considered the availability of resources in different parts of the world, noting that countries in the outer and expanding circles are most likely to have less resources, making the students in these contexts more disadvantaged than their counterparts in the inner circle. (In Chapter 5, I explore the availability or lack of resources for academic writing to students in the three contexts and how this impacts on their writing.)

Lastly, the chapter focused on reflection as a key learning point in business education and pointed to problems related to linking reflective writing with assessment. (In Chapter 6, I explore students' experiences of reflective writing for assessment.)

## **Chapter 3** **Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

My main aim in this chapter is to provide an outline of the methodological framework of the study. As already discussed in chapter 1, my interest in issues around student academic writing in UK based courses in contexts where English is neither the first nor official language stems from my experience as an ESL speaker and teacher in Swaziland teaching courses designed and examined in the UK.

Recent studies adopting a social perspective on student academic writing have used a combination of methods which enable the researcher to collect data using a number of research instruments and to analyse the data using qualitative and quantitative analysis (such as, Spack 1997; Prior 1998; Angelova and Riazantseva 1999; Lillis 1999). These studies have influenced my choice of methods of data collection and analysis in that I have aimed to provide 'multiple perspectives [enabling] more valid description of complex social realities' (Ramanathan and Atkinson 1999b). I collected different types of data: written assignments, pro-formas, course materials and interview data from students and tutors. Together, the data from tutors and students is used in order to provide a rich description (Denzin and Lincoln 1998) of the course and tutors, cohorts of students in different contexts (Ethiopia, Russia and the UK) and individual students' perspectives.

This chapter is organised into the following seven sections. In section 3.2 I list the research questions. In section 3.3 I present an outline of the methods used in the study. In section 3.4 I give a summary of the research design, the courses and participants. In section 3.5 I outline the data collection tools. In section 3.6 I describe the analysis of the data collected. Section 3.7 is a summary of how the research was set up and the problems encountered and how some of these were solved.

Finally, section 3.8 summarises the problems with the methodology, and issues of validity and generalisability of the research findings.

### **3.2 Research Questions**

The questions that this study sets out to address are:

1. Are non-UK based students studying in their local contexts disadvantaged by geographic and social context and resource issues in a globally delivered open access distance course?
2. What are the students' experiences of studying in English in their local context?
3. What difficulties if any do non-native users of English have with the language used in the OUBS course materials?
4. What do students and tutors say about the extent to which the course content and academic writing requirements take into account the varied situations?
5. What are the students' experiences of writing about reflection for assessment?

My starting questions were questions 1 and 2 above. The other remaining questions came about as I read the course materials and identified the requirements which students had to adhere to during the preparation and writing of the assignments. On reading the course materials and requirements for the course, I realised in the OU MBA programme that reflection and reflective writing for assessment are regarded as important parts of learning. The literature on reflective writing indicates that reflection is not straightforward, so I decided to focus on students' reflective writing and their experiences of reflective writing for assessment.

The research questions are explored in the three data chapters in the following way:

Questions 2 and 3 are dealt with in Chapter 4. Questions 1 and 4 are discussed in Chapter 5 and Question 5 is dealt with in Chapter 6.

### **3.3 Research instruments**

#### **3.3.1 Qualitative and quantitative study**

Social science research methods are commonly described as either qualitative or quantitative. Qualitative research examines the subject of the study within the social and cultural settings in which it occurs, using multiple methods. Denzin and Lincoln (1998) define qualitative research as follows:

Qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998:3)

Qualitative study, directs attention to the specifics of a particular case providing a rich description of the case. In contrast, quantitative study relies upon mathematical models and statistical data and looks for variations or similarities. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) draw attention to the fact that quantitative and qualitative approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

The use of both qualitative and quantitative approaches to data analysis is appropriate as the use of qualitative and quantitative analysis can be viewed as complementary and has been used in social practices research on academic writing (such as the work of Ivanic 1998). In this study I use qualitative and quantitative analysis to explore different aspects of the data. I use qualitative analysis with interview data and written assignments and quantitative analysis with written assignments for error analysis of students' writing.

### 3.3.2 Case study

I describe this study as involving a case study approach. Case study is not a term that is used in a clear, fixed sense (Gomm, Hammersley, and Foster 2000). Yin (1994) defines case study in terms of the research process, 'a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident' (p. 13), while Merriam (1988) defines case study in terms of its end product, 'a qualitative case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or its social unit' (p. 21). The case study can be further defined by its special features, 'qualitative case studies can be characterized as being particularistic, descriptive and heuristic' (Merriam 1998: 29). This study is particularistic and descriptive in that it covers details of specific students, their particular local contexts and similarities and discrepancies between viewpoints held by students in their local contexts and across the three contexts. The study is heuristic in that it not only describes students' experiences of studying in English in their local contexts but also aims to raise questions about students' experiences, issues of access to resources and the use of English as a language of instruction in global open distance learning.

This study focuses on students' writing on a distance MBA course from the different geographical contexts of Ethiopia, Russia and the United Kingdom. At one level then, this study is a case study of students and their writing on one particular course as it is studied in several contexts. It can also be considered a case study at a number of levels: 1) each of the sites are regarded as case studies; 2) within these sites individual students are regarded as case studies; 3) the course itself is a case study.

Case studies are not without criticism, in particular in relation to claims for the generalisability of findings. Yin (1994) argues that they can be generalised for the purpose of developing theoretical propositions but can not lead to universal generalisable truths. Stake (2000) and Lincoln and Guba (2000) state that findings from case studies are generalisable in the sense that they may have relevance to other contexts, in what they refer to as: 'naturalistic generalization' or what Lincoln and Guba (2000) call 'transferability.' Given the specificity and small scale nature of case study research, the value and therefore the validity of the case study approach seems to lie in the relevance found by the reader. Readers of case studies themselves must determine whether the findings are applicable to other cases than those studied by the researcher.

In this study I do not claim that it is possible to generate generalisable truths on the basis of the small scale case study research here, but rather that 'their particular strength lies in their attention to the subtlety and complexity of the case in its own right' (Cohen and Manion 1994). This study provides a specific view of the students' experiences of writing in English in their local contexts. Highlighting issues of language of learning and writing, access to resources and specific demands in writing.

### **3.3.2.1 Triangulation**

The use of multiple methods or triangulation in a single case study is best understood 'as a strategy that adds rigour, breadth and depth to any investigation' (Denzin and Lincoln 1998: 4). The advantage of using multiple sources of evidence is 'the development of converging lines of inquiry' (Yin 1994: 92). Patton (1987) identifies four types of triangulation:

1. data triangulation
2. methodological triangulation
3. investigator triangulation (among different evaluators)
4. theory triangulation

This discussion will focus on data triangulation, methodological triangulation and investigator triangulation which as these have been used in this study. Data was collected from different sources with the aim of exploring key themes and to address the research questions from different angles. Sources of data used were pro-formas, semi-structured interviews, electronic questionnaires, course materials and students' written assignments with tutor comments (details of these are given in section 3.4).

On methodological triangulation, the study uses both qualitative and quantitative methods in analysing the data (details in section 3.3.1 above). Investigator triangulation was used in this study in the analysis of errors (see Chapter 4). I analysed students' assignments for the following sentence level errors: spelling, punctuation, grammar, preposition, and lexis/idiom. 25% of randomly selected assignments were checked by an independent evaluator who is a language researcher. This was to check the accuracy my classification of errors and to discuss problematic cases which helped inform my analysis. The level of agreement was 90%. The concept of triangulation enhances validity, in the sense that 'it suggests that social phenomena are a little more than one dimensional, and that your study has accordingly managed to grasp more than one of those dimensions' (Manson 2002: 190). This study managed to grasp more than one dimension to academic writing in distance learning as it deals with issues of language, resources, and reflection as they impinge on writing. Studies such as this are valid in their attention to specific detail:



Understandings are grounded in individual cases. What research of this sort loses in terms of the power of numbers, it gains and surpasses in other ways. Its power lies in revealing the richness and complexity of the phenomenon under investigation (Ivanic and Weldon 1999:173).

### 3.4 Research Design

#### 3.4.1 Courses

This study focused on an MBA programme offered by the OUBS. The MBA is offered in two stages. There are two entry routes into the MBA programme the 'fast track' route and the 'open access' route. The fast track entry is for students who already have a first degree. Further specifications for the fast track course are that students should be aged over 27 and have significant management experience. The 'fast track' course is a single course, *Foundations of Senior Management (B800)*. For this course, students have to write 8 tutor marked assignments (TMAs), seminars, and attend a residential school. This course leads to entry to the second stage of the MBA programme. In the 'open access' route, according to the OUBS prospectus, students can take the *Professional Certificate in Management* and *Professional Diploma in Management* courses. This route is regarded as open access entry because students do not need any prior academic qualification. These routes afford students entry to stage 2 of the MBA programme.

In stage two of the programme, the *Strategy* course (820) is a compulsory six months course after which students study elective courses such as *Financial Strategy*, *Marketing in a complex world*, *Creativity, Innovation and change* etc. See Table 3.1 for different routes followed by students.

Table: 3.1 Routes to stage 2 of MBA

ROUTE 1	ROUTE 2
Certificate and Diploma in Business Management courses (Open Access)	Foundations of Senior Management course (Fast Track) (B800)
<b>STAGE 2 MBA</b> Strategy Course (B820)	

In this study, the focus was on both these courses which are; *Foundations of Senior Management* course as it is delivered in Russia and the UK and the *Strategy* course as it is delivered in Ethiopia, Russia and the UK. The study focused on these two courses because they provide diversity in terms of the students and the contexts in which they study. The three contexts have students with diverse cultural, linguistic and educational backgrounds. This diversity is of specific interest as the aim of the study was to investigate the experiences of students' academic writing while studying UK designed distance courses in their diverse local contexts. It also focused on access to resources for writing in the diverse contexts and issues around the use of English as a language of instruction in local contexts and reflective writing for assessment. The *Strategy* course requires students to draw not only on the course materials provided but also on other sources when writing their assignments. The question which students had to answer for TMA 01 of the *Strategy* course is given and discussed in Chapter 5.

The *Foundations of Senior Management* course is interesting because students are required to reflect on their learning and to write about their reflection for assessment. Change of thinking and practice appear to be an obligatory part of reflection on learning in this course as suggested in the TMA question. The question which students had to answer for TMA 01 of this course is given and discussed in chapter 6 where I discuss issues around reflection.

### **3.4.2 Participants**

#### **3.4.2.1 Students**

All the students who took part in the study were studying either the *Foundations of Senior Management* course or the *Strategy* course.

#### **Ethiopia**

##### *Strategy* course

In Ethiopia there were ten students who participated in this study. All the students had come to the MBA course via the 'open access route' which is both the *Certificate* and *Diploma in Business Management* courses delivered in English. For these students the *Strategy* course was the first course they were studying at masters level. All students speak Amharic and other local languages such as Tigrinya or Orominga. English is either a third or fourth language which they use mainly for studying the MBA courses.

#### **Russia**

##### *Strategy* course

In Russia there were nine students who participated in this study. Two of the students had come through the open access route with courses delivered in Russian. For those two students who came through the open access route this course was not only their first course at masters level but also their first course in English. The remaining seven had come directly from the fast track first stage of the MBA. This group was therefore a mix of students studying their first course at masters level and those studying their second masters level course. This was also the only group, which submitted their assignments electronically.

*Foundations of Senior Management* course.

There were six students from this course in this study. For most of the students this was their first course in English as their previous OU courses were taught in Russian.

Almost all of the Russian students on both courses use English for study purposes only. All of them have had their previous education in Russian.

## **United Kingdom (UK)**

*Strategy* course

In the UK there were eight students who participated in this study. All the students had come through direct from stage 1 of the MBA, which is the fast track entry *Foundations of Senior Management* course. The *Strategy* course was the second course they were studying at masters level.

*Foundation of Senior Management* course

There were six students from this course in this study. All but one has English as a first language. Their previous education has been in English and all live and work in the UK.

The following tables (reproduced as Appendix 3) summarise the different routes to stage 2 of the MBA programme and different immediate routes followed by students in the three countries. All students and tutors were given pseudonyms. The pseudonyms used were the names adopted by the students themselves.

Table 3.2 Students' route to MBA programme

Country	Open Access	Fast Track
UK	-	8
Ethiopia	10	-
Russia	2	7

Tables 3.3 and 3.4 below provide details of some of the students in the *Foundation of Senior Management and the Strategy* courses respectively. These are not all the students as some participants did not complete the pro-forma which was meant to elicit these details. Even some of those who completed the pro-forma did not complete all given sections (see Appendix 2 for pro-forma).

Table 3.3 *Foundations of Senior Management students' details: country, age bracket, language and education*

Pseudonym	Country	Gender	Age bracket	Language used at work and language of previous education	Highest educational qualification
Phil	UK	M	40-49	English	BSc
Stella	UK	F	30-39	English	MA
Patrick	UK	M	50-59	English	ACCA
Richard	UK	M	30-39	English	FCCA/ACIM
Matthew	UK	M	40-49	English	PGD industrial chemistry
David	UK	M	40-49	English	PhD
Bridget	Russia	F	30-39	Russian	University degree
Collin	Russia	M	30-39	Russian	Diploma in economics and engineering
Gloria	Russia	F	40-49	Russian	Higher education in economics
Vincent	Russia	M	-	Russian	Military institution degree
Mark	Russia	M		Russian/English	MA applied Maths
Tina	Russia	F	30-39	Russian	B.A Law

Table 3.4 Strategy course students' details: Country, age bracket, language education.

Pseudonym	Country	Gender	Age bracket	Language used at work and language of previous education	Highest educational qualification
Amandla	Ethiopia	M	40-49	Amharic/English	O U Diploma in Management
Greg	Ethiopia	M	30-39	Amharic/Amharic	O U Diploma in Management
Duncan	Ethiopia	M	-	Amharic/Amharic	O.U Diploma in Management
Kate	Russia	F	30-39	Russian/Russian	PhD Physics
Victor	Russia	M	30-39	Russian/Russian	O U Diploma in management
Karl	Russia	M		Russian/Russian	MA in Maths
Frank	UK	M	30-39	English/French	PhD.
James	UK	M	40-49	English/English	Honours in Engineering

### 3.4.2.2 Tutors

Five tutors agreed for me to use their comments on students' assignments and to be interviewed about their experiences and perspectives on tutoring on the MBA courses in Ethiopia, Russia and the United Kingdom. They had all tutored for at least three years in different contexts on one or both of the MBA courses which this study focuses on. Table 3.4 provides a profile of the tutors. Interviewing tutors was important because it enhanced the data by providing a different perspective to that of the students on teaching and learning in diverse contexts. Looking at their feedback was important in that it allowed me to see if there were any specific issues of language that tutors focused and commented on when marking students' assignments.

Table: 3 5 Tutors' experiences, teaching contexts (current and previous) and first language.

Pseudonym	Gender	Tutoring contexts	Experience	First language
Andy Anderson	M	UK Western Europe Russia	5 years	English
James Blake	M	UK Ethiopia Eritrea	8 years	English
Justine Chambers	M	UK Russia Ethiopia	5 years	English
Rachael Douglas	F	UK Russia Western Europe	3 years	English
Ralph Edwards	M	UK Russia	4 years	English



### **3.5 Data collection**

#### **3.5.1 Pro-forma**

A pro-forma was used to solicit background details of participating students. These included personal details, educational background, main language and work experience. Collecting these details about the students was important in terms of finding out about their prior education, main language and work experience which are all resources students can draw on when writing their assignments. (See Appendix 2 for pro-forma)

#### **3.5.2 Interviews and electronic questionnaires**

The main aim of this study was to explore and understand the experiences of students studying on a distance course, with specific focus on their academic writing. In addition, I wanted to hear the perspectives of tutors. I regarded interviewing as the most suitable way to explore peoples' experiences and perspectives because, as stated by Seidman (1991), interviewing as a research method

is a powerful way to gain insight into educational issues through understanding the experience of the individuals whose lives constitute education....It affirms the importance of the individual without denigrating the possibility of community and collaboration (p.7).

I conducted semi-structured interviews in order to explore students' experiences around academic writing in a distance learning MBA programme (see Appendix 4 and 5 for interview questions). These interviews also allowed me to explore issues raised by participants. Interviews were arranged with students who expressed interest/willingness to participate via the consent form. Interviews lasted for approximately 40 minutes. A total of 23 interviews were conducted, 18 with students and 5 with tutors (see Table 3.5 for data

summary). Some students were not willing to participate in the interviews but consented to the use of their marked assignments. Their unwillingness was disappointing and limited the study in terms of data collection. Where it was not possible to conduct face-to-face interviews due to circumstances beyond my control, I had to rely on electronic questionnaires which had the same questions as the interview.

Specific types of interviewing focusing on written texts have been developed in literacy research. Odell, Goswami and Herrington (1983) used 'discourse based interviews' to discuss specific features of participants' writing shortly after they had written their texts. Similarly, Ivanic (1998) Lea and Street (1999) and Lillis (1999) have used what has been referred to as 'talk around text' to explore a variety of issues on academic writing such as identity and students' meaning making in higher education. I would have liked to use the talk around text method as part of my research in order to explore in more detail students' perspectives on specific aspects of their texts. However, this was not possible due to the difficulties I discuss in section 3.7.1. I therefore used semi-structured interviews and electronic questionnaires.

The interviews and pro-formas generated some similar information: for example, descriptive information about the languages participants spoke, or the job in which they were currently employed. However, these different methods also generated qualitatively different data. For example, in her pro-forma Kate stated that she did not have any worries about the writing to be done for the course, yet during the interview she described how anxious she was before writing the first assignment. Her anxieties have to do specifically with academic writing conventions in English:

*For the first TMA I feel the necessity to obtain to this knowledge because it was my first practice to write TMA in English and I was not sure about all the principles for writing this TMA. I need the concrete explanation what I must do for writing TMA for good marks. [RSTINTKate]*

The semi-structured interview therefore often yielded additional information.

The use of semi-structured interviews or electronic questionnaires raises issues about the reliability of the data gathered. One issue commonly raised in the literature on interviewing is that of the reliability of memory; it is argued that where the interview takes place some time after the writing task, it is possible that memory is affected, as the person recalling it has new experiences, ideas and beliefs to form the context of the memory (Hage and Meek 1993). A different issue raised by Matsumoto (1994; 1996) is the possibility that 'informants may know more than they can tell' (p.373). Factors he suggests may contribute to this situation are: time lapse and intervening experience; questions being too general and not evoking detailed recall, and the possibility that the informants may not be able to express themselves or their actions well.

Whilst I was interested in any specific information or memory that students had of experiences relating to their writing, I did not see the interviews as a record of the 'correct' memory of their writing. Inevitably, given the circumstances surrounding the interviewing, I assumed that only partial accounts of their experiences would be expressed: participants had no previous relationship with me; only one interview (maximum) was carried out with each participant; participants and I were both communicating through English as a foreign or second language. My main aim therefore was to explore something of their perspectives. Of course perspectives can and do shift with time so I saw my interviews as a snapshot of a particular moment in the students' perspectives.

Interviews with tutors were also semi-structured; these were carried out with tutors who were either still tutoring on the course or had tutored on the course in a different context in the immediate past. Interview questions asked for information about the tutors' experiences of tutoring in these contexts, views about language issues, course content and

resources (see Appendix 6 for interview questions). This provides a point of comparison with the students, particularly in relation to the nature of the key issues raised by the students and issues arising from analysis of the assignments. I interviewed five tutors, each interview lasting between an hour and an hour and a half.

Respondent validation of interview data, that is getting participants to check content of interview transcripts, was not carried out mainly because of the difficulty in contacting students (see section 3.7.1 below for further discussion). It would have been difficult to achieve because of the time frame, as students had already moved on to the next course and because it would have presented a further imposition on their time. This has been taken into consideration in interpreting the data and in the claims I make in this study: I recognise the need to express caution. However, whilst recognising that in such a small study within constrained circumstances any findings must be treated with caution, I think that the fact that similar themes emerge across the set of interviews indicates the significance of such themes: for example, the theme of difficulties caused by the language of the course material is indicated by several students (see discussion in Chapter 4).

### **3.5.3 Students' assignments**

As the study focuses on writing, students' written assignments are an important source of data as students' are assessed through writing and assignment marks count towards the final exam marks. It is also through the assignments that I could see the sources students used in their assignments, find out what they actually wrote about in their reflective writing, and see tutor comments and feedback on their writing.

Since the courses are delivered at a distance, tutors mark the assignments and then send the marked assignments to the university's assignment handling office for the marks to be recorded. Then the assignment handling office sends the assignments back to the students. Marked assignments with marginal tutor comments were collected from students mainly through the assignment handling office and a few were received directly from the students and tutors. The individual student's assignments had both marginal comments and general comments from the tutor. In a few instances tutors provided general comments on the whole tutor group on a separate sheet of paper. These were also collected.

#### **3.5.4 Course materials**

All course materials which the student received were collected and some of the handouts distributed by the tutors. I was not able to get all handouts distributed to the different groups by the tutors because not all participating students had tutors who were also taking part in the study. Details on difficulties relating to access to both students and tutors are discussed in detail in section 3.7.1. There were three important reasons for collecting course materials which are: 1) I used the course materials to familiarise myself with the course content; 2) Course materials were analysed to identify instructions on the use of English language in the assignment guidelines (this part of the analysis is discussed in Chapter 4) 3) The course materials were analysed to identify sources and references available to students (this is part of the analysis of sources and resources discussed in Chapter 5). A summary of all data collected is presented in Table 3.6.

Table 3.6: Summary of data collected

	Pro-forma	Interview/electronic questionnaire	Tutor marked assignments
<b>Students</b>			
Ethiopia	3	10	18
Russia	11	4	19
<b>United Kingdom</b>	11	4	14
<b>Tutors</b>			
United Kingdom	n/a	5	n/a
<b>Course materials</b>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Foundation of Senior Management</i> course books</li> <li>• <i>Strategy</i> course books</li> <li>• Handouts from tutors</li> <li>• General comments from tutors</li> </ul>			

Table 3.7: Conventions used for transcribing interviews

., ?	Conventions of punctuation to indicate in writing my understanding of the sense of the spoken words. (Halliday 1989: 90)
G	Initial of person speaking
*	Unclear speech
[...]	Gap in data transcribed
( )	Additional comments

The interviews were transcribed broadly in the way the students and tutors were speaking. I used conventional orthography, including punctuation to record my understanding of students' and tutors' meaning. I did not attempt to convey paralinguistic features although I made use of these in interpreting the interviewee's meaning. References are given at the end of extracts from written and spoken data, to indicate their source within the general data collection, as illustrated in the key below, which is reproduced as Appendix 11.

## Key

E= Ethiopia R = Russia U = United Kingdom

S= Strategy course

F= Foundations course

TMA= Tutor marked assignment

INT= Interview

### Examples:

ESTMA01Amandla= Ethiopia Strategy course TMA number 1 +student's pseudonym

USINTJames=UK Strategy course Interview+student's pseudonym

TutorAnderson-INT = Tutor+tutor's pseudonym interview

*Courier new*=Extracts from students' assignments

*Italics*+ extracts from students and tutor interviews

## 3.6 Methods of analysis of data

### 3.6.1. Interviews

In total 18 interviews were carried out with students and 5 with tutors. Transcriptions of the interviews were carried out by me. This gave me the opportunity to become familiar with the content of the interview while transcribing (see Appendix 8). Transcriptions were categorised according to key themes such as use of English language, resources for writing and writing about reflection which were set up in the research questions. While the interview questions sought to explore students' experiences, the interview also offered the opportunity for students to express their own views. The students' and tutors' responses were used to inform chapters 4, 5 and 6.

### 3.6.2 Analysis of assignments

Students' written texts in this study were analysed in three different ways for the following: error analysis using the following categories: spelling, punctuation, grammar, preposition and lexis/idiom. These categories are from Mayor, Hewings, North, Swann, and Coffin (forthcoming). Analysing students' written assignments is important because students on the MBA programme are expected to use 'proper English' when writing assignments yet their competency in English differs between each context and between students in the same context (see Chapter 4 for further discussion on English). For some students, English is not their first language and it is also not the language used either at work or at home. Error analysis was carried out on *Strategy* course assignments only, because unlike the *Foundation of Senior Management* course which is not available to students in Ethiopia, the *Strategy* course was studied by students in all three contexts which allowed for a comparison of students writing in the three contexts. Specific details of analysis are discussed in Chapter 4.

The *Strategy* course assignments were also analysed for the resources used by students because students on the course are required to draw on sources other than those provided as part of the course materials when writing assignments. In order to identify sources not provided by the institution and therefore 'additional' used by students in each *Strategy* assignment, I looked for any use of references or citation from additional sources i.e. sources that were not part of the course package or not referred to in the course materials. I have used the term resources to refer to any source of publication which students draw on when writing their assignments. These resources can be material resources such as books, journals, newspapers, reports, and other non-material resources such as previous educational experience, other students and background knowledge relevant to course content. This is dealt with in detail in Chapter 5.



*Foundations of Senior Management* assignments were analysed for students carrying out reflective writing. Specific details of analysis are in Chapter 6.

### **3.6.3 Course materials**

As mentioned earlier there were three important reasons for close reading and analysis of course materials; 1) I used the course materials to familiarise myself with the course content; 2) Course materials were analysed to identify specific instruction on the use of the English language (this is part of the analysis is discussed in Chapter 4); 3) The course materials were also analysed to identify sources and references available to students (this is part of the analysis of sources and resources discussed in Chapter 5.)

### **3.7 Setting up the research**

In setting up this study I began looking at OU courses that are offered globally. Because of its open access policy, the OU enables higher education access to adult students with a wide range of previous educational experiences. In this context, the text-based nature of distance learning courses requires students to read and their reading is the basis of their writing for the assignments. The student-tutor relationship is founded on the exchange of texts which can be subject to different and /or conflicting interpretation by students.

I was particularly interested in the geographic, educational, cultural, linguistic, diversity of the contexts where the courses were offered. I was looking for a programme offered in different contexts which encompassed these diversities. The different local contexts of Ethiopia, Russia and UK allowed me to compare students' experiences and perspectives both within each context and across the three contexts. The OUBS MBA programme was one which fitted well as it is offered in diverse contexts.

Given that the course is offered in the parts of Africa and continental Europe, these specific contexts can be classified into two of Kachru's three circles, the 'inner circle' and the 'expanding circle'

For the study, I chose to focus on one country in Africa, Ethiopia and two in Europe which are Russia and the United Kingdom. These sites were ideal in that; firstly, the same programme is delivered by tutors from the OUBS without adaptations in all three contexts; secondly, because of the open access policy of the OU, students in these contexts were doing the same course although they had come to the course through different routes; thirdly, students' were from diverse educational and linguistic backgrounds and English had a different status in each context.

### **3.7.1 Gaining access to research sites**

Gaining access to students and tutors was far more difficult than I had first anticipated. In order to get access to the tutors and students, I contacted the OUBS as tutors and students could only be contacted through the institution. Seidman (1991) points to the fact that when interviewers try to contact potential participants whom they do not know, they often face gatekeepers who control access to those people. I provided a detailed proposal for my research as required by the OUBS and then asked to be allowed to attend the tutors' meeting before the start of the course in order to tell them about my research and enlist tutors' support and participation. My request was turned down and instead I was assigned a 'gatekeeper' whose function was to inform tutors about the research on my behalf during the meeting and provide them with a written statement of what the research was about and what was expected of participating tutors and students. As this meeting was held before the first tutorial sessions with students, I also prepared consent forms (see Appendix 1) for tutors and a consent form and pro-forma (to elicit background details such as education,

language etc from students) which tutors would pass to their students. There were five tutors who were interested in taking part in the research and there were some who did not want to participate themselves but were willing to inform their students about the research during their first tutorial session.

On receipt of the tutors' consent forms, I was then able to contact the tutors directly by phone and email and answer any questions they had about the research. I also explained that it would be ideal if students would agree to the use of their marked assignments and to be interviewed. However, students who did not wish to be interviewed could consent to the use of their assignments only. For confidentiality reasons, I was not allowed to attend tutorial sessions, therefore access to the students depended on the tutors. This arrangement was problematic especially in Ethiopia; unlike in the UK and Russia where each tutor regularly meets up with his/her tutor group, in Ethiopia a team of UK-based tutors go there on a rotational basis and tutor to all groups at different times. Thus students do not get to see the same tutor at all times. On this occasion, the research statement, consent forms and pro-formas were given to the tutor whose turn it was to go to Ethiopia.

Due to time constraints, in all contexts, students did not have time to complete the consent forms during the tutorial session. In the UK, students promised to give these back to the tutor on completion or to send them directly to me. In Russia, forms were given to officials of the partner institution. In Ethiopia, students were asked to return the forms to the British Council as it is responsible for the co-ordination of the course but most were unable to do so due to the poor postal service, so they kept the forms until the next tutorial session.

All these difficulties resulted in a delay in receiving the consent forms without which I was unable to get the students' assignments from the OU assignment handling office. Consent forms from Ethiopia and Russia in particular arrived well after the first assignment had been marked by the tutor, recorded and sent back to the students by the assignment handling office. As the Russian students submit their assignments electronically, it was relatively easy to get the assignments via the assignment handling office. The UK and Ethiopian students' assignments were not electronic. On requesting the students' assignments directly from them, some UK students sent me their assignments to copy or via email. The situation with Ethiopian students was slightly different and problematic because almost all none of them could be contacted by phone, they had no access to email and the postal service was poor. In this case, the British Council made copies of some of the assignments which were brought by the tutor from the UK on their second tutorial. Students were then requested to bring all their other assignments when coming for the final revision tutorial which I was to attend to meet and interview participating students. During this visit, I was able to get some assignments from the students. Relying on the assignment handling office was not unproblematic; some assignments from students who had given consent were accidentally missed during photocopying. In one rare instance involving Ethiopian assignments, the assignment handling office only received the tutor feedback report with the students' scores and the assignments had already been sent to the student. In this case I was not able to get the assignments directly from the students.

