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The Academic Writing Skills Programme: A model for technology-enhanced, blended delivery of an academic writing programme

Jennifer Boyle
University of Glasgow, Scotland, jennifer.boyle@glasgow.ac.uk

Scott Ramsay
University of Glasgow, Scotland, scott.ramsay.2@glasgow.ac.uk

Andrew Struan
University of Glasgow, Scotland, andrew.struan@glasgow.ac.uk

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Recognising the varied challenges presented by an increasingly diverse student body at our UK university (a research-intensive institution with a high proportion of international and widening participation students), an online and blended writing programme was developed. The Academic Writing Skills Programme (AWSP) is a fully online, compulsory writing diagnostic, consisting of a range of multiple-choice questions on grammar and a short essay. Run centrally by a department of multidisciplinary academic writing advisers, the programme was taken from a small, discipline-specific writing programme and transformed into an institution-wide, fully-funded technology-enhanced academic language course. This paper details and evaluates the process through which this development was achieved; it discusses the challenges encountered, explores the pedagogical justification and background of our approach, provides student assessment and feedback on the impact and efficacy of the programme, and offers guidance for practitioners in academic language support.

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Recognising the varied challenges presented by an increasingly diverse student body at our UK university (a research-intensive institution with a high proportion of international and widening participation students), an online and blended writing programme was developed. The Academic Writing Skills Programme (AWSP) is a fully online, compulsory writing diagnostic, consisting of a range of multiple-choice questions on grammar and a short essay. Run centrally by a department of multidisciplinary academic writing advisers, the programme was taken from a small, discipline-specific writing programme and transformed into an institution-wide, fully-funded technology-enhanced academic language course. This paper details and evaluates the process through which this development was achieved; it discusses the challenges encountered, explores the pedagogical justification and background of our approach, provides student assessment and feedback on the impact and efficacy of the programme, and offers guidance for practitioners in academic language support.

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Introduction

In 2006, an article critical of the approach to 'study skills' in the United Kingdom noted that it was unlikely that a British research-intensive university would put in place institution-wide provision to enhance and develop students' academic writing:

> *It is especially unlikely that research-intensive universities, which attract a large percentage of high-achieving 'traditional' students, will see the need to make such a commitment to student learning. (Wingate 2006, p. 467)*

Changes in the global higher education sector since 2006, alongside the development of blended, online and technology-driven approaches to teaching and learning, have meant that we now have a technology-enhanced academic writing programme that runs across an entire research-intensive, Ancient university in Scotland.

This writing programme, known as the Academic Writing Skills Programme (AWSP), is a compulsory course for all of the institution's *c*. 12,000 incoming undergraduate and postgraduate (taught) students each academic year. Run and assessed centrally by the Learning Enhancement and Academic Development Service (LEADS), the programme is a developmental, formative assessment for students from the department tasked with improving and enhancing all students' academic success. This essay presents the history, rationale and development of the AWSP; it establishes the central importance of technology-enhanced approaches to large-scale assessment and teaching of writing within a British context; and it looks to provide information on lessons learnt and established good practice.

As Anglophone universities look to enhance the English language ability of their graduates, and with increasing numbers of students with English as a second or other language (Naidoo 2007), the focus on teaching academic writing has become central to discussion around graduate attributes and student outcomes (Fenton-Smith, Humphreys & Walkinshaw 2018). Similarly, the perennial problem of *student writing*, and the supposed 'faults' of our students' understanding of grammar and/or secondary education systems' failures to prepare students to write clearly and coherently, is widely discussed (e.g. Alaka 2010). Outside of the United States, there has been no common approach within and across Anglophone universities to enhancing student writing. In the United Kingdom, much of the discussion around enhancing student learning is a result of the expansion of access to higher education in the 1990s, and the resulting widening participation/internationalisation priorities across the sector.

The North American models of Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) and Writing in the Disciplines (WID) have not been adopted in the United Kingdom. WAC models tend to provide some form of centralised writing provision for all students at American universities, and they have a long history of pedagogical development in the United States (Condon & Rutz 2012). The discussion around WAC often focuses on the development of particular programmes of study in individual institutions (Condon & Rutz 2012). A common theme in the roughly half of American institutions with WAC programmes (Fenton-Smith, Humphreys & Walkinshaw 2018) is that

institutional buy-in, staff mobilisation and energy and continued funding are crucial to the ongoing success of writing programmes.

