

# Embracing Diversity for Attainment: An Inclusive Approach to a Redesigned Foundation Module in the Social Sciences

Learning and Language Support Services (LLSS)

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## Executive summary

### Introduction

The purpose of this research project was to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of an inclusive *Writing in the Disciplines* (WiD) approach, an initiative that has run within the School of Social Sciences, UEL since September 2015, led by the Learning and Language Support Services (LLSS) and supported by academic colleagues. This research drew on a redesigned Extended Degree Programme transitional module (*SC3001 Key Ideas and Issues for Social Scientists*), where we had heavily embedded our academic writing support in line with the subject content and assessments and worked closely with the module leader (Dr. Georgie Wemyss). We hope the dissemination of the report across schools will add value to the development of student academic literacy within the university and encourage the close collaboration and communication between subject lecturers and writing experts.

### Pedagogical approaches

The implementation of WiD approach is to address the situation where there is a strong need for students to develop their academic voice and identity during their university studies. This is particularly the case when UEL offers non-traditional HE students admission through alternative pathways (vs. A-Levels), and as such, students may perceive academic cultures as alien to them due in part to their varying academic literacy skills and their need for academic support networks. To promote the idea that academic literacy skills are integrated in all subject content learning, the embedded academic writing provision as part of subject curriculum helps to eliminate the concept of ‘stigma’ and ‘remedial’, which dissuades some students from seeking ‘extra’ support (cf. generic study skills support) (Morey, 2015). In other words, academic literacy development synchronises with subject content exploration, both of which are equally important for students to develop in higher education.

### Methodology

To evaluate the impact of our academic writing provision, we aim to address the following research questions:

1. What are students’ experiences of writing and assessments during their foundation year?
2. What are students’ perceptions and experiences of the embedded academic writing provision (incl. students’ suggestions for improvement)?
3. To what extent does the embedded academic writing intervention contribute to student attainment, and retention and progression rates for the focal foundation programme?

In order to explore the first two questions, we conducted individual/focus group discussions, where 41 students participated. As part of student discussions, a form which requested their personal information (e.g., gender, age, educational background and other relevant demographic data) was distributed to the students to fill in individually at the end of the discussions. Students’ grades for different assignments in the focal module in the programme, and retention and progression rates across academic years (2015-16 and 2014-15) were obtained from the programme leader and Qlikview programme (i.e. REP Data and Retention Analytics) to explore whether the embedded writing provision has contributed to better rates of retention, progression and attainment of students taking the courses this year, compared to 2014/15.

### Key findings

Key findings from student individual/focus group discussions, and retention and progression data are as follows:

<b>Students’ experiences of writing in the foundation programme</b>
Theme: Challenging aspects of various types of academic writing and their packed deadlines
<i>Sub-themes</i>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students have identified the use of academic sources in writing, referencing, and independent research as the most challenging aspects of studying at university level.</li> <li>• Students have found academic writing challenging due to its distinctive features and conventions.</li> <li>• Students have found written assessments challenging because there are more variations in text types, compared with their previous studies.</li> <li>• Students have found challenging to unpack academic terminology associated with assessments and meet lecturer expectations.</li> <li>• Students have found written assessments challenging because of having gaps in education.</li> <li>• Students have found it challenging to complete their coursework on time due to other commitments (e.g., work and family) and packed submission deadlines.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Students' perceptions of the academic writing provision</b></p>
<p>Theme: Content and positive impact on their academic literacy development</p>
<p><i>Sub-themes</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students have found the writing intervention helpful, relevant and tailored to their studies, particularly in relation to how these sessions have helped to ease their transition to university study.</li> <li>• Students have expressed that the writing provision complements the subject lectures well.</li> <li>• Students have stated that the academic writing provision has helped them to unpack academic terminology and requirements related to different types of assessments and hence better meet lecturer expectations (self-reported better attainment).</li> <li>• Students have frequently used the session materials from module pages on Moodle.</li> <li>• Most students have reported a significant increase in their level of confidence when it comes to writing in an academic style.</li> <li>• Students have stated that the academic skills they have learned from the writing provision are transferrable to other modules and life.</li> </ul>
<p>Theme: Students' suggestions on the academic writing provision</p>
<p><i>Sub-themes</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The provision should cater to different students' needs.</li> <li>• The provision should be dispersed more widely to other modules in the programme.</li> <li>• The teaching methods used in the sessions should be balanced between individual work and pair/group work.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Student grades and relative progress, retention and progression</b></p>
<p>Theme: Academic writing provision contributes to student retention and progression</p>
<p><i>Sub-themes</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All the student participants (41/41) have stated that the academic writing instruction has raised their understanding of modules' expectations of the assessments, positively impacting their levels of attainment.</li> <li>• All the students have expressed their increased level of confidence as a learner and writer in higher education. 35 out of 41 students have expressed their intention to carry on their studies at UEL.</li> <li>• In comparison with the previous academic year (2014-15), there is a significant higher percentage of students in the year 2015-16 who increased their grades by at least one grade when comparing their relative progress between Coursework 1 (Research proposal) and Coursework 2 (Research report) in the focal module (SC3001).</li> </ul>

### Conclusion and ways forward

This project focuses on the evaluation of the impact and effectiveness of the inclusive *Writing in the Disciplines* approach, drawing on a case study of the redesigned Extended Degree Programme module (*Key Ideas and Issues for Social Scientists*) within the School of Social Sciences. The findings have provided evidence on the positive impact on student academic literacies development through the explicit

embedding of academic literacy instruction within the subject curriculum in the focal level 3 foundation programme. Our intervention has also contributed to better rates of retention (i.e. for specific age groups), progression and attainment of students taking the module in the year 2015-16, compared with 2014-15. Specifically, the concept of *Writing in the Disciplines* with the genre-based approach and academic literacies perspective has proved to be beneficial for enhancing students' motivation and transition to university. In this project, we have observed an increased sense of autonomy and belonging among the focal students who had previously seen academic cultures and research communities as alien to them. The features of inclusion and accessibility of the discipline-specific provision facilitate students to embrace the idea that academic literacy development is not a discrete aspect of their studies, but an integral part of the process of acquiring subject knowledge, establishing their own academic identity and raising their aspiration to belong and achieve at university. The implementation of this approach encourages strong collaboration between subject lecturers and writing experts. The positive outcomes of our collaborative work have directly impacted the recent successful revalidation for the redesigned foundation programme in the Social Sciences in May 2016. This revalidation has further developed the embedding of academic literacies within its main transitional module.

One of our challenges ahead is associated with the issue of catering to diverse student needs, as discussed during the focus groups. This issue also presents in the literature which highlights the changes and new opportunities brought about by the diversification of HE in the UK (e.g. Northedge, 2003). This debate is at the core of the principles that have underpinned our intervention where we believe in the need to do away with the 'generic study skills' and 'stigmatisation' of non-traditional students who are regularly characterised as 'lacking' in skills. We have also emphasised that regardless of their background, every undergraduate student needs to receive the explicit instruction of the types of writing expected within their situated field of study. In the light of this stance, we have argued that the academic writing provision should be dispersed more widely across modules and programmes.

This project has implications relevant to the development of 'transferable skills', the term used often by our student participants, which in turn has an association to the critical concept – employability. This concept has been highlighted in UEL's Academic Strategy 2020 document (Colton, 2016) which stresses the importance of embedding element of employability into the curriculum. Aligned with this emphasis, we would like to extend our research and teaching practice to include explicit and systematic connections to employability skills in our embedded academic literacy provision, in collaboration with the employability team. We are very confident that the *Writing in the Disciplines* approach will continue to contribute to student success, progression and retention at UEL.

## 1. Introduction

This report documents an action research project which aims to investigate the extent to which an inclusive *Writing in the Disciplines* (WiD) approach can enhance foundation students' transition to university-level studies at UEL. This approach is a university-wide initiative since September 2015, led by the Learning and Language Support Services (LLSS) and supported by academic colleagues within schools, where it promotes the idea of implementing embedded academic literacies support and instruction into the mainstream disciplinary curriculum. This report draws on a redesigned Extended Degree Programme transitional module (*SC3001 Key Ideas and Issues for Social Scientists*) for 2015-16 in the School of Social Sciences, where we have heavily embedded our writing support in line with the subject content and assessments and worked closely with the module leader. As we aim to develop student academic literacy and writing skills to enhance their transition to university, the focus of the foundation degree provides a range of empirical evidence and opportunities to explore the impact of the WiD model on subject curriculum.

