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'On the outside I'm smiling but inside I'm crying': communication successes and challenges for undergraduate academic writing

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'On the outside I'm smiling but inside I'm crying': communication successes and challenges for undergraduate academic writing.

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Abstract

Student difficulties with the transition to writing in higher education are well documented whether from a 'study skills', an 'academic socialisation' or an 'academic literacies' perspective. In order to more closely examine the challenges faced by students from widening participation backgrounds and diverse routes into undergraduate study, this project focuses on first year undergraduate experiences of developing academic literacies on an Education Studies programme at one university in England. It highlights the impact of different support and guidance within and beyond their degree programme where attempts to embed academic literacy development are part of subject modules. The paper reports the findings generated using a mixed methods interpretive approach. Questionnaires were collected at the beginning (n=48) and end of the students' first year (n=44), and interviews and visual data collection methods (n=19) were used at the mid-point of the academic year. Key findings highlight students' expectations of achievement on entry to university and the influence of the emotional journey of students as they begin to make progress as academic writers. Identifying, selecting and applying academic reading were an enduring concern whilst some students struggled with the digital literacy implicit in undergraduate work. Importantly, some strategies developed to support student transition to academic writing in higher education may have unintended consequences as they progress through the first year.

Keywords

Introduction

This paper reports findings from a small scale, exploratory research project carried out with 44 BA (hons) Education Studies students at a UK university in 2016. The research builds on published research (Beaumont, O'Doherty and Shannon 2011; Borg and Deane 2011; Hamilton 2016; Hardy and Clughen 2012; Itua, Coffey, Merryweather, Norton & Foxcroft 2014; Lea and Street 1998; Lumsden, McBryde-Wilding and Rose 2010; Street 2010; Wingate 2012) which has examined the academic writing support needs of undergraduate students in Higher Education.

. The questions for this research were:

1. What are first year undergraduate students' experiences of academic writing prior to and post university enrolment?

2. How are the strategies designed by academic tutors, to support first year undergraduate students with academic writing, perceived by the recipients?

Whilst the findings may not be entirely generalisable to other institutions, they offer an interesting insight into potential challenges facing undergraduate students, as they develop skills for university writing and experience strategies that may support them.

Literature Review

Several factors influence first year undergraduate students' experiences of academic writing. One well-documented influence is the contrast in teaching and learning methods adopted by schools, further education (FE) colleges and universities. For example, Beaumont, O'Doherty and Shannon (2011) identified some differences in the adopted approaches to teaching and learning in English schools and universities. Teaching and learning approaches in schools appeared to be more focused on presenting classes with precise information that could be easily translated into examination answers and assignments. Such approaches may lead pupils to concentrate on the material delivered by staff rather than on the wider subject. Beaumont, O'Doherty and Shannon (2011) reported that:

> Both students and teachers used the term 'spoon feeding' to describe the learning process in school explaining that it aims to deliver high grades (Beaumont, O'Doherty and Shannon 2011, as cited in Beaumont, Moscrop and Canning 2016, 332).

Similarly, Lea and Street (1998) and Lumsden, McBryde-Wilding and Rose (2010) identified the 'mismatch' of academic skills gained prior to university and the skills allegedly required at university for learning and academic writing. Students' pre-university experiences may include limited use of the library and little guidance around effective internet searching as well as dependency on revision guides, model answers and on-going formative feedback (Lumsden, McBryde-Wilding and Rose 2010). If strategies that students have found to be successful for pre-university assignments do not meet university requirements, some first year undergraduate students will undoubtedly experience difficulties with academic reading and writing (Lea & Street 1998).

Furthermore, findings generated using focus groups with second-year university health studies students (n=70), further education college teachers (n=3) and health studies lecturers in a university (n=6) suggest that staff and students perceptions of what constitutes good academic writing often differ (Itua et al. 2014). Itua et al. (2014) list the barriers to academic writing as lack of extended writing at FE level, lack of reading and understanding of academic texts or journals and issues with academic jargon. Commentators also identify students' limited awareness of the time required to read academically in order to write academically (Borg and Deane 2011; Hamilton 2016). It seems therefore, that tutors' awareness of the barriers first year students face with academic reading as well as academic writing must be raised.

One additional key factor which can influence first year undergraduate students' experiences of academic writing is that they may struggle to understand the academic writing conventions of a higher education (HE) institution and what makes a piece of writing academic (Borg and Deane 2011; Itua et al. 2014). Analysis of first year undergraduate work, following writing centre tutorials at Coventry University, showed that students needed support to recognise the difference between academic writing and 'other types of writing'. In particular, they did not automatically include more theories and research findings in their academic work in place of unsubstantiated statements and overly descriptive content (Borg and Deane 2011). This indicates that providing the opportunity for FE and university students to learn how to recognise the different features of university level academic writing in comparison with 'other types of writing' is crucial (Itua et al. 2014).