In the United Kingdom, there has been no similar push for WAC-type programmes. Instead, the focus on students' writing development has tended to come under a general approach to enhancing student skills. The growth of units, teams and departments dedicated to enhancing student success was largely born out of a variety of widening participation and retention programmes, but has expanded to be a central feature of the modern British university (Hill, Tinker & Catterall 2010). The original approach here was a deficit model: struggling students, often from non-traditional backgrounds, needed their skills 'topped-up' in order to succeed at university. Over time, this deficit model approach has shifted to a whole-institution approach that focuses on the development of academic literacies.

Lea and Street (2006) argued that approaches to student writing development fall under three broad categories: study skills (that is, a focus on the surface 'skills' that students need to develop in order to succeed); academic socialisation (that is, the development of students' acculturation into academic and subject discourses); and academic literacies (that is, a focus on making meaning and understanding institutional and academic constructions of knowledge). Earlier focuses within student writing development tended to focus on study skills and academic socialisation, but recently a shift to academic literacies has come to the fore.

> *This approach sees literacies as social practices, in the way we have suggested. It views student writing and learning as issues at the level of epistemology and identities rather than skill or socialisation. An academic literacies approach views the institutions in which academic practices take place as constituted in, and as sites of, discourse and power. It sees the literacy demands of the curriculum as involving a variety of communicative practices, including genres, fields and disciplines. From the student point of view a dominant feature of academic literacy practices is the requirement to switch practices between one setting and another, to deploy a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriate to each setting, and to handle the social meanings and identities that each evokes. (Lea & Street 1998, p. 159)*

With a greater understanding of the complexities around academic literacies, and with increasing pressure to promote student academic development, the deficit model approach has come to be roundly criticised.

This deficit model approach often saw academic writing grouped together with presentation skills, note-making abilities, and so on, under the broad category of 'study skills'. The problem with this approach, as Wingate (2006) has established, is that it promotes the idea of a 'quick fix' in students' learning, and does not encourage the deep, long-lasting engagement required in order to improve student attainment. The old-fashioned study skills approach, then, does not target the needs of students, and does not promote effective, life-long learning. Instead, Wingate (2006, p. 458) suggests, we need "inclusive models […] that reach all students". Crucially, "[f]or the development of effective learning, students need to be given the experience of dealing with academic tasks, and feedback on this experience in order to encourage reflection". Traditional

approaches within student academic development (that is, workshops and classes) cannot readily meet the demands of large, institution-wide, compulsory courses.

In order to approach this inclusive, university-wide model, we must utilise increasingly blended and online methods of delivery and assessment. Studies into traditional assessment and feedback methods show that students engage most with feedback when they are provided with a positive message, and given instructions in how to 'fix' any problems (Kim 2004, p. 306). In order to do this across the institution, we have adopted and adapted technology-enhanced approaches to our assessment and teaching of writing. The course aims to meet the needs of all our incoming students (both undergraduate and postgraduate), and provides a model of a centralised, technology-enhanced academic language writing programme that works at scale.

The Academic Writing Skills Programme: Current Design

The AWSP is a compulsory course for approximately 12,000 students per academic year. The AWSP is designed as a formative, developmental writing exercise. By providing feedback and guidance on, as well as development of, academic writing in advance of first summative assessments, the AWSP aims to improve and enhance the quality of students' written work through targeted feedback and provision. The AWSP is hosted on our virtual learning environment (VLE), Moodle, and students are presented with a range of pre-exercise resources and information. These resources are available for students to work through at the start of their university career.

