

Students' Perceptions and Performances in Academic Essay Writing in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

All students who have completed their higher school certificate are expected to be both familiar with and equipped with the skills necessary for academic writing at university level. However, international students may experience various difficulties in this regard, deriving from linguistic, cultural, and/or social differences. International students must, therefore, develop and practise new skills and strategies if they are to write successfully at an academic level. Nevertheless, it is not unusual for lecturers to find that the academic writing of international students is better than that of some local students whose first language is English. This suggests that satisfactory academic writing is affected by factors other than just proficiency level in English.

This paper uses the case study of one group of university students in Australia to investigate the impact of an introductory session about the lecturer's expectations for their academic writing on the students' actual writing performance. Data were collected from a questionnaire measuring the students' backgrounds and perceptions of their academic writing and a text analysis of their actual writing. This helped to identify factors that may contribute to the performance of each student in the writing of academic essays. It is anticipated that the findings of the study may assist educators to devise intervention strategies to support students in this area.

Keywords: academic essay, higher education, students' performance, students' perceptions, preparatory activities

INTRODUCTION

The unsatisfactory English language proficiency level of university graduates has been a subject of recent discussion in higher education (Curry & Lillis, 2003), and it is not only non-native English speakers who are the focus of concern. As Furneaux observes, 'Many students (native speakers, too) have never been taught how to write; their schooling has given them a lot of writing practice, but the focus is usually on the product (what you produce) and not the process (how you produce it)' (Furneaux, 1995, p. 7). Some suggested approaches of tackling this deficiency are the establishment of national language standards (Arkoudis, 2011), the introduction of corporation, collaboration and/or team-teaching between academics and English-language specialists throughout the students' university study (Arkoudis, 2011, Etherington, 2008, Morley, 2008), scaffolding language development required for specific assessment tasks (Arkoudis, 2011), the employment of reflective learning journals (Creme, 2000, Watson, 2010), and

facilitating strategic system of academic's feedback (Harrington, 2011, Horne & Peake, 2011, Wingate 2011). It may be true that 'for most academics, language assessment is not yet core business' (Arkoudis, 2011, p. 3), since their focus is generally on students' knowledge of their particular discipline in terms of content and they are not officially required to teach or measure language skills. (See, for example, how Lilis and Swann (2003) challenged for such situation.) This has the effect of distancing them from the issue of English proficiency in the tertiary education context (Dunworth, 2006), and this situation is compounded by concerns that if academics were to attend more to students' language skills, there would be an increase in workload, resulting in their having insufficient time to cover the discipline content. At the same time, academics may also have concerns about their own ability to teach pure academic writing, which is a skill in itself (Wingate et al., 2011). The reluctance shown by many academics to teach these skills may also be related to the tendency in higher education, within Australia as well as internationally, for more emphasis to be placed upon research than on teaching (Blackwell, 2012).

One – perhaps the only – occasion when academics can observe and measure the development of their students' English usage is when marking assessment tasks. Academic writing is considered to be a major part of student assessment in the Australian tertiary education context. All students who have completed their higher school certificates are assumed to have adequate literacy levels, but this does not necessarily guarantee that they have adequate skills for academic writing at university level. For international students this is even more difficult, as they are writing in a foreign language and can experience difficulties deriving from the different linguistic, inter-cultural, and/or social background they bring to their studies. They are required to transfer their first-language/mother-tongue skills to English (Furneaux, 1995), and then to acquire, develop, and practise the skills needed to achieve the levels required for writing in their respective academic disciplines. In response to the situation of international students, the practice of reformulation as a teaching approach was endorsed by Allwright et al. (1988). They suggested that the academic writing of these students could be improved by a process in which native English-speaking students looked over their work and then discussed with them changes and improvements that might be made; however it would be difficult to make provision for this kind of strategy in the current higher educational context.

It might be seem self-evident that the complexities of writing in a foreign language would place international students at a disadvantage when compared with local students. However, it is, in fact, not unusual for lecturers to find that the academic writing of many of their international students' is of a higher standard than that of some students whose first language is English. From this, the conclusion may be drawn that successful academic writing is not necessarily relative to English proficiency levels; it may also suggest that there is not much point trying to differentiate between 'non-native' and 'native' writing for the purposes of this particular discussion, despite the fact that several studies (including Allwright et al., 1988) have highlighted differences in terms of their mechanics and functions.

