The 'Build-Up' Approach To Academic Writing Skills Development: The Case For A Discipline-Driven Collaborative Design[*]

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Abstract

This paper discusses the design and delivery of support for academic writing skills development. The paper also presents a case study of such support on an undergraduate, part-time degree programme at University College Dublin (UCD). Elton (2010) suggests that the approach to academic writing is discipline dependent and that neither specialists in academic writing nor practising academics in a discipline can separately provide students with the necessary support to develop the ability to write. Three models of academic skills support are provided in the literature; bolt-on, build-on and build-up. These models provide a useful framework for conceptualizing the different approaches to skills development (academic writing in this case). The 'bolt on' approach describes institutions that provide additional sessions to address academic writing (Wingate, 2006). The 'build-in' approach is where the provision of such support is embedded into the curriculum and usually occurs early in a student's studies. Finally, the 'build-up' approach, first suggested by Dowling and Ryan (2007), is explored. In this approach, institutions provide supports embedded in the delivery of the curriculum and allow students to 'build-up' their academic writing skills, not only upon programme commencement, but throughout the duration of their studies. The paper asserts a greater likelihood of success in developing academic writing skills where interventions are embedded within a broader framework of student support. Through ongoing collaboration between programme support and academic staff, academic writing skills interventions can be scheduled in a progressive manner throughout a degree.

1.0   Introduction

This paper outlines how academic and support staff collaborate to adopt a programmatic approach to support the development of students' academic writing skills. The changing profile of students at tertiary level has instigated a growing interest in developing the academic skills students require. Students are increasingly diverse not only in terms of demographics but also in terms of their preparedness to engage with pedagogy, curriculum and discipline conventions (Horstmanshof and Brownie, 2011). Recently, many studies in Europe have examined the provision of academic skills, including academic writing development interventions at tertiary level (for example, Webb, 1997; Wingate, 2006). In the US also, research has reviewed supports for the development of students' academic writing where the teaching of skills in this area is more commonplace (e.g. Horowitz, 1986, Pally, 2001 and Zhu, 2004). There are many terms associated with the discourse of academic writing development, including, academic skills, academic literacies, study skills and writing competencies. The term 'academic writing skills development' is used throughout this paper. Selecting this term recognizes that these skills are about more than just a once-off approach to learning how to write, but instead the term encompasses the need to support the ongoing development of academic writing skills.

Academic writing is a challenging process for students; it requires sustained and conscious structured support. Academic writing at third level calls for a different approach to that which students have experienced in the secondary school system or in the workplace. Academic writing is an ongoing process of development, with the demands of academic writing increasing as students progress through their studies. Three ingredients are pivotal in developing academic writing skills: the provision and delivery of accessible support, the content of supports provided and the use of assessment and feedback. Both assessment and feedback motivate students to learn and self-diagnose their academic writing approach, rather

than this being externally diagnosed (see Knowles 1984).

This paper provides an overview of the literature regarding the practice of academic writing skills support and presents a case study of the approach adopted by the School of Business at UCD for its part-time undergraduate degree programme. Unlike the university transition approach where institutions provide academic skills support upon commencement of a programme (see Wingate, 2007), the UCD approach endorses an integrated and progressive 'learning to learn' approach. The case study supports Vardi's (2012) recommendation that high impact written feedback from lecturers can improve students' learning when one piece of assessment is designed to feed into other assessments on the programme, clear grading standards are provided and trained staff provide suitable feedback. While this paper explores possible modules of writing support for part-time business students, a number of practices highlighted here, e.g. clear grading standards and a managed approach to assessment, are relatively easily transferable to more traditional full-time programmes in any discipline.

