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An exploratory study of the first-year student experience of academic essay writing and individual strategies pursued

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A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Philosophy

2009

Copyright Statement

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere thanks and gratitude to the following people for their help and support during this research project.

- My supervisors, Dr Rowena Murray and Dr June Mitchell who provided me with invaluable advice and support in bringing this project to fruition.
- Professor Sarah Moore for all her love, support and encouragement.
- Dr Mary Fitzpatrick for her generous feedback on my emerging dissertation along with much-appreciated warm support and encouragement.
- I would also particularly like to thank each of the students who participated in this research, for giving their valuable time to tell me their stories in such an honest and open way.
- Kim and Patricia for their insightful comments on various drafts of the dissertation.
- Angelica and all my colleagues at the Centre for Teaching and Learning.
- My dear friends Jacqy, Kathleen, Margaret, Mairead, Mary B & Mary M for always keeping me positive and giving me a laugh when I badly needed one.
- My family, Anne, Eileen, Michael and Gerard for your unfailing support, encouragement and love in this endeavour.
- Finally Dad for being my rock.

Table of Contents

Abstract

An exploratory study of the first-year student experience of academic essay writing and individual strategies pursued.

It has often been noted that new students find academic writing very difficult and sometimes problematic. This thesis sets out to examine the writing experiences of a group of first-year students at the University of Limerick. The objective of this study is to contribute towards an understanding of first-year academic writing in higher education with a view to making recommendations based on these findings.

The study adopts a qualitative research approach involving semi-structured interviews with nine first-year students of mixed gender and age. The students were interviewed twice; once in the early part of their first semester and again in the early part of their second semester. The data were analysed using the analysis framework of Huberman and Miles, (1994) which is interpretive and social constructivist in nature. In addition to the interpretive approach, thematic coding and content analysis were employed in order to extend and confirm key findings.

An analysis of the differences between first and second interviews illustrates clearly that the students' expectations and satisfaction with their writing experiences had changed.

As a result of the analysis, the author shows that despite some difficulties with writing and with writing supports identified by respondents, the students in this sample underwent predominantly positive changes in their writing-related experiences and orientations. This suggests that the supports provided were at least in some way adequate or that natural development of confidence through immersion had occurred. The analysis also shows that for the sample of respondents in this study, writing-related emotions seem to be at least as important as writing-related skills and supports. Also while writing does seem for this group to have been characterised by a number of common experiences (e.g. the relevance of emotions, the gradual development of self-efficacy, the struggle with identity and voice) there are still many aspects of writing experiences that seem to have been individualistic and idiosyncratic.

This study extends the current knowledge in relation to the first-year experience with academic writing by focusing particularly on the importance of understanding changes in writing-related experiences between the first and the second semester.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

This study aims to contribute to an understanding of the subjective experiences of first-year academic essay writing in higher education. It reviews the literature on student academic writing, taking into account the transitions and changes required when moving from second level education to third level education. It reports the findings from interviews with students facing their first essay assignment focusing on the experiences and strategies associated with student academic writing and it analyses the research findings in the context of the theories and issues reviewed from the literature. The focus of this research is student-centred. It examines the students' observations, thoughts and perceptions of their writing tasks in a new educational context. Through the use of semi-structured interviews, the study explores the significant issues around academic writing encountered by the first-year students on entry to the University of Limerick.

So this research aims to shed light on how new students encounter their first writing tasks in higher education settings. Its main contribution will be to explore and categorise the experience of students in a single institutional setting in order to add to the repertoire of existing approaches that have been used to understand the challenges and experiences that may be encountered by new students.

1.2 Rationale for Study

Writing in higher education is a challenging task for many students. Such 'literate acts' or individual constructive acts, are, according to Flower (1994: 19)

> *"Sites of construction, tension, divergence, and conflict. They happen at the intersection of diverse goals, values and assumptions, where social roles interact with personal images of one's self and one's situation.*

They are often sites of negotiation where the meaning that emerges may reflect resolution, abiding contradiction, or perhaps just a temporary stay against uncertainty."

To understand learning as a 'site of negotiation' is a useful way of exploring students' experiences of writing in higher education. Flower's quote above highlights how complex a process it can be for many first-year students. It is crucial that we have an understanding of the complexities and challenges facing our first-year students in relation to academic writing. This study seeks to add to the empirical research base by studying and learning from the perspective of first-year students.

This research is very small scale and so it does not make any claims to generalisability beyond the sample that was studied. However, the qualitative approach used helped to explore and explain the writing-related experiences of these respondents in rich and complex detail. In doing this, I uncovered themes, emotions, ideas and insights that might not have been identified in other ways. By talking to students about their writing in a safe and high trust environment, they told me things about their experiences that I think would have been very difficult to learn via survey instruments, performance analysis or other methodologies. I argue that the approach used in this study is a valuable way of eliciting the real, lived and subjective experiences of students facing academic writing challenges for the first time in a higher education setting.

1.3 Research Questions

The two key research questions that this research aims to answer are:

- What is the first-year student experience when approaching their first piece of academic essay writing?
- How do early experiences, attitudes, emotions and orientations relating to first-year academic writing change (if at all) between the first and the second semester within a higher educational context?

1.4 Motivations for undertaking this research

The research topic for this thesis has stemmed from both a personal and professional interest in the topic of academic writing. I returned to education as a mature student and completed my BA as a distance-learning student in 2002. Through this experience, I had an understanding of the problems and the tensions of the novice writer. In my professional life as a member of the team at the Centre for Teaching and Learning in UL I have had significant amount of experience dealing with the coordination and running of writers' retreats for academic staff at the University of Limerick and for academics from a range of other institutions. Also with my interactions with the student body, particularly first-year students, I have developed a strong interest in understanding academic writing in higher education.

My experience in researching and co-authoring a study skills book (Moore and Murphy, 2005) contributed positively and significantly to my understanding of student writing. This has been my motivation in carrying out this research so as to bring it to the attention of a wide audience of fellow practitioners.

1.5 Context – The University of Limerick

Irish universities and colleges like others across Europe, experienced rapid growth over the last three decades. The eight Irish universities have developed differently despite their common origins with Britain (Ryan, 2002). Students constitute a distinct and visible group in Irish society: at close to 150,000, they are more numerous than most occupational or sectional interest groups (Ryan and O'Kelly, 2001). The majority of higher education students come directly from school. The University of Limerick (UL) was established in 1989 but has been in existence since 1972 as the National Institute for Higher Education. The University currently has a student population of over 11,500 students. Divided into four faculties it offers a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes through a variety of teaching methods. The university's academic year is divided into two fifteen week semesters, which includes a reading week and a two-week period of examinations. A distinctive feature of the four-year degree programme at the University of Limerick is the inclusion of a co-operative education module, which provides

students with the opportunity to experience a working environment during their time at university. A number of courses also have a study abroad element as part of the four year programme. In addition the University of Limerick has, in recent years established a number of Learning Centres aimed at providing supplementary academic support for students in areas where they were found to be lacking in skills. The Mathematics Learning Centre, The Science Learning Centre and the Language Learning Centre, have been found to be valuable supports for students and are examples of useful initiatives put in place by the institution.

The research is informed by primary research conducted with a sample of first-year students. The unique contribution of this research is that it presents the findings of a sample of Irish first-year university students in relation to their academic writing. Its focus on in-depth exploration of the subjective experience of the students will help to provide a fine-grained understanding of the challenges experienced and strategies adopted by the chosen sample. The emerging analysis and will provide some initial, tentative suggestions about support interventions that could help to meet student needs in similar contexts.

1.6 Structure of the Thesis

1.6.1 Chapter One

This first chapter presents the background and introduces the rationale for the study and the motivations for undertaking this research. The chapter highlights the aims and objectives of the study and presents the main questions for investigation. Finally, the chapter outlines the general framework of this research.

1.6.2 Chapter Two

Chapter two provides a review of the existing literature on student academic writing in higher education. This review begins by looking at the developing research literature on issues of disciplinarity and disciplinary practice in academic writing. It focuses on key researchers and theoretical perspectives relating to writing and identity and also addresses the concept of emotions and writing behaviour.

1.6.3 Chapter Three

This chapter explains the research methodology used in this study. The adoption of a purely qualitative approach is defended. I argue that a qualitative methodology is the most appropriate, given the aims and objectives of the research – to gain an insight into the writing experience perceptions and views of a sample of first-year students. This chapter also examines the various research instruments available and justifies the use of the semi-structured interview technique, which was adopted. The various sampling options available are explored and I outline why a convenience sample was used in this study. I conclude this chapter with a description of the actual research process and outline how the interview schedule was designed and piloted. I describe the issues involved in gaining access to first-year students within the University of Limerick, how the sample was eventually finalised and how the interviews were carried out, transcribed and analysed. I also discuss the ethical considerations involved in carrying out such research and how I sought and received ethical approval from the University of Strathclyde for my research and finally I describe the steps taken to ensure confidentiality of the students' responses and maintaining a professional approach to the research.

1.6.4 Chapter Four

Chapter Four presents the qualitative data derived from this study and organises that data into a series of themes based on the frequency with which overarching subjects were identified by the respondents themselves. Key themes include the respondent's initial orientations toward writing, their struggle with the use of their own voice in academic writing, the strategies they adopted, the importance of guidance, and the clear evidence of emerging confidence as a result of immersion.

1.6.5 Chapter Five

This chapter focuses on an analytical approach to the data that is explored qualitatively and descriptively in the previous chapter. It presents an analysis of the extent and nature of writing-related changes among respondents between time 1 (first Semester) and time 2 (second semester).

1.6.6. Chapter Six

This chapter analyses the observed changes between times 1 and 2 with a focus on enhancing our understanding of the writing experience of the first-year students in this sample.

1.6.7 Chapter Seven

The final chapter discusses the implications for this study and the directions for future research.

1.7 Aims of the Study

My personal interest in the first-year experience and academic writing were major motivators for writing this thesis. I was interested in exploring how 1st years made the transition from essay writing in a secondary school context to producing their first piece of academic work at university. I wanted to talk to students on an individual basis and have in-depth conversations with them about their own insights about academic writing in first-year. I was keen to discover how they experienced the transition and what the significant issues were for them in relation to academic writing. I wanted to articulate the students' voices and bring their barriers, thoughts and views to a wider audience. I felt they needed a voice.

Having experience of working with first-year students and as a researcher on the first-year experience it was easy to think that I knew what the issues were for them, when in fact there were dimensions and aspects of their concerns I was not aware of. I did not want to prescribe in advance, what the best strategies were for these students. We cannot presume to know the experience of others, and it is always important to get this information directly from the people involved and currently experience academic writing for the first time.

Academic writing has been informed by literature both from American and English contexts. The writing related experiences of Irish students have not yet been subjected to structured investigation or analysis.

Irish students come from a very prescriptive environment in second level education to a looser, less directed writing in a third level environment. From my literature review I did identify that there is a lot of work published on first-year writing, but it was more on the technical issues involved such as grammar and writing structure and also how do students 'crack the code' when they arrive in university. In other words, how do students interpret what their lecturer wants from them and how do they go about producing this. I felt there was a gap in the literature in the Irish context in relation to first-year students' thoughts and views in relation to academic writing transition. This thesis begins to fill the gap in the Irish context. The research is informed by primary research among first-year students. The unique contribution of this thesis will be that it will be researching the Irish experience of first-years and designing bespoke interventions to meet the Irish context in general and the UL context in particular.

The two key research questions that this research aimed to answer were:

- What is the nature of the first-year student experience when approaching their first piece of academic essay writing?
- How do early experiences, attitudes, emotion and orientations relating to academic writing change (if at all) between the first and the second semester within a higher educational context?

The first question is exploratory and answering it will help to produce a rich description of the experiences of the respondents as reflected in the interview data gathered. The second question is more analytical and reflects the ultimate aim of this thesis: that is whether, for this group of students, early writing-related experiences change, and if so, what is the nature of those changes as expressed by the students themselves. Answering this question will shed more light on the intricacies of the writing-related experiences of these early students, and perhaps help to define a template or guide for future analysis and exploration of the writing-related experiences of new higher education students more generally.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Transition to Higher Education involves many changes. Whatever their previous contexts, new students to university tend to experience a significantly different and more challenging academic culture. The prevailing expectations related to their writing tasks often create challenges that many find difficult to navigate (Lea and Street, 1998). In many discipline, the essay remains a common form of assessment at university. The ability to express oneself competently in written form is a skill students need to develop if they are to survive this challenging academic demand. Tinto (1996) cites 'academic difficulty' as one of the most common causes of attrition, and other research indicates that a significant source of such difficulty for many students is that of the first written assignment (Krause, 1998).

This chapter explores a sample of the relevant literature on student academic writing in higher education. It reviews and identifies the challenges faced by the novice writer and sets the scene for the research questions. This review begins by looking at the developing research literature on issues of disciplinarity and disciplinary practice in academic writing. It focuses on key researchers and theoretical perspectives relating to writing and identity and also addresses the concept of emotions and writing behaviour. Various related concepts such as understanding the ground rules of academic writing, the difference between staff and student interpretations of academic writing, the model produced by Lea and Street (1997) on the different sources of difficulty experienced by students when writing essays are also explored.

2.2 Disciplinary Cultures of Academic Writing

The skills needed to become a confident and effective academic writer can present a serious challenge for first-year students. It has been acknowledged that transition to university is a life-changing event for a student, which extends beyond academic adjustments (Knox, 2005).

The shift from a controlled environment of school and family to an environment in which students are expected to accept personal responsibility for both academic and social aspects of their lives can cause them to experience both stress and anxiety.

Going to university involves some level of substantial adjustment in routine and levels of intellectual engagement for most students. For some, it presents challenges that have been described as an 'intimidating leap into the unknown' (McInnis et al., 1995, p.2). Research has shown that the first-year experience involves the development of many new and complex routines that are not always easy to acquire. Issues facing students at the start of the academic year are not necessarily always the same issues they encounter throughout the year. Adjustment is often a matter of dealing with the unfamiliar. Lowe and Cook (2003) showed that in the UK, although most students coped adequately with the transition into higher education, there was 'a considerable minority' who had problems many of whom found university to be a negative experience and many of whom failed to come to terms with the academic and social demands of university life. The results of that study indicated that a substantial proportion of students were poorly prepared for the emotional aspects of separating from their previous environment and adjusting to their new environment at university (Lowe and Cook, 2003). Astin's Theory of Involvement proposes that successful integration of students into the campus environment influences academic success (Astin, 1984; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991).

So a lot of the evidence suggests that social adjustment, sense of identity and a feeling of belonging are all important parts of students' effective transition into university life. A sense of belongingness can often be a troublesome goal when we take into consideration how 'tribal' and 'territorial' universities can be and in particular, how such tribalism and territoriality is often a fundamental feature of academic disciplines themselves.

Becoming 'socialised into a discipline' (see for example Becher 1989 and Becher and Trowler, 2001) is a process that is fraught with potential error and misunderstanding.

It is often deemed to be a problem of misinterpretation on the part of the 'novice' learner but perhaps more correctly conceived of as a 'barrier to entry' created by the mysterious rules and routines of disciplinary practice. Becher and Trowler conclude that those working in different disciplines could be understood as belonging to different 'tribes', having distinctively different cultures and ways of knowing. They developed a theoretical frame for different disciplinary cultures, broken down as follows according to the nature of the knowledge and the disciplinary grouping:

Disciplinary grouping	**Nature of Knowledge**
Pure sciences ('hard-pure')	Cumulative; atomistic, concerned with universals; impersonal; value-free; clear criteria for knowledge verification and obsolescence; consensus over significant questions (to address, now and then in the future)
Humanities and pure social sciences ('soft-pure')	Reiterative; holistic; concerned with particulars; personal; value-laden; dispute over criteria for knowledge verification and obsolescence; lack of consensus over significant questions
Technologies ('hard-applied')	Purposive; pragmatic; concerned with mastery of physical environment; applies heuristic approaches; uses both qualitative and quantitative approaches; criteria for judgement are purposive
Applied social sciences ('soft-applied')	Functional; utilitarian; concerned with enhancement of semi-professional practice; uses "case" studies and case law to a large extent

(Source: Biglan as cited in Becher & Towler, 2001 page 36).

So it can be seen from Becher and Trowler's work that the different disciplinary cultures that students are integrated into impacts on their style of writing. This research explores this further.

In other research, Bazerman (1981, p.362) explored the ways in which academic knowledge is constructed in different subject areas. Taking established academic's writing in different disciplines he examined three essays using four contexts which included the "object under study, the literature of the field, the anticipated audience and the author's own self". Using this method, he was in a position to reveal the meanings and intentions in the written texts from the different disciplines he studied. His analysis recognised the crucial importance of the writer's self in the academic writing process. This is a significant insight that has influenced this research because student's sense of self has an impact on their confidence as a writer.

Ken Hyland's *Disciplinary Discourses* also explores the diversity among disciplines. According to Hyland writers in the different disciplines develop an awareness of the 'expectations of their audience and are likely to use language to relate independent beliefs to shared experience' (Hyland, 2008, p.543-562).

What these commentaries suggest is that different disciplines value and expect quite different kinds of argument and therefore the kinds of writing that different disciplines expect can vary, sometimes dramatically. In the Humanities and Social Sciences, analysing and synthesising information from multiple sources is important while in science and technology subjects activity-based skills like describing procedures, defining objects, and planning solutions are the more predominant types of requirements (Hyland, 2005). Hyland illustrates how writers convey their own set of values and identities that relate to their own particular discipline showing how writers use for example 'Hedges' (ways of qualifying or moderating claims) and 'boosters' (ways of strengthening or bolstering claims), in their writing. Hedges and boosters are common examples of the ways that writers express their commitments to their claims, either conveying caution or acknowledging others' divergent views by hedging, or stressing their commitment and closing out alternatives with boosters.

Citation is another example of how writing works differently across disciplines with citation conventions differing again sometimes radically, from discipline to discipline. Another important example of how disciplines differ can be the degree of tolerance there is to the writer's reference to self, and how much they are permitted to incorporate the use of 'I' in the production of text. It has also been observed that the soft sciences largely used verbs that refer to writing activities, like discuss, hypothesise, suggest, and argue, while the hard sciences preferred verbs like observe, discover, show, analyse and calculate. Identity in writing and the use of 'I' are more prevalent in the soft sciences where the writer's use of 'I' allows them to express their own convictions and their contribution to the field of research. In the hard sciences writers generally seem to downplay their personal role in the research in order to highlight the phenomena under study.

Lea and Stierer (Eds. 2000) highlighted potential barriers for students engaging in academic writing erected in the form of implicit academic writing conventions and disciplinary practices. Their research also suggests that there is not only divergence in academic conventions between higher education institutions but also between disciplines within one institution. In more general terms, Borg (2008) has shown that academic writing tends to share features across a range of domains. The first domain he identified was explication. By this, he meant laying out the nature of the argument clearly, the assumptions underpinning the argument and the signposting of the text from the very start. He also included objectivity (even those disciplines that permit the use of the 'I' in the writing, tend to demand some level of detachment and distance from the writing). The second domain he identified was intertextuality by which he meant the explicit recognition of other writers who have influenced or informed the work. The third domain advocated was critical thinking, which he understood as a rhetorical stance that requires adopting a sceptical position and an orientation towards investigating, and questioning the nature of any claims made.