This perhaps raises the question of whether educating students about the key elements of essay writing before they tackle such tasks might have a favourable effect on their written performance. If a student has insufficient grounding in academic writing as a practice, does a detailed explanation of the lecturers' expectations in this regard have an effect upon their actual written performance? This paper describes an intervention in which a lecturer/tutor conducted a pre-writing session at the beginning of the semester to inform a group of students of their expectations for essay writing, and compared their actual writing performances with their own perception of that performance. The purpose of the study was to identify strategies academics can use to support the development of their students' writing skills.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

While essays, laboratory reports, research project reports, and reflective diaries can be seen as typical academic text types (Curry & Hewings, 2003), essay writing is the most traditional and often-utilised assessment task across disciplines (Curry & Lillis, 2003, Irvin, 2010). However, there is a wide range of elements that contribute to sound academic essay writing. These include factors such as the students' fundamental academic knowledge, the application of skills such as referencing and paraphrasing without plagiarism, and the use of register and vocabulary specific to the particular discipline. In addition, students need to be aware of the various expository methods and take responsibility for selecting the most appropriate one for a particular piece of writing, although for them to be able to do this well requires a considerable amount of skill development and practice. The fact that there are so many different elements in play makes it difficult to identify and measure the key quality of academic writing; accordingly, this research has elected to focus on a number of aspects which have been identified as important in this area. A study conducted by Nauman et al. (2011) categorised the perspectives of 75 teachers and six professional writers on what constitutes good writing as threefold: (1) good thinking and communication; (2) structure and clarity; and (3) purpose, voice, and correctness. Also, Curry and Hewings (2003) highlighted that pre-writing strategies including brainstorming and freewriting can help students to discover and conceptualise ideas, to gather information and draw on 'embedded' knowledge they may not have been consciously aware of, and to structure their thoughts. Considering these aspects, the following Research Objectives (ROs) were established in order to learn more about how students deal with their academic writing.

RO1: To measure students' academic essay performance

RO2: To identify students' perceptions of their written essays

RO3: To inspect the preparatory activities that students carry out prior to the commencement of writing an essay

RO4: To compare students' academic essay performances with their perceptions of their academic essay writing skills

The focus of RO1 was on the degree to which students structured their essays in a conventional academic manner. This section links to Nauman's et al. (2011) categories (2) and (3) above and includes writing conventions such as the practice of commencing with an introductory section with a thesis statement, followed by (approximately) three mainstream ideas explored in each body section, with a topic sentence in each idea and the supporting points for each body part. Although the validity of this so-called five-paragraph essay is the subject of some debate (Irvin, 2010), the written work analysed in this research tended to follow this format. This is because this very basic organisational format is taught at high school (Curry & Hewings, 2003) and enables assessors to readily locate the thesis statement and topic sentence, which lead naturally to the argumentative stance of the written work. The need for students to adopt this form of orderly, coherent paragraph organisation, which has itself been labelled a discrete literacy task in the context of higher education, and which differs from 'just' writing a paper without consideration for these aspects (Carroll, 2002, cited in Irvin, 2010), was emphasised repeatedly in the academic writing briefing session. Category (3) – voice and correctness – was disregarded for this research due to the fact that these elements are influenced directly by students' personal experiences, prior knowledge, and other factors, which do not seem to be controllable in the context of an individual unit offered at one university.

Compared with RO1, which focused on the students' actual essay writing, RO2 concentrated more on how they perceive that writing. This was also linked directly to RO3, which was established to

investigate the students' actual writing processes, with a focus on the first of Nauman's et al. (2011) categories: namely the preparatory work and activities which take place prior to the commencement of essay writing, such as brainstorming and the formulation of opinions. Facets of RO1, RO2, and RO3 above were examined in more detail by comparing and contrasting the difference between them, which is the purpose of RO4.