1.1   Developing Academic Writing Skills – To bolt-on, build-in or build-up?

Questions concerning the most suitable ways of supporting academic writing are widely debated in the literature of higher education (Cottrell and Jones, 2003; Durkin and Main, 2002; Gibbs, 1981; Wingate, 2006; Dowling and Ryan, 2007; Elton, 2010; Saunders, 2011; Fernsten and Reda, 2011). The UK National Council of Teachers of English suggests instructional writing practices that are 'holistic, authentic, and varied', highlighting that current literacies require writers to think critically about new writing tasks (Fernsten and Reda, 2011:173). Students must learn to review and adjust their own writing and their approach to thinking as they navigate through their studies. Reflection is also invaluable to help students engage theory with their own experience and demonstrate a higher level of understanding in their writing.

The literature outlines three approaches to supporting academic writing skills development. With the popular 'bolt-on' approach, institutions offer 'extra-curricular 'study skills' courses', including academic writing or reflection (Wingate, 2006: 457).   These courses are divorced from the disciplinary programme of study. Such interventions are often provided by a central institutional learning support service. However, there is consensus that generic academic skills provision is not effective. Wingate (2006) suggests that this approach results in academic skills becoming divorced from subject content and knowledge. Another limitation is the failure to recognize that all students need support in developing effective approaches to their learning and writing (Wingate, 2006). Wingate (2006) also acknowledges that for effective learning to occur, opportunities should be provided to practice handling various course-specific academic tasks and to receive feedback on these tasks. The 'bolt-on' approach does not provide these opportunities. Finally, where academic skills development is not embedded in a programme, students may perceive interventions as a means of learning the general 'tricks and techniques' of success (Wingate, 2006: 459). Gibbs (1981) highlights the need for students to develop academic skills in their everyday activities. An approach that reaches all students is required (Wingate, 2006) and one that embeds academic skills as an integral component of all programmes (Cottrell, 2001; Drummond *et al*, 1999; Gibbs, 1994).

The second approach ('build-in') (Angelova and Riazantseva, 1999; Durkin and Main, 2002) recognises that discipline content and academic skills development cannot be divorced (Wingate, 2006). Thus, support is developed and delivered from within the discipline. Durkin and Main (2002: 25) found that greater student demand existed for a 'discipline-based' approach to academic skills development and such an approach helped clarify for students the expectations of their tutors.   This approach reinforces the role of faculty in instilling in their students an understanding of how to learn in their own particular subject area. By designing writing skills provision to cater for discipline-specific needs, HE institutions can encourage greater student motivation to engage proactively in their own writing skills development. It is

instructive to consider why a 'build-in' approach has not been more evident in HE.   Reasons include the challenge of winning over academic staff regarding the progressive and developmental, rather than remedial, nature of such skills provision (Norton and Crowley, 1995) and potential organisational and management difficulties (Drummond *et al*, 1999; Wingate, 2006).

Whilst Thomas (1994) suggests that students have traditionally developed academic skills through, for example, course assessment, it is important to evolve beyond the basic provision of 'front-end' academic skills provision to a more integrated approach across a programme. This third, and less evident, approach was promoted by Dowling and Ryan (2007) who labeled it the 'build-up' approach.   With this approach, academic writing support is offered not just at the start of a programme of study but on an ongoing and progressive basis. The development of academic writing skills is driven by the changing needs of the discipline at different intervals and writing skills interventions are developed by programme support staff, such as administrative colleagues or writing development centre staff,   in collaboration with module academic staff.   Such an approach provides students with a supporting scaffold to develop their academic writing within modules and through targeted supports designed to directly support students undertaking all modules in their chosen discipline. This 'build-up approach' demands coordination of overall programme design, individual modules and close monitoring of students' writing progress.   To-date, few case studies illustrating examples of where the 'build-up' approach has been successfully implemented have been published.

Key Ingredients for Successful Writing Skills Development: Content, Delivery, Assessment and Feedback

While this paper acknowledges the need for programme administrative and academic staff to collaborate on the design and development of suitable academic writing skills initiatives, three other ingredients appear prevalent in the literature regarding the provision of support for academic writing skills development.   These ingredients – content, delivery and assessment

and feedback – are now discussed. The case study outlines how these ingredients have been operationalised into the 'build-up' approach at UCD School of Business (while the case study focuses on a part-time business degree programme, the ingredients discussed could be equally applied to more traditional programmes in other disciplines).