The AWSP exercise runs through Moodle Quiz. Students first answer a range of multiple-choice questions (MCQs); these questions challenge students on elements of correct grammar and argumentation, as well as on good academic practice. The MCQs are marked automatically by Moodle, and students receive instant feedback on their answers (importantly, including where, and why, they have gone wrong or got information right). Students then submit an essay (chosen from a bank of essay questions covering all subjects taught at the institution) and submit the work via Moodle. The essays are then assessed by a large team of trained doctoral students from across the institution. Crucially, we maintain broad and cognate subject focus in the assessment teams: arts, humanities and social science essays are assessed by doctoral students from across the arts, humanities and social sciences, while medicine, engineering and science students are assessed by doctoral students from those same subject areas.

The essays are assessed by using pre-determined, but tailored, feedback options. Marking is undertaken in Moodle Quiz, and overall feedback is provided that targets particular elements of the submissions. With a focus on development and enhancement of writing, the feedback provides detail on strengths and weaknesses. Markers can select from a range of pre-determined feedback options that target a number of areas: grammar, tone and style, argument and structure. Students are provided with specific, tailored resources that focus on the particular areas of concern.

The majority of students are deemed to have completed the AWSP at the point when they receive this feedback. This is the case for students that the markers determine could improve writing through their own, independent study. These students are encouraged to attend open, optional classes run as part of our department's regular teaching, but they need do nothing more in order to complete the programme. For students who need more targeted and structured development of their writing, their feedback will direct them to one of two ways to complete the programme: a

fully online writing course (hosted via Moodle Lesson) or a number of face-to-face classes and a second submission of work for further feedback.

The online lesson is designed to take approximately five hours to complete. Through provision of detailed information on grammar, sentence structure and syntax, as well as argumentation and referencing/good academic practice, followed by a range of MCQs, students work through the course. The courses are tailored for arts and social sciences or medicine and sciences students, and provide a wealth of first point of contact information. Students are able to access, and re-access, this information throughout the academic year.

The face-to-face classes run for a number of weeks before the first summative assessments in most courses (that is, week six of our semester). As with the online course above, the classes cover a range of elements of grammar, syntax, sentence structure, tone, argumentation and academic practice. At the end of the class series, students resubmit a piece of work to their tutor and receive further developmental feedback on their written work. These students receive the most targeted provision for the enhancement of their writing. The classes are taught again by doctoral students from within the broad subject areas. Student reflections on the process have highlighted that these classes are some of the most informative and enjoyable of their first year, as well as being essential for their continued academic success.

Through this process, every incoming undergraduate and postgraduate taught student receives feedback on their writing at the start of their studies. For the institution, the AWSP allows for targeted intervention at the start of students' studies, and provides students with prolonged contact with the institution's department tasked with enhancing student success. The AWSP is the first main point of assessment contact between our institution and our students, and as such it is framed as a positive, feedback-driven, low-pressure experience to enhance and improve student success.

Conception and Development of the Academic Writing Skills Programme

The AWSP was originally conceived by the department of English Literature as a means to address what they perceived as problematic standards of writing ability in new students which, they argued, had a detrimental impact on student progress and the retention rate. Members of staff collaborated with colleagues from the Learning and Teaching Centre to create an online exercise which was completed early in the first term, and subsequently followed by ten weeks of classes for those who were deemed to require additional support.

The rationale behind the exercise meant that both the diagnostic exercise and the programme were initially designed on a remedial model, seeking to identify what knowledge and skills students were 'lacking', and then using classes to raise their skills to a defined standard.

The original exercise consisted of three initial questions: two which focused on grammar, and one which focused on style. Students were then presented with four possible essay titles and asked to write a short essay. They were reassured at the outset that the exercise was not a 'test', but a 'diagnostic', which aimed to help them develop the writing skills they would need at university.

Assessors were asked to focus on punctuation, tone, agreement, sentence structure, paragraph structure, concision, generalisation, parts of speech, and word choice. They were also reminded

that the exercise was not a test and told to avoid using the words ‘pass’ or ‘fail’. Students would instead be given feedback from one of four categories:

> *Grades 1-3* – The student’s writing is sound. They should always strive to improve, but nothing seems to be problematic.
>
> *Grades 3-5* – The student’s writing is generally sound, but there are one or two minor issues that they should seek to address using online resources for self-study.
>
> *Grades 4-6* – There are some minor aspects of the student’s writing that need work, but there are also some major issues to be addressed. They should refer to the online resources and look at the support offered by the Student Learning Service.
>
> *Grades 7-10* – The assessor is concerned that they cannot articulate their thinking clearly in writing, which means their essays are unlikely to be a true reflection of ability. The student is advised to attend a short series of classes to support them in developing the necessary skills.