Prior to the 2015-16, generic writing workshops offered by the LLSS team were generally not well attended as they were not perceived as relevant and specific to the students' programmes of study (*see* Wingate, 2006). Since March 2015, the expansion of LLSS through the recruitment of English language specialists meant the allocation of two academic writing and language tutors for the School of Social Sciences. The new strategy focused on a closer collaboration between writing tutors, and subject lecturers, with the aim of integrating LLSS provision into the school programme. The consideration of the embedded discipline-specific writing pedagogy is in part to eliminate the concept of 'stigma' which dissuades some students from seeking 'extra' writing support. This is particularly the case when UEL offers non-traditional HE students admission through alternative pathways (vs. A-Levels) as part of widening participation (McQueen et al., 2009), and as such, students may perceive academic cultures as alien to them due to their varying academic literacy skills and their need for academic support networks. In other words, "many students are not fully prepared for the demands of academic writing, which is the key assessment tool at universities in the UK" (Wingate, Andon & Cogo, 2011, p. 70; *see also* Murray, 2010). As researchers and practitioners with extensive experiences in HE/FE, we have observed diverse student writing practices across the university where there is a strong need for students to develop their academic voice and identities. This initiation also addresses the importance of developing students' transferable skills for employability, where communication skill, both written and spoken, is listed as one of the top ten aspects that employers are looking for (The Guardian, 2013).

To embrace and appreciate student diversity and differences at UEL, we employ the genre-based approach (Swales, 1990; Hyland, 2004, 2005; Wingate, 2012, 2015) which aligns with WiD tradition and its pedagogy, and is complemented by the academic literacies perspective (Lea & Street, 2006; Street, 2010), which together provides a more inclusive angle and allows us to approach meanings as contested and co-constructed in a collaborative effort amongst students and academics. By inviting students to openly discuss academic conventions and values (e.g., academic integrity), this blended approach to academic writing aims to facilitate a sense of autonomy, belonging and equal partnership between students and academics. The three research questions of this study are as follows:

1. What are students' experiences of writing and assessments during their foundation year?
2. What are students' perceptions and experiences of the embedded academic writing provision (incl. students' suggestions for improvement)?
3. To what extent does the embedded academic writing intervention contribute to the student attainment, and retention and progression rate for the focal foundation programme?

We will discuss the pedagogical implications of the study's findings in terms of academic language and literacy, and material development. We hope the dissemination of the report across schools will add value



to the development of student academic literacy within the university and encourage the close collaboration and constant communication between subject lecturers and writing experts.

## 2. Pedagogical approaches

For our academic writing provision, we have drawn on the two dominant pedagogical approaches to realise the concept of WiD – English for Academic Purposes (EAP, i.e. genre-based approach) and Academic Literacies (AcLits) – to the teaching of academic writing and literacies (*see* Wingate and Tribble, 2012). Although these two approaches have often been seen as incompatible in terms of their pedagogical perspectives and impact, as will be explained below, we have argued that they can complement each other to facilitate student development of academic voice and identity.

The tradition of WiD promotes the idea that writing from different disciplines carries different disciplinary features which are often less transparent to novice student writers and requires a process of acquisition to demystify them (cf. general university-level composition and instruction in writing, *see* Bazerman et al., 2005). Hyland (2013, p. 53, cited in Erwin & Zappile, 2013, p. 1) states:

...how we as academics and students understand our discipline(s), evaluate discourse, and effectively assert our own views is inextricably linked with our understanding of and ability to express through language in the written form, as it is through language that academics and students conceptualise their subjects and argue their claims persuasively.

The statement above indicates that there is a bounded connection between language and subject learning, both of which are essential for students to explore in higher education. In the light of this, academic language and literacies acquisition cannot be seen as something separate from the mainstream curriculum, but rather it is an integral part of learning how knowledge is constructed and argued in a specific discipline. Thus, we aim to provide bespoke academic writing provision specific to respective subject areas and their assessments. To conceptualise this pedagogical intention, we have adopted ‘genre acquisition’ (or genre-based approach) commonly used in North America and in the studies of EAP, which is greatly informed by the seminal work of Swales (1981) where he analysed the rhetorical structure of the introduction sections of research articles using move-step analysis. A ‘move’ can be seen as a textual logic/movement from one part of the text to another whereas a ‘step’ entails the strategies to fulfil each ‘move’ (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993). Many researchers in the field of applied linguistics have adopted Swales’ rhetorical move-step analysis to investigate the typical rhetorical structures and the linguistic features of a particular type of text (e.g., Chiu, 2016; Bunton, 2005). In line with this approach, we guide students to explore the purpose and textual features of a specific type of writing through explicit modelling of a target genre where ample opportunities are provided for students to deconstruct sample texts and analyse how a text can be structured in the way that meets disciplinary conventions. To cater different learning needs, we have also developed our writing resources on Moodle which consist of annotated text samples which highlight the textual and rhetorical features for specific text types, hands-on exercises, handouts with specific guidance and useful academic language tailored to different assessments.

To balance between providing an explicit example for students to model as the genre-based approach could provide and giving students leeway to negotiate meaning, we have adopted the AcLits perspective to complement our session planning where it draws attention to issues such as student writer voice, and “the processes of meaning-making and contestation around meaning rather than as skills or deficits” (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 159). This perspective is particularly important for our teaching context as many students often carry their ‘autobiographical self’ (Ivanič, 1998) to the act of writing, which is based on their previous experiences and these experiences will continue to develop the individual and influence the ways in which they write. Specifically, Ivanič (1998) has found that “multiple and conflicting identity is hard to ignore” for those who have returned to university after an absence of several years from the academic community (p. 6). For example, students might face problems like ‘accommodation’,

‘opposition’, and ‘resistance’, while composing their writing for/in a new academic discourse community (Chase, 1988; *see also* Hirvela & Belcher, 2001). To help to ease student transition to higher education, we have aligned our approaches with the AcLits perspective where students are invited to explicitly discuss and explore academic conventions. We believe this will address the challenges of the gaps between student and academic expectations and interpretations in terms of what is required in academic writing. One of the gaps, according to Lea and Street (1998), is associated with terminology such as ‘analysis’ and ‘argument’ that academics tend to use to describe or evaluate academic writing. They have argued that these academic terminology might not be entirely transparent to the students. In other words, students may raise questions: *What does it mean by ‘argument’ in academic writing? What does it mean by analysing and evaluating academic sources? What are academic expectations of us from reading our work? What is a literature review?* As such, these commonly used academic terminology in HE settings cannot be taken for granted when we explain module assessments and provide feedback to our student writing. Part of our academic writing provision is to provide opportunities for students to discuss and explore these academic keywords and their underlying meanings. With explicit engagement of exploring academic language and culture within specific disciplines, students are able to develop their confidence to meet the assessment requirements and tutor expectations. To enhance this learning outcome, we have been working closely with the academics in different modules. Table 1 below summarises the logistics of the collaboration:

Table 1 Framework of academic and writing tutor collaboration for writing provision in subject curriculum

Aspects of consideration	From academics	From writing specialists
<b>Relevance</b> to modules and assessments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide module guide, assessment brief, and good and bad scoring student written pieces from previous academic year</li> <li>Give permission for writing tutors to upload/access materials on module’s Moodle page (IT service can also help with the access)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Work out types of assessment in modules</li> <li>Unpack and teach discourse features and academic voice: genre awareness and text features</li> <li>Use core readings and former student essay examples from modules (i.e. discipline-specific texts) for in-class exercises</li> </ul> <p><b>IMP: Due to limited capacity, we prioritise core modules as a starting point as this would allow a full coverage of student cohort.</b></p>
<b>Academic expectations</b> (to ensure consistency)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide expectations of module assessments (i.e. <i>What do academics expect to see from reading student work?</i>)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conceptualise academic expectations for session planning</li> <li>Facilitate discussion with students on how to meet academic expectations</li> </ul>
<b>Timing</b> for writing intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide timetable for the module and information on assessment deadlines</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Discuss suitable timing for writing intervention in modules (ideally, 3 weeks in advance of assessment due dates)</li> </ul>

The collaboration between academics and writing experts, as outlined above, aligns well with a statement in the proposed *Student Success Framework* in UEL’s Academic Strategy 2020 document (Colton, 2016) where it states “by building relationships between service and academic staff as experts in their fields we will take a holistic approach to our students by supporting them to address any personal, financial and academic challenges” (p. 12). In line with this principle, the close working relationship and constant communication between academic staff and writing specialists for the embedding of academic literacies in curricula will maximise the academic potential of our diverse learners and hence contribute to student retention and progression at UEL, as this research project would suggest.

### 3. Methodology

This research aims to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the embedded academic writing provision as part of the subject curriculum, drawing on a foundation transitional module (*SC3001 Key Ideas and Issues for Social Scientists*) for 2015-16. The objectives are to gain insights into students' views and experience of our writing provision; student relative progress/improvement, comparing their grades across assessments; and retention and progression rate compared with 2014-15 academic year. We collected the following data to help shed light on our areas of interest: 1) student individual/focus group discussions (incl. a brief demographic form); 2) student grades/relative progress across assessments in the focal module; and 3) retention and progression data. The second and third datasets from the focal cohort were compared against with last year's cohort. In this study, student grades/relative progress, and retention and progression data were taken as subsidiary data to complement the discussion drawing mostly on student individual/focus group discussions.