A further factor which can influence first year undergraduate students' experiences of academic writing is a personal sense of feeling overwhelmed and a cumulative loss of confidence with academic writing (Hardy and Clughen 2012, 27; Hamilton 2016; Itua et al. 2014). It has been argued that the, possibly over emphasised, technical aspects of referencing and citations required by academic writing are a contributory factor to students' loss of confidence with academic writing (Hamilton 2016). Students' issues with 'technical and instrumental' skills (Street 2010) often dealt with by university 'study skills' programmes have also been recognised by Hardy and Clughen (2012). Additionally, Hardy and Clughen report on the difference in the written work that students encounter at university in comparison to the pieces they have completed prior to university, both in terms of genres and writing conventions. This variance in written work can lead to much criticism about students'

technical skills, particularly the basic ability to express themselves adequately in their writing (Hardy and Clughen 2012, 26).

The need for higher education institutions (HEIs) to 'modify their approaches' and recognise that many students enrol with a deficit in knowledge and understanding about the requirements of academic writing contributed to Street's (2010) research which focused on what he named the 'academic socialisation' perspective. This suggests that if skills tutors and academics in HEIs are willing to acknowledge that first year undergraduate students do enrol with some credible learning and writing skills, then coaching students into the university's culture with regards to interpreting learning tasks could be valuable.

From an academic socialisation perspective, one of the strategies academic tutors can employ to support new undergraduate writers is 'transitional scaffolding' (Beaumont, Moscrop and Canning 2016; Lumsden et al. 2010). First year undergraduate students in Beaumont et al.'s (2016) study pinpointed dissatisfaction with their transition to university level academic writing. The dissatisfaction followed comparatively little formative, preparatory guidance when an assignment brief was introduced and during the weeks leading up to submission. The students indicated that this lack of guidance significantly contributed to confusion regarding what was required. Therefore, to ease the students' transition from FE to HE Beaumont et al.'s (2016) scaffolding intervention project adopted a dialogic feedback cycle (DLC) applied in further education colleges. The DLC began at the point of releasing the assignment brief and included three stages. Stage one provided the students with preparatory assignment guidance. Stage two offered 'in task guidance' with drafts and practise, generic feedback, pre-assessment tips and peer assessment. The final stage of the DLC offered performance feedback with high levels of discussion in addition to written feedback (Beaumont et al. 2016). This scaffolding process, evaluated by questionnaire, focus groups and an intervention group led to:

> statistically significant improvements…in students' perceptions of their understanding of assessment tasks and criteria and increased confidence in terms of completing assessment tasks and self-regulated learning (Beaumont et al. 2016, 331).

Self-regulated learning was fostered by allowing the high levels of guidance offered at the beginning of the academic year to fade as the students gained experience (Beaumont et al. 2016). Similarly, an action research project, with first year Early Childhood Studies students in a UK university, found transitional scaffolding improved student confidence levels in

accessing appropriate resources (Lumsden et al. 2010). Embedding academic writing support in module teaching also led to high levels of student completion, retention and satisfaction. It could be argued that these types of transitional scaffolding offer the most fruitful approach to supporting first year undergraduate students. Moreover, Borg and Deane (2011, 319) emphasise that universities must be responsible for fostering the growth of students' academic literacies. Such support is usually offered in one of two ways, embedded disciplinary support or generic study skills teaching. An 'academic literacies' perspective on supporting new undergraduates highlights the need for disciplinary support strategies to be embedded in course content and facilitated by academic tutors in order to address disciplinary writing conventions and aid understanding (Wingate, Andon and Cogo 2011).

However, there is an added complication with embedded disciplinary support facilitated by academic tutors. The evidence suggests that particular difficulties arise on large courses where there are many academics, each having their own unique expectations of academic writing and personal beliefs about good writing in relation to teaching objectives (Hardy and Clughen 2012, 26). Therefore, difficulties are particularly acute for first year students who study more than one discipline, for example on joint honours degree courses, where there are often contradictory inter-disciplinary variations in accepted writing style. One effective support strategy found by Wingate (2012), involving three writing development initiatives carried out at King's College London, identified the analysis of discipline-specific texts as the best starting point for teaching academic writing. Additionally, commentators (Jones 2009; Gimenez 2012) argue that it is important for academics and students to examine together how generic skills such as critical thinking, analysis and problem solving are communicated and displayed in different subjects because they are so context sensitive rather than context-flexible.

