

A Report on the Teaching of Academic Writing in UK Higher Education

By Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams



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Abstract

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A proposal for researching standards of student writing in UK higher education was put forward by Professor David Wray and Professor Jeremy Treglown at the University of Warwick in 1999. The proposal was prompted by ‘increasing national concern about a supposed falling-off in areas such as grammar, spelling, punctuation, as well as in more sophisticated aspects of writing’.¹ The purpose of the project was to lay preliminary groundwork for researching student writing in higher education and for determining how writing skills can best be taught at university level. The project gained support, in the form of a Post-Doctoral Fellowship, from the Royal Literary Fund.

Because it was motivated by the perception of a ‘crisis’ in the writing skills of students, the original approach to the project was to investigate student writing from a perspective of measurable standards—such as standards of grammar. Throughout the course of the research, however, this approach was shown to be less productive for studying student writing than other emerging research methodologies. The focus of the project changed, therefore, as the researcher, Dr. Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams, gained a knowledge of UK higher education writing pedagogy as an already emergent field supported by an active and varied research culture.

The report begins by examining the context in which the project arose: the ‘literacy crisis’ in student writing that is currently perceived in UK higher education. Section Two of the report discusses a survey of university staff perspectives on student writing that was undertaken as a starting point for the research, and also illustrates the challenges of attempting to conduct a comparative study of standards of student writing across decades. Section Three of the report, which surveys existing Academic Writing scholarship and pedagogical approaches, represents the project’s shift from a deficit to a developmental method of laying groundwork for the study of student writing, and posits a ‘whole institution’ approach to supporting student-writers. Section Four concludes the report by making recommendations for future funding in the area of Academic Writing pedagogy and research.

¹ ‘Literacy Standards and Targets in Higher Education’, Research Proposal, February 1999.

Section 1 Introduction: The ‘Literacy Crisis’ in UK Higher Education

Today’s media headlines report a crisis in the literacy levels of university students: ‘Generation blighted by exam meddling’ (McVeigh, *Guardian* 22 September 2002); ‘Harder exams will teach pupils how to argue’ (Owen, *Times* 12 November 2003); ‘Student spelling and grammar at “crisis” levels’ (Smithers, *Guardian* 1 March 2003); ‘Students “cannot write essays”’ (Garner, *Independent* 6 March 2004); ‘Lecturers fear academic standards are slipping’ (Bright, *Observer* 1 August 2004). Newspaper articles assert that ‘the current intake of students is the weakest in history’ (Owen) and that ‘[s]tandards of spelling and grammar among an entire generation of English-speaking university students are now so poor that there is “a degree of crisis” in their written use of the language’ (Smithers). In addition, students ‘are in danger of dropping out of university because they cannot string their thoughts together to write an essay’ (Garner). Professional journals, too, state ‘[t]hat a problem with student writing skills exists few would doubt or question’ (Bergstrom, *English Subject Centre Newsletter* February 2004), and make reference to ‘the literacy crisis’ in student writing as a recognised phenomenon (Wandor, *Times Higher Education Supplement* 6 August 2004).

While some of the most recent references to student literacy, and in particular to student writing, are cited above, the discourse of falling standards has been emphasised in news articles since the late 1980s (Street; Cameron 78-115; Crowley 249; Clark and Ivanič 187). Concerns have been expressed by the general public, government agencies and graduate employers, as well as by university staff. This project, whose focus is on laying groundwork for researching and teaching writing in higher education, was motivated by an interest in this seemingly widespread unease over student writing.

Periods of ‘crisis’ in student literacy have been a recurring theme throughout educational history (Russell 6; Graff 390-393). David Russell, for instance, identifies ‘a 120-year tradition of complaint about student writing’ in the United States (6), and Thomas Miller reports that classical educators of the mid-1700s believed standards of academic discourse were declining ‘as inadequately prepared students were admitted to universities’ in Scotland (157-158). A number of scholars argue that current criticisms of student literacy can be attributed to anxieties that have surfaced because of changes in UK educational policy over recent decades. In particular, scholars refer to the debate surrounding the teaching of grammar that occurred in reaction to the 1988 national curriculum reform in schools (Cameron; Crowley). Scholars also make reference to higher education policy-making since the 1980s, which has been characterised by a drive for widening access that has resulted in an exponential increase in university student numbers and a much greater diversity of student backgrounds than in the past (Lillis; Bennett et. al. 2; Scott 5).

Prompted by the idea of a crisis in student literacy, the initial approach to this project was to investigate student writing in terms of measurable standards or ‘levels of attainment’ (Brooks 136). Section 2 illustrates this focus in two ways: by reporting on a survey of university staff perspectives about student writing that was conducted for the project and by illustrating the challenges of attempting to carry out a comparative study of standards of student writing across decades. Section 3 of the report represents the project’s shift to a more developmental method of laying

groundwork for the study of student writing. This section surveys current approaches to teaching writing in higher education and discusses both a critical framework and a 'whole institution' approach for Academic Writing pedagogy and scholarship. Section 4 concludes the report by making recommendations for future funding in the area of Academic Writing teaching and research.

Section 2 Measuring Writing Standards

This section presents two pieces of research: a survey of staff perspectives on student writing and a comparison of student writing over three decades. This research was undertaken to gain insight into the context of student writing in UK higher education and to test the validity of claims of a ‘literacy crisis’. Discussion of the research designs and findings includes a consideration of the challenges of attempting to compare student writing of the past with that of the present. The value of this approach to researching student writing is also questioned.

2.1 A Survey of Staff Perspectives on Student Writing

In Autumn 2000, academic and student support staff within all universities and higher education colleges in England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland were sent a questionnaire entitled ‘A National Survey of Staff Perspectives on the Teaching of Academic Writing in Higher Education’ (Appendix A). Staff were asked to fill out and return the questionnaire within a period of four weeks.

2.1.1 Purpose

The purpose of the survey was to question staff across a range of disciplines and institutions about their perceptions of undergraduate student literacy levels and their expectations of students’ writing both in the past and today, as well as to solicit their views on the issue of teaching writing in higher education.

2.1.2 Sample

The targeted population was representative of the current institutional diversity in UK higher education. The questionnaire was sent to staff at all UK universities and to at least one affiliated university college per institution, as well as to music colleges, performing arts colleges, and medical colleges. Thus, the sample was representative of a diversity of mission statements, student populations, and institutional strata.

The targeted population was also representative of a variety of disciplines or sectors within institutions. Four areas (English, Education, Engineering, and Counselling) were chosen because it was surmised that staff in these areas were likely to have a particular interest in student writing. English departments seem to many to be the place from which to develop models for teaching writing because the study of literature is to some extent the study of writing.² Education departments are interested in the development of writing pedagogy in schools,³ and, following on from this, in ensuring that newly-qualified teachers are skilled in writing and in

² The recent development of English Subject Centre projects in teaching student writing and grammar in UK university English departments attests to the belief that English departments are viewed as a site from which to develop models of writing instruction for students in higher education. For more discussion of these projects, see Section 3.4 of this report.

³ See, for example, the work of David Wray, Maureen Lewis, Jane Medwell on teaching writing in primary schools, and of Wray and Lewis on teaching writing in secondary schools (Lewis, Maureen and David Wray (2000) *Literacy in the Secondary School*, David Fulton). Also see accounts of the LINC (Language in the National Curriculum) Project and the of the NLS (National Literacy Strategy), particularly Sealey, Alison (1999) *Theories about Language in the National Literacy Strategy*, Coventry: Centre for Elementary and Primary Education, University of Warwick.

teaching writing. Engineering, the university discipline out of which the teaching of technical writing arose, ‘demands extensive writing by the very nature of the field, poised as it is between the pure sciences and industry’ (Russell 120). Finally, interviews conducted prior to drawing up the questionnaire revealed that in the absence of a centralised writing programme, an institution’s student Counselling Service may serve as a primary point of writing support for students.

A further reason for selecting the disciplines of English, Education and Engineering was to provide perspectives from the three main faculties within higher education: the Arts and Humanities, the Social Sciences, and the Sciences.⁴

Institutions and names and addresses of staff members were identified through the use of the *Commonwealth Universities Yearbook*, university and college websites, and phone calls to institutions. Where possible, the questionnaire was sent by name to Heads of Departments or to Programme Leaders. It was judged that the risk of a resulting age and experience bias of respondents would be outweighed by an assurance that the survey would reach those who could provide an overview and who would have the power to delegate the questionnaire to a more appropriate respondent (such as an Exam Secretary or Admissions Tutor) if necessary.

2.1.3 Design

The nature and wording of the survey questions were based on the outcome of a series of pilot interviews on the topic of ‘student literacy in higher education’ conducted at the University of Warwick during the 1999-2000 academic year. It was found that staff at this institution exhibited a high level of interest in the issue of student literacy. Out of the 27 departments contacted (10 Arts and Humanities, 9 Social Sciences, and 8 Sciences), the majority responded within two weeks and interviews were conducted with Heads of Departments, Admissions Tutors, and/or Programme Leaders in all but one department per faculty, yielding close to a 90% response rate per faculty and overall. The interviews contributed to the formulation of a number of the survey questions. For example, the pilot interviews helped to generate a list of 14 varieties of writing currently required of university students (Question 8), and demonstrated the usefulness of a question about expectations of student writing development throughout years of study (Question 16). The interviews also helped to clarify sites of existing support for Academic Writing in higher education (Questions 18 and 21) and to suggest levels of support for potential new types of Academic Writing provision for students and staff (Question 19).

The design of the survey and the nature and wording of the survey questions were also influenced by the response of the Academic Literacies Research Group (AcLits), an inter-university and inter-disciplinary group of scholars who meet regularly at the Institute of Education, University of London, and whose interests include student

⁴ Mary Lea and Brian Street (Lea, Mary and Brian Street (1996) ‘Academic Literacies’, *Learning Matters*, Vol. 3, p. 2-4), posit an alternative to applying faculty-based distinctions in writing research. Lea and Street found that faculty-based perspectives proved less relevant to research on Academic Writing than differences in perspective between academically-orientated fields (e.g. Literature or History) and professionally-orientated fields (e.g. Nursing or Business).

writing at the tertiary level.⁵ In June 2000, AcLits served as a focus group for testing the questionnaire's design, including the appropriateness and wording of questions. Members of AcLits insightfully pointed out that the draft questionnaire aimed to study conceptions about student writing but employed terminology that would influence responses. 'Leading' terms included words that could be characterised as government- and media-influenced educational discourse, such as 'skills', 'transferable skills', 'generic skills', and 'standards' (Orr)⁶. In light of the research group's response, the questionnaire was redesigned to avoid leading terms by speaking more broadly of 'competencies' and 'proficiency', and 'techniques', 'components', and 'characteristics' of writing. The questionnaire was also redesigned to avoid stock phrases such as 'transferable skills' by posing direct, jargon-free questions such as those listed below:

- Does your department take measures to gauge the writing proficiency of applicants to undergraduate courses?
- Through what forms of writing are your students assessed?
- During the academic year, approximately how often do you read student writing?
- Do you expect students to show significant improvement in writing from their first to their final year of undergraduate study?
 - a) If **yes**, how would you describe the differences between your expectations for first-year writing and for the writing of degree finalists?
- What measures do you take to help students develop proficiency in writing?

A final point relating to the design of the questionnaire is that questions were grouped into three sections: 'Background Information', 'Expectations of Student Writing', and 'Developing Student Writing'. This grouping was intended both as a simple guideline for respondents as to the motivation underlying each question and as an organisational tool for the researcher.

2.1.4 Response

The six-page questionnaire survey was sent, in paper format, to 450 members of staff at approximately 125 institutions.⁷ The number of questionnaires returned was 137 (30%), demonstrating widespread interest. Of those who responded, 106 people (77%) expressed interest in receiving a summary of the survey's findings. The

⁵ The AcLits research group is convened by Mary Scott, Senior Lecturer at the Institute of Education, University of London.

⁶ See the following report for an overview of the origins and meanings of these terms in UK higher education policy and debate (Drew, Sue (1998) *Key Skills in Higher Education: Background and Rationale*, Birmingham: Staff and Educational Development Association).

⁷ The number of institutions is approximate because it follows the practices of individual institutions in counting university colleges as separate institutions in some but not all cases.

breakdown of information that follows was compiled from responses to part one of the questionnaire, 'Background Information'.

While 80% of returns (110 questionnaires) represent the opinions of university staff, 20% (27 questionnaires) represent the opinions of staff from colleges of higher education.

The profile of respondents can be broken down in terms of three factors: gender, age, and years of service in higher education. A higher proportion (56%) of respondents were male, as compared with female respondents (44%). In terms of age, Figure 1 illustrates that the highest proportion of respondents (58%) were aged 51 or above, with a further 29% aged between 41-50. Only 13% of respondents were aged 40 or below.