The exercise itself was originally administered via a simple form hosted on the Arts server. It was not presented over multiple pages: every question was presented on one page. Students’ submissions were then entered into a large database which could be accessed by assessors and marked over a three-week period. Students would then be emailed their feedback.

The technology used for the original diagnostic exercise had numerous issues which presented difficulties that point to the importance of selecting a robust technological platform. The exercise crashed frequently for students and assessors. When these crashes occurred, this resulted in the student’s submission being completed and stored as an incomplete entry (which meant the student had to be notified, and then advised to reattempt the exercise). There was no restriction on how many times students could attempt the exercise, and there was also no way to sort the database, which meant the same student could be marked multiple times by different markers.

These technical issues had a marked impact on students’ response to the diagnostic. Even before encountering the diagnostic itself (and the emphasis on the use of the word ‘diagnostic’ as opposed to ‘test’), students still often expressed anxiety at the prospect of assessment at the beginning of the academic year. Technical problems often exacerbated this anxiety. If the exercise crashed while the student was completing it, this could cause considerable stress. This stress was carried over to classes (if a student was asked to attend), and often led to defensiveness and a reluctance to engage fully with the course. Receiving contrasting feedback from different markers on multiple submissions had a similar effect. Interestingly, students often seemed to regard technical problems with the exercise as a valid reason to refuse to engage with classes (Kirschner and De Bruyckere 2017), in the sense that if the University had not upheld its standards and obligations in providing working software, then they need not honour their obligations by attending classes.

The AWSP ran for two years on this model before being taken over by a new member of staff within English Literature, who decided to make substantial revisions to both the technology employed and the content of the exercise. The following changes were made to the existing model.

The diagnostic was to be offered via bespoke software designed by a member of staff who worked within I.T. Services. There were several changes made based on student and marker feedback, the

most notable being that the database of submissions could now be sorted according to student ID. This helped to speed up the marking process, which in turn meant that students received feedback sooner, alleviating some of the initial anxieties around the exercise.

Despite these improvements, however, the software still had several problems. If students did not complete the exercise within the specified time frame, the exercise closed, and their submission was recorded as blank. Any student who had experienced problems like this, or had perhaps lost connectivity while completing the exercise, had to contact a member of staff to have their exercise reset. As in the first iteration of AWSP, students had a tendency to quickly disengage from the exercise if they experienced technical problems, either becoming hostile, or generally taking the experience less seriously.

The content of the diagnostic was also revised. The first questions on formal grammar were removed. Instead, students were asked to complete a multiple-choice quiz consisting of ten questions on punctuation, revise a sample paragraph for tone and structural issues, and write a short essay. The grading criteria and feedback categories remained the same.

The structure of the class programme was also streamlined. Instead of ten weeks, there was now a six-week class programme in place. The class contents themselves were redesigned to focus on the essential essay-writing skills students would need to have in place in order to deal with their coursework assignments, working up towards the essay from punctuation, sentence structure, and paragraphing.

The AWSP continued on this model for three years. Feedback from students improved, and tutors on the course encountered less resistance to the diagnostic, as well as improved engagement in classes. Overall, it was well-regarded enough that in 2012, the decision was made that the AWSP should be moved out of the College of Arts and centralised. It would now be delivered by the Student Learning Service, with the additional aim of broadening uptake across all four Colleges of the University. Importantly, the diagnostic exercise would now be offered via Moodle, the University's VLE.

Lessons learned

In the course of trialling the AWSP in pockets across the University, we experimented with several delivery models. This involved optimising: the extent to which the programme was compulsory; timing of the programme across a student's degree (i.e. first year, second year, *etc.*); timing of the programme within the academic year (i.e. semester 1 vs. semester 2); the freedom students were given to complete the initial diagnostic exercise in their own time vs. completing it *en masse* in a supervised computer lab; the number and duration of the subsequent classes; and the sequence of topics delivered in classes week-by-week.