What seem to be very common among the experience of early students are that such features and rules, whether they span all disciplines, or whether they are specific only to one or few, are rarely explained or discussed.

It seems to be true of many higher education environments that 'learning the ropes' is something that is left up to students who have to uncover these implicit rules for themselves often by having their early written work criticised according to these often hidden, un-discussed and unexpected criteria (Lea and Street, 1998).

So academic writing conventions guide the assessment and evaluation of written work, they are discipline specific they are associated with specific rules of writing such as structure, the use of the first person, the use of evidence in academic writing and referencing, and in many educational contexts. They are often not freely nor explicitly shared with students who often learn these rules through a mystifying process of trial and error. Students who struggle to conform to these conventions may receive support in the form of a traditional 'skills deficit'. But the orientations and conventions required for academic writing in any discipline are often not transparent and cannot always be addressed simply by learning a set of skills. Research that explores such issues is important particularly because lack of transparency in terms of writing processes can have a significant impact on student learning in this field.

2.3 Writer Identity Emotions and Confidence in Student Academic Writing

When learning to write in academia, the issue of identity and voice are also important to consider. According to Prior (2002) "Writers are social and political beings who are participating in complex literate activities and who have lives and histories that impinge upon their writing practices their identities are multiple and shifting" (Prior, 2002, p. 4-5). The process of learning to write at university has in fact been referred to as a process of establishing a new identity (e.g. Fan Shen 1988) that aligns with the assumptions and expectations of the subject being taught and learned.

Indeed, as Duff (2007) has clearly noted: 'academic discourse socialisation [including academic writing], is a dynamic, situated, social and cultural process that in contemporary context of higher education is often multimodal' (p1).

Identity in academic writing is of course much more than a question of whether or not the author reveals aspects of themselves overtly in the text, however, as will be demonstrated in this research, this issue of 'self-concealment' is one that surfaces as a major symptom of confusion and discomfort among the participants in this study. Therefore, the dimension of identity that relates to the impersonal nature of academic writing, does receive some specific and deliberate attention in the analysis and exploration of the data gathered for the purposes of this research.

Students often approach university-writing assignments with the idea that academic prose is impersonal, they are not allowed to write anything personal, and many of them learn quickly that in order for their writing to be deemed acceptable, they must disguise their identity and ensure to remain anonymous in their writing. According to Hyland (2002) the extent to which writers can explicitly intrude into their writing and mark their personal involvement by using first person pronouns, varies between the disciplines.

However, research suggests (Ivanič, 1994, 1995, 1998; Lillis, 1997) a growing trend away from the traditional notion of academic writing as distant and impersonal, towards a recognition that academic writing need not be totally devoid of the writer's presence. In *Writing and Identity*, Ivanič, (1998) has developed a well-articulated framework comprising four interrelated aspects of writer identity. The autobiographical self, the discoursal self, the self as author, and the possibilities for self-hood in the socio-cultural and institutional context (pp. 24-29). Ivanič draws upon Irving Goffman's social role theory as a tool to analyse students' experiences of apprenticeship into academic writing. Her model suggests that students draw upon different layers of 'self' in their writing. 'Autobiographical self' relates to the students' own personal history – the events that shape their life story. 'Discoursal self' is the persona the student-writer adapts when writing – the 'voice' they want their audience to hear. 'Self as author' relates to the student-writers' willingness to make claims and/or their reliance on external authorities to support those claims.

Finally, 'possibilities for self-hood in the socio-cultural and institutional contexts' relates to the circumstances in which students are expected to write.

In her discussions of identity, Ivanič, recognizes that the relationship between the writer and the institution is important. Clearly this is a complex interplay for the novice student as this research will show. In order to participate successfully and develop a 'discoursal self', students need to develop some sense of belonging with the culture of the discourse. Decisions concerning whether to adopt an impersonal style or to represent one-self explicitly can have an important impact on how a particular message is received. Writers in the hard sciences and engineering tend to depersonalize the writing. It is rare if ever the first person is in evidence in academic writing from this discipline (Hyland, 2002).

The writing tends to be more technical (ibid) and this is a skill that is expected of their students. In the Humanities however, there appears more license to be more creative in the use of authorial voice (Ivanič, 1997). The use of the first person is not a trivial decision but rather is related to such things as disciplinary norms, ownership and identity in academic writing.

Lea and Street (1998) view issues of identity and personhood as central to their model of academic literacy which recognises the value of the beliefs and assumptions about writing and knowledge that students bring to the university. The relevance of identity to student writings in higher education has also been identified by Bowl (2000). In her exploration of the experiences of non-traditional students in higher education she found that the life experiences of these students resulted in them having a different interpretation of discourses but that these were not necessarily acceptable in their academic writing. Lillis (2001) identified similar experiences amongst the students involved in her research. She highlighted a number of ways in which students felt regulated in their meaning making including the words that they used and the ideas that they represented in their academic writing.

So the issue of one's own identity in academic writing has received quite a lot of attention in the literature to date. Lillis refers to different types of identity, and others show that the extent to which one's own self is allowed expression in academic writing varies again from discipline to discipline. It seems however that in every academic discipline there is a struggle among many writers (especially new ones) that relates to where their own voice and identity 'fits' if at all, in the writing that they are required to produce. And it seems a strange paradox, that in higher educational environments where professional identity is important, that same identity needs somehow to be subverted when academic writing tasks are being completed. This is a paradox and an issue that resonates in the primary research as well as in the work of other commentators on the subject and forms an important element of this study.

2.3.1 Emotions and Writing Behaviour

Writing involves emotion as well as cognition (Murray and Moore, 2006), and to the more holistic aspects, such as the student-writer's sense of self and identity, their emotional orientation to their writing and their creative process. Support for writing in academia tends to focus on the technical and practical aspects of scholarly writing. Advice is rarely provided on managing creative and emotional facets of writing factors that greatly contribute to writing quality and success. According to Antoniou and Moriarty, (2008) student writing involves emotional risk-taking by the student and by providing them with a supportive safe environment where they can take risks then it is possible that they can substantially improve their confidence and find their own voice and so develop a variety of skills that greatly contribute to the quality of their writing. Crème and Hunt (2002) explored the possibility that giving university students an opportunity to explore their relationship with their essays through a range of creative writing techniques might enhance creativity in university writing. Their research covered issues of genre, writer identity, creativity and play and their findings suggest that by drawing on different approaches to academic writing such as the use of creative writing, free writing, the relationship with the writing self and using the notion of play in academic writing students can feel more empowered and more invested in their university writing.

Brand (1987) argues that emotions influence not only what one writes and how one writes, but also how one views the process and how it shapes one's thinking. According to her, writing is a highly complex mental task and it can be delayed, interrupted, or abandoned at any time for any and all reasons: the impulse to write may be heavily imbued with emotion or empty of it. McLeod (1987) observed that because writing was as much an emotional as a cognitive activity, affective components strongly influence all phases of the writing process and by helping students understand how these affective processes work could inform their writing practices.

Lillis (2001) focuses on a common tension across the student writers' experience, which is the tension between what they feel they want to say and what they feel they are allowed to say in their academic writing. She argues that the kinds of meanings that the student writers make in their academic writing and their feelings about what they do or do not mean in their writing are bound up with ongoing aspects of their identities in the many dimensions of their lives, both inside and outside the higher education system.

2.3.2 Confidence

The issue of voice is an extremely ambiguous notion in academic writing. Whether or not to say 'I agree with x' or whether to assert one's own opinion is an area fraught with uncertainty and confusion. Many students become quickly adept at editing themselves out of their academic texts. Others argue and struggle with the sense that they have to. In addition, others fall foul of the assessment process by asserting their voice when their evaluators deem this inappropriate. On the one hand, academic writing is often expected to be 'confident and bold' (Martin, 1997, p.479-486), but on the other, it is also required not to step beyond the boundaries of evidence or convention (Murray and Moore, 2006). In such a minefield, it is difficult to find a confident way forward A study by Branthwaite et al. (1980) on the essay-writing strategies of students demonstrated that a self-confident assertive style will achieve higher grades.

Read, Francis, and Robson, (2001) found that students predominantly adopted a mildly 'assertive' style when presenting their own 'voice' in essays. Also in this study a significant number of students claimed that they held back from presenting their own opinions, not because of a lack of knowledge of the 'rules of the game', but because of the un-empowered position of the student in relation to the tutor marking their essays. A number of writers on the subject of undergraduate essay writing have noted the unequal power relationship between student and tutor (Hounsell, 1987; Lea, 1994). Many students might know that to achieve a good grade, they need to present their own 'voice', yet they lack the confidence to do so, as they feel they are not able to challenge the opinions of 'established' academics. Bourdieu states that the cultural and symbolic capital acquired by the lecturer through academic qualifications and occupational status translates in the 'field' of the university, into a greater 'authority' to communicate, relative to the student (Bourdieu, 1988). As a consequence of this inequality, many students do not feel confident about the importance or usefulness of their own opinions.

Therefore issues of voice, confidence, identity and the self in academic writing are almost inevitably problematic given some of the commentary presented above. Yet, the development and encouragement of student voice and confidence is a key aspect of higher education teaching. However, given the context of cultural elitism power and newcomer disorientation it is unsurprising that new students face significant challenges in the development of their academic voice and confidence. These are particular challenges for higher education teachers however, the facilitation of student writing that is sensitive to the particular challenges that new students encounter would ease their writing transition in higher education.

2.4 Models of Student Writing in Higher Education

Lea and Street (1998) introduced new theoretical frames to the field of academic writing. They suggested that research into student writing in higher education had fallen into three main fields of enquiry: study skills, academic socialisation and academic literacies.

The study skills model has the view that students who have deficits in their academic writing can learn the necessary skills such as spelling, grammar, punctuation and cohesion in the university writing centre or by attending study skills workshops. The academic socialisation model views academic writing as a cultural matter with each university or discipline representing a certain culture. In order to master academic writing, the students must embrace and adapt to this culture. The final model views universities as sites of discourse and power, and sees academic practices as reflecting issues of epistemology and identity rather than the simpler issues of skill or socialisation. Lea and Street viewed each model as successively encapsulating the other so that the academic socialisation perspective takes account of study skills but includes them in the broader context of the acculturation processes and likewise the academic literacies approach encapsulates the academic socialisation model building on the insights developed there as well as the study skills view. The academic literacies model, then, incorporates both of the other models into a more encompassing understanding of the nature of student writing within institutional practices, power relations and identities (Lea and Street, 1998). Lea and Street took a hierarchical view of the relationship between the three models and privileged the 'academic literacies' approach.

This typology has been influential in educational research and much of the recent literature has adopted an academic literacies approach that has located student writing within an explicitly social, political and institutional framework (Lillis, 2001; Baynham, 2000). Academic literacies research has been highly successful in providing evidence for new approaches to student academic writing that challenges more conventional deficit models and highlights the link between student writing and learning at university. It contrasts with the view that writing is essentially mechanistic based upon the acquisition of incremental skills. Lea and Stierer (2000) suggest that the traditional approach is based upon the belief that:

The qualities of 'good writing' are assumed to be self- evident, and largely a matter of learning and mastering universal rules of, for example, grammar, usage and text organisation. (Lea and Stierer, 2000, p.3).

A social practices approach involves reflecting on the influence of both the disciplinary and social context of any writing act and the recognition of the writer's choice. From the student point of view a dominant feature of this approach is the requirement to change practices between one setting and another, to use a set of linguistic practices appropriate to each setting and to handle the social meanings and identities that each evokes. Linguistic choices will be affected by the power relationship the experience of engaging with the subject and the conventions and roles in the higher education institution. The student will make choices in relation to all of these aspects of the discursive event, which will contribute, to the process of 'making meaning'. "The term 'making meaning' denotes a shift from seeing writing as a collection of rule bound codes as represented by some of the traditional models of grammar and punctuation to socially interactive processes of creating meaning" (Lillis, 2003, p.192-207).

So, academic writing has been variously conceptualised as something governed by a simple set of mechanistic rules that everyone faced with the task simply has to learn, to an activity operating within a context that is characterised by a complex web of dynamics, power relationships, values, assumptions and rituals. The research carried out in this thesis recognises this complex context. The researcher believes that complex institutional and personal influences impact upon student's capacity to develop the skills of academic writing. If it were simply down to a set of mechanistic skills to be learned the problems associated with academic writing would be easily solved however, this review of relevant literature indicates that the contrary is the case.

2.5 First-year Academic Integration and Writing Development

2.5.1 Introduction

This section will explore academic integration in the first year, understanding the ground rules of academic writing, the difference between staff and student interpretations of academic writing, the model produced by Lea and Street (1997) on the different sources of difficulty experienced by students when writing essays.

Issues around areas such as confidence, feedback and anxieties about referencing and plagiarism are also addressed. These are key topics that receive attention in the literature to date and are also relevant in the context of the current research.

The developing research area of student writing in higher education is a highly topical one, with student intake and curriculum provision in universities changing rapidly. Students are coming from an increasingly wide range of educational cultural and linguistic backgrounds to study in a number of diverse learning contexts in universities.

There is no single 'first-year experience'. It is not easy to identify determining factors that are, or should be, associated with the first-year experience because of the idiosyncratic way students engage with it. Nonetheless, all the research referenced here suggests that the process of transition and adjustment is perhaps one of the few dimensions that can be said to be distinctive about and apply generally to the first year experience.

Preparation (or lack of it) for higher education provided by previous educational backgrounds contributes to students' experiences of higher education (Clark and Ramsey, 1990). McInnis et al. (2000) note that despite widespread and concerted efforts to improve the links between school and university, two thirds of students in that study reported that they did not feel well prepared for university study. Many of the students enter a higher education environment without much preparation, and without really having any sense of what to expect (Upcraft and Gardner, 1989).
Consequently, because of this lack of preparation and knowledge, it is then difficult for students to adjust to the changes and challenges that university life presents on academic, social and personal levels. It seems, according to some research, that the very early weeks (some cite the first seven as being particularly crucial, Rickinson and Rutherford, 1995) contain the potential for adjustment or disengagement to what is often a very new and unfamiliar social and academic context. In university, the support systems that first-years have built for themselves from previous environments may be gone or no longer are supportive, and they can find themselves

in a sink-or-swim situation. Tinto, (1993), claims that whether a student persists or drops out of university is quite strongly predicted by their degree of both academic and social integration. Broadly, defined, academic integration includes, but is not limited to, those experiences that students have on a university campus that:

- support academic development,
- encourage cognitive development and
- enhance a student's academic motivation to pursue academic tasks.

Social integration includes those experiences that help to connect the students to the university environment, which helps in their psychosocial development and that contributes to their overall satisfaction in college.

Arguably, academic writing has a role to play in all of these articulated forms of adjustment. Krause (2001) explored ways in which students' experiences during the writing process could contribute to their academic integration. Her findings suggest that interactions with staff and peers during the assignment writing process can provide significant opportunities for integration provided these interactions are supportive. Krause argues that the initial academic writing experience has a far-reaching and influential impact that can contribute to the relative success of the academic integration of first-year students. She also highlights the opportunity that teachers have to ensure that students establish good writing habits in their first writing task that will carry them through a range of other interrelated challenges and also to ensure that the first writing assignment can become a pathway to integration that fosters a sense of belonging in the university learning community.

Many pedagogical commentators state that the qualities of good writing are assumed to be self-evident, and largely a matter of learning and conquering universal rules of, such elements as grammar, usage and textual organisation (Bernstein, 1996; Lillis, 2001).

Explanations for students who experience problems with writing tend to locate the problem as a deficit in the student rather than question the way in which the 'ground rules' of academic writing become established and negotiated in particular academic contexts (Lea and Stierer, 2000). To understand what counts as 'good writing' in higher education requires an understanding of the culture of the individual academic disciplines. The ground rules of academic writing in a subject area are often not made explicit to students (Lea and Street, 2000). They are often mediated by individual members of teaching staff through, for example, their general advice on writing and their feedback to students on specific pieces of written work. What counts as 'good writing' is therefore partly a matter of the individual preferences of teaching staff, or the individual interpretation by teaching staff of the given rules of good writing (Lea and Street, 2000). There is now an increasing recognition of fundamental differences between academic disciplines in terms of the written genres students are expected to master at university. The past few years have seen a rapid growth of new technologies in the area of teaching and learning in higher education. However, according to Lea and Street (2000)

> "*in spite of this apparent transformation in teaching and learning and modes of course delivery, the issues surrounding student writing for assessment purposes appear to be remarkably stable*" (Lea and Street, 2000, p.32-46).

According to (Cohen, 1993; Lea and Street 1997b; Stierer, 1997) there is a growing body of literature, which suggests that one explanation for student writing problems might be the gaps between academic staff expectations and student interpretations of what is involved in student writing.

Lea and Street (1997b) differentiated between three different but overlapping sources of difficulty for students writing essays and reports, and how their institutions dealt with them. The first focused on the student and suggests that students lack a set of basic skills (grammar, spelling punctuation and style) that can be dealt with through study skills support workshops.

The second identified most clearly by the students was the interaction of tutor and student and concerned issues such as student and tutor assumptions and understandings of assignment titles, tutor feedback on students' written work and for the students themselves the importance of their own identity as writers. The third area was broadly at an institutional level and concerned the implications of modularity assessment and university procedures on student writing. Lea and Street placed their greatest emphasis on the second area of difficulty that is, difficulties with 'interpretation'. Their research involved textual examination of tutor written feedback on student work and also students' interpretations of the meanings that they attached to this feedback in relation to a specific piece of written work.

They suggest that the implicit models that were generally used to understand student writing in higher education do not adequately take account of the importance of issues of identity and the institutional relationships of power and authority that surround the diverse student writing practices across the university.

A number of studies have highlighted the difficulties students face in acquiring this crucial cultural knowledge. A survey on essay writing conducted with over 100 Psychology students at the University of Keele found that the students' single greatest difficulty was not being able to understand what was required of them when writing an essay, (Hartley and Chesworth 2000). These findings seemed to apply equally to all of the four subgroups of students surveyed – men and women, mature students and traditional entry (those entering from second level education). These results and those of Street and Lea suggest that university staff need to pay more attention to resolving their 'institutional failings' and their students' problems of 'interpretation' than they currently do.

This theme is built on from further research by Lea and Street (2000) where they argue that institutions need to address the difficulties for students not yet acquainted with the disciplinary underpinnings of academic writing and of faculty feedback.

Clerehan (2003) reported the 'Transition to Tertiary Writing Project' at an Australian university that attempted to explore how well students were prepared for and developed writing skills that matched staff expectations. Lecturers expected written work to be a dialogue between student and sources. However, first-year students were still inclined to express their opinion, with little sense of the need to arbitrate between different scholarly points of view. One insight that emerged from the project was that teaching staff underestimated how much careful explication the students required. Clerehan (2002) argued that staff needed to play a greater role in bridging this gap.

