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Your success is our goal: An intervention for failing students

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Your success is our goal: An intervention for failing students

Abstract

More diversity is now shown in students gaining admission into universities, many who are ill-equipped for first-year studies and assessment writing. This can result in a failing grade for some, which can impact their success and progression. This study contributes to the student success literature by reporting on the six-step one-on-one targeted intervention strategy devised to support the 33 out of 500 students who were unsuccessful in their first university assessment and its resubmission. The study also details the theoretical framework that underpinned the subject—Carol Dweck's growth mindset, Mezirow's transformative learning theory, and the maxim "Your success is our goal"! The study determined that: i) the intervention was successful for the 33 students who each passed the assessment; ii) a pre- and post-intervention writing skills assessment showed an improvement of +0.67 to give an average of 3.48, where 3 is a pass, and iii) at interview, students (76.9%) reported their improved writing abilities and that the intervention support was helpful. The study concluded that failing students can be successful when they are encouraged to use a growth mindset and individually supported to develop their writing skills.

Practitioner Notes

1. First-year students fail resubmission of their first assignment
2. Changing their perception of their writing ability is key to success
3. Changing their mindset from fixed to growth increases their ability to persist with failed assessment
4. One-on-One intervention strategy improved student confidence for written work
5. A requirement to participate in the writing intervention before being able to resubmit work was reported by students as very helpful

Keywords

Intervention strategies, failing students, student success, growth mindset, academic writing skills, first-year students

Introduction

In 2021, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported that some of its member countries were increasingly creating more flexible pathways into tertiary studies to meet the needs of their diverse populations (OECD, 2021a). Nonetheless, many students are not well prepared for their first year of university (Beckman & Rayner, 2011; van Rooij et al., 2018). For example, a New Zealand study reported that 70% of first-year students underestimated the amount and type of writing required (Emerson et al., 2015). Other studies have determined that the skills first-year university students require are different from what students need in other settings (Potter & Bye, 2014; Wilkes et al., 2015). This underestimation can result in some students not passing their first university assignment which consequently creates a barrier for them to successfully complete the subject. This study is set in the context of beginning university students. It explored the problem of how first-year university students who failed their first assignment and the resubmission they were offered, could be supported to succeed when provided with an individualised targeted intervention and a second opportunity to resubmit.

The OECD (2021b) maintains that education systems that perform best across OECD countries bring together: i) quality, regarding the effectiveness of how their students incorporate the skills they need to flourish in society, and; ii) equity, ensuring an individual's set of circumstances are not a barrier to their educational attainment and that all individuals attain a minimal achievement. In their literature review on the term "equity" in education, de los Santos et al. (2020) pointed out that "equity" is difficult to define because it is dependent on many, mainly political, factors. Hence, while education systems typically have equity as a fundamental value, equity can present itself differently in different educational policies. For example, in Australia where this study was set, equity groups include those originating from: a regional or remote area; a low socioeconomic household, or; a family where neither parent has a higher education qualification (Australian Government, 2020).

It has been acknowledged that belonging to an equity group can negatively impact a student's chance of higher education completion and that belonging to more than one equity group has a cumulative effect (Australian Government, 2020). For these reasons, students from equity groups are more likely to attain poor academic results and are more likely to contemplate dropping out (Li & Carroll, 2020). In data collected from more than 70 countries, the OECD drew particular attention to the correlation between a student's socioeconomic status (SES)—a student's economic, social and cultural status—and their educational outcomes (OECD, 2017). Similar findings have been reported in Australia (Australian Government, 2020) including in one study (Devlin & McKay, 2019) that found that students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds attending Australian regional universities often need support to succeed. Furthermore, a nationally representative study of American ninth-grade public school students determined that students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds held higher fixed mindset beliefs about their academic abilities than did students from higher SES background which accounted, in part, for their lower academic achievements (Destin et al., 2019). Separate British (Hassel & Ridout, 2018) and Canadian studies noted that many students whose parents had not achieved a bachelor's degree—"first-generation students" (Cameron & Rideout, 2020, p. 40)—were not equipped to be independent learners. While a study (Stone & O'Shea, 2019) that focussed on Australian university students who were more than 25 years of age and first-in-family to attend university, found that such students usually have no one in their home—or possibly in community or friendship groups—who had experience of university on which they could draw.