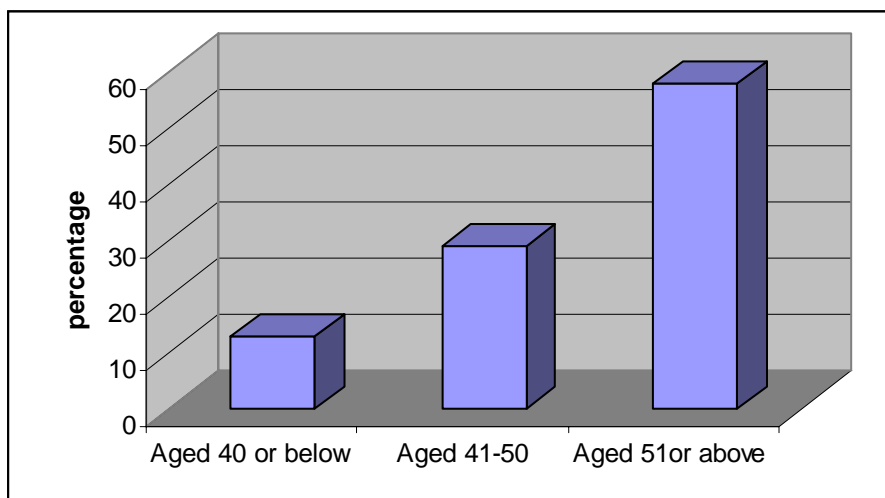


Figure 1. Age of Respondents

Figure 2 represents respondents' years of service in higher education: 6% had between 0 and 5 years of experience of working in higher education, 54% had between 6 and 20 years of service, and 40% had between 21 and 35 years of service.

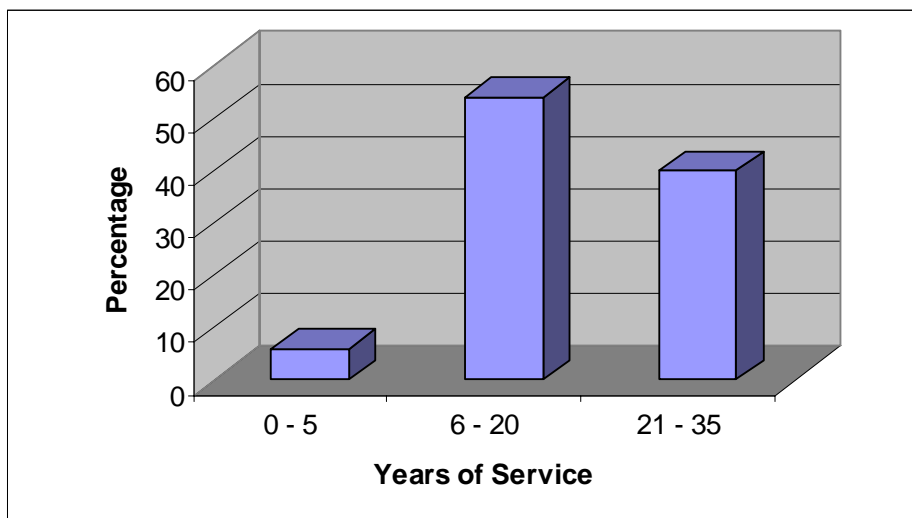


Figure 2. Respondents' Years of Service in Higher Education

The total number of returns per department (English, Education, Engineering, and Counselling) is represented in Figure 3: English 40 returns, Education 36 returns, Engineering 22 returns, Counselling 24 returns. Fifteen of the returned questionnaires (11%), had been redirected to staff in other departments: Communication and Fine Arts, Library, History, Arts and Humanities, Economics, Chemistry, Cultural Studies, and Centre for Academic Practice.

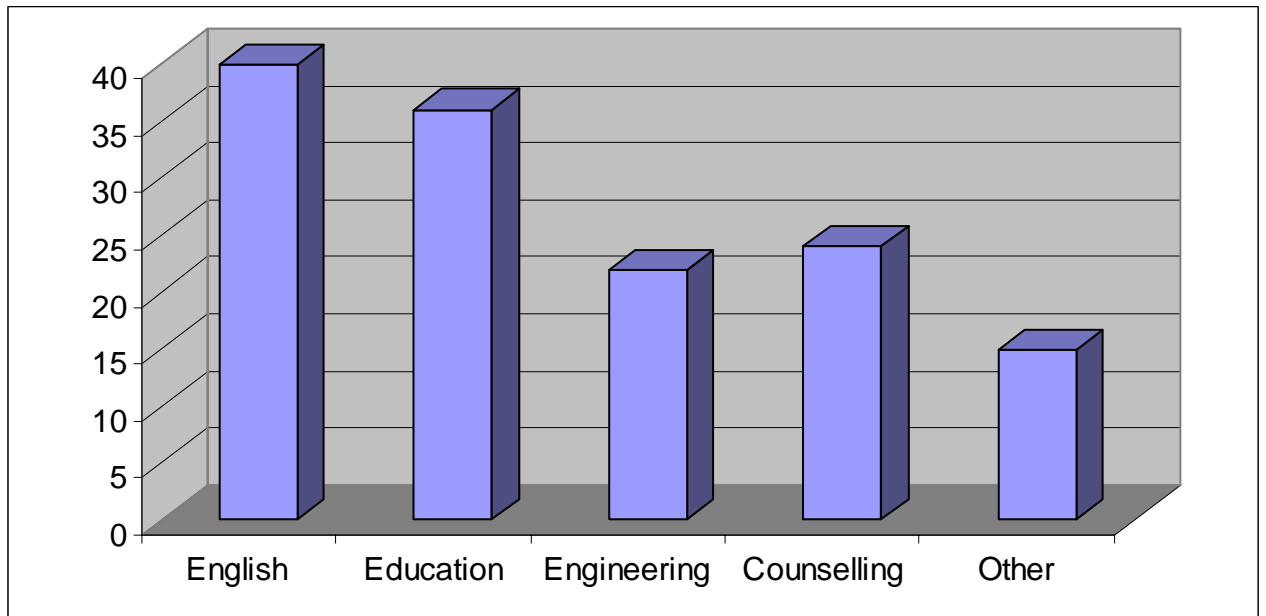


Figure 3. Total Number of Returns per Department

Returns from departments of English make up 29% of the total number of returns and 26% are from Education, as compared with the lower percentages of 18% from Counselling and 16% from Engineering.

The differential rate of return per department is shown in Figure 4. The highest rate of return was from staff in the departments of English and Education; the return rate of both departments was 36%.

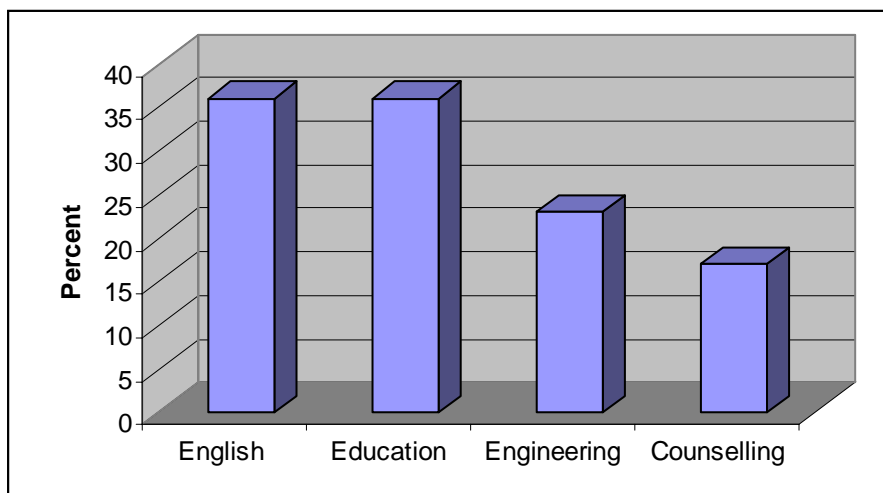


Figure 4. Differential Rate of Return per Department

Of the questionnaires sent to Engineering, 23% were returned. That 17% were returned from Counselling is indicative of the fact that student writing sometimes falls under the wider remit of staff employed to provide emotional and psychological support: 8 of the 24 questionnaires returned by Counsellors said that they read student writing frequently (daily, weekly, or every few weeks). Discursive comments written on these questionnaires and discussion in the follow-up interviews pointed out that Counsellors are sometimes put in the position of advising students on Academic Writing as part of wider strategies for addressing student anxiety and time-management skills.⁸

2.1.5 Findings

The findings of the survey are based on responses to the questionnaire as well as on additional data gathered through follow-up interviews conducted with 14 (10%) of the respondents. The purpose of the follow-up interviews was to gain further insight into staff perceptions of student writing by discussing in more detail staff responses to survey questions. Interviews were conducted with staff representing the four targeted areas (English, Education, Engineering, Counselling) and a variety of institutions and institutional types. The findings reported in this section are taken mainly from the middle part of the questionnaire, 'Expectations of Student Writing' (Questions 7-16). For a discussion of findings relating to part three of the questionnaire, 'Developing Student Writing', see Section 3 of this report.

Question 7 asks 'Does your department take measures to gauge the writing proficiency of applicants to undergraduate courses? If yes, please describe these measures'. While 130 people responded to this question, 73 people (56%) answered 'no' and 57 people (44%) answered 'yes'. Of those who answered 'yes', 32 people or 56% said that such measures consisted of relying on *external 'evidence'*, such as GCSE and A Level test scores (20 respondents), IELTS or TOEFL test scores in the case of overseas students (7 respondents), UCAS references and personal statements on UCAS forms (4 respondents), and Access course marks (1 respondent). In contrast, 25 people or 44% said that candidates to degree courses were tested for writing proficiency in *degree-specific or institution-specific ways* upon interview or as part of the application process: it was reported that a grammar/writing test is set on interview as part of the selection process for applicants to some Initial Teacher Training courses (10 respondents), that applicants are asked to write a short descriptive piece or brief autobiography to submit with their application to some degree courses (7 respondents), that in some cases a writing sample or written test is required for mature students and Access course students (5 respondents), and that writing samples are sometimes required for applicants to Literature degrees and to Creative Writing degrees (3 respondents). The follow-up interviews revealed that rather than screening applicants on writing proficiency at the application and/or interview stages, a number of departments and subject groups have begun to set diagnostic writing assignments at the start of their students' first year of study, in order to assess the writing needs of individuals and cohorts.

To gauge the ways in which student writing is expected to develop over the course of an undergraduate degree, Question 16 asks: 'Do you expect students to show

⁸ University Librarians were also named as staff to whom students turn for advice on Academic Writing.

significant improvement in writing from their first to their final year of undergraduate study?’ Out of the 126 people who replied to this question, 124 people (98%) said ‘yes’. One of the 2 who responded ‘no’ gave the following reason: ‘With a mix of access, overseas, mature, and transfer students and school-leavers, we have no firm expectations!’

When asked ‘How would you describe the differences between your expectations for first-year writing and the writing of degree finalists?’ (Question 16a), 80 people (63% of respondents) stressed that by the final year of study students should be able to *structure* and *organise* complex and cohesive *arguments*. Seventy-one people (56% of respondents) also pointed out a need for final-year students to demonstrate a *command of language* or an *understanding of how language works*: ‘an ability to present work which is not in need of correction of basic grammar, punctuation, and spelling’. Sixty-six people (52% of respondents) emphasised the importance of learning to write *critically*: whereas first-year writing tends to be descriptive, ‘finalist writing exhibits a stronger point of view’ and ‘students are able to combine a synthesis of their reading and research with their own reasoned views and opinions’. Thirty-eight respondents (30%) noted that by the final year, students should have a sense of *audience* (‘adapting the writing to the context’) as well as a grasp of *referencing/ citation systems*. Approximately 20% of respondents also commented on the need for students to mature in their *understanding of content* (‘assignments require more substantial/ appropriate/ accurate content’ and an ‘increased understanding of subject area’) and in their ability to utilise language and argumentative structures appropriate to *disciplinary conventions*.

Follow-up interviews on Question 16/ 16a indicated that it is becoming increasingly common for university departments and subject groups to set criteria outlining differences in expectations between Year/ Level 1, Year/ Level 2, and Year/ Level 3 student writing. Descriptors of first-year or Level 1 writing typically include tasks such as ‘define’, ‘describe’, ‘explain’, ‘discuss’, and ‘identify’, whilst writing beyond the first year/ Level 1 involves, at more and more sophisticated levels, ‘applying’, ‘appraising’, ‘comparing and contrasting’, ‘critiquing’, ‘arguing,’ ‘synthesising,’ and ‘examining’.