Content

Where academic skills interventions, such as those for academic writing, are embedded in a programme and assessed, they provide students with an opportunity to develop skills that are integrated with subject content and knowledge rather than forming a separate focus of study. Newble and Entwistle (1986) recommended that provision emphasize the process of learning. While some students may be provided with support for academic skills development, frequently they do not understand how they learn (Norton and Crowley, 1995). Farley (2006) suggests that one of the outcomes of education should be that students become skilled at learning. Students need to learn how to monitor and review their approach and be encouraged to write reflectively about their approach. Teaching students to be reflective in their writing encourages them to perceive themselves as writers learning to navigate the different literacies required of them at university (Fernsten and Reda, 2011). This encourages student engagement with the ongoing development of their academic writing skills.

Delivery

Lowe and Cooke (2003:75) recommend that provision of skills development be seen as a 'process instead of an event'. The complex skills that students need require progressive provision throughout their studies (Biggs, 1987; Wingate, 2006). However, the literature provides few examples where academic writing and the development of other skills are provided in a systematic fashion throughout the duration of a programme. Many of the useful examples available are based on the experience of individual modules or individual academics (e.g. Thonus, 2002, Wellington, 2010 or Vardi, 2012).

Assessment and Feedback

Assessment constitutes a necessary component of learning, as clearly demonstrated by the seminal meta-analysis completed by Black and William (1998). Formative assessment and feedback should empower students to become self-regulated. With the 'bolt-on' approach, direct assessment of academic skills is neglected with students only being provided with limited materials to assist them. With the 'build-on' approach, academic skills are developed through the disciplinary-based modules. This approach calls for tutors to be more aware of students' need for skills development within their regular teaching. Vardi (2012) reports on the use of written feedback from staff that has a direct impact on student outcomes and grades from one assessment task to the next. Vardi also highlights the use of designing assessment so that one assessment task builds on another. Such an approach is useful not only within a module but between modules and from one semester or year to another.

1.2   Academic Writing Skills Development at UCD School of Business

This case study presents an overview of a progressive and programmatic/disciplinary-based approach to the development of academic writing skills. It illustrates the 'build-up' approach adopted by UCD School of Business for its four-year part-time Bachelor of Business Studies (BBS) degree. It demonstrates that a structured and disciplinary-driven approach to the three key factors identified earlier – content; delivery; assessment and feedback – is needed for the support of academic writing to be effective

Context

The BBS is a part-time programme delivered through a blend of independent study and occasional weekend attendance on campus and was designed for adults returning to part-time education. The provision of supports was key in the programme's early design given the non-traditional nature of the cohort. This approach has been developed within a broader framework of part-time student support. Among the main features of the student support provided include the availability of programme-based Learning Support Officers (LSOs) who handle all academic and administrative queries and provide day-to-day advice on all module content and assessment. This academic support is provided to students in close consultation with the programme academic staff. The LSO also actively monitors the study progress and academic skills development of each student and helps to identify students requiring additional individual academic writing support.

Anecdotal evidence from module lecturers concerning particular writing deficiencies among students provided the impetus for the development of programmatic-level academic writing skills support for the School's part-time students. The student support framework was enhanced with the creation of two disciplinary-driven academic skills modules as part of the Year 1 curriculum: Module 1 (Semester 1): 'Returning to Learning and Academic Competencies' and Module 2 (Semester 2): 'Developing Academic Competencies'. To demonstrate the commitment to academic development, each module is compulsory and worth five credits on the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) (the same credit weighting as all other modules in the first two years of the programme). The credit weighting assists students in appreciating the importance of these modules and the ultimate contribution of the skills gained to the achievement of the programme goals and programme award. Module 1 enables students to develop core academic writing and cognitive skills, whereas Module 2 focuses on meta-cognitive skills and provides students with ample opportunity to reflect on their own academic writing capability. The modules provide the initial building blocks for the development

of students' academic writing skills across the entire degree programme.   Figure 1 presents an overview of the module content.

