RESEARCH ARTICLE

ACADEMIC WRITING: CHALLENGES AND WAYFORWARD A PERSPECTIVE FROM UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Student perceptions of what constitutes good academic writing (AW) in higher education often differ. This is reflected in written assignments, which frequently fall below the expected standard. In seeking to develop the writing skills of students and propose potential solutions to writing difficulties, a study was conducted in Gedu College of Business Studies, (GCBS) Royal University of Bhutan. (RUB). This paper reports the findings generated using unmoderated focus groups of second-year students and third-year students of Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) & Bachelor of Commerce (B. Com) GCBS. The findings indicated that students' perceptions of what constitutes AW differed. The barriers to academic writing that were identified were lack of time and confidence, lack of extended writing, lack of reading and understanding of academic texts or journals, referencing and academic jargon.

Keywords: *Academic Writing; Perceptions; Solutions; Barriers; Academic Jargon.*

List of Abbreviations
• RUB - Royal University of Bhutan
• AW - Academic Writing
• GCBS - Gedu College of Business Studies
• BBA - Bachelor of Business Administration
• BCom - Bachelor of Commerce
• HSS - Higher Secondary school
• APA - American Psychological Association

1. INTRODUCTION

The genesis of Academic Writing can be found in the seventeenth century and stems from a western historical–cultural model where writing is expected to be smooth and present a clear transition between ideas and arguments, with careful and complete referencing of other writers' work (Lillis and Turner 2001). Writing, as a basic skill is expected to be developed through school education which is interconnected with all aspects of students' learning. It is intrinsically linked to the process of critical thinking, reasoning, and problem solving (Reynolds, 2010; Russell, 2001; Walvoord, 2014), and likewise, is correlated to student academic success, engagement, and retention (Habley, Bloom, & Robbins, 2012; Light, 2001). Moreover, written communication is critical to success in the twenty-first century workforce and continues to be one of the most emphasized skills desired.

In this paper, academic writing is conceptualized as more than simply use of literacy skills such as grammar, punctuation and spelling. The literature shows barriers to successful and appropriate Academic Writing broadly falls into two categories:

(1) barriers formed by students' prior educational experience and associated epistemological beliefs (Entwistle, McCune, and Hounsell 2002; Kember 2001).

(2) barriers inherent within Academic Writing that have been explored by theorists focusing on academic literacies (Lea and Street 1998; 2006).

1.1 PROBLEM STATEMENT.

Student perceptions of what constitutes good academic writing in higher education often differ amongst the students. This has been well reflected in written assignments, which frequently fall below the expected standard. Concerns that students are arriving at university unprepared have been widely highlighted (Thomson 2008). This has been blamed owing to school curriculum being too structured and text-oriented syllabus. Further, the concept of AW is not explicitly taught in school setting. Moreover, students often believe that they are required to reproduce what they are taught without critical reflection – that teaching is the process of knowledge transmission, whilst learning is the absorption of that knowledge, with judgements about learning being based on the student's ability to reproduce material verbatim (Kember 2001). In his research, Kember found that students who commence Higher Education with a didactic/reproductive belief can find the process difficult and even traumatic, since university assignments require more than reproduction of material. The formation of this belief is said to be influenced in an inter-related way by the students' learning approaches, their conception of knowledge and the teacher's beliefs about teaching (Sheppard and Gilbert 1991).

All the colleges under the RUB, the first-year students are offered a university-wide module called ACS101 Academic Skills as a foundational course to help students acquire academic writing skills. The module offers a range of subjects that are primarily focused on academic writing. However, having taught the module to all the first-year students in the

beginning of the undergraduates' programme, the successive semesters' assignments, academic discourse, and writing log indicated that students are still largely poor in academic writing skills. In fact, the students are expected to improve their academic writing skills as they progress to higher level of learning. However, the students show lesser interest as well as poor quality of AW.