For the focus groups, we recruited students who were, at the time of this research, studying in the focal module where we had heavily embedded our writing support. We explained our research aim and intention in one of our writing sessions. The information sheet concerning the details pertinent to the purpose of the research and what might be asked of the students in the research process was given in class. There were in total of 55 students regularly present in the course (excluding 'withdrawn for non-attendance') where we recruited 41, which was more than half of the whole cohort (75%). As the involvement in this project was voluntary, students were notified that they would not be disadvantaged should they decide not to participate in the discussions. In terms of the grouping for focus groups, we were initially thinking of having groups of 4-5. However, due to student availability and our capacity, students who had expressed their interest in participating were grouped ranged from 2 – 6, with a few individual discussions, which results in a total of 17 sessions (Groups A-Q). Each discussion lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded.

The schedule of the discussions involved four areas of inquiry: a) students' views and experiences of assignment writing in the foundation degree; b) students' perceptions of our embedded sessions for academic writing (incl. suggestions for improvement); c) student overall experience of studying in the foundation degree programme and future plans; and d) student prior academic/writing experiences. On the day of the discussions, students were asked to read and sign the consent form, and agree to be audio-recorded. A statement about confidentiality was brought to the attention of all the participants at the beginning of the discussions to minimise their concerns. Given the consideration of student availability, individual/focus group discussions were conducted between April and May (i.e. before the summer vacation).

As part of student focus group/individual discussion, a form which requests student personal information (e.g., gender, age, educational background and other relevant demographic data) was given to the students to fill in at the end of the sessions. The reason for acquiring this piece of information was to see whether there is any correlation between certain demographic aspects and what they expressed in the discussions. Tables 2 and 3 below provide a brief description of student participants collected in terms of their ethnicity and age:

Table 2 Student participant ethnicity

Ethnicity	Count
<i>Asian, Asian British, Asian English, Asian Scottish, or Asian Welsh</i>	7
Asian/Asian British	2
Bangladeshi	2
Chinese	0
Indian	0

Pakistani	0
Other Asian background	3
<i>White</i>	12
British	7
English	2
Gypsy or Irish Traveller	0
Irish	0
Scottish	0
Welsh	0
Other White background	3
<i>Black, Black British, Black English, Black Scottish, or Black Welsh</i>	16
African	10
Caribbean	5
Other Black background	1
<i>Mixed</i>	2
White and Asian	1
White and Black African	0
White and Black Caribbean	0
White and Chinese	0
Other mixed background	1
<i>Other ethnic group</i>	2
Arab	0
Other ethnic group	2
<i>Prefer not to say</i>	2
<i>Not stated</i>	0
Total	41

Table 3 Student participant age

Age	Count
16 - 24	26
25 - 34	6
35 - 44	4
45 - 54	5
55 - 64	0
65+	0
Prefer not to say	0
Total	41

For our data analysis, student individual/focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim for analysis. We coded the discussions using *NVivo 10* to help sort and organise data systematically, with the aim of identifying recurring/significant concepts in relation to student views of our academic writing provision and their experience of writing in the foundation programme. Once the initial themes have been identified, we applied a process of “identifying links between categories, grouping them thematically and then sorting them according to different levels of generality” to develop “a hierarchy of main and subthemes” (Ritchie, Spencer, & O'Connor, 2003, p. 222). To enhance its inter-rater reliability, we both coded three pieces of individual/focus group discussions respectively, and compared and discussed our coding categories to make sure the data were coded systematically and the coding scheme was fine-tuned.

For the data of student grades/relative progress, and retention and progression obtained from the programme leader and Qlikview programme (i.e. REP Data and Retention Analytics), we aimed to explore the following inquires:

- What are the retention and progression rates in 2014-15 and 2015-16 academic years? Which academic year has a higher retention and progression rate?
- What is the relative progress between Coursework 1 (Research proposal) and Coursework 2 (Research report) in the focal module (SC3001) for 2014-15 and 2015-16? Which year has a higher percentage of students with a positive relative progress (e.g., better attainment)?

Initially, we had planned to explore the relative progress across all the foundation modules and academic years (2014-15 without writing intervention and 2015-16 with writing intervention). However, after the initial exploration, we concluded that it might not be reliable and comparable due to many other variations such as the size of the cohort. We thus focused only on the relative progress between coursework assignments 1 and 2 in the focal module (SC3001) across 2014-15 and 2015-16 academic years. The reason for this comparison was also because we had most of our intervention in SC3010, with a weekly hour and a half seminar dedicated to each of the different sections in a research report (i.e. introduction, literature review, methods, findings and discussion) during the year 2015/16. Thus, we would like to explore whether our tailored and intensive approach have impacted positively on student attainment.

#### 4. Key findings and discussion

The analysis of individual/focus group discussions suggests that students, overall, responded positively to our embedded academic writing provision where all of them have expressed how the embedded academic writing instruction has raised their understanding of the lecturer expectations of assessments and helped develop their academic voice and confidence. Based on the thematic coding and analysis, we have derived a range of themes that can be categorised into the following topic areas:

Table 4 Topic areas in individual/focus group discussions

Categories	Sources*	References*
a. Student experiences of writing in the foundation programme	17	341
b. Student perceptions of the academic writing provision	17	847
c. Student prior experience and mature learner identity	17	299
d. Student improvement in academic literacies	17	161
e. Student progression for next academic year	17	90

\* Sources: the number of individual/focus group discussions.

\* References: the number of instances identified in relation to the topic areas.

In our discussion, we focus on the first two areas – a) students’ experiences of writing in the foundation programme; and b) students’ perceptions of the academic writing provision – as these directly address to our research questions. The first area – ‘students’ experiences of writing in the foundation programme’ – focuses on how students see and reflect their overall experience of assignment writing in the foundation year. The second area – ‘students’ perceptions of the academic writing provision’ – is associated with what students think about the embedded writing sessions and areas for improvement. These two areas are organised and discussed by themes and sub-themes that we have derived from the thematic analysis, as shown in sections 4.1 and 4.2. Here, it should be noted that when students discussed their experiences of writing, they made frequent reference to their prior educational experience and constantly referred to their identity as a mature learner). Where appropriate, we will draw on either students’ accounts alone or a string of conversation to support the discussion. The purpose of the latter is to demonstrate how discussion was co-constructed between students in a group.

#### 4.1 Students' experiences of writing in the foundation programme

The individual/focus group discussions have suggested that most of the students have found writing at university level challenging due to a variety of writing types and convention, and their packed submission deadlines. Table 5 below summarises the themes and sub-themes of students' experiences of writing in the foundation study:

Table 5 Students' experiences of writing in the foundation programme

Themes and sub-themes
Theme: Challenging aspects of various types of academic writing and their packed deadlines
<p><i>Sub-themes</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students have identified the use of <b>academic sources</b> in writing, <b>referencing</b>, and independent research as the most challenging aspects of studying at university level.</li> <li>• Students have found academic writing challenging due to its <b>distinctive features and conventions</b>.</li> <li>• Students have found written assessments challenging because there are more <b>variations in text types</b>, compared with their previous studies.</li> <li>• Students have found challenging to unpack <b>academic terminology</b> associated with assessments and meet lecturer expectations.</li> <li>• Students have found written assessments challenging because of <b>having gaps in education</b>.</li> <li>• Students have found challenging to complete their coursework on time due to <b>other commitments</b> (e.g., work and family) and <b>packed submission deadlines</b>.</li> </ul>

When students were prompted to express their views on the most challenging aspects of writing at university level, most of them (NG<sup>1</sup>=13/17) stated that they have found the use of proper academic sources in writing, and referencing difficult, as exemplified below:

*During my A levels, there wasn't a high demand. You put the website link at the bottom and then... basically do whatever you want, really. That's why when I came here I found it so hard with referencing... for some of us, it was the first time that we've done this, to use someone else's work as evidence. (Focus Group F)*

*When I studied English, we had to quote certain poets, and authors and what-not, but not really with the same style as like Harvard reference. (From Group E)*

*At first I wasn't really used to the referencing. I didn't know you had to get information from books and other sources. That's the hardest part for me. With the actual essay writing, I feel I am pretty good with words. I can make sentences, create sentences that go together, but my problem was doing the research and the case studies and actually finding information to put down. (Focus Group D)*

As can be seen from above, students made reference to their previous academic experience (e.g., 'during my A levels...', 'when I studied English...') as a contrastive comparison of what they had experienced in working on academic sources and doing referencing for their writing in the foundation programme. The students' accounts above indicate that there is a particular style of referencing (in this case, 'Harvard') which many students are not familiar with. In many cases, this is due to the fact that students might not have experienced this type of referencing before or even if they have some experience, the expectations and requirements might be different from their school and college encounters. In the light of this, there seems to be a discontinuation from students' previous experiences that has contributed to the hardship faced by many of them, in a way as suggested in our introduction and pedagogical approaches sections

<sup>1</sup> NG: The number of groups that touched on the themes/topics.

where students often perceive academic culture as alien to them due in part to their different prior academic literacy experiences (*see also* Ivanič, 1998 – ‘multiple and conflicting identity’). Many students also commented that another key challenge was to meet the academic expectations of their writing in an academic style and with academic voice, as shown below:

*You are expected to use scholarly words, academic words, concise words and this is one of the challenges. They [lecturers] want us to write, not normal common language, they want us to get accustomed to use big words for simple things. I guess, making us more advanced mentally, and widening our vocabulary... They want us to write concise and academically where we have to use proper academic words. (Focus Group B)*

As can be seen above, the word ‘academic’ was mentioned many times where one of the students drew a distinction between ‘academic’ and non-academic ways of writing (‘*normal common language*’) when he discussed the challenges in academic writing. The other demanding aspect of writing in the university is that there are more variations in text types, compared with student previous academic experience. For instance, many students (NG=12/17) expressed that they had to submit different types of written assignments such as research proposal, research project and media diary, as highlighted below:

*I think the thing that was really challenging for me was that different things to do like the research and stuff like that, like reading diaries and some of the modules’ work as well... different formats and requirements, like, wow! What can you do with all these? Like media diary, even though it was something small, we’ve never done the media diary before and that makes it hard. (Focus Group M)*

The concern above has been shared by many students where there are various assessment formats and requirements. Specifically, students are aware that they are expected to adopt different structures and conventions for different types of assessments. When the students were asked to discuss their writing experience, one of them brought up an analogy of wearing different ‘hats’ when he dealt with different assessments, which reflects the challenges of meeting respective requirements:

*... because there were different essays and case studies and research projects, just learning all these disciplines; it was challenging but for me I had to embrace it and I had to become ... If I was going to be a researcher I had to put on my research ‘hat’, if I was going to be an essayist, I had to know the structure, the introduction, the body of the work and the conclusion. If I was going to do the presentation, then I had to use those kinds of ‘hats’ ... (Focus Group O)*

The need for students to deal with a variety of assessments has, in fact, intensified the difficulty for students in unpacking the requirements and meet tutor expectations as they move from one type of writing to another. This concern has been particularly associated with academic terminology, used frequently by academics to describe assessments, which are not often made explicit and transparent to the students, as illustrated in one of the focus groups below:

*Student 1: The hardest thing that I found with the academic writing is trying to understand what your tutors want from you... for me in particular, I’m a very visual person, and I think seeing something and knowing what you are looking for when you are marking my work is important to me. That will help me to structure my work...so when you hear the title “Literature Review” you’re like, “What is this?”, “What does it mean?”*

*Student 2: I think you are absolutely right because I’ve come to you [one of the researchers] about three times and I keep repeating myself because the interpretation of what the lecturers are*

*expecting, the meaning is different from me. Where I say 'information sheet' for student participants. What does that mean by information sheet in research? Do I need to give my information, are you asking for somebody else's information? I'll just put what I'm comfortable putting and then coming to you [one of the tutors as well as researchers] as my lecturer and you are saying that's not the interpretation of the information that you put out there. It's really tough.*  
(Focus Group H)

As can be seen above, one of the challenging aspects for academic writing is when students attempt to unpack the meaning and requirements of their written assessments. As in the case above, students struggled to grasp the meaning of the concepts such as 'literature review', and 'information sheet' for research proposal writing as these terminology might appear to be alien to them and might not have carried the same meaning across modules and assessments. For instance, some students expressed that they had research proposal writing for two of their modules; however, the expectations associated with this type of writing were different, which caused certain confusions. In fact, Lea and Street (1998) stressed that it is often difficult for students to uptake what is expected of them as "in practice, what makes a piece of student writing 'appropriate' has more to do with issues of epistemology than with the surface features of form to which staff often have recourse when describing their students' writing" (p. 162). In the light of this, it can be argued that as in the case of 'research proposal' writing across modules, the format of this type of writing might be similar; yet, the ways in which academics conceptualise the assessment requirements can be varied based on the learning outcomes of modules. In this case, the same terminology used to refer to different assessments may carry different meanings, which cannot be taken for granted and must be communicated properly to students when we elaborate assessment requirements and provide feedback on their writing.

Another key theme that emerges as being important to the student experience of writing is associated with students' prior educational experiences and other areas of commitments alongside their studies. For instance, more than half of our student participants are mature students where many of them have a long gap in education. When the students were asked to reflect on their writing experience in the foundation year, many of them expressed the struggles of trying to acculturate themselves to the academic environment, as highlighted below:

*I found it challenging, in the sense that, coming from a different environment, because I am coming from a working environment into the university, and we are told that we have to write in an academic way, which is quite different from the normal way of just writing, because now you have to write in a more academic way.*

*With my kind of background, I've been out of school almost 25 years now, so coming back to the university to me it's like learning new things altogether.*

(Focus Group N)

The instance where students expressed their gap in education can also be found in many other focus groups. Here, it can be argued that as many of our focal students came into higher education through alternative pathways (vs. A-levels), they would need academic support networks to ease their transition into new academic community. Without those academic conventions being communicated openly, students might consider higher education as a journey they cannot cope with, which might lead to dropout. As such, the delivery of embedded writing sessions into subject curriculum in a way that directly addresses module assessments and feedback can help to foster student sense of autonomy and belonging to the academic community, as will be discussed in section 4.2. Regarding their writing experience, students also found it challenging to complete their coursework on a packed submission time frame due to other commitments they had. For example, many students brought up their identity as mature students who also



have work/parental responsibility when they commented on their study workload and pressure to meet the assessment deadlines:

*With regards of the module, especially this one, this last one we are like tied up. Because I personally I'm a family person, I have three kids and I do part time job as well. When they pile up the deadlines, I find it very very difficult because it's like I have to do the presentation, I have to do the PowerPoint, and there is an essay as well. How am I going to do all this, with my family, work, and studies? (Focus Group H)*

*When you are an adult in your family, it's not that easy, compared to when I went to high school... I had no wife, no children. It was mommy and daddy house you were living in, so you could access these things in the evening or the next day. That's the advantage of some of these younger ones in the university who have no wife and family. In my opinion, they have no excuse for not doing their work. (Focus Group B)*

The accounts above has brought up the challenging aspect for some students to balance between their education, career and personal commitments. Here, it is interesting to note that the account from the focus group B appears to suggest that there is a distinction between mature and younger students in terms of their learning capacity. Specifically, it is suggested that mature students might not have as much time as their younger colleagues for study due to other commitments outside of university. In fact, many students made frequent reference to their younger/mature counterparts in class when they discussed their experience of foundation studies and views towards our writing provision, as exemplified below:

*Student 1: Maybe some of the writing sessions should, because obviously you've got the older people, they probably haven't had that education job. They've had that massive gap. Maybe for them it was useful, but then for people who have been through A-level, they don't need it as much...*

*Student 2: That's the difficult thing with coming to University as well cos everyone is at different stages ... It's not that everyone follows the kind of academic route, some people have done different things so it's kind of difficult to meet different needs...*

*(Focus Group I)*

The accounts above are drawn from two younger students who stated that they might not need that much support on academic writing, compared with mature students. This idea has led to some students' suggestion that academic writing provision should cater to different students' needs (*see* section 4.2 for details).

#### 4.2 Students' perceptions of the academic writing provision

The individual and focus group discussions have suggested that most of the students consider the academic writing provision very useful and relevant to their studies, which has eased their transition to higher education. Table 6 below summarises the themes and sub-themes that relate to students' perceptions of the provision (incl. suggestions for improvement):

Table 6 Students' perceptions of academic writing provision

Themes and sub-themes
Theme: Content and positive impact on their academic literacy development
<p><i>Sub-themes</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students have found the writing intervention <b>helpful, relevant</b> and <b>tailored</b> to their studies, particularly in relation to how these sessions have helped to <b>ease their transition to university study</b>.</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students have expressed that the writing provision <b>complements the subject lectures</b> well.</li> <li>• Students have stated that the academic writing provision has helped them to unpack <b>academic terms and requirements</b> related to different types of assessments and hence better meet <b>lecturer expectations</b> (self-reported better attainment).</li> <li>• Students have frequently used the session <b>materials from module</b> pages on Moodle.</li> <li>• Most students have reported a significant increase in their <b>level of confidence</b> when it comes to writing in an <b>academic style</b>.</li> <li>• Students have stated that the academic skills they have learned from the writing provision are <b>transferrable</b> to other modules and life.</li> </ul>
Theme: Suggestions on the academic writing provision
<p><i>Sub-themes</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The provision should <b>cater to different students' needs</b>.</li> <li>• The provision should be <b>dispersed more widely</b> to other modules in the programme.</li> <li>• The teaching methods used in the sessions should be <b>balanced</b> between <b>individual work</b> and <b>pair/group work</b>.</li> </ul>

According to the students, the usefulness and relevance of the provision has been associated with a direct linkage with module assessments and timing for the provision. For example, several students (NG=15/17) expressed how the academic writing sessions had connected to their lectures and helped them to unpack the lecturers' expectations of the assessments, as shown below:

*I found that the writing seminars were a continuation, an expansion, of the actual lectures. What I mean by that is this in its simplicity, it broke down what was expected from the assignment. You [the writing tutors] broke it down into a layman's terms that was easier for us to understand. That really has been a blessing. (Focus Group O)*