TARGET PARTICIPANTS AND RESEARCH METHOD

The participants in this research were students at Curtin University in Western Australia who had completed the unit Japanese Society and Culture 250 (JSC250) offered in Semester 1, 2011. This research was conducted in 2012, so there was no connection between their participation in this research and their academic results in the unit. After the nature of the research was explained to all students enrolled in this unit, 39 students agreed to participate. The aim of this unit was for students to develop a broad general knowledge about contemporary Japanese culture and current affairs. The students were required to complete four assessment tasks during the 12 weeks of the semester: one essay, one presentation, on-going weekly tests, and an end-of-semester examination.

The unit JSC250 had a fairly even distribution of both local and international students and the essay was written in English. The essay (2500-3000 words) assessment made this unit suitable for the research for two reasons. First reason is that an essay guidance session is provided in this unit. Students in this unit were required to attend three hours of face-to-face interactive sessions: one one-hour lecture and one two-hour tutorial. One tutorial session at the beginning of the semester was devoted to this guidance, with the tutor explaining how the essay content should be created and what the assessor would be looking for. At the same time there was an opportunity for students to raise questions and seek guidance about how to produce written work of satisfactory quality. In other words, this introductory session was intended to bridge the gap between two issues. The first was addressed by Elton (2010) and Lea and Street (2000) that academics tend to have their own definition of how the writing piece in their disciplinary areas should be produced, and the second issue was described by Dunworth (2006) that students tend to be entirely ignorant of the expository methods for completing academic writing. The second reason this unit was considered suitable for the research is that students were given the freedom to select their own topics, based on their curiosity and interests, rather than being required to write on a single topic set by the lecturer. For those who did not have any general knowledge or knowledge about prevailing contemporary social and cultural elements in Japan, general information was provided in the weekly lecture which introduced 12 different topical issues, thereby dispelling student concerns about their individual backgrounds in the subject matter.

There were two chief sources of data collection for this research – the essay, which was used to examine students' actual writing itself, and a questionnaire. It was vital to make the marking less subjective (Nauman et al., 2011), so the researcher revisited the written work of former students and independently marked this by employing four different scales (0 to 3). From the 39 students, 30 essays were submitted (submission rate: 76.92%). These had already been marked for their academic assessment purpose the year before the research was conducted, so the analysis did not have any impact upon the students' assessment. On the other hand, the questionnaire (Appendix) was designed to collect data about the students' academic backgrounds, their theoretical perceptions of their academic writing, and their cognitive background to their writing. The questionnaire was sent to the 39 students enrolled in JSC250 in 2011, and 18 valid responses were returned.

RO1: TO MEASURE THE STUDENTS' ACADEMIC ESSAY PERFORMANCE

The quality of academic writing is determined by a variety of factors and influenced by the assessor's particular focus on those factors. For the purposes of this research, the structure was primarily drawn its attention, and several sets of measurement (and sub-measurement) categories were developed. These included the three main themes (and their six sub-measurement categories): the Five Main Parts/Paragraphs essay (Introduction, Body with (approximately) Three Main Ideas, and Conclusion), the Introduction (including a Thesis Statement in it), and the Body (including a Topic Sentence, as well as Supporting Points for Each Statement). These were selected because they were all derived primarily from the fundamental academic knowledge acquired by students during the preparatory period, as well as being suitable measures by which the researcher could evaluate the cohesion and coherence of their writing. Although some scholars have suggested that academic writing should not be deliberately taught (Allwright et al., 1988), this research focused on proficiency in text construction, proceeding from the belief that this should be the first and most fundamental level of skill for students to be aware of, to acquire, and to be proficient in demonstrating.