The requirements for writing vary not just between subjects, for example between history and law, but between university departments, individual tutors and specific assignments. Given this, it is easy to understand why students struggle with their writing in trying to work out the 'ground rules' of what is involved in any particular context. Students need to be aware of the ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding and arguing that define the discourse of the academic community (Bartholomae, 1985). Students are aware that a certain style of writing is required at university but are often uncertain of the specific details involved (Francis et al., 2000). New conventions must be learned and new literacy skills acquired, including those of library research, critical interpretation and argument development. The novice student writer may have a limited understanding of the intended audience, their expectations and their demands. Often the writing task demands that the student writer compose with authority for an audience about which she/he has only a vague awareness and understanding, and this poses significant pressures (Bartholomae, 1985). According to Read et. al. (2001, p.388) "the 'conventions' of the academic writing style can therefore be seen metaphorically as a type of 'code' to be 'cracked', a form of knowledge that students must uncover for themselves".

According to Lillis (1997), failure to utilise these 'codes' correctly is often interpreted as the responsibility and deficiency of the student as opposed to the inevitable difficulties associated with adjusting to new forms of expression that are

almost never encountered outside the university. Furthermore, Krause and Duchesne (2000) found students admit to being afraid of the size of the groups in which they are being taught and they talk about the sense of 'alienation' that students experience when they meet in large lecture halls only encounter their teachers or tutors once a week (Krause and Duchesne, 2000).

McCune's (2004) findings suggested that the students made some progress in their conceptions of academic writing, but that even after a lot of exposure to teaching many of them were still unable to describe what was expected for their essays in a way that reflected what their tutors said they wanted to see. While students were given help that seemed relevant to developing their conceptions, there was little evidence in interviews that this made an impact on their learning.

Branthwaite et al. (1980) conducted a study of students' conceptions of the criteria lecturers use to mark essays, and compared these with the criteria rated by a sample of lecturers. Forty percent of students mentioned 'originality' as an important criterion, while this was not mentioned at all by lecturers, who rated most highly criteria such as 'evidence', 'reading' and 'relevance'. They found that students who rated presenting their own opinions highly achieved lower marks than others (Branthwaite et al., 1980). Hounsell (1987) found that students who perceived essay writing as primarily a vehicle for presenting the student's 'viewpoint' achieved lower grades than those who perceived essay writing as the presentation of 'arguments'. For academics, the issue of referencing sources seems clear, but for students the boundary between their sources and their own account is less certain, as they feel that all of their knowledge is implicated in others' texts.

Research would suggest (Ashworth et al., 1997) that universities cannot assume that both tutors and students share the same interpretation and understanding of plagiarism. Lea and Street (1998) also confirmed from their research that this was the case. The students they interviewed reported being anxious about the possibility of plagiarising in terms of their own identity as writers.

"They were unclear about what constituted plagiarism and their 'concerns were that the texts they read were authoritative and that they as students had little useful to say" (Lea and Street 1998, p.167).

2.5.2 Feedback

Giving feedback is recognised as a crucial element in improving student learning (Gibbs, 1999). The critical question is what is the best way of doing this, given the current climate of increasing student numbers, with many courses being fragmented into twelve-week modules. This can result in students receiving feedback too late, so that they are unlikely to take much notice of it. A recent study by Higgins, Hartley and Skelton (2002) found 97% of students said they read tutor feedback, with 82% claiming they paid close attention to the comments.

It is important that students understand the discourse of assessment and that lecturers do not presume that students' understanding is the same as theirs. Williams (2005) examined the way in which a cohort of first-year Chemistry students interpreted commonly used assessment task verbs and compared these responses with their lecturers' usage of these terms. The results of this study suggest that the gap between the understandings held by students new to university and those held by lecturers is sufficient to indicate that changes in practice are needed to contribute to fair assessment practices. The paper argued that understanding assessment, as a specific academic discourse will help explain the substantial gap between student understandings and lecturer usage of assessment terms. Students must become members of this discourse community to gain mastery within it (Williams, 2005).

In a report funded by the Australian Government (Krause, Hartley, James and McInnis, 2005) reported that despite the many positive trends in relation to student perceptions of teaching only a minority of students felt that teaching staff gave helpful feedback on a regular basis and had taken an interest in student progress. In a study carried out by McCune (2004) an analysis was made of the feedback students' received on their writing and their comments about this feedback in subsequent interviews.

A few students mentioned that they had some problems in reading or interpreting the feedback, but they generally said they felt that the feedback was reasonable. In the interviews, the students were able to describe what feedback was written on their essays, but were unable to discuss this in detail and generally gave the impression that they had not paid much attention to it. There was little in what the students said in the interviews to suggest that their conception of writing had changed due to receiving written feedback. Although most of the students seemed to have grasped the basic points made in their feedback, at least in a limited sense, it also appeared to be possible for them to badly misinterpret it.

While written feedback seemed to lead mainly to quite gradual development from these students, discussion with their tutors apparently had the potential to provoke changes that are more significant. Hounsell (1987) emphasised the need for dialogue between staff and students to explore the assumptions behind advice given on essay writing. If students understand what is expected of them in their assignments, if they can see writing models and evidence of what it is that comprises a good academic essay, then the likelihood of their developing an affiliation with the academic environment both within and outside the classroom will be increased (Nora, 1993).

However Turner's (1993) study of students' reactions to feedback at Lancaster University suggests that most students do try to make sense of the responses they receive. He found that while some students felt daunted by detailed comments, brief ones frustrated others. They often complained that they did not receive enough feedback, that what they got was not comprehensive enough, and that it was not helpful, not legible or not timely. Some students talked about feeling 'validated' by detailed responses and saw that they allowed useful learning even though it was specific to a particular piece of writing. If students are to take their tutors' responses seriously then it matters very much what they contain. Taylor (1996) illustrates the importance of students' emotional coping skills in the development of their learning. From his study he reported that the level of emotional coping skills might be a reason why students did not engage well with essay advice given, as it may have challenged them in ways that they could not accept.

Interestingly Snyder (1971) noted that assessment can have a powerful effect on individuals' sense of their worth as students and at times on their sense of their worth as people. The students interviewed by Turner (1993) revealed how discouraging feedback affected their self-esteem, their confidence and their whole approach to a course. Krause (2001) reported that the data collected in her study indicated that some students perceived of the broader university environment as a place, which was competitive, and daunting, particularly when it came to finding information and writing their first assignment. Students emphasised their preferences and need for face-to-face contact, as opposed to virtual or online contact with faculty, where academic assignment assistance and support was involved. In addition, this study revealed that in terms of the research process, students ranked finding relevant references by searching library computer databases as the most difficult task listed on the survey.

These results support Krause's (1998) earlier findings regarding students' concerns about use of computer technology to locate reference material in the library. Searching for reference materials via electronic databases is an increasingly essential skill for university students. These findings show the importance of the need for early academic integration efforts in the area of library research.

Concerning the literature reviewed on student academic writing, which included such issues as student interpretation, writing in different contexts, presenting viewpoints versus arguments, referencing and plagiarism, confidence, and assessment all of these areas were discussed by the first-year University students I interviewed.

This research suggests that from this study there is considerable scope for future research into the role institutions play in providing this information to their first-year students as they navigate the complexities between second level writing and university level academic writing.

Having discussed these various elements of academic writing it demonstrates the further need for research within the Irish context the experience first-year students have with academic writing.

2.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter explored the relevant literature on student academic writing, the first-year experience and writing related issues that are linked to student retention, all of which have an impact on first-year academic writing.

The research themes presented in this chapter are used as the basis for this study and will be revisited in the discussion chapter.

2.7 Key Insights

The literature that has been reviewed above suggests a number of quite simple things relating to academic writing:

Firstly, **students often do not know what is expected of them** and they are often given scant instruction or guidance on the specific and distinguishing characteristics of academic writing. What constitutes 'academic' writing is often extremely unclear to them, and it seems from the evidence reviewed in a range of contexts that teachers tend to make assumptions about new students' ability to produce text that is adequately scholarly, structured, referenced and explicit in the particular ways that academic contexts often require. In terms of this research, this is important because if students are not inducted well into what is expected of them writing can become a frustrating and deeply challenging experience. It may negatively affect the development of their academic writing therefore sensitive and supportive contexts are necessary for the empowerment of students as writers.

Academic writing is a complex process and cannot be defined as a single or simple capacity. In fact, it seems from the literature that a range of different and quite complex competencies need to be mobilised in order to engage in and produce academic writing.

Time management, reading skills, interpretation capacities, organisational skills, cognitive and emotional orientations all play a role. It seems that in order to understand the development of the skills associated with academic writing, educators need to pay attention to many different kinds of capacities, some of which new students are only at the early stages of developing. Therefore, it is important to listen to student voice in order to illuminate academics understanding of the complexities of the student experience. Building student capacities as writers takes time and must be informed by the students themselves.

Institutions have responsibilities to outline criteria and expectations that they do not always deliver on. The assumption that students will learn to write effectively in academia seems to permeate many higher educational environments, and may derive from a time when higher education was accessible only by an elite few. Indeed, there remains strong evidence that for some students, simple immersion in academic writing tasks ('just doing it') can be a process that is accompanied by the gradual development of their academic writing skills. However, this is not always the case, and the development of writing skills 'by default' may be an easier process for some students than it is for others – depending for example on the extent to which they can avail of supports, knowledge and assistance outside their education environments. Sensitive awareness of the stages that student experience in the development of their writing capacity is important as this research sought to illuminate. Research that listens to student voice has a significant contribution to make to the development of supportive structures, which can facilitate students to become more comfortable in their writing.

Issues of voice, identity and confidence are problematic in the context of student academic writing. Literature has shown that students struggle with how to express and articulate their own identity in their academic writing. Also how to display their own role in the writing process and the research that it reports, and they often seem to lack confidence about the subtle and unstable rules that govern the assessment of their writing and the way that they present their own voice within that writing.

Understanding how students interpret the subtleties of academic writing is necessary in order to build their writing capacities as potential academics.

The 'rules' of academic writing are very unstable and often idiosyncratic. Different disciplines, different teachers, and different targets for writing often demand different writing strategies and tactics from students. This can be a frustrating experience for students who may feel on the one hand that they have 'cracked' a set of writing practices in one setting, only to discover that these practices do not apply in other contexts or that the emphasis on different criteria are different. The diversity of requirements and the idiosyncratic demands of different teachers can make students who are learning to write in academia for the first time, feel confused in ways that can undermine their confidence, give rise to confusion and overall threaten their sense of competence and self-efficacy. Fostering a discourse of coherence in expectation of students as writers is important. This research is informed by the voices of students who were aware of the complexities that impacted on their writing. The students in this study have clear messages that can deepen the academics understanding of the issues that students contend with as writers within the academy. The following chapter will show how the research was conceptualised and implemented because of the insights gained from the review of relevant literature outlined here.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

From the review of relevant literature in the previous chapter some key issues emerged in terms of academic writing. Lack of student clarity, in terms of academic expectation, the development of personal confidence as a writer and the range and complexity of influences that impact on the writing process are key issues that novice students contend with. Therefore, this research sought to qualitatively explore the lived experience and impact of these issues for novice students within an academic setting. Because of the subjective nature of academic writing a research approach that facilitated the exploration of these subjectivities was deemed most appropriate. This chapter will present the research questions, which this study seeks to answer. In it, the fundamental principles that informed the decision to utilise a qualitative approach are explored and discussed. The assumptions underpinning the qualitative paradigm are discussed the research design is outlined as are the fieldwork instruments and the implementation process is also outlined. Data analysis is discussed the ethical considerations are also outlined and the limitations of the study are also explored. Copies of the recruitment leaflet, interviewee consent form the interview schedule used and the ethical consent form are included in Appendices A, B, C, and D.

3.2 Research Questions

This research study investigates the experiences and perceptions of undergraduate students relating to their first essay writing assignment in a university context.

The two key research questions that this research aims to answer are:

- What is the nature of the first-year student experience when approaching their first piece of academic essay writing?

- How do early experiences, attitudes, emotion and orientations relating to academic writing change (if at all) between the first and the second semester within a higher educational context?

3.3 Participants

Participants were drawn from a first year module on English Literature and these students were enrolled in a range of disciplinary areas across the university, thus providing some diversity in academic background. All participants in this study were in their first year of university study and enrolled full-time. The sample comprised of a combination of school-leavers and mature-age students, with a larger representation of females than males. Convenience sampling was selected: the population was local, accessible and available to the researcher. The researcher acknowledges that the findings derived from this study are not generalisable either within or beyond the institution in which they were gathered. What the findings do achieve is a rich picture of the experiences and subjective perceptions of early academic writing from the point of view of a small but quite intensively studied group of students. The subsequent categorisation and analysis of these experiences are certainly worthy of reflection within their context, and the possible extension and replication to other similar early undergraduate settings. Therefore, the generalisability of these findings is limited as the analysis is based on feedback from a relatively small number of students in a single university setting. All the students interviewed were taking the same English Literature module so it is difficult to provide a powerful look into the writing diversity among disciplines. What this thesis does provide, is a rich and fine-grained set of insights into the individual experiences of this sample of students. The analysis and categorisation of these experiences provide new interpretations of the subjective experiences of writing that will help to enrich approaches to explaining some of the features of academic writing. This may be most resonant for students, within similar settings, reflecting and explaining some of the earlier literature in the field, though of course this cannot be confirmed without further, similar research.

3.4 Research Design

The identification of a research approach is perhaps the most significant decision to be made when undertaking research.

A study must be firmly grounded within a methodological approach to successfully address or generate its research questions (Allen et al., 1986). Qualitative research data can includes interviews, questionnaires, observation and documentary analysis. The research design for this study was structured around two separate phases of semi-structured interviews in conjunction with a thorough and comprehensive literature review on student academic writing and its related topics. This facilitated the gathering of rich, fine-grained, meaningful data within the context of the research study. Bassey (1999, pp. 38-40) argues that educational research is *"critical enquiry aimed at informing educational judgements and decisions in order to improve educational action".* This is a critical enquiry into first-year academic writing in order to explore and understand some of the initial experiences with academic writing that may be encountered by early higher education students. The purpose of the research is to describe and explain student experiences with writing tasks, from their perspective and to explore what these experiences might suggest for higher education in general, and teachers and students in particular.

3.5 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research has been defined as *"a situated activity that locates the observer in the real world",* and qualitative researchers as those who *"attempt to make sense of, or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them"* (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000 p5). Qualitative research tends to involve observation, description and interpretation, rather than measurement, control, prediction or experiment. It does not set out to predict measure or quantify. Rather, it provides insight, often from the perspective of quite a small sample of people. It looks for meanings and examines the world from the viewpoint of the people studied (Silverman, 2000). Research involves many choices and strategies and it is imperative to select the most suitable approaches available. Miles and Huberman (1994, pp.6-7) suggest that the purpose of qualitative research is *"to gain a holistic*

overview of the context under study". They see the role of the researcher as attempting *"to capture data on the perceptions of local actors, from the inside".* I wanted to capture the voices of local actors, in this case, the first-year students in order to see how they made sense of their writing experience in context.
The interviews I conducted asked respondents to tell me about their real, lived writing related experiences. While I did not observe participants in their day to day settings, the research focused as far as possible on finding out about those settings based on the respondents own accounts.

Quantitative research tends to rely on established frames and formulae for analysis. Quantitative methods were developed originally in the natural sciences and are used to observe natural phenomena. They are characterised by laboratory experiments and mathematical and numerical methods.

In contrast to quantitative methods, qualitative analysis depends more on descriptive data as a result of in-depth exploration of the study area as opposed to the more structured, highly convention-bound approach of quantitative research. Qualitative research can be very analytical, but its approach relies more on looser, flexible, interpretive orientations towards analysis. Qualitative research is appropriate when the research question relates more to subjective, human, and experiential aspects of phenomena, as is the case with this research. For the purpose of this study the qualitative technique adopted will use in-depth interviews as sources of information and a means of gathering data.

Qualitative research is viewed by some as soft, vague or impressionistic (Ambert et al, 1995), and according to Mays and Pope (2000) qualitative reports cannot be evaluated by conventional measures of validity and reliability. Validity is concerned with conveying the authentic views of the informants with minimal distortion by the research process (Wainwright, 1997). To promote validity in this study the researcher strove to remain reflexive throughout the research process. Reflexivity implies sensitivity to the ways that the researcher or research process may have influenced the collected data (Mays and Pope, 2000). In an effort to fully understand

the way the informant thinks and experiences the researcher must interact with the informants and researchers may get so involved they fail to remain objective (Parahoo, 1997).

As qualitative data collection methods normally entail the study of a small sample, their *"claims to population validity are usually considered to be limited to the actual phenomena under investigation during fieldwork"* (Gill and Johnson, 1997, p.24).

But according to the same commentators, (Gill and Johnson, 1997, p.25) such interpretative research is considered to be strong in ecological validity, since it "*takes place in the natural setting of the everyday activities of the subjects under investigation"* and hence "artificiality" of responses is reduced to a certain extent. More subjects do not necessarily yield more information and it may be more productive to engage in in-depth probing of a limited number of individuals; sometimes as few as three to six (Sanders, 1972 in Wilson, 1989).

3.6 Methodology

This is a largely phenomenological study and it uses as its main source of data, the results of qualitative interviews, giving respondents as much opportunity as possible to represent their experiences in their own words. However, in addition to gaining a wide range of qualitative insights allowing for in-depth qualitative analysis of participant perceptions and experiences with academic writing, I have also engaged in a more structured content analysis of the findings in order to identify frequencies, categories and changes over time in a way that can be quantified, at least to some degree. It might be argued that including a content analysis in the context of a phenomenological study is rather reductionistic. However, in the light of my focus on tracking the changes in students' experience over time, this approach served to provide some objective gauge of the changes experienced and the broad nature of those change (see p.52 for an account of how the content analysis was conducted).

The purpose of the phenomenological approach is to illuminate the specific, to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the individuals within their own situations. Phenomenology is concerned with the study of experience from the perspective of the individual involved. Creswell (1998) states, "a phenomenological study describes the meaning of the lived experience for several individuals about a concept or phenomenon" (p. 51). Phenomenology supports the re-examination of a taken-for-granted experience and through examining the qualities of the experience allows us to identify its essence. According to Finlay (2005, 271-92) "the quality of any phenomenological study can be judged in its relative power to draw the reader into the researcher's discoveries allowing the reader to see the worlds of others in new and deeper ways".

Polkinghorne (1983) offered four qualities to help the reader evaluate the power and trustworthiness of phenomenological accounts: vividness, accuracy, richness and elegance. Is the research vivid in the sense that it generates a precise and clear account and that it draws the reader in? Are readers able to recognise the phenomenon either from their own experience or from imagining the situation vicariously? In terms of richness, can readers readily grasp the essence and tenor of the experience? Finally, has the phenomenon been described as economically and elegantly as possible? A variety of methods can be used in phenomenological-based research including interviews, conversations, participant observation, action research and focus meetings.