*The writing sessions were very good. Very useful. I think it was something that we definitely needed. Because obviously, we didn't get to discuss it much in the actual lecture's content so it was nice to be able to have a session purely on the writing... I think writing and subject lectures go hand-in-hand. Yeah, I think that without writing sessions, we would have seriously struggled. (Focus Group E)*

*They [subject lecturers] are teaching us about our subject, but you are teaching us generally how to write academically and how to understand what we are putting in certain areas... you have taught us, because the information that you've given me has been very handy or the academic phrasebank that is absolutely excellent. It's something that I think every student should have because those words and those terms are exactly what they want from us. (Focus Group H)*

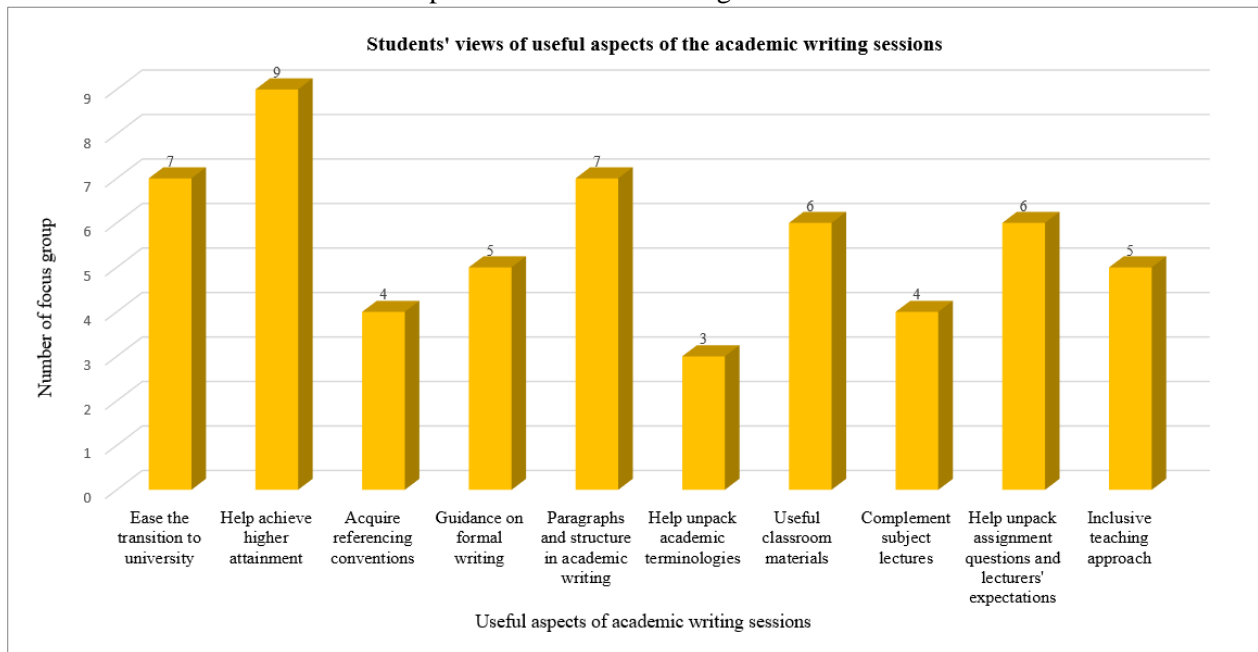
The use of phrases such as 'a continuation', 'an expansion', and 'go hand-in-hand' above suggests a close connection between the academic writing sessions and the subject lectures. Specifically, the students stated that the writing sessions have helped to break down the assessment requirements and unpack the academic terminology that are associated with the assessments ('*broke it down into a layman's terms that was easier for us to understand*'). The provision has addressed the issues raised by many students regarding the opaque nature of tutor expectations ('*The hardest thing I found with the academic writing is trying to understand what your tutors want from you*', '*I think that without writing sessions, we would have seriously struggled*'). Lea and Street (1998) have also pointed out that "one explanation for problems in student writing might be the gaps between academic expectations and student interpretations of what is involved in student writing" (p. 159). For example, students might not be familiar with what it means by having their own 'argument' in writing, let alone how to construct it. In this case, the writing tutors can be seen as a medium to bridge the gap and help to decipher the underlying meanings in assessment

instructions. The example below shows how the sessions have contributed to the increase in student awareness of subject lecturers' expectations:

*I haven't been in class for a long time, so you guys coming in with the support, it gives you great new knowledge of what the lecturer is probably expecting of you. Yeah. To me 90% helped my assignment writing. (Focus Group N)*

The account above echoes what we have discussed in section 4.1 where many of the focal students have a long gap between their education, which requires some academic support to help them to settle in a new academic discourse community. Table 7 below summarises students' views of the most useful aspects of the writing sessions:

Table 7 Students' views of useful aspects of academic writing sessions



As can be seen in Table 7, a high proportion of the focus groups expressed that the academic writing provision has not only helped them to unpack assignment question and lecturers' expectations of assessments, but also helped to develop their academic writing voice and style to meet the academic standards with a higher attainment (e.g., paragraphs and structure in writing, referencing, formality). Some students' accounts are as follows:

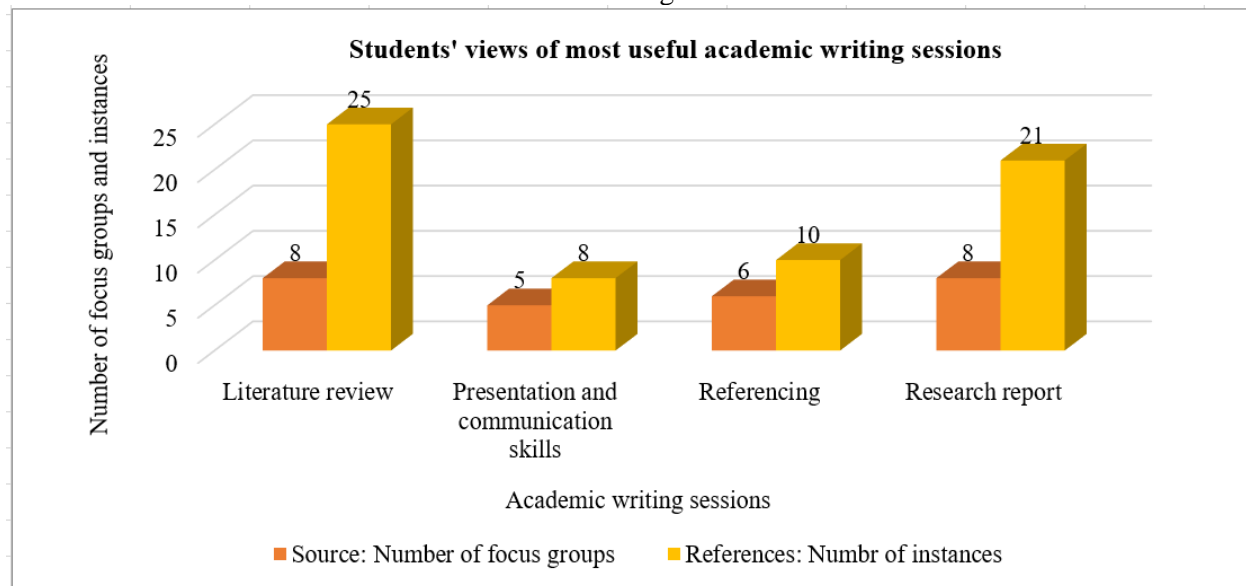
*They helped a lot because at first I wasn't too sure how the style of writing would be in University and what standard they would like. The way it was explained to me was very useful. (Focus Group F)*

*You give out a lot of information. You give a lot of handouts and show us exactly step-by-step and tell us how to do it exactly. You just don't give us the handout and say, "Here. Go and look at it." You tell us how to do it. (Focus Group C)*

*...without these sessions, I wouldn't have had any structure, I wouldn't know how to go into what, I wouldn't know academic writing style from non-academic writing. Everything would have been all over the place, probably would have been failing everything. (Focus Group M)*

The accounts above have echoed our earlier discussion on how the writing sessions have helped students to break down their assessment instructions and provided students with the opportunity to explore academic style and conventions through the process of unpacking the requirements in class. When students were asked to state which sessions they thought most useful, they particularly highlighted the ones on report writing, referencing, literature review and presentation skills, as shown in Table 8 below:

Table 8 Students' views of most useful academic writing sessions



This finding has resonated with the discussion in section 4.1 where students have found academic writing challenging due in part to their lack/inadequate exposure to academic language and writing in their previous learning experiences and to a variety of academic text types. When students were asked which type of writing they felt most difficult, one of the students stated as below:

*Maybe literature review writing, because you know when you hear the title "Literature review" you're like, "What is this?" But when it's been broken down in the session, you know what to do. Like I said, in secondary, you've done the same sort of thing where you get different research and you put together. It's the same thing but when you actually hear the words "literature review" you think something different. (Focus Group A)*

The account above has echoed our pedagogical approaches where we have argued that the academic terminology such as 'literature review' and 'case study' cannot be treated as straightforward text labels. As in the case above, the student stated that when she did not uptake what a literature review entails, this type of writing presents to be challenging to her. Once she grasped the concept in the session, she was able to draw on her prior experiences of writing ('in secondary, you've done the same sort of thing where you get different research and you put together') and make sense of the writing she came across in the foundation programme. In the light of this, it is vital to make requirements and expectations associated with these terminology explicit to our students, as also stressed in section 2. The student's account above has brought up our pedagogical belief that given the consideration of diverse student body at UEL, it is important that we help students to develop their academic voice and identity, building upon their prior learning experiences (Lea, 2004). With this approach, we hope to minimise the instances of 'opposition', and 'resistance' in student development of academic literacy, as pointed out by Ivanič (1998).