The analysis was based on a four-point scale, where: 0 represented 'the target item does not exist or is unable to be identified by the researcher'; 1 meant 'the item is present but the writer needs a lot more effort to describe the content clearly'; 2 meant 'the item is clearly present but the writer needs to describe the content a bit more clearly'; and 3 meant 'the item is clearly present but its content is also clearly described'. The ratings of the 30 essays can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1

Student Essay (= SE)	Five Main Parts/Paragraphs			Introduction	Body		Essay Performance Score (EPS) /18
	Introduction	Body	Conclusion	Thesis Statement	Topic Sentence	Supporting Points for each Statement	
SE1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
SE2	1	0	2	0	0	1	4
SE3	2	2	2	3	1	1	11
SE4	3	2	2	2	2	2	13
SE5	0	1	2	1	1	1	6
SE6	1	0	1	0	0	1	3
SE7	3	2	2	2	1	2	12
SE8	3	1	3	1	1	2	11
SE9	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
SE10	3	2	3	2	1	2	13
SE11	1	0	0	0	0	1	2
SE12	3	2	3	1	1	1	11
SE13	0	0	1	0	0	1	2
SE14	1	2	3	1	1	1	9
SE15	1	1	3	1	1	1	8
SE16	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
SE17	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
SE18	3	2	1	2	0	1	9
SE19	2	1	2	1	1	1	8

SE20	2	1	1	2	1	1	8
SE21	2	2	2	1	0	1	8
SE22	0	0	1	0	0	1	2
SE23	1	0	2	0	0	1	4
SE24	2	1	1	2	1	1	8
SE25	1	1	1	2	1	1	7
SE26	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
SE27	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
SE28	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
SE29	1	0	1	0	1	1	4
SE30	3	3	3	3	2	3	17

For the Introduction, eight essays were rated 0 (26.7%), 10 were rated 1 (33.3%), five were rated 2 (16.7%), and seven were rated 3 (23.3%). This means that 60% of the students either omitted the introduction completely or it was unsatisfactory. This suggests one area which requires intervention since the introduction is an area where students have the opportunity to clearly demonstrate their academic knowledge. As for the Body of the essay, 14 essays were rated 0 (46.6%), seven were rated 1 (23.3%), eight were rated 2 (26.7%), and only one was rated 3 (3.33%). With nearly 70% rated only 0 or 1, it appears that this is another area in need of improvement. Most of those 14 student essays simply continued to introduce various references, rather than expressing their own opinions. Regarding the Conclusion, eight of the essays were rated 0 (26.7%), eight were rated 1 (26.7%), eight were rated 2 (26.7%), and six were rated 3 (20.0%). This means that over half of the essays rated did not include the conclusion or failed to show it clearly. Dividing the total score 9 into the further three categories, A: 0-3, B: 4-6 and C: 7-9, there were 16 essays (containing five, SE1, SE9, SE26, SE27 and SE28 marked 0) (53.33%), 8 essays in B (26.66%) and 6 essays in C (20.00%). This means that more than half the essays were structured very poorly.

Secondly, the presence of the Thesis Statement in the Introduction was investigated. 14 essays were rated 0 (46.67%), seven were rated 1 (23.33%), seven were rated 2 (23.33%), and two were rated 3 (6.67%). Although it would seem to be a very simple and straightforward task for students to introduce the thesis statement, indicating the issues in which the essay will engage, nearly half failed to do so. In fact, only two students did this clearly.

Thirdly, the presence and quality of the Body was examined from the two perspectives: Topic Sentence and Supporting Points for Each Statement. For the Topic Sentence, 15 essays were rated 0 (50.00%), 13 were rated 1 (43.33%), two were rated 2 (6.67%), and none was rated 3 (0.00%). With regard to the Supporting Points for Each Statement, five were rated 0 (16.67%), 20 were rated 1 (66.67%), four were rated 2 (13.33%), and one was rated 3 (3.33%). Nearly 95% of essays (28) did not (overtly) include their topic sentence, and over 80% of the student essays (25) failed to show their supporting points satisfactorily. Considering the fact that argumentative points were a focus of the preparatory session on academic writing at the beginning of the semester, this outcome suggests that the students simply may not have formulated any specific opinions for the purpose of discussion/argument. Moreover, it seems reasonable to assume that these two elements – topic sentence and supporting points – cannot be composed coherently without each other, which is the reason why the ratios of their presence and quality are in proportion.