To establish exactly what types of writing students are asked to do at university, Question 8 and Question 9 were posed. These two questions, ‘Through what forms of writing are your students assessed?’ and ‘What other kinds of writing are expected of your students as part of their course of study?’, generated a response list of 64 varieties of writing that, according to the university staff surveyed, are currently asked of students in higher education (Table 1).

essay	communications to academic staff
examination essay	communications to potential employers
final year undergraduate dissertation	Personal Development Profile
literature review	letter to project clients
translation	policy proposal
evaluation of lesson (Teacher Training)	policy evaluation
précis	art/design critique
collaborative research paper	annotated bibliography
OHP/Power Point slides	portfolio analysing teaching resources
handouts	essay proposal
report	email discussion group/ forum
grammar exercises	abstract
poster text	book report
textual commentary	CV
work placement log	teaching experience notes
classroom observation notes (Teacher Training)	thesis
performance review	website text
written material to support visual work	marketing materials
self-evaluation of teaching	book review
report to school pupils	textual analysis/explication
report to parents (Teacher Training)	teaching portfolio
report to accompany oral presentation	written feedback on other students' writing
reflective journal	dissertation outline
summary/synopsis	lesson plan
log book	laboratory report
film script	laboratory notes
notes for making an oral presentation	reading notes
scholarly article	case study
commentary	business plan
project report	technical manual
technical report	popular article
scenario	researched term paper

Table 1. Varieties of Writing Expected of Students in Higher Education

While some of the genres of writing listed are discipline-specific (e.g. business plans, reports to school pupils and parents, teaching experience notes), most could be required of any student (e.g. essays, reports, examination essays, final year undergraduate dissertations, website text, Power Point slides, Personal Development Profiles). This finding suggests that the term ‘Academic Writing’ encompasses a wide range of genres and assignment types, and that today’s university students are expected to possess or to acquire a working knowledge of a variety of written forms and writing conventions.

Responses to Question 8: ‘Through what forms of writing are your students assessed?’ suggest that the most common forms of writing assigned to university students in the disciplines surveyed include essays (88%), examination essays (85%), case studies (71%), and extended dissertations (58%).

Staff were also asked ‘During the academic year, approximately how often do you read or assess student writing?’ (Question 10). Of the 133 people who responded to this question, 50% said ‘every few weeks’, 16% said ‘weekly’, and 7% said ‘daily’. A further 10% said ‘twice per term—mid-term assignment and end-of-term assignment’. ‘Rarely’ or ‘never’ was a response given by 6% of those who replied. Other responses included indefinite answers such as ‘depends on the requirements for each module because different assignments have different timescales’. Discussion in

the follow-up interviews pointed out that while staff often read the work of postgraduates weekly or every few weeks, less time is usually available for reading undergraduate student writing.

The responses to Question 10 suggest that university staff are asked or required to engage with student writing on a frequent basis. However, what the replies do not reveal is to what end, how productively, and at what stage of the writing process staff read and respond to student writing. Do staff engage support students when they are in the process of reading and making sense of assignment briefs, choosing topics or titles, formulating arguments, and planning the structure or papers? Do tutors read and respond to rough drafts, or do they, for the most part, focus on final drafts or written products? A common response in the follow-up interviews was that in many UK academic departments, staff have agreed to a policy of not reading students' drafts, or of not reading more than a certain percentage of a draft, such as an introduction, a conclusion, or a set number of paragraphs. Such policies have apparently been set both to protect staff time and because there is a widespread perception that reading or discussing student writing too closely will be seen as collaborating or 'spoonfeeding'.⁹

Responses to Question 17, from part three of the questionnaire on 'Developing Student Writing', provide more insight into staff practices of engaging with student-writers. Asked 'What measures do you take to help students develop proficiency in writing?', 117 people (85%) said that they include instructive comments when marking written assignments and 114 people (83%) said that they discuss students' writing with them. What is not clear from these answers is what percentage of respondents discuss students' writing 'in problem cases only!', as one respondent adamantly noted. Follow-up interviews indicated that the practice of discussing students' writing with students is more often than not confined to discussion with those whose writing exhibits major weaknesses (in structure, relevance, grasp of disciplinary writing conventions, grammar, or presentation). This finding suggests that even though the majority of staff surveyed said that they include instructive comments when marking writing assignments, it is not likely that they discuss these comments with most students on a regular basis.¹⁰

The preceding questions were set in order to gain insight into current staff expectations of student writing and the role that Academic Writing plays in university

⁹ Such policies can be seen as perpetuating what Theresa Lillis describes as an 'institutional practice of mystery' about expectations of student writing (Lillis, Theresa (1999), 'Whose "Common Sense"? Essayist Literacy and the Institutional Practice of Mystery', in Carys Jones et. al., *Students Writing in the University: Cultural and Epistemological Issues*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins).

¹⁰ Research shows that tutors' written comments are not always very clear or helpful to students if given to students without any feedback discussion occurring between tutor and student. Summer Smith provides a useful overview of research on the topic of tutors' comments on student writing (Smith, Summer (1997), 'The Genre of the End Comment: Conventions in Teacher Responses to Student Writing', *College Composition and Communication*, Vol. 48.2). For discussion of feedback practices specific to the UK university context, see Dai Hounsell's research on the quality of tutors' feedback (Hounsell, Dai (1987) 'Essay Writing and the Quality of Feedback', *Student Learning: Research in Education and Cognitive Psychology*, Eds. John T. E. Richardson, Michael W. Eysenck, and David Warren Piper, Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 109-119). Also see Lillis, who identifies tutor feedback on student writing as too often being a 'monologic space reserved for the tutor' rather than a space for dialogue between student and tutor (Lillis 'Whose' 126).

courses today. The following three questions (Questions 11, 12, and 13) concentrate instead on eliciting staff perceptions of how student writing and expectations of student writing may have changed from past standards. These questions are related directly to the original focus of the project on the idea of a literacy crisis, and it is Questions 11 and 12 which have generated the greatest number of discursive comments and the most impassioned responses to the questionnaire.

One striking finding that can be observed is the tendency of respondents to equate Question 11/ 11a/ 11b ('Have you noticed differences between your current students' written work and students' written work when you first became a member of staff?', 'If yes, how would you describe these differences?', 'In your view, what are the main reasons for these differences?') with the topic of declining writing standards. This issue is not actually raised until Question 12 ('There have been a number of recent claims in the media that students' proficiency in writing has declined. Based on your experience, how valid are such claims?'). This finding demonstrates the pervasiveness of the idea of falling standards of student writing.

In response to Question 11 and as Figure 5 illustrates, 53% of respondents (72 people) said that they have noticed differences between the written work of current students and that of students when they first became members of staff, while 33% (46 people) said that they have not noticed differences.

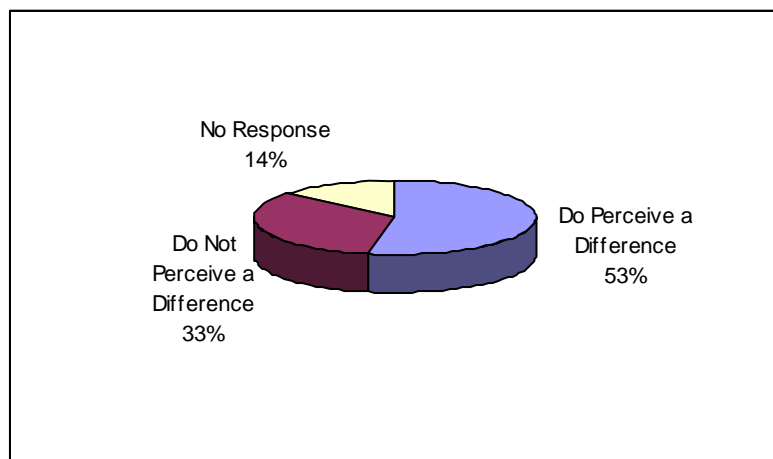


Figure 5. Staff Perceptions of Differences between Current Students' Written Work and Past Students' Written Work

When those who answered 'yes' were asked to describe the differences they perceive, 46 people claimed that current students are less competent with *grammar*: 'less attention given to grammar', 'poorer grammar', 'increasingly illogical grammar', 'students lack basic understanding of sentence construction,' 'there is a weakening grasp of sentence structure', 'students do not know what constitutes a sentence, grammatically speaking'. In addition, 21 people emphasised a decline in *spelling* competency: 'poorer spelling,' 'reduced competencies in spelling', 'students are less aware that spelling matters or exists'. Finally, 13 people said that students today are less adept with *punctuation*: 'less attention given to punctuation,' 'increasing carelessness in punctuation, amounting to puzzlement about the function of certain punctuation marks'.

A selection of other comments, both positive and negative and with a response frequency rate of between 1 and 7, is listed in Table 2.

'the best students remain as fluent as ever'	'students now write as they speak'
'differences between ability levels is more extreme'	'writing is more inventive: students are much more open to experimentation'
'a higher proportion of intelligent students are unable to express themselves clearly and accurately'	'almost all work now is typed/wordprocessed, compared with the past, in which it was nearly all handwritten'
'essays are less well-structured'	'students' vocabulary is more limited'
'final drafts of written work display fewer faults in spelling because of computerised spell-checkers'	'tutors and higher education generally demand much more from students in the way of written submissions than in the past'
'inability to develop arguments'	'higher standard of visual presentation today'
'students use bullet-point structure'	'poor referencing/use of citation systems'
'students use headlines and notes approach'	'students clearly lack confidence in their writing skills'

Table 2. Staff Descriptions of Perceived Differences in Current Students' Written Work and Past Students' Written Work

When staff who responded 'yes' were asked to explain what, in their view, are the main reasons for the differences they see in student writing of the past and today, a higher proportion of responses focused on the negative. Twenty-five respondents cited a lack of current students' exposure to the *study of grammar and writing at school*. A further 14 people blamed a *lack of wide reading on the part of students*: 'TV viewing has reduced reading', 'students now spend too much time in front of computers', 'there has been a steady, remorseless replacement of literary culture by visual stimulation', 'an increased prescriptivism of Initial Teacher Training course requirements has led to less discursive reading'. Fourteen people also placed blame at the level of government policy, by commenting that *increased access to higher education has lowered standards*: 'widening participation means offering higher education to students with weaker ability/lower motivation for independent study', and 'we no longer require competence on entry'.

Other responses pointed to the effects on student writing of changes in teaching and assessment patterns, computer technology, and student demographics: 'the introduction of modular schemes of teaching and assessment has fragmented student writing', 'the use of word processors has led to an increased attention to presentation of written work,' 'young people probably read more than say 10-15 years ago—but what they read is each other (emails, etc.) not models of published prose', 'the percentage of foreign students with a poor command of English has increased', 'students' time is limited by undertaking paid work', and 'time constraints and models in the workplace encourage the use of bullet-point format'.

Positive comments about the effects of an increased explicitness in teaching students about writing include: 'our students today have better tuition and skill development in writing', 'we concentrate much more on process than on product, compared with twenty years ago and the students respond to this by producing "better" work', 'students display increased fluency and better organisation in their writing' as a result of 'systematic review of their written work'.

Question 12 asks how valid the claim is that students' proficiency in writing has declined. As Figure 6 outlines, 65% of respondents (88 people) said they perceive this claim to be 'valid', while 28% (39 people) said they do not perceive it to be valid.

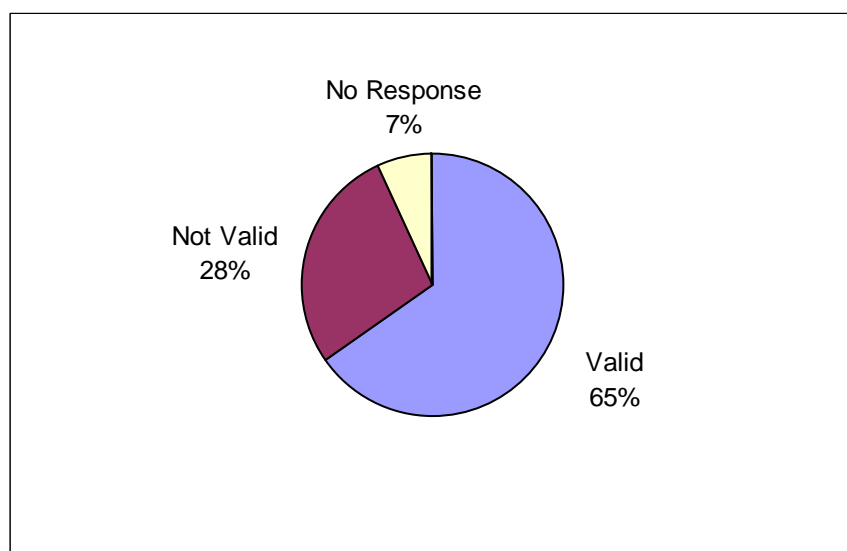


Figure 6. Staff Perceptions of Claim that Students' Proficiency in Writing has Declined

The main perceived features of a decline (lower student competence in grammar, spelling, and punctuation) and the main perceived causes of a decline (lack of grammar teaching in schools, lack of student reading, and the government's 'widening access' policy) have been discussed above. Respondents' written comments on Question 12 and responses in the follow-up interviews also provide insight into why a decline is not perceived by some staff:

- 'Though popular opinion claims that standards of writing have fallen, I think in balance that they have remained about the same', 'students have always found the move from writing in school to independent academic genres to be a difficult one'
- '[student writing] was always disappointing', 'writing proficiency remains weak or naïve for most students', 'problems in proficiency have been evident throughout my 28 years of experience'
- "'decline" is an effect of increased access to higher education: the more students, the greater the mix of abilities', 'there has always been variation, and as access widens, this perhaps becomes more apparent'
- 'It is simply impossible to measure such a decline as there is a lack of evidence on which to base any argument about decline'
- 'I do not believe standards are falling—I oppose this deficit model [. . .] we have new learners with new needs', 'Say a lecturer of 20 years' experience says he or she notes a distinct drop in standards throughout those 20 years. What account do we take of his or her increasing experience, so that perhaps something they would not have noticed in their first year has, by year 20, become a bugbear?'
- 'In general, why would literacy decline? With more teachers out teaching more people for longer, the dissemination of literacy is better now than ever before. The philistinism that is embodied in the idea that we are in some

permanent decline from some ill-defined golden period is a threat to continued improvement, not valid analysis’

- ‘the range of writing has extended’, ‘expectations may be higher’, ‘higher education demands more from students than in the past’, ‘from a historical perspective, the widening of literacy-based tasks has been massive throughout the twentieth century. Because the elitist, high-minded ground is lost the view is that standards are dropping’
- ‘proficiency depends on students’ subject areas and familiarity with the demands of academic writing’, ‘academic discourses are frequently not familiar to novice writers who have mastered other genres (e.g. memo, letter, email)’
- ‘Whether proficiency has declined or not is irrelevant: I know students’ proficiency is poor and is certainly not improving!’