To make features of academic writing transparent to our students, we have designed in-class activities that have adopted a genre-based approach, aiming to support students “through their enhanced understanding of the requirements that had been made explicit to them” (Wingate et al., 2011, p. 73). As discussed in section 2, students were advised to observe sample texts for the type of language and rhetorical moves that feature a particular genre (e.g., research proposal) in our sessions. Many students described how these genre-based activities had provided them with a clear picture of the structure of their assignments:

*Initially, I knew what I wanted to write, but I didn't know how to structure, but with the writing seminar, there was a sample that was given to observe, so it was easy to see how to structure the assignment and what to include in each section (Focus Group N)*

Based on the student's statement above, it shows the close relationship between ‘what’ and ‘how’ aspects in writing where our provision devotes to the latter. Specifically, after students have obtained subject knowledge from their lectures, we support them to present their ideas in an academic manner and make sure their academic voice is appropriate for that particular type of writing. With the explicit teaching of academic genre, all the focus groups (NG=17/17 with 54 instances found) have responded affirmatively when asked whether their confidence as a writer and learner in higher education has increased, as exemplified below:

*I'm more confident. When they say, “Write a report,” I know how to set it or they say an essay, I know how to write it. Proposal, I know how to set it... A literature review, I know what to do. The sessions help you. Like I have said, this foundation is helpful because it helps you learn and take onto the first year. (Focus Group A)*

*Now I feel more confident because in the past, like when I said the research topic, I felt I didn't understand what was required, but with the writing seminar, where yourself and Tiffany have told us how to break things down... It helps me to understand. Not get frightened of, “What am I going to write?” (Focus Group N)*

The positive impact on student confidence in writing can be associated with our pedagogical belief that we view student diversity and differences as part of learning and teaching resources. Specifically, we have strived to provide students with as many opportunities as possible (e.g., pair/group exercise) to interact, construct and negotiate meaning through dialogue. Students are encouraged to participate actively in classroom exercises to maximise the learning outcomes, as also highlighted by one of the key UEL corporate objectives – ‘Learning by doing’ (Cottrell, 2015). The writing provision has also helped students with their transition to the university (‘*this foundation is helpful because it helps you learn and take onto the first year*’). The positive impact on learning and self-confidence building has been evident through students’ comments and reflections towards the use of pair/group activities, as shown below:

*For me, I think that some people in the class might not speak because the class is huge. People kind of feel frightened of saying something wrong. But when it's in the small group, you feel more ... For me, I felt more confident speaking in the small group than speaking in front of the whole class. (Focus Group N)*

*You know when you're in a group you share ideas, you bounce ideas back to each other but when you're by yourself, you kind of question yourself like, “Is this right? Is this not right?” When you're with a group you can tell them, “This is my idea. What's yours?” (Focus Group A)*

*I find it interesting and useful, and just like he said, something about learning from each other... there was this cooperation and everybody tried to contribute in one way or the other, which was very helpful. (Focus Group O)*

The positive response towards pair and group activities has shared by many other focus groups (NG=16/17) where students also commented on the social, communication and teamwork skills they have developed over time through pair/group exercises:

*Pair group is good to make you come out of your shell... To communicate with people. It's a form of communication, and doing away any sort of shy barrier, it's good. (Focus Group B)*

*Group work is good because it's like team work, you come up with difference of opinion but at the end of the day, we end up achieving the same goal. Working in a group is of great help because it makes you to have the support of others and you don't have to rely on your own alone, you can get information from each other. It's like working as a team. (Focus Group L)*

The accounts above appear to be associated with the aspect of employability such as communication and teamwork. In fact, many students have expressed how the academic skills they have developed from the writing provision are transferrable to other modules and life. For example, some students explained how they found one of the assignments for a different module much easier to approach as it consisted of the same type of writing that had been previously discussed during our sessions. There is also a concrete example of how students might have transferred their academic skills for life, as illustrated below:

*I'll give an example, in my daughter's school, we were told to do a write up about things that they do at home, where I found myself ... I felt I was still writing an essay, like I still had to do it the way we do it in essay writing. I applied those skills. Though I was writing for her school book, I still thought ... It's kind of become part of me. (Focus Group N)*

The example above has explicitly revealed the important connection to the concept of employability where many academic skills in higher education are relevant and transferrable to life and future employment settings.

In terms of the pair and group work, although most of the students have responded positively, some students have suggested that we introduce a better balance between individual and group activities, instead of relying heavily on the latter. Specifically, some students preferred to work individually for some tasks and some raised issues of disengagement from their team members which results in the challenges of teamwork, as shown below:

*It's okay to have group work every once in a while, but sometimes I just like to do my own work sometimes, instead of just doing it all together all the time. I can see why people do it because it's meant to just, team-building and stuff like that, but sometimes I kind of just want to do it myself. (Focus Group Q)*

*I think sometimes it's quite helpful, but it just depends on who you're with because some people just don't really participate or they don't really actually discuss work, so it's quite difficult to actually do group work. (Focus Group G)*

The accounts above demonstrate the issues of student learning style ('sometimes I kind of just want to do it myself') and unequal participation and contribution that happened in group work. Some thoughts to address these issues will be discussed in section 5 where we state how we strike a balance between our belief in peer interaction and problems that this form of learning might trigger.

The other suggestion students had made is the writing provision could be made compulsory to those who need them the most. Specifically, some students argued that the support might have been more appropriate for the mature students due to their long gap in education:

*Obviously, you've got the elder people, they probably haven't had an education. They've had this massive gap. Maybe for them it was useful, but then for people who have been to sixth form recently, they don't need it as much. (Focus Group I)*

The statement above suggests students' different learning needs based on their respective stage in education. Importantly, we have observed a relationship between the needs of diverse students and the ways in which students utilise the resources available to them. For instance, we have noticed that not all the students attended all our writing sessions. This is particularly the case for those who do not have a long gap in education. Initially, we were concerned with the lack of engagement in learning for this particular group of students. However, after we heard more about their learning preference in the focus groups, we have found that these students who have relatively more academic experience have, in fact, frequently engaged with the academic writing materials we uploaded to the UEL's VLE (Moodle). This finding indicates that students adopt different learning strategies, apart from the traditional lecture and seminar attendance and participation in class activities. Specifically, it has raised a crucial point that what counts as 'learning' needs to be carefully examined as its conventional line of thinking where most of the learning happens in the classroom, as normatively described, may not be the way the concept was intended by many students in the contemporary higher education.

In the discussion below, three students in one of the focus groups unanimously expressed their frequent interaction with the writing resources we uploaded to Moodle:

Interviewer *In terms of the writing sessions, how often do you use those resources?*

Student 1: *Every time.*

Student 3: *Every time, for every of my assignment, yeah.*

Interviewer: *Really?*

Student 3: *I think it's just good to look back on what you have established.*

Interviewer: *I see.*

Student 3: *Especially if you've missed that writing seminar.*

Student 2: *Moodle's wicked, honestly.*

(From Group I)

The conversation above shows students' (both young and mature) engagement with our moodle resources. Given the consideration of a higher number of the participants with other commitments outside the university, the resources on moodle has provided students with a more flexible learning platform as they are able to access these resources at any time and in any space. Lea (2004) has discussed how the expansion of the use of VLEs have provided further opportunities for a more inclusive and multimodal approach to the explicit instruction of academic literacies to students from non-traditional backgrounds. As these online writing resources are tailored to specific modules' assessments, it has a direct impact on students' willingness to engage with them, as highlighted below:

*When it's time to do the actual assignment, I'll go back to Moodle and look at the materials that you've put on there and it's helpful. (From Group F)*

*I used the resources in Moodle especially when we had to write the research report. There was an example of a literature review for it, so it was very useful. And even for other modules as well, you still kind of go back and look at them. (From Group M)*

*Another suggestion that all the focus groups (NG=17/17) have pointed out is that the provision could be dispersed more widely to other modules in the foundation programme. One of the students proposes targeting those modules with more complex assessments ( 'Because there are some modules which are quite difficult in terms of writing, ... I think more materials and more skills need to be taught in them' – Focus Group G). We will address this point in section 5.*