Varying each of these elements brought their own positive and negative outcomes for the students as well as the staff running the Programme, and these outcomes were often in tension. Currently, we believe we have found a delivery model that is administratively tenable to operate at scale across all of campus, while also suitable for the requirements of all subject areas, maximising positive outcomes for the students. Here, we aim to share some of the lessons learned.

Compulsoriness – Diagnostic Exercise

While the original design was for an entirely compulsory programme, this was contained within the College of Arts, where essay-writing quickly forms a significant and important component of a new student's responsibilities. In rolling out the AWSP to the scientific colleges, where pieces of sustained writing typically do not feature until the later stages of a degree, we initially pitched the AWSP as an optional enhancement activity that would be of benefit to anyone who either wanted to check their performance against a benchmark (the diagnostic exercise) or who self-identified as having room to improve. In a large class of approximately 650 first-year biology students, however, only around 70 opted in to undertake the diagnostic exercise. Of those who did, a large proportion passed with a strong performance, presumably reflecting a self-selection of the 'worried well' who simply sought reassurance. Of those who underperformed and were referred to classes, only a very small minority attended. This meant that the significant amount of administrative effort of scheduling, rooming and preparing materials for classes was wasted. Future iterations were therefore carried out on a more compulsory basis.

Compulsoriness – Classes

Some subject areas recognised the importance of embedding academic writing teaching within their degrees, and were keen to opt-in to early trials. In one third-year biology course, the head of the subject decided to have their students complete not only the exercise on a compulsory basis, but also to attend the follow-on classes whether their score in the exercise would have earned them a referral or not. To lend authenticity, the pair of 2-hour classes was delivered during mainstream class time. While they were delivered by a member of staff who emphasised that the classes were designed to enhance rather than to penalise, feedback was strongly negative; high-performing students felt their time was being wasted and their autonomy curbed, and a vocal minority affected the mood of the class to the detriment of those who had most to gain. In addition, the large-group format (*c*. 60 students) made it more difficult to include the usual individual or small-group exercises and achieve the same engagement with the teacher. Finally, as it would be impossible to scale up across the whole University without an unrealistic investment in staff time, we would wholeheartedly not recommend this approach.

Diagnostic Exercise - Students' Own Time vs. Supervised In-Class

Some subject staff – particularly those with MSc students on short, one-year degrees – were keen to put their students through early trials of the AWSP as quickly as possible. Computer clusters were booked so that the students could all undertake the diagnostic at the same time, during week one, under the supervision of a member of staff who could give direction and respond to any problems encountered. It was also thought that this would eliminate any possibility for collusion between classmates, as the students would essentially sit the exercise under exam conditions.

This arrangement was quickly decided to be unworkable at scale, however. Aside from the issue of booking computer clusters for large numbers of students, it represents an inefficient use of staff time to supervise an exercise that requires no supervision. The exercise has always been timed, so there is limited opportunity for students to find, read and plagiarise from pre-existing texts online. Collusion and similarity between students working at neighbouring computers can be easily spotted without live invigilation as general teaching assistants (GTA) are allocated their marking load based on sequential batches of submissions. Finally, the exercise on Moodle is simple enough

that no technical problems were ever brought to the staff member in charge of these trial sessions (with the exception of several forced Windows upgrades that took place mid-exercise as a consequence of centralised campus IT policy).

Timing – Across Degree

Different subject areas naturally require that their students undertake different types of assessment, and these vary as the nature and complexity of a degree progresses. In designing an AWSP schedule, we balanced the need acknowledged in Evans' literature review (2013) to 'ensur[e] early opportunities for students to undertake assessment and obtain feedback' with the stage in a student's degree when our feedback would be most suited to the coursework currently facing them.

For students who mainly have to deal with multiple choice questions, short-answer exams, and practical assessments for the first half of their studies, we conservatively assumed that many lessons learned from the AWSP in first year would likely be quickly forgotten. We therefore initially explored targeting the AWSP at the different times for different cohorts of students: a 'just-in-time' model that saw some students undertake the course in year three (of our four-year Scottish degrees).