Many universities throughout the world provide programs to support students' academic success. Despite their availability, such programs are reported to have had varying success (for example Nelson et al., 2012; Palmer et al., 2014; Taylor, 2017) with many students, including those who are first-in-family (Hoyne & McNaught, 2013), unlikely to seek help or participate in these optional services (Aruguete & Katrevich, 2017; Whannell & Whannell, 2015). Universities need to find ways to identify and support at-risk first-year students to reduce their academic skills gap and help them succeed (Harris & Dargusch, 2020; Larsen et al., 2020). Nevertheless, there is a lack of literature on strategies to support first-year students who have failed their first assignment to enable them to recoup their failing grades. Not only can failing a first assignment often result in disengagement and a loss of confidence, but it can also result in students dropping out of their program (George et al., 2021; Tarmizi et al., 2019). It was against the pragmatic background of academics seeking to support failing first year students in their subject, that this study was conceived. In this regard, the study asked the question: what was the intervention strategy designed to support first-year, first-semester students who had failed the resubmission of their first university assessment, and what was its impact?

Study Context

This study took place in an Australian regional university which exceeds the sector average for participation rates of students from three of the six equity groups (Australian Government, 2020), these being: low socioeconomic status backgrounds (25%); regional or remote (57%); and, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds (4.3%). Many students are from two or more equity groups, while more than 60% are first-in-family to attend university (TEQSA, 2017). This equity student make-up is similar to that of universities in many other countries whereby first year students are derived from a myriad of cultural and educational backgrounds, which influence their mindsets and aspirations for success (Destin et al., 2019; OECD, 2018).

This paper's focus is the mandatory first-year, first-semester subject, *Foundations: Language and Literacy*, in which all first-year undergraduate Education students enrol. The University designed this subject as a foundational literacy subject for beginning students and also as one of eight non-teacher education subjects that first-year Education students must pass before admission into the second year of their teacher education program.[1] Seventy-five per cent of the 500+ students who enrol each year in the subject undertake it internally on one of the University's three campuses. The remaining 25% study externally, that is, online. In the subject, students were required to gain a passing grade in all three assessment tasks (Table 1) to gain an overall pass. Those students who did not pass an assessment task were offered another attempt.

[1] An entry requirement into undergraduate teacher education programs in New South Wales is that students have well-developed literacy and numeracy skills. The Government's measure of this is that teacher education entrants must have achieved a minimum of three Band 5 results, one of which needs to be English (NSW Government, 2013), in the New South Wales' Higher School Certificate, the highest award in the State's schools (NSW Government, n.d.). An alternative to this requirement is that teacher education providers must offer a first year of discipline (non-teacher education) that teacher education students must pass before entering the second year of their program (NSW Government, 2013).

Table 1

Summary of Assessment Tasks in Foundations: Language and Literacy

	Assessment Type and Weighting	Details	Support Provided
1	Online computer-marked quiz. *Non-graded pass*	50 multiple-choice questions in 60 minutes on the technical skills of writing	Multiple attempts allowed until students attain at least 45/50
2	Portfolio *50%*:		a. Scaffolded question to help analyse written work and video work b. An annotated exemplar of an analysis of an article and a video c. Correct use of APA in exemplars
	a. Analysis of a professional article from *The Conversation*	Read the identified article and provide a written analysis of the article. Use APA 7th referencing system [360 words]	
	b. Analysis of a 3-minute video on an education topic	Watch the video and provide a written analysis of the video. Use APA 7th referencing system [360 words]	
	c. Professional letter	Write a letter seeking part-time work in a school as a teacher's aide [280 words]	Letter template provided
	d. Video recording	Roleplay being a teacher speaking to a parent at a Parent-Teacher event [90 seconds]	YouTube clip resource
3	Two-hour examination *50%*	a. Grammar and spelling b. Reading comprehension c. Paragraph writing d. Reflective essay (topic provided before exam)	Exam revision covered during final tutorial

Note. This study relates to Assessment 2a, 2b and 2c.