Question 13 follows up on the idea that staff may now perceive a need to address student writing more explicitly in the past. This question asks ‘In your department, is more emphasis placed on teaching competence in writing than fifteen years ago?’. Eighty-three people (74% of respondents) replied ‘yes’, while only 29 people (26% of respondents) replied ‘no’. Of those who replied ‘yes’, 43% cited ‘recommendations from business/ industry on graduates’ writing proficiency’ as a motivating factor for an increased teaching of writing, 42% cited ‘Teaching Quality Assessment reports’, 39% cited ‘research on the role of writing in promoting students’ intellectual development’, 36% cited ‘our own recognition that students need help in writing’, and 31% cited ‘government requirements for Newly Qualified Teachers’. Only 9 people (11%) cited ‘media reports on student literacy’ as a direct motivating factor.

2.1.6 Discussion

It is important to emphasise that the data from this questionnaire and from the follow-up interviews is qualitative: both the questionnaire and the interviews sampled staff *perceptions* of student writing. Distinguishing between qualitative and quantitative data is paramount in the reporting of research findings on student writing. In a research area in which empirical evidence can be difficult to gather (see Section 2.2 of this report), there is a danger of drawing potentially inaccurate conclusions from perceptual data about student writers and their writing. For example, in ‘A National Survey of UK Undergraduates’ Standards of English’ (1992), Bernard C. Lamb reports findings of a survey that was based on the opinions and ‘subjective impressions of many different individual academic staff, unselected with respect to their own standards of English’ (5). Lamb inaccurately interprets academic staff responses to the following question as hard evidence about students’ attainment levels in writing:

As far as you can estimate, roughly what percentages of your [students] have these degrees of competence (good, adequate, poor) in these aspects of English: spelling; punctuation; grammar; handwriting; vocabulary; clarity of written expression; clarity of spoken expression? (11)

According to Lamb, responses to this question (in which the key terms ‘good’, ‘adequate’, and ‘poor’ were not standardised) ‘show just how bad the standards are in some departments, even in departments of English and other Arts departments’ (11). In his report, Lamb asserts that his survey of staff perceptions ‘showed that poor

English, especially spelling, punctuation, and grammar, was widespread in students in all subjects and in all the universities surveyed' (1). In an article in the *British Journal of Educational Studies* (1995), Christopher Winch and Peter Wells perpetuate this misinterpretation by citing Lamb's work as if his conclusions came from empirical evidence on student writing rather than from staff impressions:

[A]rguments on student literacy need systematic evidence to support them [. . .] this paper present[s] six pieces of evidence which give an indication of the scale and scope of the problem. Firstly, Lamb (1992), in a survey of UK undergraduate standards of English [. . .] found, 'that poor English, especially spelling, punctuation and grammar was widespread in students in all subjects and in all the universities surveyed'. (76)

Furthermore, in an otherwise extremely useful article, Ann Hinkle (1997) cites this same sentence from Lamb, calling his survey 'one of the most comprehensive, national surveys of UK undergraduates' and categorising it as a study that 'has revealed writing problems amongst undergraduates in higher education' (164).

This report draws no such sweeping conclusions. What findings from 'A National Survey of Staff Perspectives on the Teaching of Academic Writing in Higher Education' do reveal is that staff from a wide cross-section of UK universities and higher education colleges and a variety of disciplines appear to be interested in the issue of student writing at this time, and that they believe that more emphasis is put on teaching competence in writing at university than in the past. The survey establishes that there are at least 64 types of writing assignments required of university students today, and that students are expected to possess or to acquire a working knowledge of a variety of written forms and disciplinary conventions. Findings from the survey also give insight into the criteria by which university students' writing is judged and the ways in which student writing proficiency is expected to develop over the course of an undergraduate degree. In addition, the survey's findings suggest that university staff frequently are asked or required to engage with student writing, but that it is not common practice for staff to discuss writing with undergraduates on a regular basis. Finally, it can be reported that 'A National Survey of Staff Perspectives on the Teaching of Academic Writing in Higher Education' has found that there appears to be a widespread perception among university staff that discussion of student writing is linked with the claim that the standard of student writing has declined, and that a significant proportion of staff surveyed said that based on their own experiences, they believe this claim to be valid.

2.2 A Comparative Study of Student Writing of Different Decades

The findings of 'A National Survey of Staff Perspectives on the Teaching of Academic Writing in Higher Education' identify a number of directions for further study. Based on this research project's primary concern with standards of student writing, an initial piece of follow-on research was undertaken to address issues raised by Question 11 and Question 12 of the survey, the questions that focused directly on the issue of writing standards. The follow-on research took the form of a comparative study of student writing from different decades.

2.2.1 Purpose and Rationale

The purpose of the study was to compare samples of students' writing from different decades, in order to gauge whether significant differences exist between student writing of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, and to examine the nature of any such differences. The study focused on these three decades because, as discussed in Section 1 of this report, the recent massification and concomitant diversification of higher education in Britain is viewed by many as precipitating a lowered standard of student literacy. Specifically, it was during the middle of the period 1970-2000 that 'Britain acquired a mass system' of higher education: 'in the mid-1980s [student numbers] reach[ed] 15 per cent, the threshold figure that marks the boundary between elite and mass higher education. Between 1987 and 1992 participation almost doubled from 14.6 to 27.8 per cent' (Scott 5). The underlying purpose of the study was to explore whether it is possible to measure characteristics of student writing across decades, and if 'measurement' is not possible, to discover what can be learned from such a comparison.

2.2.2 Sample

The initial challenge in carrying out a study involving past student writing was to locate a sample. Pilot interviews conducted at the University of Warwick during 1999-2000 (Section 2.1.3) revealed that due to lack of storage space, it is an accepted practice for academic departments to keep copies of student essays for only a limited period—typically three to four years—after a student has graduated. All academic departments at this institution were asked if they had student essays on file from the 1970s onwards, and all responded 'no'.

One member of staff interviewed at the University of Warwick, however, noted that some institutions keep collections of student essays for reference by other students. The University of York was identified as one institution holding such a collection, and the student union representative in charge was contacted and agreed to make available a small number of student papers for this study. Whilst this effort was greatly appreciated, the papers themselves were judged not usable for the following reasons: the sample was too small, the paper topics and formats were too diverse to compare, and vital contextualising information (including the paper's mark, the degree course for which the paper was written, the year in which the paper was written, and the year or level of study of the student-writer) was not provided consistently.

An appropriate sample eventually was identified, in the form of an essay archive compiled and maintained by Mr. Martin Warner in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Warwick. This archive has been kept in order to provide students with assignment models and bibliographic references. When interviewed, Mr. Warner stated that the archive contains approximately 1,000 student essays. The essays were written by final-year undergraduate students, were produced for a single course, and span the period 1971-present. The archive has been kept systematically; every essay written by every student each year (which equates to 2 essays per student and in some cases 3 essays per student) has been filed, and a record of the essay marks as well as the students' overall course marks has been made. According to Mr. Warner, the assignment guidelines and the grammar/ style/ referencing rules in the Philosophy undergraduate student handbook have remained the same since 1971-1972, the first year of the course. Although paper topics have changed slightly, the assignment types and weighting of marks have not altered since the start of the

course. The course, whose original name of ‘Philosophical Texts’ has been changed to ‘Textual Studies’, has also been taught in a remarkably consistent manner, with Mr. Warner as convenor and a very small number of other Lecturers providing the teaching under his guidance over the past thirty years. Thus, Martin Warner’s essay collection provided a sample that was controlled to a very high degree without being contrived.

2.2.3 Design

Once the sample of student papers had been identified, the method of analysis was formulated. As Ann Hinkle notes, there are a number of ‘compositional’ features of student writing (including the structure, logic, argument, and style of a paper), as well as ‘transcriptional’ features (such as grammar, punctuation, and spelling) that could be investigated (164). As discussed in Section 2.1.5, ‘A National Survey of Staff Perspectives on the Teaching of Academic Writing in Higher Education’, from which this study followed on, identified *grammar*, *spelling*, and *punctuation* as the three main areas cited by staff who said they perceive a decline in students’ Academic Writing abilities. Therefore, the study was designed to address these features.

In looking for models of error-analysis on which to base the design of the study, no UK tradition of this type of research on the writing of university students was found.¹¹ However, one strand of US Composition scholarship has focused on error-frequency analysis, mainly with the aim of identifying common patterns of error in university students’ written work in order to inform the writing of grammar handbooks aimed at this market.¹² The largest empirical study of this type, conducted by Robert J. Connors and Andrea A. Lunsford in the mid-1980s, prior to their writing the *St. Martin’s Handbook*, examined the patterns of errors in more than 21,500 undergraduate student papers, composed for first-year writing classes in 300 universities across the United States. From a sample of 300 randomly-selected essays, these researchers generated a list of 54 error types from which they extracted

¹¹ The following studies contain elements of error-analysis: Chris Robertson, Iris Keating and Billy Cooper, “‘I don’t seem to have done very much work on English Grammar (sic) at all’”. A Study of the Written English Skills of First Year Undergraduate Students: Their Perceptions of the Reality’ (*Journal of Further and Higher Education* 22.1 1998, 5-14); Christopher Winch and Peter Wells, ‘The Quality of Student Writing in Higher Education: A Cause for Concern?’ (*British Journal of Educational Studies* 43.1 1995, 75-87); and Ann O’Keeffe, ‘Undergraduate Academic Writing: An Analysis of Errors and Weaknesses in Syntax, Lexis, Style and Structure’ (*Language and Literacy for the New Millennium*, eds. Gerry Shiel, Ursula Ni Dhalaiagh, and Eithne Kennedy, Dublin: Reading Association of Ireland, 2000, 167-186).

¹² In the United States, a tradition of grammar handbooks aimed at university students dates back to the late nineteenth century (Connors ‘Handbooks’ 87; Hawhee). In the UK there can be found no such tradition; Fowler’s *Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (updated by Sir Ernest Gowers in 1965 and again by R.W. Burchfield in 1996) has been a standard reference book since 1926, but is aimed at a literate public rather than at students. When John Peck, co-author with Martin Coyle of *The Student’s Guide to Writing: Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling* (Palgrave/MacMillan 1999), was asked ‘What grammar/ style/ essay-writing handbooks would UK university students have been using prior to the publication of your text?’, he responded: ‘[I found] a number of books published between 1902 and 1939, but these seemed very much aimed at schools and people working for professional qualifications. When I was working on *The Students Guide* [in the mid to late 1990s] the only helpful materials aimed at university students seemed to be American. [. . .] I didn’t come across any evidence of these skills being taught in British universities’ (Peck).

the ‘top twenty’ most frequent error patterns (Connors and Lunsford 161-163).¹³ The frequencies of the twenty errors were then counted by a group of fifty trained raters in a much larger sample of 3,000 essays. The resulting ranking of the twenty most common error patterns is shown in Table 3.

1. missing comma after an introductory element
2. vague pronoun reference
3. missing comma in a compound sentence
4. wrong word
5. missing comma(s) with non-restrictive element
6. wrong or missing verb ending
7. wrong or missing preposition
8. comma splice
9. missing or misplaced possessive apostrophe
10. unnecessary shift in tense
11. unnecessary shift in pronoun
12. sentence fragment
13. wrong tense or verb form
14. lack of agreement between subject and verb
15. missing comma in a series
16. lack of agreement between pronoun and antecedent
17. unnecessary comma(s) with a restrictive element
18. fused sentence
19. misplaced or dangling modifier
20. its/it's confusion

Table 3. The Twenty Most Common Errors Found in Student Papers (Lunsford and Connors I-14).

It was decided that the comparative study of UK student writing of the past and present would utilise the list of the ‘top twenty’ errors found by Connors and Lunsford’s well-known study, with the additional category of ‘spelling’, as the instrument for measuring students’ written proficiency. Royal Literary Fund Fellow Alan Wall, writing teacher and grammarian, agreed to take part in the study and to analyse a small number of sample essays using this instrument to identify and count errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

Twenty-eight essays were chosen for examination. The essay sample was stratified at five-year intervals, starting with 1972. Thus, essays from 1972, 1977, 1982, 1987, 1992, and 1997, as well as from 2002, were chosen. One example from each marking band (1st class, 2i, 2ii, and 3rd class) was included for each of the years represented.¹⁴ To ensure that any student work to be analysed was solidly representative of these marking categories, papers were selected for analysis on the basis of students’ earning marks within the same classification band on all of the essays they wrote for the course.