#### 4.3 Student grades/improvement and relative progress, retention and progression

Table 9 below summarises the key findings in relation to the positive impact our provision has contributed, drawing on the data of students' grades, retention and progression across academic years (2014-15 and 2015-16):

Table 9 Student grades and relative progress, retention and progression

Themes and sub-themes
Theme: Academic writing provision contributes to student retention and progression
<p><i>Sub-themes</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All the student participants (41/41) have stated that the academic writing instruction has raised their understanding of modules' expectations of the assessments, positively impacting their levels of attainment.</li> <li>• All the students have expressed their increased level of confidence as a learner and writer in higher education. 35 out of 41 students have expressed their intention to carry on their studies at UEL.</li> <li>• In comparison with the previous academic year (2014-15), there is a significant higher percentage of students in the year 2015-16 who increased their grades at least by one grade scale when comparing their relative progress between Coursework 1 (Research proposal) and Coursework 2 (Research report) in the focal module (SC3001).</li> </ul>

As discussed in section 4.2, all student participants (41/41) have stated that the academic writing instruction has raised their understanding of modules' expectations of the assessments, which contributes to their increased level of confidence and attainment. If we consider the progression data for this specific cohort in the year 2015/16 (see Table 10 below), there appears to be an increase in the level of progression of 2.30% (69.00% - 66.70%), when compared to the cohort in the previous year. However, we are aware that there are many other variables such as the differences in the number of students, demographic information and other levels of attainment at modules without our embedded writing intervention. These variables might complicate the attempt to draw a direct link between the increase in progression and our intervention.

Table 10 Overall progression in the Social Sciences Foundation Programme for the years 2014/15 and 2015/16

Academic year	Level	120 credits (n*)	<b>120 credits (%)</b>	60-89 credits (n)	60-89 credits (%)	30-59 credits (n)	30-59 credits (%)	0 credits (n)	0 credits (%)	Total (n)	Total (%)
2015/16	3	40	<b>69.00%</b>	0	0.00%	1	1.70%	17	29.30%	58	100%
2014/15	3	34	<b>66.70%</b>	2	3.90%	3	5.90%	12	23.50%	51	100%

\* N: Number of students

As can be seen from Table 11 below which shows the retention data from the previous two years, we have found that there seems to be consistencies between what students have reported in the focus groups and increased retention from the year 2015/16 in specific age groups.

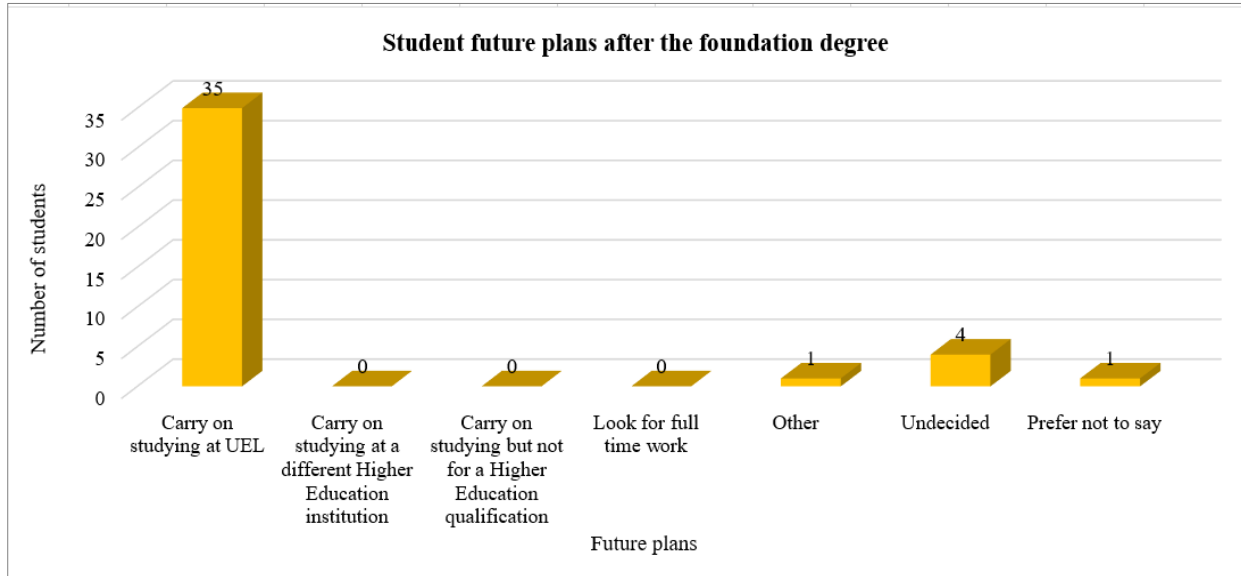
Specifically, 8 focal mature students between the age range of 30 to 59, emphasised how the writing sessions have helped them with the transition to university after a long gap in education. As can be observed from Table 11, there seems to be a significant increase of 14.30% (64.30% - 50.00%) in the level of retention in the age group 30-59. It should also be noted that there is an increase in the number of mature students enrolled – and progressing. This seems to be a group who particularly benefit from the support, as the research would suggest. As this cohort is a particularly target for UEL, it would be useful to stress that this finding needs to be emphasised.

Table 11 Retention in the Social Sciences Foundation Programme by age on entry

Cohort 2014/15		2014/15		2015/16	
Age on Entry	Outcome	n	%	n	%
20 and under	Complete a different award from the one they enrolled on	2	5.60%	2	8.00%
	Continue at university or college	26	72.20%	15	60.00%
	Left before completing their course	8	22.20%	8	32.00%
	Total	36	100%	25	100%
21-24	Continue at university or college	2	100%	9	69.20%
	Left before completing their course			4	30.80%
	Total	2	100.00%	13	100.00%
25-29	Are taking a break from their studies			1	33.30%
	Continue at university or college	6	85.70%		
	Left before completing their course	1	14.30%	2	66.70%
	Total	7	100.00%	3	100.00%
30-59	Continue at university or college	3	<b>50.00%</b>	9	<b>64.30%</b>
	Left before completing their course	3	50.00%	5	35.70%
	Total	6	100.00%	14	100.00%

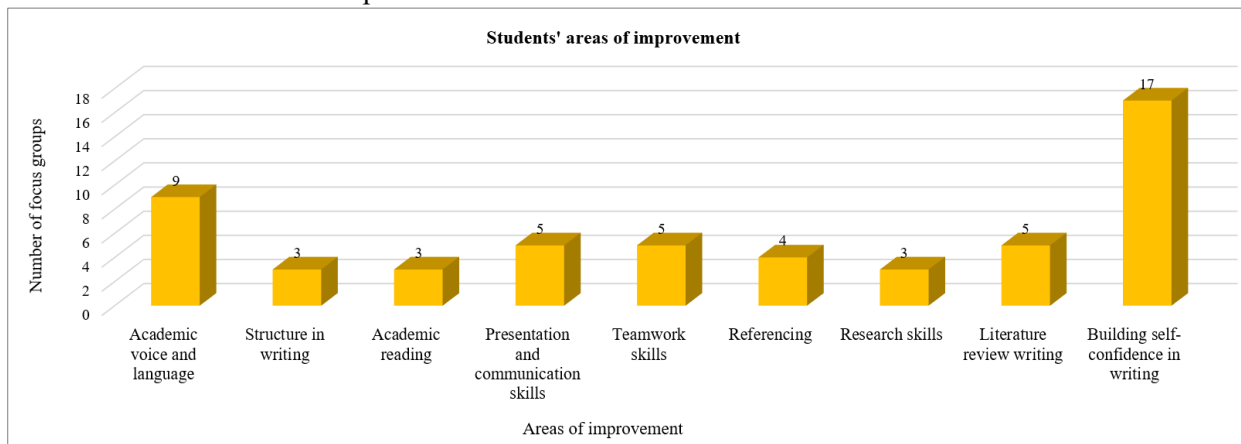
This increase has also reflected on what students shared in the focus groups where 35 out of 41 students expressed their intention to carry on their studies at UEL after their foundation study, as shown in Table 12 below:

Table 12 Students' future plans after the foundation year



As discussed in section 4.2, all focus groups (NG=17/17) responded positively when asked whether their confidence as a writer and learner in HE has increased. Table 13 below, which summarises student self-reported areas of improvement in relation to academic literacy development:

Table 13 Students' areas of improvement



In addition to the discussion above, the most relevant measurement of our impact relates to students' relative progress between their grades for the first coursework (Research plan) and their second coursework (Research report) in the focal module, in comparison with the relative progress of students from the previous year, who were also required to complete the same assessments for this module. As can be seen from Table 14 below, given the consideration of a higher level of difficulty of the second coursework (Research report), it might not be surprising to see that around 35% of the students went down at least one level in both academic years. However, the table shows that a significant higher percentage of students in the year 2015/16 increase their grades at least by one level than the ones during the previous year (44.78% vs. 33.33%). Our intervention during the year 2015/16 has mainly focused on the second coursework, with a weekly hour and a half seminar dedicated to each of the different sections in the research report (i.e. introduction, literature review, methods, findings and discussion). We think this tailored and intensive approach might have impacted positively on students' final grades for the research report. This result also coincides with students' reported views and experiences towards our writing intervention, as detailed in section 4.2, where they highlighted the relevance and usefulness of the intervention to their assessments.