3.7 Research Instrument – Qualitative Interviews

Interviews are a common research strategy and can have a number of purposes such as to test or develop hypotheses or to gather data. An interview is useful for displaying how people make sense of their social world and of each other (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 268). There is a range of accepted qualitative research tools but for this study the researcher employed a scheduled interview technique with semi-structured questions. Semi-structured interviews were developed according to the guidelines developed by Gardner (2003). The information needed to answer the research questions was identified, and it resulted in a number of lead questions and subsidiary

questions or probes to supplement these. Semi-structured questions enables the researcher to make a truer assessment of what the interviewee believes (Barker, 1996) and are most appropriate to use in an exploratory study.

This research was highly exploratory in nature, designed to get a sense of the lived experience of respondents and to give voice to the writing-related issues that they felt were important and relevant to that experience, so the semi-structured interview approach seemed particularly appropriate because:

- With semi-structured interviews the interviewer can invite the interviewee to develop his/her responses by asking additional questions of the interviewer's own choosing (Barker, 1996).
- Validity is enhanced in semi-structured interviews because participants can be helped to understand the questions by the interviewer (Parahoo, 1997).
- The fact that the interview is an adaptable and flexible research method is one of its key advantages, (e.g. Bell 2005).

One of the key drawbacks of using the interview as a research method is the danger of bias. Inevitably, research interviews inherently contain sources of bias that require recognition and containment (Cohen et al. 2000).

The interviewer's attitudes and opinions may lead the interviewer to seek answers that support his/her preconceived ideas (Cohen et al. 2000). Aware of this risk, the researcher made every effort not to lead the interviewees during the interview process by maintaining a non-directive and a non-intrusive stance throughout. The researcher was aware that verbal and non-verbal communication on her part could influence the interviewee. So she worked very hard to ensure that she did not influence the flow of the conversation during the key times when the interviewee was talking. However, in order to elicit additional information to questions, the researcher did use prompts to expand on ideas already offered or to redirect, or indeed clarify the respondent's position, all the time, trying not to influence the respondent's answer.

It was important that her level of communication was adequately balanced to encourage but not lead the interviewee. While conducting the interviews the researcher really tried to be a listener rather than a speaker and worked hard to make sure that the interview was a safe experience in which the respondents felt completely free to explain and explore their experiences. The participants were encouraged to continue talking by techniques such as nodding the head and by making sounds that indicate interest as recommended by Burns and Grove (2001).

3.8 Selection of Sample

A sample refers to the proportion of a population included in the research study. The two types of sampling methods include:

1. Probability sampling, which assumes that every member of the population has an equal chance of being chosen for the study. For this reason the findings from a study using probability sampling are (within certain degrees of accuracy) generalisable. Methods include random sampling, systematic sampling and cluster sampling.

2. Non-Probability Sampling, where the probability of a person being chosen is not known and therefore the results are not as easily generalisable. Methods include quota sampling, dimensional sampling, convenience sampling and snowball sampling.

The approach adopted for this study was a non-probability sampling approach. Firstly, to produce findings reflective of the overall first-year student population at the University of Limerick, the researcher would have had to adopt a more large-scale approach such as the use of questionnaires, thereby forfeiting the information rich data acquired through dialogue with the students. Also because the researcher was interested in getting exploratory insights into the writing experiences of first-year students she was not overly concerned with how generalisable the findings would be but she recognises that the emerging analysis can only be read as preliminary and tentative in nature, not making any broad generalisations about the

early experiences of all students, but nonetheless highlighting real, lived experiences of some students that may offer useful avenues for future research.

> *"A convenience sample is one that is simply available to I by virtue of its accessibility"* (Bryman and Bell 2003, p.105).

3.9 Description of Procedures

This section is devoted to the description of the preparation and execution of the primary data collection methods. The researcher identified a class where the first-year students would be submitting a substantial piece of work in January for assessment and emailed this class, inviting the students to participate in the research. The exact parameters, requirements and timing issues were made clear to the students, and the researcher explained exactly what would be involved and she specified the associated time requirement. The researcher advised the participants about the timing of the two planned interviews that she wanted to carry out with each of them: that is, one interview each, prior to submitting their first essay and one interview each again after they had received their assessment on that piece of work. Nine students volunteered to participate in the research. The breakdown of this group was: 7 female (4 'traditional' school leavers, and 3 'mature' students – i.e. over 23 years on registration) and 2 male (one 'traditional' and one 'mature').

The first round interviews took place during the autumn semester 2005 and the second round interviews (again using the same questions) took place during the spring semester 2006. During the autumn semester the students were new on campus and had not submitted any significant piece of work at that stage. During the period of interviews in the Spring semester of '06 the students had at this stage submitted a significant piece of writing and had also received feedback and grading on this. The interviews themselves took approximately one hour each and each was audio recorded with the permission of the participants. The recorded interview allows the interviewer maximum freedom to listen more attentively, to follow more carefully what is being said during the interview and to concentrate on establishing and maintaining rapport with the interviewee. The recorded conversation can then be played at leisure, at a later stage, offering greater opportunity for reflection.

Most importantly, the audio recording ensures that what the respondents have said has been accurately captured and therefore is less subject to paraphrasing, misinterpretation, misremembering or 'glossing over' by the researcher.

3.10 Piloting the Questionnaire

Burns and Grove (2001) describe a pilot study as a smaller version of the proposed study, which provides a trial run before embarking on the actual study. The function of a pilot study is to test the adequacy of the research design so that problems can be rectified in advance of the actual study. Baird (2000) emphasises the importance of pilot studies in supporting and enhancing the main study. All data-gathering instruments should be piloted to test how long it takes recipients to complete them, to elucidate that all questions and instructions are clear and to enable the removal of any items which do not yield usable data (Bell, 2005).

Having surveyed the relevant literature a draft schedule of questions was drawn up, and feasibility interviews were carried out in an informal setting with three first-year students who were pursuing studies similar to those who had been invited to participate in the study. These three pilot interview participants did not participate in the subsequent study. This had the added advantage of giving the researcher experience of conducting interviews (Cormack, 2000). At the end of the interviews the researcher asked the interviewees a number of questions relating to the interview process regarding the length of the interview, timing and clarity of questions and suggestions to improve the interview process. All three students reported being happy with the questions asked and reported that the questions were clear and concise and needed no further elaboration.

However, they all agreed that they would like to have had the opportunity to give their overall comments at the end of the interview on issues that were important for them.

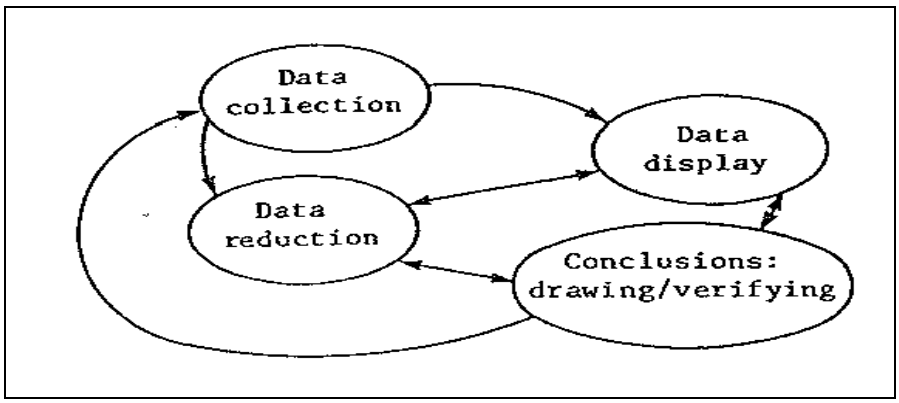
The main message the researcher got from the pilot was that if she provided space and time at the end of the interview, for respondents to identify issues that had not been covered, that the quality of the overall interview and her ability to access the lived experience of the respondents would be enhanced.

It was as a result of this insight derived from the pilot process that the researcher decided to include a final question "Is there anything else you would like to say to me today. Something that maybe we did not cover that you feel is important for you?" Also one interviewee suggested that the researcher should talk informally about the study in advance of the tape being switched on, so she also incorporated this approach into the interviews.

3.11 Data Analysis Framework

The data analysis process was interpretive in nature and was informed by Huberman and Miles (1994) framework for analysis. This conceptual framework acknowledges the social nature of knowledge and seeks to understand it by discovering explanations for it.

The analytical framework offered by Huberman and Miles (1994) includes what they define as three sub-processes namely data reduction data display and conclusion drawing. Data reduction for this research meant gaining coherence of all the data collected this included summarising the data, thematically coding them, identifying the emergent themes and clustering them together. The researcher used content analysis in order to do this (more fully explained on p. 52). Data display included more focused presentation of the data which according to Huberman and Miles (1994, p. 429) "includes structured summary synopsis, vignettes …" as was done in this case. Conclusion drawing was the final stage and involved pulling out the most meaningful themes, analysing them and drawing conclusions. These conclusions were also informed by what published literature in the field had to offer on each theme. In this way the data is transformed "as information is condensed, clustered, sorted and linked" (ibid).



Components of Data Analysis: Interactive Model (Miles and Huberman, 1994 p. 429)

According to Saunders et al (2003), the capturing and analysis of qualitative data is a demanding process. The most time-consuming part of the work involves transcribing the interviews verbatim from the recordings. These complete transcripts gave accurate and rich data (Silverman, 2000). Polit and Hungler (1999) define qualitative data analysis as the arrangement and examination of non-numeric information in order to discern vital categories and themes. The purpose of data analysis is to impose some order on the large body of information so that conclusions can be reached and a report compiled (Polit and Hungler, 1999).

The researcher transcribed the data from the individual semi-structured interviews and checked the transcriptions against the tapes for accuracy. Morse and Field (1996) suggest that theory does not emerge from the data without immersion, complete familiarity with the data and active intellectual work. As the researcher listened to and transcribed the data collected she found herself becoming very familiar with the content and was able to reflect more deeply on the statements made by each respondent. The researcher repeatedly listened to the audiotapes and read the transcriptions noting the significant issues being communicated and the similarities and differences being voiced (Smith, Jarman and Osborn, 1999). Thematic coding was employed for the data analysis. Through this process key themes began to emerge that formed the basis of her analysis.

3.12 Development of Themes

Thematic analysis can be used to *'to unpick or unravel'* (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 81) key dimensions of people's lived experiences in relation to a particular phenomenon – in this case, academic writing. A theme represents some level of pattern or meaning in data (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 82), such as prevalence or 'keyness' with respect to the research question.

'*Applying thematic analysis to the whole data set enables the reader to get a sense of important themes through rich thematic description. This is a useful method for an under-researched area or for participants whose views on the topic are not known'* (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 83).

Braun and Clarke (2006) discuss an approach to thematic analysis where the analyst looks for patterns of meaning, issues of potential interest across the whole data set. This gives a coherent account of the whole story that the data tells within and across themes. They suggest that researchers embed extracts within an analytical narrative that go '*beyond description of the data and makes an argument in relation to your research question'* Braun and Clarke (2006), p.77-101. In this approach to thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006) argue the researcher plays an active role in identifying themes, selecting those of interest and reporting them. This approach to thematic analysis was used for the study.

Once transcribed the transcripts were read and re-read in order to identify emergent themes. This reading was done bearing in mind the research objectives and the insights gained from the review of the relevant literature. Therefore, themes that related to the research objectives were identified and were clustered together to form the main themes which best reflected the voices of the participants.

3.12.1 Content Analysis

Content analysis was instrumental in identifying the frequency of these themes. In content analysis the researcher identifies a set of categories that emerge from the data and then counts the number of instances that fall into each category (Silverman,

2001). This was useful in supporting a more coherent and structured data analysis. Simple counting techniques can offer a means to survey the whole dataset which can sometimes be lost in intensive, qualitative research. Some qualitative theorists argue that content analysis can be excessively reductionistic and can strip meaning from more holistic, intuitive and qualitative approaches (see for example Kracauer, 1953). However, many others have shown, and I too have found, that content analysis can supplement, enrich and extend understandings of data that are gathered and explored using an interpretative framework. Content analysis can also add to the intuitive and loosely formulated interpretations derived using more firmly qualitative methodologies, (see for example Denzin and Lincoln 1994). In the case of this research, the content analysis facilitated the development of a firmer, verifiable sense of the frequency of the emergent themes and served to confirm and to quantify those observed patterns and themes that seemed to resonate most frequently with the participants. This very much aided my understanding of the importance and emphasis that the participants seemed to place on the issues relevant to their experiences with academic writing. The themes that emerged will be discussed in the findings section.

3.12.2 Specific approach used to summarise and aggregate features of change over time

The content analysis in this research focused on identifying and quantifying key themes that are fully explained in the results section. The analysis pursued an intensive observation of the differences in respondents' perceptions, experiences and orientations between 'time 1' and 'time 2'. So for example, if a respondent reported lack of writing motivation in time 1, and similarly reported a lack of writing motivation in time 2, then this observation was assigned a '0' code – broadly indicating no change from one time period of the study to the next. However, where a respondent reported that for example, their main focus when writing in time 1 was on survival, and that in time 2, their main focus was performance, that indicated a positive change (based on what the literature on academic writing defines as competence development) and was assigned a '+' code within its category.

Where for example a respondent reported being confused, say by referencing conventions in time 1, and then subsequently reported even more confusion about this aspect of writing in time 2, this was assigned a '-' code within its category indicating a negative change (in this instance relating to skills and knowledge) over time. Where a change was observed, but where it was deemed impossible to evaluate that change as either positive or negative (say for example the respondent talked about a change in writing strategy that may or may not lead to positive outcomes or the development of competency), then this type of change was assigned a 'Δ' code in order to indicate change without an evaluative dimension. Of course there were parts of the data that were much easier to code than others. As with all attempts to reduce qualitative data to coded categories and measurements, this was not a completely exact or utterly precise process. However it did allow me to apply an objective frame to the interpretation of this data and to contain and track important dimensions of the large amount of messy, unstructured evidence that had been gathered and that comprised many uniquely articulated insights.

3.13 Ethical Considerations and 'insider research'

It is very important to behave in an ethical way, no matter what type of research you are conducting. Human beings should not experience research as participants that damages them or compromises them in any way. The researcher has considered the ethical issues in this research study very carefully. In any kind of research involving human subjects and information of a personal nature, it is vital that the highest ethical standards are adhered to. The issue of 'informed consent' is one of the key ethical principles to be considered when carrying out research with human subjects.

> *"[the principle of informed consent] means that prospective research participants should be given as much information as might be needed to make an informed decision about whether or not they wish to participate in a study"* (Bryman and Bell 2003, p.542).

Parahoo (1997) synthesised six ethical principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, fidelity, justice, veracity and confidentiality into four rights;

- the right to full disclosure,
- the right to self-determination,
- the right to non-maleficence
- the right to privacy anonymity and confidentiality.

Permission was sought through the completion of an ethics form and its submission to the ethics committee at the University of Strathclyde (Appendix D). At the outset the confidentiality of the process was emphasised. This reassurance was essential in facilitating an open and candid interaction during the interview process. All participants were most generous with their time and replied to questions in a spontaneous and straightforward manner. Each individual was asked the same questions outlined in the interview schedule, but, as outline above, the semi structured nature of the interviews also provided opportunities for probing, prompting and elaborating based on their own individual and sometimes unique, experiences (See Appendix A). Each interview was preceded with an explanation of the research and the areas of interest. In all cases the respondents were reminded that they were under no obligation to proceed, but in all cases they reported that they were happy to go ahead with the interviews. As outlined earlier, participants' permission was also sought and secured to audio-tape the interviews. Each person was offered a copy of his/her tape. The researcher sought and received permission to use participant quotes for future research, conferences and publications. Interview tapes were transcribed and stored on a memory stick. Tapes, memory sticks and interview transcripts were numbered, dated and stored in a safe place. To ensure anonymity none of the participants' names or addresses was recorded on stored material. Analysis commenced at the outset of the data collection. Final conclusions were deferred until all data had been analysed.

3.14 Insider-research

Clegg (2003) notes that higher education research is overwhelmingly insider research: The researcher carries out a study in the setting in which they work and the study is concerned with the nature of that work.

Robson (2002) identifies the role as that of practitioner-researcher and discusses both the advantages and disadvantages of the role.

In this study the researcher was a member of staff at the Centre for Teaching and Learning in the University of Limerick. There are advantages: it is practical to research the work setting. The context of the study and the history and development of the research setting was known to her and access to first-year students was straightforward.

However, Oliver (2003) identifies the ambiguity present in the multiple roles of insider research and suggests some possible strategies for coping with multiple roles in the research context. Robson (2002) concurs and suggests that knowledge of confidential information obtained through research can affect working relationships with colleagues and it questions the objectivity of the researcher, given the relationship between the researcher, the participants and the institution. Mercer (2007, p.6) identifies the issues of access, intrusiveness, familiarity and rapport for insider-researchers. Rooney (2005, p.9) notes the lack of time for insider-researchers, as the research competes with the daily demands of employment.

The researcher took into consideration some of these drawbacks when conducting this research. Her role was not one of teacher of any students and she had not met any of these students prior to conducting the research. Thus many of the rapport and familiarity related deficiencies of insider research were not relevant in this case.

However, she was aware that as an official employee of the University with a strong learner support role, her position may have made some of the respondents feel implicitly obliged to participate.

This is why it was particularly important for her to underline and re-emphasise the voluntary and confidential nature of the process and to ensure that respondents were fully aware that there would be no negative consequences either of participating or not participating. In this way she was satisfied that any residual risks associated with insider research were minimised.

3.15 Limitations

Convenience sampling was chosen for practical and access- related reasons. The researcher was aware of the disadvantage of this sampling technique in that it will be impossible to identify how representative the information collected from this sample is to the population as a whole (Morse and Field, 1996). Selecting participants from two or more sites would have increased the potential diversity. On the other hand, the researcher believed that convenience sampling was an adequate source of data given the exploratory nature of this study. The information collected provided valuable insights into the experiences of this particular set of first-year students with their early academic writing tasks.

There are recognised limitations associated with using interviews as a method of data collection. Walker (1983, p.155-165) suggests that 'people find it difficult to break out of the constraints of telling you what they think you want, or ought to know'. Another limitation is that people are not always able to express their thoughts and ideas clearly, accurately or in readily accessible ways.

Other issues relevant to the study were informant bias and interview reciprocity (Mercer, 2007). There is no doubt that the participants were aware of the researcher's interest in first-year student academic writing. However, the interview questions were open-ended to enable the participants to say what they though rather than what they thought the researcher wanted to hear.

She was aware of interview reciprocity and at times did share her own experience with the participants which is something that she thought enhanced rapport and created a sense of empathy between her and the respondents, but the use of the semi-structured interview and her careful adherence to a focus on their experience through the use of questioning helped her to minimise this.

It is also entirely possible that the findings that this research has uncovered, particularly with respect to the changes observed in writing experiences and orientations may have occurred for reasons that relate to a) research effects (i.e. my own research interventions, questions and attention given to participants could have given rise to a more reflective and deliberate approach on the part of the participants, which could have enhanced their writing related experiences and strategies). Or b) overall adaptation and adjustment to their new environment (i.e. that as students acclimatise to a university environment, more specific skills and competencies including those relating to academic writing also improve). Both these possible reasons are implicit in parts of my discussion, and both of them should be considered as important possibilities.