2.2.4 Findings and Discussion

Between June and August of 2003, error analysis of student papers was carried out chronologically from the 1972 sample through the 1987 sample, and the 2002 sample was also analysed. At that point, however, the study was terminated and the eight

¹³ Because of an overwhelming predominance of spelling errors in Connors and Lunsford’s sample, ‘spelling’ was dropped as a category and became the focus of a further study, which found that ‘the words student writers misspell most frequently’ tend to be homonyms (Lunsford and Connors ix).

¹⁴ In some years no students earned 1st-class or 3rd-class marks.

remaining papers, from 1992 and 1997, were left unexamined. The decision to end the study was taken because the researchers agreed that the measurement instrument had proven to be inappropriate.¹⁵

The instrument was judged to be inappropriate for a number of reasons. First, it contained too many terms. It was agreed that to be practicable, the error list would need to be simplified and reduced to a much smaller number of broad groupings, such as those named in Table 4:

1. misuse/ misplacing/ or omission of necessary punctuation
2. misuse/ misunderstanding/ misplacing of words (e.g. 'long insensitivity')
3. misspelling of words
4. anacoluthon (any grammatical mismatch, e.g. where parts of a sentence don't fit together grammatically)
5. unidiomatic word usage (e.g. 'I sat down <i>on</i> the river')

Table 4. Potential Revised List of Errors

Secondly, the analysis of the student papers revealed that there were two main indexes of error, those made due to haste/ tiredness/ slovenliness and those made because of a student's syntactical and lexical incompetence. Alan Wall observes:

Errors in a given piece of writing do not necessarily prove competence or incompetence. In some of the essays under review, for example, competence is sometimes displayed in the use of the apostrophe in cases both of possession and omission, only to be subsequently reversed by a misuse or default regarding both functions. Here the problem is not competence but attentiveness. It is noticeable that errors are far more likely to creep in towards the end of an essay. Any proofreader knows that inattention is a more constant generator of error than incompetence. In one of the [handwritten] essays under review 'etymology' is followed some pages later by 'eytomology'. The writer knew perfectly well how to spell the word. Slovenly execution, or hurry, induced the error. (Wall 2)

By relying on an error list as the sole means of measurement, these two indexes were not being taken into account.

Also unaccounted for by the isolated use of an error list as a measuring tool was the knowledge that 'different modes of producing texts [may] generate different types of error' (Wall 2). Bearing in mind that the essays under analysis in this study included handwritten, typed, and word-processed work, Wall notes:

Handwriting lacks the homogeneity of type or print; idiosyncratic variants of letter configuration are often harder to spot, both for the writer and reader. Typing (particularly on a manual typewriter) is the hardest form of text to re-write or correct. A serious correction requires a whole page being re-written. Word-processing is designed for correction, re-writing, re-configuration. (2)

¹⁵ A problem with the sample of student papers was also noted: culled from a single, elite university, the sample does not fully represent the changes to the student population of UK universities brought about by mass participation in the higher education system. This factor illustrates how difficult it is to carry out a fully representative comparative study of student writing across decades.

Another finding that showed the measurement instrument to be inappropriate was that some of the errors made by British students differed from those made by the American university students in Connors and Lunsford's 'top twenty' list. For example, error number three, 'missing comma in a compound sentence', is not considered to be an error in British English because the use of a co-ordinating conjunction (and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet) obviates the need for a comma. In contrast, American English grammar requires a comma to be placed before the co-ordinating conjunction 'to indicate a pause between the two thoughts' (Lunsford and Connors I-16).

The study also found that what is considered to be an error changes over time. Wall comments:

Where the word 'however' would, thirty years ago, have probably been surrounded by commas, this is far less likely now. Commas have become less popular. [. . . Similarly, i]f someone had written 'he' or 'she' and later connected up either subject with the possessive pronoun 'their' even ten years ago, such usage would have been deemed incorrect. Burchfield [in his 1996 third edition of Fowler's *Dictionary of Modern English Usage*] now proclaims it acceptable. [. . . In addition], many disciplines would now regard the use throughout an essay of a universalizing, gendered pronoun 'he' as regrettable, if not actually incorrect. Forty years ago any deviation from it would probably have been penalised. (3)

Connors and Lunsford, too, note changes over time in definitions of error. 'What seem to us the most common and permanent of terms and definitions are likely to be newer and far more transient than we know. Errors like "stringy sentences" and "use of *would* for simple past tense forms" seemed obvious and serious to teachers in 1925 or 1917 but [are] obscure to us today' (Connors and Lunsford 161). Furthermore, '[i]n the late nineteenth century, [. . .] instructors at Harvard said that the most serious writing problem their students had was an inability to distinguish between the proper uses of *shall* and *will*. Similarly, split infinitives seemed to many instructors of the 1950s a very serious problem' (Lunsford and Connors I-13).

Lunsford and Connors stress that 'examples of shifting standards do not mean that there is no such thing as "correctness" in writing—only that correctness always depends on some context' (I-13). They also point out that 'the time-bound nature of studies of error makes comparisons difficult and definitions of errors counted in earlier research are hard to correlate' (Connors and Lunsford 166). British literacy researchers David Wray and Maureen Lewis concur with this position: 'Comparing standards of literacy over time is notoriously difficult. There are problems concerning what is being compared, whether compatible measurements are being applied and whether comparable groups are being compared' (Lewis and Wray 1-2).

Connors and Lunsford conclude that 'ideas about error definition and classification have always been absolute products of their times and cultures' (161). Therefore, the use of Connors and Lunsford's 'top twenty' list of student errors was not appropriate as a measurement instrument for this study because it reflects patterns of student error as perceived by US teacher-researchers in the 1980s. Realising the extent to which judgements of error in student writing are time- and context-bound demonstrates that

compiling an error list capable of measuring error-frequencies in student writing in a context-specific way over a thirty-year span is a vexed—if not impossible—task.

Furthermore, examining the errors in students' writing did not prove, overall, to be a productive way of gauging students' competence as writers. As Alan Wall explains:

Competence at grammar, spelling, and punctuation are not automatic translations of intellectual competence generally. It is possible to be competent in all these fields and still be intellectually negligible; conversely, highly competent and celebrated [writers] have displayed varying degrees of incompetence in one or more of the above categories. (1)

Finally, attempting to carry out this study has highlighted that error analysis used in isolation tends to encourage a deficit approach to thinking about student writing; students' work is judged on what it fails to master. Viewing student writing in this way can lead to a variety of pathological, moral, and even criminal ways of describing—and hence conceptualising—student competence. The application to student writing of medical words like 'surgery', 'clinic' and 'remediation', for instance, is not uncommon. Lamb's 1992 survey (Section 2.1.6 of this report), speaks in pathologising terms of 'poor English' being 'widespread in students' (1), in moralising terms of students having 'very poor standards' (2), and in criminalising terms of students being 'penalised' for their errors (1). Similarly, Duncan Robertson's 1961 handbook *Errors in Composition* assumes a need to take students to task for 'errors they have failed to avoid', and seeks to reassure readers that '[t]he system presented [in this handbook] should be capable of dealing with most of the errors that students are likely to commit' (xi). Such a deficit approach to viewing student writing can be misleading because, intentionally or not, it advances the premise that the responsibility for developing students' proficiency in Academic Writing lies solely with individual students, and not with higher education policy and institutions.

This section of the report has discussed in detail the major limitations made apparent by an error-analysis approach to examining student writing across decades. In addition to uncovering these limitations, what was learned from this study? Alan Wall reports that when analysing the essays from the past through to the present, 'individual differences in competence and usage, changing intellectual fashions, and shifts from empirical to more theoretical modes of thought' were discernible (3). However, in 'taking these essays as the examples', no 'substantive pattern' of 'either greater or lesser competence' in students' writing could be observed (3-4)

2.3 Moving from a Deficit Approach to a Developmental Approach to Student Writing

While claims of a 'literacy crisis' and falling standards of student writing in higher education provided the motivation for this research project, this section has shown the limitations of trying to examine student writing from a deficit approach. Section 3 of this report represents the project's shift from a deficit to a developmental method of laying groundwork for the study of student writing.

Section 3 Developing Student Writing

This section returns to the survey of staff perspectives described in Section 2.1 and views it from a different angle: as a catalyst for investigating recent developments in the teaching of Academic Writing in UK higher education. Beginning by identifying the need to teach writing explicitly, the section considers a developmental model of supporting student-writers. In discussing this approach, a ‘map’ of existing practical initiatives for developing student writing is provided and a key theoretical framework is outlined. The section concludes by arguing for a ‘whole institution’ approach to supporting student-writers.

3.1 Purpose/ Methodology/ Resources

The purpose of this section is to move away from a focus on past standards of student writing and toward an understanding of the present context for teaching and learning how to write effectively in higher education. The section lays groundwork for the study of student writing by surveying recent developments in Academic Writing pedagogy and scholarship. A knowledge of this emerging field was gained as a result of contacts made with writing researchers and teachers. Two important resources enabled colleagues to be identified. The first resource, ‘A National Survey of Staff Perspectives on the Teaching of Academic Writing in Higher Education’, provided numerous staff contacts within universities and higher education colleges, including some of the 137 people who answered the survey as well as some of the 75 people who were named in response to Question 22: ‘Can you recommend anyone, at your institution or at another UK institution of higher education, whom we might contact to find out more about writing programme development?’ The second resource was an international conference entitled ‘Teaching Writing in Higher Education’, organised as part of this project and hosted in March 2001 by the University of Warwick Writing Programme with support from the Royal Literary Fund. This event generated an awareness of other professionals interested in teaching and theorising student writing both within UK higher education and in university systems outside of the UK.

3.2 A Developmental Model

Dr. Jan Skillen, Senior Lecturer in Learning Development at the University of Wollongong in New South Wales, Australia, is one colleague whose influential work on developing student writing was presented at the ‘Teaching Writing in Higher Education Conference’. In an earlier paper, ‘Learning and Literacy Development in Higher Education: An Issue of Institutional Change’ (1997), Skillen and colleague Mary Jane Mahony of the University of Sydney set out a convincing rationale for following a developmental model of student literacy:

Commitment to teaching and learning in higher education has long been premised on assumptions that on enrolment, students are already equipped with generic skills of learning and literacy suitable for tertiary study; when they do not have the necessary skills, or do not begin to develop them appropriately, it is a remedial problem; and, that those responsible for development of generic and discipline-specific learning and literacy skills must be situated outside of the body of academics teaching in an academic program. These assumptions are no longer tenable. It is now recognised that academic success in higher education entails the

acquisition of academic learning and language skills which are new to our average student at university entry. Facilitating the acquisition of such skills is thus not seen as a remedial strategy but a developmental goal which allows all students to be initiated into the academic and professional discourses of academia, and which gives all students greater chances to achieve at their potential. (Skillen and Mahony 1)

Referring to the massification of Australian higher education that took place in the 1970s and 1980s, Skillen and Mahony stress that the need to teach writing explicitly at the tertiary level arises in part ‘from the new times in which higher education finds itself—an era of mass education with a policy trend towards universal post secondary education (West 1997, p.4) and where the diversity of students' backgrounds in terms of language and culture is greater than ever’ (Skillen and Mahony 1). This changed context of Australian higher education has much in common with that of the UK, which, as discussed in Sections 1 and 2.2.1, has now moved from an elite to a mass system in which student numbers have increased dramatically and students’ social and educational backgrounds are far more diverse (Scott 5; Bennett 1-3).

3.3 Addressing the Needs of Today’s UK Student-Writers

Findings from ‘A National Survey of Staff Perspectives on the Teaching of Academic Writing in Higher Education’ show that when asked ‘Do you think it is necessary to teach writing to university students?’, 90% of respondents (or 111 UK university and college staff members) replied ‘yes’ while only 10% (13 staff members) answered ‘no’ (Question 20). In addition, when asked ‘In your department, is more emphasis placed on teaching competence in writing than fifteen years ago?’, 74% of respondents (83 people) said that they perceive that there is now more emphasis on teaching writing than in the past.

How is writing being taught, however, and how should it be taught? Staff responding to the national survey indicated that they believe there to be a number of useful ways of developing student writing. As illustrated in Table 5, the four types of provision deemed most useful by this cross-section of staff include one-to-one tutorials in writing offered via a university writing centre (93%), optional professional development sessions for academic staff in the teaching of writing (92%), optional courses taught by a writing specialist on subject-specific forms of writing (91%), and optional centrally-taught writing courses for students from all disciplines (88%). Required courses for students and for staff were supported to a lesser extent (65% and 52%), while the idea of ‘required centrally-taught writing courses for students from all disciplines’ was categorised as ‘useful’ by only 44% of respondents.