Additional difficulties arose when I set out to interview students. I conducted semi-structured interviews with students under different circumstances in each of the sites. All the interviews and questionnaires were administered some time after the assignments had been submitted, marked and returned to the students. In Ethiopia, interviews were conducted with students who attended the final tutorial session. Of the 10 interviews held, 6 were incomplete as they lasted for about 15 minutes thus I could not cover all questions

with students. Due to time pressures, interviews with Ethiopian students were held between tutorial sessions as students had to rush for public transport immediately after the tutorial session; as a result some interviews were not completed. Interviews with the Russian students were held during the residential school week in the UK. However, because the residential school day runs from 9am to 9 pm, interviews with students were conducted after 9 pm which was inconvenient for some students as they either had to be involved in group discussion with other students in preparation for next day's sessions or were exhausted because of the long day's work. Even though the residential school appeared to be the best way to get to the students, it was also problematic in that students are free to attend any residential school in Europe which meant that Russian students attended different residential schools and it was impossible for me to attend the various residential schools in Europe.

The use of electronic questionnaires (with interview questions) with Russian students who did not attend the same residential school was not very successful as only one student completed the electronic questionnaire. It could be that students were not prepared to complete the questionnaire electronically because English is a foreign language and it probably takes them a lot of time to write. All but one of the Russian students responded to email messages sent to them. Being in the UK enabled interviews with UK students to be conducted at a time and location convenient to each student as I could travel to where the students were.

In summary, the difficulties encountered were access to both students and tutors which resulted in delays in getting consent from both students and tutors which in turn led to delays in getting students' marked assignments and in some instances missing students' assignments altogether. There was also time pressure on students during interviews during the residential school and during the tutorial session in Ethiopia.

The students' unwillingness to respond to emails and electronic questionnaires, due to what I think was lack of confidence in their written English, was a hindrance in the data collection process.

### **3.8 Conclusion**

This study uses a case study approach involving qualitative and quantitative data analysis to provide a detailed account of the students' experiences and perspectives on writing and tutors' experiences of tutoring in a global open distance learning course. This chapter has described the methodology used for this study, difficulties with gaining access to research sites and how these affected the data collection process.

There were three difficulties with setting up the study. These were; 1) gaining access to research sites; 2) data collection, in particular arranging for interviews and getting hold of some students' assignments and; 3) time constraints during the interviews with Ethiopian and Russian students.

One key weakness with the data collection is the fewer number of interviews with individual students than I had planned and the inability to discuss their writing with them after they had written the assignment using talk around text mentioned earlier, as used by Ivanič (1998) Lea and Street (1999) and Lillis (1999). However, this problem could not have been easily avoided because of the distance between students and the researcher and the students' unwillingness to be interviewed over the phone or to respond to electronic questionnaires, (in the case of Russia) and the lack of access to the telephone and computers (in Ethiopia.)

Despite all the problems encountered and the limited data collected, the study does offer some understanding of students' experiences of writing in English in diverse contexts. This was a study of a part of one particular OU programme, and on the basis of the data that I have there is a limit to claims that can be made. However, the interviews with students constitute a rich source of information although conducting more follow-up interviews based on students' writing would undoubtedly increase the quality of the data informing this study. Despite all the difficulties with access to tutors, access to students, access to students' written assignments due to institutional constraints, and distance, I was able to collect sufficient data to provide useful insights into the experiences of some students and tutors studying and tutoring in different contexts respectively and to provide insights into some problem areas with the 'globalisation of education,' with particular reference to academic writing.

## Chapter 4 Academic reading and writing in English

### 4.1 Introduction

As mentioned earlier, OU distance education courses designed in the UK initially for a UK audience which involves predominantly EL1 speakers of English, are increasingly being made available in contexts where English is not a native language, including countries such as Ethiopia and Russia where English is neither one of the official languages nor the medium of educational instruction. English is the predominant language of most subjects for OU global courses. The text-based nature of OU courses requires students to read course materials written in English, and these materials form the basis of their writing for assignments.

Research that has been carried out on globally delivered OU courses in relation to language seems to indicate that there may be linguistic and cultural barriers for EFL/ESL students educated outside the UK (e.g. Manning and Mayor 1999). Other findings indicate the following: EFL/ESL students take longer to write and communicate in English (Lea et al. 2000b); producing an assignment written in business English presents a major challenge (Dence and O'Toole 1999); and there may be different interpretations of 'plain' English in diverse contexts (Windy 1997). In this chapter, my aim is to contribute to this body of research by exploring language issues as they arise for students following a specific OU course in Ethiopia, Russia and the UK.

Drawing on interviews with students and tutors, written assignments and course materials this chapter has four key aims. Firstly, it explores course materials in order to establish explicit and implicit requirements about the use of English in written assignments.



Secondly, it explores students' perspectives on academic reading and writing in English as a foreign language in different contexts. Thirdly, it analyses students' written texts to document the nature of the errors, to enable comparison between students and contexts, to investigate if EFL/ESL make more errors than their EL1 counterparts and to find out if EFL/ESL students receive lower marks than their NS counterparts (as suggested by Lea, Goodfellow, Gonzalez, and Mason 2000a). Finally, it discusses tutors' perspectives on the use of English in the course materials and the use of English in students' assignments. This chapter considers English from these four perspectives to provide an integrated picture of some of the key issues relating to teaching and learning in English in a globally delivered OU course.

#### **4.2 What the MBA course says about English language**

OU courses are designed in the 'inner circle' (see Chapter 2 for discussion of Kachru's circles) where English is the dominant language and delivered mainly by EL1 speaking tutors to a diverse group of students in diverse contexts in the inner, outer and expanding circles. English, the language of instruction for OU courses invariably becomes an important issue because of the diversity of the students' language use and their experience of English and the status of English in each local context. In this section I focus on what the course materials, which all students are provided with, say about the use of English.

I began by looking at all *Foundations of Senior Management* and *Strategy* course materials for explicit instruction and/or guidance to students on English language use and writing conventions. I also looked for the less explicit guidance: where certain views are presupposed for example rather than explicitly stated. The two main sources on language instruction and guidance were the Course File, which contains all the assignment questions

and notes; and also the MBA handbook which includes study skills advice for students following the MBA programme.

The Course File refers briefly to course team policy on non-gender specific language, and on the term adopted for non-profit-making organisations:

Two points concerning language are perhaps worth highlighting. In line with the UK practice of trying to make materials non-gender specific, we have used 'he or she' or 'they' where possible, and either 'he' or 'she' when talking about a particular manager, aiming for a balance. The second point concerns what Americans call 'not-for-profit' organizations, those which are neither private profit-seeking organizations nor government or government-centred statutory bodies. We have tended to refer to these as 'voluntary and non-profit organizations' (Course File p5)

There are only two pieces of advice for students that relate specifically to students' language use. A vague but important general point is made in the Course File where it states that:

The main thing is to aim for a thoughtful analysis, with well constructed arguments, presented clearly in proper English, and with insightful use of course ideas. (Course File. p. 5).

However, there is no explanation in the Course File as to what is meant by 'proper English'. In this context 'proper English' is likely to refer to the use of Standard English, a notion which is problematic because of the diversity of the contexts in which English is used. What could be regarded as 'proper English' in the UK might not be the same as 'proper English' in other places such as Ethiopia and Russia (for an overview of 'Englishes', see McArthur 2002). The reference to proper English was influential in my decision to explore students' written assignment, a) to identify usages which might be considered 'errors' in Standard English and, b) to explore whether these errors affect assessment (discussion of this analysis occurs later in the chapter).

A second reference to language occurs in the MBA handbook, where there is acknowledgement of the potential language problems faced by students for whom English is a second or foreign language. The advice they are offered is as follows:

If English is not your first language, and is weak, you should probably take a language course before starting your MBA. (Cameron 1997: 244)

Despite the fact that the courses are delivered to students from diverse linguistic backgrounds this is the only time in the course materials where users of English as a second or foreign language are addressed directly. This advice indicates that it is the EFL/ESL students' responsibility to ensure that his/ her level of English is of a suitable level for studying the courses. The practical drawback with this specific piece of advice is that it comes to the students late, as they get the MBA handbook as part of the provided course material which students receive after they have registered for the course.

The MBA handbook has a list of words commonly mis-spelled or misused in MBA assignments. The list includes words such as: advice-advise, affect-effect, councillor-counsellor, disinterested-uninterested, ensure-insure, hear-here, imply-infer, i.e.-e.g.-etc., it's-its. There are also basic guidelines and short explanations of how punctuation can be used.

Generally, guidance on English language use is extremely limited. The limited guidance is restricted to the few points on spelling and punctuation outlined above. There is no recognition of potential cultural differences in language practices in different contexts. The next section explores students' perspectives of reading and writing in English in different local contexts.

### 4.3 Students' perspectives: academic reading and writing

This section focuses on how language, in particular English the language of instruction of the course impacts on individual students. Language may be considered one of the non-material resources which students draw upon during preparation and writing of assignments (see Chapter 5 on resources). English is a necessary resource for success in this course, but this is problematic for some of the students because of their linguistic backgrounds. As mentioned earlier, English is either a second or foreign language for all the Russian and Ethiopian students. Prior to studying with the OU most Ethiopian students had their previous education in their national language Amharic. The Russian students all had their previous education in Russian. English is used only for OU study purposes by these students. Only one UK student in my sample does not have English as his first language. However, although English has not been the language of instruction in all his previous higher education this student has lived and worked in the UK for a long time.

In this section I present student profiles from both the *Foundations of Senior Management* course and the *Strategy* course: two profiles from Ethiopia, three from Russia and the UK. These students were selected because they are the ones from whom I had the richest data overall (see Chapter 3 for issues to do with data collection). The profiles provide evidence of considerable cultural and linguistic diversity. Even in the same geographical context, the profiles illustrate differences at an individual level because of the different situations of each participant.

These profiles draw on data from at least two of the following sources; pro-formas completed by students, semi-structured interviews with students or electronic questionnaires and students' written assignments (see Chapter 3 for details of data collection and Appendix 11 for guide on the typeface and abbreviations used in the profiles.)

#### **4.3.1 Amandla (Ethiopia)**

Amandla is in the 40-49 age bracket, and he uses two languages on a regular basis: Amharic and Tigrinya. He was educated in a private school in Ethiopia. English has been the language of his previous education. He was an engineering student at university two decades ago but did not complete his degree because of his involvement in politics and the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. He was a teacher of English for about ten years in Ethiopia. During this period he was a member of the curricular promotion department in his school and used to write articles and brochures in English for both local students and the general public. At present he works for a rural non-governmental organisation as the leader of the development section. In his present job he writes reports in Amharic which follow a specific format designed for all departments. This format, he says, is different from the kind of report he is expected to produce for the *Strategy* course assignments.

Before signing up for the *Strategy* course he studied the OUBS Certificate and Diploma in Business Management. He did not have any concerns about English language and the reading he had to do for the course, as he felt he could draw on his experience and knowledge as a school teacher of English. He is studying this course because he believes that this is the 'era of the discipline of management' and he hopes to achieve what he refers to as 'managerial capability'. Amandla did not attend any English language preparatory

course and had no concerns about the reading that has to be done for the course. He stated that:

*The cases in the book are very long, some 40 pages. Besides that there's not much of a problem. In high school I had British teachers therefore I am used to a fair level of English. I can read fine but the cases are very long. I like the ideas but you forget the beginning when you reach the end. [ESINT Amandla]*

Amandla's main concern is not with the language but with the amount of reading that has to be done for the course. He has a good grasp of English in general, which is useful in terms of the reading and writing that has to be done for the course. In Amandla's case, English language is a resource he can rely on as he claims to have a fairly good knowledge of the language from his previous education and work experience as a teacher of English. Error analysis of his writing shown later in this chapter indicates that he does indeed have a good level of Standard English as he makes very few mistakes as shown in Table 4.2.

#### **4.3.2. Greg (Ethiopia)**

Greg is in the 30-39 age bracket, and his first language is Amharic. His previous education was in Amharic and he graduated from an agricultural teacher training school. He has also completed the OUBS *Certificate* and *Diploma in Business Management* courses, which were the first courses he studied in English. He currently works for a semi-governmental organisation. Part of his duties entail writing reports which he does by filling in specially prepared report forms in Amharic. Like Amandla in his current position, he hardly ever uses English at work. English is a foreign language for Greg. He has only studied it as a subject in school and English was not the language of instruction for other subjects at school. The only time Greg uses English is when studying the OU courses. At work everything is done in Amharic. Unlike Amandla who seemed confident with the use of English for the course, Greg identifies problems:

*It is difficult for us, our main problem is not with the course concepts but its main problem is language problem. We don't get from any place any training about language: we are trained simply by our experience in this language. [ESINTGreg]*

Greg acknowledges that the language of the course is difficult. 'We are trained simply by our experience in this language' could suggest very little experience in using the language considering the fact that Greg says he doesn't use English at work, and only uses it for studying this course. In Greg's case the English language may be said to be a barrier to learning as he finds the language of the course difficult. He suggests:

*When we compare our standard [of English] in Ethiopia when they [course writers] write the language they must put words to the standard that is not difficult in our standard. [ESINTGreg]*

Greg acknowledges that their (Ethiopian) standard of English is not the same as it is in the UK and this makes the course difficult for him. This seems to indicate that as a student Greg is concerned about Ethiopian students not operating on a level field with students from other countries.

*We know everything in Amharic, we identify with things more in Amharic and can describe everything but when we translate the idea to English we don't come to the point, it's only vast, too much difficult. [ESINTGreg]*

Greg highlights the problem he encounters when translating and expressing the points he needs to in English. Overall, Greg's concerns are that there are differences between the standard of English used and expected by the course team and the standard of English available to students in Ethiopia. Error analysis of his writing shown later in this chapter indicates that he does indeed have problems with Standard British English as he makes a lot of mistakes as shown in Table 4.2.

### 4.3.3. Mark (Russia)

Mark is a software test manager who has been in this position for a period of two years. He holds an MA in applied mathematics. Mark's first language is Russian, he also speaks, reads and writes English. *Foundations of Senior Management* course is his first OU course. Russian was the language of instruction for his previous studies. He chose to study with the OU because he says he wants to have an MBA qualification and *Foundations of Senior Management* course is the first step in that 'long journey.' His main aim in studying this course is to acquire some management guidelines and the experience to apply it in a real day-to-day job. He says he did not follow any preparatory English course prior to registering for this course because he uses English on a daily basis at work when speaking to clients, writing email and reports. However, he has experienced some problems with vocabulary:

*There were more than 500 words which were unknown for me; these are the following words: falter, slack, compelling, agile, corollary, vault, cite, nestle, multifaceted, abreast, ramification, regurgitate, fierce. [RSINTMark]*

Asked how he dealt with the problem of words that he did not know Mark said,

*The solution was very easy, I bought English-Russian electronic dictionary and used it for translation. [RSINTMark]*

The problematic words listed by Mark are not subject specialist terms but they are probably relatively uncommon in his experience of English. Although Mark seems to suggest that this was unproblematic, it probably was time consuming. On the writing that has to be done for the course, he says that his main concern is grammar because 'at work we don't pay much attention to grammar.' By 'grammar', he explained he meant using all tenses fluently.

He was also worried about the style of academic writing required in assignments. He explains that:



*The usual style of our reports at work is to write the report from the first person. There are many sentences started with 'I guess, I think, I suggest.' According to the report writing guidelines I tried to change that style especially for TMAs. Sometimes it's good to change own style, but sometimes it's better to allow a person write the report as he used to do it. [RSINTMark]*

The difficulties between writing an MBA report and report writing at work is not understood by Mark to be one of format, as in the case of Amandla. It has to do with style e.g. the change from using the first person to using the third person as mentioned in the Course File. Although Mark appreciates learning a different style of writing he believes that sometimes one should be allowed to write in a style one is used to.

Mark's language concerns relate to different aspects of language use: unfamiliar vocabulary, a specific aspect of grammar (the use of tenses) and unfamiliar report.

#### **4.3.4 Kate (Russia)**

Kate is in the 30-39 age bracket. Her first language is Russian and she has had all her previous education in Russian. She holds a PhD in Physics in Russian and she has completed the OUBS Certificate and Diploma in Business Management courses, both of which were delivered in Russian. Presently she is employed as a commercial director of a pharmaceutical company. Before joining the *Strategy* course she did not study on any English language preparatory course, as she says she has been studying English with a private institution for a long time. During her interview she stated that she did not particularly have worries about the reading and writing that has to be done for the course. Like Mark, she said that if she encounters difficulties she uses her English-Russian dictionary. Kate is studying this course because she wants to 'acquire knowledge about business strategy and also to graduate with an MBA.' According to her, this course is her first step towards an MBA. Her job entails writing reports in Russian and some in English,

as she works for a foreign company. Talking about writing on the course, Kate stated that she found it difficult to summarise information from the various sources she had:

*The difficulties may be to summarise a lot of information for concrete questions, for the TMA. [RSINTKate]*

Since Kate's previous education, including the OU certificate and diploma courses were in Russian, this could be one reason why she finds it difficult to summarise a lot of information in English. Although in her pro-forma Kate stated that she did not have any worries about the writing to be done for the course, during the interview she describes how anxious she was before writing the first assignment. Her anxieties have to do specifically with academic writing conventions in English:

*For the first TMA I feel the necessity to obtain to this knowledge because it was my first practice to write TMA in English and I was not sure about all the principles for writing this TMA. I need the concrete explanation what I must do for writing TMA for good marks. [RSTINTKate]*

Kate seems to suggest that she was anxious about writing her first assignment in English as her previous education and OU courses (certificate and diploma) had been in Russian. This contrasts with Amanda and Greg who have studied their previous OU courses in English. Talking about the language used in the course material, Kate also acknowledged that she has difficulty in reading the materials:

*K: I got some language difficulties for example some-\**

*G: Pardon*

*K: Some new words.*

*G: Some new words?*

*K: Yes, some new words and I must use dictionary for translate these words in the Russian to understand what is it (laughs) [RSTINTKate]*

Like Greg and Mark, Kate's difficulties with reading centre on unfamiliar vocabulary. She has to use an English-Russian dictionary in order to fully understand the meanings of the words. English may therefore be a barrier to learning. Despite this, however, she emphasises the importance of trying to learn English.

*Because for me it is important to master English and I got a little but I've got practice at meetings with my English bosses and I need to discuss some business problems in English. That's why it is very useful for me to study in English. [RSTINTKate]*

Although Kate generally has difficulty with the language used in the course material she emphasises the importance of English at her work place. Kate, like Mark, has opportunities to use English at work, unlike Amandla and Greg who only use English for studying.

Asked about her experiences at the residential school which was in the UK she said

*K: It is a very interesting question because this is my first activity to participate in a group who speaks only English and to discuss some materials, to discuss some ideas. I think if my language (English) will be better it will be more useful for me to be in such activity. But I enjoy it- I've got some language difficulties.*

*G: Like?*

*K: For example, I understand just good all discussions but my possibilities to speak is not so good for participating in discussions. That's why I hear and I speak a little. I hear, I write, but I speak a little bit. [RSTINTKate]*

She again mentions language as a problem for her - in the specific context of the UK residential school, with almost all the students speaking English. Kate indicates that she enjoys being part of an all English speaking group discussion whilst facing some difficulties. Actively participating in discussion is considered to be an important part of the residential school which she is only partly able to do because she feels her English is not good enough for speaking in such contexts.

Although English is the language she has chosen for her education, it does present some problems for her and can be said to be a barrier in her learning which she is, however, prepared to face in order to improve her career prospects. Error analysis of her writing shown later in this chapter indicates that she has a good level of Standard English as she makes few mistakes as shown in Table 4.3.

#### 4.3.5 Victor (Russia)

Victor is in the 30-39 age bracket, his first language is Russian and he holds a degree in engineering. Presently he is employed as a manager in the engineering department of a regional office in the airline industry. His previous education has been in Russian. He has completed the Certificate and Diploma in Business Management in Russian and a management and health care course offered by the OU in English. The MBA *Strategy* course is his second course in the English language. Before registering for the course he did not follow any English language preparatory course. As an engineer he stated that he had very good experience of writing scientific reports in both English and Russian. His main concern was about the amount of reading and writing which has to be done for the course. In relation to reading, he was concerned about study time:

*The problem is, I can read in English and have to read twice. In Russian I read twice as faster than in English [RSINTVictor]*

With regard to writing, his main concern was the examination: he felt that because English is not his first language he should be allowed more than 3 hours to write the examination.

In his interview he described the difficulty he has with finding words in English:

*It's not somewhere simple when you write in a foreign language, you know [...]. There's a problem for me because I can't write so much in a foreign language than in Russian. I write less but not more. I cannot find words to write in English, I write more in Russian. [RSINTVictor]*

Talking about the strategy they used for discussion during the self-help groups Victor stated that:

*We speak a mixture of Russian and English, Russian language with English terms very interesting to hear. When you speak in Russian then English for the matrix models and so on then you continue in Russian. Because I had some meetings and the most knowledgeable students with the best language skills in English language skills says that 'yes I know English well but my native language is Russian and I can think deeply in Russian'. So we discuss in Russian and then write in English. [RSINTVictor]*

The use of the local language during discussion can be said to be a useful resource for Victor, in terms of enhancing his understanding of the course content. However, it does not provide him with the language he needs for writing his assignment in English.

Victor also identifies specific problems with the use of colloquial English:

*When the situation [referring to the case study] was written was brought from a newspaper and was written in very interesting language with the usage of slang and so on. It was a problem for students to understand the first part of this article and some of them were so frustrated that they are not able to write anything at all. [RSINTVictor]*

The use of 'slang' may be interesting, but in this case it also presents difficulties for EFL/ESL students. In many respects, the language of the course can be said to be a barrier for Victor's learning.

Overall, Victor's concerns have to do with reading and writing, with work load, and with particular aspects of English (vocabulary and slang).

#### **4.3.6 Phil (UK)**

Phil is in the 40-49 age bracket. He is an IT planning manager and has been holding this post for the past 17 years. His main language is English but he also speaks and writes a little French. Phil has a Bachelor of Science degree. He has previously studied an OU database course which is part of the MSc degree. He says he chose to study the MBA because he thinks it is relevant to his job. As English is his first language he did not have to follow any preparatory course before joining the course. In his pro-forma, Phil stated that his concern about studying *Foundations of Senior Management* course was the reading that had to be done. He was concerned that 'there was a lot of reading and that I wouldn't have the time to do it.' During the interview he also acknowledged difficulties in understanding:

*When reading, I think I can sort of understand that but all the time I can't really judge whether I have understood it or not. Therefore because I'm grappling with all of that and grappling to retain all the conflicting points of view and then trying to pick them up and applying them, I think that's the most difficult part. Because at work it is not like that, because you just know this guy wants this, this guy thinks the opposite. Okay, I can see a bit of that argument and a bit of that argument and usually you can find a way that reconciles both, whereas here I don't understand, or I feel I don't understand either argument. It's much more difficult.[UFINTPhil]*

The basis of Phil's difficulties in understanding is not clear, although it relates generally to academic argument- retaining and applying conflicting points of view. Like Amandla, Greg and Mark, the writing he does at work is also different from the writing he does for the course. He comments, 'I have not written essays in years and the assignments take a long time.'

#### **4.3.7. Frank (UK)**

Frank is a marketing manager, is in the 30-39 age bracket. His first language is French, and he also speaks and writes English, Swedish and German. His previous education has been in French in France and his highest qualification is a doctorate. He has spent most of his adult life working in the UK. He came to the *Strategy* course after studying the *Foundations of Senior Management* course. He did not take any preparatory English language course before registering for the MBA course because he thought his English was good enough. Even though he said the reading takes a long time, and he reads more slowly than EL1 speakers, he was not concerned about it because he has the time to do this.

*I have a lot of time, it takes long but that's fine that's not too much of a problem. I think I find it fine than other students and probably I absorb less. So I have to get back to it, but I certainly spend more than the nine hours a week that the course material suggest you should spend. [USINTFrank]*

As marketing manager, Frank's job entails writing reports in English so he is used to writing in English on a daily basis like Kate and Mark. Like Phil and Victor he admits that reading materials and writing assignments is time consuming. However, Frank's comment

shows that the context of study influences whether something constitutes a barrier. He reads slowly but this doesn't seem to be a major problem because he is able to spend a lot of time on it, which might not be the case with some students.

Talking about language use in the course material, Frank's comments are in contrast to those made by some other students:

*Overall I actually find that the courses are made very well. The books flow sort of very easily, make good sense and easy to read. [USINTFrank]*

Frank also raises difficulties he sometimes has during the tutorial session which he attends with mainly EL1 speaking students.

*The tutorial is difficult sometimes also because all the English speaking, native speaking absorb the material faster so that makes it also difficult at times. [USINTFrank]*

Generally Frank does not have any difficulties with the language of the course materials, but although he lives and works in the UK he acknowledges that he needs more time to grasp concepts during discussions in English than his EL1 counterparts. Unlike Kate, Frank mentioned that he does contribute during discussions. Error analysis of his writing shown later in this chapter indicates that he does indeed have a good level of Standard English as he makes very few mistakes as shown in Table 4.4.

#### **4.3.8 James (UK)**

James is in the 40-49 year age bracket. He holds an honours degree in engineering and is presently working as a project engineer. As his first language is English, James said that he did not take any preparatory English course and had no concerns about reading and writing before taking up the course. He is studying the MBA course because he says he wants to gain better management skills and understanding of business strategy and he intends to change jobs on completion of the MBA. Like all the other students his principal

reason for studying the course is to improve his career prospects. Talking about the language of the course materials, James mentioned that:

*The course material is fairly simple, it's almost too easy to read and I have no problems at all with the language. [USINTJames]*

Like Frank but unlike some other students, James finds the course materials relatively easy and says he has no problems with the language used. Error analysis of his writing shown later in this chapter indicates that he does indeed have a good level of Standard English as he makes very few mistakes as shown in Table 4.4.

#### **4.3.9 Discussion**

Students' experiences of English correspond to the distinction commonly made between English as a first, second and foreign language. For example, English is James' first language like many of the UK students. It is Frank's second language. Frank works and lives in the UK and has acquired a near-native competency in the language. In Amandla's case, English was the language of instruction throughout his education, I therefore regard him as falling in the ESL category. Amandla has also been an English language teacher, he is very fluent and writes and speaks English regularly at work. Greg, Kate, Mark and Victor have English as a foreign language as they either learnt it at school as a subject or privately. Amharic or Russian were the languages of instruction throughout their education and none use English regularly at work. They use English mainly when studying the courses.

In Russia there are other MBA course providers who offer MBA programmes in Russian. Kate, Mark and Victor have chosen English not Russian as the language of their educational instruction. This reflects findings from Berns et al.(1998) Barkhuizen (2002b) Friedrich (2003) and Gayol and Schied (2003) that EFL/ESL speakers often have a



positive attitude to English and prefer English as the language of educational instruction. The positive attitude towards English could be because of the opportunities English offers to them by making them more employable at both local and international level. The context in Ethiopia is different as the OU MBA programme is a government funded project for civil servants.

Key issues that have come up from the profiles include the following: specific language problems, study time, differences between modes, generic expectations of assignments and various strategies for tackling problems. Where students do have problems with language, these sometimes have to do with specific features of English: e.g. 'slang', which may seem lively/interesting to the UK based students but would not be within the experience of many EFL/ESL students in their local contexts.

Difficulties often relate to study time: it may simply take some EFL/ESL speaking students longer to read course materials or write assignments in a second or foreign language. The experiences of Amandla and Greg are similar to the observations by Mordaunt (1997) and Windy (1997) on OUBS students in Zimbabwe and Ethiopia respectively: students were found to spend a lot of time reading the course materials.

There are also differences between students' competence in different modes. For example Frank finds the language of the course fairly straightforward. However, although he spends most of his time and works within an English speaking environment, he like Kate still has slight difficulties in listening: having to cope with listening to native speakers during tutorial sessions poses a challenge for him.

Some students' difficulties are to do with the generic expectations of assignments: for instance the kinds of writing expected may bear little similarity to the kinds of writing students do at work. Students in all three contexts are used to writing reports at work in their local languages and in English. These reports however, are not like the 'academic' report they are required to write for their assignments for the course. They differ in terms of style, content and format. For example, Mark writes reports in English at work mainly in the first person while the course recommends the use of third person in report writing. This means that Mark has to adapt his writing to suit the course and cannot draw on his experience of writing reports at work. Phil writes reports at work which he finds easier than the reports he writes for the course because he understands the content as it is part of his work, and he usually knows what the addressee/ his boss wants. When writing the assignments he struggles with reconciling the different arguments. Unlike Mark and Phil, Greg writes reports only in Amharic by completing relevant sections of a specially prepared report form. The students on the course bring different experiences of writing reports but cannot draw on these when writing their assignments as they require different writing conventions.

Despite difficulties EFL/ESL students often welcome studying in English as they think this will be advantageous to them in their work. Students also have strategies for tackling and resolving problems, such as using bilingual dictionaries, spending more time reading course materials and using their first languages to discuss course concepts. Finally, it is notable that students' experiences are highly diverse: both across teaching contexts and within the same teaching contexts, students have different levels and types of experience in English; different problems in using English; and different strategies for tackling these. This level of diversity raises issues for course providers (see Chapter 7).

Having looked at what students say about their use of English, in the next section I look at how English is actually used in student writing, focussing particularly on an analysis of errors in their texts.

#### **4.4 Errors in students' writing: an analytic framework**

In this section I present an analysis of errors in 27 students' written assignments from the *Strategy* course. I have analysed the assignments of students on the *Strategy* course because this course involves students from all three contexts and therefore allows me to make comparisons across all three. Some of the students' views on English have been discussed in the preceding profiles. Analysing students' written assignments is important because, as mentioned earlier, students on the MBA programme are expected to use 'proper English' when writing assignments yet their competency in English is likely to differ between each context and between students in the same context.

The error analysis aims to do a follows: 1) document the nature of errors in English; 2) enable comparisons to be made between students in diverse contexts and; 3) identify whether there is a relationship between the number of errors in an assignment and assignment grades.