Table 14 Students' relative progress between CW1 and CW2 in the two academic years

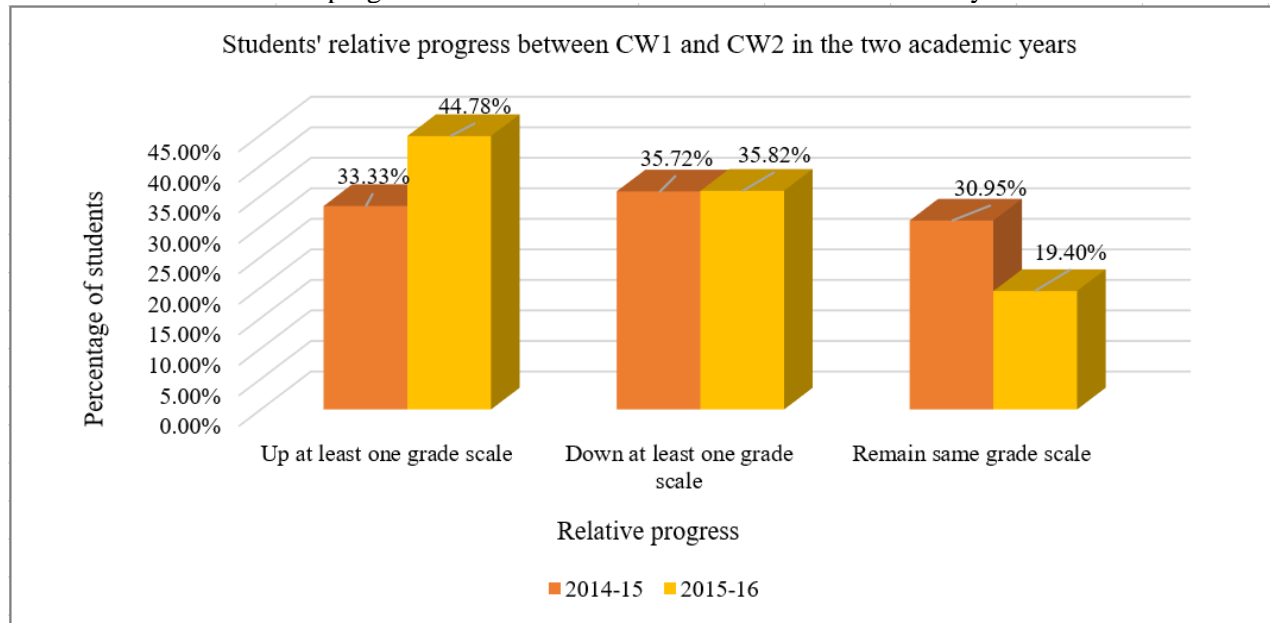
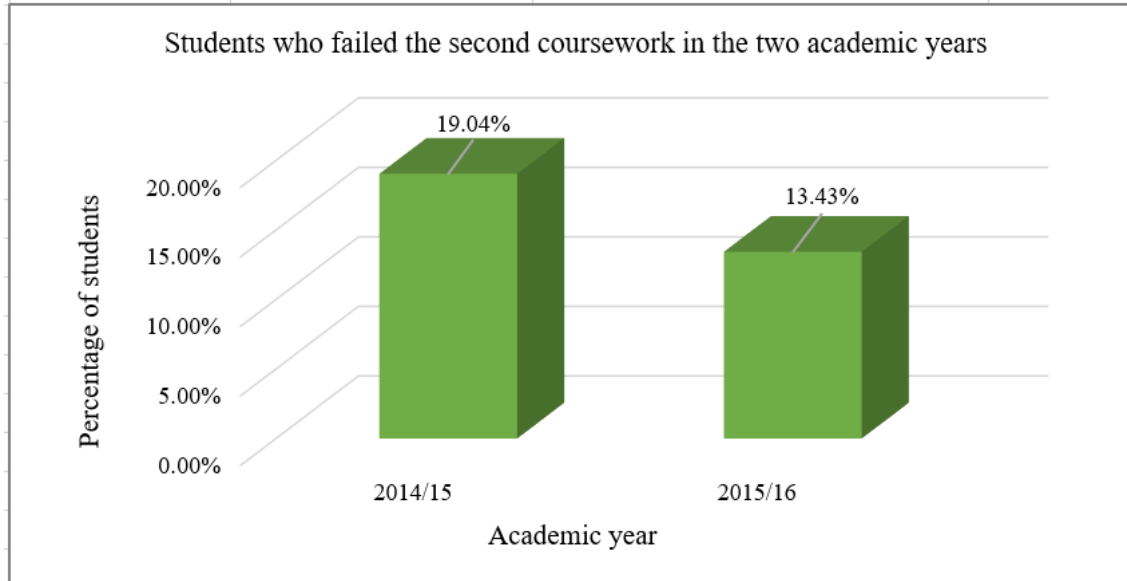


Table 15 below shows that there has also been a slightly lower percentage of students who failed their second coursework (13.43%) in 2015/16, when compared to the previous year (19.04%):

Table 15 Percentage of students who failed the second coursework in the two academic years



Based on these discussions, it can be said that our intervention appears to have a positive impact on the levels of progression, retention and attainment for this particular cohort at UEL. Although the data here might have been influenced by other variables unrelated to our intervention and their possible effect on students' academic performance, the students' own accounts and experiences of our intervention, as detailed comprehensively in sections 4.1 and 4.2, provide solid and strong evidence of the positive impact that our embedded academic literacy provision have brought to student academic literacy development at UEL.

## 5. Conclusion and ways forward

This project focuses on the evaluation of the impact and effectiveness of the inclusive *Writing in the Disciplines* approach, drawing on a case study of the redesigned Extended Degree Programme module (*Key Ideas and Issues for Social Scientists*) within the School of Social Sciences. The findings have provided evidence on the positive impact on student academic literacies development through the explicit embedding of academic literacy instruction within the subject curriculum in the focal level 3 foundation programme. Our intervention has also contributed to better rates of retention (i.e. for specific age groups), progression and attainment of students taking the module in the year 2015-16, compared with 2014-15. Specifically, the concept of *Writing in the Disciplines* with the genre-based approach and academic literacies perspective has proved to be beneficial for enhancing students' motivation and transition to university, as discussed in section 4.2. In this project, we have observed an increased sense of autonomy and belonging among the focal students who had previously seen academic cultures and research communities as alien to them. The features of inclusion and accessibility of the discipline-specific provision facilitate students to embrace the idea that academic literacy development is not a discrete aspect of their studies, but an integral part of the process of acquiring subject knowledge, establishing their own academic identity and raising their aspiration to belong and achieve at university. The implementation of this approach encourages strong collaboration between subject lecturers and writing experts. The positive outcomes of our collaborative work have directly impacted the recent successful revalidation for the redesigned foundation programme in the Social Sciences in May 2016. This revalidation has further developed the embedding of academic literacies within its main transitional module.

One of our challenges ahead is associated with the issue of catering to diverse student needs, as discussed during the focus groups. This issue also presents in the literature which highlights the changes and new opportunities brought about by the diversification of HE in the UK (e.g. Northedge, 2003). This debate is at the core of the principles that have underpinned our intervention where we believe in the need to do away with the 'generic study skills' and 'stigmatisation' of non-traditional students who are regularly characterised as 'lacking' in skills. We have also emphasised that regardless of their background, every undergraduate student needs to receive the explicit instruction of the types of writing expected within their situated field of study. In the light of this stance, we have argued that the academic writing provision should be dispersed more widely across modules and programmes, as highlighted by the focal students. Another issue that the students have raised is that we introduce a better balance between individual and group activities, instead of relying heavily on the latter. This is to address different needs of our students and to hone students' skills through different modes of learning. Specifically, as much as we believe in the benefits that pair/group work can bring to student learning via dialogue and negotiation, we need to implement some individual-based activities which provide students with the opportunity to tackle problems independently and hence facilitates students' sense of autonomy. The individual and group work can also be blended in a learning exercise where students are given "individual 'think time' before setting them up in groups" (Shmoop University, 2016, n.p.), as also suggested by some of our focal students.

This project has implications relevant to the development of 'transferable skills', the term used often by our student participants, which in turn has an association to the critical concept – employability. This concept has been highlighted in UEL's Academic Strategy 2020 document (Colton, 2016) which stresses the importance of embedding element of employability into the curriculum. Aligned with this emphasis, we would like to extend our research and teaching practice to include explicit and systematic connections to employability skills in our embedded academic literacy provision, in collaboration with the employability team. We are very confident that the *Writing in the Disciplines* approach will continue to contribute to student success, progression and retention at UEL.

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