1. A university writing centre offering one-to-one tutorials in writing.	Useful 93%	Not Useful 7%
2. Optional professional development sessions for academic staff in the teaching of writing.	Useful 92%	Not Useful 8%
3. Optional courses taught by a writing specialist on subject-specific forms of writing.	Useful 91%	Not Useful 9%
4. Optional centrally-taught writing courses for students from all disciplines.	Useful 88%	Not Useful 12%
5. Required courses taught by a writing specialist on subject-specific forms of writing.	Useful 65%	Not Useful 35%
6. Required professional development sessions for academic staff in the teaching of writing.	Useful 52%	Not Useful 48%
7. Required centrally-taught writing courses for students from all disciplines.	Useful 44%	Not Useful 56%

Table 5. Staff Views on Establishing Academic Writing Provision in Higher Education

A further approach, implied in the concept of staff development but not stated explicitly as a prompt on the survey questionnaire, is that of embedding the teaching of writing within subject curricula. To establish a clearer sense of what different types of provision might entail, the following section examines a number of new programmes and initiatives for supporting student writing in UK higher education institutions.

3.4 Mapping Current Programmes and Initiatives

This section provides an overview of existing Academic Writing programmes and initiatives in UK higher education. The overview is offered as a provisional map of current approaches taken by staff to support student writing. As with any emerging pedagogical area, features, boundaries, and ownership of various approaches will inevitably shift, but this map is intended as a starting point for surveying the field.

It was recognised that a map could be drawn in a number of ways. For example, institutions at which pedagogical activity in Academic Writing is taking place could be plotted visually; alternatively, developments in Academic Writing pedagogy could be listed chronologically. It was decided that the most appropriate format for this project would be to group developments into topic areas and to report on key instances of Academic Writing teaching activity.

- **Dedicated One-to-One Tutoring in Academic Writing**

Specialised one-to-one and small-group tutoring in Academic Writing is being set up in a number of UK higher education institutions.¹⁶ In 1999, the Royal Literary

¹⁶ In the UK, the first documented attempt to establish a writing centre offering students specialist one-to-one tutoring in Academic Writing was at Newcastle Polytechnic (now Northumbria University) in 1979 (Hebron 92). This centre was set up on the model of a US university 'writing center' and offered one-to-one tuition on writing and writing processes. It is reported that tutoring at this centre helped students to talk about their writing, to overcome writer's block, to plan and structure assignments, to work on grammar, punctuation, and spelling, to find support for dyslexia, and to learn to write through

Fund launched a Fellowship Scheme placing professional writers (poets, playwrights, novelists, biographers, translators, and technical writers) in UK universities and colleges to tutor students in writing for academic courses, and widespread student take-up was experienced (Ganobcsik-Williams 'Report' 4).¹⁷ Perhaps due to the influence of the Royal Literary Fund Fellowship Scheme as well as that of a number of newly-founded European university writing centres, there is increasing interest in developing this form of provision in the UK.¹⁸ A 'Writing by Appointment' initiative, for instance, has been put in place at the University of Dundee. Funded centrally by the institution, this initiative is described as a new project 'designed to complement learning in all subject areas by helping students develop academic writing and learning skills. Students can make individual appointments to work with a Writing Tutor on structure, style, grammar and punctuation in relation to their course work. Normally, tutoring sessions are for one hour and students can choose to make several appointments'.¹⁹ A writing centre providing one-to-one tutorials has also been trialled at the Crichton University Campus of the University of Glasgow, funded by a small internal grant,²⁰ and in 2003 a writing centre was set up at Liverpool Hope University with a start-up grant from HEFCE (the Higher Education Funding Council for England).²¹ In 2004, a centrally-funded Centre for Academic Writing providing one-to-one writing tutorials for students as well as staff development in the teaching of writing was founded at Coventry University.²²

- **Study Support/ Study Skills Tutoring**

Study Support/ Study Skills Units or Centres have been a part of many UK universities since the 1990s, and a new style of student support centres, or

learning to re-write (87-97). The attempt to establish a writing centre at Newcastle Polytechnic failed, however, due to lack of institutional support and funding for what was viewed by the institution at that time as 'remedial' work (Ali). A broader-based Study Skills Centre was later established at Northumbria University (see http://online.northumbria.ac.uk/central_departments/student_services/study_skills/whatisthessc.html).

¹⁷ The Royal Literary Fund Fellowship Scheme has expanded greatly in terms of both numbers of Fellows and institutions, and is currently in its sixth year. For details see <http://www.rlf.org.uk/index.cfm>.

¹⁸ The European Writing Centers Association (EWCA) was founded in 1998 (see <http://ewca.sabanciuniv.edu/>). The American Writing Centers Association, established in 1983, has recently changed its name to the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) in recognition that university writing centres are now being set up in universities in a number of countries (see <http://writingcenters.org/governance.htm>).

¹⁹ For information on the University of Dundee's 'Writing by Appointment' initiative, see: <http://www.dundee.ac.uk/learning/chalkdust/writing.htm>.

²⁰ See http://www.cc.gla.ac.uk/layer2/cc_studies/writing_centre.htm for information on the Crichton Campus Writing Centre. Due to lack of institutional commitment to a writing centre, writing tutoring has now become one component of 'effective learning' tutoring offered by Student Services.

²¹ For information on the Liverpool Hope Writing Centre, see <http://hopelive.hope.ac.uk/writingcentre/about.htm>.

²² For information on the Centre for Academic Writing at Coventry University, see <http://www.coventry.ac.uk/CAW>.

‘Learning Centres’, now serve as a hub for a variety of student-related services. The Adsetts Centre at Sheffield Hallam University is one example of a Learning Centre at which tutoring in Academic Writing and other aspects of study skills is available.²³ Margo Blythman, Teaching and Learning Co-ordinator at the London College of Communication, University of the Arts London, explains that at her institution, the study support service ‘offers small group and one-to-one academic support to students. The service is staffed by qualified Lecturers who have specialist knowledge in the areas of language, literacy, and EFL. As well as supporting student writing, the team works with students on all aspects of learning, including study skills and research techniques’ (Blythman).

Peer Tutoring in Academic Writing

One component, or potential component, of the individualised tutoring in Academic Writing now available in some UK universities is the use of student peers in tutoring other students. Although peer writing tutoring is an accepted model in US writing centres, some Study Support Lecturers in the UK have expressed serious reservations about writing tutoring being conducted by non-professionals (Devet, Blythman, Orr, and Bishop). One UK example of employing and training students as peer tutors in writing is the writing tutorial programme in the School of Humanities, Languages and Social Sciences at the University of Wolverhampton (Pieterick). A pedagogy-based research project on peer tutoring, funded by the English Subject Centre and focusing on ‘Exploring the Potential of Peer Tutoring in Developing Student Writing in English’, has also been carried out in the English Department of St. Mary’s University College, Belfast (January 2002-September 2004).²⁴

• General Writing Courses

Like the peer-tutoring model of writing tuition, the generalist writing course required of all students in the first year of study is an established model for teaching student writing in US universities and colleges.²⁵ In the UK, this model has been adopted by Richmond, the American International University in London (Tomic). An example of a general writing course offered on an optional basis in a UK university is the ‘Academic Writing’ module of the Warwick Skills Certificate at the University of Warwick. Launched in 2001-2002, the Skills Certificate comprises a set of extracurricular modules designed to recognise skills that students develop at university and to allow these skills to be recorded and certified. The Academic Writing module is open to students in all disciplines and focuses on students’ writing processes.²⁶

²³ To find out more about the Adsetts Centre see <http://www.shu.ac.uk/services/lc/> and <http://students.shu.ac.uk/learning/study.html>. From October 2004, individualised tutoring in ‘planning and structuring written assignments’, ‘critical analysis’, and ‘report writing and essay writing’ is available.

²⁴ For details of the ‘Exploring the Potential of Peer Tutoring in Developing Student Writing in English’ project see <http://www.english.itsn.ac.uk/projects/deptprojects/peertut.htm>.

²⁵ See Robert Connors ‘Abolition’ 279-294 for a history of the development of the general writing course in US colleges and universities.

²⁶ For a description of this course, see Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams, ‘Is This Freshman Composition? Teaching General Studies Writing in Europe,’ *Teaching Academic Writing Across Europe*:

- **Teaching Writing within Subject Disciplines**

There are a growing number of initiatives for teaching writing within subject disciplines in UK higher education. Out of the following five examples, four are located within English departments. This positioning reflects, in part, an opportunity recently provided by the English Subject Centre to carry out funded research projects linked to the teaching of Academic Writing.²⁷ Two of the English Subject Centre projects are the ‘Foundational Writing Skills’ project carried out in the English Department at Chester College and the ‘Write Through the Semester’ course developed in the Department of English at Keele University. The Chester College project (December 2001-January 2003) has enabled two types of student writing provision, a writing class and a writing tutorial, to be created for English degree students, and it is reported that this provision has proven to be so popular that it has been allowed to continue and is now funded by the English Department and the College (Alsop). The project at Keele University (January 2002-June 2003) has also been successful in that it has given staff time and resources to develop a course focusing on Academic Writing strategies that is ‘embedded in a specific discipline, piloted in a module in English, yet adaptable to the requirements of other disciplines’ (Bruce).

A third example of a disciplinary writing initiative in English is the Speak-Write Programme, established in the English Department of Anglia Polytechnic University in 1997 by a team headed by Cordelia Bryan, Simon Avery, and Rebecca Stott, and now co-ordinated by Dr. Tory Young. Originally funded by the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE), the programme has now gained institutional funding. The Speak-Write model integrates the teaching of writing into the disciplinary study of English Literature and is available to all students, not just those who seek help or are identified as failing. The course and materials teach sentence construction and essay-writing techniques through Literary Study. These materials, piloted and developed at Anglia Polytechnic University, were published as a series of four books by Longman in 2001 and have been tailored for use in English Departments across the higher education sector through a curriculum consultancy service.²⁸

A fourth example of a departmental initiative in Academic Writing is the development of undergraduate writing support within the English Programme at the University of Derby. Over the past two years, the English Subject Group at this institution has begun to set up Academic Writing provision for students as part of their degree study in English. Students are required to take a first-year module (‘First Words’) introducing the disciplinary conventions of academic English, and are offered one-to-one tutorial assistance in writing as well as the opportunity to attend a series of workshops in which they reflect on the way their

Proceedings of the 2nd Conference of the European Association for Teachers of Academic Writing, CD-ROM, 2004).

²⁷ In the August 2001 *English Subject Centre Newsletter* English Departments were invited to bid for funding for teaching and learning projects. For detailed information on the Centre’s ‘Communication Skills’ projects, see <http://www.english.ltsn.ac.uk/projects/deptprojects/index.htm>.

²⁸ See <http://www.apu.ac.uk/english/speakwrite/> for details on the Speak-Write Programme.

own writing is developing through their understanding of disciplinary norms and tutor expectations. A required second-year module emphasising Academic Writing ('Essays and Conversations') is also taught (Ganobcsik-Williams and Ellis).

Finally, an example of a discipline-specific writing initiative outside of English studies is a core course taught in the department of Civil Engineering at Imperial College London. This course, 'Engineering in Context 1', provides a 'writing imperative' for students in the form of a report on an engineering project that is devised and executed by the student, utilising teamwork, independent enquiry, critical thinking and writing for a scholarly audience. Alison Ahearn, the course convenor and Lecturer in Educational Development and Civil Engineering, reports that students are motivated to succeed because this writing assignment respects their intelligence and subject expertise and is one 'they want to write effectively' (Ahearn).

- **An Academic Writing Programme**

Another type of initiative to develop within a single department, but one that caters for other departments, is the Warwick Writing Programme. Founded in 1995 as an initiative of the Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies at the University of Warwick, this programme is widely-known for its expertise in teaching Creative Writing but from the start has had two branches: Creative Writing and Academic Writing. While the Creative Writing branch runs as an undergraduate and postgraduate degree programme, the Academic Writing branch consists of courses and dayschools tailor-made for other academic departments, who pay for this provision.²⁹

- **Staff and Postgraduate Development in Teaching Academic Writing**

University-wide programmes and initiatives are also being established. Since 2000, a Writing in the Disciplines or 'WiD' approach to embedding the teaching of writing within subject courses has been in operation at Queen Mary, University of London. Co-ordinated by Sally Mitchell and Alan Evison and centrally based in the institution's Learning Development and Continuing Education Unit, this initiative works with subject staff to move the teaching of writing into mainstream subject curricula. The WiD initiative at Queen Mary developed out of a connection with the writing programme at Cornell University in the United States, and progress has been dependent on a variety of factors, including 'the ability to reshape the discourse surrounding writing within the institution'; 'the ability to link writing with thinking, learning and disciplinary expertise'; 'opportunities and resources for curriculum redesign'; and 'the ability to connect with and articulate the benefits of a focus on writing for other institutional agendas such as Widening Participation and Personal Development Profiles' (Mitchell and Evison). Mitchell and Evison argue that 'a key to achieving change [in staff attitudes to student writing] is to promote the understanding of writing as integral to processes of

²⁹ For information on the Warwick Writing Programme, see <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/writingprog/>.

learning and thinking, and therefore as a central concern and responsibility of disciplines and the institution'.³⁰

Building on the success of the WiD approach at Queen Mary, a WiD project has been piloted at University College London since 2003. Funded by a three-year grant from the institution's Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund, a 'Writing and Learning Mentor Project' was set up in 2003 to 'foster the development of student writing within mainstream teaching at UCL' (WLM Website). Project co-ordinators Dr. Colleen McKenna and Dr. Phyllis Crème, centrally based in the institution's Department of Education and Professional Development, are training doctoral students in all subject areas, who are selected by their subject departments, to work with students in their own disciplines on Academic Writing. These doctoral Mentors 'build in writing development activities into courses they teach' in subject disciplines; offer one-to-one writing tutorials; 'convene writing support groups or one-off discussion and practice sessions'; and start peer-support schemes in writing. Mentors are either paid a stipend or participate in the Writing and Learning Mentor project as part of their fieldwork while completing a teaching Certificate in Higher Education (WLM Website; McKenna 'Personal').³¹

A WiD initiative is also in place at Coventry University. Through the Centre for Academic Writing, which is closely affiliated with the university's Centre for Higher Education Development, academics and other university staff are offered training in the teaching of Academic Writing. Since the Centre's opening in May 2004, its Co-ordinator has worked with individual members of staff and with Subject Groups to embed the teaching of writing into subject courses, to re-develop writing assessment strategies, and to formulate new types of writing assignments. This work involves Centre for Academic Writing staff in team-teaching with academics and administrators as well as in providing training and support in embedding the teaching of writing.