Figure 1: Academic Skills – Module Content

Returning to Learning and Academic Competencies (Semester 1)

Learning at University:
Managing Your Learning
Organising Your Study
Learning from Lectures
Reading and Note-Taking
Memory Techniques

Academic Writing:
Essay Writing 1 – Planning & Structure
Essay Writing 2 – Grammar & Punctuation
Referencing Guidelines

Examinations:
Preparing for Examinations

Developing Academic Competencies (Semester 2)

Learning to Learn:
Reflective Learning
Understanding Learning
Approaches to Studying and Learning
Classification of Learning
How to Learn Creatively
Developing Analytical Skills

Developing Academic Writing Skills:
Writing Style and Structure
Different Forms of Assessment
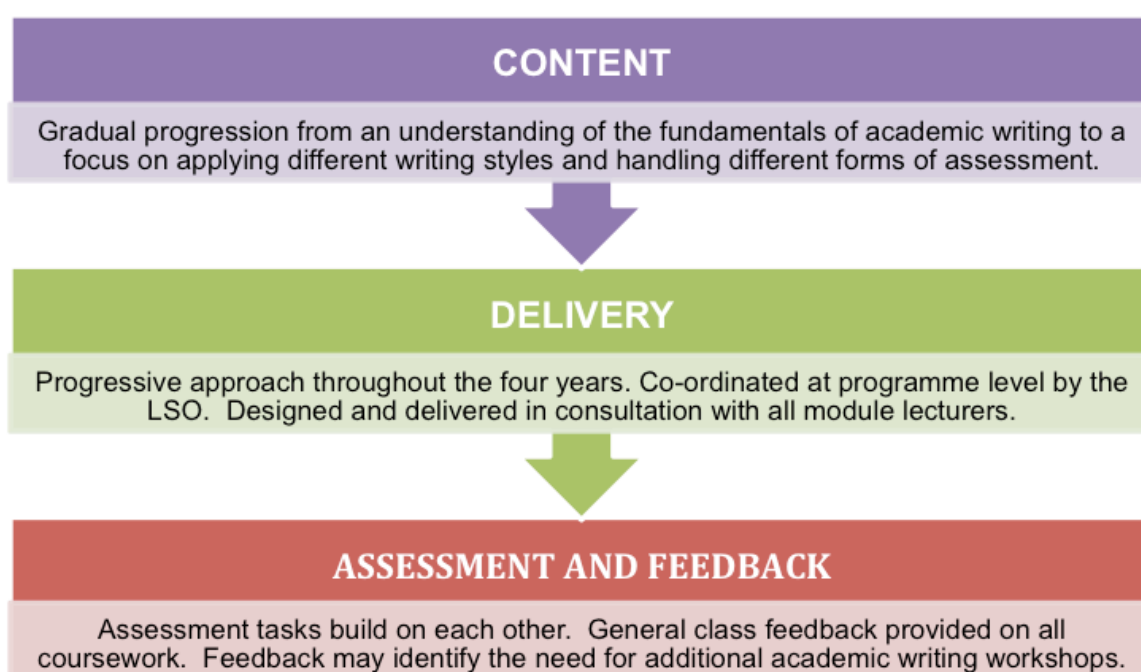Sourcing and Evaluating Information

The 'Build-Up' Approach to Academic Writing Skills Development

The School has adopted a discipline-based and programmatic approach to academic writing skills development where the emphasis is placed on customizing the content and assessment of the skills interventions to meet the needs of the discipline-based modules as students move through the four years of the programme.   The content, delivery and assessment of the academic writing skills interventions are co-ordinated centrally at a programme level by the LSO. In other institutions, this might be managed by the Programme Manager or Programme

Coordinator, with assistance from relevant academic and learning support staff. A sustained, structured and co-ordinated approach to academic writing skills development is essential for success in this area. Central to the School's approach is the gradual 'build-up' of students' writing capability through a series of collective and individual interventions at key stages throughout the programme. The 'build-up' approach is illustrated in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: The 'Build-Up' Approach

CONTENT

Gradual progression from an understanding of the fundamentals of academic writing to a focus on applying different writing styles and handling different forms of assessment.