From Table 1 it can be seen that a total score of 9 means the essay has addressed the three categories; Introduction, Body and Conclusion. It is interesting to find that SE30 is the only one (3.33%) meeting this criteria, while five (16.67%) received a score of 0. Two essays (6.67%) scored 8, three (30.00%) scored 7,

four (13.33%) scored 6, two (6.67%) scored 5, two (6.67%) scored 4, four (13.33%) scored 3, and other two (6.67%) scored 2.

RO2: TO IDENTIFY THE STDUENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF TEHIR WRITTEN ESSAYS

Out of the total 39 students enrolled in the unit JSC250, 18 (46.15%) returned the questionnaire. In Table 2, the letter S in the left vertical line means 'Student', and Q in the horizontal line means 'Questionnaire item'. (The Actual questions utilised in the questionnaire can be seen in Appendix.) Y means 'Yes', YB means 'Yes, but not always', and N means 'No'.

Table 2

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11	Q12
S1	Y	Y	3	Y	2	2	Y	YB	Y	Y	YB	Y
S2	Y	Y	3	Y	1	3	Y	YB	Y	Y	Y	Y
S3	Y	N	1	N	6	6	Y	YB	Y	Y	N	Y
S4	N	N	3	N	5	4	YB	YB	Y	N	YB	Y
S5	N	N	4	Y	5	6	Y	Y	YB	N	YB	Y
S6	Y	Y	2	Y	7	6	Y	Y	Y	YB	YB	YB
S7	Y	Y	4	Y	1	1	YB	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
S8	Y	Y	2	Y	3	4	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
S9	Y	Y	3	Y	1	2	YB	N	Y	N	YB	YB
S10	N	Y	3	Y	2	2	Y	Y	Y	YB	N	Y
S11	N	N	3	N	5	5	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
S12	N	Y	4	Y	3	4	Y	Y	Y	YB	Y	Y
S13	N	N	3	Y	3	4	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	YB
S14	Y	N	3	Y	2	4	Y	Y	YB	YB	YB	Y
S15	Y	N	3	Y	2	4	Y	Y	YB	YB	YB	Y
S16	Y	Y	3	Y	3	2	YB	YB	Y	Y	YB	N
S17	Y	Y	3	Y	1	3	Y	Y	Y	Y	YB	YB
S18	Y	Y	2	Y	4	7	YB	Y	Y	N	YB	Y

The questionnaire began with questions about demographic information. Twelve students answered that their first language was English, while others' first languages were Chinese, including Mandarin and Cantonese dialects (five students), and Malay (one student). Eleven students answered that they had completed Year 12 or its equivalent in an educational institution in Australia, while seven students had not. There were one 1st year student, three 2nd year, 11 3rd year and three 4th year students.

15 out of the 18 students (83.33%) indicated their experience in learning how to write academically in English. Their responses were recorded on a 9-point scale from 1 (very familiar) to 9 (not familiar at all). Four students gave a rating of 1, four indicated 2, another four indicated 3, one indicated 4, three indicated 5, one indicated 6 and one indicated 7. Nobody rated 8 or 9. Their confidence in the quality of academic essay writing in English, was also ranked on a 9-point scale, from 1 (extremely confident) to 9 (not confident at all). One student ranked 1, four students put 2, two indicated 3, six indicated 4, one mentioned 5, and three showed 6, while none rated 7, 8 or 9.

The students were also questioned about specific patterns of behaviour in relation to their writing. For the question asking whether they brainstorm their ideas prior to writing their essay, 13 students answered they always do and the remaining five said they do but not always. In terms of forming their opinions prior to their writing, 12 students always do, five do not always do, and one student does not.

On the selection of (approximately) three main ideas written in an essay, 15 said yes, while three answered that this is not always done. On the issue of establishing a thesis statement prior to writing their essays, nine said they always do, five do but not always, and four said they do not. For the presence of a topic sentence for each paragraph/body part, six students always do, ten do this but not always, and two students do not do this at all. The final question asked about their preparation of the supporting points for each paragraph/body; 13 students said they always do this, while four students do not always do it and one student admitted to not doing it.

