

Students as Change Agents in Learning and Teaching
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Project blog: <https://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/studentprojects>
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Case study 4 – Geography: Academic Writing Support for Geography Undergraduates

Introduction

As provision currently stands in Geography, the first year is the only year in which students have academic tutorials. Previously, such tutorials had been available across all years, but students had pushed for these to be dropped, and contact hours for second year students now consist solely of lectures. However, this has led, in particular, to students perceiving that support for academic writing is lacking. A number of study skills and writing support workshops as well as individual appointments have been available through Education Enhancement and the Literacy Fund; Geography students currently have a relatively high usage of the one-to-one appointments available, but these are difficult to book on a wider scale. In addition, students suggest that they would benefit from more tailored support, especially Physical Geography students who consider they have slightly different academic writing support needs to Human Geography students since they are expected to submit reports that are different in form to any writing they will have done at A-level.

The School therefore decided that finding a means to develop writing skills effectively would be highly beneficial. In collaboration with Education Enhancement, the School has successfully won a joint bid for £5000 from the Alumni Annual Fund in order to develop writing initiatives, with the view that a PhD student should be trained to support study skills within the School. The project described below was established in order to investigate in particular which aspects of academic writing skills students are struggling with, in order to make recommendations on future support for student writing and to inform the directions of the Annual Fund project.

Methods of data collection

A student-designed questionnaire was circulated by paper and email and was completed by 68 Geography students (roughly 15% of the total undergraduate cohort): 33 Year 1, 20 Year 2, 15 Year 3, and 3 unknown. The questionnaire was designed to capture student feedback on:

- Which aspects of academic writing students were struggling with
- What support was currently being utilised
- How further support might look if it were developed.

Analysis of data

Almost half of respondents indicated that they have problems with academic writing. Students particularly report struggling with the development of argument and style, as shown in Table 1.

	%	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Essay structure		30	20	40
Development of argument		64	85	33
Style		36	65	27
Analytical/critical writing		24	10	6
Referencing		39	10	13
I do not struggle with my academic writing		3	0	13

Table 1: Areas of academic writing with which students struggle

According to student feedback gained, as they progress in their degree, so their understanding of how to improve their academic writing improves. Just a third of first year students suggested they knew how to improve their academic writing, compared to two thirds of third year students. Currently, however, issues with writing seem most prevalent in the second year of study. All second year students indicated that they have difficulties with some aspect of their academic writing, which may be linked to the fact that students in this year receive the least 1-to-1 contact. One first year student commented '*apparently next academic year we*

don't have any tutorials i.e. set tutorials with a tutor. In my eyes this is unacceptable as I see them as a key part of our academic learning experience and the understanding of our course'. Second year students were the least positive about knowing how to improve, with two in five feeling they did not know how to achieve improvements. Only one in five second year students indicated that they are given sufficient support for essay writing; this is in comparison to 40% in Year 1 and 60% in Year 3.

By the third year, a third of students suggested they felt more comfortable with the development of argument - the aspect of writing considered to be most difficult for them, but this is still a comparatively small number of the whole group. Indeed, only 13% suggest by the third year that they do not have any difficulties with academic writing, highlighting that this continues to present difficulties for students throughout their degree.

Students reported that they tend to talk to fellow students when they need help (see Table 2), though this decreases as they move into the second and third years, and by the third year personal tutors are the most popular source of support. By the third year, over three quarters of students felt they could approach their tutor or module convener at any time if they needed help.

	%	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Speak to the module convener of the module when having difficulties		21	30	33
Speak to your personal tutor		39	30	47
Speak to another lecturer		3	0	0
Speak to fellow students		75	55	40
Don't try and to get help		0	20	7

Table 2: Whom students speak to when having difficulties

Most (82%) did not know that Education Enhancement runs one-to-one skills sessions for students who are struggling with time management and academic writing. Most also state that they would take up extra support and attend writing techniques/skills workshops if they knew these were available. Support for this was again highest for second years (75%).