DELIVERY

Progressive approach throughout the four years. Co-ordinated at programme level by the LSO. Designed and delivered in consultation with all module lecturers.

ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK

Assessment tasks build on each other. General class feedback provided on all coursework. Feedback may identify the need for additional academic writing workshops.

Each of the above three elements of the 'build-up' approach to academic writing skills development is further explained below and examples are provided.

Content

The School has adopted a 'scaffolding', 'staged' approach to academic writing skills development. Module 1 covers the fundamentals of academic writing skills (e.g. essay planning, structure, grammar/punctuation and referencing), whereas Module 2 develops students' academic writing skills and focuses on the various writing styles, writing structure and the various writing approaches needed for different forms of assessment that will be encountered throughout the degree. The delivery of academic writing workshops in Year 1 is timed to ensure students are developing the necessary skills 'just-in-time'. For example, a workshop on how to plan and structure a descriptive style essay is timetabled early in the first semester, whereas a workshop in the second semester focuses more on other styles of writing (e.g. argumentative/analytical, evaluative etc.).

All of the academic writing workshops throughout the degree are strongly integrated with the other disciplinary modules being undertaken at the same time so that students are equipped with the necessary skills to deal with the writing and assessment requirements of those modules. For example, a session on how to approach different types of assessment that students will encounter in the following year (e.g. case studies, legal problems) is scheduled late in Year 1. During Year 2 students are required to analyse legal problems as part of the Business Law module and tackle case studies as part of the Marketing Management module. The session facilitates student understanding of the writing style requirements of different forms of assessment and how to apply these skills when they encounter these types of assesment.

Delivery

The academic skills modules and all follow-up workshops are designed and delivered by the LSO within a broader day-to-day learner support framework outlined. The LSO provides ongoing academic writing support to students (see Ryan and Dowling, 2006) and monitors individual student progress, particularly regarding academic writing ability, across all modules.

The approach adopted by UCD recognises that academic writing skills development is an ongoing process where the skills of students are built-up over time. As students progress to later stages of the programme, the academic writing demands on them become greater and this necessitates the scheduling of progressive academic skills workshops at key intervals throughout the Degree. For example, a workshop is delivered at the start of Year 3 to provide students with a greater understanding of the academic writing requirements and expectations of that stage of the programme.   Having consulted with all Year 3 module lecturers and identified the kinds of assessment strategies to be used, the LSO will design the writing workshop with these strategies in mind.   Typically this workshop focuses on student engagement with academic writing that demonstrates skills associated with higher order learning (e.g. reflection, analysis, synthesis and evaluation). This workshop signals a shift in the type of academic writing skills students need to demonstrate in the later stages of the degree compared to those that may have been acceptable at the earlier stages of the programme.

Assessment and Formative Feedback

Assessment and formative feedback play a central role in the 'build-up' approach. The writing skills assessments that form part of the Year 1 academic skills modules are designed, not only to build on each other, but also to develop the writing skills students will need for the other discipline-based modules (see Figure 3 for an example of some of the assessments that have formed part of these modules). The assessment design ensures that students actively engage and reflect upon developing the requisite academic writing skills during the initial stages of their degree.