1.2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES.

i.   To identify students' perceptions of the barriers to successful Academic Writing

ii. To develop context-specific solutions to successful Academic Writing

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS.

i.   What are the students' perceptions of the barriers to successful Academic Writing?

ii. What are some of the methods to develop context-specific solutions to successful Academic Writing?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Given this theoretical background to Academic Writing, it is clear that the ability of students to present information and ideas through their writing has an integral role in both academic and professional success. Elton (2010, 151) highlights that 'student writing is an academic discipline 'which is rarely taught by those with expertise in academic writing. He asserts that AW often relies on 'tacit knowledge' and is something that cannot be taught by transmission. Similarly, Lea and Street (1998, 159) found that whilst academic staff could 'describe what constitutes successful academic writing, difficulties arose when they attempted to make explicit what a well-developed argument looks like in a written

assignment'. Difficulties with AW are therefore not confined to undergraduate students and have been reported in several studies of academics (Murray, Thow, Moore, and Murphy 2008; Moore 2003; Murray 2002). Failure in AW has been known to impact on student progress throughout university, often resulting in drop-out and underachievement, frequently during the first major assessment period (Lowe and Cook 2003). In most cases, the reason for drop-out or underachievement is the failure to make a successful transition from Higher Secondary school (HSS) to university, particularly in the epistemological beliefs developed. The scale of the specific AW problem faced by students as they transit from HSS to university is as yet unknown, but it is likely to be strongly affected by epistemological beliefs – as well as habits developed in informal spoken language, which uses a greater proportion of grammatical words rather than noun phrases which group ideas together into complex bundles as used in academic writing, making academic text more difficult to read (Borg and Deane 2011).

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conception of knowledge and the teacher's beliefs about teaching (Sheppard and Gilbert 1991).

Lea and Street (1998, 2006) discuss the barriers inherent within AW broadly defined under the term 'health literacies', or social practices which see student writing as an identity and way of knowing rather than an issue of skill or socialization. These ways of knowing will involve a number of different disciplines, fields and genres, which students will need to switch between as necessary. In terms of identity, students are also required to understand when impersonal and passive forms of writing are acceptable. This form of writing requires students to engage with the 'processes of meaning-making and contestation around meaning' rather than with straightforward study skills (Lea and Street 1998, 157).

3. METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative approach involving a unmoderated focus groups with second and third year students of BBA and B. Com who were divided into small groups (n= 5 people per group with a total of 10 groups). A total of fifty students were involved in the studies to discuss and record their feelings about AW, and identify potential solutions to any challenges encountered. The questions used in the focus groups were generated and modified after an extensive review of the literature. The tool used to conduct the research were personal interviews and semi-structured interviews. Such tools provide participants with higher degree of freedom to explain their thoughts.

3.1 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Qualitative approaches are useful to explore the richness and significance of people's context-dependent experiences; in the generation of new theories; and in the early stages of problem analysis and project design (Griffiths 1999). Focus groups are increasingly used to elicit the beliefs, attitudes, or views of a range of populations (Barbour and Kitzinger 1999) and have a number of advantages. Focus groups allow the participants to highlight issues that are important to them; can potentially negate the inherent power relations between the researcher and the researched; can allow the true voices of participants to be heard (Cully, Hudson, and Rapport 2007); and can produce a breadth of information and allow researchers to increase their sample sizes. Unmoderated (no moderator present) focus groups were used for students to facilitate deeper exploration and expression of views and opinions, and to eliminate moderator bias.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

The data which were collected is analyzed and interpreted thematically. Thematic analysis is the process of identifying patterns or themes that are important and interesting in the data to address the research. Thematic analysis is a flexible data analysis plan that qualitative researchers use to generate themes from interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). They provide a six-step process for identifying, analyzing and reporting qualitative data. It is used to analyze data about what students and faculty have said in their interviews.

5. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The responses given by focus groups were transcribed and analyzed to draw out key themes using thematic content analysis, where themes are grouped relating to each of the questions as outlined below.

6. STUDENTS FOCUS GROUP

- ***What do you understand AW to be, and how important do you feel it is?***

Most of the groups (8/10) identified AW in terms of forms of assessment associated specifically with university, such as 'essays, lit reviews and research' and 'reports, journals, research proposals, projects, essays. This was in turn related to the need for such writing to be 'based on evidence', with a number of groups (8/10) indicating that AW should be 'based on studies, peer reviews', 'mainly based on research' and, again, 'based on evidence in terms of references, and not just opinion-based'. Others described AW as 'intellectual writing' involving 'critical thinking'. The importance of AW was associated with developing 'understanding of specific subjects', 'aiding learning' by encouraging students to read around topics and helping to develop writing skills by improving grammar. One group did see AW as helping with learning but added that it also 'constrains you to write in a particular way'.

