



## Optimising Academic Writing Support for Learners: the Perspectives of Lecturers

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### Abstract

*The Academic Writing Centre (AWC) at Technological University of the Shannon Midlands (TUS: Midlands) is a relatively new initiative. It was set up in 2015 and its staff provide academic writing support to all registered learners across every subject area (Kelly and Harding, 2016). The service is optional – the onus is on students to request academic writing support – and is open to learners of all abilities. Prior to its establishment, academic writing was previously available on an ‘ad hoc’ basis, similar to many other third level institutes (Cleary et al., 2009, p. 4.1).*

*Writing support is available through individual consultations in addition to writing seminars and presentations to classes. Topics covered in the seminars include writing literature reviews, critical writing, reflective writing, planning writing assignments, writing techniques, structure and referencing (Connolly, 2022b).*

*A significant proportion of students request writing support on the advice of their lecturers. Given their key role in the process of writing support, this paper examines, specifically, lecturers’ interpretations on how best the AWC could run. How can learners be encouraged to engage with a service that is wholly optional? How, essentially, can the service be optimised?*

*Findings show that lecturers believe that content should be subject-specific and tailored to each individual or group. Topics including writing structure, grammar, punctuation and reading and writing skills should be a strong focus and a blended learning approach – tailored to the individual needs of learners – which was adopted during the Covid-19 pandemic – should be continued.*

*The idea of lecturers working in partnership with the AWC was supported by respondents; this avoids conflicting feedback and also helps to reinforce the role of the AWC (Ma, 2019).*

*The ongoing practice of AWC staff attending classes for introductory sessions – with lecturing staff present and playing an active role – was viewed as positive, as it provided the initial introduction to learners, many of who were more likely to request individual bookings as a result.*

**Keywords:** *Academic writing; Lecturers’ perspectives; Tailored writing support; AWC*

### Introduction

Academic writing support at Technological University of the Shannon Midlands (TUS: Midlands) is available to all learners registered with the institute (Athlone Institute of Technology, 2021; Kelly and Harding, 2016). The writing support is provided through individual consultations and also writing seminars and class seminars. In the individual appointments, staff in the Academic Writing Centre (AWC) provide feedback on the writing, for example a focus on technical elements including editing, grammar and punctuation, writing structure, essay structure or referencing – based on the individual request from the learner. In terms of the seminars, lecturers contact the AWC and request that a member of staff present a seminar specifically for the class, while the AWC also runs seminars open to all registered students across every subject area. Among the areas covered in the seminars include planning writing tasks, writing literature reviews, critical writing, reflective writing, writing techniques, structure and referencing (Connolly, 2022b). In addition to the live presentations, a range of academic writing resources are available to all learners on the virtual learning environment Moodle.

Like other academic writing centres in higher education, an inclusive and welcoming approach for learners, many of who face challenges in their academic writing, is a priority for the AWC in TUS: Midlands (Gonzalez and Donnelly 2022; Lea, 1998). Approachability is important, given that for many students, academic writing is very different to the writing they were accustomed to prior to attending



third level. “Learning in higher education involves adapting to new ways of knowing: new ways of understanding, interpreting and organising knowledge” (Lea and Street, 1998, p. 158).

As Ntereke and Ramoroka (2015) found in their research, it is not just first year students who face challenges with academic writing as writing difficulties are experienced by learners across all years of study including both undergraduates and postgraduates. There is also the challenge that the service is part-time and resources are limited. Optimal use of the time that is there is important and collaborating with lecturers across subject areas is key to this.

## The importance of collaboration in higher education

Collaboration between departments in higher education is important to ensure the learning experience is enhanced, as working together and sharing information ultimately benefits learners. It is particularly important in this situation as the AWC is not embedded into any department, yet works with all departments.

“Collaboration and participation in leadership approaches often makes for more informed and better decisions than what might come from an individual approach” (Coleman and Bandyopadhyay, 2011, p.371). Coleman and Bandyopadhyay (2011) are correct in their assertion and in this instance, staff in the AWC working with lecturers across subject areas is essential. For example, if a lecturer in Engineering books a member of staff from the AWC to present a seminar, while the AWC staff member focuses on the academic writing element of the presentation, the lecturer complements this by focusing on the subject-specific detail.