RO3: TO EXAMINE THE PREPARATORY ACTIVITIES THAT STUDENTS CARRY OUT PRIOR TO THE COMMENCEMENT OF WRITING AN ESSAY

Of the 18 students who returned the questionnaire, only 15 submitted an essay for assessment (S1-S15 in Table 2). 15 students' questionnaires were compared with their academic essay performance scores (EPS) as calculated for RO1 (SE1-SE15 in Table 1).

As explained briefly above, RO3 was established to investigate the students' actual writing processes in the light of the first category explained by Nauman et al. (2011), namely the preparatory work and activities done prior to the commencement of their essay writing. For the purpose of this research, the focus was on three things: brainstorming, forming an opinion and choosing three main ideas which could be measured by Q7 to Q9 in the questionnaire, comparing the summarised outcomes of their performance points (A full score: 18 points). The summary can be seen in Table 3.

12 students in the group of 15 (80.00%) indicated that they always brainstorm prior to the commencement of their writing, while three (20.00%) said they do but not always. The following scale was used to rate the students' essay writing performance: (1) 0-6: not satisfactory; (2) 7-12: satisfactory; and (3) 13-18: highly satisfactory. The work of seven students was categorised as (1), six as (2), and two as (3). Of the seven 'category (1)' students – S1, S2, S5, S6, S9, S11, and S13 – all except S9 responded that they always brainstorm. Although it is a vital initial part of the academic writing process, brainstorming does not necessarily guarantee high performance and achievement. From this result, we might conclude that the important conceptualising process associated with brainstorming does not necessarily translate into the written context. Students may formulate opinions during the preparation process but be unable to express them comprehensively and persuasively in their actual essay. Q8 shows that neither brainstorming nor 'opinion forming' processes were conducted by S9, while S1 and S2 said they always brainstorm but sometimes neglect to formulate opinions – to clarify and organise their 'brainstormed' thoughts – as a part of this process. While S5, S6, S11 and S13 claimed their brainstorming process did always include the 'opinion forming' with regard to the topic, this was not reflected in their writing performance. It is interesting to compare this result with Q9, which asked whether they choose three (or more/less) main ideas prior to writing their essays. Only six (40.00%) of the 15 students: S6, S8, S10, S11, S12, and S13, said they always conduct all three steps of brainstorming, forming opinions, and choosing three main ideas.

A question arises here that some students might not extend their preparatory activities beyond simple brainstorming, failing to progress to the stage of establishing their own individual perspectives on the given topic. It may be that while they believe they complete the preparatory activities properly, they are actually not following the appropriate procedures, and are perhaps simply conceptualising ideas rather than following through in translating these ideas into the structure of a written argument.

Table 3

Student	Essay Performance Score (EPS)/ Total 18	Q7 in the Questionnaire	Q8 in the Questionnaire	Q9 in the Questionnaire
S1	1	Y	YB	Y
S2	4	Y	YB	Y
S3	11	Y	YB	Y
S4	13	YB	YB	Y
S5	6	Y	Y	YB
S6	3	Y	Y	Y
S7	12	YB	Y	Y
S8	11	Y	Y	Y
S9	1	YB	N	Y
S10	13	Y	Y	Y
S11	2	Y	Y	Y
S12	11	Y	Y	Y
S13	2	Y	Y	Y
S14	9	Y	Y	YB
S15	8	Y	Y	YB

The following section pays extra attention to three more specific aspects of the academic written component, namely Thesis Statement, Topic Sentence, and Supporting Points. Comparison of these aspects can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4

Student	Thesis Statement (in Introduction)		Topic Sentence (in Body)		Supporting Points (in Body)	
	Score/ Total 3	Q10 in the Questionnaire	Score/ Total 3	Q11 in the Questionnaire	Score/ Total 3	Q12 in the Questionnaire
S1	0	Y	0	YB	1	Y
S2	0	Y	0	Y	1	Y
S3	3	Y	1	N	1	Y
S4	2	N	2	YB	2	Y
S5	1	N	1	YB	1	Y
S6	0	YB	0	YB	1	YB
S7	2	Y	1	Y	2	Y
S8	1	Y	1	Y	2	Y
S9	0	N	0	YB	1	YB
S10	2	YB	1	N	2	Y
S11	0	Y	0	Y	1	Y
S12	1	YB	1	Y	1	Y
S13	0	Y	0	Y	1	YB
S14	1	YB	1	YB	1	Y
S15	1	YB	1	YB	1	Y