- ***Has your understanding of AW changed since you left HSS? If so, how?***

Nearly all the groups (9/10) agreed that their understanding of AW had changed significantly since leaving HSS. Several highlighted what they regarded to be the key differences between writing at HSS and University levels, pointing particularly to the lack of requirement to provide references at A-level – for example, 'referencing is required more at university, but you didn't need it at school'. It was felt that writing at university level was 'not as simple as it was in HSS' and that it had to be more 'in-depth', 'analytical', 'structured', 'complex', 'critical' and 'concise'. Writing at HSS level was understood as being 'more descriptive', whereas in college a greater emphasis was placed on 'evidence and analyses. Further, one group noted that 'HSS didn't mind us using websites, but now we have to use more government websites, trusted sites and journal articles.

- ***Are there any issues that make AW difficult for you? If so, what are these?***

Three main issues emerged from group discussions: 'referencing', 'academic jargon' and 'writing structure'. The primary issue for the students lay with *referencing:* all groups identified this as a problematic aspect of AW. Concerns ranged from putting 'others' work into your own words' and being able to demonstrate that 'the data that you find is backed up [by] research' to simply not knowing how to reference correctly. The latter was in turn associated with 'different reference styles for different subjects', 'too many obstacles as you have to reference everything', not knowing 'how many [references] to use', and a general difficulty with 'getting it right' – as one group asserted:

REFERENCING! No matter how many times we are given lectures, hand-outs or guides to referencing, it is so difficult to apply when writing an essay or report.

A further theme identified by groups related to *'complicated vocabulary and subject jargon'* which 'make AW difficult'. This appeared to be experienced

as a barrier to learning, with several groups expressing frustration at what they regarded as unnecessary language – 'sometimes there's no need for it' – whilst others viewed it as slowing down their learning: '[a] new way of writing takes time and understanding, especially with complex words'. Interestingly, this highlights what Lea and Street (2006) talk about in their academic literacies concept: learning the appropriate discourse is an integral part of learning to think like a psychologist, or a geographer, or a health scientist. A small number of groups expressed some concern over the *structure of AW*, which was recognized as being 'a lot more complex in structure'. It was suggested that perhaps more could be done to advice students how to develop their skills. One group noted: 'we were given examples of what a good essay was but didn't understand why it was good'.

- ***In what ways do you feel that HSS prepared you for writing academically at university and could this preparation have been improved?***

Responses to this question were mixed, reflecting very different experiences of AW at HSS. For some groups, HSS was viewed as not having provided adequate preparation for University: HSS did not prepare us. The writing style was completely different at HSS. Others asserted that HSS provided a basis for understanding AW which had acted as a 'steppingstone' to University and had prepared them quite well by introducing 'academic words' and helping to improve writing skills; that referencing techniques had been used at college; and that HSS had encouraged them to think about providing evidence for their ideas. Regarding potential improvements at HSS, some felt that writing should

be linked more clearly to expectations at university. Specific issues included a greater emphasis on referencing across the HSS curriculum, more support regarding how to undertake research and less reliance on the use of websites. Further reference was made to the actual writing itself, for example: HSS need to teach how essays are going to be written differently in university.

- ***In what ways do you feel [your] first year has prepared you for AW in your second and third years, and do you feel this preparation could have been improved?***

Students' views on their first year's effectiveness in preparing them for their second year were generally quite positive. Some focused-on referencing, suggesting that 'lessons on referencing and writing', the introduction of APA referencing and encouragement to 'use journals' had acted as good preparation. One group commented that lectures and tutorials made clear the expectations around AW, particularly around structure, whilst further reference was made to the guidance provided on 'how to research' and the 'importance of proof-reading'. Students felt that second-year preparation could be improved by providing general essay feedback sessions; more lessons on AW; more essays, which would help 'improve understanding of AW in practice'; more opportunities to submit drafts; more homework; a chance to use essays from previous years to help develop writing skills; more support for general reading; more information on how to research; and tougher marking, so that students knew what to expect.