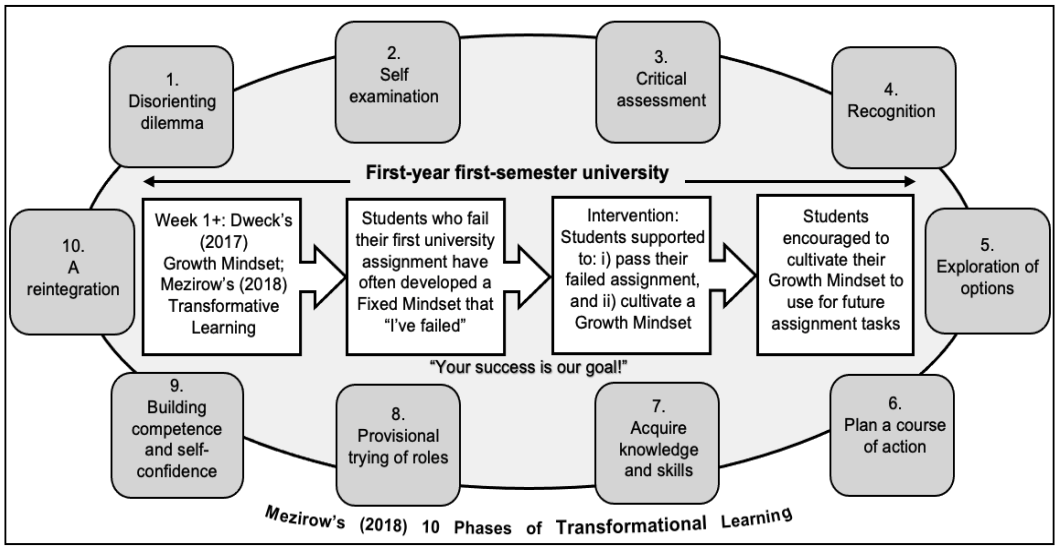
The subject has three assessment tasks: a quiz, a portfolio, and a closed-book examination (Table 1). Assessment 1 and 3 have been designed to support students in their preparation for the literacy component of the Australian Government's Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education (LANTITE), a computer-based test that all Australian teacher education students must pass before they complete their degree (ACER, 2021). This study focussed on Assessment 2, the Portfolio, which is the students' first written assessment in both the subject and their university studies. Participants were those students who failed this assessment task and failed the assessment for the second time after being allowed to resubmit.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that underpins the subject *Foundations: Language and Literacy* and this study was Carol Dweck's (2017) growth and fixed mindset theory and Jack Mezirow's (2018) transformational learning theory, together with the maxim "Your success is our goal!" (Figure 1).

Figure 1

The Theoretical Framework That Underpinned Foundations: Language and Literacy



Note. Week 1 + (left square) indicates where growth mindset and transformational learning theory were introduced in Week 1.

This underpinning approach to *Foundations: Language and Literacy* (depicted in Figure 1) was based on the concept that success at university relies on a student's cognitive processes, which assist with capacity-building to complete assessment tasks. It is not unusual for first-in-family students to perceive assessment tasks as challenging and representing barriers they cannot overcome. Hence, changing the mindset towards growth can be a transformative experience (Dweck, 2017). This transformation results from the learner interpreting and reinterpreting their expertise to get new information through critical reflection and understanding, and shifting their previous mindset (Mezirow, 1991; 2018). This process of interpreting involves several phases, which consist of a disorientation dilemma, self-examination, critical assessment of assumptions, planning a course of action, acquisition of knowledge and skills, exploring new roles, and building self-efficacy (Mezirow, 2018).

In Week 1 of this subject, students were introduced to these two theories and the maxim in relation to themselves as beginning university students, and were reminded of these in subsequent weeks. Through growth and fixed mindsets, students engage with the idea that they can develop their capacities over time, persist when challenged, see effort as necessary, and take advantage of advice and guidance (Dweck & Yeager, 2019). Transformational learning theory was explained to students in terms of how Mezirow had developed his approach: that is, after studying the reactions of his wife and her peers as they engaged with beginning college studies, which was the situation for many of the *Foundations: Language and Literacy* students. Mezirow's theory proposes that at various times in life, individuals encounter unsettling experiences that cause them to reflect critically and engage in self-examination, resulting in them exploring new actions, roles, or relationships that can be transformative (Mezirow, 2018). The third component of the framework was the "Your success is our goal!" maxim that was included in the subject documentation and which the teaching staff spoke to students about throughout the semester. This framework provided an underpinning of the

intervention strategy for failing students who opted to resubmit their assessment task. Students working through the intervention strategy can break that fixed mindset cycle and believe that their essential qualities can be cultivated through effort and thus eliminate the skill gap. In that reset in mindset, they can start to realise that they have the potential for success and that new learning is achievable.