Figure 3: Academic Skills Modules – Assessment of Writing Skills
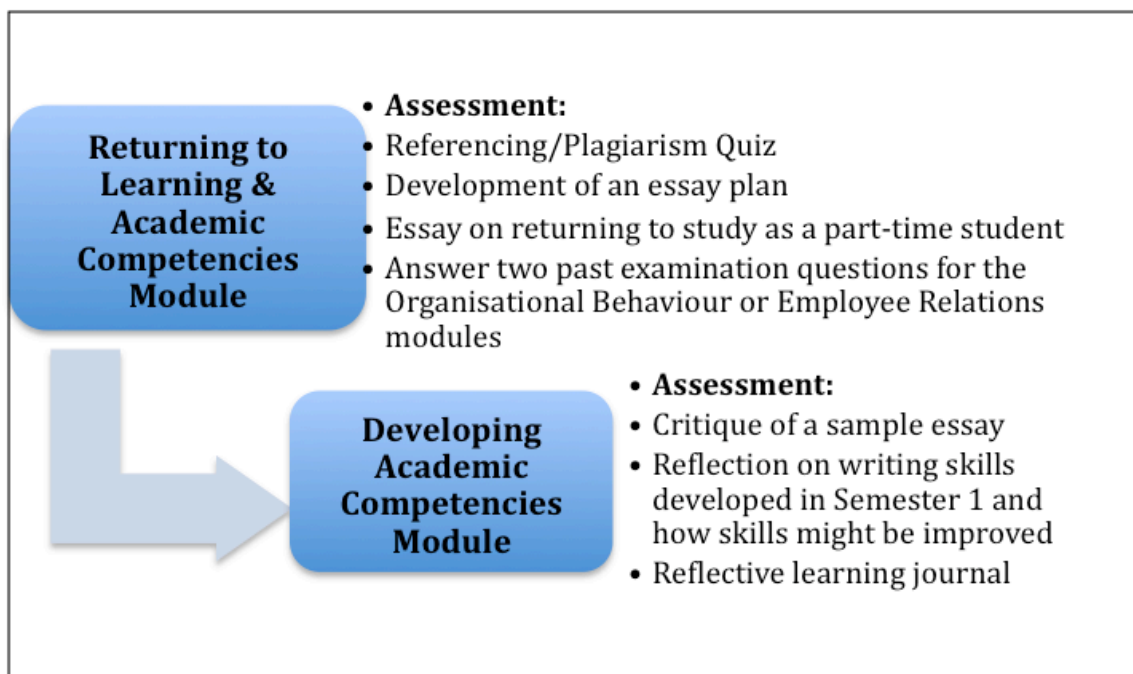
The central thread assisting the effectiveness of the Year 1 and 2 academic writing skills workshops is the provision of formative feedback on all coursework submitted throughout the four years of the programme. Students receive general feedback that provides an overview of the strengths and weaknesses of all assignments submitted by the entire class. This ongoing feedback on assignments identifies any deficiencies in the application of writing skills developed and allows students to build on their skills from one assessment task to another. In assessing students' academic writing skills development, the School considers it essential to examine the assessment feedback from the discipline-based modules and not just the feedback from the academic skills modules. While the content of this feedback is important, equally so is the timely provision of such feedback. This is considered critical in allowing students to make any necessary future adjustments to their future coursework based on past feedback.

The LSO reviews all formative feedback provided by module lecturers, thereby allowing him/her to develop an ongoing awareness of a student's progress in developing the requisite writing skills. The monitoring of feedback ensures that a programmatic approach is taken and that a profile of an individual student's progress is possible on an ongoing basis. Based on the feedback, additional academic writing skills interventions can be implemented on an individual or collective basis as required. The dissertation module in Year 4 is one example of this. Formative feedback suggested that students were not sufficiently engaging in a critical and analytical manner with the readings in the literature review element of the dissertation. A workshop, focusing on a critique of two sample literature reviews (one that demonstrated excellent engagement with the literature and one that was weak in this regard), was designed for the next cohort of students. The critique of both by students allowed them to develop a much greater understanding of the academic writing style required for the dissertation.