A strategy that all academic tutors employ to support new undergraduate writers is providing written feedback following a formal assessment (Beaumont et al. 2016). Such written feedback will most usually comment on the student's response to an assignment question or brief, their use of supporting evidence and adherence to academic genres (Beaumont et al., 2016). To whatever degree, in spite of high quality feedback being acknowledged as essential for learning, National Student Surveys and the Quality Assurance Agency have identified it as a problem area in UK higher education (Beaumont et al. 2016). According to Hamilton (2016), high quality feedback would prioritise higher level issues such as the student's development of a theme or argument in their text before making any comments on the

referencing, grammatical skills or vocabulary selected by the student. It could be argued that, if tutors are to offer the best support for first year undergraduate writers, establishing consensus, guidance and training with regards to providing high quality feedback is essential (Borg and Deane 2011).

Building on previous research, this study suggests that effective academic writing support should be informed by knowledge and understanding of the aspects of undergraduate writing that students identify as the most challenging. Academic tutors should receive training which will support them to fine tune teaching approaches (informed by research) that are empathetic to the academic writing development needs of their students. To this end the following study was designed to explore first year undergraduate students' experiences of academic writing and their perspectives on attempts by Education Studies tutors to include academic literacies and academic socialisation approaches as part of their programme.

Research design, sample and ethics

The research was designed as a longitudinal case-study bound by the timing and location of the project (Stark and Torrance 2005; Stake 2008; Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011; Day-Ashley 2012; Creswell 2013). The research design was developed from a largely interpretive sociocultural perspective and therefore set out to identify the participants' individual perceptions of their social learning experiences (Geertz 1973; Martin 1993; O'Donoghue 2007; Morehouse 2012; Creswell 2013). Data were collected over the course of the student participants' first year as undergraduate students at one university in the east midlands of England. The university was a particular site of interest as a small HE provider that commonly welcomed students from 'widening participation' backgrounds, such as those who were the first in their family to access university education or who had followed non-traditional routes into HE. All students were enrolled on an Education Studies undergraduate programme and either studied education as a single honours degree course or as part of a joint honours course in combination with English, Maths, History, Special Educational Needs and Inclusion, Theology, Psychology, Sport or Drama. Most students intended to later train as teachers in a range of age groups or to work in education related careers. The course was a traditional taught undergraduate programme, which employed weekly, whole cohort (c 150) lectures, tutor led seminars in groups of about 25 and directed-study using online and library resources. Students also spent several days each semester on work-based placements in local schools where they observed and assisted with specific aspects of teaching and learning in

order to link theory and practice. The sample of students was voluntary, predominantly female and aged between 18 and 24, which was similar to the student population on the Education Studies course as a whole. Ethical approval was obtained in line with university policy and the project worked within the British Educational Research Association (2011) and institutional guidelines.

The study followed Education Studies students during their first year at university and focused on their experience of preparing for and writing assessments within the joint honours modules. These comprised of one module focused on theories of learning and development, and one sociological module focused on educational inequalities. Students completed one 3,000 word assessed portfolio after two months of their course. The portfolio was divided into three sections requiring students to relate different phases in their personal experiences of education to theory. At the end of Semester 1, students completed one 3,000 word essay discussing theories of learning. At the end of Semester 2 students completed one 3,000 word essay discussing chosen aspects of educational inequality and one group, oral presentation focused on ways to address the 'attainment gap'.

Similarly to the dialogic feedback cycle employed by Beaumont et al. (2016), all four assignments in this piece of research were 'scaffolded' in the following ways. The assignment brief and mark scheme were introduced in the first session with opportunities for group discussion and questions. Module essential reading was provided in weekly study units online and module workshops integrated academic reading and writing activities, such as paraphrasing and referencing, with module content. In addition, wider university support was available from specialist academic skills support staff in the 'learning development team' and library staff. Semester 1 also included a designated, small group academic writing seminar. The seminar entailed a first year peer providing academic writing feedback on a section of their partner's assignment, with guidance and support from their regular workshop tutor. Semester 2 offered group or individual tutorial support by appointment on designated days.

In order to gain an in depth understanding of the experience from the students' perspectives, and a picture of the way in which this changed during the year, an interpretive mixed methods approach was developed. This approach combined semi-structured, primarily quantitative, questionnaires at the beginning and end of the academic year (Appendix 1) with qualitative methods of semi-structured individual interviews, a focus group and individual

annotated drawings completed during Semester 2. The first semi-structured questionnaire gathered some background data about students' previous experiences in terms of subjects studied, qualifications gained, methods of assessment experienced, and whether they were the first in their family to attend university. It also included some qualitative questions such as asking them to predict their first assignment results, providing reasons for their prediction, and to explain their feelings about writing at university. The design arose from common areas of concern identified in a previous study by Hardy and Clughen (2012).