Research into errors made in writing by users of English as a second or foreign language has indicated that certain aspects tend to be problematic: subject-verb agreement, omission of articles, word order (Corder 1981, 1990; Jain 1990; Richards 1990a; Ferris 1999; Yates and Kenkel 2002). In my study, I use a framework for doing error analysis that was developed by Mayor, Hewings, North, Swann, and Coffin (forthcoming). They also point out that doing error analysis

It should be recognised that identifying, classifying and quantifying errors is not a straightforward process. It is not always obvious what precisely counts as an error, or how it should be categorised (Mayor et al. forthcoming: 6)

Mayor et al. highlight certain difficulties associated with the subjective nature of error analysis. They note that error analysis is dependent on two assumptions; that 'we can recognise what the writer trying to say' and that 'we can itemise elements of the linguistic system' (p.56). Error analysis is also a relational notion: something may be viewed as an error in one context but not in another. These point to the need to be cautious both when carrying out the analysis and in interpreting the results.

Mayor et al.'s framework was developed for the linguistic analysis of Chinese and Greek speaking candidates' written language tests for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). The fact that the framework is based on non-native writers made it relevant to the students on this study as they are also EFL/ESL speakers living and working in local contexts and writing in English. Other studies in errors analysis such as Corder (1981; 1990) Jain (1990) and Richards (1990b; 1990a) have focused on errors made by EFL/ESL learners. Mayor et al.'s study was more relevant in that it directly relates to a target group of future higher education students. For my own analysis, I have grouped the students according to their declared main languages i.e. Amharic, Russian and English in order to make comparisons between students within the same language group and across the three groups. I have used the original categories used in Mayor et al., (forthcoming)

The error analysis categories adopted were as follows:

### **1. Spelling**

- Errors in spelling
- Word division

### **2. Punctuation**

- Errors in use of punctuation marks
- Capitals
- Sentence initial conjunctions
- Run-on sentences

### **3. Grammar**

- Tense
- Voice
- Use of modals
- Non-finite forms
- Concord
- Number
- Countability
- Article usage
- Word order
- Word class
- Faulty cohesion (failure to agree with antecedent)
- Lack of conjunction

### **4. Preposition**

- Inappropriate preposition
- Omitted preposition

### **5. Lexis/Idiom**

- Incorrect or inappropriate vocabulary
- Unclear reference
- Excessive parataxis

In this framework, the prepositions are classified as a separate category. Prepositions might normally be considered an aspect of grammar, but they were classified separately by Mayor et al. because in practice there was often an overlap between semantic and grammatical issues. This practice has also been followed in this study.

#### 4.4.1. Examples of errors

In this section I present some examples of errors from students' assignments which can be said to be fairly straightforward and unproblematic. Errors are marked by underlining and possible corrections are indicated in square brackets. Some of the sentences given as examples have more than one error, but I will focus only on the errors selected to illustrate the relevant category.

##### Spelling

1. Stratgy [strategy] is concerned with matching a firms resources and capabilities. (ESTMA1 Greg)
2. Different internal and external factors have been infulencing [influencing] the operation. (ESTMA1-Dennis)
3. The first part concerning on the environmental change of the airline industry, its alteractiveness [attractiveness] and basic strategic area. (ESTMA1 Alex)

##### Punctuation

4. To examine the structure of the airline industry Poters [Porter's] Five Forces framework is used. (USTMA1 James)
5. A Consistent [c], coherent, Effective [e] and appropriate strategy is critical to success. (ESTMA1 Alex)

##### Grammar

6. The report considers the main environment issues \_\_ [and] assesses the structure of the European Airline industry. (USTMA1 James)
7. Stelios reject [rejects/rejected] these opportunities. (RSTMA1 Victor)
8. The budget airline need [needs] to consider this. (USTMA1 Betty)

##### Preposition:

9. A policy paper dealing with aviation issues in the U.K. makes a lengthy description on [of] the effects of deregulation on the economic, social and environmental situation in the country. (ESTMA1 Duncan)

10. The analysis of this level is limited to the mere observation that ever more people travel long distances for not only[for] work but also [for] vacation or family reasons. ( USTMA 1 Frank)

#### **Lexis/Idiom.**

11. The company better get [go] public. (ESTMA1 Amandla)
12. Accidental incidents by terrors [terrorists] or technical faults, example, the tragic [tragedy] of September 11. (ESTMA1 Dan)

#### **4.4. 2. Issues relating to error analysis**

The above examples suggest that the framework works with unproblematic examples.

However, there are a number of more difficult areas such as legibility, classification and multiple spelling errors.

Specific difficulties with legibility in the analysis were mainly from the four students who hand wrote their assignments. These were problematic because occasionally the handwriting was impossible to decipher. Another difficulty with the hand-written assignments is that it was at times difficult to tell where paragraph breaks are intended and thus made it difficult to categorise as an error (or not) in punctuation. This was probably worsened by the fact that these were copies, not the original assignments. In dealing with legibility problems I resorted to getting a second opinion on the illegible words and referred closely to the surrounding context.

Classification difficulties occurred where errors were ambiguous as in the examples below:

Spelling or lexis

How to apprise the choice of Stelios. (ESTMA Alex)

In principle this could be a spelling error (appraise) or a lexical error (inappropriate term used) but I classified it as a spelling error because the word 'appraise' was used in the assignment question – to 'appraise' the choices made by Stelios. I resolved such problems by close reference to the course materials.

Grammar or spelling:

Mainly it is middle level of businessmen and managers who travel a lot due to their business. Then it is not reach travellers such as students, workers, teachers, and so on. first class. ( RSTMA Victor)

Alternative corrections:

If we consider these errors to be grammatical the possible alternative correction would be as follows:

Mainly it is middle level of businessmen and managers who travel a lot due to their business. Then it does not reach travellers such as students, workers, teachers, and so on.

However, if we consider the error to be lexis the correction would be

Mainly it is the middle level of businessmen and managers who travel a lot due to their business. Then it is not rich travellers such as students, workers, teachers, and so on.

In this case the decision on how the errors are classified affects the quantity of errors - whether one or two are counted. In resolving this problem, the guiding principle I used was to use the surrounding context and meaning, and at times referring to the course material for clarification.

When a text is corrigible in different ways, it may be difficult to count how many errors are involved and this is also influenced by the various possible alternative corrections.

Considering the Porter's Five Forces and the concept of Key Success factors we can recommend to Stelios to (all\_ time) remember that changes in one factor can influence and change another one. (RSTMA Victor)



Alternative corrections:

Considering \_Porter's Five Forces and the concept of Key Success Factors we can recommend to Stellios to always remember that changes in one factor can influence and change another one.

or

Considering \_Porter's Five Forces and the concept of Key Success Factors we can recommend to Stellios to remember all the time that changes in one factor can influence and change another one.

In the first alternative there are four corrections. In the second alternative one is uncertain whether to say there are four or five corrections, considering the fact that the word order has had to be changed and the definite article inserted between 'all time'. I resolved this problem by considering only the alternative which had the least number of corrections.

Multiple spelling errors were also problematic. Sometimes students used the same incorrect spelling several times; or used different incorrect spellings for the same word. In both cases I counted the misspelt word as a single error.

The above examples illustrate that error analysis is problematic and cannot be exact because what counts as an error and how it is classified relies mainly on the judgement of the analyst and can be very subjective. This should be borne in mind when interpreting the analysis which follows. In this analysis I requested a second opinion on my analysis of 25 percent of the assignments which were randomly selected from the three groups. This was done by another researcher in order to check on my classification (see Chapter 3 for details).

The following tables (on pages 96 to101) show the distribution of errors within each group and across all groups i.e. according to both country of residence and relationship to the English language.

Table: 4.1: Country comparison: errors per 1,000 words.

Country	Total No of words	Error type per 1,000 words					Total errors per 1,000 words
		Spell	Punct	Gram	Prep	Lex/Id	
Ethiopia	27765	6.519	5.366	15.343	3.350	1.153	31.731
Russia	27976	1.609	2.431	9.794	1.394	0.322	15.549
UK	24399	0.369	2.869	4.221	0.984	0.205	8.648

Spell = spelling  
Punct = punctuation  
Gram = grammar  
Prep = prepositions  
Lex/Id = lexis/idiom

Table 4.2 Ethiopian students: errors per 1,000 words, percentage of error types and assignment grade (TMA 01).

Name	Assignment grade	Errors/1000 words	Percentage of error types					Assignment length
			Spelling	Punctuation	Grammar	Preposition	Lexis/idiom	
Amandla	58%	11.085	36.36	36.36	21.21	3.03	3.03	2977
Dan	54%	40.931	11.93	18.35	56.88	6.42	6.42	2663
Waweru	50%	15.647	15.56	4.44	60.00	13.33	6.67	2876
Melvin	50%	24.919	50.65	15.58	23.38	6.49	3.90	3090
Greg	49%	56.069	23.08	0.00	59.34	13.19	4.40	1623
Dennis	48%	28.458	12.66	20.25	58.23	6.33	2.53	2776
Alex	41%	77.296	16.08	22.35	49.02	10.98	1.57	3299
Duncan	40%	9.705	4.17	16.67	54.17	20.83	4.17	2473
William	40%	24.333	20.55	24.66	39.73	10.96	4.11	3000
Kenneth	36%	31.794	23.16	8.42	47.37	16.84	4.21	2988

Table 4.3: Russian students: errors per 1,000 words, percentage of error types and assignment grade (TMA 01).

Name	Assignment grade	Errors/1000 words	Percentage of error types					Assignment length
			Spelling	Punctuation	Grammar	Preposition	Lexis/idiom	
Pavel	74%	13.096	14.29	2.38	78.57	4.76	0	3207
Safin	71%	14.320	23.81	9.52	59.52	7.14	0	2933
Victor	64%	25.305	6.17	6.17	74.07	9.88	3.7	3201
Ralph	61%	13.405	12.5	12.5	60	12.5	2.5	2984
Kislova	61%	10.345	15.15	24.24	45.45	15.15	0	3190
Kafelnikov	58%	13.863	9.09	22.73	50	13.64	4.55	3174
Kevin	58%	26.907	4.40	26.37	58.24	8.79	2.20	3382
Kate	44%	12.004	6.06	27.27	57.58	6.06	3.03	2749
Martin	40%	9.189	13.79	6.90	79.31	0	0	3156

Table 4.4 UK students: errors per 1,000 words, percentage of error types and assignment grade (TMA 01).

Name	Assignment grade	Errors/1000 words	Percentage of error types					Assignment length
			Spelling	Punctuation	Grammar	Preposition	Lexis/idiom	
James	82%	11.31	5.56	41.67	44.44	8.33	0	3182
Ray	75%	5.120	0	23.53	70.59	0	5.88	3320
Anna	60%	8.725	3.85	19.23	57.69	15.38	3.85	2980
Susan	58%	5.926	6.25	12.5	50	31.25	0	2700
Frank	58%	8.296	4.55	13.64	54.55	18.18	9.09	2652
Fay	55%	5.484	11.76	17.65	58.82	11.76	0	3100
Juliet	48%	8.761	6.90	24.14	55.17	10.34	3.45	3310
Betty	41%	15.21	0	64.58	29.17	6.25	0	3155

Table 4.5 EL1 students: errors per 1,000 words, percentage of error types and assignment grade (TMA 01).

Name	Assignment grade	Errors/1000 words	Percentage of error types					Assignment length
			Spelling	Punctuation	Grammar	Preposition	Lexis/idiom	
James	82%	11.31	5.56	41.67	44.44	8.33	0	3182
Ray	75%	5.120	0	23.53	70.59	0	5.88	3320
Anna	60%	8.725	3.85	19.23	57.69	15.38	3.85	2980
Susan	58%	5.926	6.25	12.5	50	31.25	0	2700
Fay	55%	5.484	11.76	17.65	58.82	11.76	0	3100
Juliet	48%	8.761	6.90	24.14	55.17	10.34	3.45	3310
Betty	41%	15.21	0	64.58	29.17	6.25	0	3155

Table 4.6 ESL students: errors per 1,000 words, percentage of error types and assignment grade (TMA 01).

Name	Assignment grade	Errors/1000 words	Percentage of error types					Assignment length
			Spelling	Punctuation	Grammar	Preposition	Lexis/idiom	
Amanda	58%	11.085	36.36	36.36	21.21	3.03	3.03	2977
Frank	58%	8.296	4.55	13.64	54.55	18.18	9.09	2652

Table 4.7 EFL students: errors per 1,000 words, percentage of error types and assignment grade (TMA 01).

Name	Assignment grade	Errors/1000 words	Percentage of error types					Assignment length
			Spelling	Punctuation	Grammar	Preposition	Lexis/idiom	
Pavel	74%	13.096	14.29	2.38	78.57	4.76	0	3207
Safin	71%	14.320	23.81	9.52	59.52	7.14	0	2933
Victor	64%	25.305	6.17	6.17	74.07	9.88	3.7	3201
Ralph	61%	13.405	12.5	12.5	60	12.5	2.5	2984
Kislova	61%	10.345	15.15	24.24	45.45	15.15	0	3190
Kafelnikov	58%	13.863	9.09	22.73	50	13.64	4.55	3174
Kevin	58%	26.907	4.40	26.37	58.24	8.79	2.20	3382
Dan	54%	40.931	11.93	18.35	56.88	6.42	6.42	2663
Waweru	50%	15.647	15.56	4.44	60.00	13.33	6.67	2876
Melvin	50%	24.919	50.65	15.58	23.38	6.49	3.90	3090
Greg	49%	56.069	23.08	0.00	59.34	13.19	4.40	1623
Dennis	48%	28.458	12.66	20.25	58.23	6.33	2.53	2776
Kate	44%	12.004	6.06	27.27	57.58	6.06	3.03	2749
Alex	41%	77.296	16.08	22.35	49.02	10.98	1.57	3299
Martin	40%	9.189	13.79	6.90	79.31	0.00	0.00	3156
Duncan	40%	9.705	4.17	16.67	54.17	20.83	4.17	2473
William	40%	24.333	20.55	24.66	39.73	10.96	4.11	3000
Kenneth	36%	31.794	23.16	8.42	47.37	16.84	4.21	2988

### 4.4.3. Discussion

Table 4.1 shows that there were differences in the number of errors produced in different categories in all student groups. There were also differences between student groups. Grammar was the commonest and lexis and idiom the least common. UK students made the least number of errors overall, Russian students rather more and Ethiopian students the most. However, although UK students made slightly more punctuation errors than Russian students. Russian and UK students had relatively low numbers of spelling errors this could be due to the fact they all used word processors which have a spell checker.

Spelling errors in both these groups were mainly those which could not be picked up by the spell checker for example 'the' for 'there', 'saw' for 'was'. Some of the Ethiopian students' assignments were either hand-written or typed by someone paid to do the typing within a limited period of time. In cases where the assignments were type written by someone else it is possible that some of the errors were introduced by the typist or alternatively the typist could have corrected students' errors.

Tables 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, 4.5, 4.6, 4.7 show that errors do not seem to affect the students' grades. A possible interpretation for this could be that these errors are regarded as unimportant by tutors when they do not hinder the meaning. In support of this interpretation it is worth noting that none of the marginal or overall comments from tutors refer to the students' spelling or grammatical errors. In a few instances, tutors have either underlined the misspelled word or simply written the correct spelling above the word or put a question mark next to the error. Tutors' views on errors and on the use of English in the course more generally are discussed in section 4.5.



#### 4.5. Tutors' perspectives on English

In this section I present tutors' perspectives on language issues in the MBA courses and on students' use of English based on interview data (see Appendix 6) and marginal tutor comments on students' assignments. Interviews were carried out with 5 tutors who have tutored on one or both courses for more than three years in different contexts (see Table 4.6).

Table: 4.6 Tutors' experiences and teaching contexts (current and previous).

Pseudonym	Gender	Tutoring contexts	Experience	First language
Andy Anderson	M	UK Western Europe Russia	5 years	English
James Blake	M	UK Ethiopia Eritrea	8 years	English
Justine Chambers	M	UK Russia Ethiopia	5 years	English
Rachael Douglas	F	UK Russia Western Europe	3 years	English
Ralph Edwards	M	UK Russia	4 years	English

The semi-structured interviews were informed by the key themes that emerged from the interviews with students and tutors' own experiences. These were language difficulties with the course materials; reading in English and student workload; views about students' errors in English; and the potential of students' first language as a learning tool.

#### 4.5.1 Language difficulties with the course materials

All the tutors acknowledge that the language of the course materials can be a problem for EFL/ESL students. In discussing this question tutor Blake comments:

*I think also the use of language in our course materials is something which has to be mentioned. The standards of academic writing even within particular courses do vary considerably. Obviously the editors do their job but sometimes the language is not as accessible as it could be. It's not always written in plain English. It's not always expressed succinctly, and I think students for whom English is a study language actually require a closer reading and understanding speeds down quite considerably. [Tutor Blake-INT]*

Tutor Blake's comments on the accessibility of course materials echoes the views expressed by students Greg and Victor. At a later point in the interview, Tutor Blake draws attention to the fact that students in Ethiopia unlike those in the UK and Eastern Europe, have no other resource to draw on when confronted by language problems as 'they cannot get help from other students via FirstClass conferencing and also do not have people who speak English to ask.' Therefore the extent and type of support available to students differs between contexts.

Tutor Edwards draws attention to difficulties posed by colloquial expressions in the course materials:

*I think, when it comes to understanding the material, this is, if you like, if we can criticise our own material is when it comes to case studies and some other materials in the course package where they put in a story, a scenario or something like that.*

*They use idiomatic and colloquial language, which they (students) can't use a dictionary to understand. The reasoning (course team's) was that everybody says 'It is a fantastic article about Marks and Spencer.' It was a newspaper article, I think. Everybody on the team said it's a fantastic article. The trouble is it is the hardest one for the students to understand because it has a lot of idioms and cricket analogies and all of that going in. But for the students in Russia it means nothing, absolutely nothing. For the locals it was fantastic. I think when it comes to the use of idioms and colloquial expressions, we can't deprive our UK students but we also have to be sympathetic to the others. [Tutor Edwards-INT]*

Tutor Edwards' views are consistent with the views expressed by Victor, one of the Russian students. Tutor Edwards recognises why the course team wanted to include articles that might involve and/or motivate EL1 students, but recognises the need to balance the interests of EL1 students against those of EFL/ESL students. Even though he is a member of the course team himself, Tutor Edwards did admit that for some time he was not aware that the use of idioms, analogies and colloquial expressions created a problem for non-native students:

*In one of the tutorials one tutor said he made a special effort to go back to the case and explain what this (colloquial expression) means. When he said that, I wasn't thinking of it and that was a learning point for me when he said it. I had never thought of it. [Tutor Edwards-INT]*

His comment points to a developing awareness of tutors as they increasingly work with EFL/ESL students. Tutor Edward's admission suggests that it is possible that other members of the course team were equally unaware of the difficulties such language use poses for EFL/ESL students.

Overall, all five tutors agree that students for whom English is what they refer to as a 'study language' may be being disadvantaged because of the language used in course materials. However, they clearly feel that it is essential to use language which may involve UK students in learning, such as the use of idioms and colloquial expressions. This is a difficult balance to maintain and indicates some tension between course production and the actual delivery of the course. The tutors' views are similar to the views expressed by some Ethiopian and Russian students whilst alluding to the view of UK students.

Tutors also point to the potential value of advice to students contemplating studying the MBA, though there is some uncertainty about actual local practices. Tutor Douglas comments:

*Depends what advice they get when they are thinking of signing up and what we were told. Well, in Russia they have an opportunity to go a local centre and look at the course materials and read through them and maybe think of trying to do some of the activities to see if their English comprehension is good enough for them to do that much. But that's what we'd hope happens but I don't know if that does happen. So I don't know anything really about the side of marketing of our courses in Russia. [Tutor Douglas- INT]*

*This comes down to the sort of local sort of entrance and selection criteria. In Ethiopia there is a presumption that all of the students whose names are put forward have a requisite standard of English. They may well be perfectly able to understand a social conversation, they may be able to read a newspaper without any problems. But it's merging the sort of reading, the writing the speaking together and that can be problematic for those perhaps whose level of English is not as good or whose confidence in their use of English is perhaps not as developed because they have not had the practice [Tutor Chambers-INT]*

The situation in Ethiopia differs from the UK and Russia. In Ethiopia all students are civil servants, selected by government officials to study the course and are funded by UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) as part of a deal with the Ethiopian government. Tutor Chambers notes that there may be lack of awareness about the level and type of English required for MBA studies.

#### **4.5.2 Academic reading in English and student workload**

All tutors were of the opinion that EFL/ESL students might be at a disadvantage with regard to reading demands, because of the additional time required by students to read the course materials. For instance:

*I think reading in English as a study language, there is a time penalty. There is time penalty in reading, there's a time penalty in the understanding, there's a time penalty in the consolidation of that learning. [Tutor Chambers-INT]*

*They are reading something which is not in their first language probably second or even third language for some people. They do have language issues. So they would start, I think, just from talking to some of the students, what some of them would say is that they start the course, you know, going to the dictionary for every sentence you know taking a lot of time and then they realize they don't have the time to do that so they speed up so that they just get the sense of the paragraph. So they stop but it will take them longer to read it because of the language. They're probably not always understanding what's been said really. [Tutor Douglas-INT]*

Tutor Anderson was of the opinion that the amount of reading for the course was too much for all students:

*For people who have English as their first language it's a very large amount and if English is not your first language it must be an even larger amount. I mean obviously your reading pace is slow. It's the volume of reading that needs to be done rather than the complexity of the reading that is the main problem. [Tutor Anderson-INT]*

In general tutors felt that reading in English for EFL/ESL students required them to spend more time than the time suggested in the course materials.

#### **4.5.3 Tutors' views about students' errors in English**

Students on the course are assessed through written assignments. Although students are instructed to use 'proper English' all five tutors said that they did not comment on students' grammar or spelling when marking assignments. Here are some examples from interviews with tutors:

*I think the course is not an English language course and therefore I feel you are getting very petty if you say there should be an apostrophe here or you should have had a new paragraph here or if you get too hung up on the way it is written. I tend to comment on the overall presentation style [Tutor Edwards-INT]*

*I teach strategy not English. So I will not comment on language unless I cannot get a sense of what the student is trying to communicate to me or if I feel that the way they have expressed it is a barrier or an impediment to my understanding, the same reason I tend not to correct spelling so you can think of there and their – complement and compliment, lots of words in English very similar spelling but totally different meanings and generally I might just draw a minor underlining. [Tutor Chambers-INT]*

*I sort of see through it. I, in a way, am sort of conscious that they've got bad grammar or spelling words wrong and have got a very stilted style, it is almost in the way for some of them. Their English is so poor you have to rewrite it for them. So where would you start in making corrections? So I'd have to rewrite the whole thing. So what's the point in starting (laughing)? Unless there are some words which are used completely and utterly in error. [Tutor Douglas-INT]*

These tutors draw attention to the fact that in their view the course is not an English language course therefore their key focus in students' assignments is on the course content, or style in the case of Tutor Edwards, but certainly not on grammar or spelling. This is consistent with students' expectations. Only one student mentioned that he expected tutors to comment on his language because he wanted to improve his grammar.

Tutors acknowledge that some students' writing is not good. Tutor Douglas wondered what the instruction to use 'proper English' meant. This highlights a possible tension and distance between course team designers and the teachers of the course. Looking at the students' assignments for tutors' actual responses to language errors revealed that overall, tutors' marginal and general comments on assignments do not comment on grammar or spelling. In a few instances tutors either underline or correct the wrongly spelt word. Most grammatical errors are ignored with very few instances where the tutor inserts the missing word or just puts a question mark where the meaning of what the student is trying to communicate is not clear. All five tutors said that they did not penalise or take into consideration grammatical or spelling errors when marking assignments: their main concern is that students should display that they have learned the course concepts.

On reflection however, Tutor Douglas was concerned about the impression given to students by not correcting their grammar and spelling mistakes:

*I just wonder now if I give a false impression that they've written well in English when they haven't. [Tutor Douglas-INT]*

Tutor Douglas indicates here a developing awareness of what students expect from tutors. Although Tutor Douglas is aware that some students' English is not good she also brings to light a strategy used by two Russian students to deal with their lack of competency in English when writing their assignments:

*The student I was working with on Wednesday afternoon you know I said to him 'you didn't write this TMA in English did you? You wrote it in Ukrainian first' and he said 'yes'. I actually don't think he wrote it in Ukrainian. I think he dictated it to his secretary in Ukrainian and the secretary has got very good English. I have spoken to her before on the phone then she translates it for him. Another student said he had written it himself and then used a computer program cause he told me he did that sometimes, used a computer program to translate into English and then he probably gives it to the secretary just to check the grammar. I think several of them are doing that. Several of them are using computer programs and there are very few who are actually writing in English straight on, which is going to be a problem when it comes to the exam [Tutor Douglas-INT]*

Tutor Douglas' comment points to complications surrounding the production of assignments, the practices involved and who is actually doing the writing. This raises ethical questions about the practices some students use in their production of assignments- such as a secretary translating and typing assignments - yet the tutor doesn't seem unduly concerned about all this.

#### **4.5.4 Potential of students' first language as a learning tool**

Discussions are an important part of the courses and allow students the opportunity to discuss course concepts and work related experience in groups. The tutors comment that students' first language may be drawn on as a resource in such contexts:

*Group discussions are almost invariably local language. It's something I encourage because I think they can cover the ground more quickly, more effectively. What often happens is that if you give a group a tutorial activity, they will spend time reading through the brief and the person in the group with the best English sort of goes through line by line explaining to the others what it is about and then they get on with the activity. So something that you'd think should take 20 to 25 minutes could quite easily take double that time. [Tutor Chambers-INT]*

*From a tutor's point of view that is really quite interesting because if you are trying to monitor these discussions, the discussion is going on and you suddenly hear you know in the midst of Amharic or whatever language it is, you suddenly hear management terms and so you pick up the general thread of the discussion. [Tutor Chambers-INT]*

Tutor Chambers views the use of local language during group discussion positively because it saves time as students understand and contribute to the discussion in their first language. Another useful point is that the activity is explained to the rest of the group in the local language by the one who has the best English.

Tutor Blake notes that using the local language balances the different levels of competency in English between students.

*The use of the local language during group discussions also helps to compensate for different standards, different understandings of English. [Tutor Blake-INT]*

Overall tutors agree that students using their local language benefit a lot from the discussion, although the use of local language is also a disadvantage in the sense that the tutor, who in most cases does not understand the local language, will not be able to follow the discussion and make additional points which students might overlook in their discussion or redirect the focus of the discussion. The second potential drawback not mentioned by tutors is that by using the local language during discussions the students do not acquire the much needed English vocabulary to use when writing their assignments.



## 4.6. Conclusion

This chapter has addressed a number of issues raised by the use of English as the language of teaching and learning in culturally and linguistically diverse teaching contexts.

The MBA materials themselves provide little guidance on the English language demands of the courses, and limited specific language support for students. Students themselves point to a number of problems posed by studying in English, ranging from difficulties faced by specific vocabulary to the lack of familiarity with academic genres, such as the academic report, and the extra time required for study. It is interesting to note that students do not point to subject-specific terminology as creating difficulties for them.

A major point to emerge from the profiles in section 4.3 however, is the diversity amongst students even in the same teaching context. Students have different levels of competence in English, experience different types of problems and have different strategies for dealing with these. Such diversity poses a challenge to providers of distance learning courses where ‘the same’ course is generally made available to all students.

The analysis of student errors in writing suggests that overall students from Ethiopia make more sentence level errors than students from Russia and the UK; that a greater number of specific errors are made by different groups, for example, Russian students make more grammatical errors; that the type and number of errors varies according to individuals within groups.

However, on the basis of tutors’ interview comments and analysis of assignment grades, there is no evidence to indicate that EFL/ESL students who make more errors in English grammar are penalised because of those errors. Tutors’ comments indicate that they are

more concerned with evidence that students have mastered course concepts than identifying and correcting sentence-level errors in English.

Tutors and EFL/ESL students are of the view that the local language may be a positive resource for learning e.g. during group discussions. However, the use of local language may potentially create problems for students, in the sense that the tutor who in most cases does not understand the language will not be able to intervene in discussions and therefore support them. Furthermore, the use of the local language may inhibit students' acquisition of much needed English vocabulary to use when writing assignments.

Tutors appear to be sensitive both to the problematic experiences of EFL/ESL students and the difficulties faced by course teams in producing course material which is relevant to needs of both EL1 and ESL/EFL students. There are tensions here for example, course material may be made inaccessible to EFL/ESL students by the use of idioms, analogies and colloquial expressions designed to appeal to EL1 students. This raises issues of how or whether materials can be made accessible to all students. I return to this question in Chapter 7.

## Chapter 5

### An exploration of the resources students use in writing two assignments for the *Strategy* course (B820)

#### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the issue of access to resources by students in diverse contexts. Focusing on resources is important because the students come from diverse geographical, cultural, linguistic and educational backgrounds thus they have different resources available to them in each context. The availability or the lack of resources has a direct impact on what students do in their writing for assessment.

Research on the availability of resources for academics (Gibbs 1995b, 1995a; Canagarajah 1996; Belay 2000; UNDP 2001) indicates that there is a shortage of material resources in developing countries (see Chapter 2 for fuller discussion). While this research focuses on the impact of resources on professional academics' lives, OUBS reports on tutors' personal experiences in globally delivered courses seem to indicate that there are a number of issues relating to the availability resources for students in globally delivered courses. These include the following: in many parts of the world many students have no access to electronic communication of any kind (Mordaunt 1997); acute problems may be caused by poor infrastructure and lack of equipment (Green quoted in Cook 2001); students may not recognise or understand the British cultural context and they may also lack familiarity with Anglo-Saxon academic writing Le Mare and Tuffs (in Manning and Mayor 1999); students may have difficulties in making sense of some western management theories and of their relevance and applicability (Dence and O'Toole 1999). In this chapter my aim is to contribute to the small body of research exploring the impact of material resources on students' academic writing, by pursuing some of the issues raised above in relation to students from Ethiopia, Russia and the United Kingdom.

The focus of this chapter is on the *Strategy* course as it is delivered in Ethiopia, Russia and the UK. Students get to this compulsory first stage 2 MBA course by following different routes; these differ between students in the same context and also between the different contexts (see Chapter 3). Using both quantitative and qualitative analysis, this chapter draws on the following data sources: interviews with students and tutors, written assignments and course materials.