Discussion

Direction on how to demonstrate understanding, critical thinking and reflection is required at higher education (HE) to support students in their development of academic writing skills. The literature suggests that where an academic skills module is offered or academic writing support is provided in isolation from other modules (i.e. the 'bolt-on' approach), students may perceive it as just another module to be completed in order to 'get through' the programme. With the 'build-in' approach, there is a danger that academic writing is managed by individual academics on the respective modules and there is no coordination of the interventions made. While the 'build-on' approach places the onus on individual academics, who are subject experts, to ensure skills are developed within the content–oriented modules, it does not provide time to focus exclusively on academic skills. These approaches might be presented as two extremes on a continuum, rather than as two absolute approaches.

The 'build-up' approach exemplified in this paper draws on the strengths of both the 'bolt-on' and 'build-in' models and the case study demonstrates how it might be operationalised to overcome the inherent limitations of the two original approaches; it supports students to 'build-up' their academic writing skills in a structured and progressive manner during their studies. This build-up' approach leverages assessment and formative feedback gradually to develop students' academic writing skills. The use of assessment here ensures that academic skills modules are meshed with the discipline-based modules *and* within the overall support framework. Thus, writing skills are explicitly developed, semester-by-semester and stage-by-stage for the duration of the programme. The 'build-up' approach is founded upon an ethos of longevity and integration with discipline-based modules. It ensures that responsibility and time is allocated to the provision and development of academic writing in a symbiotic relationship between academic development and discipline-based modules. What is clear from all three approaches is that there is a need for a programme champion to ensure the agenda of academic writing is progressed and managed from a programme perspective (Durkin and Main, 2002).

The general principles underlying the three key ingredients set out in the case study are transferable to both full-time and part-time undergraduate degree programmes in other disciplines. What is important, however, is that an appropriately managed and programme co-ordinated infrastructure of support is in place, that academic staff are involved and consulted regularly in relation to the academic writing skills requirements of their modules and that the development of such skills among students is monitored continuously. Failure to implement such an infrastructure may significantly hinder the effective implementation of the 'build-up' approach. While it could be argued that the UCD approach is resource-intensive, this could be overcome in a number of ways. For example, programme managers who also had the skills to contribute to the design and delivery of academic writing support were central to the success at UCD. The enhanced co-ordination, of the previously ad-hoc academic writing skills support already delivered benefitted the students and providing a significant return on investment. This

programme manager role facilitated a better awareness of the various ad-hoc academic writing skills supports that were, already provided and ensure supports were centrally co-ordinated by the programme.

1.3   Conclusion

While there is an abundance of literature on the topic of academic writing, there remains debate about the positioning of, and responsibility for delivering, student support for academic writing. This paper presented an overview of best practice in the provision of academic skills approaches in HE, and a case study of the academic writing support adopted by UCD School of Business in the context of its part-time programmes. This approach draws on the strengths of both the 'bolt-on' and 'build-on' approaches, coupled with collaboration from academic and programme staff which allows for a progressive and structured approach to academic skills development for the duration of the programme of study.   Admittedly, the framework for student support at UCD is resource intensive (particularly given the employment of two full-time programme managers/learning support officers dedicated to the programme in question). Yet, the approach has proven to be particularly effective. While the authors acknowledge that it may not be feasible for all institutions to exactly mirror the 'build-up' approach across all programmes irrespective of discipline, this does not detract from the key message that support for the development of academic writing skills is most effective when it is managed and co-ordinated on a programme basis. To conclude, the 'build-up' approach incorporates the three key ingredients – content, delivery and assessment and feedback – and these are attainable by both full-time and part-time programmes in other institutions as a means of supporting students as they develop and reflect on their academic writing. It is vital that HEIs take a programmatic approach and systematically review the extent and timing of interventions within and outside modules and ensure that they are offered in a progressive and structured fashion so that students can successfully and steadily 'build-up' their academic writing skills. This approach offers significant benefits in terms of for supporting and maintaining academic standards as well its direct and positive impact on students' skills themselves.

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