Additionally, practical measures relating to facilitating the transition from the first to the second

year were identified. These included more advice provided at the end of the first year regarding the expectations of the second year, and provision of a brief resume of referencing techniques at the beginning of the second year. Students reported that whilst first-year guidance had been helpful, in the second year they felt that they had been 'left to get on with it' and had 'been thrown in at the deep end' – although one group noted that students could take more responsibility themselves, saying 'those that took [the first year] seriously are well prepared'.

- **At this point in time what do you feel could be done to improve your AW skills?**

Responses to this question were quite sparse; nevertheless, a few observations were made which are worthy of comment. Some groups mentioned that greater use of the Writing Centre and/or the provision of additional classes or AW-focused tutorials would help further develop the necessary skills, with one group suggesting that it should be 'compulsory to take [the] first assignment to the Writing Centre'. A related suggestion was that there should be further opportunities for practicing essay writing, to help with critical analysis skills. Further suggestions included refresher lessons on referencing and AW at the beginning of the second year, a 'different library tour to focus more on journals' and greater emphasis on the use of academic literature to develop critical writing skills.

7. BARRIERS TO ACADEMIC WRITING

7.1 Online resources: Students feel that 'technology' was one of the key contributors to students' difficulties in respect of understanding, evaluating and answering questions. This was exacerbated by

the fact that they did not seem to read books, but instead relied heavily on information sources such as google: The tutors similarly felt that students were using websites (described as the 'internet phenomenon') rather than reading good sources (i.e. textbooks/journals) to inform their writing. This was seen to be a result of the way students study in university, using online resources (plagiarism) extensively to generate a range of easy-to-read information. This resulted in a number of problems, such as not engaging with the literature, a reluctance to spend time using the library and unscientific/layman's terminology being used. The faculty also felt that in school, students were not encouraged to read round the topic but taught to rely on hand-outs which provide all the answers, leaving them unprepared to understand issues and form their own opinions.

7.2 Lack of reading: University tutors felt that 'academic reading' was essential to developing AW skills, perceiving that students were not good readers and were generally doing a very limited amount of reading. To combat this, a range of strategies were being used by tutors to foster academic reading in their student groups, including asking students to read accessible material before classes and to read during the classes. There was a feeling that students had to be almost 'forced' to read; whilst this was worthwhile, the process was seen as very time-consuming.

I've never really read a journal article, because they are hard to read...

It was felt that if students found it difficult to understand a journal article on the first read, the majority of them would reject that article in favour of

an easier-to-read text. This could result in research skills not translating into writing competency, with students able to source the information but unable, or lacking the time, to develop an understanding of it. University tutors asserted that it would be better for students to read and understand a few texts, rather than sourcing but not understanding many. The value of including a large number of references was also questioned, with a suggestion that students might include a lot of sources without necessarily engaging with those sources and understanding them.

7.3 Lack of integration of AW in other modules: Most of the tutors teaching other modules offered in the programme feel that teaching academic writing skills is somehow the job of language tutors, which is a deep concern. In fact academic writings is applicable to all the modules irrespective of the nature and the content of the modules. Since students are expected to produce academic writings (research-based assignments) it's the responsibility of each tutor to encourage and enhance AW skills. However, some of the tutors reported that it was difficult to pay particular attention to students' AW for several reasons, such as time limitations, pressure on tutor to get students through the course and the need to keep pupils engaged.

I just try and get them through the module...I'm not trying to make them better essay writers, I am actually personally just trying to get them through what they need to do to actually pass my module.

8. STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE AW

8.1 Engaging students in academic reading

Reading is fundamental to writing and research at university. Academic reading is a specific category of reading. It's helpful to remember that academic reading is an act of performance**.** Engaging students in academic reading with a concise, succinct representation of an academic text such as a scholarly book, journal article, and research report would assist them in understanding academic writing precisely. Further, providing appropriate academic resources for first year students as a starting point for developing their AW would be beneficial.

8.2 IMPROVING WRITING SKILLS

Academic writing is arguably the most important skill in academic contexts, since writing is the main method of academic communication. It is also the most difficult skill for most students to master. However, there are certain tools such as writing packs, reading packs, writing workshops or diagnostic tools designed to explore writing and learning skills. Further, the use of comprehension-type exercises from reliable journal articles will develop students' ability to understand AW. It was felt that breaking down early assignments into 'bite-sized pieces', as well as giving students more time to develop their work in depth, would help to develop both AW and students' confidence in learning.