It is also important to be conscious that flexibility, to take into account that partnerships “change and morph over time” and “new inputs and adjusting accordingly” to changes in modules, departments and personnel, is key to ensuring the partnership works well consistently (Amey et al., 2007, p. 12). This is particularly relevant as personnel change, content covered in modules change, work patterns change and in recent years delivery of teaching has focused more on a blended approach in the past. It is important to embrace those changes to ensure the learner benefits consistently.

## Lecturers’ perspectives

Students’ views and experiences in relation to academic writing support provided by the AWC were previously examined and provided an overall positive response to the supports available (Connolly, 2022a).

This research set out to complement this by adding the perspectives of lecturers. Twenty lecturers participated in this research, by completing a survey circulated on Microsoft Forms. All of the participants were familiar with the work carried out by the AWC and had booked a session with the AWC for their students and the lecturers participated in the sessions. The AWC Co-ordinator collaborated with each individual lecturer – across Business and Hospitality, Engineering, Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, Life and Health Science, Science and Health and Lifelong Learning – in advance of the classes by preparing tailored classes and presentations to suit the particular requests to ensure the content was relevant to each cohort of students. The following questions were asked (the responses are detailed below):

1. What type of session would you like to see delivered to your class/classes in future i.e. an overall lecture/small group sessions/online session?
2. Can you outline any proposals on further collaboration with the Academic Writing Centre?
3. Going forward, are you interested in face-to-face, online delivery or combination of both Academic Writing sessions?

Overall, the findings suggest that content delivered by the AWC staff should be specific to the modules or programmes studied by the particular class or individual student. All lecturers expressed the view that this was important for engagement of students.



**1. What type of session would you like to see delivered to your class/classes in future i.e. an overall lecture/small group sessions?**

Eight lecturers stated that a large group session suited their requirements; eight preferred small group sessions for their smaller groups, while four lecturers opted for a combination of large and small group sessions. See Figure 1 below.

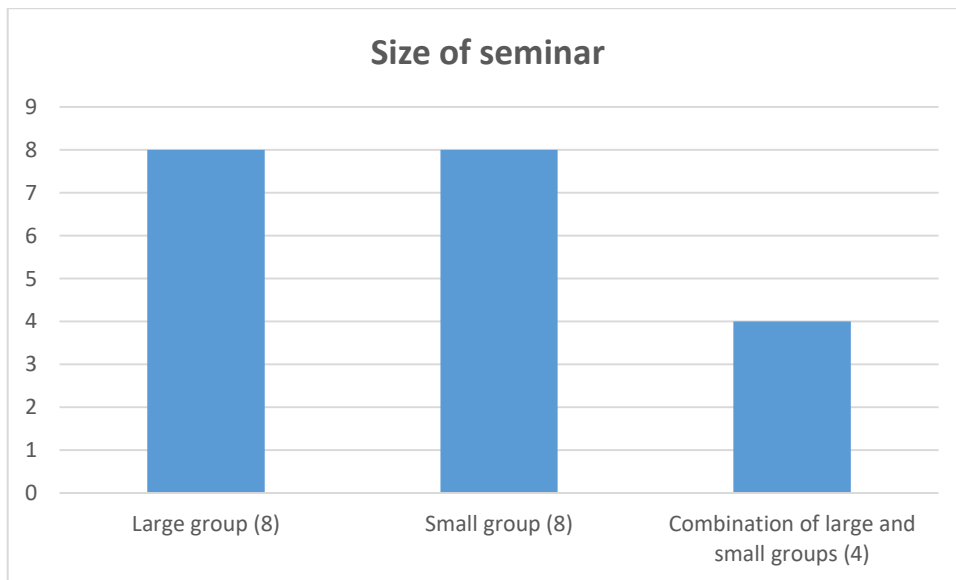


Figure 1: An outline of the seminar size preferred by lecturers

**2. Can you outline any proposals on further collaboration with the Academic Writing Centre?**

Lecturers overwhelmingly supported and were all happy to recommend the continuation of a partnership approach between AWC staff and lecturers. For example, all lecturers were supportive of the AWC practice of inviting them to provide academic book chapters or journal articles for use in the presentations. The AWC staff then base their presentations around the academic paper and this helps to engage students. The partnership approach also helps to avoid conflicting feedback: lecturers attend the presentations delivered by the AWC (Ma, 2019).