The chapter has three key aims. Firstly, it explores course materials in order to establish requirements about the use of resources in students' writing. Secondly, it looks at students' perspectives on resources available in their local contexts. Thirdly, it explores tutors' perspectives on the availability of resources for students. My focus is on teasing out the precise nature of resources required and used by students in their writing.

## **5.2 Resource requirements for writing on the *Strategy* course (B820)**

I use the term 'resources' to refer to any source which students can draw on when writing their assignments. This would include materials provided by the course, materials derived from students' immediate prior study in the MBA programme; and additional resources that students may find for themselves e.g. from their companies, libraries or the Internet. Many of these resources, in particular those used by students in their assignments, can be seen as material resources such as academic books, articles, company reports etc. But the availability of non-material resources such as contact with other students, background knowledge and experience is also important. In all cases the availability of such resources varies between students and between groups of students. In the course materials students are informed that they do not have to read outside the course to be successful in it. However, two of the course assignments, TMA 01 and TMA 03 do suggest that students should go beyond the course. See TMA questions below.

### TMA 01 Question

Examine the changes in the environment and the structure of the European airline industry since its deregulation in 1992 and evaluate the attractiveness of the budget airline sector. Illustrate your answer by reference to material taken from the case study, your own research and any other collaborative investigation you have undertaken

(b) Drawing on your analysis in part (a) critically appraise the choices made by Stelios Haji-Ioannou in respect of the strategies pursued by easyJet in the period covered by the study guide. To what extent do they allow easyJet to compete successfully in the airline industry?

The demands of the use of publications other than those provided as part of the course material is apparent in this question: 'illustrate your answer with material taken from the case study, your **own research** and any other **collaborative investigation** you have undertaken.' (my emphasis). The guidance notes to the question further emphasise the need to draw on additional sources when answering the above question:

You are required to undertake some primary research (that can be supported by collaboration with your fellow students) in part (a) of the question. You **may** use any sources you consider relevant, e.g. libraries, journals, the business press, etc. It is anticipated, however that you **will** use the FirstClass system, ROUTES and other forms of Internet access to identify a few key sites and sources of data. (Course File p. 39) (my emphasis)

From the above extract it is clear that the course also anticipates that students will have access to other resources, in particular the Internet and /or other students to collaborate with. The use of the modal 'may' is ambiguous and might be regarded as optional by some students. The use of 'will' suggests that all students have access to a computer and Internet.

TMA 03 question:

Assume that the top management team of your organisation (or of an organisation with which you are familiar) has asked you to provide a report on the strategic position of the organisation. In particular, they wish you to address the following issues in your report:

- a) How do the resources and capabilities (including power, culture, structures and systems) of your organisation support the strategies it is following? To what extent do these strategies allow it to compete or operate successfully in its sector?
- b) Assess the suitability of these strategies in the long term. Your answer should consider the likely impact of international competition and stakeholder expectations. What strategic actions would you recommend to the top team which would enhance the organisation's ability to achieve its main purpose in the future?

The notes on answering TMA 03 give the following guidance:

As part of your preparations you **may wish** to use Internet and OU Library sources to gather relevant industry data (much as you did in TMA 01 on the European airline industry. In considering part (b), in addition to the analysis of your organisation's position that you can carry out using B820 concepts and frameworks, you are **encouraged to draw upon additional external information resource**, (e.g. Internet, printed material, conferencing etc.). (Course File p. 42-43).

Again, this suggests students have Internet access and that they should go beyond the course materials to collect information although the use of 'may wish' and 'encouraged' are ambiguous. In both cases, although students are provided with most resources, it is also anticipated that they have access to other resources when writing this assignment.

### 5.3. Resources provided by the course

Students who study the *Strategy* course are provided with the course materials they need for their study and the Course File states that it is not necessary to go beyond the course to be successful in it. I shall refer to course material, which is supplied to students as **provided resources**. I shall refer to any other source which is outside of the given course material as **additional resources**.

Students are provided with the following course materials:

- Eleven course books
- Set book: *Contemporary Strategy Analysis* by Robert M. Grant
- Course reader: *The Strategy Reader* edited by Susan Segal-Horn
- Case Study book
- Video Cassettes (2)
- Audio Cassettes (3)
- CD-ROM with FirstClass software and installation guide.
- Course File –The Course File contains the tutor-marked assignment questions and guidelines on how to deal with the given question.

The course offers students opportunities to discuss and share ideas through the following features: seminars/tutorials, residential school and computer conferencing. Self-help groups are also encouraged; these are discussion groups organised and run by students.

The residential school and computer conferencing are regarded as important parts of this course:

*B820 Strategy* uses the wide range of learning media typical of all Open University Business School courses, from seminars to reader articles, from assignments to worked case studies. The seminars, residential schools, and computer conferences (the latter two of which are compulsory) are interactive experiences and your learning will partly depend on the commitment and preparation you contribute to them. (Strategy Course File 2000, p.4)

Conferencing: Computer-mediated conferencing and access to the Internet and World Wide Web are **central parts** of your experience of learning about strategy on B820. This learning involves **researching**, discussing and **preparing source material with your peers**. (Course File, p. 14 my emphasis)

Computer conferencing, Internet access and residential school are regarded as ‘central parts’ of the course and students learning ‘will partly depend on the commitment and preparation you contribute to them’ (Course File p. 14). As computer and Internet access is a pre-requisite for this course, students receive with their first pack of course material a

CD-ROM containing the most recent version of FirstClass software and an installation guide. FirstClass conferencing is an electronic networked means of communication that allows users to communicate with each other regardless of whether they are able to engage in face-to-face interaction. The *Strategy* course conferencing is divided into the following functions: course team notices, discussion, café and local tutor conference. 'The course team section is a read-only section which provides up-to-date news on the course as well as information about mailing times, any errata to course materials and general advice' (Course File, p.67). The discussion section is moderated by an experienced tutor to allow discussion between students and tutors about various aspects of the course. This is a discussion by and for all students studying this course irrespective of where they are. The Café is described as a place to develop a wider network of self-help groups and for comments that relate to the course. The local tutor conference is one that is run by the individual tutor for practical purposes such as reminders about seminars, discussion and its also regarded as a good place to arrange meetings of self-help groups.

Another feature of the Internet which is made available to students via the course conference site is ROUTES, which:

Collects, manages and evaluates Internet resources for OU courses...The B820 section will contain links to resources that you will find useful during the course...The B820 section contains links to resources, particularly for TMA 01. (Course File p.68)

An important point to note is that although access to a computer is a pre-requisite to studying the course, in actual fact some students have neither access to a computer nor the Internet. Thus although the students are provided with software FirstClass CD Rom- some are not in a position to use it. I have therefore classified use of the computer, FirstClass and the Internet as additional resources, as I discuss below.



The same is true of access to other students: the course recommendations that students use 'other students' as a resource does not always apply in all contexts. The actual implications for students are discussed in section 5.4.4.

## **5.4 Additional resources**

### **5.4.1 Immediate prior study**

I consider immediate prior study as a resource because students who follow the fast track route to the MBA can draw on the resources from a previous MBA course (*Foundations of Senior Management*) when writing assignments on this course. This option is not however available to students who follow the open access route. Below I look at differences in the routes followed by the participants in each of the geographical contexts under study.

In Ethiopia all 10 students participating in this study have come to the MBA course via the open access route delivered in English. They have studied the *Certificate and Diploma in Business Management* courses. They have not studied the *Foundations of Senior Management* course. For these students the *Strategy* course is the first course they are studying at masters level.

In Russia of the nine students participating in this study, two have come through the open access (*Certificate and Diploma in Business Management* courses) route which in this case is delivered in Russian. For these two students this course is not only their first course at masters level but also their first course in English. The remaining seven have come directly from the fast track first stage of the MBA and have studied the *Foundations of Senior Management* course. This group is therefore a mix of students studying their first course at masters level and those studying their second masters level course.

In the UK of the eight students participating in this study all have come through direct from stage 1 of the fast track route and have therefore studied *Foundations of Senior Management* course. The *Strategy* course is the second course they are studying at masters level. Table 5.1 below summarises the different routes followed by students in the three countries.

Table 5.1. Students' routes to the MBA programme

Country	Open Access	Fast Track
UK	-	8
Ethiopia	10	-
Russia	2	7

The different routes in the different contexts suggest potential advantages and disadvantages in terms of experience and knowledge gained, and in terms of access to actual material resources, such as course books. This will be followed up in section 5.4.4.

#### 5.4 2 Non-OU resources

Non-OU resources include any resources which are not provided by the institution. These encompass the sources that are recommended by the OUBS. Students are given an additional reading list which is made up of 70 recommended texts with the aim to, 'further enrich your understanding of strategy and complement the course...by providing new perspectives and reinforcing your learning' (Course File p.18). This seems inconsistent with advice to students provided elsewhere that they 'don't have to read outside the course to be successful in it' (Course File p. 17). Non-OU resources also include sources which students have found on their own. These may include Internet resources e.g. electronic

journals, print journals, books, newspapers etc. As already indicated, access to these is likely to differ in different contexts, so certain students may be disadvantaged.

### **5.4.3 Use of computers and the Internet**

The literature discussed in Chapter 2 demonstrates that electronic resources are distributed differently across countries. Reliance on ‘virtual’ resources- the Internet and FirstClass is likely to disadvantage students in certain cultural and geographic contexts, in particular Ethiopia in this case. Thus although access to a computer and the Internet is a course requirement, computers are not provided. In some contexts, as is discussed below, students do not even have access to a computer let alone the Internet.

### **5.4.4 Students’ use of additional resources**

As mentioned earlier assignment 01 and assignment 03 require students to use additional resources by conducting research and/or collaborative work with other students and writing about their organisation. In this section I look at the sources available to students in the different contexts. The different immediate prior study indicates that students on the course get to the *Strategy* course with the following different additional resources:

- Course books from Certificate course
- Course books from Diploma course
- Course books from MBA stage 1 course (*Foundations of Senior Management*)

I have suggested, those students who have come via the fast track and have studied the *Foundations of Senior Management* course have an advantage as they can draw on the course materials as additional resources in the next stage of the MBA.

In order to explore how access to resources impacts on students' writing, I have used the following data sources:

- Course File (assignment material)
- Marked assignments with marginal comments from tutors
- Tutor feedback forms
- Interviews with students (semi-structured)/ electronic questionnaires
- Interviews with tutors (semi-structured)

In order to identify additional sources used by students in each assignment, I looked for any use of references or citation from additional sources i.e. sources that were not in the course package or not referred to in the course materials. Table 5.2 provides a comparative summary of the type of additional sources and instances of use in assignment 1.

Table 5.2: Type of additional sources and instances of use in assignment 01.

Type of additional source	Ethiopia	Russia	UK
<b>Internet</b>	-	31	22
Journals	5	-	7
Newspaper reports	-	-	3
Company reports	-	1	3
MBA stage 1 course books(prior study)	-	1	2
First-Class Conferencing	-	2	-
Magazines	2	-	17
<b>Total</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>Number of students using additional sources</b>	<b>3/10</b>	<b>9/9</b>	<b>8/8</b>

The Internet was used mainly to cite information from company WebPages like easyJet WebPages, Ryanair WebPages. Journals cited were hard copy journals that are also available online such as the *Business Management Journal*. I classified citations from online journals under the hard copy journals because the students who cited an online

journal were those who had received a printed copy from the tutor and had not actually used the Internet. Classifying these as Internet use would imply that the students had access to the Internet when the reality is that they do not. Examples of newspapers cited are the *Financial Times* and the *Guardian*. Company reports used were annual reports and other internal documents produced by the company. By MBA stage 1 course books, I mean course material from *Foundations of Senior Management* course, which was available to students who followed the fast track entry route.

In writing assignment 01 all Ethiopian and two Russian students could not draw on the course materials from the *Foundations of Senior Management* course as a resource as they came through the open access route. All UK and seven Russian students could draw on the course materials from the *Foundations of Senior Management* course as a resource as discussed in the analysis below. The following table is a summary of the additional sources used by students in assignment 03.

Table 5.3: Type of additional sources and instances of use in assignment 03

Type of additional source	Ethiopia	Russia	UK
<b>Internet</b>	-	4	5
Journals	-		3
Books	1		
Newspaper reports	1		
Company reports	3		5
Magazines	1		
<b>Total instances of additional source used</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>No of students using additional sources</b>	<b>2/6</b>	<b>4/9</b>	<b>6/8</b>

In Ethiopia, even though there are 7 instances of additional source usage these were only from 2 students with only 1 student having access to company reports. While in Russia there were only 4 instances of additional source usage these were from 4 students.

In the UK however, there were 13 references and these were from 6 students. Four of the UK students referred to company reports.

**Fig 1: % of students using additional sources**

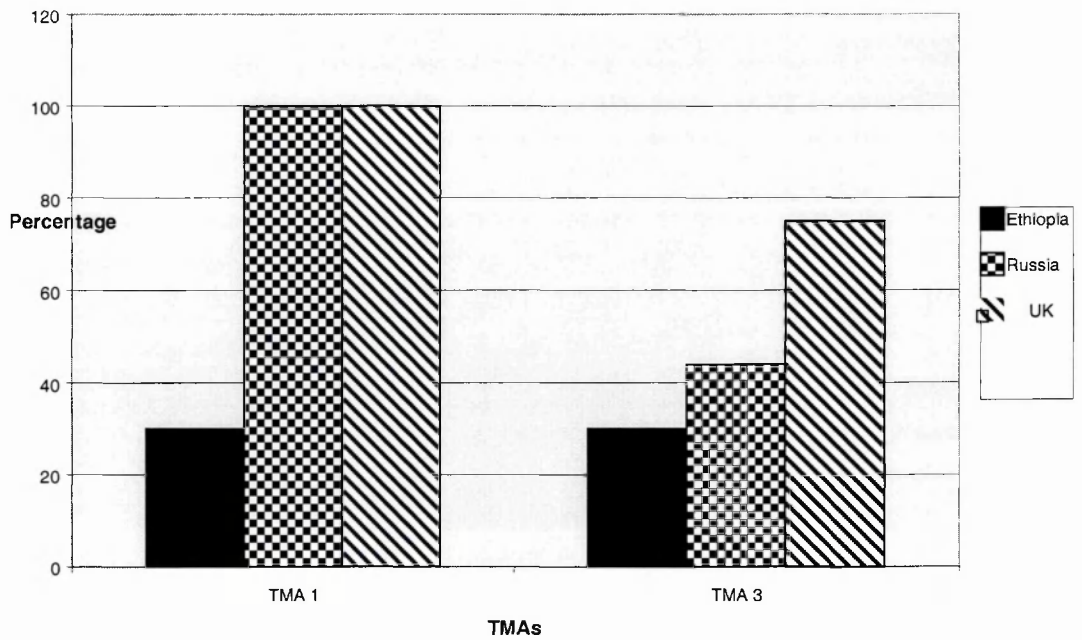


Figure 1 indicates the proportion of usage in addition to the numbers above.

Table 5.4: Ethiopian students' grade and type of additional source used in TMA 01.

Pseudonym	Grade	Type of additional source used
Amandla	58%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Magazine</li> <li>• Journal article (from tutor)</li> </ul>
Dan	54%	
Waweru	50%	
Melvin	50%	
Greg	49%	
Dennis	48%	
Alex	41%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Journal article (from tutor)</li> </ul>
Duncan	40%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Journal article (from tutor)</li> </ul>
William	40%	
Kenneth	36%	
Average	46.6%	

Table 5.5 Russian students' grade and type of additional source used in TMA 01.

Pseudonym	Grade	Type of additional source used
Pavel	74%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet</li> </ul>
Safin	71%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet</li> <li>• Company reports</li> <li>• Magazine</li> </ul>
Victor	64%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet</li> <li>• Company reports</li> </ul>
Ralph	61%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet</li> <li>• MBA stage 1 course books</li> </ul>
Kislova	61%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet</li> </ul>
Kafelnikov	58%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet</li> </ul>
Kevin	58%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet</li> </ul>
Kate	44%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet</li> </ul>
Martin	40%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet</li> <li>• FirstClass conference</li> </ul>
Average	59%	

Table 5.6 UK students' grade and type of additional source used in TMA 01.

pseudonym	Grade	Type of additional source
James	82%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet</li> <li>• Newspaper (Guardian)</li> <li>• Newspaper(Daily telegraph)</li> <li>• Magazine</li> <li>• Airline report</li> </ul>
Ray	75%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet</li> <li>• Airline report</li> <li>• Journal</li> </ul>
Anna	60%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet</li> <li>• magazine</li> </ul>
Susan	58%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet</li> </ul>
Frank	58%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Magazine</li> <li>• Airline report</li> <li>• Internet</li> <li>• Journal</li> </ul>
Fay	55%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet</li> <li>• MBA stage 1 course books</li> </ul>
Juliet	48%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet</li> </ul>
Betty	41%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet</li> <li>• magazine</li> </ul>
Average	59.6%	

Tables 5.4, 5.5 and 5.6 show that the Ethiopian group of students with fewer or no additional resources to use have the lowest average grade of 46.6%, while Russian and UK students who have access to a number of additional sources both have an average grade of above 50%.

Table 5.7 Ethiopian students' grade and type of additional source used in TMA 3

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Grade %</b>	<b>Type of additional source used</b>
Melvin	70	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Newspaper report</li> <li>• Company report</li> <li>• Management book</li> </ul>
Alex	58	
Duncan	64	
Amandla	57	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Company report</li> <li>• Magazine</li> </ul>
Dennis	54	
Greg	42	
Average	57%	

Table 5.8 Russian students' grade and type of additional source used in TMA 03

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Grade %</b>	<b>Type of additional source used</b>
Victor	78	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet</li> </ul>
Kafelnikov	78	
Safin	77	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet</li> </ul>
Kate	70	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet</li> </ul>
Pavel	67	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet</li> </ul>
Ralph	65	
Kevin	64	
Kislova	60	
Martin	60	
Average	68%	



### 5.9 UK students' grade and type of additional source used in TMA 03

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Grade %</b>	<b>Type of additional source</b>
Ray	76	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet</li> <li>• Journal</li> <li>• Company report</li> </ul>
James	72	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet</li> <li>• Journal</li> <li>• Company report</li> </ul>
Anna	69	
Susan	64	
Juliet	64	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet</li> <li>• Company report</li> </ul>
Frank	61	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet</li> <li>• Journal</li> <li>• Company report</li> </ul>
Betty	59	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Company report</li> </ul>
Fay	50	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet</li> </ul>
Average	64%	

Tables 5.7, 5.8 and 5.9 shows an increase in the average grade for Ethiopian students probably because they were writing about their own companies and had the necessary background knowledge. The Russian and UK students also have higher average grades than in TMA 01. This could be because of both knowledge of their companies and availability of additional resources.

### 5.5 Students' profiles

Continuing with 6 of the profiles from the previous chapter, this section will focus on how access to and lack of access to resources can impact on individual students and their writing. While the TMA analysis above focussed primarily on material resources-as evidenced in sources cited by students in their writing- the profiles suggest non-material resources may also be important.

In this section I present two cases each from Ethiopia, Russia and the UK. These profiles were selected because they are the ones for which I had the richest data (see Chapter 3 for issues with data collection). These profiles draw on data from a combination of at least two of the following sources, pro-forma, semi-structured interviews with students and tutors, questionnaires or interviews and written assignments.

### 5.5.1 Amandla (Ethiopia)

Talking about additional resources in preparation for these assignments Amandla mentions that he has access to a computer and the Internet but he states that:

*There are a lot of problem regarding Internet access in our country so I did not manage to do that. What I did was I found one of the magazines regarding the airline sector. I got one and actually got a particular case about airline and I applied it. It was of course secondary which was not bad for the first time.  
[ESINTAmandla]*

Even though Amandla has access to a computer and Internet he was not able to use this resource because of problems with the Internet service provider. He acknowledges the problems with Internet access and then gives the alternative source he used. Although he does not mention this in his interview, his assignment 01 also contains reference to a journal article which he received from his tutor during the tutorial session. The tutor in this instance is helpful to Amandla by providing him with an additional source of information to use. However, in preparing for assignment 03 Amnadla did not have access to any reports from his own organisation. His assignment 03 does not have any references to the organisation's documents. In his interview he commented that he had to use his knowledge of the organisation as the basis for this assignment.

*I attached the general background to my organisation as an appendix and then tried to figure out strategic issues first and then I went to strategies and evaluated the strategies.[ESINTAmandla]*

Asked if he had previously carried out any research, Amandla said that he had not done much research previously and acknowledged that he had difficulty with doing research. He notes that, 'getting the information was a problem.' This suggests that his lack of previous experience and the lack of research resources made doing assignment 01 much more difficult for him than it might be for students working in contexts where they had access to such resources.

Commenting on the various possibilities in the course for students to learn from each other through FirstClass conferencing, tutorials, and residential school Amandla stated that:

*A: Well I've always asked one question about this FirstClass, whatever they call it. We do not have the access to attend or participate in that. But they say all the tutors say you can do without, but I'm worried, I'm curious, I want to know.*

*G: They say you can do without it?*

*A: That you can ignore it, that I can ignore it. It is immaterial, but I am curious, I want to have all the inputs that are necessary you know. It's a resource on itself I want to experience, but I will again raise it and try to communicate about access to that service. Besides tutorial, in particular at the residential school we were very very effective. I've taken lots of lessons there.[ESINTAmandla]*

Amandla's responses demonstrate that he feels that FirstClass conferencing is an important resource where students can discuss course concepts and share ideas. He also stresses the fact that he would like to have 'all the inputs that are necessary' when studying. He is keen to know about FirstClass and also 'worried' presumably by not being able to draw on FirstClass when writing his assignment. Amandla underlines the usefulness of the tutorials and residential school during which students share varied experiences.

Students are given case studies about businesses which they are to read and analyse, commenting on the course content. Amandla admits that he finds the course material 'European centred' and that it does not compare to the less developed businesses available in Ethiopia.

*They are (case studies) European centred. The business industry is not developed in my country some cases are just new to us. The Industry, very limited in our country. Some ideas are quite new to us but we try to relate to them. [ESINTAmandla]*

Here Amandla hints at the lack of background knowledge of the course content as he states that some of the cases are new. This could be businesses that Ethiopian students do not know about as cases are narratives on how a particular company runs its business. This lack of background relevant to course content can be said to be another resource he does not possess. This might suggest that there are mistaken assumptions made by the course team producing materials, that students in all contexts have prior knowledge of specific businesses and their products. They seem to overlook the fact that what is in the public domain in industrialised countries or well known in Europe is not necessarily in the public domain in developing countries such as Ethiopia.

Overall, there are several resources the *Strategy* course anticipates will be available to students which Amandla does not have access to. These are: the Internet, reports from his organization, background knowledge relevant to the course content and contact with other students. His tutor is a useful resource, in one case providing a journal article. This may compensate to some extent for Amandla's inability to access similar material via the Internet. However, although Amandla has an additional relevant source he can refer to he has not found this himself, so he has had little practice in independent research which was required of him in the assignment. The resources he does use seem to have a positive impact on Amandla's assignment (see Table 5.4).

### 5.5.2 Greg (Ethiopia)

During the interview Greg mentioned that he did not have access to a computer and no access to the Internet. Talking about additional resources when preparing and writing these assignments Greg relates that:

*No Internet, no computers according to our situation. Because of this how can we stand? At what level we are standing? We put our foot, its difficult vacuum for us. It's very very difficult for us at that time, we don't have any evidence and we have no experience about reading researches before. The problem is no evidence and no information about British airline industry. Especially in Ethiopia, even Ethiopian airline we have no access to their strategy information, as it is government.*  
[ESINTGreg]

Because Greg has no access to a computer and Internet, in his interview he said that he was not able to do any research for assignment 01 and that he relied solely on the course books. He clearly underlines the frustration of being expected to conduct Internet research without the resources and also highlights the fact that Ethiopian students do not even have access to documents from the local airline because it is a government owned airline and such documents are not available to the public.

Greg also implies that he is at a disadvantage compared to other students - 'because of this, how can we stand, at what level we are standing'. He further draws attention to the fact that this is his first experience of doing research and expresses how he felt about it:

*I don't do any research before, especially TMA 01 it was difficult and I am frightened for that because we don't do or have any researches. We have no experience in doing any research. The first TMA it was say go from Internet, I don't have Internet, I don't have computer. I just use the course books.*  
[ESINTGreg]

In this extract Greg brings out his lack of confidence and anxiety in doing the assignment, because he has never done any research before. This is new territory for him. This raises the issue of whether the first assignment should be a research-based question or whether more structured guidance could be offered. In Greg's case one can say that in addition to

not having the required Internet access, previous experience in doing research is another resource he does not possess. The assumption made by the course team in the assignment requirement is that all students studying the course will have had prior experience of doing some research. This assumption could also be said to be an assumption made not only by the course team but also by the institution (OU) as a whole: for while it is the course team that develop the curriculum content, it is the institution which seeks to establish links with and provide courses to students in diverse geographical and linguistic contexts.

Commenting about the content of the case studies that had to be analysed, Greg admits that there are some difficulties with the content itself:

*The main difficulty is reading European companies. We don't know the names, the companies is far from our area this is difficult for us. We have Ethiopian companies related to Ethiopia. According to our standard, to dig and get out problems related to those companies-sometimes we are amazed- we don't differentiate the person's names (laughing) and the company (laughing) it is difficult for us [ESTINTGreg]*

Greg expresses the confusion he has with the names that are alien. Thus he sometimes cannot tell whether it's a person's name or a company name. This comment brings to light what the course team has taken for granted, such as the names of giant companies, such as Microsoft, Apple and Sony. These are presumably known to most students in the UK and Russia, but are alien to Greg as they are not in the public domain in his context. Thus he says,

*The case study that was quite difficult was Sony. The case study about Sony company was difficult because the company we don't know about the company. We have no companies, we know with similar. We don't know about Apple, about Sony about the products it's very difficult. [ESINTGreg]*

However, his experience of writing assignment 03 where he was required to analyse the strategies of his organisation was in some ways positive. Although Greg as a junior officer at his place of work couldn't access his company's documents- a requirement for TMA03-

he was able to write about the strategic issues in his organisation because of his general familiarity with the company, and he claims this was easier than the first assignment,

*It was easier to write TMA 03 because we start from what we know, I know my organisation, what is the situation, what is current, what is best. I know it is not so difficult when I write about my own place, I match with the course concepts, it's not difficult. [ESINTGreg]*

As mentioned earlier, the course offers students chances to benefit from each other through FirstClass conferencing, tutorial sessions, residential school and self-help groups.

Commenting on the various possibilities in the course for students to share ideas and learn from each other, Greg mentioned that there was only one student from his geographical area who is also studying the course but they never meet for discussions because they live at a considerable distance from one another:

*We cannot communicate. We only communicate when we are at this place (tutorial session). We have the tutor to help us. [ESINTGreg]*

Greg says that they are a distance away from each other and also implies that they do not have other means to communicate i.e. telephone. He acknowledges the value of the residential school which took place in Ethiopia.

*Residential was good for us. I don't know but according to myself a good class it's highly excellence for us. We get more potential, we get more experience sharing and we are applying more clearly in the group work and we are writing in confidence and we are building confidence about the course. [ESINTGreg]*

The only way Greg gets to share ideas with other students is during the tutorial sessions and the residential school, as he does not have any self-help group and has no access to FirstClass conferencing. Greg said that the tutor was helpful. However, the only contact he has with the tutor is during the tutorial sessions and during the residential school,

*I do not contact my tutor because I have no access to email. [ESINTGreg]*

Overall, there are several resources the *Strategy* course anticipates will be available to students, which Greg does not have access to. These are: the Internet, background knowledge relevant to the course content, reports from his organization, and contact with other students. Because Greg does not have any additional relevant sources to refer to, he

has not had practice in independent or collaborative research that was required of him in the assignment 01. It seems that the lack of resources has a negative impact on Greg's assignment (see Table 5.4). Although he said it was much easier to write assignment 03 as he could draw on his knowledge of his company his grade, however, was not better than the one he had for assignment 01.

### 5.5.3 Kate (Russia )

The requirement to draw on additional sources was not problematic for Kate who has access to additional sources via the Internet. However, although Kate has easy access to the Internet, the main difficulty for her was doing the research itself as she says,

*It was my first practice of doing research and it was maybe just difficult for me to do it for the first time because I have no previous practice in this kind of work. The difficulties may be to summarise a lot of information for concrete questions, for the TMA. [RSINTKate]*

Like Greg, Kate's comment points to the problematic assumption that all students have some kind of previous research experience, which is not the case with some students. The difficulty Kate has is dealing with a lot of information, that is, condensing it for assignment purposes. Since Kate's previous education, including the OU *Certificate* and *Diploma in Business Management* courses were in Russian, this could be one reason why she finds it difficult to summarise a lot of information in English. Commenting on the various possibilities in the course for students to share ideas and learn from each other, Kate mentioned that:

*Self-help group help for students for preparing for the TMA and writing for exams. We discuss Russian about it and we try to write English, for example Azhorf matrix we write in English (laughs) but speak in Russian. We have got a people from the OUBS partner in Russia responsible on this self-group activity. He can help out, he organises resources. Yes he can help, he can focus us to some concrete ideas for this course for this concrete case study [RSTINTKate]*



Kate draws attention to the value of being able to use Russian during discussions. She also brings forth the value of having the partner organisation which organises self-help group discussion and also helps in directing the students on what the main focus of their discussion should be for each assignment. In this situation students benefit from each other and from the partner organisation.

FirstClass conferencing, telephone and email are the other resources available to Kate:

*I use FirstClass and yes, I use email system for co-operation with other students and telephone for co-ordinate with Russian students. Because some Russian students learned previous courses in English, they have got experience, more experience than me. Yes, that's why it is useful for me to co-operate with them to ask some questions in this kind of activity [RSTINTKate]*

Kate uses email and the telephone to communicate with other students. This communication is beneficial to her because she gets to share ideas from students who have come to this course via the *Foundations of Senior Management* course.