In Semester 2, once the first year students had completed two assessed essays, 15 of the Education Studies third year undergraduate students worked with tutors as co-researchers to design the next stage of the research. They created semi-structured interviews, a focus group and visual data collection methods such as annotated drawings, which they later conducted with the first year students. The third year student co-researchers were included with the aim of increasing the openness of first year participant responses. They also provided a valuable student perspective in the process of designing research tools and interpreting data (Atkins and Welikala 2014). The interview questions built on themes identified in initial analysis of the first round of questionnaire data. They focused on what students found to be supportive factors for the development of their academic reading and writing within and beyond the modules, specific difficulties with assignment writing and reading, expectations and understanding of marks and feedback and student self-evaluation of progress and targets. The focus group and visual data collection were mostly concerned with changing feelings of confidence, as this seemed to be an important element alluded to by students in the questionnaire and interview. The final questionnaire included quantitative questions about student experience on entry, for ease of comparison with the first questionnaire, as well as more qualitative questions about progress and experiences of academic writing support or challenge during the year. The questionnaire provided more information from a larger number of participants and some opportunities to identify changes to student perceptions during the year.

Methods and analysis

48 students completed an anonymous semi-structured questionnaire in the first week of the Education Studies programme. 44 students from the same two seminar groups completed a further semi-structured questionnaire at the end of the first year of the programme. During Semester 2, seven students from the questionnaire sample volunteered to complete a follow

up semi-structured interview. Two different students from the questionnaire group participated in a focus group. In addition, ten students from the questionnaire sample, some of whom had also been interviewed, completed a range of visual data-collection tasks involving drawing and labelling their experiences. Visual data collection methods were included as they had the potential to provoke more honest and relaxed responses from the first year undergraduates (Cooper and Hyland 2000; Mitchell, Weber and O'Reilly Scanlon 2005; Wheeldon and Ahlberg 2012).

Qualitative data from questionnaires, interviews and the focus group transcripts as well as the labels and narrative comments included in the participants' annotated drawings was analysed using a process broadly informed by a directed qualitative content analysis approach (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). The drawings were not analysed separately. Instead, the focus was given to the narrative labels and comments that the participants used to explain their drawing in order to aid interpretation (Ellis 2009; Gribich 2013). This overall approach provided 'subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes' (Hsieh and Shannon 2005, 1278). Coding was initially deductively driven by themes identified in the review of previous research which had shaped the structure of the research instruments (Hsieh and Shannon 2005; Miles, Huberman and Saldana 2014). Participant responses were therefore analysed under the overarching headings of difficulties, support, confidence, expectations and critical thinking. Following this, additional specific categories were developed inductively from the data. For example, participants referred to difficulties associated with using technology to support academic reading and writing on their entry to university so 'technology' became a subcategory within the broader code of 'difficulties'. The third year student co-researchers and tutors individually highlighted and annotated the interview and focus group transcripts and visual data on separate occasions. For each data set, categories emerging from individual researcher's analysis were discussed and final categories agreed as a group then reapplied across all the data. This was in an attempt to make the coding as consistent as possible (Boyatzis 1998; Yin 2009; Miles, Huberman and Saldana 2014) and strengthen interpretive validity by sharing and comparing analysis between tutors and student co-researchers (Cohen et al. 2011). The quantitative data included yes or no responses or choices of categories and so with the relatively small numbers of the sample was not subject to any statistical analysis. Data were counted and reported as numerical responses. The final questionnaire replicated some questions from the initial questionnaire for comparison and included new questions

arising from the analysis of the initial questionnaire data and supplementary data sources. Once all first year data collection was completed, tutors used the agreed categories to analyse the qualitative responses from across all data sets. This process effectively triangulated the quantitative data.

Themes emerging from the data

Several key themes were present in all the different forms of data collected. These included students' very varied academic writing experiences prior to university and a possible mismatch between 'study skills' gained prior to enrolment and those required during the first year of undergraduate study. Many responses highlighted changes to students' confidence and understanding about academic writing during the year. They also commented on the influence of the guidance provided as well as difficulties they encountered or barriers to their success. In particular, they indicated difficulties associated with changes to assignment structure during the year, concerns about the digital literacy needed to present university assignments and access module materials and anxiety associated with maintaining grades. The findings pertaining to these themes are reported under overarching headings below.

Findings and Discussion

Research question 1: First year undergraduates' experiences of academic writing

The student participants in this study came from diverse starting points as undergraduates. Frequently the first in their family to attend university (35 out of 48 of those who completed the questionnaire), their most recent academic experiences included BTECC and vocational qualifications as well as 'A' levels in a range of subjects, many requiring limited traditional essay writing. In addition to this, 31 of the students who responded to the questionnaire experienced more than one 'academic literacy' once they began university as they studied different subject disciplines in combination with Education Studies as part of their joint honours course.

It became clear through the research that university expectations were not always transparent to the students. This issue may have been exacerbated by the non-traditional routes into university education experienced by the participants in this study. This finding links to Haggis (2006) and Lillis and Turner (2001) who noted barriers in communication between university tutors and students about their expectations for academic writing, in particular for students from non-traditional backgrounds.