Design and Method

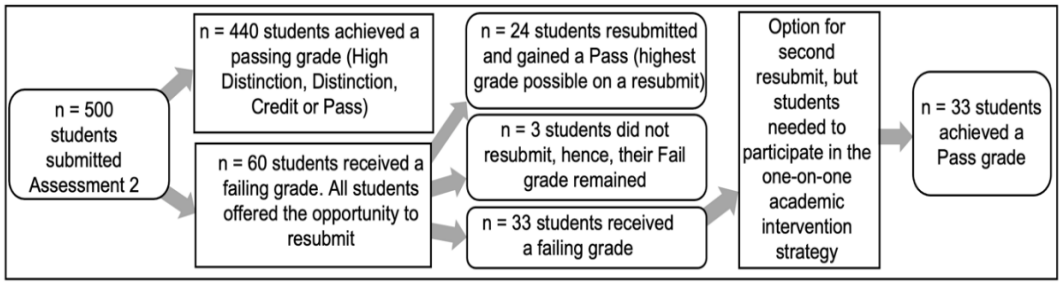
The researchers used a case study design to investigate the experience of the one-on-one individualised intervention and its impact. A case study is described as both a learning process and a learning product (Stake, 1995). Its features stem from its focus on a phenomenon within a real-world context where there are many variables of interest (Yin, 2018). Hence, this approach enabled the researchers to develop valuable insights (Fraenkel et al., 2015) into the academic literacy intervention and the students' experience of the intervention strategy, and its effects on their self-efficacy and mindset.

Students' Performance in Assessment 2

Sixty of the 500 students who submitted Assessment 2 did not achieve a passing grade (Figure 2). In alignment with the subject's theoretical underpinning (Figure 1) and the University's policy that first-year students should be allowed to resubmit an assessment task that they did not pass, all 60 students who scored a failing grade were invited to resubmit the assessment task. Of these, 33 did not pass their resubmit and were offered a second resubmit, provided they participated in a targeted academic intervention strategy. All 33 students chose this option, and each eventually gained a passing grade, the highest possible grade the University allows for a resubmitted assignment. These 33 students who did not pass both their first and second resubmit are the focus of this case study.

Figure 2

Results for Students in Their First Written University Assessment Task—Assessment 2



Choosing Participants

Purposeful sampling (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015) was used to generate the target group for this study using a combination of three criteria. All students: i) had been enrolled in the first-year, first-session subject, *Foundations: Language and Literacy*, ii) had been unsuccessful in their first university assignment and a resubmit of this assignment (n=33), and iii) had participated in the one-on-one intervention (n=33) (Figure 2).

The Intervention Strategy

The intervention comprised six steps.

1. The Subject Coordinator developed a supportively worded email template to be sent to students who had failed the resubmit of their assessment task. The email advised students of their grades and encouraged them to adopt a growth mindset and participate in the one-on-one academic intervention program. The email concluded with "Your success is our goal".

2. The Subject Coordinator allocated each of the 33 students to one of two academics—an Academic Skills lecturer who had agreed to participate, or herself—then emailed each student using the template. The academics followed up on any students who did not participate by text, phone or email.

3. Each student spent one or more one-on-one in-person or Zoom sessions with their allocated academic, working through their marked-up assignment. The most common writing issues that the academics worked on with their students were: i) essay structure—introduction-body-conclusion, ii) topic sentences and appropriate paragraphing with the logical sequencing of ideas, iii) language and grammar, iv) the difference between a summary and an analysis, v) writing an analysis, and vi) the correct use of citations and referencing.

4. The students undertook scaffolded exercises for identified writing issues to learn and develop a new skill while being supported by the academic. Exemplars for the scaffolded practice exercises also helped students visualise a well-written assignment at credit level.

5. During the session/s, students then replicated the new skill in their assignment.

6. After carefully considering the marker's feedback and the scaffolding exercises, students then resubmitted for the second time within 14 days.

Study Design

The researchers gained ethics approval from the University's Ethics Committee before the commencement of the study. The study was not commenced until after i) all students had submitted and had received their result for their resubmit, ii) the conclusion of the semester, and iii) the University had advised all students of their overall grade for the subject.

The study used an interview format with semi-structured open-ended questions and Likert-scale questions that were asked during a phone interview. The phone interview process was used to give students the opportunity to provide a deep expression of their experience to increase the researchers' understanding of the student context (Driscoll, 2011). The interviewer also used voice inflections to demonstrate empathy and understanding and prompt the students to help them share more information about their experience. Although using an interview technique can lead to bias as the interviewer interacts with the participant, in some instances, this can lead to guided answers. The bias was decreased by using an interviewer who was not involved with the teaching of the subject and had not had any prior contact with the students (Secor, 2010). The use of interviews was appropriate for this study as the intent of the case study was to understand the student experience in a one-on-one intervention program which required gathering qualitative data about their experience

as a participant in the program and the external factors that affected the student's ability to resubmit the writing task successfully.