3.16 Summary

In this chapter the methodological design and related issues have been discussed in some detail. It has presented the method used to gather data to answer the research questions identified from the literature. The rationale for the study has been discussed and I have explored how the process unfolded. The nature of the data gathered and the approach to analysis were discussed. The ethical considerations observed in the study have been identified and explained. In the next chapter the data gathered is analysed and discussed.

Chapter 4: FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction and Context

This chapter provides a descriptive outline of the key themes, insights, ideas and experiences that interviewed students invoked when the primary research for this thesis was being gathered. Chapters Five and Six proceed with more analytical and interpretive treatment of the data. To anchor the analysis, the function of this current chapter is to give an overview of the general writing-related experiences reported by the respondents – with a focus on their first writing assignment - and the kinds of specific themes and insights that they talked about when asked to reflect on and explain their perspectives on academic writing.

While this chapter does engage in some descriptions and explorations of changes in respondents' writing orientation over the short time frame between the two sets of interviews, the subsequent chapters engage in much more analytical comparisons of the two different time periods during which students were interviewed. This chapter presents a treatment of the qualitative data by collecting and presenting the general themes and issues that seem to be most important to the respondents, and in doing that, it attempts to provide a descriptive basis for the subsequent analysis.

To review briefly: The nine undergraduate students that participated in this research were interviewed during the early weeks of their first semester at university. The first set of interviews was conducted with these participants in November and December of 2005. During the interviews, a semi-structured format was adopted with each respondent being asked a set number of questions, but also being encouraged to elaborate, expand and develop their responses based on what they perceived to be the most important issues from their perspectives. Participants were re-interviewed during the beginning of their second semester at university using the same interview process and framework. The second set of interviews took place between the 23rd of February '06 and the 6th of March '06.

This chapter will outline, describe and organise the key subjective issues that students discussed during their interviews.

The chapter will also highlight many of the wider adjustment-related issues that respondents discussed during the course of the interviews. It shows that at least for this group of respondents, challenges associated with academic writing cannot necessarily be disentangled from other. The issues that students face may be associated more generally with their adaptation to university life and to the often radically new learning and life, dynamics that they need to adopt in order to have a positive experience at University.

So, while exploring their experiences with academic writing, the research findings also touch on a variety of adjustment related dynamics.

4.2 Brief demographic descriptions of each of the nine interviewees

Respondent 1: Anne

Anne is a direct entry student from second level education in a rural school setting. She said she loves writing and felt it came naturally to her and was always writing short stories and had always wanted to be a journalist. She had worked very hard for her leaving cert exams and had achieved an A2 in English and also an A2 in History. She felt she enjoyed her writing more when she was writing on a topic that she was interested in and mentioned an essay she had completed on 'Body Language' where she had received top marks.

Respondent 2: Eileen

Eileen is a female mature student who had worked in the bank for a few years, but then gave up her job to stay at home and care for her three children. When her children got older she decided she wanted to go back into full time education and complete a degree course. She did not want to go back into banking and wanted a complete career change, so she decided to complete an Arts degree. She had to commute sixty miles return journey each day to attend the university and she was finding this very stressful.

Respondent 3: Mary

Mary is an undergraduate student in her first-year at university having recently completed her Leaving Certificate. She is the first in her family to pursue third level education and is from a small rural area in Co Clare. She is excited, yet apprehensive, about attending university and living away from home for the first time. She is very worried that she will not complete the first-year at college, as to-date she is finding it extremely stressful. She described her shock on her first day with the volume of students that were walking around the campus

Respondent 4: Deirdre

Deirdre is a first-year student who has recently completed her leaving certificate and is passionate about pursuing a career in journalism. She hated to admit how overwhelmed she felt during the orientation week and the welcome sessions. She had always been at the top of her class in secondary school, and her parents have high expectations of her success at university. She is feeling confused about the requirements of the essays and does not understand what actually constitutes plagiarism let alone what the difference is between the MLA and Harvard Referencing systems. She has no idea whom she should ask or what her questions are, other than to say she does not understand. This has resulted in feelings of inadequacy, so she has decided to keep her confusion to herself.

Respondent 5 Patricia

Patricia had been inspired by her English teacher and had received an A in her Leaving Cert English paper. She loves writing and is really excited about her choice of study at university and is determined to succeed in her studies. She spoke about the difference in standard between leaving certificate and university and expressed how shocked she was with the difference.

Respondent 6: Marie

Marie is a mature student. She is 56 years old, married, the mother of four children and working part-time. Prior to this, her education ceased when she completed her Leaving Certificate. She described getting a job and getting married as being the focus of her twenties and thirties, but she also indicated that deep within she had always wished to pursue further education. The increase in profile of mature students returning to university provided the encouragement for her to finally make the decision to return to education. She decided to pursue a Humanities degree, focusing specifically on Literature and English. The return to education was extremely daunting for her, and she encountered several difficulties during the transition, including her confidence in her writing abilities. The use of academic terminology was her greatest anxiety.

Respondent 7: Paul

Paul is a 31 year old mature student, currently not working and receiving a disability allowance due to poor health. He decided to return to full-time education. He suffers from ongoing health issues that prevented him from attending university when he left secondary school. However, currently his health is under control, and he takes daily medication. His passion is writing and music, and he currently plays the guitar and is involved in a band in his hometown. He describes himself as very creative and writes many songs. He is very involved in the music scene. However, it was always his desire to return to education. His father, who had returned to education as a mature student and completed a Psychology degree, particularly inspired and motivated him to pursue his dream.

Respondent 8: Ruth

Ruth is a mature student who finished second level education in 1979 after completing her Leaving Certificate. At that stage she did not have the confidence to attend university, as the perception of the time was you became a teacher, got a job in the bank or got married. Ruth completed a secretarial course and started working with a small accountancy firm in her local town, and after three years, she left to get married and raised her family of two girls and one boy. Ruth always had a deep desire to return to formal education, and so after 25 years away from study she decided to attend the University of Limerick and completed the Access Course, which is designed to help mature students' transition back into formal education. Having successfully completed this course she decided to return full time to university and pursue an Arts degree, specialising in English.

Respondent 9: Gerard

Gerard has recently done his leaving certificate, and for as long as he can remember, he wanted to do a course in Sports Science and English at the University of Limerick. He is heavily involved in all types of sports, but particularly hurling. He played hurling for his local team and also for his school team. He had won a county medal for under 16 with his local team and had won the Inter Colleges Cup with his school. He wants to teach sport in second level education and is so excited now that he is finally getting the opportunity to pursue his dream. He says he has always liked English essay writing in school and has decided to take English as his elective subject. He is the oldest in his family, and so the first to attend university. He expressed that having finally arrived on campus he is finding the experience very daunting. He feels a lot of pressure on his shoulders to succeed and set a good example to his younger siblings, and he is finding this very stressful.

So, this chapter pulls out some of the important key themes that respondents talked about in relation to their academic writing.

4.3 Part 1: A focus on initial writing orientations, perceptions on 'voice' and guidance and time management strategies

4.3.1 Introduction

While evidence from both phases of interviews is presented, the emphasis of part 1 of this chapter lies more on the first set of interviews and in particular it focuses on the issues that concerned students from the beginning of their writing-related experience. By focusing on the perceptions and perspectives that students brought with them from their previous educational or professional contexts, I hoped that I would be able to shed light on how important these contexts are in helping us to understand why students sometimes find academic writing challenging, confusing and difficult.

The key themes explored in part 1 of this chapter are:

Section 1

- Respondents' personal contexts and experiences with writing
- Respondents' early sense of confidence and competence relating to academic writing
- General feelings about writing

Section 2

- The importance to respondents of receiving parameters, guidance and instruction
- The frustration that sometimes comes with academic constraints and requirements
- The role of feedback

Section 3

- Perspectives on respondents' own sense of their 'voice' and their opinion in academic writing within this particular context

Section 4

- Personal strategies relating to time management, achieving focus and initiating and maintaining motivation

4.4 Section 1: Personal contexts and new beginnings: competence, confidence and general feelings about writing

There was a very strong sense that students felt they were embarking on something very new and very challenging when they talked about their first academic writing task. It may be that the writing task itself was simply enmeshed with all of the challenges required for effective adjustment to university life. But certainly there seemed to be an overall perception that academic writing was difficult and

complicated and that they felt the focus they would have to adopt was going to require a lot of energy and hard work. When embarking on their first writing task, respondents talked about feeling low levels of confidence, about being afraid of looking stupid, about worries associated with 'the rules' of academic writing and about trying to 'muddle' through and hope for the best even though they weren't sure whether their writing was good enough.

Anne reported that she was not at all confident in terms of what was expected of her. She said she felt very nervous, as the standard of writing was so completely different from her previous experience with writing. She talked about her previous second-level experience and mentioned that before university, she was not expected to have done research. She spoke about the difficulties of keeping motivated especially when you are new and trying to find your way around and particularly when all her essays were due in at the same time. She also stated that she was worried about the standard that was expected at university. She felt she still wrote 'like a second level student' and not a third level student but did not know how to make this leap:

> *"I wrote my first draft of an essay and I think it sounded like a leaving cert essay and I know they don't want that so I don't know how to make it sound like a third level essay. I have just been so used to writing like a second level student so it's hard to change your standard all of a sudden".*

Eileen also talked about her previous experience with writing and the notion that she was at the bottom of a very steep learning curve. She talked about feeling at a disadvantage from the beginning, due to the length of time it had been since she had attended school. She felt added pressure of not wanting to appear stupid in front of the other students and the lecturers. She said she was not confident with having to complete and submit essays in a formal academic way.

Mary said that that while she 'loved' writing essays and had always achieved good results in second level, she found essay writing in university 'so completely different'.

It seems that from the outset, she was aware that there were substantial differences between writing at school and now, being expected to write at university. She was able to point out some specific ways in which those differences manifested themselves. She lamented the fact that her essays were not personal anymore, and that now she was expected to 'present an argument and provide references'. This she said was a total change for her and she was finding it 'very weird'.

Eileen talked about the challenge as being difficult, partly because she felt she had to do it on her own:

'..it's a lot more like you have to figure it out for yourself. You have to think about it yourself, which is obviously what you are supposed to do. But it's a big change".

Patricia talked about how difficult she *thought* the writing challenge was going to be, but that quickly, she surprised herself with what she was able to do and achieve. She did say that when she came to university she thought that everyone was going to be so much better than she was. However, she soon realised that everyone was feeling the same as she was. So she did not feel so alone.

Marie had worked for various voluntary organisations and had written to the local papers on their behalf on many occasions. She stated that this was her very first experience with academic writing. She did not feel confident in her ability to produce an academic piece of writing and was very concerned in particular, about her sense that her vocabulary was limited; something that she felt was a disadvantage for her. While many of the respondents noted very positive changes in their writing orientations between the two time frames of the interviews (for more analysis of the differences between interview timeframes, see chapter 5), Marie continued to experience difficulties with her vocabulary and still found this time consuming, when she had to research academic terminology to express herself:

> *"Because I have not read a lot I find that my vocabulary is very limited. I spend so much time with the dictionary in my hand looking up words and*

trying to replace ordinary words with more academic ones, but it takes so long".

Marie also voiced her view about her inability to use academic words in her writing. She felt her vocabulary was very limited, and she had to spend so much time on the Internet thesaurus typing in a word to find similar more academic phrases to use. She found this frustrating, as it took up so much of her time, but she felt the expectation was there from lecturers that if you did not use academic terminology you would not get good results:

"I have the ideas and I know what I want to say but I am finding this academic approach so difficult at the moment. No one tells you how to get around it."

Ruth talked about the major difficulties she felt she faced with her grammar and spelling, and this had always been an issue for her, even when she was in primary and second level education. Ruth wondered if she would survive four years in university:

"Getting it down on paper and spelling and grammar are major barriers for me. I mean I just don't get the grammar. I know I should".

She also talked about the issues of confidence and also referred to the importance of motivation. She said that she needed to be motivated to write, but felt her lack of confidence in her ability as a writer was holding her back. She talked about constantly doubting herself and her ability and felt this arose from her time in second level education. Even after the second interview, she still reported not having confidence in her writing abilities but by then, she had identified the possibility that she might be dyslexic – (All three of her children were dyslexics). She said that she had been tested for it, but the results showed her as marginal. She had been advised to let her lecturers know the situation. This particular issue was causing her a lot of concern and stress, and she was finding it difficult to deal with.

It seemed to contribute strongly to low levels of writing confidence:

> *"I have to be motivated to write and I suppose it doesn't help that I have no confidence in my ability to write - the self-doubt is constantly in my head".*

So when asked about their writing orientations and perspectives at the beginning of the process, almost all respondents mentioned the issue of confidence and recognised that the writing they had done in previous contexts was substantially different from the writing challenges they faced now.

4.4.1 Writing and enjoyment

When asked whether they liked writing, almost all of the participants expressed their love of writing and how they wanted to pursue careers in journalism. Confidence in their writing was an issue discussed by all the participants during the interviews. Seven of the participants stated that they were lacking in confidence concerning their writing and their concerns included being nervous, a feeling of struggling, finding writing more complicated, a sense of having no guidance, not knowing what was expected of them, a belief that this task involved some challenging transition for them. However, all of these students when interviewed again during the second semester expressed the view that their confidence had improved in relation to their writing. Several reasons were given for this and they included *'understanding what is expected', 'changed my way of writing', paying more attention in tutorials and doing the recommended reading', and 'understand now I need to substantiate and elaborate'.* One of the students expressed his confidence during both interviews, and this level of confidence had not changed. Another student stated during both interviews that he was not confident about his writing.

> *"I took a strange angle on one of my essays and I ended up getting an A2 in it. So that gave me confidence to say, well I'm glad that they like to hear some one give a different opinion. So I don't mind at all.*

The way I see it if you have enough evidence to back up your argument then you can't really go wrong."

"I've actually gotten used to the way of writing. I really enjoy it now. It is very easy to kind of adapt to it after a while. I wrote the first essay and I thought it's not going to be any good at all and I got an A1. So I was very delighted then so it's been easy to actually change my way of writing now."

The students whose confidence had improved from the first semester reported that this was a result of feedback on their writing and having achieved good grades in their exams.

What was also notable, was how often the respondents mentioned how much they liked writing, and certainly how much they had enjoyed writing in previous educational or other contexts. Some talked about their 'passion' and 'love' for writing. Others said it was always something they had been very good at doing. Patricia reported for example that she loved writing, was confident with her approach to it and did not have a problem with showing it to her peers for comment. Deirdre talked about her 'keen interest' in writing and about how she wanted to pursue a career in journalism. Marie said that she loved to write and particularly enjoyed writing when she had a belief in and passion for what she was writing about. Paul said that he always loved writing. He said that writing had always come naturally to him, and since he was fourteen he had been reading Freud and Beckett, which was more natural for him to do than look at television.

The love of writing was not extinguished by their early experiences with academically challenging writing tasks, despite some of the new and different skills they had to develop. Many of them had maintained a positive orientation towards writing over the timeframe of their first academic writing task, and many of them felt that their competence and versatility had developed in very positive ways.

So for this particular group of students - possibly related to the programme choices they had in common - writing as a general notion was something that they had at least some strong, general and positive feelings about. However, their own sense of competence and ability in navigating the challenges of academic writing in their new academically challenging environment was something they were generally much less sure about, particularly at the early stages of their time at university. Respondents were aware that there were some significant and sometimes problematic differences between the writing they had done in previous contexts and the writing they were expected to do now. These were the kinds of perspectives and experiences they articulated, particularly (but not exclusively) during the first phase of interviews (again for a detailed analysis of the differences between 'time 1' and 'time 2' interviews, see chapter five).

It has often been noted that people tend to feel strongly about writing in general and about writing tasks in particular (e.g. Elbow, 2005). This group of respondents reflected that observation in their preliminary statements and discussions about their perspectives on writing.

4.4 Section 2: The importance of parameters, guidance and instruction – along with the frustration of constraint

The dependence on guidance for most of the respondents seems at this early stage in their higher education experience, to be extremely strong. Some express the importance of instruction in extreme and dramatic terms:

"*If they tell me I have to sit in the courtyard and polish the stones with a tooth brush to get my degree then that is what I will do*". (Paul)

While Anne had not been told what was expected of her, but from her grades she felt she had to be doing something right.

"It was very annoying as I was never really told how to do it I just had to learn by myself so I must have gotten it right given my results though it would have been

better if they were a bit more clear about what they wanted I wouldn't have stressed so".

Eileen said that she found it extremely difficult not knowing what was expected of her when she submitted an assignment, as she had received absolutely no guidelines to assist her:

"So I am at a point where I'm submitting an essay having had to go through that Broadview book myself and figure out what was expected of me in the way to lay out an essay and bibliography and referencing and all that, and it has been a struggle for me".

Eileen talked a lot about not knowing what was expected and what the standard of writing was, and this was proving difficult for her. In discussions about the rules of writing during the second interview Eileen stated that it would have been so beneficial for her if there had been some guidance on referencing prior to handing in her first piece of academic work.

Marie expressed her frustration at trying to complete a piece of academic writing and not knowing which approach to take. Anne provided considerable detail about the challenges associated with certain specific activities, such as identifying and using sources to back up her argument were things that she said she found very difficult to get used to.

She also mentioned her particular struggle with having to stick to a word count limit and felt that she was not able to present an argument within the limited word count that had been specified. (She had been asked to complete three A4 pages of an essay and this included the footnoting and had been told that if anyone went over this requirement their essays would not be marked). With this limit, she felt she would not be able to include a good constructive argument in the essay and not go over the requirement.

Eileen found her experienced lack of guidance on some of the basic rules of academic writing to have been very stressful and frustrating:

"The big issue for me is having to hand in an essay with absolutely no guidance on the bibliography and how to do that".

Mary expressed disappointment with not having received any assistance or guidance about the rules of writing. She found referencing very difficult and was not aware of this concept prior to university. She stated that she felt having to adhere to all these rules took the pleasure and creativity away from her writing:

"It takes the creativity out of the writing because you have all these little ... things you have to do. It is not just write the piece and enjoy your writing. It's write the piece and make sure you go by all these rules".

Several of the respondents wondered why they were expected to use so many different formats, such as footnotes for history, Harvard for English and MLA for media studies, and felt it would have been easier if they had just used one referencing system.

So students described finding it very difficult to ascertain what was expected of them with regard to structure and content when they handed in their first piece of writing. Some students mentioned the fact that they would love to see an example essay and understand how the grading process worked. Students commented on the lack of guidance about what content to include and the fact that university essays required independent thinking and that students had a greater freedom to interpret questions to seek out appropriate sources and to create their own arguments. This concept was new to them and had not been fully explained.

Students struggled to acquire 'academic literacy' and felt like they were trying to learn a game, but had not been told the rules. Read, Francis and Robson (2001) also reported this finding, stating that academic conventions are not made explicit for students.