For example, at the beginning of their first year as undergraduates, student expectations for their first essay mark were extremely variable. 30 out of 48 students, who responded to the questionnaire, thought their marks would fall in the 50-60% mark band. The students' questionnaire open responses explained that this prediction stemmed from their expectation that writing at university would be different and more difficult than their previous experiences of academic writing:

> I believe essay writing will be much harder to pass at university level despite how much work you put in. (Questionnaire, female 18-24, Education Studies)

> I feel like I will take a while to get used to the layout and how much detail is needed in the essays. (Questionnaire, male 18-24, Education Studies and Sport)

In contrast, 11 out of 48 students predicted that they would gain a mark between 70 and 84% for their first undergraduate essay. When the questionnaire questions asked them to explain why they had these expectations for their marks the students' written commentaries showed that some predictions were based on a limited understanding of what a 'good' grade at this stage would look like. One comment from a student who predicted that they would gain 80% for their first assignment highlighted that some students may not have realistic expectations of the new demands of university essay writing:

> I will do my best to get full marks but if I aim for 100% and don't get it I will be disappointed, 80 seems more realistic. (Questionnaire, female 18-24, Education Studies)

Without transparent dialogue about university marking, this student had assumed that a mark of 100% was a reasonable aspiration that would indicate a comprehensive grasp of the module content. She was unaware that more commonly students entering university might at least take some time to learn to write in a way that would achieve 80% and that this was a very high expectation.

Some of this mismatch between tutor and student expectations may result from different perceptions of the demands of university academic writing (Itua et al. 2014). Itua et al. (2014) highlighted that students were aware that writing at university required them to use more analysis, evidence and wider credible sources. However, in contrast, their tutors appeared to be more concerned about structure, fluency, vocabulary, grammar and formal voice in the students' writing. Furthermore, tutors may take the written expectations of their subjects so much for granted that they are unable to articulate them to students (Lillis and Turner 2001;

Hamilton 2016). In this first year of the project, tutor and student perspectives were not compared but our findings suggest that expectations of writing in different mark bands were not clear to students. This issue could negatively affect student confidence and become an inhibitor to academic writing success.

Our participants, in common with earlier studies (Lea and Street 1998; Lumsden et al. 2010; Itua et al. 2014; Hamilton 2016) reported that 'technical' requirements initially caused them some concern. Common areas of concern for all students were meeting the word count, referencing accurately and a sense that the expectations of academic writing were mysterious and unfamiliar:

> I thought I wonder if I'm doing this right because a lot of people drill it into you that university writing is very different from college. So I think I knew how to academically write but what if I am not doing it to the standard of this university? (Interview, female 18-24, Education Studies)

Although the students did not begin the course with a shared understanding of the marking expectations, when questionnaire responses at the beginning and end of the first year were compared, it was clear that the students began and ended the year in agreement that the content of the assignment was the most important element. When asked to rank essay-writing elements in order of priority, content was consistently ranked first, with reading the most frequent second choice. At the end of the year, only one participant selected presentation as most important and nine chose reading. Our interpretation of these responses is that the students were able to see beyond their concerns about presentation and referencing and realise that demonstrating knowledge and understanding through evidence-based analysis of content was most important. However, others might argue that the students were not aware of the impact that technical elements were likely to have on their marks.

Confidence and feelings

Noticeably, in all the data collected, the students described becoming more confident about their academic writing as the year progressed and university expectations became more transparent:

> It was clear on what was expected. The reading was easy to understand and lectures were easy to follow. (Comments on visual data collection, female 18-24, Education Studies and subject not known)

In questionnaire data at the end of the first year, 39 out of the 44 student participants stated that they felt confident as academic writers. 29 students felt that their confidence had improved since the beginning of the course:

> I feel my academic writing has improved and feel more confident when creating an argument during an essay. (Questionnaire, male 18-24, Education Studies and Sport)

However, in some contrast to this, 19 out of 44 students indicated in questionnaire responses that they were still 'not very' or 'not at all' confident in searching for academic sources. This seems unlikely to have been a technical concern as many students commented on the supportiveness of library staff and that they felt confident with online searching using the library resources. Although there were no written explanations required for this particular questionnaire question, it seems most likely that the students' continuing anxiety about finding sources was because they had used the set reading provided for them for the majority of their first year and were yet to supplement this with more independent searching. In addition, at interview some students spoke about struggling to know what to select from the sources available. Although discussions about choosing sources based on academic validity and credibility had been part of taught sessions, this was an area that some first year students found particularly daunting.

Development in understanding

In the end of year questionnaire, students demonstrated changes to their understanding of what was required to be a successful undergraduate academic writer through their reflections on progress and plans for their second undergraduate year. By the end of the first year of undergraduate study, 11 out of 44 questionnaire responses agreed that the main area in which they still needed support was reading. In interviews and questionnaire responses, the students explained that they still lacked confidence in identifying and selecting the most appropriate sources. They were also concerned about applying their reading effectively to support points made in their writing. In questionnaire data, 12 students also indicated that their priority for the next academic year was to use wider reading more effectively:

> I will read and analyse my reading more and explain why all my points are relevant. (Questionnaire, female 18-24, Education Studies).