In the following sections, a score 0 or 1 refers to a poor performance in including the thesis statement. (Q10 is asking whether students believe they write a thesis statement prior to writing their essay.) Table 4-1 below shows that 11 students, S1, S2, S5, S6, S8, S9, S11, S12, S13, S14, and S15 (/15, 73.33%) scored 0 or 1, meaning that they failed to include their thesis statements or did not show them explicitly in their essays. It is surprising that even though four of the seven students, S1, S2, S11, S13 (57.14%) indicated that they prepare the thesis statement before writing, there was no sign in any of their actual essays of any such statement. In the case of S9 and S10 it is not clear whether they do think about a thesis statement without committing it to writing or whether they do not consider it at all in their essay planning. Regardless, however, it is clear that these students are not planning their thesis statements appropriately.

Table 4-1

Q10 Score	Yes	Yes, but not always	Not at all
0	S1, S2, S11, S13	S6	S9
1	S8	S12, S14, S15	S5
2	S7	S10	S4
3	S3	-	-

Table 4-2 below shows the summary statistics regarding the quality of the topic sentence description. (Q11, asking whether they think they write a topic sentence for each paragraph prior to writing their essay.) 14 of the 15 students (93.33%) scored either 0 or 1 and failed to provide any proper topic sentence description. Six (S2, S7, S8, S11, S12, and S13) said 'yes' while another six (S1, S5, S6, S9, S14, and S15) said 'yes but not always'. Two students said they do not include any topic sentence at all, which was clearly evident in their actual essays. Apart from S4, whose topic sentence was observed indirectly in the essay, there was nobody who demonstrated this feature clearly in their writing.

Table 4-2

Q11 Score	Yes	Yes, but not always	Not at all
0	S2, S11, S13	S1, S6, S9, S14, S15	S10
1	S7, S8, S12	S5	S3
2	-	S4	-
3	-	-	-

Q12 asked whether students believe they choose supporting points for each paragraph prior to writing their essay. The summary of these data can be seen in Table 4-3 below. Eight students (S1, S2, S3, S5, S11, S12, S14, and S15) said 'yes' and three students (S6, S9, and S13) said 'yes but not always'. However, these 11 students were unable to present supporting points clearly in their essays, and no essays were scored 3. This suggests that the students knew (or thought they knew) about the requirement for supporting statements and they may have attempted it (or believed they did), but this did not reflect in their actual written performance.

Table 4-3

Q12 Score	Yes	Yes, but not always	Not at all
0	-	-	-
1	S1, S2, S3, S5, S11, S12, S14, S15	S6, S9, S13	-

2	S4, S7, S8, S10	-	-
3	-	-	-

RO4: To compare students' academic essay performances with their perceptions of their academic essay writing skills

As the same manner as RO3 explained above, the 15 students (S1-S15) shown in Table 2 who had submitted both questionnaires and essays are the focus for this section. Their perceptions of their familiarity with and confidence in essay writing in English were compared with their academic essay performances (SE1-SE15 in Table 1, respectively).

Table 5

Student	Essay Performance Score (EPS)/ Total 18	Familiarity and Confidence Score (FCS)/ Total 18	Familiarity (Q5 in the Questionnaire) Score/ Total 9	Confidence (Q6 in the Questionnaire) Score / Total 9
S1	1	4	2	2
S2	4	4	1	3
S3	11	6	6	6
S4	13	9	5	4
S5	6	12	5	6
S6	3	13	7	6
S7	12	2	1	1
S8	11	7	3	4
S9	1	3	1	2
S10	13	4	2	2
S11	2	10	5	5
S12	11	7	3	4
S13	2	7	3	4
S14	9	6	2	4
S15	8	6	2	4

Refer to Table 5. The students' Essay Performance Scores (EPS) range from 0 (worst) to 18 (best) and their perceptions are ranked from 1 (extremely familiar or confident) to 9 (not at all). In order to read this table, therefore, it is important to understand that the higher EPS represent greater achievement. However, higher Familiarity and Confidence Scores (FCS) mean that they are less familiar with and confident in academic essay writing. These scores are shown in Table 5-1, ranked by EPS.