Two lecturers proposed the establishment of workshops led by the AWC for lecturers: to guide lecturers on incorporating good essay structure into their modules, where relevant, and also to guide lecturers on delivering effective feedback to learners.

**3. Going forward, are you interested in face-to-face, online delivery or combination of both Academic Writing sessions?**

Responses from lecturers stated that the blended learning approach, which worked well during the Covid-19 pandemic, was preferable, particularly to cater for postgraduate students and part-time learners attending classes online in the evenings. It was notable that the lecturers who work in the Department of Lifelong Learning (where programmes are delivered online in the evenings) expressed a preference for online only, while those working across other departments opted for a variety of approaches. See Figure 2 below.

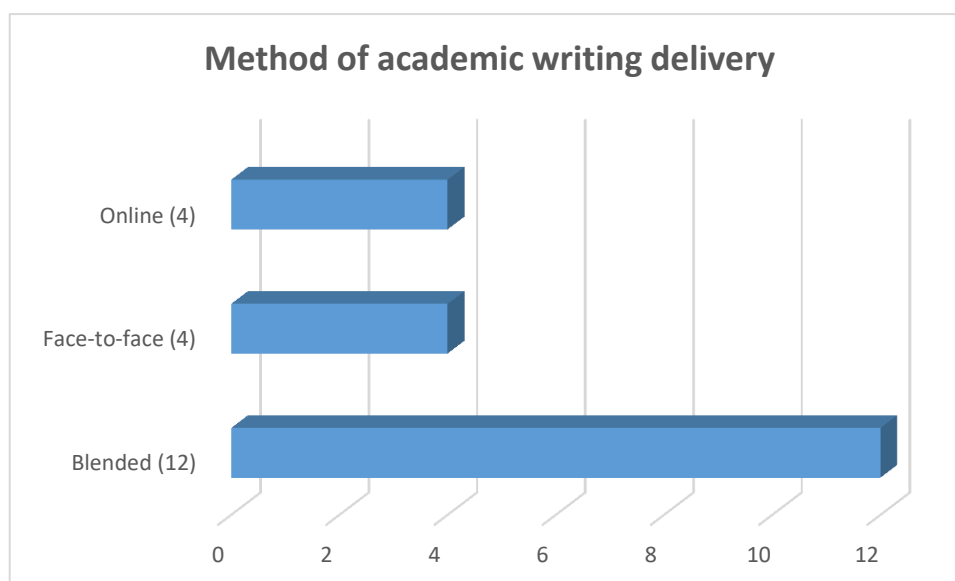


Figure 2: Method of academic writing delivery preferred by lecturers, based on feedback from their students

## Conclusions and Recommendations

It is evident that the partnership approach, between AWC and lecturers, is essential to ensure the optimisation of the academic writing service provided by the institution. Clear communication is key to this, to ensure that students engage, feel supported in their academic writing and that the student-centred approach – which is at the core of the institute’s work – remains a priority. The partnership approach has been a success to date, but needs support from lecturers to ensure this continues to be the case.

Going forward, subject to the availability of resources, I recommend that the relationship between the AWC and lecturing staff be strengthened further – based on feedback from this research – and seminars on assisting lecturers to focus on good essay structure in their modules and also guidance for lecturers in delivering effective feedback to learners.

A learning community, which could potentially also include learners, would be of huge benefit in this regard. This would benefit from input from lecturers who already collaborate with the AWC and also those who currently don’t, as this could enhance existing links and build others. This is a difficulty particularly as the AWC service is part-time and resources and time are limited, a challenge also raised by Ntereke and Ramoroka (2015). Given that the resources are limited, the aim of engaging additional numbers of students is a challenge, but through a partnership approach lecturers could, potentially, be in a position to assist students in their writing related challenges. This ultimately enhances student learning.

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