• **Computerised Support for Student Writing**

In addition to the forms of student writing pedagogy outlined above, a number of teachers and researchers are exploring how computerised support can assist student-writers. Some institutions are piloting in-house models of online writing support; for instance, Sue Drew, Senior Lecturer at Sheffield Hallam University's Teaching and Learning Institute, is developing a computerised 'Writing for University Courses' resource that can be used in three formats: *optional* (students use it on their own), *directed* (tutors work through part of the resource with students in class and students complete the work on their own time), or *integrated and assessed* (academic staff use parts of the resource within their subject curricula on an ongoing basis) (Drew 'Personal'). At Nottingham Trent University an online grammar test called the Grammar Beagle is being piloted for use by students across the disciplines. The aim of the test is to enable students to

³⁰ See <http://www.learndev.qmul.ac.uk/wid/> and <http://www.thinkingwriting.qmul.ac.uk/index.htm> both for information on the WiD initiative at Queen Mary and for materials generated by this initiative.

³¹ For information on the 'Writing and Learning Mentor' initiative at University College London, see www.ucl.ac.uk/epd/acp/wlm.htm.

identify, in specific ways, their potential strengths and weaknesses in writing skills. A secondary aim is to provide information to the university's student support services on broad trends in order to suggest where further support could be helpful for student-writers at that institution (Foster et. al.). Computer software is also being developed to support Dyslexic students: programmes such as 'Inspiration', a visual aid for structuring the content and logic of a writing assignment, and 'Read and Write', a programme that reads the text of a student's assignment aloud, are in use at many institutions. Although developed with Dyslexic students in mind, these computer packages are of use to any student writer (Williams).³² In addition, Peter Hartley at the University of Bradford, Noel Williams at Sheffield Hallam University, and James Hartley at Keele University are some of those involved in developing speech-recognition software that converts speech to text for use by disabled computer users, including students with Dyslexia, students who are visually impaired, and students who are paralysed (Williams et. al.; Hartley et. al.). Another area of computer application to student writing is the concept of hypertext writing assignments that integrate textual and visual modes. Colleen McKenna at University College London is one teacher-researcher who is exploring the potential of hypertext for student writing (McKenna 'Hypertext').

As the map of student writing provision outlined above makes clear, pedagogical needs inform scholarship on student writing. Section 3.5 presents a scholarly framework generated by the recent UK higher education context that can be used to evaluate developments in the teaching of student writing such as those mapped out above.

3.5 A Theoretical Framework for Academic Writing Pedagogy

An important piece of research on tertiary-level student writing in the UK is Mary Lea and Brian Street's 'Perspectives on Academic Literacies: An Institutional Approach' project, conducted in 1995-1996 and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). This study, which took into account the perspectives of students as well as academic staff, enabled the researchers to lay down a critical framework for theorising different approaches to working with university students on their writing. Since the publication of their 1998 article 'Student Writing in Higher Education: An Academic Literacies Approach', Lea and Street's 'Academic Literacies' framework has become widely referenced by UK and European university teachers and researchers of Academic Writing. One reason this framework is important is because it can be used by writing developers to interrogate the types of student writing provision they—or their institutions—are seeking to implement.

The framework outlined by Lea and Street describes two theoretical models underpinning how student writing provision is commonly designed: the 'Study Skills' model and the 'Academic Socialisation' model. Lea and Street categorise 'Study Skills' as an approach that locates deficiencies within individual students. This approach assumes that Academic Writing is made up of 'a set of atomised skills which students have to learn and which are then transferable to other contexts. The

³² For information on 'Inspiration' see <http://www.inspiration.com/>, and for 'Read and Write' see <http://www.texthelp.com/rwguk.asp?q1=products&q2=rwg>.

focus is on attempts to “fix” problems with student learning [. . .]. The theory of language on which [this approach] is based emphasises surface features’ of writing rather than logic and structure (158-159).

Lea and Street note that unlike the ‘Study Skills’ model, ‘Academic Socialisation’ recognises that university-level writing is not simply comprised of a broad set of generalisable skills, but that it is shaped by disciplinary conventions of logic and expression. Pedagogy based on the theory of ‘Academic Socialisation’, therefore, seeks to acculturate and induct students into specific forms of academic discourse (172). While the ‘Academic Socialisation’ approach is ‘more sensitive both to the student as learner and to the cultural context’ than the ‘Study Skills’ model, it ‘tends to treat writing as a transparent medium of representation and so fails to address the deep language, literacy and discourse issues involved in the institutional production and representation of meaning’ (159).

The third component of Lea and Street’s framework is ‘Academic Literacies’, which articulates a different way of viewing student writing. This approach sees student writing at a developmental level beyond that of skill or acculturation, and in terms of how students use the writing they do for university courses to validate their own knowledge and identities. As Lea and Street explain:

From the student point of view a dominant feature of academic literacy practices is the requirement to switch practices between one setting and another, to deploy a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriate to each setting, and to handle the social meanings and identities that each evokes. This emphasis on identities and social meanings draws attention to deep affective and ideological conflicts in such switching and use of the linguistic repertoire. A student’s personal identity—who am ‘I’—may be challenged by the forms of writing required in different disciplines, notably prescriptions about the use of impersonal and passive forms as opposed to first person and active forms, and students may feel threatened and resistant—‘this isn’t me’ (Lea, 1994; Ivanic, 1998). The recognition of this level of engagement with student writing, as opposed to the more straightforward study skills and academic socialisation approaches, comes [. . .] to see student writing as being concerned with the processes of meaning-making and contestation around meaning [. . . this approach] suggests that one explanation for problems in student writing might be the gaps between academic staff expectations and student interpretations of what is involved in student writing. (159)

The three models Lea and Street describe ‘are not mutually exclusive’ and do not follow a simple linear pattern ‘whereby one model supersedes or replaces the insights provided by the other’ (158). Instead:

each model successively encapsulates the other, so that the *academic socialisation* perspective takes account of *study skills* but includes them in the broader context of [. . .] acculturation processes [. . .] and likewise the *academic literacies* approach encapsulates the *academic socialisation* model, building on the insights developed there as well as the *study skills* view. The *academic literacies* model, then, incorporates both of the other models into a more encompassing understanding of the nature of student writing within institutional practices, power relations and identities. (158 emphasis added)

Thus, Lea and Street emphasise that elements of each of these models may be necessary or useful in teaching student writing and that teaching staff should have an awareness of all three, so they do not limit their pedagogical methods to those that only see student writing as a set of itemised skills or departmental conventions to be learned. In this way, Lea and Street's theoretical framework can be used to inform each of the approaches to student writing mapped in Section 3.4. Individualised tutoring, for example, can provide an opportunity for a student to articulate issues or perspectives s/he feels have been excluded by an assignment topic or by a particular type of assignment structure, as well as the opportunity to develop specific writing skills or a facility with discipline-specific ways of writing. Writing instruction, whether with students from a variety of disciplines or embedded within one subject area, can also provide these opportunities, particularly if instruction is sustained and related directly to students' work. Computer diagnostics and skill-building programmes, too, can transcend a simple 'Study Skills' model if they are not used in isolation, but meshed into the context of the subject classroom by being made open for discussion as well as by being made relevant to the writing assignments set.

3.6 A 'Whole Institution' Approach to Supporting Student Writing

Lea and Street provide an important framework for theorising the teaching of student writing in higher education. In addition to theoretical rigour, however, practical considerations shape the type(s) of provision institutions offer. The mapping exercise undertaken in this section has demonstrated that local circumstances within institutions play a role in determining writing provision, and that a variety of approaches to teaching writing are currently emerging across the higher education sector. In a recent article on 'The Status of Writing in the University', Salford University Lecturer Carson Bergstrom cautions that writing support can take different forms, reflecting different degrees of commitment to teaching writing within institutions. While there have been several notable and innovative attempts to establish writing provision in UK universities, Bergstrom makes the point that judged in terms of allocation of resources, the concept of teaching students to write does not yet 'play a major role in how [most] UK universities conceive of their mission as providers of education' (10). As Bergstrom implies and the map of provision outlined in Section 3.4 demonstrates, many UK university writing projects and initiatives to date have been small-scale and funded by short-term internal or external grants (13). Furthermore, the status of writing in the sector is reflected in the status of the staff who teach it: too often these are subject staff who take on additional duties of teaching student writing in isolation within their departments or casual staff hired on hourly-paid or fixed-term contracts. Therefore, while many university staff seem willing to engage with students' writing, most institutions do not yet prioritise the need to teach writing explicitly.

In seeking to move forward on the issue of student writing as an institutional priority, much can be learned from recent research on teaching writing at primary and secondary school levels, in which a 'whole school' approach is advocated. In *Literacy in the Secondary School*, for instance, Maureen Lewis and David Wray emphasise that the teaching of reading and writing can not be seen as the exclusive province of English and Learning Support teachers, but that all teachers need to promote and contribute to such teaching (3). They also stress that a 'multi-strategy

approach' to reading and writing development across an institution is more effective than the adoption of a single strategy (5). Educational researchers Bridie Raban and Gillian Essex add to this point by arguing that literacy development does not work 'when changes are made on a classroom-by-classroom basis,' but that '[c]hanges for improvement and effectiveness [. . .] need to be conducted on a whole school basis' (221).

Raban and Essex identify a number of studies on 'school effectiveness' at the primary school level that together set up a framework for a 'whole school' approach: 'Slavin and colleagues in the USA (1996), Hill in Australia (1995), Barber and Sebba (1999) and Reynolds and colleagues (1994) in England, and Fullan (2000) in Canada' (218). Lewis and Wray add that '[t]here are no shortage of detailed and persuasive models for the necessary steps needed to implement a whole-school literacy curriculum development cycle (see for example Webster *et. al.* 1996, Catron 1997, Bearne 1999)' (150). Many of the factors cited by Raban and Essex and Lewis and Wray from this body of research can be applied to the development of students' writing in the higher education context:

- 'A whole-school literacy awareness [. . .] that concentrates on creating and maintaining a positive ethos towards literacy and a high public profile for literacy within the institution' is needed (Lewis and Wray 150).
- 'There [needs to be] a belief that all students can succeed given sufficient time and support, and that teachers are a key element in making a difference' (Raban and Essex 218).
- 'Realistic challenges [need to be] in place for all students and [. . .] a commitment at all stages to supporting those students who are underachieving' (Raban and Essex 218).
- 'Early support for underachieving students is [. . .] integral' (Raban and Essex 218).
- 'Teachers [need to] use a range of teaching approaches' (Raban and Essex 218).
- 'Regular monitoring of student achievement and progress [that] informs further teaching' is needed (Raban and Essex 218).
- 'Groups of teachers [need to] engage in learning experiences designed to have a high impact on their classroom practices' (Raban and Essex 218). 'Strong and committed leadership [needs to] support [. . .] the learning teams of teachers' (218).
- '[M]embers for a school "literacy" group to manage the initiative' must be identified (Lewis and Wray 151). The institution must '[d]ecide on priorities' and 'develop [a] specific, public action plan', the institution's literacy group

must ‘monitor and evaluate, report back to [the] whole school’, and ‘refine action plans and policy documents as result of monitoring/evaluation’ (151)³³.

In sum, strategies for a comprehensive or ‘whole institution’ policy on student writing include ‘a mixture of management objectives, teaching and learning objectives, targeting of specific groups of pupils as well as *all* pupils, monitoring and assessment objectives and the trialling of some specific teaching strategies’ (Lewis and Wray 6). Not only must the teaching of writing be embedded and made part of an institution’s culture, but strongly-led and well-supported teacher and staff development must be a high priority.