4.4.1 The role of feedback on writing as an essential dimension of guidance in the early stages:

A particular dimension of writing-related guidance is the role of feedback on writing and its impact on academic writing. The following findings explore respondents' views and experiences associated with feedback on their writing:

When she was interviewed during the second semester Mary highlighted that even when she did well, she wanted feedback explaining to her how she had achieved this:

> *"Getting feedback is very important for me. Even when I do well I want to know why".*

Deirdre explained that the higher the stakes for an assignment, the more important it was to receive face-to-face feedback She suggests that written feedback is not as valuable as face-to-face feedback. Even by the second interview, she reported that she had not received a lot of feedback to date, and what she had was in very brief written format. She would have preferred receiving more detailed feedback that would help her to understand what she had done right and what she had done wrong in her work. Patricia was very positive about receiving constructive feedback and valued it as an opportunity to learn more about her writing. Like Deirdre, she also expressed a preference for receiving oral as opposed to written feedback. Marie talked about how both verbal and written feedback was useful in helping her to improve and to learn.

Paul did not express a preference for written or oral feedback but he did describe how useful a particular piece of feedback had been on a written a piece for which he had not received a good mark.

He said when it was explained to him, he could see exactly where he had gone wrong with this piece of writing and described the feedback as 'like gold to me'.

Similarly, Ruth explained that receiving feedback on her written work felt like the only possible way she could learn and set herself new goals for the future and that feedback on writing was critical for her learning.

Gerard related an experience with his lecturer who had written that a certain paragraph was too 'clunky'. Gerard had no idea what this meant. He stated that receiving constructive feedback was a very positive experience for him, and he could see where he had to make improvements. What did affect his confidence was receiving feedback that he did not understand:

> *"How can I improve if I don't understand the technical jargon they use when giving me written feedback on my essay. That is what has affected my confidence so far, is the fact of not understanding the feedback".*

A lot of the data in this section seems to point to an interesting tension here that has been noted also in previous literature (e.g. Murray and Moore 2006). The need that students experience for clear and precise instruction about the rules and requirements of academic writing seems to be extremely important and extremely strong. On the other hand, the constraints and restrictions that such instructions imply also create a sense of challenge for many of the respondents. Students need to know for example what the word limit for a piece of writing will be so that they can stay within that limit. However, a word limit also imposes other requirements – such as brevity and the need to condense arguments often more tightly than they might be comfortable with doing. This is just one example of how clear guidance can confront students comfort zones and writing habits in ways that tend to make them feel uncertain and even anxious, particularly at the early stages of their academic writing tasks.

4.4 Section 3: Perspectives on the students' own 'voices' in academic writing – perspectives on finding the place for their own ideas

Anne also recounted her confidence in expressing her own opinion in her academic writing, and she felt this was important, as she wanted to pursue a career in journalism. She did not feel that she was confident in giving her own opinion in her work. She felt that lecturers were not interested in hearing opinions. They only wanted work that referred to other different authors or different articles to show that you had done research. She also said how her lecturers had emphasised totally the whole area around plagiarism so much, so that she now felt afraid to write down anything:

> *"I am almost afraid to write anything down because anything you write down has to come from somewhere. You have to be influenced by it from something you have read somewhere along the way, so I could be plagiarising".*

Eileen was still very conscious that she might inadvertently plagiarise and continued to be worried about this:

> *"Yes it's something I would always be conscious of. I would still have that fear in my mind, just afraid that someone will look at it and go, 'you are not saying this it's not your opinion. You got it from someone else".*

Mary noted that she was confident in presenting her own opinions in her work and looked forwarded to comments from her lecturers on this. During the second interview she reported that this continued to be the case, and she was very confident in presenting her own opinions and was not worried if her audience agreed with her or not.

Deirdre described that she was confident with presenting her own opinions in her writing. She continued to maintain this confidence and explained how in her essays she would always argue her own opinion and back this up with references.

Patricia reported that she had no problems with grammar, but was less confident in presenting her own opinion in her writing. She stated that the standard was so high in university. For her there was much more at stake now when submitting a piece of writing. During the second interview, Patricia stated that she was still confident with her grammar but remained cautious about presenting her own opinion in her writing:

> "*I would be less confident with the whole thing of plagiarism because you don't know if what you are saying is original or not, and I could have used something I thought was original but my lecturer could say it was not. Then I would be in trouble".*

During the preliminary interviews in the 1st Semester, some students reported that even though the emphasis on plagiarism had been stressed to them at every opportunity as is evident from this quote.

> *"Apart from 'thou shall not kill', this has been drummed into our heads as the next most important commandment".*

However, the students felt that the relationship between plagiarism and correct referencing was not fully apparent, and they were worried that they could plagiarise unknowingly. All of the students expressed anxieties about plagiarism, as they were unclear about what actually constituted plagiarism, with being simultaneously concerned about correct protocols in how to acknowledge the authority of academic texts. Their overriding concerns were that the texts they read were authoritative and that they as students had little else useful to contribute. They reported that they were confused about the conventions of referencing and what was most difficult was having to use two different referencing systems.

In their English Literature class, they were asked to use the MLA referencing system, and in their history class, they were asked to use the Harvard referencing system. The students complained that they had received no help or guidance in using either system and stated that it would have been extremely beneficial if they had received a tutorial on the conventions of referencing. One student reported that she was very stressed and concerned about handing in an essay worth 40% of the course grade without having had this help. Students also commented on the fact that they had not received any guidance on how to compile a bibliography and were finding this very difficult to do.

All of the students commented on the fact that prior to arriving at university they were not aware of the existence of the conventions of plagiarism, referencing and bibliographies. They reported that life would have been so much easier for them if these aspects had been covered in the earlier stages of the semester. These findings concur with the research of Lea and Street (1998). Their study revealed that first-year students were not only confused about the conventions for referencing, but more importantly, they found it difficult to understand the implicit relationship between acknowledging the source of the text and acknowledging the authority of the text. When interviewed again during the second semester most students reported that they were confident that they had come to understand what plagiarism meant and how to avoid it.

Marie said that one of the things she had learned was that the lecturers did not want to know your opinion. They just wanted you to present an argument and discuss this and backing your discussion up with references from experts in the area. She did say she enjoyed and was confident in giving her opinion in tutorials, but that the written format was very different:

> *"I always feel a bit inferior when I am surrounded by academics because they are so well educated. I am very anxious about the way I speak. If I was in a room with rich people it would not bother me, but if it was well educated people I would feel very inferior".*

Paul noted that even though he currently had no academic qualification he was very confident in presenting his opinion in his writing. When interviewed again during the second semester Paul stated that he was a little more confident in relation to the use of grammar because of the exam results, but felt he was in a very similar situation to the first interview. He also reported that he was still very confident in presenting his own opinion in his academic writing:

> *"I would be very confident about it again I would be egotistical about it I don't have the academic qualifications but I have done a lot in my thirty odd years so the only thing I have is my opinion so I would have no problem in putting my opinion in my work".*

Eileen said that she was not confident about expressing her own opinion in her work:

> *"Sometimes I lack confidence in my own opinion about something. I spend too long at looking at it from different ways, or I think something about it or I'd have an opinion about it, and I think that's not necessarily in line with everyone else's opinion, and maybe I should look at it from the other side. But you see it's just a lack of confidence in my own opinion about it to actually put that down on paper and go with it".*

Mary stated that, for her, not being able to give her own opinions and not being able to use the word 'I' was one barrier for her. She found essay writing in university was focused on analysing, evaluating, and referencing, and this had taken the fun out of her writing.

Patricia stated that her class had been made aware of plagiarism and how serious it was. She said at every opportunity lecturers were telling them about this.

This comment from Gerard also reflects a sense of uncertainty and anxiousness about the place of his own voice alongside his fears of accidental plagiarism:

> *"We have been informed about the implications of plagiarism, but we have been told nothing about referencing, so I am afraid I could do it [plagiarise] accidentally. I have a piece of work to hand in this week, and I don't know how to do the referencing".*

He also talked about the sense of being daunted by the expertise of others:

> *"At this stage I don't think I would be confident enough to give my own opinion in my writing. I find it very daunting, as the lecturers are the experts in their field. We were taught at secondary school that the teacher is always right".*

One of the mature students felt very constrained by her inability to bring her years of life experience and working for a local paper into her essay writing. She did not feel comfortable with the pragmatic approach of playing the rules of the game, which she felt seemed to require her to simply juxtapose data from different sources and to forget personal knowledge:

> *"I don't think they want your opinion at all. They don't mind you being part of a tutorial and giving your opinion there, but in the essays they just want you to back up what your are saying by what you have read about what someone else has said, just to show you have done the reading."*

Ruth stated that it was very difficult to rid herself completely of old stigmas from her second level school days and her lack of confidence in her writing. She stated that her style of writing is very simple and she felt that everyone was more well-read and wrote better than she did, but having received some results on essays submitted she reported that she was feeling a little more confident now in her ability to present her own opinion.

During the second interview, Ruth stated that she had received more good results, but was still not confident in presenting her own opinion in her essay writing. She reported that she still struggled with trying to be a perfectionist in her writing and stated that she was aware that the only person she was competing with was herself. She acknowledged that it was something that she would have to address for herself:

> *"When you go to university you think that everyone is well read and writing a lot better than you, and I know I write extremely simply but the feed back that I have got is that I am getting my point across. So I am feeling a little more confident in my writing".*

4.4 Section 4: Making and using time: Time management, focus and motivation

4.4.1 Time Management

The issue of time management was one barrier discussed by all nine students in this study and included references to family, part-time work commitments, long-distance commuting and locating a quiet working environment. Students shared several insights regarding the academic culture of the university and how different it was compared to their school experience. A majority of participants commented on the difficulties imposed by having to manage so many assignments and so much reading with so little time:

> *"No one prepares you for the huge change. It's so difficult trying to juggle everything. I don't know what to give priority to".*

Several students contrasted the "daunting" university environment with the "security" of school, which was associated with the support of friends and the accessibility of teachers.

> *"All of a sudden you find it's not explained to you and you don't have the support of your friends to ask the little questions you don't want to ask the lecturer you feel so overwhelmed and you feel you can't cope".*

One student commented on how she found the whole third level experience to be so very different to how she had envisaged, it because of the time constraints:

> *"I find it so difficult to give equal time to all areas of my course as it's just not possible".*

Three students reported how they felt so overwhelmed by the amount of reading that was required of them:

> *"So much reading to do and so little time to do it in".*

A related sub-theme emerging from student perceptions of the difficulties encountered during transition to university is summarised in the following comment:

> *"The transition to university is so huge there is so much more of everything they don't want to know your personal thoughts in essays they just want you quoting others which I am not used to and it's so much tougher and intimidating".*

A concurring comment pertaining to the assignment writing and research process was:

> *"Information is not as accessible, structured or straightforward in school you could just use information from one textbook, but now you need much more detail from so many different sources. It's a much higher standard".*

Anne talked about the importance for her of always having her work completed a week in advance of the deadline, giving her time to go back and review and amend as required. Eileen reported being aware that she spent too much time on one essay often to the detriment of others, but did not know how and when to let go of her work.

Eileen reported that she continued to struggle with time management and commuting to college. She stated that she was trying to address the time management issues and work around them but was finding that difficult. Time management was also another area of difficulty for her, and she reported struggling with all the different projects she had on the go at the same time and how hard it was to juggle everything:

> *"It's hard to juggle everything. I know we have very little contact hours, but still if I wasn't on until 12 noon I'd be inclined not to get up until a quarter to twelve I'd much rather with the timetable if they put us on earlier, like 9am".*

> Deirdre related time management and motivation issues strongly to the huge general life-related adjustments that she was in the process of making. Her statement seems to highlight how the specific difficulties associated with academic writing in the early weeks of higher education cannot necessarily be disentangled from the general challenges associated with adjusting to university life:

> *"I think I'm lazy to be honest, and the difference between college and school is at school you were at home in the evening and your mother was there saying, 'have you your homework done have you your study done and did you get that essay finished?' No one is putting pressure on you here. You have to motivate yourself".*

Marie said for her the biggest barrier was time management and having to juggle so many commitments at the same time. In relation to time management, she was feeling very guilty about not spending enough time with her youngest son who was twelve years old. She recounted that her feelings of guilt were overwhelming in relation to her husband, children, part-time job, running the family home, doing all the housework and having time to study. She talked about how these feelings had paralysed her into a state of inaction and not knowing what to do for the best.

She felt that she was paying a high price in order to continue with her studies and wondered if it would be worth it, and at what cost to her family life:

> *"I have a twelve year old boy and I feel so guilty that I am not giving him enough of my time. When I came in last night from work he was gone to bed, and when I got up this morning he was gone out to school.*
> *He has a confirmation meeting tonight, and his father will have to go, as I am working again tonight and neither one are too happy with that".*

Gerard explained how the pressures of his programme of study seemed to make time management a particularly problematic issue for him.

> *"I am doing Physical Education at the moment, so English is only my elective, which is another huge problem. I have handed up over seventy assignments this semester. So time management is a major problem because they have changed from the exam system of assessment to continuous assessment. So we have assessment all the time, and we have been doing our practical teaching twice a week also, so we have twenty eight contact hours so it's impossible to get everything done".*

Crucially, as well as juggling a range of responsibilities and pressures to find time for writing, respondents talked about the importance of focus even when time had been found and was being used for their writing tasks. Anne talks about 'subject focus' highlighting how important it was for her to stay focused on the specifics of the writing task. She said that when doing an essay it was very important for her to keep reminding herself to 'just answer the question asked'. She acknowledged that she had a tendency to go off 'into tangents' and was trying to work to avoid this. Ruth talks about a different kind of focus – mental focus - the importance of adopting and maintaining a sharp and committed focus on her writing tasks. She talked about getting bored very quickly, so, to manage this, she had developed a habit of working on her essay for about an hour, and then going away, thinking about it, and coming back to it again.

Other insights that the respondents gained as a result of having completed their first academic writing task included the recognition that deadlines could be very helpful in mobilising their energies and that getting started automatically created momentum. For some, the expectation of writing was more difficult than the activity itself (Anne and Mary) but for others, the thought of writing was sometimes easier than the process turned out to be (Ruth).

4.4.2 Perceptions of 'writers' block'

Eileen talked about 'writer's block', something that seemed from her description to be experienced as a form of 'writing stage fright'. Something that should have been easy was suddenly something that she found impossible to do:

> *"Writer's block would be a barrier for me. We did a simple thing in English. We had a little quiz to do and I know I had total block.*
> *I was looking at this thing knowing that I know it, but it would not come back to me. Just had a complete block".*

Patricia talked about 'writers' block; too, but for her it seems to be associated with difficulties relating to getting started on a writing task:

> *"Sometimes just writer's block. Even today I was there and I was trying to do another question and I can't get started on it. It's hard to do one essay straight after another one because you find yourself getting more involved in the first one than the second one".*

All the students recounted the challenges they had experienced concerning their attitudes and confidence towards academic writing. Some of the students relayed how overwhelmed they felt by the use of academic terminology in the classroom and how difficult this was to understand and also to reproduce in their writing. Most of these students felt that they struggled with the amount of information they were given during orientation and the first few weeks of semester.

All of the students noted that receiving good grades was very important for them and all of them seemed to feel that receiving feedback on their work helped them to understand their mistakes and improve their work.

It seems also that their sense of ambition and their belief in their ability to perform well improved during the first few weeks and as a result of engaging in the writing process. This process of improvement and the changes by which it was characterised will be explored in more detail in the next part of this chapter.

4.5 Part 2: Emerging issues – the development of insights, orientation and competence

4.5.1 Introduction

This part of the chapter focuses on elaborating and identifying emerging issues for all of the respondents as their experience with academic writing developed. In particular it pulls out some of the important key themes that respondents talked about in relation to their overall adjustment to University life and by doing this it elaborates on some of the wider adjustment and transition related issues and their relationship with academic writing. Again, while evidence from both phases of interviews is invoked, this time, the emphasis is on a) some of the insights from respondents that imply an institutional response and b) the evidence, (mainly from the second set of interviews) that shows how respondents felt their competence and confidence in academic writing had increased.

The key themes explored in this part of the chapter are:

Section 1

How general adjustment issues are related to getting used to academic writing;

Section 2

How simple supports and strategies helped respondents to engage with their academic writing and their ideas on how such supports could be improved,

Section 3

Respondents' perceptions and experiences with the development of skills strategies; performance and grades and specific skills developed

Section 4

The self-observed development of confidence and competence that their interview-based discussion implied.

Section 5

Learning about the drafting process.

Note that the gradual emergence of a sense of confidence and competence will be further investigated and analysed in chapter 5 where a more detailed, coded examination of this particular finding is presented.

So, in this part of the chapter, some of the broader issues associated with the student experience are reported and related to the specific focus of this thesis, academic writing. I argue that unless we take into account the 'whole' experience that students are encountering at University in their early weeks, there may be issues associated with academic writing that could be more difficult to identify or to tackle. Thus, part 2 also aims to give voice to some issues that might seem on the surface unrelated to their academic writing challenges, but that I argue, need to be taken into account in our attempts to explore and understand their experiences and perspectives on academic writing.

This part of the exploration of my findings also presents the preliminary evidence that relates to one of the most important overall findings of this thesis: that over the period of the two interview phases there is clear evidence of the gradual emergence

of competence and confidence among this group of students relating to academic writing. This finding is then further analysed and investigated in the more fine-grained analysis in chapter 5.

4.6 Section 1: Overall Experience of First-Year Students with Early Academic Essay Writing

4.6.1 Introduction

The early first year experience can be viewed as the first crucial part of the process of cultural, social and academic assimilation into the world of higher education. The first year experience evolves and changes both temporally and culturally, as the issues facing students when they first begin their academic journey are not the same issues either halfway through the first-year, or towards the end.

4.6.2 Transition to University Academic, Personal and Social Adjustment

It was clear that their expectations and satisfaction with the experience had changed between the two periods in which the respondents were interviewed. All students interviewed found the transition to University from secondary school to have been at least somewhat difficult. Many of them said that the experience was lonely and stressful. One student noted that she found the transition to university was 'huge', and that while her secondary school teacher had told her that university would be different from post primary she had no idea how different it actually would be:

> *"I was blown out of the water. The change is so enormous. And I am an 'A' student".*

Another student reported that she found the initial experience to be very lonely and isolating. Other students reported going through the first semester in a haze, not knowing what was going on and feeling so overwhelmed by the whole experience. These findings support previous research.

For example, Upcraft and Gardner (1989) related that many students enter a higher education environment with little preparation, having little idea of what to expect and little understanding of how the university environment can affect their lives.

This research suggests it would be helpful if there were greater collaboration with secondary schools and universities in order to identify differences between the pre-higher education experience and that of higher education, to enable support for students in adjusting to higher education.

Four mature students were interviewed as part of this study, and they all reported having particular difficulties in adjusting to University life, given the time span involved since their last experience with formal education. However, it seemed clear from their conversations that they were extremely motivated, focused and driven, with a personal commitment to achieve. There is general agreement evident within the research that mature students are equally and often more motivated than younger students (Morrissey and Irvine, 1991). They did report their fears and doubts in having returned to education and appeared honest in their discussions. According to the research literature, there is a significant tendency for mature students to suffer from poor self-esteem, low levels of confidence and a poor self-image. Researchers such as Norman Hyland (2003) and McGivney (1993) described how anxiety and a lack of self-confidence could cause considerable problems for mature students.