Data Collection

All 33 students who had participated in the intervention were invited to participate in a phone interview. For this study, two types of data were collected.

1. The phone interview involved a mix of open-ended and closed-ended questions which ran for approximately 25 minutes. Interview questions were designed to understand the students' context, time management, level of support with studies outside of the University, and impact of support from the intervention focusing on the marker's feedback and how these assisted in filling the academic skills gap they had experienced. To minimise bias, researchers not involved with the subject conducted the interviews. Through the interviews, students were empowered to share their stories.

2. Data was compared from students' pre-intervention assignments (to determine each student's initial assignment writing errors) and post-intervention assignments (to assess the reduction in writing errors that indicated writing improvements). Students' works were judged on a scale of 1 (for low errors) to 5 (for high errors) at pre-intervention and post-intervention to determine any reduction in writing mistakes in order to evaluate academic writing improvements from participating in the intervention.

Data Analysis

Three data analysis procedures were used: two for the interviews, and one for the pre-and post-intervention assignments (Table 2). The demographic and Likert-scale questions were analysed in Excel to create graphs to represent the trends.

After the interviews were transcribed, qualitative interview questions were imported into NVivo 11 (QSR, 2015) to determine emerging themes. The data analysis process was the constant comparative method where an interplay occurred between the researcher, text segments, categories, and themes (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). This allowed for continuous comparison and reduction of redundancy in codes and categories, which created a picture that better reflected the student experience.

Table 2

The study's design: data sources, data analysis and data reporting procedures

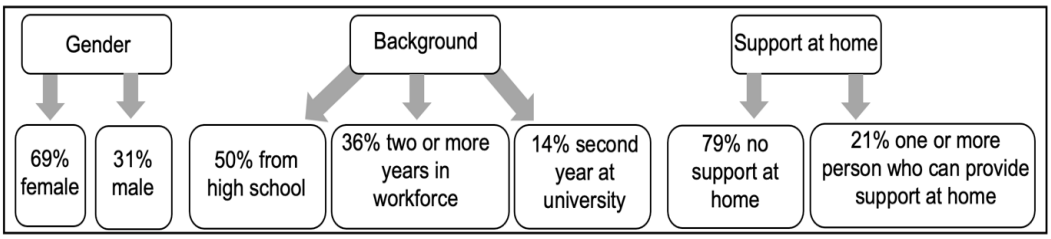
Data source	Semi-Structured Interviews			Students' first assignment	Students' final assignment
	Open-ended questions	Demographic questions	Likert-scale questions		
Data analysis	NVivo 11 to assess for pre-coded and emergent themes	Excel	Excel	Excel	Excel
Data reporting	Narrative format with data organised into themes and subthemes	Graph to organise data	Graph to organise data	Graph to organise data	Graph to organise data

Results

Of the 60 students who had resubmitted their first failed assignment, the study examined the impact of a targeted academic skills intervention strategy on the 33 students who were unsuccessful in the resubmission of their first university assessment.

Figure 3

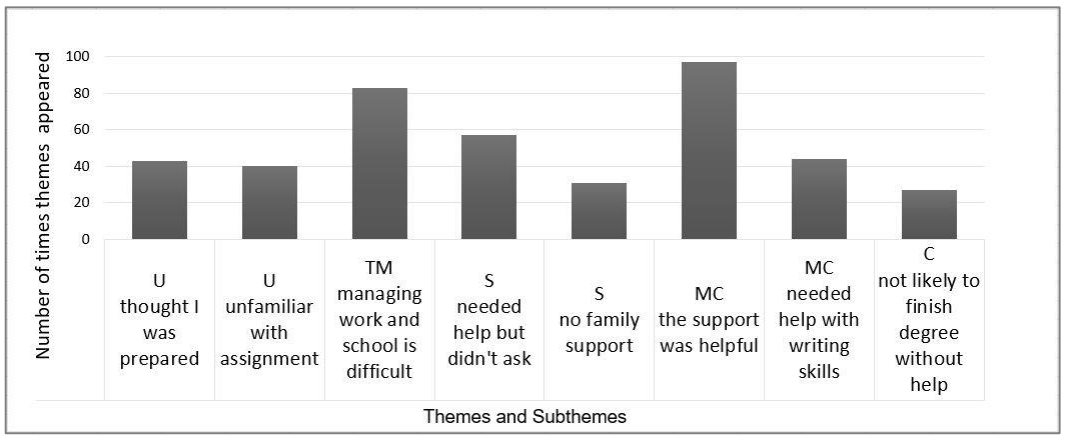
Demographics of Interviewed Students (n = 13)



The demographic characteristics shown in Figure 3 indicate that interviewed students were predominantly female, directly from high school, and had little support from home.