These responses specified that students felt they needed to work on identifying and accessing appropriate sources beyond the reading provided by their tutors. They also referred to

concerns about reading more efficiently in a way that allowed them to analyse key points and effectively apply their reading to their assessed work.

Further areas for development identified by the students at the end of their first undergraduate year included personal organisation. In the end of year questionnaire, 7 students indicated that they wanted to improve their time-management. This was often with a focus on managing the demands of wider reading through improved planning:

> Take more time to find a wider range of references. Plan my work beforehand. Give myself more time by starting earlier and not 2-3 days before the deadline. (Questionnaire, male 18-24, Education Studies and Sport)

5 students made comments to the effect that they would make more effort and suggested that they had not fully committed to their studies during this first year:

> Have more motivation and put in more effort into my work as I haven't been trying my hardest this year. (Questionnaire, female 18-24, Education Studies)

There was no specific data available to explain this lack of motivation but fluctuating student anxiety and confidence as well as balancing home and university life may offer some possible reason for this. A small number of students also still felt the need for help with using appropriately 'academic' vocabulary. For example, in answer to the questionnaire question: 'Which of the above list do you feel you need most support with and why?' one participant responded with: 'Vocabulary-don't want to sound pretentious or not academic enough' (Questionnaire, female 18-24, Education Studies and Psychology).

Research question 2: Student perspectives on academic support strategies

Throughout the data gathered, students were very positive about the guidance and support available. They made clear that the combination of methods of support used by the university had enabled them to become more effective and confident academic writers during their first undergraduate year. All the students highlighted verbal guidance offered by tutors and library staff as flexible, responsive and relevant. They also found the booklet 'handbook for written coursework', which explained referencing and presentation expectations, a useful tool as they became familiar with university expectations:

There is a lot of support from the staff. Whenever I didn't understand something I would be completely honest and they would make sure I had all the information I needed. (Interview, female 18-24, Education Studies)

I didn't understand the library system when I first started but they are very helpful in there to help with your understanding. (Interview, female 18-24, Education Studies)

When I first started in September, I was given the academic writing handbook which was very useful for giving tips and advice and telling you exactly what you need to do; so that's been very helpful. (Interview, male 18-24, Education Studies and Drama)

Overall, the students agreed that the mechanisms in place to introduce and support academic writing had been effective. They specifically praised the module embedded seminars and lectures about academic writing, one to one tutorials and essay feedback:

It was nice to sort of have that [taught session focused on academic writing] as an introduction really, so that you knew the basic do's and don'ts. (Interview, male 18-24, Education Studies and Drama)

Tutorials helped immensely as I found I could bring up any problems I had with any of my assignments. (Interview, female 18-24, Education Studies)

I thought that the feedback was useful a lot of it was where I could have maybe expanded on something or perhaps changed a point slightly and some of it was just little mistakes. (Interview, male 18-24 Education Studies and Drama)

From taking advice from the end of semester I've grown into a better writer. (Questionnaire, male 18-24, Education Studies)

In mid-year student interviews, participants identified the module online sources of information and essential reading as being particularly helpful in providing access to relevant materials. They felt that the organisation of reading materials in weekly sessions helped them to work out what to focus their reading on. Individual students also gave examples of specific tutor guidance that they had benefitted from. They referred to in seminar guidance on paraphrasing, skim reading and note taking as well as tutor feedback on draft essay extracts during seminars and group tutorials.

At the end of their first year, a significant minority of students described difficulties with time management that may have affected the technical accuracy of their work. In line with Hamilton's (2016) findings, the students in this study also reported that they found it challenging and time consuming to read widely and reference evidence for all the points made in their work. These participants highlighted their concerns with selecting appropriate reading, and applying the reading to their writing effectively. It is hard to know whether these concerns arose from a preferred 'simple' approach to learning; students may have hoped to bypass the sustained work of reading and instead rely on tutors to transmit information, as indicated in previous studies (Beaumont et al. 2016; Cook and Leckey 1999; Hardy and Clughen 2012; Itua et al. 2014). Our interpretation was that the students were genuinely overwhelmed with the amount and type of reading needed on a joint honours programme and that they were especially underprepared as a result of the diverse routes from which they entered undergraduate study at our university. However, scaffolding these students' transition from school or college to university by narrowing and directing their reading may have inadvertently reinforced 'reproductive conceptions of learning' (Kember 2001). This support strategy simply delayed the stress that students experienced later in the year once reading expectations became more broad.