The mature student participants in this study displayed few, if any, characteristics of low self-confidence or poor self-esteem. When interviewed during their first semester they did admit to feeling somewhat apprehensive. However, when interviewed again during their second semester they described how they had quickly gained confidence and began to feel more self-assured as they passed various academic milestones.

4.6.3 Information Overload

One key area for support of first-year students is induction, which is seen as important in retention and enabling adjustment to the higher education culture. The students described the overload of information provided to them during the orientation process and the first few weeks at university. One student described the first semester as *"an assault of information on the senses".* It forced him to speed up the way in which he took in information. Another student reported that the volume of information *"being fired at them"* was ridiculous, and she had no time to prepare for her assignments. Lewis's (1984) participant observation study of the first-year introductory week at a UK university showed that the first few weeks are characterised by confusion in the minds of most new students, as they are 'assaulted' by new information. The students in this study reported that they had not received crucial information, such as advice and guidelines on referencing and compiling a bibliography, which would have been beneficial for them in the early weeks of the semester.

4.6.4 Grades and Assessment

All of the students were committed to achieving good grades and expressed how important this was for them, and how disappointed they would be if they were not successful:

> *"I just don't want to get a degree I want to get an honours degree I would be very put out if I didn't get a considerable high grade compared to other people".*

This was also very evident from the discussions with the mature students expressing how driven they were to achieve:

"Well there is no point being here unless I go for an 'A' in everything I am thirty one so I'm not here for a party I am here for a degree so my grades are very important to me".

All of the students emphasised their preference and need for face-to-face feedback on their work and highlighted the value of interactions with their tutors and lecturers during the essay writing process.

Some of the students reported that they had received feedback electronically, but did not understand the feedback and wondered how they could be expected to learn and improve:

"I have no problem with constructive criticism. I like verbal feedback as then I can explain myself and I can ask the lecturer questions".

4.7 Section 2: Practical institutional supports and issues

Many practical supports and resources were also mentioned during the course of the interviews. Anne talked about the fact that she now had her own laptop as being a great help. Patricia mentioned the frustrations associated with finding books in the library. Several of the respondents felt that the timing of tutorials, and the sequence of formal supports provided could have been more thoroughly thought through by the institution, so that they would have more time and more assistance in the development of their academic writing skills in a way that reflected the rigours and sequence of their programme of study. In particular, Deirdre described how bothered she was with her tutorials starting so late in the semester:

"Tutorials don't start until week 3, which is crazy, as we also get our assignments in week three. So we have wasted all that time where we could have been learning things that would have been a help to me when we finally did get the assignments".

Anne mentioned how useful it would be to have seen a sample essay in advance of writing one in the first instance. She felt more support should be available so support first-year students' experiences, tensions and issues.

During both sets of interviews all students reported that they felt that tutorials started too late in the semester. All students agreed that for them it was important for tutorials to begin in week one, as it would have helped with the feelings of being overwhelmed and stressed. All claimed that their tutorials only started in Week 4 of semester. One student stated that her essay was due in for Week Seven but her tutorials did not start until week four and this forced her to leave it all to the last minute, which was very stressful. Another student stated that had tutorials started in week one of semester it would have made things less stressful for her. It would appear from the conversations with students that they felt they were not prepared for their essay assignments due to lack of tutorials in the first few weeks of semester. This research shows that the point of crisis for the students was the lack of guidance and support during the first four weeks of semester and not in fact the first essay assignment. Lea and Street (2000) argue the importance of academic socialisation for first-year students when they arrive at the academy, including inculcating students into a new 'culture' which focuses on student orientation to learning and the interpretation of the learning task, e.g. 'surface' 'deep' 'strategic' learning.

Students who take a surface approach tend not to have the primary intention of becoming interested in and of understanding the subject, but rather their motivation tends to be that of jumping through the necessary hoops in order to acquire the mark, or the grade or the qualification. Students who take a deep approach have the intention of understanding, engaging with, operating in and valuing the subject. The strategic or achieving approach is that approach which students are said to take when they wish to achieve positive outcomes in terms of obtaining a pass or better in the subject.

4.7.1 Stress

The available research indicates that the prevalence of stress is increasing among students studying in higher education (Aherne, 2001; Ross, et al, 1999; Bush, et al, 1985). All students in this study reported finding the first semester very stressful and difficult to cope with. Striving to meet deadlines was a major source of stress for almost all of the students. There was a sense of feeling overwhelmed and daunted at the volume of work they had to get through. One student stated that if she took any break now she would be completely 'swamped' and reported in her follow up interview that she had in fact given up her part time job so as to be able to concentrate better on her studies. This reflects the study by Porter and Swing (2006), which argued that the main determinants of stress tend to be study factors rather than personal or external factors. Interestingly mature students in this research reported that their stress was not caused by study factors but in fact by external considerations of family responsibilities misunderstanding and lack of support. One mature student reported feeling very isolated and stressed during the first semester. It was something she had always wanted to do since leaving school at fifteen years of age, but she was unsure now at what implication to herself and her family. While some in the follow-up interviews mentioned the issue of stress again, it did not appear to be as significant an issue for the traditional students. They reported that they now felt like they had 'cracked the code' and felt sure that the second semester would not be as stressful as the first one. However, issues around external stress continued to be an emotional journey for the mature students over their first-year at university:

> *"I have 100% exam this semester which I am very stressed and worried about. Because I would prefer to do an essay so that I would have some marks going into the exam just in case I get another mental block and I fail it. If I do I am not coming back to repeat I am just giving up because I am not putting myself under that can of stress and pressure".*

4.8 Section 3: Strategies and Skills

It must be acknowledged that few students arrive at university for undergraduate study with mastery of the writing skills they need to tackle the kinds of assessment

tasks they will be asked to complete (Bock, 1988; Chanock, 2002). What we know of student writing, and how it best develops suggests that staged and explicit teaching of the genres and discourses expected within a course of study, and using plenty of examples is important. In this study, it was evident that on arrival at university these first-year students described how they felt they did not have the necessary academic writing skills. They reported that they had not been required in second level education to reference and quote throughout their essays and include a bibliography. In addition, the concept of plagiarism was not one they had experienced before.

4.8.1 Development of IT and Research Skills

The research interviews with the students revealed that during the first semester at college none of the respondents reported using any electronic resources when conducting their research for assignments. Students described how they were not comfortable with using the electronic resources in the library. They also stated that they had not been given sufficient details in the usage of library systems, and some students reported not having received a tour of the library during orientation week. Most felt they lacked the skills to find their way around using the electronic resources in the library for research purposes. They felt that they were not competent in doing this, as this was a skill that they had never used before. They felt they needed much more support in this area and had not received it. When asked where they would do their research all students said that they would get books out of the library for their research, and one student stated that she would not know how to research outside of books, that she was not confident with the Internet and had avoided using the electronic resources:

> *"I've tried using articles and I find JSTOR rubbish. I find it really bad. I can't find anything in it I just don't understand it. I wouldn't know how to research outside of book".*

One might expect that these students who had grown up in an information technological age would have no fears around electronic research.

One could conclude from this that the students only considered technology for recreational purposes and not academic purposes. However, when interviewed during the second semester this lack of confidence in using electronic resources had changed for all of the students. They reported that they were not as anxious now about using the electronic resources, and all reported that they now used a resource called JSTOR in the library to do their research. In addition, the students reported that knowing their way around the library and knowing where to find material made things much easier for them now when researching for assignments:

> *"My friend is working in the library and she showed me how to look up the journals. I discovered the electronic databases so I love doing online research now. However, the first time I went into the library I had got an essay to do on Ireland as a woman and I typed that in and nothing relevant came up. But now I know about putting in the key words and phrases and it's much better",*

4.9 Section 4: The gradual development of competence and confidence in academic writing

This is one of the key findings of this thesis, and the emergence of confidence and competence will be analysed and discussed in more detail in the subsequent chapters. But even on a purely reported and descriptive basis, almost all respondents recognised that simply writing an essay and getting the result seemed to have a strong impact on their overall sense of efficacy when it came to academic writing and was a way of highlighting the abilities they already had as well as a way of developing new capacities.

During the first interview, Anne hinted at her perceptions of the underlying requirements associated with academic writing in the following statement:

> *'it's hard to keep under the word count and condense down what I want to say and make it still sound intelligent'.*

‘Sounding intelligent’ was often cited by students as one of the key criteria that defined academic writing for them. As we will see, that rather one-dimensional way of conceptualising what academic writing was, did develop, and become more contextualised and complex as the students engaged in the task and developed their skills. This perspective is also reflected in other respondents’ references to their struggle with academic language and academic terminology. In particular, Paul said that he found it difficult ‘not coming from an academic background’ and that his limited use of academic terminology was a major obstacle for him. He reported how for one of his essays he had to write a piece on ‘ideology’. He had to read this section in the core text with a dictionary in his other hand and write down in the margins the meanings of the words and phrases. He relayed once he had put the academic terminology in ‘simpler’ English he was better able to understand it.

> *“In my English module the lecturer was talking about the” tenet of someone’s ideology”. I did not have a clue what this meant. I am not coming from secondary school, so I am not coming from academic into academic, so this is a big stumbling block for me”.*

However, in time, Paul started to hint at the development of an implicit capacity use academic terminology:

> *‘when you are surrounded by it every day it begins to rub off on you’.*

The development of confidence and competence was articulated in other ways too. During her second interview, Anne stated that she was now able to deal with some of the constraints that had stymied her earlier. Limited word count was no longer a barrier though she still struggled with motivation, which seemed to become more problematic for her as workloads increased and as significant readings in relation to research for her essays became more demanding and complex:

"I actually have gotten used to writing in a college style now. I don't really think like leaving cert style anymore which is good because that was my big problem first time. I kept writing it like it was a leaving cert essay but I think I've gotten used to writing a proper third level essay using the language we should use and stuff".

Eileen reported that her confidence improved in the first semester, and she no longer thought the time away from study was such a big disadvantage for her. She stated that she now felt that once she attended her lectures and tutorials and was attentive in class she was really at the same level as everyone else. Mary reported that she had adapted to this new way of writing and was really enjoying it now. An excellent grade in her first essay (A1) had also given her great confidence and belief in herself. Similarly, Marie referred to her good grades as having provided a substantial boost to her sense of academic writing confidence.

Deirdre talked about the immense satisfaction she derived from submitting her essays and from achieving good grades. She also highlighted the role that support from her lecturers was playing:

"It's completely different now. The lecturers are very helpful. They do say if you are having any trouble email me, but I have office hours. Come and meet me.

At first Patricia said that she never used electronic resources available in the library. She said she had tried to use a database one day in the library but was not able to navigate the source and did not understand it. During her second interview, Patricia reported on her improved IT skills and stated that she now did most of her research on-line and used the electronic databases in the library and also used Google Scholar to research articles:

"I've a 2,500 word essay to write for next week and I am worried about it, because I don't know how many books I'm going to have to take out of the

library. I already had a 1,500 word one for this week and I used five books. So I'm thinking I may have to get ten books for this one".

Eileen's development of confidence and ambition seemed clear when, during her second interview she said:

"this place just does something to you and you say to yourself "I can do that". So certainly if I am going to do it I want to do it right".

Ruth reiterates a focus on the importance of achievement:

"Obviously grades are very important, as it's all I've talked about with my friends".

4.10 Section 5: Learning about the drafting process

The drafting process was something that many of the respondents explained and described during their interviews. Anne said she always worked with a rough written draft, completing her introduction first and working through it. It was only after she had a draft in long hand that she would then type it up in full. This ritual seemed to help her to see clearly what to include or change. Similarly, Eileen talked about 'going over a piece of writing several times' until she 'feels its right'. She would also jot down notes and key points in separate notes as her writing task unfolds.

Eileen reported in the second interview that she had changed her method. She did not now go over every essay in detail, drafting and re-drafting she would just complete and move on. In relation to the skills, she used she reported that she still put a lot of planning into her writing and was more aware now of only answering the question that was being asked, but she did admit that she still had to be very conscious of this, as she still had the tendency to stray from the point. Mary stated that she liked giving her writing to others for review and comment, and that she would always write notes first and then put them all together on paper. Respondent

four reported that she always planned and used a structure when writing. She would always think first, about how she was going to approach the writing task and then put her ideas down on paper, do a spider diagram and work from there. Patricia outlined her approach and stated that she always did as much reading as possible, first on the topic she was writing about, and then she would write a draft paper on the subject.

> *"I always read around the topic first then I do a draft but I wouldn't necessarily stick to it, but at least I would have something on paper".*

Marie stated that she was trying to be more structured in her approach to completing her assignments, but was finding this very difficult. She was attending the study skills workshops every week and found these a great help, but she stated that she would love to see an example of what the lecturers considered a good essay. She described herself as a person who needed to see examples visually in order to learn, so that reading an example of an excellent essay would be very beneficial for her. During the second interview, Marie reported that she was still struggling with the layout and content of her essays and what was expected of her:

> *"If you show me how to put in a light bulb then I will know it for evermore. Don't give me the instructions to read, as that just doesn't work for me, so I would love if they would give me examples of what they think is a good essay. This is the way I like to learn".*

Paul stated that he always worked out the essay in his head first and then put it down on paper. He would always take a break from it, then go back, and re-work any areas he felt needed it.

He also stated that he had learnt that while he did work well under pressure, he did not have the physical capacity to cram and leave everything to the last minute, due to his health problems. Therefore, it was imperative for him to give himself sufficient time to complete all essays.

During the second interview, Paul stated that he continued to plan the outline for his essay in his head first and then put it on paper. He also reported that due to poor time management he ended up doing two essays in one night. For the first, he got a good mark, but he did not do very well with the second essay. This was a major learning curve for him, and he stated that he now knew that intense cramming did not work for him. He said he was lucky that he had not failed the second essay. He also reported during the second interview that he had become friends with another male mature student, and they now shared their work and got comments from each other on how they could improve their writing. He said it might have made things easier for him if he had met this student during the first semester:

> *"I have a stomach problem, so I cannot physically afford the cramming that the other students tend to do. So I have a limit of the amount of writing I can do in any one night".*

Ruth stated that she would always do a plan in her head first and think through her thoughts. Then she would do a rough plan on paper. From there she would start to write on her laptop. She reported how difficult she found it to get her ideas down on paper, and how on many occasions, she had sat in front of her computer and nothing flowed for her. Having received one result for an essay submitted, she had been told by her lecturer that it was a very good first attempt, but that her spelling and grammar had let her down, and this resulted in a poor grade. Ruth stated that she saw the positive in this and understood that she would need to be more meticulous in her writing, but that importantly for her the content was good. During the second interview Ruth stated that she still had to formulate a plan in her head and then get it down on the computer. She said that she had been completely caught up with the idea of having to come up with original ideas for her essays, and she found this very difficult. However, she had met with her lecturer for feedback on an essay and he told her that it was not about having original ideas but about getting your ideas on paper and backing these up with your research and having good grammar and spelling. She reported that she continued to struggle with her writing and the whole experience was very stressful:

"I need to have it worked out in my head first before I can actually do the plan. So I would do it in my head then do a plan and then start and I wouldn't have it very detailed in the plan. But as I'm writing I'd expand on the plan".

Gerard said that he would always do a rough draft on paper in point format, and then he would expand on the points. He stated that he never shows his work to any of his peers, as it was his attitude if he wanted them to read it then he would publish it. He reported that this had happened in one of his tutorial classes, and he was horrified that his work was given to another student to read and give comments. When interviewed again Gerard stated that he continued to do his rough draft in point format, and then he elaborated on that. He stated that he was still not comfortable with other students reading his work and was relieved that this had not happened again in any of his tutorials:

"Generally just notes like brain storming different ideas and then put them into paragraphs and just do it that way. I much prefer doing in point form and then expanding on the points. I find that much easier".

Anne

"The first few weeks I didn't start any of my essays until late in the semester because I had no idea how to do them, whereas now it is week 3 and I have already started one of them".

Anne finally stated what she had learnt from the whole transition process:

"At least I know what I am doing now. I think I have figured it out now".

4.11 Some concluding insights

The data indicates that some of the students interviewed perceived of the broader university environment as a place which was daunting, particularly in the first semester when it came to finding information and writing their first assignment. These perceptions highlight for the researcher the need to develop learning communities in which collaboration replaces the sometimes overwhelming sense of alienation that some students experience during their first-year.

As a result of conversations with a group of first-year students regarding academic writing in university it was evident from their responses that for them essay writing at the University of Limerick is not a task preformed in isolation, but that many other factors are involved in determining both the short and long-term outcome of this process.

It is apparent that the change from limited, intensive reading pre-higher education to wide-ranging, extensive, contextualised reading in higher education is a major obstacle for some students. Ways need to be identified in which this chasm can be bridged (Lea, 1994). Students also expressed their frustration with their difficulty in the transitional move to adopting a more independent study style and being responsible for their own learning. One of the students stated that a huge issue for her was being left to herself to just get on with it and having the responsibility in disciplining herself. These findings endorse those of Lowe and Cook (2003) who surveyed first-year students across the University of Ulster and found that almost a third (31%) of students reported similar difficulties.

Academic writing is just one of the many challenges that students have to face when they start university. Transition to university education is a difficulty process for many students, and all the students participating in this research seem to acknowledge this in a range of ways, by reporting a diversity of experiences. Paul described the intensity of the information given in the early weeks of his time at university as ‘an assault on the senses’.

The frequency and intensity with which respondents talked about their adjustment challenges in relation to their writing, suggests that general adjustment difficulties are enmeshed with some of the more specific challenges associated with the task of academic writing.

This chapter has predominantly reported the findings of the interviews and clustered student responses according to key emerging themes. The next chapter engages in a more analytical approach to the data, in particular coding and analysing orientations and experiences that change between the first set of interviews and the second.

Chapter 5 Analysis of the extent and nature of writing-related changes among respondents between time 1 (first semester) and time 2 (second semester)

5.1 Comparing and contrasting writing orientations between time 1 (early weeks of semester 1) and time 2 (beginning of semester 2)

This chapter focuses on an analytical approach to the data that has been explored qualitatively and descriptively in the previous chapter.

In order to engage analytically with the data, I searched the qualitative data for similarities and differences between times 1 and time 2 interviews. All respondent transcripts converged on the research questions. The following table sets out, by participant, the similarities and differences between the two interviews conducted with each:

Table 5.1 contains the following information:
a) A summary of the academic writing orientations of respondents as expressed at interview during time 1 (first semester)
b) A summary of the academic writing orientations and experiences of respondents as expressed at interview in time 2 (second semester),
c) A coded indication indicating one of the following for each of the dimensions identified:

o = no change;
+ = positive change;
- = negative change;
Δ = change that cannot be defined as positive or negative

The final column in this table places each feature of each respondent's experience into one of the four emerging categories that seems to have emerged from an analysis of the respondent transcripts. These four categories are:

1. Writing-related feelings attitudes and self-concept

Where respondents referred to their emotions, their self-confidence, and their sense of themselves or their attitudes towards writing, the reference was coded into this category. Such references included emotion related states (e.g. motivation, experienced attitudes towards constraints such as imposed word limits, enjoyment and pleasure associated with writing as well as fears, doubts and worries)

2. Skills and knowledge

Where respondents referred to knowledge of writing requirements, abilities and skills in relation to information and literature searches, understanding expectations, vocabulary, developing knowledge about referencing conventions, skills in the use of academic terminology, grammatical competence or referencing skills, such comments were coded under the 'skills and knowledge' category.