Figure 4

Number of Times Themes and Subthemes were Mentioned in the Interviews

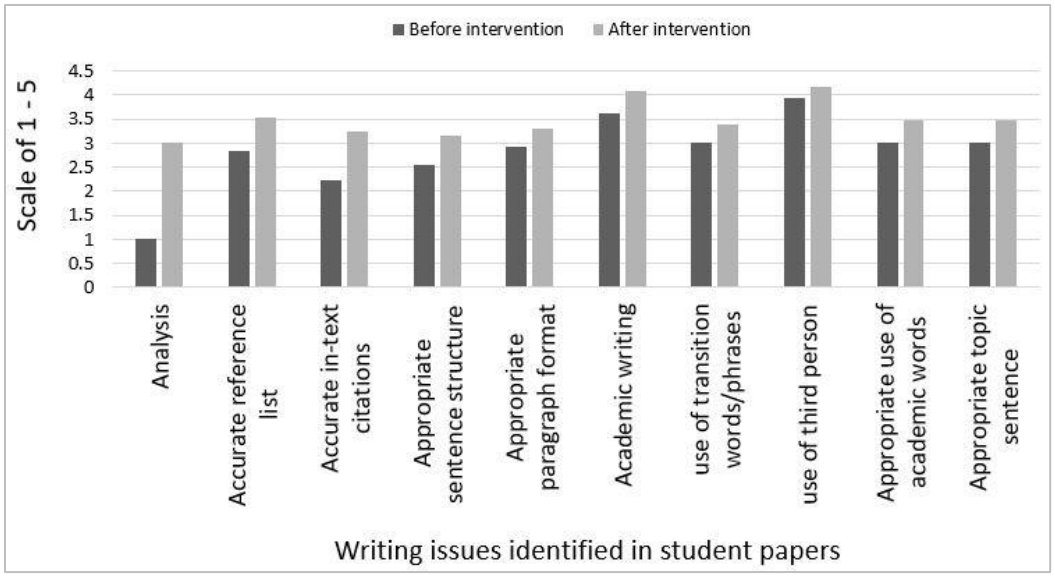


Note. The five themes are designated by the abbreviation under each bar where: U=unprepared/unfamiliar; TM=time management; S=lack of support at home; MC=making connections; C=completing a degree. Subthemes are spelt out under themes.

Eight subthemes emerged from the analysis of the interviews as shown in Figure 4. These were then collated to form five main themes that explained the students' context as first-years' perceptions (Figure 4). Subthemes were based on the number of times they were mentioned. These included: feeling unfamiliar with assignment writing; problems with time management; lack of support at home; making connections with others at university, and; perceptions on their ability to complete the degree. Nearly all students reported that the support offered through the intervention was helpful.

Figure 5

Average Scores of Participants for the Initial and Final Assignment

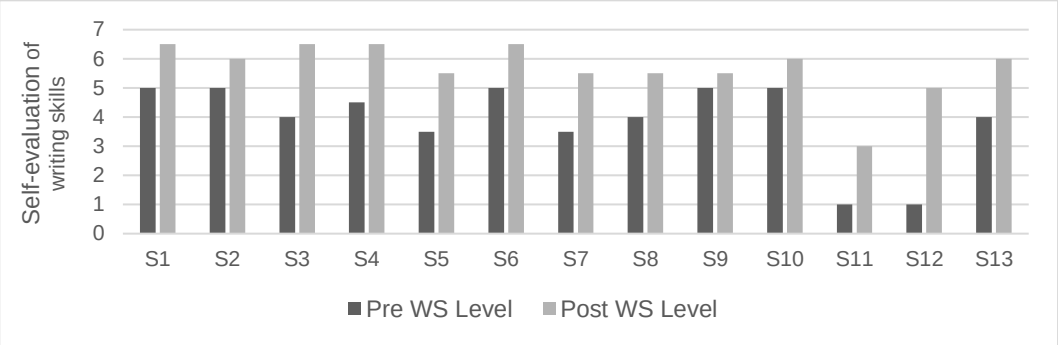


Note. Dark grey is before intervention and light grey is after intervention. Side scale: 1-very poor; 3-pass, and; 5-excellent. It is worth noting that the students' existing strength areas also improved.