8.3 'SKILLS WEEK' AT THE START OF THE SECOND YEAR

Some of the tutors recommended to establish a 'skills week' which would be useful at the beginning of the second year. This will not only refresh students' knowledge of the skills acquired in

first year but also emphasize the importance of AW in achieving higher grades.

9. DISCUSSION

This qualitative study was conducted in order to find students' perceptions of barriers and solutions to successful AW. An understanding of student beliefs about AW is important for university teachers, to enable them to produce graduates 'with strong writing skills who write and communicate effectively in their learning communities' (Hammann 2005, 17).

10. FINDINGS OF THIS STUDY ARE:

• There was difficulty in defining academic writing.

• Staff and students; views of what constituted academic writing differed.

• The barriers and solutions identified by both tutors and students differed, perhaps as a reflection of differences in the perception of what constitutes academic writing.

Students perceived AW to be about evidence-based essays, literature reviews, reports, journals, research proposals and projects. For students, the emphasis was on the 'evidence-based' aspect. This is a clear expectation in the subject discipline of health studies. However, tutors perceived AW as concerned with good grammar and vocabulary, logic, structured paragraphs, fluent, formal English, sense, and the requirement to be 'concise and… factually loaded'.

Most of the students identified referencing, the use of academic jargon and difficulties in structuring work as major barriers to AW. Lack of reading and understanding of (complex) text was a barrier identified by tutors, along with the lack of extended writing practice, emphasis on short writing tasks and the challenge/fear of open pieces of writing available online was reported. Tutors felt that technology prevented students from developing AW skills, with Wikipedia and Google playing a detrimental role in a 'fast culture'. There is also lack of integration of AW across the module tutors. This inevitably means that university tutors do not always feel competent to advise or teach their students about how to write academically.

Several solutions were suggested by both tutors and students. These included giving clearer guidance on what is meant by AW and tutors' expectations at the outset (at each level); avoiding assuming *a priori* what the problems of AW are; recognizing the constraints placed on HSS; paying greater attention to students' understanding of academic texts; engaging students in developing their own AW; considering how the number of comments on 'referencing' may skew students' perceptions of what is important, negatively impacting on understanding, and seeking a better balance between 'skills' and 'knowledge'.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study clearly highlight a range of barriers to AW that BBA and BCom students are experiencing, predominantly in relation to referencing, finding academic text boring or difficult to understand, and having a lack of time to engage with AW. The differences in expectations of school/college and university tutors. Interestingly, the barriers and solutions suggested by tutors were quite different from those suggested by the students, focusing on clearer guidance about AW and

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expectations at the outset of each level, greater awareness of the constraints and empowering students to develop their own AW skills, potentially by reducing the number of sources that students were expected to engage with in order to encourage greater depth and synthesis. This shows how the issue of supporting academic writing at any level is not addressed by any single solution.

Overall, the findings from this study support the literature, which highlights how differences in epistemological beliefs between higher secondary school and university education may negatively impact on the transition process. Whilst it would appear that changes to the way in which students are taught in higher secondary school would reduce the number of barriers to AW identified in this study, the suggested recommendations must be situated within the context of this research. Therefore, it is imperative to recognize the pressures that HSS teachers are under to achieve exam success, the degree of 'responsibility' for student learning that HSS teachers seem to have, and the difference in epistemological beliefs between HSS and university tutors.

The following recommendations/implications are therefore put forward for possible incorporation:

- Students need clearer guidance on what constitutes AW and encouragement to engage with writing support services, where available.

- All the tutors, irrespective of the nature of modules taught, must facilitate/incorporate AW in their academic tasks/assignments. It must be a collective effort of the entire faculty to guide and support AW in all levels of their teaching.

- Given the power of tutors to influence students' beliefs in respect of AW, coupled with the challenges to AW that tutors themselves report (Murray et al. 2008), it would appear that the students' issues cannot be addressed separately from the issue of tutors' own AW experience.

- Hence, there is a need for staff development, specifically in clarifying what constitutes academic writing and in developing their own academic writing skills – which, in turn, raises its own challenges (Elvidge 2004).

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