Changes to assignment structure for different modules

Data from the project pinpointed students' difficulties with moving between the first and third person voice for different assignments during the year. It also highlighted how unsettled they were by changes to expectations of assignment structure for different tasks. During the first year, the assignments had been designed by the academic tutors in tutor teams to move from writing in the first person, using a specific portfolio structure, to writing in the third person with transitional scaffolding available. In the second semester, students were able to create their own essay structure independently or follow a suggested essay plan format. This change was an intentional way of scaffolding students' writing from what the tutors perceived to be a more familiar and comfortable way of writing to something more challenging. Findings from this project indicated that perhaps the changes during the year were more difficult for the students than learning one way to approach essay writing and continuing to work on that during the year. Individual students also highlighted issues with not being as confident in presentations and exams, and the difference between expectations in joint honours degree subjects.

Beaumont et al. (2016) indicate that scaffolding the undergraduate transition to academic writing through course adaptation is a complex process. In their study, following changes to an undergraduate route, which included additional verbal essay feedback and seminar work on essay marking criteria, student confidence improved with no perceptible influence on their marks. Comparably, the Education Studies course also provided a workshop that focused on the essay criteria and clarified the meaning of targets set previously via marking feedback. In some cases, despite this scaffolding, assignment grades decreased between the first and second written assessment. Such inconsistencies raise further questions about how the transition into the first undergraduate year can be effectively scaffolded. One possible interpretation is that, in some cases, close direction of reading and writing in the first semester had inhibited student independence. However, this requires further research.

Emotional and technological demands of essay writing

Other difficulties experienced by the students were related to their personal responses and emotional reaction to the demands of university writing as well as the social environment in which they were learning. These were highlighted in the visual data, which comprised of an individual drawing and labelling task focused on student feelings at the beginning and mid-point of the course. For the mature students in this study, this task revealed additional pressures linked to balancing home life and university. One mature student wrote:

> I was unsure if I could write academically as I have not been in education for 12 years. I didn't know how I could juggle uni with family life and work etc.

and labelled a drawing of herself at the beginning of the course with:

> On the outside I'm smiling but inside I'm crying. (Visual data, female 24-30, Education Studies and subject not known)

Comments such as these emphasised the highly charged emotional journey and the potential vulnerability of all students during this first year and perhaps indicated the increased need that mature students might feel to 'put on a brave face'. One further contributing factor to stress and anxiety, which was commonly referred to by the mature students in the study, was the extra challenge of being new to an academic environment that was organised through technology:

> I was really, really nervous to begin with. I didn't even have a laptop when I started and since school a lot of it now is online and feels a lot more intimidating. Even finding the module through Blackboard was intimidating. (Interview, female 30-35, Education Studies and Theology)

It seems that these concerns were somewhat overlooked by the strategies put in place within the subject discipline to support the students' transition to university. Tutors may have underestimated the mature students' feelings of insecurity or believed that concentrating on academic support would help to overcome these. They may also have been unaware of issues with ICT or expected it to be addressed via general university induction. O'Connell and Dymont (2016) also found that students in general did not want to use new technology, such as blogs and wikis, as they lacked confidence and worried about it taking more time than word-processing. However, some of these issues may have been a result of more significant epistemological differences between the academic staff and the students. For instance, some students, in our study and previous research, may have focused on acquiring knowledge with the aim of passing their assessments. This meant that students might have regarded any expectations of participatory learning involving new technology as unnecessary and time-consuming (Cook and Leckey 1999; Itua et al. 2014). Our findings lend further weight to O'Connell and Dymonts' (2016) conclusion that HE should not assume students are 'digital natives' (Prensky 2001) but should get to know student preferences, provide training and perhaps limit choices so that students engage with technology.

Pressure surrounding 'hand in'

Another element that did not appear to be fully addressed by the subject-embedded academic writing support was the vulnerability felt by all students as they attempted to manage university expectations for academic writing. There were clear peaks and troughs in their confidence and periods that they found highly stressful. Immediately before they handed in the first assignment they were generally confident that they were well prepared:

> I had done all of the essential and extended reading for the module and therefore felt ready and prepared to write the assignment. (Visual data, female 18-24, Education Studies and subject not known)

However, before submitting their third written assignment (in Semester 2) their anxiety levels had greatly increased:

> The academic style is a lot harder and there's lots of pressure. This with other uni factors causes more stress. (Visual data, male 18-24, Education Studies and Drama)

> I'm halfway through the assignment so at this stage I usually feel like this but it does seem more increased as I'm doubting whether I've done it correctly. (Visual data, female 18-24, Education Studies and subject not known)

Some of this anxiety seemed to have come about because the assignment structure differed slightly from their previous assignments. However, there was also considerable pressure felt by students who had been successful in their first assignments:

> As I achieved firsts on my first two assignments, I feel very pressured to continue to achieve high grades- this doesn't help my concentration and makes me feel more stressed. (Visual data, female 18-24, Education Studies and subject not known)

Similarly, despite help with broader strategies for academic writing, several students, in visual data, interviews and questionnaires, referred to their essay marks throughout the year as surprising or disappointing. These students' feelings of anxiety or confidence about their academic writing were highly dependent on the marks they received. As mentioned previously, this suggested that although students were generally clear about what markers were looking for in terms of reading, analysis, and referencing they were yet to establish a subtler grasp of the differences between mark-bands which might enable them to feel more secure about their progress and to more accurately predict their outcomes. As a result, the first year undergraduates experienced an uneven trajectory of confidence about their academic writing.