Most students wanted scheduled workshops covering set topics. Several indicated that a combination of three types of sessions would be useful: drop-in sessions, small group workshops and pre-booked one-to-one sessions (Table 3).

	%	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Drop-in sessions		30	25	40
Scheduled workshops covering set topics		55	55	58
One-to-one timetabled sessions		40	50	50

Table 3: What form should writing support take?

Most students considered that support should be made available fortnightly although a third thought monthly would be sufficient.

	%	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Weekly		18	10	50
Fortnightly		39	47	50
Monthly		27	37	33
Termly		9	5	17

Table 4: How often should support be available?

Table 5 indicates students' preferences with regards to group size. Most had a preference for small groups, though they indicated that one-to-one sessions would be useful in certain contexts.

	%	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
One to one support		24	35	25
Small group		6	55	75
Whole year		12	5	8

Table 5: What size groups should support be available to?

The majority of students wanted the support to cover all aspects of essay writing.

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
All aspects of essay writing	48%	37%	67%

Specific aspects of essay writing	33%	31%	25%
Tailored support	27%	37%	17%

Table 6: What types of support would students like?

Students were asked to indicate whether they would want to change anything about support given and 51% suggested that they would. Below are some of their comments on ways in which they would like to improve support, including a writing guide, samples of good student work and more tutor support for writing skills.

- *'More guidance at the beginning of the year on how to write essays, the format of developing an argument, and also far more on referencing as it is confusing'.*
- *'I would have appreciated more guidance at the start of an assignment explaining what style of writing was encouraged, instead of simply being told to look at the mark scheme as its hard to change your personal writing style or improve without encouragement and guidance on the matter'.*
- *'A guide to writing scientific reports, how to present figures, the style of writing expected, a staff member specifically employed to help students with style'.*
- *'More past example essays to observe writing style, layout, formation etc. as opposed to structure sheets. For me, reading through several past dissertations helped with how I presented my own, would definitely be the same with essays'.*
- *'Just some prior knowledge of academic writing styles... there is a great variation between A2 level and degree levels styles. Also the level of terminology that should be used. Often if it is complex - they [tutors] believe it's someone else's work that you haven't referenced, yet if it is too simple you get marked down... what's going on here?'*
- *'General guidance in what the examiners and markers are looking for, how to achieve the higher grade boundaries... tailored support in how we can improve our own technique'.*
- *'A time to discuss and a chance to improve, because at the moment I feel I am not improving... but staying on a plateau'.*

Summary of Findings

This study suggests that many students in the School of Geography really feel that they struggle with academic writing, in particular in the second year, but also throughout their degree. They state that they would take up extra support if it were available. A combination of workshops and one-to-one sessions for small groups and individuals, on a fortnightly basis, would be preferred. Students would want sessions to cover all aspects of essay writing; they would also appreciate access to a certain amount of tailored support to meet the needs of individuals. They would also appreciate additional support through writing guides, being able to review examples of good work by other students, and by tutors talking to them more about writing skills.

Recommendations/Solutions

If students' preferences are acted on, support should come in the form of a mixture of small group workshops covering a range of topics and one-to-one sessions to meet the needs of individuals (or possibly pairs of students). These might be available on a fortnightly basis. The support should be provided by a skilled advisor to all years, but possibly with an emphasis on second year students. Good communication between academic staff and the advisor would be needed to ensure students are made aware of the provision available, and to ensure that it is correctly signposted. This kind of liaison would also ensure that support could be tailored for individuals and groups as it becomes apparent what difficulties are arising with any particular modules or year groups at any particular time. In this way, workshops for certain topics could be prioritised accordingly, so that student needs are met in a timely fashion.

One of the problems with initiatives to provide skills is that students state they want additional support and then fail to attend sessions when they are provided. It is important that the School works closely with Education Enhancement in order to devise marketing and strategies that make sure that opportunities are not wasted, and to promote a culture in which working at writing skills is seen by students as a worthwhile and purposeful activity that will support their learning.

*Study undertaken with Kirsty Williams
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