While we still feel this rationale has some merit, administration of the programme becomes increasingly difficult with each additional variation from a single, standard delivery model. For example, students whose course choices straddle subjects in the arts and the sciences might find themselves directed to undertake the AWSP at first year as well as at third year, and similarly with students who change degree midway through their studies. Our experience is also that students who discuss their progress with their colleagues on degrees where the AWSP is delivered at a different timepoint can unintentionally generate a climate of panic amongst those peers. Each of these situations has led to hundreds of unnecessary emails each year from students worried about misunderstanding instructions, or angry about what they believe to have been our error for not emailing them yet, when in fact they were not scheduled to do the undertake for as many as two more years.

Timing – Across Academic Year

In rolling out the AWSP across all subject areas, we have had to deal with the technological issues of having thousands of students submit an exercise at the same time. The technology, the capacity of our human markers, and the challenge of room bookings have all played into a decision to stagger delivery of the programme across the course of the whole academic year. We currently have an iteration in the first semester, an iteration in the second semester, and a mop-up iteration in the summer period. Priority is given in the first semester to those students who are only here for one year (e.g. Master's students) so that they can realise the benefits as early as possible, as well as to those students who will be assessed heavily by essays (i.e. undergraduates in the College of Arts and the College of Social Sciences). The second semester iteration is delivered for students who can afford more time (i.e. undergraduates in our College of Science & Engineering and our College of Medical, Veterinary & Life Sciences). As the AWSP is compulsory, those who fail to engage in either of these two main semesters are required to take part in the third iteration over the summer.

This staggered approach allows us to more easily manage the administrative processes that underpin such a large programme, and, more importantly, to use a smaller number of markers than if every student submitted at the same time. This helps with quality control, as there are fewer doctoral students to train, and they are more likely to become increasingly efficient with each iteration.

Marker / Tutor Community

Each year, we now employ a pool of approximately 30 doctoral student Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) to mark the AWSP submissions and deliver the subsequent classes. They each take an equal share of the marking, carried out through Moodle, and each commit to teaching an equal number of the follow-on classes. We train our GTAs in marking before the programme officially opens, and we run group marking sessions when the first assignments are submitted to make sure the team are marking in equivalent ways. This group training also encourages a sense of confidence and communal accountability. We then provide access to a closed group within Microsoft Teams, which allows the team to continue to communicate over instant messenger.

We have found this community-building to be indispensable in ensuring continued standardisation and marking accountability. For example, markers will regularly post short (anonymous) excerpts from their allocation of essays that they judge to be on the borderline between grades, inviting the others to say how they would score them. We find that they regularly update each other on progress with their allocation of the marking, and self-organise cover for class teaching when required.

In line with the findings of Linenberger *et al* (2014), who reported that actively working to cultivate an environment of collaboration between GTAs improved openness, effectiveness and self-confidence, we see that our GTAs are more efficient and communicative with us when we actively encourage them to engage with each other and with us. In the past, our GTA pool has consisted of eight doctoral students, which has been relatively easy to cultivate into a cohesive group; expanding the AWSP campus-wide and recruiting 30 GTAs has made the facilitation and active encouragement of a sense of community amongst these markers even more crucial.

Technology Driving Face-to-Face Interaction

LEADS sits as a central department within our institution, and as such, students in every subject area have always been offered information about our regular classes, our online resources and our individual appointments. Since the mainstreaming of the AWSP, all students are now *required* to engage with us as one of their first tasks at university. This has had the effect of bringing us even more solidly to the forefront of their attention as a resource that can be accessed at any point throughout their studies, thus enhancing our reputation as a team that can offer a meaningful contribution to students at levels from first year to postgraduate. The smooth running of the programme, and an efficient and meaningful learning experience for students, is therefore crucial to beginning and maintaining our department's relationship with the student body.

Take-home messages

Expertise and reputation

The AWSP is administered and adapted by LEADS. LEADS has built a reputation across the institution as the source of expertise and knowledge on all aspects of student writing and student academic success. Academic staff consult with SLD throughout the year in order to address a variety of issues pertaining to student writing and broader academic skills. As such, staff faith in LEADS's content and ability to deliver that content is high.