Table 5-1

Student	Essay Performance Score (EPS)/ Total 18	Familiarity and Confidence Score (FCS)/ Total 18
S10	13	4
S4	13	9
S7	12	2
S3	11	6
S8	11	7
S12	11	7
S14	9	6

S15	8	6
S5	6	12
S2	4	4
S6	3	13
S13	2	7
S11	2	10
S9	1	3
S1	1	4

Generally speaking, as seen in Table 5-1, students' essay writing performance is in proportion to their perceptions. However, four students, S4, S2, S9 and S1, appear to be exceptions to this generalisation. S4 is a highly motivated and very studious student. His status as an international student – that is, a non-native speaker of English – might also mean that he is likely to have lowered expectations with regard to his achievement. S2 scored FCS4, meaning that she considers herself very familiar with and confident in academic essay writing. However, in fact, her EPS score is 4 out of 18, indicating that her essay was not well structured in terms of the aspects demonstrated in RO1. The essays of S9 and S1 received the lowest marks, although they perceived themselves to be familiar with and good at their essay writing. Students such as these tend to fail to seek any extra assistance or attend workshop sessions in academic writing despite the fact that they clearly lack the strategies needed to improve their writing skills.

CONCLUSION

This research focused on students' perceptions about their preparatory work prior to the commencement of their writing, and compared it with their actual writing. It discovered that what students perceive themselves to be doing in terms of preparation of their writing does not appear to represent what they are actually doing in their written work. There are a number of possible factors contributing to this tendency. First is students' failure – whether through simple oversight or hesitation – to transcribe their ideas and conceptualisations into writing in the form of notes or material they can draw upon when composing their essay. If students were to improve the way they move through these stages of the brainstorming and planning process, they would be better equipped to formulate their argument, which would in turn result in a more skilfully structured written piece. Second is the lack of sufficient explanation of the specialist vocabulary employed in the preparatory sessions. Although one would not expect it to be difficult for students to understand lexical items such as five main parts/paragraphs, introduction and conclusion, the meaning of terms such as 'thesis statement' or 'topic sentence' may not be understood fully by students. This also links to the third factor: that some lexical items may be misinterpreted by students in various ways depending on the contexts in which they are used (Anokye, 2008). The unit JSC250 which formed the focus of this research introduced a preparatory academic writing session and drew the attention of students to the term 'argument'. However, this particular term can be defined variously as: the organising structure of the text type, the linking of diverse ideas into a cohesive line of argument, the use of supporting references to rationalise or support specific points and demonstrate a broader understanding, and the writer's personal point of view or stance on something (Curry & Hewings, 2003). A complex set of factors may enhance the value of conducting a preparatory session on academic writing skills, and the findings of this research can be employed as examples to assist educators to re-design writing instructions and areas of focus for students' preparing to enter the higher education context.

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APPENDIX: ACTUAL QUESTIONS UTILISED IN THE QUESTIONNAIRE

- Q1. Is your first language English?
- Q2. Have you done Year 12 or its equivalent study at any educational institution in Australia?
- Q3. What year are you in at Curtin?
- Q4. Have you learnt how to write an academic essay in English language at any educational institutions?
- Q5. Do you think you are familiar with (academic) essay writing in English language? Please rank your familiarity with essay writing in English.
- 1: Extremely familiar - 9: Not familiar at all
- Q6. Do you think you are good at essay writing in English language? Please rank your confidence in essay writing in English.
- 1: Extremely confident - 9: Not confident at all
- Q7. Do you brainstorm your ideas prior to writing your essay?
- Q8. Do you form your opinions prior to writing your essay?
- Q9. Do you choose three (or more/less) main ideas prior to writing your essay?
- Q10. Do you write a thesis statement prior to writing your essay?
- Q11. Do you write a topic sentence for each paragraph prior to writing your essay?
- Q12. Do you choose supporting points for each paragraph prior to writing your essay?