On comparing the average scores of assignments (where < 3 is a fail, > 3 is a pass) between the pre- and post-intervention phases, a significant change was noted (Figure 5). The average score improved from 2.81 at pre-intervention to 3.48 at post-intervention. Students showed improvement post-intervention in 10 identified areas and an overall change of +0.67. In particular, any level of analysis in all assignments was missing at pre-intervention. All assignments could only score a maximum score of 3 post-intervention. All students interviewed (n = 13) identified that their writing skills had improved significantly after receiving the intervention (Figure 6).

Figure 6

Pre- and Post-Self-evaluations of Perceived Writing Skills



Note. All students (*n*=13) had an increase in their writing skills, with the lowest-performing students—S11 and S12—improving to at least a pass level.

Students' perceptions of their writing skills were captured pre-and post-intervention as a self-evaluation both before and after receiving help. Self-evaluation at the pre-intervention phase (when students had not accessed help with writing skills) indicated a range of responses (1-5) for pre-writing skills evaluation. A marked change of responses (3-6.5) was noted following the intervention strategy (after students had received support and guidance with their writing). This indicates students' increased awareness and understanding about academic writing and its impact on success and progression in their degree program. All students reported that they felt optimistic about the improvement they had achieved in their writing skills (Figure 6). Students then assessed their likelihood of completing the degree pre-and post-intervention (Figure 7). Before the intervention, 10 of the 13 interviewed students reported that they felt they may not finish their degree after failing their first assessment. After the intervention, all 13 students reported they believed they would finish their degree. However, three students indicated that they could complete their degree with or without help with academic writing. For this group, therefore, there was no change in perceptions.

Figure 7

Pre- and Post-Self-Evaluation Likelihood of Completing Degree

Note. Likelihood of finishing the degree: 1= not likely, 2 = maybe, 3 = likely

Discussion

In the present study, a step-by-step tailored approach was employed to assist and support students within a foundational education program. These students were not well equipped in academic writing skills and were unsuccessful in their first resubmission of a failed written assignment. Their demographic characteristic of predominantly being directly from high school, and with little support from home is consistent with findings by Scutter et al. (2011). First-in-family students are not inclined to seek assistance with support services offered by the university. Therefore, they are more likely to have poor writing skills resulting in failed assignments (Scutter et al., 2011).

The intervention strategy introduced in this study to support first-year, first-semester students who were unsuccessful in their first university assessment was effective. All 33 students passed their second attempt to resubmit their assignment following the tailor-made strategies agreed upon between the individual student and the academic with whom they worked. Findings demonstrated an improvement of +0.67 score, giving a combined average of 3.48, where a 3 was a passing grade. This finding stresses the importance of appropriate support, mainly related to academic skills required in written assignments, and particularly in the first year of study. This confirmed results from recent studies such as that by Emmanuel et al. (2019).

In this intervention study, noticeable improvements were noted in all areas listed in the intervention design when assignment evaluation scores for each academic writing area were compared between initial and final assignments. Furthermore, students evaluated their perceived writing ability as being much higher following the intervention (n = 10, 76.9%). This same group of students reported that they had a stronger likelihood of completing the degree due to improved academic writing as a result of the intervention. These findings confirm those obtained from prior research (Nelson et al., 2011; Palmer et al., 2014; Taylor, 2017) and suggest that appropriate support plays a major role in lower-performing students' experiences of success.

Although the study found a correlation between the support provided by the two academics and improved writing skills, there may have been other influencing factors at play. Some of these beyond-the-intervention factors may have been other student examples, additional help from outside the intervention strategy, or additional class learning as students revised their essays. However, it could be argued that cognitive processes were at work during the intervention. Pre-intervention, students had been exposed to the growth mindset concepts but still demonstrated low confidence in completing their assessment task. After the intervention, a change in mindset may have occurred from 'fixed' to 'growth' (Dweck, 2017) prompting students to put their efforts towards reverting a fail to a passing grade. This mindset change may have led students to persevere to improve their writing abilities, persist when challenged, make a worthwhile effort, and turn an opportunity into an advantage.