*K: I use FirstClass for more information about -about business school, about courses, about everything*

*G: About everything, do you actually send messages to the group discussions-when there are discussions about the course?*

*K: No I don't send messages but I like to read it (laughs) to read*

*G: To read and follow the discussion*

*K: Yes to follow- (laughing)- the discussion of other people and some questions*

*G: Do you have any reasons for not sending your comments-?*

*K: I think, I because I've got very little practice in this kind of activity. I don't send yet my messages for FirstClass and following from my begin level to more higher I will try to send my message and to use- (laughs)- this possibility more and more actively [RSTINTKate]*

Even though Kate does not contribute to any of the discussions on FirstClass, she does benefit from them by following the questions and the discussion. Whilst Kate again alludes to the notion of lack of experience in FirstClass as a hindrance to her participation, she clearly also finds the support provided in this medium beneficial.

In general, Kate has some of the resources the course team anticipates students will have these are: Internet and contact with other students. These seem to have a positive impact on Kate's assignments in particular assignment 03 where she could also draw on her knowledge of her company see Table 5.7.

#### 5.5.4 Victor (Russia)

Talking about the requirements of assignment 01 and 03, Victor states that he has access to the Internet and did not have a problem with doing the research as he did it in collaboration with other students. Like Kate he points to the benefits of the self-help groups.

*We had a special self-help group. Our research was divided into parts three parts. The first was individual research where everyone had to look to Internet to find any websites and information, data and so on. Then we gathered together so that everybody can say the work they had done on the same scheme in tutorials. Ten, fifteen days before cut off date. We create self-help group meet the next weekend and discuss our research and share ideas.[RSINTVictor]*

Victor illustrates how members of his self-help group were able to carry out individual Internet research and then come together collaboratively to discuss each one's research and share ideas in their self-help group. In preparing for assignment 03 in his interview he stated that he was able to access organisation documents i.e. annual reports, via the Internet. His assignment 03 contains reference to an annual report from the web page of his organisation.

Commenting on the course content, Victor, who works in the airline industry, had this to say about assignment 01:

*It was not so difficult for me because I was based in aircraft industry so it was not difficult for me. But there were-there are many students that are not based with the industry. And maybe it will be possible for the course to use any other company which deals with more general problems, maybe like supermarkets. [RSINTVictor]*

Victor acknowledges that the easyJet case was easy for him because it was dealing with an industry he works in. He also said that assignment 03 was easy because he was writing about his organisation which he knew well and has access to relevant reports.

In general, Victor has the resources which the course team seems to anticipate students will have in the various contexts. These are: Internet access, reports from his organisation, background knowledge relevant to the course content and contact with other students.

These resources seem to have a positive impact on Victor's assignment in terms of the use of resources (see Table 5.5).

### 5.5.5 Frank (UK)

Talking about his concerns about studying the course, Frank said he was concerned about what was expected of students studying the course, saying:

*I was very apprehensive even when I started B800 about the work that was going to be expected from students in the UK cause I had never had any sort of further education or whatever in the UK. So just how you write and so on.[USINTFrank]*

The lack of familiarity with the UK higher education system makes Frank anxious.

On the requirements for assignment 01 and assignment 03, these requirements were well received by Frank who has access to additional sources in the form of the Internet and the local university library.

*I had no problem with doing research for TMA 01 because I have Internet access both at home and at work and I can also use the local university library.  
[USINTFrank]*

For Frank and other UK and Russian students access to the Internet and other additional resources are easily available. But even though this was the case, Frank highlighted problems he encountered while doing the research for assignment 01 on the Internet.

*I'm working from home and I go for a phone line and it's slow and I spend so much time getting often into dead ends. It leads you to sites that have little information or which are difficult to search [...] The other difficulty is that the question asked to look at how successful were they over a period of time. The Internet is you know just two years old you know or well I mean it has information about the last two years and they look into the future and most of it is like present information. You know to look for information from five years ago it's like forget it, it's just impossible, just a waste of time. [USINTFrank]*

Frank's statement raises two other problems relating to the use of the Internet for research purposes. The first issue is identifying relevant sites some of which are not helpful and the second is getting less recent information. Getting less recent information can be time consuming and often without the desired results. Although not ideal, Frank clearly has and can make use of the Internet as shown in his assignment 01.

Talking about his experience of writing assignment 03 where he was required to analyse the strategies of his organisation Frank said that

*It was surprisingly more difficult when I saw it. I had access to a lot of documents you see which was good but I also felt I had to go a little bit beyond the immediate documents and look a little more at the background of the industry or company itself [...] I had so much knowledge about the industry and so on you know. of course I also had to find references to substantiate what I was going to say and I had all this information how to condense it in a way that is approachable and easy to understand, that was the difficulty I faced. [RSTMA01 Frank]*

Unlike Greg and Amanda who were comfortable about writing assignment 03 Frank thought it was difficult. Frank has access to company documents relevant for his assignment because of his position in the organisation i.e. marketing manager. He also has great knowledge of the industry himself. His problem is not the lack of information but the large quantity of information available to him, as he finds it difficult to reduce it for the purposes of assignment writing. Commenting on the various possibilities in the course for students to share ideas and learn from each other, Frank mentioned that

*I benefit from the interaction within the tutorial. I have also met maybe once in B820 with somebody else just to sort of coordinate how to approach the TMA. That's what I find, getting started, just difficult. [USINTFrank]*

Like Amandla and Greg, Frank acknowledges the value of tutorial sessions. He also has the opportunity to meet with one student from the course to discuss how to go about answering the assignment question. Although Frank has access to FirstClass conferencing, he does not particularly find it useful for purposes of writing his assignment for the following reason:

*There's only about 20% of what is said which is relevant to anything, you know. A lot of benefit is the social aspect of saying hello to each other at the beginning but you know it takes some minutes to open the thing you know to realise that there's nothing more than just to say hello (laughing) and the next person who responds also says hello to everybody. I mean seriously there are so many of these that it is just a waste of time. [USINTFrank]*

He does acknowledge the fact that FirstClass conferencing is helpful towards the exam as there is tutor involvement, albeit minimum.

*The quality (in FirstClass conferencing) tends to get a little bit better as we approach the exam I find because they are supported by the tutor a little bit who asks relevant questions. [USINTFrank]*

Remarking on the notion of the tutor as a resource Frank said that the tutor was a useful resource.

*I have the opportunity to ask the tutor over the phone go like, I'm going to do this, is it ok? And he says yes or no. I've done that and the tutor really helped me to really focus on about the question words rather than may be going di-di-di-da off subject you know. [USINTFrank]*

The tutor is a useful resource for Frank accessible via the phone as evident in the above extract. During his interview he also mentioned that he has contact with the tutor through email and FirstClass conferencing.

On the whole, Frank has the resources which the course team anticipates students studying the course will have. These are: access to additional resources, organisations reports, contact with other students, background knowledge relevant to course content and direct personal contact with the tutor. Despite having access to a number of additional resources,

Frank finds Internet research time consuming and often without the desired result. These resources seem to have a positive impact on Frank's assignment in terms of the use of resources (see Table 5.6).

### 5.5.6 James (UK)

Talking about prior research experience, James stated that he had never done research before this assignment. Despite this, he enjoyed doing the research:

*I searched on the Internet and thought of using the library but I ended up not going there. I enjoyed putting together the research. [USINTJames]*

Like Frank, James had access to the necessary resources when writing about his organisation in assignment 03:

*For this TMA (TMA 03) I had reports from the organisation. The difficulties I had were with the limited scope of my particular organisation. [USINTJames]*

The difficulty he has is not with access to the necessary resources but it is to do with the organisation itself in relation to applying the course concepts. His difficulty raises questions about the extent to which course concepts are applicable across organisations, irrespective of their different nature and size.

Commenting on the content of the course material in his questionnaire, James stated:

*I found the case studies interesting, especially as previous courses had used examples invented by the OU, and it was interesting to read real life cases. There was a lot of detail, which had to be sifted through, which was not a problem. [USINTJames]*

James finds the course materials interesting, and is appreciative of the course team's decision to use real life examples such as easyJet. On opportunities to share ideas through tutorials and FirstClass conferencing James comments:

*I make use of contact with students and my tutor through the tutor group conference. I find the general course conference very wide in content, therefore difficult to obtain specific information. I think self-help groups and the tutor conference are useful as most of the concepts either I or others are using at work and hence people sort of can deal with them even if they don't know how to use them. But if they apply them you understand and they make sense. [USINTJames]*

Like Kate, Frank and Mark James acknowledges the benefit of working with other students, either the self-help group or FirstClass conferencing.

On the whole, James has access to the resources, which the course team assumes students studying the course will have. These are, Internet, background knowledge relevant to course content and contact with other students. These resources seem to have a positive impact on James' assignment in terms of the use of resources (see Table 5.6).

### **5.5.7 Discussion**

Considerable resources are provided in the course materials which students are expected to use. In addition, the *Strategy* course anticipates that several additional resources will be available to students. This is evident in assignment 01 and assignment 03. Assignment 01 requires students to carry out research individually or collaboratively and draw on resources not provided by the course. An assumption is that all students have access to libraries, business press, the Internet and/or the telephone to communicate with each other. Furthermore, in assignment 03 the requirement to analyse strategic issues in their organisation or one they are familiar with assumes that students have access to documents in the organisation and that they have a good knowledge of the organisation's strategy. The issue of the student's position in the organisation is key in relation to access to official documents in the organisation yet easy access seems to be taken for granted by the course team. The profiles suggest that such access differs between students and contexts of study.

The profiles also point to the importance of a number of non-material resources such as contact with other students, experience and background knowledge.

In Ethiopia, Amandla and Greg's cases are similar in that a number of the resources are not available to them. These are: the Internet, background knowledge relevant to course content, reports from their organization and contact with other students. The unavailability of resources to these students is not surprising given the vast inequalities to information resources in developing countries as documented by (Gibbs 1995a; Mordaunt 1997; Cook 2001) and discussed in Chapter 2. There is however, a slight difference in Amandla and Greg's situations. This shows that there are important differences for students apparently studying within the same context. Although Amandla doesn't have access to the Internet he had an additional source he was given by the tutor and had one magazine he found himself. Greg, on the other hand, did not have any additional source to refer to at all. Furthermore, Greg had no practice in doing research at all, while Amandla had some practice although assisted by the tutor.

Unlike the Ethiopian students, Kate, Victor (Russia), Frank and James (UK), have access to the resources the course designing team expects them to have. They have access to the Internet, as would be expected. Wresch (1996) and UNDP (2001) have documented the access to electronic resources and technological advancement of the developed world. They also have access to organisation reports that they can obtain either directly from the organisation or via the Internet. This means that these students are able to conduct research either on their own or collaboratively as the case was with Victor.

Neither Amandla nor Greg had background knowledge relevant to the course content. The Russian and UK students, on the other hand do have background knowledge relevant to course content either because they work in the industry which the course deals with or



because of familiarity with the businesses dealt with in the course. Kingsley (1997) on his experience of tutoring ESL/EFL students in developing countries argues that a student's lack of knowledge and experience or status can discourage active participation, and more importantly restrain the application of ideas and concepts to issues and problems in their own organisation. Findings from Ramanathan and Kaplan (1996a) support his view. Canagarajah (1993b) questions the fact that textbooks and materials produced according to local teaching conditions can be marketed in periphery communities without needing to be adapted for their conditions. In the same vein, Sonaiya (2002), focusing on Nigeria, also questions the appropriateness of the cultural content of educational materials that are alleged to be suitable for global dissemination. The lack of background knowledge relevant to course content can be said to make the course more difficult for Amandla and Greg than it probably would be for students who have such background knowledge. Nevertheless, both Amandla and Greg commented that they found the course very helpful and that they could apply most of the concepts in the organisations they work for.

The course offers students opportunities to share ideas and experiences through tutorial sessions, residential school, FirstClass conferencing and self-help groups. Apart from tutorial sessions and the residential school however, Amandla and Greg have no contact with other students who are studying the course. They cannot make use of self-help groups, and FirstClass conferencing. The Russian and UK students on the other hand have access to FirstClass conferencing and also have self-help groups that they find very useful and are a readily available resource to them. However, the Course File states that:

Computer mediated conferencing and access to the Internet and World Wide Web are central parts of your experience of learning about strategy on B820. This learning involves researching, discussing and preparing source material with your peers. (Course File p. 14)

Despite the course team regarding computer conferencing, researching and discussing with peers as 'central parts' of the learning process, the notion of other students as resources is apparently taken for granted in the Ethiopian context. The course team assumes that students in the various contexts have access to the Internet and are within easy reach of each other, which was not the case for Amandla and Greg.

Frank is the only one who has prior experience of doing research. While Frank expressed frustration with doing the research which he thought was time consuming sometimes without the desired results, Amandla and Greg were frustrated by unavailability of resources for the research. Kate was frustrated with the amount of information she had, especially how to condense it to be suitable for the assignment while James simply enjoyed his first research exercise.

### **5.6 Tutors' perspectives.**

This section summarises the views expressed by the tutors during the semi-structured interviews on their experiences of tutoring in the different contexts, with specific reference to issues of resources (see Appendix 6 for interview).

All tutors agreed that FirstClass conferencing, self-help groups and residential schools were a valuable and important part of the students' learning experience on the MBA programme, as they all provide opportunities for students to discuss and ask questions among themselves and/or with tutors. With the exception of the residential school, such discussions are not possible in all geographical contexts as they are dependent on factors such as availability of computers and access to Internet for FirstClass conferencing and distance between students in the case of self-help groups. This was evident in the students'

comments discussed above, and is supported by tutors' comments on the different teaching contexts.

Tutor Anderson who tutors in the UK sees his students regularly for tutorial sessions, his students have access to computers and Internet and they have an active self-help group.

*I do see the students very regularly as well and there is a lot of FirstClass conferencing-exchanges between the students. There's a tutor conference as well which I and my tutor group have access to so I can communicate to all my tutor group through FirstClass and they can communicate with me and each other so you can get a reasonable discussion going. That again is quite helpful, I imagine quite helpful for distant students, me working here (UK) my students always live fairly close to each other. [TutorAnderson-INT]*

Tutor Anderson's experience is in contrast with tutor Blake's experience with Ethiopian students whom he says have no access to FirstClass and live miles away from each other and do not meet their tutor regularly. Tutors on this course go to Ethiopia in turns and conduct tutorial session with all student groups. Tutor Douglas expresses her frustration with the fact that, although her Russian students have access to FirstClass, none of them actively participate in discussions and none of them respond to any questions sent via email.

*I do encourage them, I send email saying please if you have any questions or queries about the feedback that I have given please contact me and often send down an email saying if there's any question please email me. I don't know why they don't. But I normally use the FirstClass conference so, as you've seen, it started in May. By September, I just gave up- there was no point in me putting stuff into it- they just were not responding to it. [TutorDouglas-INT]*

Russian students also have self-help group discussions organised and run by the local OU partner and discussions are in Russian. However, Tutor Douglas feels that these partner-led sessions interfere with the way she tutors: partner-led sessions, according to this tutor, tend to take the form of lectures, whereas she believes the course should be encouraging independent and active learning through discussion.

All tutors agree that the arrangements differ between contexts. In the UK students meet regularly with their tutor for tutorial sessions, have self-help groups and participate in FirstClass discussions. In Russia, students meet regularly with their tutor for tutorial sessions, have self-help groups organised and led by the partner organisation and rarely participate in FirstClass discussion. However, in the Ethiopian contexts the students do not have the same tutor all the time during tutorial sessions: instead they have any tutor who is in Ethiopia for that tutorial. Because of the vast distances between them, most students do not have self-help groups. There is therefore no consistency between contexts in the personal tutor-student relationship in terms of tutorials and no consistency in contacts between students.

On the question of familiarity with background knowledge relevant to course content, the tutors also shared a similar view that although such knowledge was an important resource for some students the lack of such knowledge can equally be a barrier to learning for those who do not have it. Tutor Blake, for instance, suggests:

*I think it's the organisational contexts. It's really not a lot of use talking about retail banking in a developing economy where banks are few and far between. It's not much use talking about a supermarket when we think of Marks and Spencer and ASDA where a supermarket might happen to be twice the size of this room (office) it just happens to be called a supermarket but it's not particularly a supermarket. I think there are issues of context there. I think also the other issue is that the lot of case examples that are given are completely outside many of the students' experience. Okay, some (students) travel abroad on official business but providing material on easyJet, Marks and Spencer, yes they will read the case, they will relate it to the course but they have no prior context of what a low cost airline or a major retail chain is.[TutorBlake-INT]*

Tutors also state that business concepts which are taken for granted in the developed world can be alien to students in developing countries. Sometimes, concepts can have different meanings to students than those usually associated with them in the UK or those intended by the course team. For example, one tutor pointed out that the phrase 'hostile takeover' would not have a business connotation to students who have lived in war zones, such as Eritrea.

Tutors concurred that examples in the course materials come from the western capitalist world and are imported to students in Ethiopia and Eastern Europe whose countries are in transition from communist/socialist world, and this can be problematic for the students. Tutors also pointed to the difficulties caused by the differences in the organisational and management structures in different contexts, and the fact that course conceptions of management structures do not fit along with students' experiences.

Overall, issues identified by the tutors in this section tie in with the issues that have been raised in the students' profiles, highlighting a number of assumptions underlying the courses indicating that the course materials do not take into account the diversity between contexts and students studying the courses. These issues include: students' background knowledge relevant to course content, differences in organisation structures and culture, and Euro-centric examples. All these put some students at a disadvantage too often.

## **5.7. Conclusion**

This chapter has considered the availability of resources to students studying the *Strategy* course in three different contexts. It shows the different ways in which students studying the same course are either disadvantaged or at an advantage in terms of material and non-material resources available to them during their study. The chapter also brings to the fore some of the problematic assumptions underlying this course. Even though Internet access is a prerequisite for the course and to that extent could be considered part of the course's 'provided' resources- all students are provided with the CD Rom software to install FirstClass conferencing- it is clearly in practice an 'additional' resource, as not all students studying the course have access to computers or the Internet. It could be that this requirement is either overlooked by Ethiopian students registering on the course or it is overlooked by the OUBS itself by not providing different requirements in view of the

students' context. UK students are in a more advantageous position in comparison to their Russian and Ethiopian counterparts. Ethiopian students are the most disadvantaged in all respects in terms of resources available to them.

The ways in which the use of additional resources impacts on students' learning is complicated in that: 1) it is unclear how different resources are valued by different tutors; 2) it is not straightforward whether the grades students get are related to the sources they use. However, in both assignments Ethiopian students who had little or no access to additional resources have the lowest average grade and; 3) their perception of themselves as disadvantaged because of not having resources for writing.

The tensions involved in providing a course globally are highlighted because of issues of access and availability of resources in diverse local contexts and the content of the course materials. There are equity issues pulling in different directions such as the need to provide material that is interesting and meaningful to EL1 students, without putting EFL/ESL students at a disadvantage.

The chapter points to the need for students working on the same course to have comparable access to resources as they are assessed in the same way. However, it is difficult to see how this can be achieved given the range of different contexts in which students are studying. I return to this issue in Chapter 7.

## Chapter 6

### Writing about reflection for assessment in *Foundations of Senior Management* course (B800)

#### 6.1 Introduction

Incorporating reflection as part of written assignments is an important aim in the *Foundations of Senior Management* course. The OUBS aims to promote reflection amongst managers by requiring them to apply theoretical frameworks studied in the course in their work situation based on the concept of experiential learning (Kolb 1984). Reflection on the learning experience in the OUBS context appears to be regarded as an indication of students' mastery of new concepts resulting in a change of perspective and/or practice which the students have to demonstrate in their assignments. This is a gradable aspect of learning.

The literature on reflective learning (see Chapter 2) reveals that reflection is a complex skill. The role of assessment in relation to writing about reflection is not unproblematic such as: the difficulty of distinguishing between what people write about reflection and what they actually do (Argyris and Schon in Bright 1996) and the difficulty in distinguishing between reflection and mastery of a reflective writing genre (Sumsion and Fleet 1996).

An indication of this complexity is that in teacher education and social work education, research has shown that tutors have to play an important role in helping students understand the process of reflection. However, in distance learning context such support is not available.

Much research on reflective writing focuses on teaching and social work such as Stierer (2000), Scott (2000), Boud and Knights (1996) and Boulton-Lewis (1994). There is very little that has been done on research on reflective writing in distance management education. There is little research evidence available which focuses on the experiences of distance learning management students, and the way in which they reflect upon those experiences for assessment purposes. This chapter aims to contribute to the body of work on reflective writing by focusing on reflective writing in an open and distance learning management course.

Using qualitative analysis only, the chapter draws on pro-formas, interview data and written assignments to explore the experiences of UK and Russian students writing about reflection as part of their assessment in the *Foundations of Senior Management* course. This chapter focuses on the *Foundations of Senior Management* course which explicitly requires students to write about reflection for assessment. It also considers some of the difficulties such requirements cause in diverse contexts building up on those indicated in the previous chapter, such as students having to draw on additional resources.

This chapter is organised into the following four sections. Section 6.2 explores what the OUBS says about reflection. Section 6.3 presents profiles of students from Russia and the UK on what they say about reflective writing for assessment and what they actually write in their assignments. Section 6.4 explores tutors' perspectives on reflection. Section 6.5 is a conclusion to the chapter.



## 6.2 Reflection and the Open University Business School (OUBS)

The following is an extract from one of the MBA course materials.

Courses in the programme are therefore designed to help managers to *apply* ideas and theoretical frameworks to the situations they face, and to develop their analytical skills in the process. The underlying model of learning, derived from Kolb and Fry (1975) as shown in figure 1. It represents learning as a continual and active process of experience, reflection on that experience, and the development of ideas to make sense of experience. ( B800 *Starting your MBA*. 1999: p. 9)

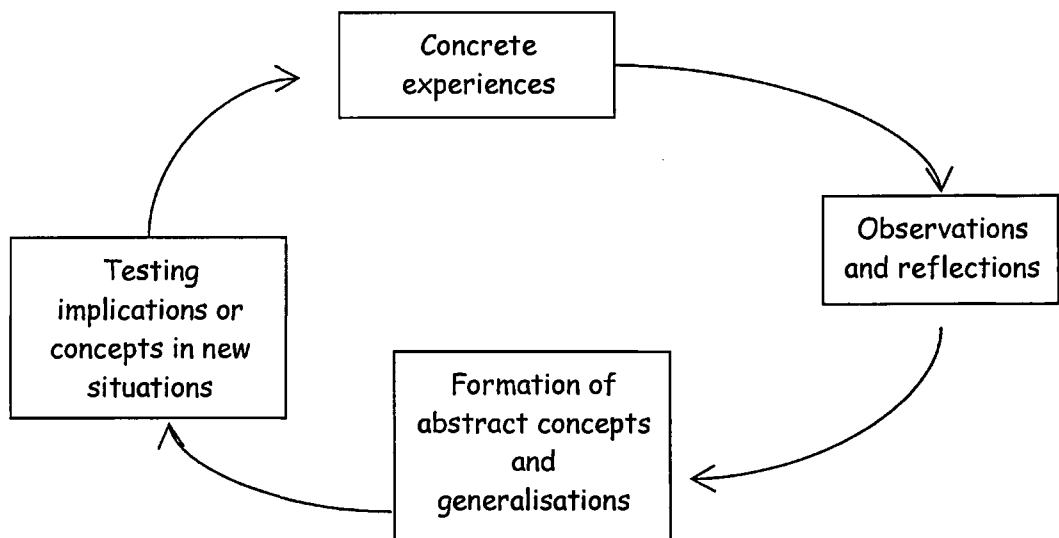


Fig 1 Kolb's learning cycle (included in B800 *Starting your MBA*. 1999: p. 9)

From the extract and diagram it is clear that reflective learning is an essential aspect of the MBA course and for assessment purposes. Reflection on the learning experience in the OUBS context appears to be regarded as the key indication of student's mastery of new concepts resulting in a change of perspective and/or practice which the students have to demonstrate in assignments. With reference to assignment 01, change of thinking and practice appear to be an obligatory part of reflection on learning as suggested in the assignment question below:

Question 3

Reflection on your experience, and on the usefulness of concepts in making sense of this experience, is an important part of management learning. Looking specifically at your own management practice, describe how two concepts from Books 1 and 2 have **affected your thinking** about the manager's role in general, and/or how your thoughts on motivation or other specific topics have **altered** as a result of B800 study. You might want to consider the following:  
How did you think about a situation before encountering certain ideas? What assumptions were you making? How have these assumptions, or other **aspects of your thinking, changed** as a result of your study? What has this suggested about your management practice? What are you going **to do or you already do differently**, as a result of this reflection? (my emphasis)

In the above question students are expected to show how the concepts have affected/altere d them by showing a change of thinking and practice after studying part of the course.

Expectations of reflection on the students' learning experience suggest that students' learn from every experience hence the expectation to do something differently after studying the course as indicated by the bolded text.

To guide students on writing about reflection they were given a handout with two fictitious examples of writing about reflection via FirstClass conferencing which stated that:

Even if your course does not require you to describe your reflection for assessment purposes, you may find that the following (fictitious) examples give you a flavour of how reflection can contribute to learning. This will help in a reflective way yourself. (Handout from tutor)

**Example provided of reflection in writing** (see appendix 5 for complete example)

This was a particularly interesting assignment because it provided the opportunity to explore how well the organisation's culture and structure were suited to the achievement of its business goals. It was quite easy to see which frameworks were relevant and how to apply them. In future, though, it will be important to try using models that I find more difficult to understand so that I can increase my repertoire.

There were several frameworks that were appropriate for evaluating the organisation's culture. Deal and Kennedy's matrix provided a suitable approach to analysis of the culture in relation to the market and type of activity the company is involved with. This provides a framework for identifying the 'ideal' culture for this situation against which the actual culture can be compared. Handy's classification of cultures allowed for a comparison between the actual culture and how it was expressed in the way the company was organised. Mintzberg's concepts of organic and mechanistic structures were also relevant.

From the given example in its full version it seems that the reflective writing of students should have the following key elements:

- Reference to course concepts or frameworks e.g. 'it was quite easy to see which frameworks were relevant and how to apply them'; 'there were several frameworks that were appropriate---Deal and Kennedy's matrix---Handy's classification---Mintzberg's concepts---
- Use of first person to indicate effect of the course on personal practice at work e.g. so that I increase my repertoire—I should encourage this culture---I might try using---I think that—
- Evidence of change of future practice (see Kolb cycle)- e.g. I will be able to discuss---I will aim to take account---I might try using---

In the following section I examine students' writing on reflection to see if they follow the given example of reflective writing and to explore what students say about reflective writing and what they actually write about reflection.

### 6.3 Students' perspectives on writing about reflection

In this section I present four student profiles, two from Russia and two from the UK.

Students from Ethiopia were not involved in this course (*Foundations of Senior Management*) because the course is not offered in Ethiopia. Ethiopian students follow the certificate and diploma courses instead.

The four profiles are presented in order to explore their experiences on writing about reflection for assessment. These particular profiles were selected because they are the ones I had the most complete data from the participants (see Chapter 3 for issues with data collection). These profiles draw on data from a combination of at least two of the following sources: pro-forma, semi-structured interviews with students/electronic questionnaires and students' written assignments.

Unlike in the previous chapters where I analysed interview data and written assignments separately, in these profiles, I use interview data, what the students say and compare this against their assignments. In focusing on particular students, my aim is to: 1) explore what they say about writing about reflection for assessment and; 2) find out what students actually do write about when writing about reflection.

### 6.3.1 Vincent (Russia)

As the deputy regional manager of a publishing company Vincent's job entails writing business reports. During the interview, Vincent mentioned that his main difficulty with assignment writing was translating the theories and applying these to real work situations:

*Sometimes in my country there is no real situations where theories and concepts from the course are applicable. That's why is difficult to find out real material for the TMAs or find out your themes or points to use in the TMAs. The last TMA 06 was on culture and structure. In Russia we have got absolutely another culture against western culture that's why it's the concepts of western style is not applicable to Russian situation. [RFINT Vincent]*

Although he is a manager, he has difficulty with finding suitable examples from work experience in Russia which can be used for assignment purposes. This difficulty presumably arises from different culture; in this particular instance it could be different management culture and/or management practices.

Commenting on the part of the assignment where students are required to reflect about their learning for assessment purposes (see section 6.1), Vincent said that he did not have any difficulties in reflecting about his learning although he had never done such reflective writing:

*Reflection is just applying of study concepts to real life and mirroring of these concepts to real life. It's not quite difficult maybe it's easy for me especially because making changes at work depends on me because of my position. I don't have to report to someone that I need training for my people. [RFINT Vincent]*

Vincent suggests that one's position in the company influences what one writes about in relation to changes within the company. Vincent clearly associates reflection with being in a position to effect change. This presumably is not the same for all students. The fact that Vincent defines reflection as 'applying study concepts to real life' is evident in the following extract from his assignment 01.

1 Earlier in every conflict or difficult situation I tried to win by any blood using my aggressive and loud voice. 2 Sometimes, of course, I lost but I thought: "It happened because they (contrary party) had a hidden powerful resources, like a possibility to discuss the matter of the conflict at an evening golf party with General director." 3 I think I was very narrow minded at my approaches to get the results desired for me. 4 I had never tried to broad agenda or look at the matter of the question by other angle. 5 It was extremely difficult to change my approach of conflict managing or discussing very complex topics as a mature manager. 6 Now I use some hints from section 'behaviours used by skill negotiators' (book 2) [TMA01 Vincent]

In his writing there is evidence that Vincent is reflecting on his previous conflict situations and identifies his previous assumptions about a conflict situation in which he did not succeed. In sentence 2, he says he thought that the other party had hidden powerful resources and thinks he was on the losing side during conflict situations. In sentences 3-4 he claims that after studying about conflict management he realised that he was narrow minded when looking at issues of conflict, however, now he has a broadminded approach enabling him to consider issues from different angles. He also uses components from course books, in particular Book 2 the section on 'behaviours used by skill negotiators.'

Vincent also engages in a more practical way of reflection, as shown in the following extract.