3.7 Establishing a Culture of Writing in the University

It was reported in Section 3.3 that respondents to ‘A National Survey of Staff Perspectives on the Teaching of Academic Writing in Higher Education’ envision the teaching of student writing to be most feasible on an optional basis: optional individualised tutoring, optional staff development in the teaching of writing, and optional subject-specific and general writing courses. Examining current manifestations of higher education writing provision, Lea and Street’s theoretical framework, and ‘whole school’ or ‘whole institution’ approaches to student writing reveals that while optional provision can be part of an institutional strategy for teaching Academic Writing, it needs to be underpinned by writing support that is embedded within mainstream curricula. In contrast to a traditional view of student writing as a private activity,³⁴ comprehensive, ‘whole institution’ provision will foster an open, informed, and vibrant culture of writing across the university.

³³ See Appendix B for a modified list of question prompts on ‘whole school’ or ‘whole institution’ approaches to student literacy and writing.

³⁴ See Dai Hounsell’s findings on the view of essay writing as ‘an essentially private activity’ (Hounsell, ‘Contrasting’, 110).

Section 4: Conclusion and Recommendations

This project on the teaching of Academic Writing in UK higher education began with the idea of a ‘literacy crisis’ as well as with an interest in finding out more about the pedagogy and scholarship of student writing. The research undertaken for the project has explored the concept of writing standards and has concluded that attempting to compare standards of student writing across decades is a very difficult if not impossible task. In changing the research focus to survey developments in the teaching of student writing, the project has enabled the researcher not only to learn about the emerging field of Academic Writing but also to become an informed and active Academic Writing teacher-researcher.

The purpose of this conclusion is to make recommendations for potential future investment in the area of student writing. As emphasised in Section 3, a ‘whole institution’ approach to supporting student-writers requires opportunities for university staff to be trained in the teaching of writing. To be effective, such staff development needs to be ongoing and must be led by staff development lecturers or other academics who are knowledgeable about current Academic Writing pedagogies and theories. While this report maintains that it is the responsibility of higher education institutions to organise and provide staff development in the teaching of writing, it also recommends that developments in this area could benefit from and be greatly accelerated by the support of external funding bodies.

Specific recommendations are:

- ***the funding of Teaching and Research Fellowships*** to enable Masters and Doctoral students to specialise in the subject of Higher Education Student Writing. Postgraduate students could be based where Academic Writing and Academic Literacy staff are located in UK universities; for instance, in Higher Education Development centres, Education departments, Academic Writing centres, Study Support centres, English departments, English Language centres, Linguistics departments, Engineering departments, and Psychology departments.
- ***the funding of Conference Participation Grants*** to enable university staff and postgraduates to take part in regional, national, and international seminars and conferences on student writing. Some of the relevant professional meetings include: Academic Literacies seminars and one-day conferences (AcLits), the UK-based Writing Development in Higher Education Network Conference (WDHE), the European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing Conference (EATAW), the European Writing Centers Association Conference (EWCA), the European Association for Research in Learning and Instruction Special Interest Group in Writing Conference (EARLI-SIG Writing), the US-based Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) and the John S. Knight Institute Consortium on Writing in the Disciplines at Cornell University.
- ***the funding of Conference Grants*** to enable university staff, postgraduates, and institutions to host professional meetings, seminars, and conferences on student writing.

- *the funding of Professional Development Grants* to enable university staff and postgraduates to visit and exchange good practice with colleagues from UK institutions who have developed student writing initiatives, programmes and centres.
- *the funding of Overseas Professional Development Grants* to enable university staff and postgraduates to visit Academic Writing programmes and centres established in other cultural contexts.
- *the funding of Programme and Initiative Development Grants* to enable ‘pump-priming’ initiatives on student writing to be piloted within higher education colleges and universities that are working toward establishing ‘whole institution’ provision.

The recommendations listed here portray a vision of higher education student writing provision that is in an early stage at the present time. As this report suggests, for writing provision to develop fully, changes will have to take place in the way teaching is structured within institutions and in the value placed on teaching and on pedagogical scholarship.³⁵ It is hoped that this report will make a significant and lasting contribution to the discussion of how higher education student writing provision will come to be shaped in the years ahead.

³⁵ One enabling factor for the study and teaching of Academic Writing in UK universities is the recent change in the national Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). The next RAE, to be conducted by the Higher Education Funding Council in 2008, will consider pedagogical or applied research to be of equal weight to ‘pure’ research (<http://www.rae.ac.uk/pubs/2004/01/>). It can be predicted, therefore, that there will be less cases of academic staff ‘being positively discouraged from writing about teaching [(or teaching about writing!)] because it [is] seen as “low-status” research’ (Bennett et. al. 47).

Appendix A:

A National Survey of Staff Perspectives on the Teaching of Academic Writing in Higher Education

A National Survey of Staff Perspectives on the Teaching of Academic Writing in Higher Education

The purpose of this questionnaire is to survey staff across a range of disciplines and institutions about their expectations of undergraduate students' writing and their perspectives on the issue of teaching writing at the level of Higher Education. The results of the survey will be used in a published report, but individual details and responses will remain strictly confidential. Thank you for your assistance.

Please return the completed questionnaire **by 17 October 2000** to: Dr. Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams, The Warwick Writing Programme, Department of English and Comparative Literary Study, The University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7AL.

Background Information

1. Years of service in Higher Education: _____
2. Department in which you are employed: _____
3. Type of institution: University Higher Education College
4. Your gender: Female Male
5. Your age category:
 20-30
 31-40
 41-50
 51-60
 Over 60
6. How would you describe the predominant characteristics of the student population you teach/counsel? (Please tick all that apply).
 native English speakers non-native English speakers
 aged between 18-22 mature students
 female male
 full-time part-time
 other relevant characteristics (please explain):

Expectations of Student Writing

7. Does your department take measures to gauge the writing proficiency of applicants to undergraduate courses?
 Yes No

a) If **yes**, please describe these measures:

8. Through what forms of writing are your students assessed? (Please tick all that apply).

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> essay | <input type="checkbox"/> case studies |
| <input type="checkbox"/> examination essay | <input type="checkbox"/> business plan |
| <input type="checkbox"/> dissertation | <input type="checkbox"/> technical manual |
| <input type="checkbox"/> laboratory report | <input type="checkbox"/> journalism |
| <input type="checkbox"/> project report | <input type="checkbox"/> creative writing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> research report | <input type="checkbox"/> reflective journal |
| <input type="checkbox"/> laboratory notes | <input type="checkbox"/> other (please specify): |
| <input type="checkbox"/> reading notes | |

9. What other kinds of writing are expected of your students as part of their course of study?

10. During the academic year, approximately how often do you read or assess student writing? (Please tick only one answer).

- daily
- weekly
- every few weeks
- at the end of each term
- at the end of each course
- other (please specify):

11. Have you noticed differences between your current students' written work and students' written work when you first became a member of staff?

- Yes No

If yes,

a) How would you describe these differences?

b) In your view, what are the main reasons for these differences?

12. There have been a number of recent claims in the media that students' proficiency in writing has declined. Based on your experience, how valid are such claims?

valid not valid

a) Please comment further on this issue if you wish.

13. In your department, is more emphasis placed on teaching **competence in writing** than fifteen years ago?

Yes No

a) If **yes**, to what factors do you attribute this increased emphasis? (Please tick all that apply).

Recommendations from business/industry on graduates' writing proficiency

Teaching Quality Assessment reports

Government requirements for Newly Qualified Teachers

Research on the role of writing in promoting students' intellectual development

Media reports on student literacy

Other (please specify): _____

14. Is more emphasis placed on teaching **oral communication and presentation techniques** than fifteen years ago?

Yes No

a) If **yes**, to what factors do you attribute this increased emphasis? (Please tick all that apply).

Recommendations from business/industry on graduates' writing proficiency

Teaching Quality Assessment reports

Government requirements for Newly Qualified Teachers

Research on the role of oral communication skills in promoting students' intellectual development

Media reports on student literacy

Other (please specify): _____

15. Please number the following six components of academic writing in what you believe is their order of importance by using a scale of **1 (most important)** to **6 (least important)**. (We understand that these categories overlap, and hope that you will bear with what is inevitably an imperfect system of classification).

- **Synthesis** (ability to incorporate external source material appropriately, including quotations and paraphrasing)
- **Audience Awareness** (student's ability to put her/himself in the position of the reader, to utilise language and argumentative structures appropriate to disciplinary conventions)
- **Command of Language** (ability to make writing precise, varied, and engaging by manipulating sentence structure, word arrangement, vocabulary, etc.)
- **Correctness** in traditional grammar, spelling, and punctuation

- **Referencing** (ability to use a citation system to document source material in a consistent format)
- **Organisation/structuring of central argument**

16. Do you expect students to show significant improvement in writing from their first to their final year of undergraduate study?

- Yes No

a) If **yes**, how would you describe the differences between your expectations for first-year writing and for the writing of degree finalists?

Developing Student Writing

17. What measures do you take to help students develop proficiency in writing? (Please tick all that apply).

Include instructive comments when marking written assignments

Discuss students' writing with them

Offer revision sessions on writing

Offer preparation sessions for writing exam essays

Refer students to their departmental personal tutor

Refer students to institution's Counselling or Student Support centre

Other (please specify) _____

18. To your knowledge, do the following forms of writing provision exist at your institution?

- a) Centrally-taught writing courses that students from all disciplines are **required** to attend. Yes No
- b) Centrally-taught writing courses that students from all disciplines have the **option** to attend. Yes No
- c) **Required** courses taught by a writing specialist on subject-specific forms of writing. Yes No
- d) **Optional** courses taught by a writing specialist on subject-specific forms of writing. Yes No
- e) A university writing centre offering one-to-one tutorials in writing and communication. Yes No
- f) **Required** Continuing Professional Development for academic staff in the teaching of writing. Yes No
- g) **Optional** Continuing Professional Development for academic staff in the teaching of writing. Yes No

19. How useful do you think such provision is/would be for your students?

- a) Centrally-taught writing courses that students from all disciplines are **required** to attend. highly useful useful not useful
- b) Centrally-taught writing courses that students from all disciplines have the **option** to attend. highly useful useful not useful
- c) **Required** courses taught by a writing specialist on subject-specific forms of writing. highly useful useful not useful
- d) **Optional** courses taught by a writing specialist on subject-specific forms of writing. highly useful useful not useful
- e) A university writing centre offering one-to-one tutorials in writing and communication. highly useful useful not useful
- f) **Required** Continuing Professional Development for academic staff in the teaching of writing. highly useful useful not useful
- g) **Optional** Continuing Professional Development for academic staff in the teaching of writing. highly useful useful not useful

20. Do you think it is necessary to teach writing to university students?

- Yes No

21. To the best of your knowledge, what departments or sectors at your institution provide support programmes for students' academic writing? (Please tick all that apply).

The EFL programme

The Department of Education

The Department of Linguistics

The Department of English

The Sciences ('Writing in the Sciences' initiatives)

The Creative Writing Programme

The Student Support or Study Skills Programme

The Careers Advisory Service

The Student Union

External Bodies (please name): _____

Other (please specify): _____

I do not know of any initiatives or programmes for supporting academic writing at my institution.

22. Can you recommend anyone, at your institution or at another UK institution of Higher Education, whom we might contact to find out more about writing programme development?

23. To enable us to follow up on any particularly interesting responses, we would be grateful if you would supply the following contact details. All information will remain confidential.

Name: _____

Institutional Address: _____

Telephone Number: _____

Email address: _____

24. Would you be willing to be interviewed briefly on some of these issues?

Yes No

25. Are you interested in receiving a summary of the findings of this study?

Yes No

Thank you again for your assistance.

Appendix B:

Question Prompts for Effecting a ‘Whole Institution’ Approach to Student Literacy and Writing

Lewis and Wray list seven question prompts identified in a 1999 report by Her Majesty's Inspectorate on secondary school literacy (6). In modified form, these prompts could be considered in terms of student writing by staff in higher education colleges and universities:

1. 'What is meant by a literate [university or college student]'?
2. 'What strategies and structures are necessary to sustain [writing] development?'
3. 'Is [writing] development for all? What are the particular needs of [EFL students, Dyslexic students, disabled students, non-traditional students, mature students, students in each discipline] and higher attainers?'
4. 'What is the relationship of [writing] development to English [departments] and to existing [student support] work?'
5. 'What kind of guidance do [institutions] need?'
6. 'To what extent can/ does [writing] development entail a "dumbing down"?''
7. 'What level of knowledge about [Academic Writing] do [Lecturers and Tutors] need?'

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Biographical Note

Dr. Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams is Co-ordinator of the new Centre for Academic Writing at Coventry University. From 1999-2001, Lisa served as the first Royal Literary Fund Research Fellow and had input into the development of the Royal Literary Fund's Fellowship Scheme for Writers. Formerly Lecturer and Co-ordinator of Academic Writing for the University of Warwick Writing Programme, Lisa has taught writing and communication courses for undergraduate and postgraduate students in a variety of disciplines. She has also had considerable experience in teaching written Composition and in tutoring students one-to-one in Academic Writing in US universities. In 2001, grants from the Royal Literary Fund and the Arts Council of England enabled Lisa and her Warwick Writing Programme colleagues to co-organise 'Teaching Writing in Higher Education', a conference promoting international discussion of how Academic Writing is theorised and taught at university level.