In the context of this study, the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 2002) can be applied to better understand the influence and behaviour change of students following the intervention strategy. The intervention's step-by-step approach allowed for a review of behavioural beliefs and attitudes, motivating students to make a conscious effort to perform at the required level intended for successful academic writing. Thoughtful responses during the interviews indicated that students better understood markers' feedback, academic writing at tertiary level, and the effort required. Timely feedback is an important strategy to help new students adapt to university expectations which have been shown to greatly enhance written work (Beccaria et al., 2019). During the intervention, feedback was provided in a positive, constructive process to help facilitate self-efficacy and offer

the opportunity to develop a growth mindset. Furthermore, students improved their understanding of the importance of applying conventional academic writing such as grammar, clarity, structure, and referencing. Recent studies (Kahu & Nelson, 2017; Kahu, 2013) argue that effective academic writing skills play an essential role in the experience of student success, engagement, and completion of the study program. More importantly, the experience of success needs to occur in first-year, first-semester, especially now as universities are seeing a more diverse range of students enrolling, many of whom are ill-equipped for first-year studies (Beckman & Rayner, 2011; van Rooij et al., 2018).

Although the intervention led to a successful assignment resubmission, some limitations were noted. All 33 students who were given another opportunity at resubmission received a passing grade, although only 13 students agreed to be interviewed. Due to the small size of the sample, this may have caused bias in the responses. It was also noted that most of those who agreed to be interviewed were female. Despite this smaller number, all of the students acknowledged improvements in their academic writing skills in their self-evaluation. In addition, they all reported their intention to continue their degree program to completion after participating in the intervention (>75%). At this point, it should be noted that unless the students had achieved a passing grade in the assessment task, they could not have passed the subject. Therefore, their overall grade for the subject would have been a failure. Hence, there was a high value for the identified students to engage in the intervention and work with the academic to lift their writing to a pass standard.

Overall, this study demonstrates a positive effect on academic writing skills for students who lack support from home and do not typically access support within the university. The one-on-one intervention comprised a range of targeted strategies relevant to the issues identified by the marker. Activities included: scaffolding exercises and explicit instruction on unpacking an assignment question; sentence, paragraph and essay structure, including writing introductory, body, and concluding paragraphs; third-person writing; the correct use of apostrophes; the use of transition words and phrases; the difference between writing a summary and an analysis, and; academic referencing. Supporting transitioning students at key transition points within the university continuum with targeted support that improves self-efficacy increases a student's chances of successfully moving beyond those key transition points (e.g. first-year first-semester) and identifying as a university student (Larson et al., 2021). This shift in the student's mindset creates the opportunity to reimagine themselves as successful university students capable of meeting study challenges and succeeding (Dweck, 2017).

It is important to consider how writing is taught at the secondary level as it impacts students' tertiary studies. Writing is a fundamental skill, but it can enhance an individual's pursuit of professional qualification and occupational achievements (Graham, 2019). It would seem that academic writing is not given much attention pre-university. Therefore, many students are not well-practised in writing before enrolment and have had little exposure to extended and formal writing in the first year. In addition, within the university, writing assignments across subjects has diminished considerably due to the high stakes involved (Applebee & Langer, 2011). Hence, the one-on-one individualised intervention was designed to support students and comprised a range of targeted strategies that differed depending on the academic writing issues present in the student's assignment. Some strategies included scaffolding exercises and explicit instructions on unpacking an assignment question and essay structure. Others involved the construction of sentences, paragraphs, third-person writing, correct use of punctuation, transition words and phrases, and referencing. Another strategy was the development of assignment exemplars on topics similar to the assignment topics (Nelson et al., 2012; Emerson et al., 2015). Thus, the intervention delivered in-person, or via a video-communication tool, enabled the 33 students to develop their academic writing and to pass the

assignment. The ultimate aim was for students to feel supported to continue to improve their academic skills necessary to succeed, and to successfully transition to their second semester.

Conclusion

An academic skills gap can prove challenging for first-year, first-semester students, in particular, for students from low socioeconomic communities who are frequently first-in-family to attend university. Often such students have no one in their home or community who has experienced university studies from whom they can draw support. Consequently, some students have difficulty achieving a passing grade in their first written assignments. The individualised approach in this study supported students to develop the skills to pass their assignment while increasing their confidence, self-efficacy and ability to apply a growth mindset. It allowed customisation to the student's academic skills gap to promote success and student retention. The positive outcome of a passing grade for all students indicated that students were motivated, engaged, and benefited with eventual success. Their achievements conveyed an important message: that failing students can be successful.

A targeted intervention strategy, individualised for a student’s learning needs, has implications beyond this particular subject and beyond first year. It can be applied across any subject, setting or year level. Further research could focus on the applicability of this individualised intervention strategy in other contexts and with larger cohorts of students to determine its effectiveness and viability at scale.

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