7 But in the end of the second quarter we faced an unpleasant situation when our result dropped down in unpredictable manner and no one had an idea what happened. 8 It was the real chance for me to apply studied theories. 9 Small investigation (discussion with my colleagues about bad performance) convinced me that I was on the right way then I rethought the situation in terms of motivation related frameworks. 10 First of all I found that Maslow's theory was hardly applicable because it was too simplified and could be applied only to a situation where African's wild men try to survive in a jungle. 11 Adam's Equity theory was inapplicable too due to lack of information about real salary of other members of the department, which one can obtain. 12 But Vroom's and Locke's theories gave me enough information for considering the inappropriate performance in light of motivational problems. 13 Having made conclusions from the analysis I developed some recommendations. 14 It was not so difficult to elaborate recommendations because it seemed that situation was of hard complexity, but in order to be sure I decided to check: "will it work? Will it improve motivation?" 15 My boss is a good help to me so we tried to apply one recommendation from my TMA. As you can see it helps? [RFTMA01 Vincent]

The above extract shows that Vincent's reflection involves what he refers to as a small investigation which is an attempt at analysing the present problems the organisation is facing. In sentences 10 to 13 he then uses the theories learned from the course, explaining why two of the theories were inapplicable and he finally settles for Vroom's theory which he finds suitable for his situation. On applying Vroom's theory he comes up with recommendations to address the situation. In sentence 15 he acknowledges the help he gets from his boss in applying one of the recommendations which was a success.

Vincent's understanding of reflection is associated with being able to effect change, thus in his writing he draws on course concepts to inform his investigation from which he is able to make suggestions for change.

On a personal level, in the interview he reveals that he has made changes after studying conflict management. In this particular instance he mentions during the interview that his colleagues can actually see changes in his behaviour during conflict in a meeting:

*My colleagues notice my change during meetings after writing this TMA and asked me what's wrong? Why are you not loud as earlier? [RFINT Vincent]*

According to Vincent his learning and change is acknowledged by his colleague. Thus one can say this indicates practical positive change after learning and reflection. However, when asked if the changes he wrote about in the section on reflection were real, Vincent said that:

*The suggestions for change which I make in the TMA are maybe in reality are not to such an extent as I describe in the TMAs. In TMAs it's hyper a bit maybe just beefed them to show my understanding of the concepts. [RFINT Vincent]*

Vincent's comment on 'hyping up' or 'beefing up' his writing on reflection can be said to be an indication that writing about reflection for assessment purposes does not necessarily mean that some issues students write about are the real issues that they need to change in their work practice after studying a section of the course. Students can 'beef' up the issues in their assignment in order to get more marks. Such comments raise the issue of whether students' writing about reflection for assessment is a 'game' students have to play to earn good marks.

Vincent has difficulties in assignment writing in particular in relating course concepts to real life situation/ real work experience, with certain concepts not being relevant or applicable in his work context. Although he says he does not have problems with writing about reflection, however, his account suggests that he exaggerates whatever changes he proposes in his assignment presumably in an attempt to get as many marks as he can.



For Vincent, reflection can be said to be examining his previous assumptions, and realising the need to change. His reflection is also practical, as it involves an investigation of a current problem and coming up with possible solutions to the problem even though it is also exaggerated.

### 6.3.2. Mark (Russia)

Mark is a software test manager who is studying with the OU for the first time.

Commenting on the requirement to reflect and write about his learning and what he will change after studying a section of the course he stated:

*It's difficult to answer on such questions immediately. It's much easy to answer after one or two months experience of implementing of the new guidelines. So I think it's better to include question about reflection in TMA03. [RFINT Mark]*

Mark suggests that writing about reflection would be much easier if he had to do it after he had time to put the new ideas from the course into practice. It seems that reflection for him is about putting new ideas into practice and see how they work as opposed to giving untried thoughts on how the theories ought to work.

Talking about the content of what he writes about in the reflection section of the assignment he said:

*You just have to make things and just write that. After Book 1 and 2 I didn't have time to try any of the things we had learned at work. My answer for TMA 1 was not straight I didn't have many things to change so I wrote about the theories. [RFINT Mark]*

Like Vincent, Mark acknowledges that in writing about reflection for assessment one has to 'make things' of the content rather than writing about the reality of one's work situation. The fact that in assignment 01 he says he wrote about theories in his reflection is evident in the following extracts from his reflection question in assignment 01.

Extract 1 from Mark's writing on reflection in assignment 01

1 Before the course study my understanding of the role of manager was not well structured. 2 My own definition of manager's role was simpler and in brief looked rather like Fayol's definition of management: to forecast, to command, to co-ordinate, to control. 3 Some of management aspects were not detailed. The links between some operations (areas) were not obvious. [RFTMA01-Mark]

In extract 1, Mark's reflection focuses on his understanding of the manager's role and says his understanding was similar to that of Fayol, a theorist from the course materials. In sentence 3 he acknowledges that some management aspects were not clear, however, he does not specify these aspects.

From this more theoretical reflection one can say that Mark implies that after his studying of Books 1 and 2 his understanding of the manager's role and other aspects of management have changed as shown in the following extract.

Extract 2 from Mark's writing on reflection in assignment 01

4 During the learning of the course and TMAs preparation some priorities in motivation has changed. 5 The additional importance has come to such needs like self-realisation (doing a good job, qualification growth) and self-actualisation (career growth, work for successful and famous company). 6 Additional knowledge and/or systematisation of previous knowledge and experience also achieved through the course reading. 7 All that enabled to increase the details of analyses. [RFTMA01-Mark]

In sentence 4, even though he does not state it clearly, he admits that some of his motivation priorities have changed. In sentence 5 he highlights the needs that have been brought to the fore during his study using key discussion from the course.

**8** Expectancy theory helps to build up and investigate the blocks of motivation chains and links between of them. **9**. Equity theory and goal-setting theory help to understand and or predict people behaviour. **10** As total this knowledge helped to construct the motivation system more clearly and logically. **11** The change situation assessment was following: The people goal (intentions) are become the main field of attention. **12** As a result the measures that offered in changes of motivation system moved from old fashion style to empowering. [RFTMA01-Mark]

In extract 3 sentences 8-9 Mark assesses the usefulness of the expectancy and equity theories respectively. He claims that knowing these theories has helped in constructing the organisation's motivation system bringing about change in the organisation. In sentence 12 he indicates that paying attention to people in the organisation resulted in him shifting from the 'old fashioned style' to empowering people.

Mark's approach can be said to be a pragmatic one in that he has not been able to change things so he could not engage in the kind of reflection leading to change as demanded of the course. Based on what he says about the content of his reflection, his writing about reflection can be said to indicate that he has mastered how to write reflectively without necessarily engaging in reflection as action. This raises the question of whether the grades he receives for his reflection are awarded for the process of reflecting or mastery of the skill to write reflectively.

### 6.3.3. Stella (UK)

Stella is an educational manager in an institution of higher education. Stella says at work she only writes 'one big piece' in the form of an annual report that involves putting together the reports from other co-ordinators into her self-assessment report.

On writing about reflection for assessment, when asked if she had ever written about reflection prior to this course, Stella responded:

*Yes, in teacher training we did lots of it and we had a whole book called the reflective practitioner. [UFINT-Stella]*

Commenting on reflection for assessment on the course Stella said:

*Well I think it's fine. I quite enjoy writing about reflection. I'm in danger of waffling a bit on that question saying what I think people want to hear about, on the whole I quite enjoy it, and it feels quite light hearted at the end of doing a TMA. [UFINT-Stella]*

Stella does not seem to have any problems with writing about reflection, in fact she says she enjoys it, which contrasts Vincent and Mark's views of writing about reflection.

Her enjoyment probably stems from the fact that such writing was part of her training as a teacher. From her comment 'it feels quite light hearted at the end of doing an assignment.' one can say that she considers reflection to be less demanding than the rest of the assignments. She goes on to say:

*But the whole thing of do something, reflect on it do something reflect on it change it has been really valuable. The bit on time management at the beginning was really valuable. So I now use my time on the train to think about what am I doing today or reflecting on did I do what I set out to do yesterday. I think I've become much more efficient as a manager its good. [UFINT Stella]*

Stella believes that reflecting is good practice which leads to change. She says she has now changed her time management plan and uses her time more efficiently than before because of having to reflect and write about it. To implement some of her changes she draws on her previous experience as a teacher:

*I've made some changes directly out of thinking through the TMA and interesting enough I started using a lot more teaching practices in my management. Things like look at different aspects of what we do as a team but not doing it in an academic way but doing it more like running the team more like a classroom where we can all sit back and can all contribute and do an activity become much more active in meetings especially that's been quite a big one for me. [UFINT Stella]*

Like Vincent Stella associates reflection with change. Talking about the content of her writing on reflection, Stella admits that the content on her reflection is overstated:

*You have to make a story sound good there's a lot of exaggeration of course. But also maybe when you are doing the TMA and are thinking things through and you say, 'oh yeah, this would be great this would be great I'll do this' and then you get back to work and it's all power fighting. [UFINT Stella]*

Exaggerating the content in order 'to make the story sound good' suggests the need to sound convincing to the tutor seems to be more important than writing about reflection in the real context of her work place. The following extracts from Stella's writing on reflection show her mastery of reflective writing and suggest that a good story will normally lead to a good grade.

Extract 1 from Stella's writing about reflection in assignment 01

1 I have always been aware of having fairly good time management skills. 2 I started on the management road when I took on the acting co-ordinator's role and, after the initial frenzy of getting sorted, found that, although the previous co-ordinator had always seemed very stressed, I had almost nothing to do. 3 This perhaps enabled me to get the job I have. [UFTMA 01 Stella]

Stella is reflecting here on time management. In sentence 1 of the above extract Stella begins by highlighting that even before studying the course she already had good time management skill, this for her is not a new idea learnt on the course. In sentence 2 she compares herself with her predecessor who she says was always stressed while she seems to have nothing to do. She believes that her time management skills got her the job (sentence 3). In extract 1, Stella's reflection focuses on action and also implies that she already knew what the course has taught her about time management. However in extract 2 below her focus is on mental processes.

Extract 2 from Stella's writing about reflection in assignment 01

4 However, I have felt guilty about my line manager and my peers working longer hours than I do. 5 I assumed that to be effective I ought to be doing as my role models were, long hours and that this would be seen to show dedication. 6 Having worked through the MBA handbook I realised that not only do I have more time because I am actually more effective with my time, but that there are still savings I can make. 7 I have realised, for example, that I don't over commit, but I could plan more effectively. [UFTMA 01 Stella]

In sentence 4 she expresses a feeling of guilt about the rewards of her effective time management while her peers work longer hours. In sentence 6 she says that after studying the MBA handbook she has more time because she is effective with her time management (this she said she already knew see extract 1). She also realises that she could still save more time.

Extract 3 from Stella's writing about reflection in assignment 01

8. I have made some quite dramatic changes, including spending time on the train each morning to plan my objectives for the day, and on Monday, for the week. 9 I have become conscious of when I am doing unimportant things and only allow myself to do them if I am thoroughly enjoying myself. 10 I have also become conscious of the do things 'well enough' concept and this has allowed me to rid myself of the stressor[UFTMA 01 Stella]

In this extract Stella recounts the changes she has made after studying Books 1 and 2 these are: making use of time on the train to plan her day's objectives, doing unimportant things only if she is enjoying herself and finally doing things 'well enough' in order to avoid getting stressed. Stella clearly demonstrates thinking, mental processes and their relation to action in her writing.

Stella enjoys reflecting and writing about reflection perhaps because of her teacher training experience in writing about reflection. The content of her reflection focuses on the practical things she has changed. She like Vincent and Mark acknowledges that the content on reflection in her assignment is exaggerated.

#### 6.3.4. Phil (UK)

Phil is an IT planning manager. Asked if he had written about reflection prior to studying *Foundations of Senior Management* course, Phil said, ‘no, maybe this all betrays my science background.’ Commenting on the requirement to reflect and write about their learning and what they will do differently after studying parts of the course:

*I hate that. It is just the hardest bit. I think, one it's a difficult question to do, two when I answer it with what I feel and think then I get zero or low marks rather on the first one. I guess that it's what the tutorials have said. It is a game with a new set of rules you have to learn and they just want you to play that game. [UFINT Phil]*

Unlike Vincent who finds reflection easy and Stella who enjoys reflection, Phil finds the reflection section the ‘hardest bit’ and he ‘hates’ it. He expresses his hatred of having to write about reflection because he feels he is not really being asked to reflect on his learning but to ‘play the game.’ The idea of ‘playing the game’ can be said to be similar to what Vincent refers to as ‘beef up’ Mark refers to it as ‘making things’ and as Stella says, ‘to make a story sound good there’s a lot of exaggeration.’ Phil however, is not at ease with playing the game.

Talking about the content of what he writes about in his reflection he recalled:

*Naively, I answered the first question. What did I learn? I said, ‘I didn’t learn much.’ Did it help in my analysis? ‘No I don’t think it did’ full stop essentially. [UFINT Phil]*

Phil says he wrote his first reflection question naively or rather truthfully stating that he hadn’t learnt much and that what he learnt didn’t help him with his analysis. This is illustrated in the following extract from Phil’s assignment 01.



Extract 1 from Phil's writing on reflection in assignment 01

1 In writing this assignment I reconsidered our job design work in line with Warr's nine elements. 2 My assumption was that we had only considered the company's needs whereas this analysis shows that the new jobs did have the elements that Warr's theory states should be present to meet the needs of individuals. 3 The department structure thus remains in place, largely unchanged today- 5 years later- so I think it has stood the test of time. [UFTMA01 Phil]

In sentence 1 Phil compares his company's job design with the 'new' theory from Warr.

In sentence 2 he says that he found that his company job design actually did have the elements recommended by Warr's theory. This implies that Phil knew about the elements of job design but probably didn't know that this was Warr's theory. In sentence 3, he asserts that the department structure remains unchanged as there is apparently no need to change it as it has the required elements. Phil also exemplified why he felt he hadn't learnt much as shown in extract 2 below.

Extract 2 from Phil's writing about reflection in assignment 01

4 My study of Book 1 has encouraged me to reflect on my styles in terms of Fayol's classical command and control approach, with Kanter and Snow's empowering views. 5 I immediately related to Fayol's views, and can see elements of planning co-ordinating and organising. 6 On a personal level, I have undertaken activities that fit into Fayol's view, such as an annual departmental plan and budget. 7 Each month, I was required to report on progress against plan, to explain deviation between actual and budgeted expenditure, and then to reforecast for the year. [UFTMA01 Phil]

In sentence 5 Phil concedes that on reflection his practice identifies with Fayol because he has personally undertaken activities that fit into Fayol's view. In fact sentence 6-7 illustrates that what Fayol suggests is what Phil has been doing all along. Phil further questions some of the ideas suggested in the course as shown in extract 3 below.

8 On deeper reflection, I am less sure that only leaving staff to decide "the how" can be described as empowerment. 9 B800 implies empowered staff are also able to decide what to do and when. 10 On one hand, staff did have some degree of freedom to decide these things. 11 Those who worked on the systems used to sort parcels in the evening tended to start work mid morning and stay late, even though their contracts said their hours were 9am to 5.30pm. 12 Conversely if every individual was allowed to do what he liked, it is hard to see how the organisation could advance to achieve its strategic objectives. [UFTMA01 Phil]

In the sentences 8-9 Phil expresses his uncertainty about leaving staff to decide how and when things should be done. He however, gives in sentences 10-11 an example of how staff in his company are given a certain scope to make decisions. What Phil does in his reflective writing is different from the writings of the other students in that he is writing about a number of things his company already does which are recommended in the course.

On his experience of writing about reflection Phil says:

*So the simplest thing is to just make it up really and just tell a story and don't worry about it. So for the first one I just naively wrote down what I thought was right and she (tutor) didn't like it. She kind of noted it's a game, play the rules and pretend you didn't know something before. Say I didn't know this now I know this. I think it's part of the game, let's pretend we are learning something even if we are not. We'll get more marks for saying we've learned something. It's silly, I hate it. I really dislike it. [UFINT Phil]*

Overall, Phil acknowledges that writing about reflection on the course is essentially just 'making up a story' to get the marks. He seems to be echoing, albeit more strongly the issue raised by Vincent, Mark and Stella. According to Phil the view of 'playing the game' is supported and encouraged by the tutor. However, this view is not the view Phil had when he started writing about reflection. He summarises his thoughts on the issue of writing about reflection for assessment, 'They don't really mean what does Phil think? They mean, dear Phil, answer the question like you did last time.'

### 6.3.5 Discussion

The students' writing about reflection shows that to a certain extent they have mastered the art of reflective writing by following the example given by the tutor. Students' writing has the key elements identified in the example given by the tutor: reference to course concepts or frameworks, use of the first person to indicate the effect of the course on personal practice at work and evidence of change of future practice in line with Kolb's cycle. The grades these four students got range from 12 to 19 out of a total of 20 marks.

The key issues emerging in these profiles are: writing about reflection can be fairly easy if one is in a position of power to effect change or if one is used to and likes writing about reflection; reflection and writing about reflection can lead to change of action; what students reflect about is not necessarily what they write about when writing about reflection for assessment purposes. This is similar to the findings of Stierer (2000) on students studying an MA in Education with the OU. Students in his study felt that writing about reflection was just a way of persuading the tutor that they were acquiring appropriate knowledge and understanding as well as an ability to apply that knowledge and understanding appropriately. Stierer's participants also felt that the writing about reflection did not necessarily represent experiences that had transformed them. Finally, the different cultural context can make applying course concepts difficult.

## 6.4 Tutors' perspectives on reflection

In this section I present tutors perspective on students writing about reflection based on interview data.

Table 6.2: Tutors' experiences, teaching contexts and first language.

Tutor	Tutoring contexts	Experience	First language
Tutor Anderson	UK Continental Western Europe Russia	5 years	English
Tutor Douglas (Ms)	UK Russia Continental Western Europe	3yrs	English

(see Chapter 3 for complete table of participating tutors)

Responding to a question on whether it was important for students to be asked to be asked to reflect on their learning in their assignments:

*It is absolutely essential that students are asked to reflect in business. But I think it should be taught more in the course. It is regarded as important in that they should pick up additional techniques, ways of doing things they haven't come across before and put it into practice in their own business. [Tutor Anderson-INT]*

Although Anderson values the use of reflection in assignments, he acknowledges the need for students to be taught about reflection more in the course. According to Anderson when students reflect they should be able to identify 'tools, new methodologies' to use in their work situation. There seems to be an underlying assumption that concepts taught in the course will be new to all students which might enable them to try the new concepts at work. However, this might not be the case, as suggested by student Phil's experience of writing about reflection, as most of what the course was advocating was already being done in his company.

Even though both tutors consider reflection essential they both acknowledge that reflecting does pose problems for students.

*The main thing is the reflection, Kolb's learning cycle, the whole thing about how adults learn. They just can't do it. They find difficulty having that personal reflection. Most of them have problems with the motivation models and don't get them right. [Tutor Douglas-INT]*

Douglas acknowledges that certain course concepts such as motivation models can be problematic for some students. The difficulty with the course concepts could be the cause of students not being able to reflect on something they cannot relate to in their own work situation. Tutors feel that students find it difficult to reflect and then demonstrate their reflection in writing. Commenting on what students actually write about when writing about reflection Douglas stated that:

*Many of them go on to talk(in writing) about what they have learnt in the course material and many of them find it difficult to go through the actual reflection process which we try to push them through using Kolb but at this stage they are still not doing it. [Tutor Douglas-INT]*

According to Douglas, writing about what they have learnt in the course materials without showing how they will use what they've learnt in their work situation, does not constitute reflection. She expresses her frustration at the students' inability to reflect and write about their reflection even after they have done a number of similar assignments.

*In their writing some of them obviously do have problems in reflecting. They find themselves in the same situation when writing as they do in their day to day lives at work they can't identify what their problems are and that sometimes comes out in their TMAs. They are a bit muddled, I sense that they are no better off or little better off from studying the course than before studying the course. They still have some problems identifying the problems they have at work. [Tutor Anderson-INT]*

Anderson feels that writing about reflection is a task which requires students to be able to identify the problems they have at work and to deal with them using the concepts from the course. He makes a distinction between the reflection and the act of writing about reflection. However, he thinks that students are not able to make this distinction.

Commenting on what he specifically looks for when marking assignments dealing with reflection Anderson said that:

*I don't get enough of this reflection in their TMAs. Even if they suggest an alternative way of doing something which is not powerful or a reasonably correct or powerful way of doing something they'll get credit for it for the sake of suggesting alternative ways. They get more credit for suggesting more suitable ways of doing something. [Tutor Anderson-INT]*

When assessing reflection Anderson looks for students' to suggest ways of doing something differently in their work place as a result of gaining concepts from the course. So reflection for him means being able to suggest an alternative way of doing something. Although he admits that students' don't write much about reflection he believes that:

*It's only through more and more experience of doing B800 and carrying on with the other parts that will give the skills and experience of reflecting that they can then take back to their work. [Tutor Anderson-INT]*

Both tutors agree that asking students to write about reflection is an important part of business management learning. Their experience shows that students have difficulty with reflection and writing about reflection. Douglas believes that difficulty could be a result of students' not mastering the course concepts thus they are unable to connect the course concepts and their work situation. Anderson suggests that reflection should be taught more on the course and believes that with more practice in reflecting and writing about reflection students can get the skills and experience of reflecting which they can use at work.

## 6.5. Conclusion

In this chapter I have looked at the experiences of students writing about reflection for assessment. The picture that emerges is consistent with the three problems around the assessment of reflection identified by (Boud and Knights 1996; Stierer 2000). First the problem of what evidence students should provide to show that they have engaged in reflection. This issue is highlighted by Vincent, Mark and Stella who have written about reflection but say that they have actually made up or exaggerated the content of their reflection. The second problem is that reflection is based on the experiences of the individual learner, this is evident in Phil's case where he has reflected in a way that does not suggest that he has learnt much from the course but is allegedly told by the tutor to 'learn the new rules and play the game.'

The third problem of students trying to impress the assessor in order to gain higher marks by giving the correct expected response is evident in the students writing and in what they say. The 4 profiles show that when required to write about reflection, individual students write about activities which differ from student to student. Stella wrote about the practical changes she has made, Vincent carried out an investigating and suggested solutions to the problem faced by the organisation, Mark wrote about his understanding of concepts, while Phil wrote about what he already knew which meant he didn't learn much.

Although these profiles are few, they shed light on the reality about students writing about reflection which may not seem to be supporting the OUBS principle that reflection helps students to develop analytical skills as reflected by assessment practice. Writing about reflection can be a combination of different things to students; a source of learning, enjoyment, a display of mastery, playing the game or unpleasant.

## **Chapter 7 Conclusion**

### **7.1 Introduction**

In this final chapter, my aim is as follows: in 7.2 to summarise the contribution of this research study to the broader area of student academic writing in higher education; in 7.3 to discuss the limitations of the research methods employed in this study; in 7.4 to suggest future possible areas of research indicated by this study; in 7.5 to outline some possible implications of this research. I conclude by offering a personal comment on my experience of carrying out this study.

### **7.2 The contribution of this study**

This study contributes to the field of academic literacies, specifically student academic writing, in open distance learning in several ways.

1. The study provides data about both EL1 and EFL/ESL students from diverse linguistic, educational and cultural backgrounds and their experience of writing in English in their diverse local contexts.
2. The study offers explorations of students' experiences of writing in English in a course produced in the 'inner circle' for students in the 'inner', 'outer' and 'expanding' circles. By focusing on English as the language of instruction in different parts of the world, the study allows us to see that students' experiences of English are highly diverse both across teaching contexts and within the same teaching contexts. This is evident in Chapter 4 where I illustrate with data that students have: different levels and types of experience



in English both across teaching contexts and within the same teaching contexts; different problems in using English; and different strategies for tackling these. This study shows that whilst there are significant differences between the contexts of study, there are also important individual student differences within each context. This level of diversity of individual student experiences in the same contexts raises issues for global educational providers, such as how to cater for diversity both at the level of local context and individual difference. The study brings to the fore the need for more extensive research on how global course materials are received by tutors and students.

3. The study emphasizes how access to material and non-material resources in different contexts impacts upon students in their writing of assignments. By focusing on students in diverse contexts, the study enables us to see the different resources available to students in their local contexts and raises questions about the nature of some of the assignment requirements. This is evident in Chapter 5 where I illustrate through examples the disparity in the availability of resources in the three contexts in which students are studying. The study contributes to existing research on the availability of resources to academic in diverse contexts (see Canagarajah 1993a; Gibbs 1995b; Gibbs 1995a; Belay 2000) which highlight the shortage of academic resources in particular in developing countries and the ways in which this shortage impinges on the academic writing of both students and scholars in developing countries. Studies discussing the impact of resources on academic writing have to date tended to focus on professional scholars only. This study emphasizes the need to consider such an impact on student academic writing and points to the need for students working on the same course to have comparable access to resources as they are assessed in the same way. However, it is difficult to see

how this can be achieved given the range of different contexts in which students are studying.

4. The study raises the issue of the content of the course materials from the 'inner circle' imported to the 'expanding' and 'outer' circles. In a small way, the study supports Canagarajah and Sonaiya. Canagarajah (1993a) questions whether textbook material produced according to local (inner circle) teaching conditions can be marketed in periphery communities without needing to be adapted. Sonaiya (2002) questions the appropriateness of the cultural content of educational materials that are alleged to be suitable for global dissemination. The study therefore draws attention to the tension between being sensitive to the needs of EL1 students while at the same time being sensitive to the needs of EFL/ESL students. For example, course material may be made inaccessible to EFL/ESL students because of the use of idioms, analogies and colloquial expressions designed to appeal to EL1 students. This raises issues of how or whether materials can be made accessible, and interesting, to all students.
  
5. This study provides students' views on writing about reflection for assessment and examples of written texts aimed at demonstrating reflection. As far as I am aware this has not been carried out before in the context of a UK based MBA course delivered in diverse contexts. This study therefore contributes to studies on the requirement to write about reflection in one specific professionally oriented course, the MBA. It suggests that what students actually write about when writing about reflection for assessment may not necessarily be what they have reflected upon on the basis of what the course expects. Some students may be able to 'play the game' in order to provide what

tutors expect. This raises questions about the purpose of reflective writing for assessment and what tutors actually value, is it the writing or the reflection? Furthermore the study draws attention to the disciplinary differences in relation to the understanding of reflection. Previous studies of writing about reflection have tended to be drawn mainly from education and social work where reflection is conceptualised as internal personal development. In contrast, this study indicates that reflection in business studies seems to be conceptualised as practical problem solving leading to change in the individual and the institution's practices.

### **7.3 Limitations of this research**

This study has been subject to a number of limitations which are described here.

Firstly, the research involved mature students studying a UK based distance delivered MBA course in their respective countries (Ethiopia, Russia and UK). As students are studying at a distance, access to students in these sites was particularly difficult due to institutional constraints. Seidman (1991) warns that, 'when interviewers try to contact potential participants whom they do not know, they often face gatekeepers who control access to those people' (p.45). I indeed faced such gatekeepers who prevented me from getting access to students at the beginning of their courses and as a result I generated less data than I would have liked.

Secondly, once consent to use students' written assignments was granted, access to students' assignments was also problematic as students' written assignments are marked by their tutors then sent to the OU assignment handling office before being dispatched to the students. Some of the assignments were returned to students who had consented to their use for research purposes without the requested photocopy being made by the assignment

handling office. It was almost impossible to get assignments directly from students. This meant I collected fewer assignments than I had hoped.

Thirdly, another issue that became apparent in the course of the research was the reluctance on the part of the students to communicate with me or indeed their tutors by telephone or via email, most of them citing the lack of confidence with their English in particular the Russian students. Ethiopian students could not be contacted by phone or email due to lack of facilities. This also contributed to the limited data collected from these students. Finally, the arrangements for interviews with the Ethiopian and Russian students were difficult to set up. Due to time constraints interviews with Ethiopian students were held between tutorial sessions in Ethiopia as students had to rush for public transport immediately after sessions. Interviews with Russian students were held during the residential school week in the UK. However, because the residential school day runs from 9am to 9pm interviews with students were conducted after 9 pm which was inconvenient for some students as they either had to be involved in group discussions with other students in preparation for the next day's session or were exhausted because of the long day's work. Even though the residential school appeared to be the best way to get to the students, it was also problematic in that students are free to attend any residential school in Europe which meant that Russian and UK students attended different residential schools. It would have probably been different if I had been able to interview students at a different time in their respective countries i.e. not during residential school as the case was with Russian students and not during tutorial session as the case was with Ethiopian students.

All these constraints prevented me from collecting the amount and the kind of data I had originally hoped for; in particular I had hoped through talk around text to focus in detail on the relationship between writing demands at work and in the university course.

## **7.4 Suggestions for further study**

There are a number of aspects of this study which could be further pursued.

Future research could include a longitudinal study following students through the whole MBA programme and examine in detail the following:

1. The impact of the availability or the lack of resources in students' writing throughout the different course options students follow.
2. The use of language and cultural content in course materials. For example, building on this study it would be useful to identify the amount of 'inner circle' colloquial language used in course materials and the ways in which students respond to these.
3. The different writing genres students have to produce throughout the course and how these relate to students' own experiences of writing at work.

In addition, writing about reflection for assessment in open distance learning focusing on the assessment of reflective writing could be usefully explored across a number of disciplines.

## **7.5 Implications for course design**

Open University distance education courses designed in the UK are increasingly made available in countries where English is neither the main language nor the language of educational instruction. This study in a small way shows that making courses available to such diverse groups in diverse contexts raises linguistic and cultural issues for students and course development and issues of availability of resources to students in different local contexts.

There are number of problematic assumptions on the part of the course team with regard to assignment requirements and the availability of various resources to students in diverse contexts.

The study has highlighted the problems caused by use of local expressions in course materials which are familiar to EL1 students which EFL/ESL speaker students have no knowledge of. In order to ensure that the MBA course is a global course, it is important for course teams to ensure that the language of the course is accessible to students from diverse cultural, geographic and linguistic backgrounds without depriving the UK students of the idioms and colloquial expressions available in their first language. This brings to the fore the difficulties/tension faced by course production teams in producing course material which is sensitive to needs of both EL1 and EFL/ESL students. One possible way of striking the balance between these could be achieved by providing a glossary of idioms and colloquial expressions used in the course materials.