Staff buy-in plays an important part in the encouragement of student engagement. While all new students receive emails informing them about AWSP, as well a brief talk from a member of LEADS at one of their introductory lectures, induction is an intense period during which students can often complain of feeling 'overloaded' by information. Subject-staff willingness to remind students about AWSP via departmental VLEs, to invite LEADS Effective Learning Advisers (ELAs) to subject inductions, etc., ensures that the information is not lost, and further reinforces the value of the AWSP for students.

This continuous dialogue with staff across the institution means that AWSP's alignment with course/subject content is closely maintained and regularly evaluated. This, in turn, ensures that the assessments offered via the AWSP are authentic and tailored to meet students' needs. Feedback has shown that students engage more positively with assessment which they perceive as directly relevant.

Further, the AWSP has been given special commendation in two successive iterations of the national Enhancement-Led Institutional Review process (ELIR; a sector-wide regulatory framework for evaluating the performance of publicly funded Higher Education institutions in Scotland, operated by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)) (QAA, 2014; QAA, *in press*). This has cemented the reputation of the University of Glasgow as a centre of excellence in academic writing support for all students.

The value added by LEADS staff is a result of their cumulative experience in designing, developing and delivering the AWSP at scale over a number of years. This experience has resulted in LEADS being home to a group of staff with deep knowledge in, and understanding of, the practicalities of technology-enhanced academic writing programmes. This expertise is the result of both trial-and-error in the development of the Programme, as well as ongoing reflection and a desire to maintain the best experience for our AWSP students.

Regular reflection and responsiveness to feedback.

AWSP has undergone continuous development and refinement since its pilot year. These developments are informed by observations gained via student feedback, tutor feedback, staff consultation, and yearly reflection on the part of those designing and delivering the content. Openness to the value of these various viewpoints ensures that the AWSP is flexible and responsive to changing challenges and contexts.

Robustness of technology

As previously discussed, informal student feedback indicates that any problems with technology (system crashes, etc.) can lead to early disengagement from the exercise. Robust technology and prompt response to any difficulties ensures completion of the exercise and subsequent attendance at classes (if required).

While bespoke software initially seemed appealing, the lack of ongoing internal support for atypical software (that may have been designed by a visiting or temporary member of staff) proved to be problematic, with no immediate support when difficulties were encountered. This, as well as the centralisation of the programme, is what led the AWSP to be housed on the University's VLE, Moodle.

This is not without its challenges. While AWSP runs efficiently on Moodle, modifications do have to be made to make the exercise 'fit' the VLE. Quiz, for example, is the best way to deliver the exercise, but presents challenges in terms of implementing a multi-marker system. Ensuring up-to-date knowledge of VLE developments is, therefore, crucial in ensuring the ongoing adaptiveness and stability of AWSP. The advantage of robustness, however, outweighs any challenges presented in adapting to the VLE.

Maintaining institutional support

AWSP has expanded hugely over recent years: 12,000 new students are expected to complete the exercise in every academic year. Dealing with these numbers has repercussions in terms of staffing numbers, budget, and workload. This, in turn, requires a continuous commitment of institutional support.

This support is dependent on positive institutional opinions on the expertise of SLD in the development and delivery of the AWSP. This means maintaining strong working relationships with staff across the institution, from academics to staff involved in student record management and student data management.

Conclusion

Running a large-scale, compulsory writing course across an institution presents a range of challenges for staff. Our experiences to date have confirmed our views that technology-enhanced approaches are the only solution to working across all students in our large, research-intensive university. Changes in the higher education sector, as well as a university strategy that focuses on real commitment to student enhancement, has meant that we have been able to lead the way in the United Kingdom with regards to large, online, compulsory writing diagnostic and courses for all students.

Our experience has highlighted the need for established expertise and relations within and across the institution, ongoing reflection and development, robustness and reliability of technology, and ongoing institutional support as central to the success of such large programmes. The dedication of staff in running, promoting and improving the programme, as well as the team of GTA markers (who mark almost 500 essays each within the space of 10 days), are crucial to the implementation of a successful programme.

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