Generally, the first year of negotiating different assignment expectations and coping with the highs and lows of their marks was characterised as one full of pressure and anxiety. One focus group participant described her experience as being typified by, 'waves of confidence' indicating that she also experienced waves of insecurity. One student described the need for reassurance even when following academic guidelines. She emphasised that she was struggling to overcome feelings of self-doubt when making independent decisions about her academic writing. Similarly, science students reported becoming increasingly aware of 'academic pressure' as well as reporting problems with time management and a focus on outcomes during their course (Cook and Leckey 1999). Our study highlights that, although there have been many studies of undergraduate experiences with academic writing since

Cook and Leckey's work, some students' perceptions of pressure and anxiety remain unchanged.

Conclusion

The findings from our small study highlight the benefits of supporting students with academic writing from within the discipline of Education Studies as well as through the wider university network of resources. This may involve taking an 'Academic Literacies' perspective (Lea and Street 1998) which recognises the varied and changing genre(s) of writing in Education Studies and attempting to make the features of these genres specific, an approach found in 'English for Academic Purposes' (Wingate, Andon and Cogo 2011). Our research supports the previous finding that students perceived centralised support for academic writing to be less effective (Hardy and Clughen 2012), although this was one part of the 'layers' of support which students used. Furthermore, Hardy and Clughen (2012) found that students were not prepared to ask tutors from their subject course for help with academic writing as they were worried about embarrassing themselves. Although we did not ask a specific question about this, the amount of spontaneous open text and verbal responses that identified tutor support positively suggest that it is unlikely that our students felt this way. However, it may have been that they were not prepared to report feeling embarrassed. Whilst the student responses in our research emphasised their emotional vulnerability and anxiety around academic writing, they also highlighted that trust established between subject tutors and students allowed for open dialogue about the process.

We remain concerned about the continued anxiety and difficulties experienced by undergraduate students as they make the transition from expectations of academic reading and writing at school to those of the university. We strongly believe that it is only by listening to student experiences that we can find out which elements of this process are challenging for them. Borg and Deane (2011) and Hardy and Clughen (2012), argue that the whole university must take responsibility for this. However, like others before us (Monroe 2003; Wingate, Andon and Cogo 2011), we would also argue that subject specialist academics should take greater responsibility for academic writing and reading support in their own disciplines. Furthermore, developing a genuine dialogue and partnership with the library team and Learning Development (academic skills) tutors must remain a priority.

Successful interventions

Our findings reveal that scaffolding sessions 'within the discipline' to support academic writing has been effective in improving first year undergraduates' confidence. In particular, our students valued sessions led by subject tutors that combined academic writing skills and subject content. We are convinced that subject tutors should take opportunities to make the style and structure of writing in Education Studies explicit through seminar teaching. Students in our study also specified that working with peers to plan essays in seminars and practising skills such as referencing and paraphrasing with their subject tutors had helped them. Furthermore, our findings indicate that subject discipline documentation, academic referencing guides, pertinent feedback and personal support from a range of university staff were all important to our students.

Key actions from our findings

Our findings indicate the relevance of evaluating the existing support that new undergraduates receive and any training for tutors that could promote a selection of approaches that may address student needs. When developing discipline specific support we must still make the expectations and strategies that are automatic to us transparent to the students. Tutors within the disciplines need to work together to develop a shared understanding of important elements of academic writing in their subject and to find ways to articulate these to students. In addition to generic university support, students can only benefit if subject discipline tutors, English for Academic Purposes and Learning Development tutors share their expertise (Wingate and Tribble 2012). Tutors may wish to reflect upon and share their own difficulties with academic writing as part of this process.

Recommendations

Firstly, academic staff in any discipline should take opportunities to identify where difficulties arise for their students as they make the transition into academic writing at university. They should pay particular attention to which scaffolding strategies may positively affect their student outcomes and self-efficacy or inadvertently limit their independence and confidence.

Secondly, academic writing support should be 'local', taking place within course timetables, so that it becomes a normal part of learning within a subject. This enables tutors, at different points in the year, to combine subject specific content with tasks that practice academic writing.

Finally, effective academic writing support is individual and tutors can use their relationships with, and knowledge of, students to fine tune empathetic support. Our students especially valued dialogue and one to one tutorials with their subject tutors as these gave them specific direction and helped to build their confidence.