The assumption in the course requirements that students will have access to additional resources in their diverse context is problematic. Despite the increase in use and availability of both electronic and non-electronic resources in the inner circle, some countries in the outer and expanding circles have little or no access to such resources. Course providers therefore, should take into account the diversity of the contexts when making writing requirements on the course or provide different writing tasks for students in other parts of the world. The fact that the MBA course places value in self-help groups and FirstClass conferencing suggests that course designers assume that every student is within easy reach of fellow students and that all have access to FirstClass conferencing which is not the case in some contexts. It is difficult to think of an obvious solution to this but it is an issue which needs to be carefully considered by all course teams.

## 7.6 Personal reflection

When I started on this research I did not anticipate that I would encounter difficulties in gaining access to research sites because the MBA programme, the focus of this study, was delivered by the OU and I was funded by the OU to carry out this study. However, I was surprised because getting access to the tutors on the courses was more complex and secretive than I thought. I was not allowed to meet tutors during the tutors' briefing meeting at the start of the course. All but one of the tutors who ended up involved in this research were hand picked by the OUBS. They were all very helpful yet the strong gatekeeping surprised me given that the OU is an institution renowned for its openness and its excellence in research. The strong gatekeeping role/element could be due to issues of student confidentiality because sometimes in the assignments students write about confidential business strategies which could compromise companies which the students work for and their jobs. It could also be an attempt to ensure that students' and tutors' workload is not increased by taking part in multiple research activities which might be going on at the same time.

I was also surprised by what I found out about the institution's behaviour towards the situation in Ethiopia. Tutors were aware that because of the lack of access to the Internet most students cannot access the OU library or any other library as an alternative resource. Yet such issues were ignored by the OUBS. This is ironic given that the OUBS insists that students should reflect on their learning, but it does not seem to be reflecting on its own teaching contexts and writing requirements.

My starting point in this research was my experience as an ESL learner and teacher of courses from the inner circle in the outer circle. I found that the experiences of OU EFL/ESL students studying in English in the expanding circle were similar to my experiences in terms of feeling disadvantaged by lack of background knowledge relevant to the course content, use of colloquial language which makes the course materials inaccessible and lack of academic resources for writing which are taken for granted by the course. The apparent insensitivity to the issues affecting global audiences could be due to a number of issues such as production costs, staff development, commercial pressures and nationally prescribed learning outcomes which the OU as an institution has to adhere to.

Although writing this thesis was harder than I expected it was useful because I have learnt to sit for hours trying to make sense of my writing. It has also encouraged me to be cautious about decisions on how I write.



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**Appendix 1**  
Consent form/letter

Dear Colleague

Research project on academic writing in a global context

This letter is to ask if you would be willing to participate in a research project on academic writing. This project forms part of my research with the Open University. I would appreciate your contribution as it is essential for me to gain a good understanding of how students whose first language is not English cope with the course content and the academic writing demands of a UK based course. The research will be of practical relevance in that it will be made available within the Open University and I hope the results will inform future teaching.

Any information you provide will be treated confidentially, and will have no influence on your assessment. If any of the information you provide is included in a research report, it will be used anonymously.

I would be grateful if you could let me know if you would be willing to contribute to this research. You will still be able to decline on any particular occasion if it is not convenient for you. If you change your mind, you will have the right to withdraw from the project at any time.

Could you please indicate whether you will be willing to:

- Allow your TMAs and PT3 feedback to be used in this research project.

Yes [  ] No [  ]

- Be interviewed or provide in writing your views and experiences of academic writing. Yes [  ] No [  ]

- Provide written comments (by email or post) on thoughts and experiences of writing TMAs on B800 or B820 course and the feedback you receive.

Yes [  ] No [  ]

Your Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Student P.I: \_\_\_\_\_

Your email address (optional): \_\_\_\_\_

I would be grateful if you could return this form in the provided envelop directly to your tutor or perhaps you could send it directly to me at the above address. Thank you very much for your co-operation in completing this form.

Yours faithfully

Gab'sile Lukhele

## Appendix 2

### Student pro-forma: general information from research participants.

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research project. Please note that all information you give will be treated in strict confidence.

Please complete by writing your answer in the spaces provided.

1. Name: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Personal Identity Number (PIN). \_\_\_\_\_
3. What is your first or main Language? \_\_\_\_\_
4. a) Which other language(s) do you speak?
4. b) Which other language(s) do you read and write?
5. Which other Open University course or courses have you studied before taking up this course?
6. What was the language of instruction for the course(s) studied earlier?
7. Please give details of what you hope to achieve from studying B800?
8. Why did you particularly choose to study this course with the Open University?
9. Did you have to follow any preparatory English language course before registering for this course? Give reason(s) for your answer
10. (a) Do you have any worries or concerns about the reading you have to do for this course?  
(b) Please give details.
11. (a) Do you have any worries or concerns about the writing you have to do for this course?  
(b) Please give details.
12. Please give some brief background information about yourself.
  - a) Please state whether you are Male or Female \_\_\_\_\_
  - b) Please indicate your age group by ticking the relevant box:  
under 25 [ ] 25-29 [ ] 30-39 [ ] 40-49 [ ] 50-59 [ ] 60-64 [ ] 65 or over [ ]

c) What is your present occupation?

d) How much work experience do you have in your present occupation?

e) Please specify your highest educational qualification:

Thank you for taking the time to provide this information.



Appendix 3 (a)

List of participants *Foundations of Senior Management* course

Pseudonym	Country	Gender	Age bracket	Language used at work and language of previous education	Highest educational qualification
Phil	UK	M	40-49	English	BSc
Stella	UK	F	30-39	English	MA
Patrick	UK	M	50-59	English	ACCA
Richard	UK	M	30-39	English	FCCA/ACIM
Matthew	UK	M	40-49	English	PGD industrial chemistry
David	UK	M	40-49	English	PhD
Bridget	Russia	F	30-39	Russian	University degree
Collin	Russia	M	30-39	Russian	Diploma in economics and engineering
Gloria	Russia	F	40-49	Russian	Higher education in economics
Vincent	Russia	M	-	Russian	Military institution degree
Mark	Russia	M		Russian/English	MA applied Maths
Tina	Russia	F	30-39	Russian	B.A Law

Appendix 3(b)

List of participants *Strategy* course

Pseudonym	Country	Gender	Age bracket	Language used at work and language of previous education	Highest educational qualification
Amandla	Ethiopia	M	40-49	Amharic/English	O U Diploma in Management
Greg	Ethiopia	M	30-39	Amharic/Amharic	O U Diploma in Management
Duncan	Ethiopia	M	-	Amharic/Amharic	O.U Diploma in Management
Kate	Russia	F	30-39	Russian/Russian	PhD Physics
Victor	Russia	M	30-39	Russian/Russian	O U Diploma in management
Karl	Russia	M		Russian/Russian	MA in Maths
Frank	UK	M	30-39	English/French	PhD.
James	UK	M	40-49	English/English	Honours in Engineering

**Appendix 4**  
Students' interview *Strategy* course (B820)

Background

1. Have you studied any courses in English before BZA 820? If yes Which ones?
2. In your experience, is there any difference in the way you are expected to write your TMAs for BZA 820 and the way you were expected to write in your other previous courses? Please give details.

WRITING

In BZA 820 course (Strategy) you are mostly required to write reports for your TMAs. In your TMAs you use the report format.

1. Do you find writing reports for TMA purposes similar to the way you write reports at work?- please give details of similarities and/or differences (issues for consideration- style/format, content, use of academic sources/references, use of first person etc )
2. Are there any aspects of academic report writing which you find difficult? Please give details.
3. How valuable/useful do you regard this kind of writing in relation to your professional development or do you just see it as an academic exercise? Give details
4. In BZA 820 you study a number of theories and models (such as STEP, Porter/Antsoff matrix) from what you have studied so far, do you have any difficulty in applying/relating any of the theories to your day-to-day work situation? Please give details.
5. For TMA 01, you were required to conduct either your own research or collaborate with other students. Have you ever conducted any research before individually or collaboratively? If so in what context?
6. Were there any constraints/ difficulties in conducting the research for this TMA? Please give details?
7. BZA 820 is based mainly on case studies, are there any concerns/ difficulties you have with the language when reading the course material or the case studies for TMAs? Please give details and examples of problematic case studies?
8. TMA 03 is not a case study like the previous TMAs. You are required to produce a report on the strategic position of your organization using course concepts for analysis and to also make recommendations.
9. What was your experience of doing this TMA. (any difficulties/ interesting aspects of doing this TMA?)

10. In this TMA you have describe the strategic issues of your organization and used course concepts to analyse them. Are these real strategic issues facing your organisation or they are just created in order to show your understanding of the theories for the purpose of writing this TMA? *How far is it do with your work situation and how far is it to do with TMA writing requirements?*
11. Do you really think that the recommendations you have make in the TMAs with regard to your company are practical/ can actually be achieved or they are just useful for TMA purposes?
12. In analysing your organization you sometimes have to be critical how do you feel about being critical of your organization/bosses? Please explain.
13. You are encouraged in the B820 course file to draw on external information resources (internet, printed material etc) Do you have access to any of these resources? (If using local sources- what language are they written in?)
14. What concerns if any do you have in relation to the exam (which involves case study analysis)?
15. Do you think you need any kind of support? Help from the university with writing TMAs?
16. What kind of support do you think would be helpful in this regard?

#### Use of first class/ Self-help groups

1. In this course do you have access to the use of first class conferencing?
2. Do you make use of first class/ self help groups? Please give details. If yes for what purpose (contact with tutor/ course discussion/ resting place/ course wide – conference) If no please state why.

#### **Comments/ reactions from tutor feedback**

1. When you received your TMA were you satisfied with your grade?
2. Please explain
3. Did you expect any comments from the tutor on your use of language or any aspect of writing?
4. What was your reaction to the comments made by the tutor i.e.
  - did you understand them?
  - were they meaningful/ useful/ valuable for future use? Please give details.
5. Is there anything you would like to add or comment about?

## Appendix 5

Students' interview *Foundations of Senior Management* course (B800)

### REPORT WRITING

In B800 course (people and organizations) you are mostly required to write reports for your TMAs.

17. Do you find writing reports for TMA purposes similar to the way you write reports at work?- please give details of similarities and/or differences (issues for consideration- style/format, content, use of academic sources/references, use of first person etc )
18. Are there any aspects of academic report writing which you find difficult? Please give details.
19. How valuable/useful do you regard this kind of writing in relation to your professional development or do you just see it as an academic exercise? Give details
20. In B800 you study a number of theories (such as expectancy theory) do you have any difficulty in applying/relating any of the theories to your day-to-day work situation? Give details
21. In writing TMAs is it easy to find examples from your work situation or do you have to adapt elements from your experiences or even invent things for purposes of TMAs?
22. When writing reports at work whom do you usually address in your report? Is there any similarity between the work report addressee and the TMA addressee?
23. Do you think you need any kind of support from the O.U with writing TMAs? If so, what kind of support do you think would be helpful in this regard?

### Reflecting on your experience

1. What do you understand by reflection i.e. when asked to reflect on your learning what exactly do you think you are expected to write about?

Have you ever written on 'reflection' before if so in what context?

What do you think about this type of question? ( reflection or question 3?) What is your experience of doing this type of question (i.e. did you find it easier to write? Please give details)

Questions on reflection require you to state what you are going to do differently after studying some of the theories from this course. Looking at your work situation, how

possible is it for you to make any changes, that is, do things differently because of what you have learned in B800 course so far? Give details of what you will be able to change and what you will not be able to change.

Your response to the question on reflection on what you've learnt was very positive. Now that it's been some time since you wrote the TMAs how far do you think your this a genuine / honest account of what you have learnt and changed because of the course or is it just something you have written for purposes of the TMAs.

You have described the problems your organisation has with motivation using the theories that you learnt in books 1 and 2. Are these real problems facing your organisation or they are just created in order to show your understanding of the theories for the purpose of writing this TMA? *How far is it do with your work situation and how far is it to do with TMA writing requirements?*

Do you really think that the recommendations you have made in the TMAs with regard to your company are practical/ can actually be achieved or they are just useful for TMA purposes?

#### **Use of first class/self help group**

- a) In this course do you have access to the use of first class conferencing?
- b) Do you make use of first class?
- c) Please give details. If yes for what purpose (contact with tutor/ tutor group discussion/ course wide- conferencing)
- d) Do you have self help groups? Do you attend?

#### **Comments/ reactions from tutor feedback**

5. When you received your TMA were you satisfied with your grade?
6. Please explain
7. Did you expect any comments from the tutor on your use of language or any aspect of writing?
8. What was your reaction to the comments made by the tutor i.e. were they meaningful/ useful/ valuable for future use? Please give details.
9. What are your thoughts and experiences of the residential school?
10. Is there anything you would like to add or comment about?

Thank you for providing this information.

## Appendix 6 Tutor Interview

### Background

1. From your experience, are there any problems encountered by students studying the *Strategy* course in Ethiopia/Russia, in particular students with no experience of UK education? [E.g. course fees, self-help groups, relative lack of face to face contact with tutor, email discussion?
2. Are there any difficulties students working in non-UK contexts encounter in shifting between 'local' professional writing and OUBS academic writing?
3. During tutorial sessions, what language do the students use during group discussion.
4. Apart from meeting students during tutorial session and residential school do the students communicate with you in any way i.e questions about course, clarification etc.

### Course content:

- a) From your experience, what issues, if any, do non-UK students find problematic in relation to course content? (e.g. topics covered in the course.)
- b) From your experience, what issues, if any, do non-UK students find problematical in relation to the pedagogy adopted in the course? ( i.e. case study )

### Language

- a) In your view, are there any particular problems with language the students have in relation to reading course texts? Please give details.
- b) Are there any particular problems with language the students have in relation to writing their TMAs? Please give details.
- c) Comments on TMAs do not focus on language is there any particular reason for this?
- d) What kind of support, if any, do students receive with their writing in English from OUBS?
- e) What kind of support does the university provide to students in Ethiopia in relation to resources ( material for reading e.g. the additional reading text recommended in course file)?
- f) How in your opinion can students support be enhanced by the Open University?

## Writing

- a) Students are required to write reports in TMAs what in your view are the aims of this sort of writing?
- b) What according to the course policy are the aims of this writing?
- c) What do you perceive as important in students writing?
- d) From your experience what difficulties if any, do students have with report writing? (Format/style, use of sources, addressee, first person)
- e) How far do you think these are common to other non-Ethiopian students?
- f) Students are expected to draw on their experience when writing TMAs (e.g. personal or professional experience). Does this give rise to any issues for non-UK students?
- g) The first two TMAs in this course are based on case study analysis? From your experience what difficulties if any do students in Ethiopia have with dealing with such questions?
- h) TMA 03 is not based on case study analysis. Students are to produce a report on the strategic position of their organization or one they are familiar with, using course concepts for analysis and to make recommendations. (a) From your experience are there any difficulties students have with this kind of assignment where they have no common text to refer to? Please give details.
- i) How important is it, for assessment purposes that the recommendations students make in TMA 03- should be feasible or just recommendations that fit the given situation?
- j) What are the key factors/ issues you evaluate in this type of question?
- k) Is there anything you would like to add or comment about?

Thank you for your time.



**Appendix 7**  
**Transcription of interview with Greg (Ethiopia) Strategy Course**

**G = Gab'sile (interviewer)**  
**Gr-Greg**

<b>Time</b>	<b>Initial</b>	<b>conversation</b>
	G	Thank you very much for agreeing to be interviewed. Well, I'll be asking you about your experiences of doing the course BZA 820.
	Gr	Okay
	G	Which other courses have you studied with the Open University?
	Gr	Pardon?
	G	(slowly) Which other courses have you done with the Open university before?
	Gr	Before- I well I start from the certificate course and the diploma courses
	G	Okay, your previous education was it in English or Amharic?
1.0	Gr	Previously my education was in Amharic. Before this I completed from the teacher training school-(*) then I applied for this opportunity, for this chance and the course.
	G	So the Open University courses were your first courses in English?
	Gr	Yah, they are the first courses in English. Before, as a subject matter, we did English as a subject matter not the course material were not in English
1.8	G	Okay, so did you find it difficult to -
	Gr	Yah it is difficult for us, our main problem is not with the course concepts but it is main problem is language problem-
	G	language problem-
	Gr	Yah the language problem. We don't, don't get from any place any training about language we are trained simply by our experience in this language.
	G	So you get the language training through your experience?
	Gr	Yes,
	G	In you opinion, are there any differences you have noticed when you have to write in English and when you are writing in your own language?
	Gr	Yah, we know the thing we know everything in Amharic we identify with things more in Amharic and can describe everything but when we translate, the Amharic translation and- and when we translate the idea to English we don't come to the point it's only vast- when our courses say don't exceed 3 thousand words or this. And if when you come to the crucial when you come to the point it's vast for the English is difficult for us.
3.3	G	Okay, lets come to the writing that you do for BZA 820
	Gr	Yeah
	G	You are required to write reports most of the time. TMA are reports
	Gr	Yah
	G	Uhm how do you find writing the reports for TMA purposes- Do you write reports in the same way at work
3.6	Gr	Yah, I think in the previous certificate and diploma course there's no introduction, presentation, recommendations that simply we write but we don't recommend for that in the last TMA we do not come to the recommendation I think the MBA course is difficult, it's a very difficult as it is our first MBA course -
4.4	G	You haven't done the B800 course?
	Gr	Now we did 800 we then now,-

4.7	G	-B800 and the B820?
	Gr	800 we passed 820- we do not do 800. We come from 751, 752, 820, we jump it.
	G	Ah, so you think 820 is difficult?
4.8	Gr	Yah strategy is difficult because of our experience is it also needs creativity
	G	Uhm
	Gr	Our background is more of a disadvantage to us because we do the certificate
	G	So you say you write the reports for TMAs in the same way as you write reports at work?
5.2	Gr	No we write in the forms
	G	Which forms?
5.3	Gr	At work we have forms for reports which we fill in.
	G	In writing the TMA you have to make use of course material like Porters 5 forces and they you give the reference-
	Gr	Yah man! Man! of course in our course we use that, before we don't understand that, simply we write down the idea, our understanding simply. It's difficult to join the course concepts or the models, the Porter models and the Grants models there's many models in this course, there's many models it difficult to apply our idea or facts to interact them with that concept or that model but now we just write, we write just now we apply it, I think I don't get the comments of being (*) but according to my understanding I apply more course concept and of Grant's model, different models.
6.2	G	Okay, when you are writing your TMAs do you use word like, I, me, my or you don't use such words?
6.4	Gr	Yah, before in the Diploma and Certificate program when I applied, I now I am using my own organisation so I apply that mostly
	G	Okay, Are there any parts of writing the report that you find difficult which part you say the report has introduction, recommendation, analysis and conclusion are there any parts you find difficult to write?
7.0	Gr	Yah, according to me, recommendation is difficult for me , I have to think, what can I conclude and what can I say what can I conclude it's difficult for me mostly or always my tutor says, 'you say more than necessary and you write a good analysis but what you come to conclude, what do you recommend. Mostly it's my difficulty, difficult for me just frightened to say this is the last thing as a recommendation( laughter)
	G	So even if you have the idea you can't just put it down?
7.6	Gr	Now I put down and say according to my familiar organisation this must be changed, this structure needs changed. I just, just need some confidence
	G	G-Uhm
	Gr	The main problem is that my own confidence can I say (laughs) this
	G	Do you find that because you are writing TMAs- do you find the writing of TMAs helping you with writing at work?
8.6	Gr	pardon
	G	Do you think that because you are writing reports for TMA are you improving with your writing at work?
	Gr	Yah , yah certainly,
	G	Uhm
8.8	Gr	Certainly from the other certificate, when I, when I try to do the TMA I go to detail with my course materials and books and I say that what is this is

		this my own organisation can it do that this way- all- or not only that I see the involvement of the situation Ethiopian are -according to Ethiopian our government at this time, different organisation and private, yes, I compare it ,I think it's good application.
	G	Okay, it's good for your professional development
	Gr	Yes, yes
	G	Alright, and then this course has a lot of theories and models that you are using here, Porters and Grant STEP , Antshof matrix and others that you have studied, loads and loads of models from what you have studied do you- is it easy for you to apply these to your day to day work work situation?
10.	Gr	Yes, yes, mostly easy when I appreciate the STEP (*)
	G	Pardon me-
	Gr	STEP affair and all that when I am analysing the internal and external environment.
	G	Uhm
10.2	Gr	I use the STEP model is easy for me, not difficult for me or tough like that.
	G	So you think you can apply it at your work?
	Gr	Yah, according to my situation , according to my organisation
	G	for the first TMA, it's unfortunate that you didn't get your first TMA back.
	Gr	Yah
	G	the instruction was that you are to conduct a bit of research either on your own or with other students. Have you ever done any piece of research before?
10.7	Gr	TMA 01?
	G	Uhm
	Gr	I don't do any research before, especially TMA 01 it was difficult and I am frightened for that because we don't do or have any researches. We have no experience in doing any research
10.9	G	No experience in research
	Gr	Yah
11.0	G	So, were there any difficulties when you had to do research for TMA 01, first TMA, and first research?
11.1	Gr	Yah, it was difficult because when your especially when you have to write about British airlines, then you don't have British airlines conditions, air traffic conditions in the British industry. The other thing we have no any evidence to get that access, no access no internet,
	G	No internet
	Gr	Yah, no internet, no computers according to our situation. Because of this how can we stand? At what level we are standing? We put our foot it's difficult it's a vacuum for us. It's very very difficult for us at that time we don't have any evidence and we have no experience about reading researches before . The problem is no evidence and no information about the British airline industry. Especially in Ethiopia, even Ethiopian airline industry we have no access to their strategy information as it is government
	G	Okay, so how did you overcome that main problem?
12.4	Gr	Yah, I think you have to according to my own, it a difficult thing not only the subject is difficult you have to manage yourself financially, I you have your own management your family are one problem and my company is one problem and my organisation myself,. Just I – am doing now or also I manage my own life just and also I manage this course, not only difficulties on the course by itself but all that influence to achieve this course but I

		manage even though I'm struggling
	G	Okay, the course this one is based mainly on case studies where you have the casebook.
	Gr	Yah!
	G	Are there any concerns about the reading that you have to do or the language in which the case studies are written?
13.6	Gr	Yah, I think the language is not now but the main difficulty is reading European companies. We don't know the names, the companies is far from our area this is difficult for us. We have Ethiopian companies related to Ethiopia. According to our standard, to dig and get out problems related to those companies- sometimes we are amazed- we don't differentiate the person's names (laughing) and company (laughing) it is difficult for us.
	G	and the company
14.5	Gr	It's difficult (laughing) to get that and the company's name and what the materials say because we are far from that mostly they are the companies of British companies, European companies, Japan companies and American companies they are difficult for us.
	G	Alright. Can you give one example of a case study which you think was more difficult- is it the airline one?
15.0	Gr	I think the case study that was quite difficult was the Sony the case study about Sony company was difficult because the company we don't know about the company we have no companies we know with similar, we don't know about Apple, about Sony about the products it's very difficult.
	G	Okay for the last TMA, which is TMA 03 -
	Gr	Yah
	G	You were not given a case study-
	Gr	Yah
	G	You were asked to write basing it on your organization, how did you find that?
	Gr	Yah!
	G	Analyzing your organisation
16.0	Gr	Yah, according to that, I don't know what the reason to be, but according to simply by when I evaluate myself it's good for me. I evaluate my own organization, my own familiar organization and then I write the history , the background of my own organization then I come to analyse my strategies, some, cultures,
	G	Yah,
16.7	Gr	And structures and what the difficulties now and I recommended , I don't know what the results are (laughing)
	G	Okay, but you think it was much easier to write-
16.8	Gr	Yah, Yah
	G	About your organization
16.9	Gr	Yah because we start from what we know, I know my own organization, what is the situation, what is current, what is best- I know it- is not so difficult when I write about my own place- I match with the course concept is not difficult
	G	It's not difficult?
	Gr	Yah.
17.2	G	Okay, you were asked to make recommendations about your organization. Are these- in what you have written in your TMA do you think these are real issues that are facing your organization or you have just created them for writing the TMA and show that-

17.4	Gr	These are real issues
	G	They are real issues
17.5	Gr	my familiar organization is a (*)
	G	Pardon?
	Gr	Water supply
	G	Water supply
	Gr	In the towns there are clearly known issues that are difficult- real issues
	G	Okay, do you think that the recommendations that you have recommended for your company can be applied- can be practical for your organization to apply what you have recommended.
18.1	Gr	Yah the it can be applied
	G	Uhm
	Gr	It can be applied
	G	Okay. In analysing your organization sometimes you have to be critical. How did you feel of being critical of your bosses who are in charged of the organization?
18.5	Gr	I think that critically, we know the problem, we know the organization, we know the issues, what are the structures. We write mostly how we feel is right for the government can they accept it –
19.3	G	Okay, do you think that as you are doing this course – do you think you need any kind of support from the University to get through the course.
19.3	Gr	Yah, especially access of computers we have no access t the internet . Apart from this the main problem for us there is also the language problem for us.
	G	With the language problem, how do you think the University could help
19.8	Gr	I don't know it's difficult.(laughs) But when we compare our standard, Ethiopia when they write the language they must put words to the standard that is not difficult in our standard
	G	To use words which are not difficult for your standard?
	Gr	Yah.
	G	With writing the TMAs what do you think? is there any help that you need maybe
20.5	Gr	Well now especially the university regulation says you write TMA using computers
	G	Yah
	Gr	And we do not have computers, no access to computers maybe they can sometimes the replacement that regulation of the Open University. Help for us in this way because that is our main problem, that is why we are far it is difficult for us.
	G	It is difficult. Now you have in your course file a list of recommended reading do you have access to any of them?
21.2	Gr	We have not any access
	G	All you have is just the course material?
	Gr	Only course material and the tutorial class. We don't access anything from other elsewhere.
	G	You said you are Kilometres away from Addis. Do you have other students you can come together with and discuss the course material? Do you have self-help groups?
	Gr	Unfortunately, there is one student fortunately in my own area, my friend, one student we are far away from each other. We cannot communicate. We only communicate when we are at this place (tutorial session). We have the tutor to help us.

	G	So it's just the two of you
	Gr	Yah the two of you- we come from the certificate, the diploma and now this MBA.
	G	Do you ever contact your tutor apart from sending your TMAs to the tutor?
	Gr	Pardon?
	G	Do you ever ask the tutor questions, when it is not tutorial time?
	Gr	We don't, we don't. No access to email
	G	So you can't. On the feedback that comes with the TMA. When you received your TMA it comes with the comments that the tutor has made. were you satisfied with the grade that you got for the TMA?
	Gr	The grade?
	G	Yah, the mark?
	Gr	Yah, I don't( *)
	G	You were?
	Gr	I don't satisfied because according- I don't know the message we received according to our suggestion -when we compare European students all Open University school it's difficult for us because always good trying for us just push- I don't know what but when you push we enhance ourselves.
	G	Uhm
	Gr	But I am not satisfied with the mark because when I look myself I do more but I'm dissatisfied with my results
	G	Not satisfied?
	Gr	Yah
	G	The comments from the tutor- did you expect any comments- did you get any comments about the language, maybe corrections of your language use?
23.3	Gr	I think it's good no comments about language. But mostly my tutor comments that use course concepts (G: okay) and relate it to the writing work. You can't relate what you said you get a problem, you don't match or relate the course concepts. I got good comments from that
	G	-You got good comments from the tutor
	Gr	Yes and also I improve and decide myself to use the concepts.
	G	Okay. So you think the comments were useful?
	Gr	Yah, useful
	G	-Very useful
	Gr	Yah, before doing - from TMA 01 we don't get any comments
	G	Oh yes because you said you didn't get your TMA back-
23.9	Gr	Yes I didn't get any comments. Then when I simply without comments I take TMA 02 but when I compare from TMA 01 and TMA 02 is that I am downwards to TMA 02 because we have not any comments based on TMA 01 simply we get numerical number for TMA 01, we don't get any comments we don't get any feedback. This difficult, I, I evaluate myself when I get -before when I get TMA 01, any comments, when I reshape TMA 02 myself. (G_uhm) But simply I go then I get low marks.
	G	That very unfortunate. Thank you very much for your time-
	Gr	You're welcome
	G	is there anything you would like to add, comments about the course, or maybe how it can be improved
25.0	Gr	I think the course is good. I don't know when you apply it to our country it's very very effective ( GL=yes) It's a good course- It can be practical. It can be doing us a lot of improvement for us (G-Ah) It's good that when I evaluate at this level, at this level myself, my own organization and make

		something that can be changed,(GL-yah) it's good for us. It's helpful, it has high potential for me, but I need to say that we have a problem with language I don't know how can we say support or how can they help us- in any way.
	G	Don't you think about having lessons /classes for you on how to write your TMAs before you even start writing your first TMAs?
	Gr	Yah, Yah writing is difficult. Now generally it's good but our main problem is language.
	G	Language?
25.9	Gr	Language and where we come from to this centre makes it complicated for the tutor and also anyone who are related to the course. We cannot communicate we only communicate when we are at this place we have the tutors to help us.
	G	Okay, so when you have your tutorials – when the tutor asks you to discuss in groups which language do you use?
26.2	Gr	English-
	G	English
	Gr	Yah, mostly before B600, starting from B600 now at the 820 a good way to express our English is the residential school
	G	Uhm
	Gr	I forgot that residential school was good for us- I don't know but according to myself a good class it's highly excellence for us we get more potential, we get more experience sharing and we are applying more clearly in the group work (GL-Yah ) work and we are writing in confidence and we are building confidence about the course (GL- yah) and we have confidence about the participation in the course , mostly, starting from basic understanding of 800 until more and more equipped.
	G	So when you are in groups you are using English?
	Gr	Yah, also in presentations, in groups we discuss in English.
	G	Yah so you get the chance to use the language
	Gr	Yah it is opportunity for us when I get this now English language, learning only on experience and sharing from colleagues and friends (GL-uhm) sometimes when I think the English language in not a learning but a share and exchanging of problems and some experience with colleagues and friends using that language it is good and makes experience
	G	Thank you very much,
	Gr	Welcome
	G	It was nice talking to you
	Gr	Okay.

Appendix 8  
Sample of reflection and learning in the OUBS

## REFLECTION AND LEARNING IN THE OUBS - Samples of Reflection

Even if your course does not require you to describe your reflection for assessment purposes, you may find that the following (fictitious) examples give you a flavour of how reflection can contribute to learning. This will help you to learn in a reflective way yourself.

*(If working electronically, hold your cursor over highlighted text to read tutor comments.)*

### Sample 1

#### Key Learning Points from Culture and Structure Assignment

*This was a particularly interesting assignment because it provided the opportunity to explore how well the organisation's culture and structure were suited to the achievement of its business goals. It was quite easy to see which frameworks were relevant and how to apply them. In future, though, it will be important to try using models that I find more difficult to understand, so that I increase my repertoire*

*There were several frameworks that were appropriate for evaluating the organisation's culture. Deal and Kennedy's matrix provided a suitable approach to analysis of the culture in relation to the market and type of activity the company is involved with. This provides a framework for identifying the "ideal" culture for this situation against which the actual culture can be compared. Handy's classification of cultures allowed for a comparison between the actual culture and how it was expressed in the way the company was organised. Mintzberg's concepts of organic and mechanistic structures were also relevant.*

*The first key point taken from this assignment is the interrelationship of culture and structure in general terms and the relationship between culture and the nature of the business (business contingencies model). This is clearly demonstrated in the analysis of the three different companies within the group.*

*Second key point is that introducing a new organisational structure and new processes cannot necessarily change culture. This coincides with my experience – the new MD at company X tried to change the structure to move away from a blame culture but this didn't really have any effect.*

*My preferred approach is to operate with a fairly open structure and with a culture that allows individuals to take responsibility for their activities and output, following a general departmental objective. This is probably closest to the "Work Hard, Play Hard" culture in the Deal & Kennedy matrix and it fits well with the organisational context. The analysis from the assignment has therefore confirmed that I should encourage this culture. However, I will aim to take account of the culture and the shape of the organisation, to ensure that any new activity we take on fits in with the company's approach.*

*As a result of what I have learned on this assignment I will be able to discuss with the Managing Director ways to approach the management of change at company X. One way to do this will be by discussing the characteristics of open and closed communications cultures – but I will need to do this in conjunction with something like Deal & Kennedy which is likely to be easier to identify with. Alternatively I might try using Mintzberg's explanations of how organic and mechanistic structures are suited to different business environments as a way of introducing the concept that in the new business environment a less directive and highly structured approach is needed. I think that one very valuable lesson from the assignment is that by using established theories you can demonstrate possible changes based on what has worked in similar situations so you do not need to rely so much on 'gut feel'. I am sure that having an objective basis for proposed changes*



*will help me to present a better case to the MD. I will also try to make sure that in future I test any changes to the structure in my own area are also grounded in theory.*

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### Appendices

- ✓ A-The Airline Rankings-Financial
- ✓ B-The Airline Rankings-Passenger Analysis
- ✓ C-DIRECTORS' REPORT AND CONSOLIDATED

### FINANCIAL STATEMENTS

Very WELL SET-UP.

# 1. Executive summary

\* BE CAREFUL  
TO DEFINE INDUSTRY  
DOMAIN + Time

In part (a) of the question the environment of the European airline industry is discussed using <sup>21</sup> Gnat's model. The changes in the <sup>17</sup> environment for the better clearly illustrates <sup>3</sup> the attractiveness of the business. The changes in structure however from simple to complex favours the big giants in that it creates barriers to the budget air line sector. It gives the global alliances higher competitive advantage at the expense of the low cost airlines.

ARILY  
BE  
WAY

In part (b) choices made by Stelios Haji-Ioannou are critically appraised. The company - better get <sup>90? 5</sup> public to survive and gradually succeed. The global alliances network and <sup>3</sup> exploit all resources (IT, Advertisements, Legal barriers, etc.) and therefore necessitate structural change of easyJet.

NO ITS STRUCTURE OF THE PASSENGER INDUSTRY NOT THE COMPANY.

The vital functions of a company should be part and parcel of easyJet for better efficiency and effectiveness for the environment denotes :

- cross share-holding
- franchising
- code-sharing ,etc. let alone the relevant vital functions to get loose. EasyJet could

← (SASHAW - I'm NOT CLEAR what you MEAN HERE

perform better by using its existent resources and leveraging its capabilities . This is preferentially done by going corporate . Last but by no means least <sup>2</sup> easyJet should give attention to the existent young staff and employing more experienced managers who can face the challenges of the environmental turbulence.

YES CONSTANT TRAINING + EXPERIENCE IS IMPORTA

In the conclusion it is sketched that though easyJet has operational effectiveness , efficiency , etc it has no clear strategy . The need therefore for easyJet to design a strategy inorder to translate its gains into sustainability .

Sustained growth leading to PROFITABILITY

- elling - 4
- ituation - 1
- onmar - 2
- eposition -
- us/idiom -

## Introduction

define boundary of your ANALYSIS

Industries in general and airline industry in particular are both a product and a vehicle of modern day international trade and technological advancement. It influences and is influenced by both the near and far environment. The European air industry is not any different from the rest of the world. As is true of all business companies competition takes place not only between the big giants but small innovative and strategically thinking companies could also appear in the arena. ?

good point

Not so clear

Furthermore, the structure and the consequent changes in it are basic aspects worth considering to look into the attractiveness of the airline industry. YES.

The terrorist attack that took place in the world trade centre in the US and the subsequent traumas on the world public caused fear of air travel. The airline business, nevertheless, is still an emerging trade.

I Agree.

## 3. ATTRACTIVENESS OF THE BUDGET AIRLINE SECTOR

Attractiveness is "how profitable the industry is relative to the average profits that may be made by employing equivalent resources in a competitive market" (Cassells, 2001).

To evaluate the attractiveness of the airline business let us first look at the changes in the environment and the structure of the sector.

OVERALL

### 3.1 Changes in the environment

From when to when.

The airline industry like other industries is subject to the fierce cut-throat competition characteristic of the increasingly globalizing international trade. Growth in these industries is mainly driven by general economic growth and reductions in the real price of air travel. The financially stronger gigantic companies take the lion's share of the market, imposing strong barriers and exploiting the modern day Information technology and promotional and advertising leverage not to mention coercive measures.

avoid HYPERBOI

expand ?

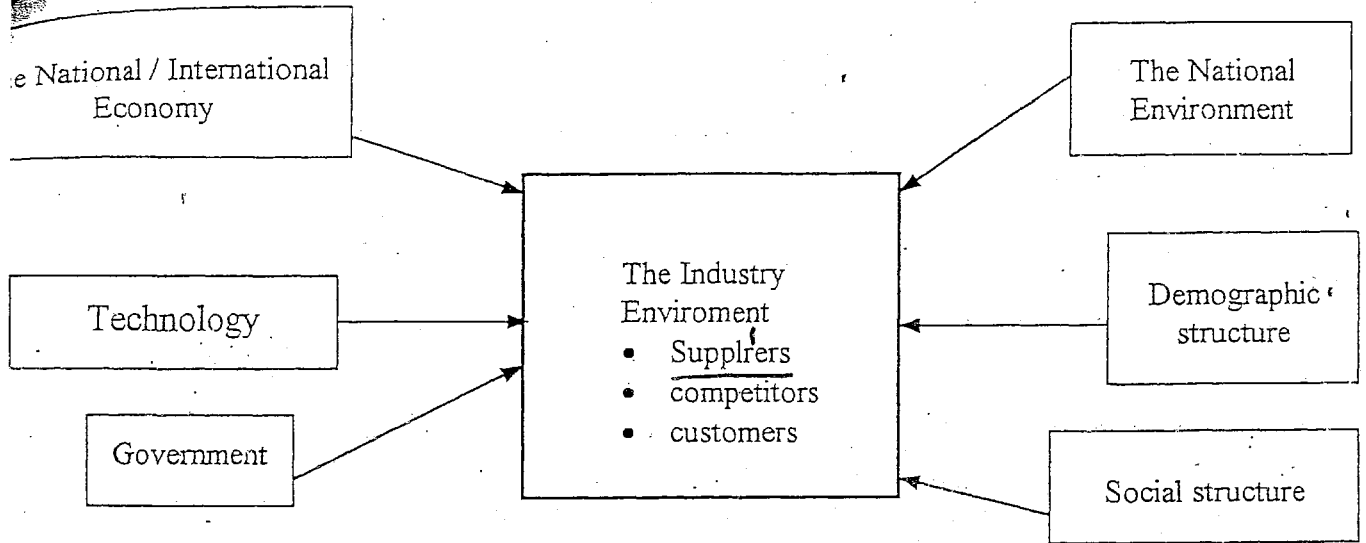
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- 3 SEPARATE PARTS OF question
- 1 ENVIRO changed
- 2 STRUCTURE OF INDUSTRY
- 3 ATTRACTIVENESS of Budget sector

KEEP SEPARATE

# The Business Environment



Grant's model of the business environment

good set up

## Application of Grant's model of the Business Environment to the budget

### Airline Industry

#### 1. The National/International Economy

The growth of international trade and the consequent mobility of people is favourable to the airline industry.

#### 2. The natural Environment

Air transport is preferred to other means of transport due to natural barriers.

Air travel is not hindered by natural forces except in few extreme cases.

#### 3. Demographic structure

People from all walks of life prefer air transport. A large segment of the population is of meager income and prefers the low cost airlines.

- LIFESTYLE changes
- YOUNGER POPULATION
- TRAVEL NOT JUST a luxury.

#### 4. Social Structure

Business executives prefer giants like BA, KLM, etc for security, luxury, and other reasons.

This is more SOCIAL changed i.e. CUSTOMERS HABITS  
 e.g. LIVING ABROAD  
 MORE TRAVELLING

- elling - 2
- creation -
- inner - 1
- position -
- ust idiom -

## Government

AND Regional governments  
such as the EU.

Government regulates free trade, competition, and enhances the flourishing of the economy. It sets policies, bills and acts in conformity with the wishes of low cost airlines. To mention only a few:

- The airline deregulation "allows carriers to collaborate on scheduling flights at peak periods at hub airports, without fear of antitrust prosecution as a way to reduce congestion" (Field, 2001).
- The Antitrust Immunity "gives airlines slots at their airports to create more capacity for other carriers" (Pilling, 2001).

yes good points

## 6. Technology

The budget airlines benefit from IT, internet, sophisticated aircraft and airport and aviation facilities. The high-flag carriers however benefit more from their world wide networks, communication media, etc..

## The Industry Environment

### 1. Customers

"CRM-Customer Relationship Management is better in budget airlines in that they build a lasting relationship with them. Other airlines, however, focus on capturing the bookings." (Andreen and Moisan, 2001)

STAY with overall  
Industri  
FOR  
PRESER

### 2. Competitors

BA, KLM, Air France, etc. try their best to take the lion's share of the market. They have huge capital and exploit all trade barriers. However, "while the Majors remained relatively in minding their capacity growth it is the turn of low cost challengers to lead traffic Growth" (O'Toole, 2001).

### 3. Suppliers

Budget airlines and other major airlines have more in common as regards suppliers. Suppliers benefit from the growth and prosperity of the trade in general.

who and what  
ARE  
THEY

The above discussion based on Grant's model regarding the attractiveness of the budget airlines clearly indicates that, according to the directors' report, growth in the low-fare sector will continue for the foreseeable future.

you must show How  
THIS IS TRUE  
DO NOT JUST  
ASSERT IT

"The overall air transport market in Europe is expected to grow substantially in the coming years." (Cassells, 2001)

Success is "effective, efficient and profitable business that is sustainable and ever flourishing" (Cassells, 2001)

This is effected in low cost airlines by utilizing different strategies:

- low operational costs
- high load factors
- no-frills services
- innovative marketing
- flying to and from secondary airports rather than hubs.

WHERE IS THE ANALYSIS GOING NOW?

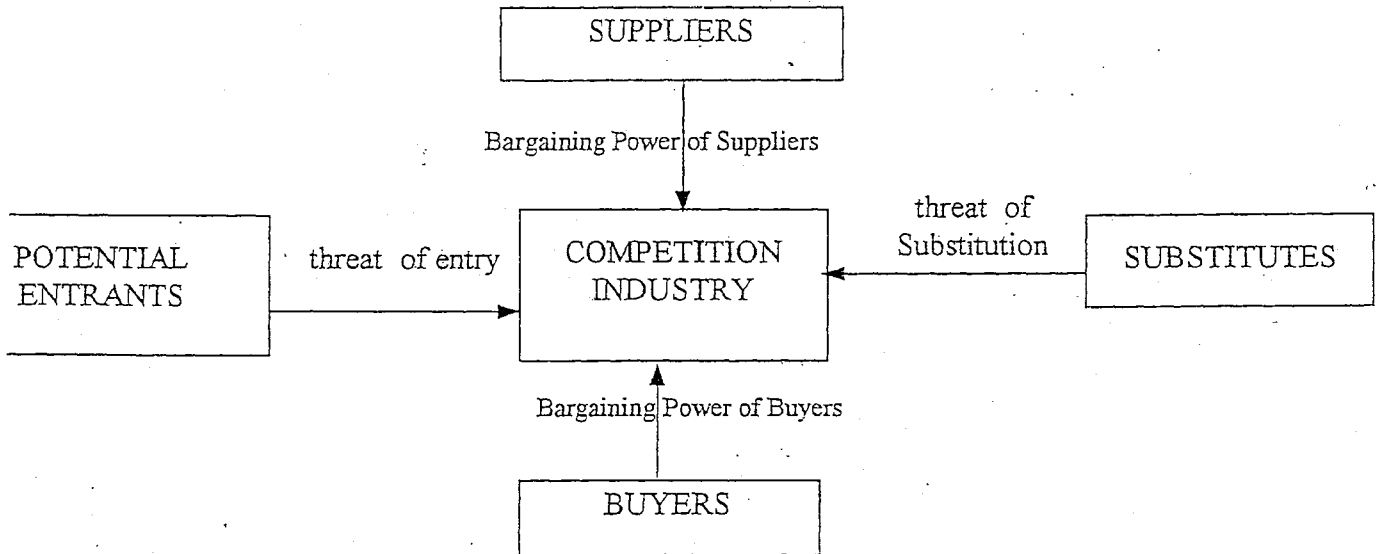
The overall air transport market in Europe is expected to grow substantially in the coming years. The International Air Transport Association (IATA) estimates that the number of international scheduled passengers traveling between countries in Europe will grow from 176 million in 1999 to 215 million in 2003, reflecting an average annual growth rate of 5.1%.

Good

By contrast, the low-fare segment of the market is expected to grow at a significantly higher rate. According to the directors' report a report published in January 2000 by Cranfield University estimated that low-cost airlines currently carry 4% of all domestic international passengers within Europe, a figure expected to increase to 12-15% by 2010.

2MT  
UNSH

yes



Porter's five forces of competition framework

Using substitution innovation in market position

	easyJet	Go	Ryanair	virgin express
	US\$ million	US\$ million	US\$ million	US\$ million
Revenue	123	51	303	262
Net profit	4	(22)	(59)	(3)
Passengers per year	1714761	2,000,000	4,900,000	2,600,000
Employees	394	500	1094	639
Number of aircraft	8	13	20	20

a chart showing the performance of three budget airlines.

good Research  
quote SOURCE

### New entrants

#### 1. Ryanair (Ireland)

Established in 1985 changed its focus to become no-frills in the early 1990<sup>2</sup> With its fleet of 20 Boeing 737s and servicing 26 destinations has more than 100 scheduled flights per day in 1999. It has planned to expand both its route base and the size of its fleet.

#### 2. Go

Established by BA in 1998 as no-frills airline operating at a loss of 22 million in 1999: created to defend BAs market share.

#### 3. Virgin express (Belgium)

Set in 1996 as a low-fare carrier provided short to medium-haul jet service within continental Europe. At the year ending Dec. 1998 it had sales of 10.5 BEF.

### Net profit for the four budget airlines

1. EasyJet (US 4 m)

2. Go (US (22) m)

3. Ryanair (US 59m)

4. Virgin express (US (3) m)

ling =  
situation = 1  
rmar =  
osition =  
sition =

Porter's Model

allows us to ASSESS

STRENGTH OF

COMPETITIVE FORCES - SWITCHING

CAPABILITY



Ratio of N° of aircraft and passengers

	EasyJet	Ryanair	Virgin express
	8	20	20
N° of aircraft	1	2.5	2.5
passengers	1	2.85	1.5

It is worth remembering that Stelios is boasting of utilizing two airplanes for the services of three. I.E. **FORCING BETTER UTILISATION OF ASSETS**

Taking employees as internal customers and passengers as buyers it can be deduced that the competitive environment is quite fierce. The competing company Ryanair has considerable lead even taking the ratio of number of aircraft into consideration.

### 3.2 Changes in the Structure

As is sketched in the directors' report the Structure is taken to be

- the boundary around the organisation
- the way activities are divided up and coordinated
- definition of individual positions and groupings
- extent of centralisation, decentralization and
- degree of formalisation.

well set up.

The airline Industry being a thriving Industry forms :

1. global alliances for-economy of scale like ONEWORLD. Alliances use
  - code sharing
  - franchising and
  - cross share holdings
2. air traffic management and aerospace manufacturers
3. regional airports which offer feeder services to hubs
4. international hub airports

RECENT  
STRUCTURAL  
changes  
good points

The changes in structure in the airline industry are expressed in that airlines in European countries have been developing hub operations at their bases: Paris-Charles De Gaulle; Amsterdam-Schiphol and Frankfurt airports.

Regional airports have grown, on average, faster than the London airports in the 1990's.

↳ Because THEY ARE CHEAPER  
BUT HAVE LESS  
FACILITIES

neg-  
vation=  
mar=  
osution=  
sliding

but can operate Regionally

Aviation is by nature a global Industry. The directors' report in its review of the aviation scene states that all of the main aviation countries adhere to the Chicago convention of 1944 which established an international framework for the civil aviation Industry.

The International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) established common operating standards. The European civil Aviation conference (ECAC) harmonises civil aviation policies and practices between members. <sup>3</sup> <sup>2</sup> on the other hand dynamic interaction between <sup>2</sup> Competition & industry is worth considering.

"Favourable Industry structures -monopoly in particular- contain the seeds of their own destruction by <sup>2</sup> Particular incentives for firms to attack established positions through new approaches to competing." (Schumpeter, 2001)

DESTRUCTIVE INNOVATION  
∴ MOVE BEFORE IT MOVES  
you.

This concept is applicable to the budget airline sector in that it benefited from one type of aircraft, point to point short-haul travel, no in-flight meals, rapid turnaround time and very high aircraft utilization- a new approach to competition. Low fare, no travel agents to cut costs and internet sales are also new approaches to competing characteristic of low cost airlines.

The effect of changes in structure in the US airline industry is clearly denoted by Grant's research: "By the mid 1990s the US airline industry had developed a structure that few of the architects of deregulation had predicted..... economists predicted that in the absence of government regulation of routes and fares, entry would be easy, concentration would fall, and fares would drop to their competitive levels. In practice, the industry has been shaped by the strategies of the leading players: the mergers and acquisitions have increased concentration; the hub-and spoke system has given rise to several local near monopolies; selective price competition has driven a number of low cost entrants into bankruptcy; and barriers to entry have been created through control of airport gates and landing slots, computer reservation systems, and frequent flyer programs." (Grant, 2001)

On the other hand <sup>2</sup> the European airline industry looks different. According to O'Toole: "While the majors remained relatively prudent in minding their capacity growth, it has been the turn of the low cost challengers to lead traffic growth. The association of European Airlines (AEA) calculates that the low-cost challengers increased their capacity offering by over 72% in summer 2000." (O'Toole, 2001)

Yes several things happening at the SAME TIME  
innovation: 4  
competition: 2  
position:

IN WHICH IS

From the above argument and facts it is inferred that European low-cost airline industry as opposed to the US one has a better environment to flourish. Nevertheless, it is worth thinking strategically in that the European leading players could just as well follow suite thus creating huge barriers to entry and so bankrupting them.

Not so clear

### 3.3 The choices of Stelios

EasyJet's business success after deregulation hinges upon cost cuts, due consideration for quality, using internet seriously and focusing on the market besides advertising and customer relationships.

For easyJet to compete successfully in the airline industry the analysis drawn in part(a) should be taken as a stepping stone.

YES IMPORTANT TO LINK ALL PARTS OF QUEST

The assessment of the operating environment underlines the strategic issue of potential competitors that jockey for position in the market. "Customers are also returning to their travel agent because they are frustrated at having to constantly enter their preferences and

L  
his

don't  
recep details." (Andreen and Morsan, 2001)

WHAT DO YOU THINK ?

#### 3.3.1. Private Vs Public Company

Funded by his FATHER

EasyJet in the era in which it began its operations did make it with a private ownership - a one man management and decision making Process. All the advertisement & Promotional work were in the hands of a single innovator who had a vision. He decided, took measures on the road and took measures daring enough to challenge high-flag competitors and won the sympathy and hearts and minds of the people-quite a Robin Hood of the time.

YES A GOOD LINK

Nevertheless, market research and strategic thinking require "Creating a match between the organisation and its environment essential to its success." (Cassells, 2001)

The environment we assessed necessitates the need for the above concept applied. Stelios has to critically assess easyJet to survive the adverse environment and go public.

COULD HE NOT THEN LOSE CONTROL

#### 3.3.2 Subcontracting

21<sup>st</sup> century airline business to be successful ought to manage the sensitive appendages of its structure by its own force than subcontracting. To compete successfully in the airline Industry easyJet should take care of its networks and plan to acquire further Potential in

elling =  
situation = 2  
income = 1  
position =

IT TAKES DOWN LEVEL OF FIXED COSTS

the form of alliances and mergers to transcend to trans-national airline business and profitability. Competitive advantage could only be attained by intensive use and management of IT in sales, communication, advertisement, services, finance, etc. which require less subcontracting. The aviation industry, a huge fast expanding one in present day trade and politicking, is becoming highly structured and formalised. Lots of issues like security, punctuality, style, services, efficiency, etc. are at stake to survive let alone prosper <sup>4ES</sup> in the industry. This requires a relatively hierarchical structure and a high degree of specialization. The activities should also be divided up and <sup>2</sup>coordinated.

LANDING RIGHTS  
VERY IMPORTANT.

### 3.3.3. Changing Corporate

Porter's five forces of competition framework analysis clearly lays bare the scope of airline business. It is fast developing; it is a victim of the globalization effect of modern day civilisation. Information is accessible to all. Shuttle flights are only chartered. High quality services, safety and standard accommodation are rewarded implying corporate growth trends. EasyJet can only survive through corporate restructuring and so changing its source of power, culture, system, management and strategic vision. EasyJet should change, go corporate first to survive then strategically to emerge successful in the market.

(Pralhad / Hamel, 1994)

### 3.3.4 Changes in the Management

EasyJet should employ experienced managers for its success because "Managers can make the difference between an organization's death, survival or prosperity" (Cassells, 2001).

I  
AGREE  
completely

EasyJet could be easy but not simple in a complex world made even more complex by the IT, cut-throat competition, world wide trade, politicking, and maneuvering, etc. Stelios should devise a strategy which has a long time horizon and is concerned with projection and <sup>2</sup>Prediction of an uncertain future.

EasyJet requires management personnel who could make the above mentioned <sup>3</sup>Possible. EasyJet to have strategic space that is "an area of Industry within an Industry" should hire experienced <sup>2</sup>Personnel and become a learning organization to succeed. (Cassells, 2001)

quote source  
ie Susan Segal Horn in Course Reader

ling = 1  
stuation = 4  
inner =  
position =  
is / idon =

## 4. CONCLUSION

After deregulation national carriers have got access to a large number of the gates of Europe's major airports. The airline market is stimulated and more people are traveling than ever. The budget airline sector in particular benefits from the changes in the environment and structure and still has a huge potential for the future. However, to remain viable and to thrive after deregulation carriers are forced to look at cost cutting and alliances which inevitably leads to job cuts.

EasyJet, a typical budget airline, with its innovative and daring manager-Stelios, took a considerable amount of the market share of the European airline industry after deregulation. Nevertheless, to survive and get competitive advantage it is imperative that Stelios develop a new Strategy.

The market is attractive but the low-cost airline business should adapt to the environmental turbulence. Change is necessary in its structure, management team and the promotion and advertising mechanisms. Coalitions and acquisitions would also be necessary to challenge political concerns, to access resources and share risks.

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. The budget airline sector shows a great deal of operational efficiency. But they are unable to translate their gains into sustainability. The sector should devise a new strategy to survive and become profitable. It needs to utilise its resources and leverage its capabilities to get competitive advantage.

5.2. The budget airline sector is quite attractive. The high-flag carriers cannot satisfy the customer segments of the low-fare market. But the general trend is for the giants to merge, create barriers to entry and bankrupt new entrants. The budget airline industry should move towards mergers and acquisition and utilize its resources to maximize its capabilities to contend with the big giants.

5.3. The budget airline sector should exploit the relatively thin strategic space in Africa and accommodate the low-fare customers and gradually transcend to the Asian and ultimately the US markets.

firmness

- but  
so helped  
w/ THE  
MARKET

→ already had these in our countries

good  
→ THEY could MERGE

→ define

yes could  
develop  
this  
point  
I say w/ how  
with  
selling -  
inclusion =  
ammar =  
reposition =

5.4. The low cost airline industry should employ high caliber experienced management personnel and change the values, mission, and culture of the "dog" business to satisfying customers the world over by providing efficient, effective, safe, and dependable services while maintaining its profitability.

OKAY

- Spelling = 1
- punctuation -
- Grammar -
- Preposition -
- Lexis / idiom -

TOTALS

- 1. Spelling = 12
  - 2. punctuation = 12
  - 3. grammar = 7
  - 4. preposition = 1
  - 5. Lexis / idiom = 1
- 33

Reflection on learning Motivation theories.

*is this reasoning appropriate? you also reflected on conflict theories*

It was extremely difficult for me to write the first assignment due to some reasons. The department I work for is extremely small - only six people headed by one manager. I thought it's something like a family where all characters and habits of each person are well known and there are no any problems relating to behavior at work and afterward hours. There is no hidden agenda was among us and arisen problems have been resolved in a friendly manner. Money as an extrinsic motivator seemed to me as a very effective and powerful tool for all the cases of our life. I thought that the same or slightly changed situations in other dealers department across Xerox CIS (we've got other two departments with the same structure in Siberia and Kazakhstan).

But in the end of second quarter we faced an unpleasant situation when our result dropped down in unpredictable manner and no one had an idea what happened. Our sophisticated manager who graduated CIMA courses and is considered to be a successful manager (in terms of B800 course concept) found some reasons in inappropriate discipline in the department and in the market situation (description of it in Appendix 1 to Question 1). But where was the genuine root of the problem? What were underlying motives of bad discipline and consequently bad performance? It was the real chance for me to apply studied theories. Small investigation (discussion with my colleagues about bad performance) convinced me that I was on the right way then I rethought the situation in terms of motivation related frameworks. First of all I found that Maslow's theory was hardly applicable because it was too simplified and could be applied only to a situation where African's wild men try to survive in a jungle. Adams' Equity theory was inapplicable too due to lack of information about real salary of other members of the department, which one can obtain. But Vroom's and Locke's theories gave me enough information for considering the inappropriate performance in light of motivational problems. Having made conclusions from the analysis I developed some recommendations. It was not so difficult to elaborate recommendations because it seemed that situation was of hard complexity, but in order to be sure I decided to check: "Will it work? Will it improve motivation?"

*see comment opposite about Maslow*

My boss is a good help to me so we tried to apply one recommendation from my TMA. As you can see it works!

*excellent!*

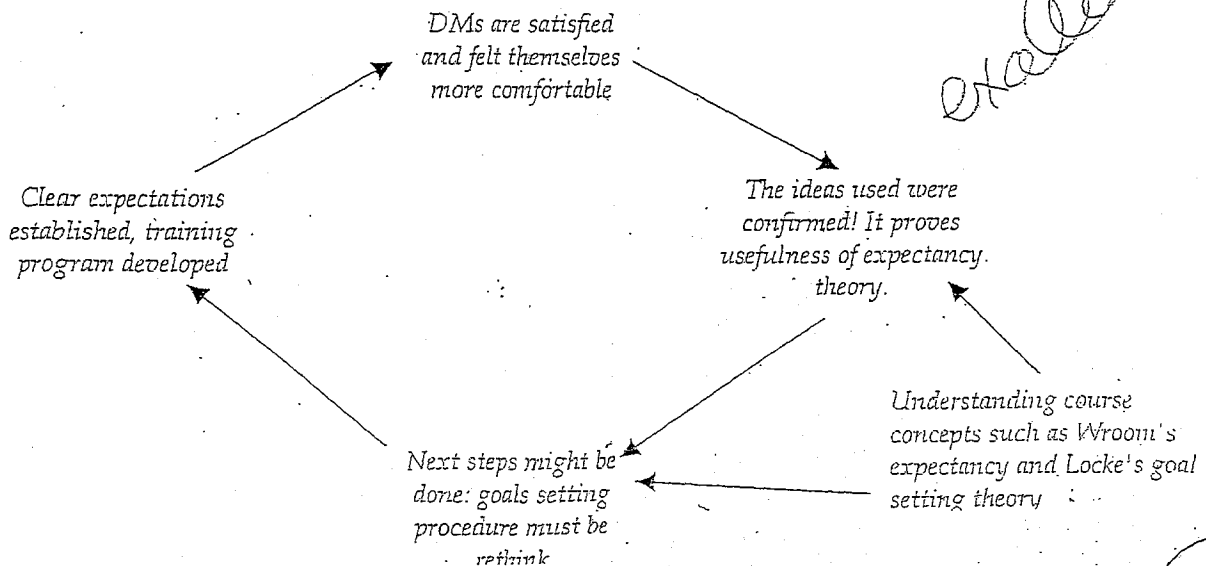


Fig 1 Kolbo's

## Appendix 11

### Key to abbreviations and fonts

#### Key

E= Ethiopia R = Russia U = United Kingdom

S= Strategy course

F= Foundations course

TMA= Tutor marked assignment

INT= Interview

#### Examples:

ESTMA01Amandla= Ethiopia Strategy course TMA number 1 +student's pseudonym

USINTJames=UK Strategy course Interview+student's pseudonym

TutorAnderson-INT = Tutor+tutor's pseudonym interview

Courier new=Extracts from students' assignments

*Italics*+ extracts from students and tutor interviews