3. Resources and support

Where respondents referred to anything that helped them to develop their writing – mainly feedback and encouragement from others – such references were categorised as 'resources and support'.

4. Strategies and orientations

Where respondents talked about behaviours such as planning, revising, learning to respond to feedback, managing time or other active orientations towards their writing, such references were categorised as 'strategies and orientations'.

Most responses were easy to categorise according to these four overarching themes. A minority did seem somewhat ambiguous. I struggled for example to know how to categorise respondent 1's reference to her sense that a word limit felt restricting. Was this a feeling or an orientation? I decided to categorise it as a feeling/attitude as it signalled a shift in her own emotional response towards prevailing constraints, constraints that had not changed.

Similarly, respondent 2's 'concerns about plagiarism' might seem to have a strong emotional dimension, but I decided that this reference fitted more neatly under skills and knowledge.

As with any qualitative coding mechanism, some references were harder to place in a category than others. However, most fitted relatively unambiguously into the categories that were identified. Where there was some ambiguity, I tried to be as consistent and objective as possible when coding, recognising that there are inevitable overlaps and intersections between the categories identified. Such overlaps and intersections will be explored in more detail in chapter 7.

Respondent number	Time 1 interview	Time 2 interview	Nature of change/no change	Emerging category/writing-related issues
Respondent 1	Low motivation	Low motivation	0	Feelings, attitudes and self concept
	Unknown requirements	Unknown requirements	0	Skills and knowledge
	Word limit restricting	Word limit not restricting	+	Feelings, attitudes and self concept
	Lack of information about own competence	Encouraging information about own competence	+	Resources and support
Respondent 2	'scattergun' approach to writing	More focused approach to writing	+	Strategies and orientations
	Time since formal education felt problematic	Time since formal education did not feel problematic	+	Feelings, attitudes and self-concept
	Confidence low	Confidence improved	+	Feelings, attitudes and self concept

	Less planning, more revising	More planning, less revising	Δ	Strategies and orientations
	Concerns about plagiarism	Concerns about plagiarism	0	Skills and knowledge
	Focus on survival	Focus on performance	+	Strategies and orientations
	Feedback important	Feedback important	0	Resources and support
Respondent 3	Difficulty adjusting to the detached 'voice' in academic writing	Adjusted to using the detached voice in academic writing	Δ	Strategies and orientations
	Sharing written work while it is in progress is important	Sharing written work while it is in progress is important	0	Resources and support
	Restricted information search skills	More elaborate information	+	Skills and knowledge

		search skills		
	Feels academic writing conventions take the creativity and pleasure out of writing	Feels writing doesn't take all the creativity and pleasure out of writing	+	Feelings, attitudes and self concept
	Feedback is important	Feedback is important	0	Resources and support
	Grades are important	Grades are even more important	+	Feelings, attitudes and self concept
	Confident about own opinion when writing	Confident about own opinion when writing	0	Feelings, attitudes and self concept
Respondent 4	Unknown expectations	Developing knowledge of expectation	+	Skills and knowledge
	Not sure of own capabilities	Huge satisfaction from positive writing	+	Feelings, attitudes and self concept

		outputs		
	Unmonitored environment, difficult to develop good writing strategy	Has adjusted to unmonitored environment and learned to develop good writing strategy	+	Strategies and orientations
	Planning for writing is important	Planning for writing is important	0	Strategies and orientations
	Restricted information search skills	More elaborate information search skills	+	Skills and knowledge
	Little guidance	Some guidance	+	Resources and support
	Feedback important	Detailed feedback important	+	Resources and support
	Lack of competence in proper referencing	Some competence in proper referencing	+	Skills and knowledge

	Cautious about where to position own opinion	Cautious about where to position own opinion	0	Feelings, attitudes and self concept
Respondent 5	Feels less capable about writing than others	Feels as capable about writing as others	+	Feelings, attitudes and self concept
	Plan and read before writing	Plan and read before writing	0	Strategies and orientations
	Search skills restricted	Search skills improved	+	Skills and knowledge
	Cautious about where to position own opinion	Cautious about where to position own opinion	0	Feelings, attitudes and self concept
	Lack of competence in proper referencing	Accelerated competence in proper referencing	+	Skills and knowledge
	Feedback important	Feedback important	0	Resources and support

Respondent 6	Love writing	Still love writing	0	Feelings, attitudes and self concept
	Low confidence in *academic* writing	More confidence in *academic* writing	+	Feelings, attitudes and self concept
	Limited vocabulary	Limited vocabulary	0	Skills and knowledge
	Focus on expectations problematic	Focus on layout, content and expectations still problematic	0	Strategies and orientations
	Fear of plagiarism	Better understanding of plagiarism	+	Feelings, attitudes and self concept
	Feels inferior about own voice and opinions	Feels own opinion is not important in academic writing	Δ	Feelings, attitudes and self concept
	General feelings of	General feelings of	0	Feelings, attitudes and self concept

	inferiority	inferiority		
	Confused by referencing conventions	More confused by referencing conventions	-	Skills and knowledge
	Some focus on the importance of grades	More focus on the importance of grades	+	Strategies and orientations
Respondent 7	Thinking and redrafting	Working with peers	Δ	Strategies and orientations
	Need to pace work carefully	Increased workload showed how important time management is	Δ	Strategies and orientations
	Finds using academic terminology difficult	Using academic terminology is getting easier	+	Skills and knowledge
	Unfocused	More focused	+	Strategies and orientations
	Search skills restricted	Search skills increased	+	Skills and knowledge

	Confused about referencing	More confused about referencing	-	Skills and knowledge
	Feedback useful	Feedback 'like gold'	+	Resources and support
	Grades important	Grades even more important	+	Strategies and orientations
Respondent 8	Motivation low	Feels deadline helps motivate	+	Feelings, attitudes and self concept
	Negative about 'starting' the writing process	Has learned to get started	+	Strategies and orientations
	No mention of learning needs	Has identified learning needs which she thinks are problematic	-	Skills and knowledge
	Time management	Time management	0	Strategies and orientations

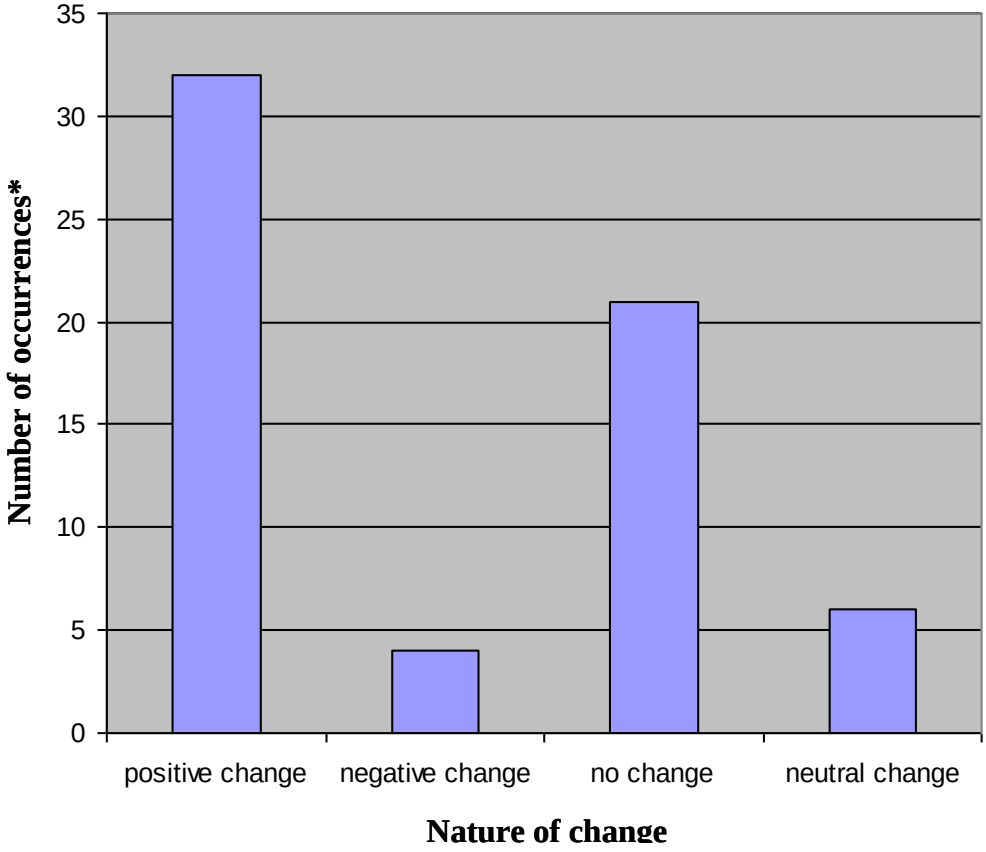
	problematic	problematic		
	Not aware of rules and requirements	Is learning rules and requirements	+	Skills and knowledge
	Grammar a major block	Grammar still a major block	0	Skills and knowledge
	Feedback vital	Feedback vital	0	Resources and support
Respondent 9	Time management a problem	Time management a problem	0	Strategies and orientations
	Academic terminology difficult	Academic terminology difficult	0	Skills and knowledge
	Workload challenging	Workload even more challenging	-	Feelings, attitudes and self concept
	Search skills restricted	Search skills increased	+	Skills and knowledge
	Referencing skills problematic	Referencing skills much improved	+	Skills and knowledge

	Face to face feedback preferred	Written feedback preferred	Δ	Resources and support

Table 5.1

Evaluative nature of change

Tracking the differences between 'time 1' and 'time 2', it is possible to identify the extent to which the respondents in this sample have experienced a change in their writing related experiences, and whether such changes are positive, negative or neutral. The following graph is an attempt to quantify the entire samples experience of a change in their writing experiences.



* As derived from content analysis of interview transcripts

Figure 5.1

By searching the numbers of changes identified by respondents in the data, it is clear that most writing-related changes between times one and two are positive, though a substantial number of references show that there are still writing-related experiences that remain unchanged. There is also evidence of some incidences of negative change or changes that cannot necessarily be defined as positive or negative.

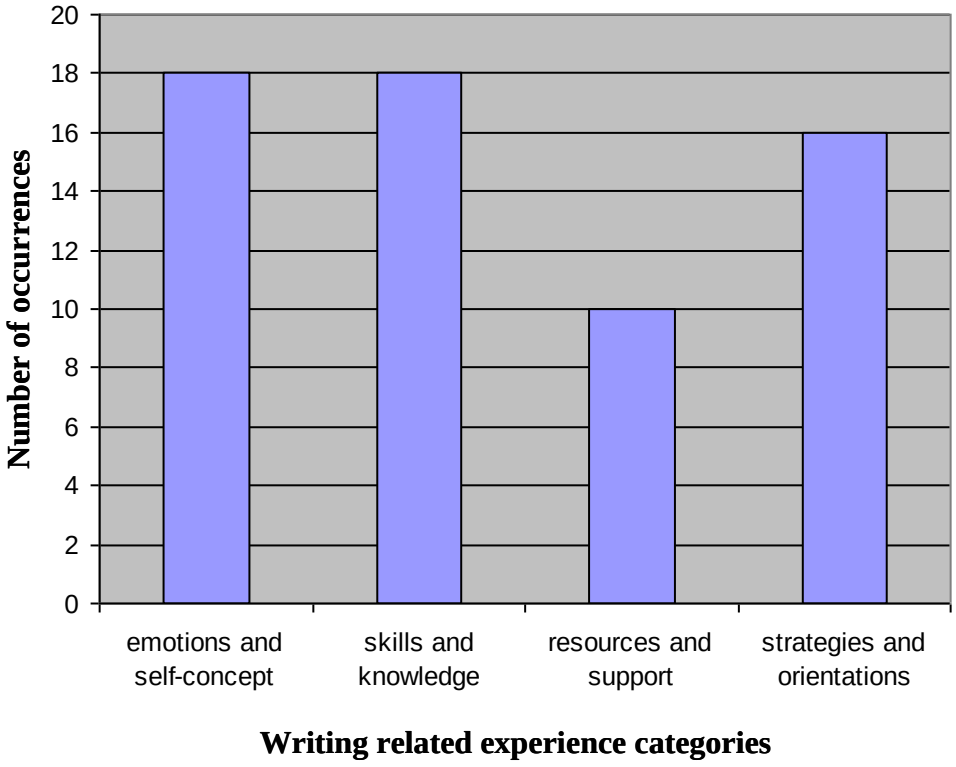


Figure 5.2

When emerging categories are enumerated, it is clear that the most frequently invoked types of writing-related experience are associated with feelings, emotions and self- concept or with writing-related skills and knowledge.

When this data is analysed further by incorporating different categories of writing-related experience, the following patterns emerge:

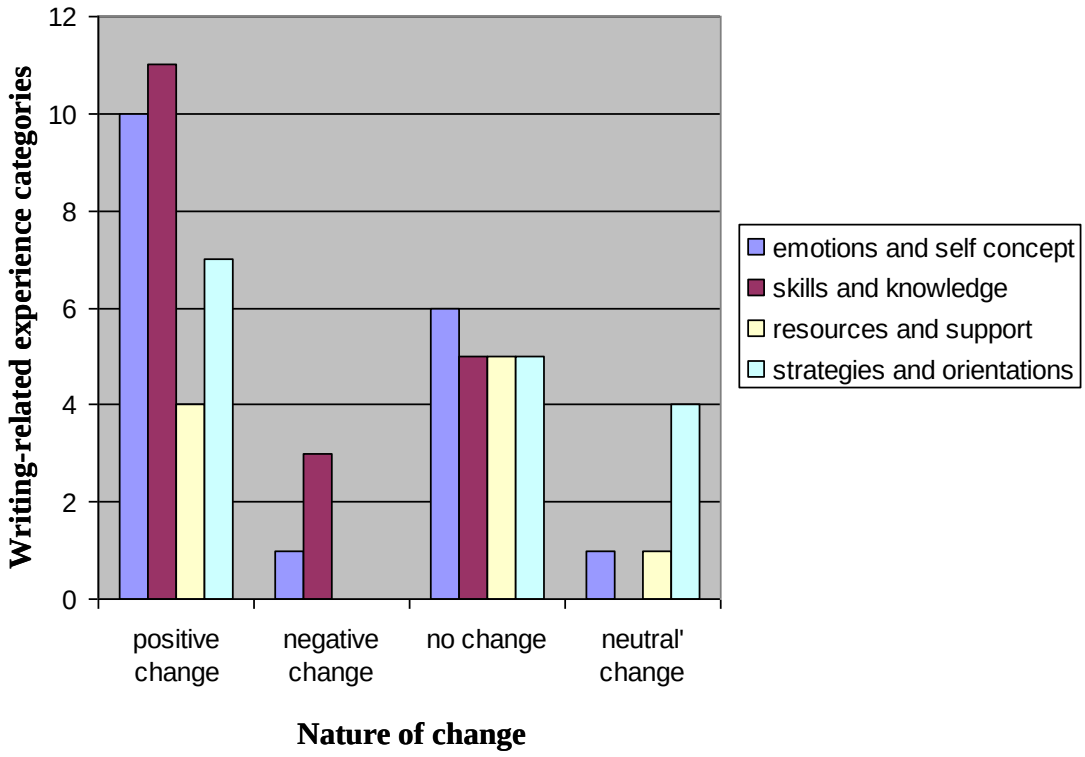


Figure 5.3

Here it is now possible to see that most of the positive changes are related to enhanced skills and knowledge as well as to more positive emotions and self-concept. The fewest reported positive changes relate to the resources and support received and experienced by respondents. Negative change is infrequently found, but where it does occur, it seems to be related mostly to negative changes in writing-related knowledge or skills. Some respondents report no change between times one and two on aspects of their writing, and where this is the case, the lack of change is spread relatively evenly across all four emerging categories of writing-related experience.

Where 'neutral' change occurs in the data, it is most likely to be associated with a change in strategy or orientation towards writing. In other words, there are some instances in which respondents indicate a different strategic approach to writing, which may not in itself be definable as positive or negative, but which seems likely to have the potential of having subsequently positive effects on performance and writing-related outcomes.

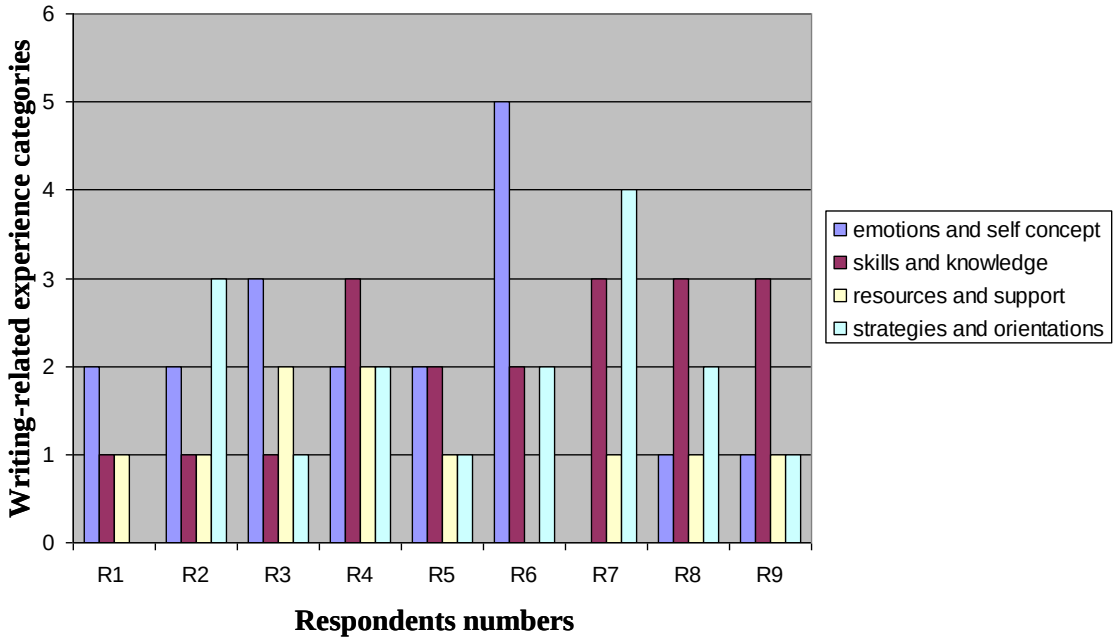


Figure 5.4

Engaging in a respondent-by-respondent category analysis shows that the patterns of writing related categories referred to by each respondent seems rather idiosyncratic. Looking at the above graph it seems clear for example that respondent 6 invokes predominantly emotion-related issues when talking about writing experiences, whereas respondent 7 talks more about strategies and orientations. The implications of the observed differences between respondent patterns and the unique and individualised experiences observed in each case will be discussed in more detail in chapter 7.

Similarly, there are differences between respondents in terms of the *evaluative* nature of the writing related changes they experienced:

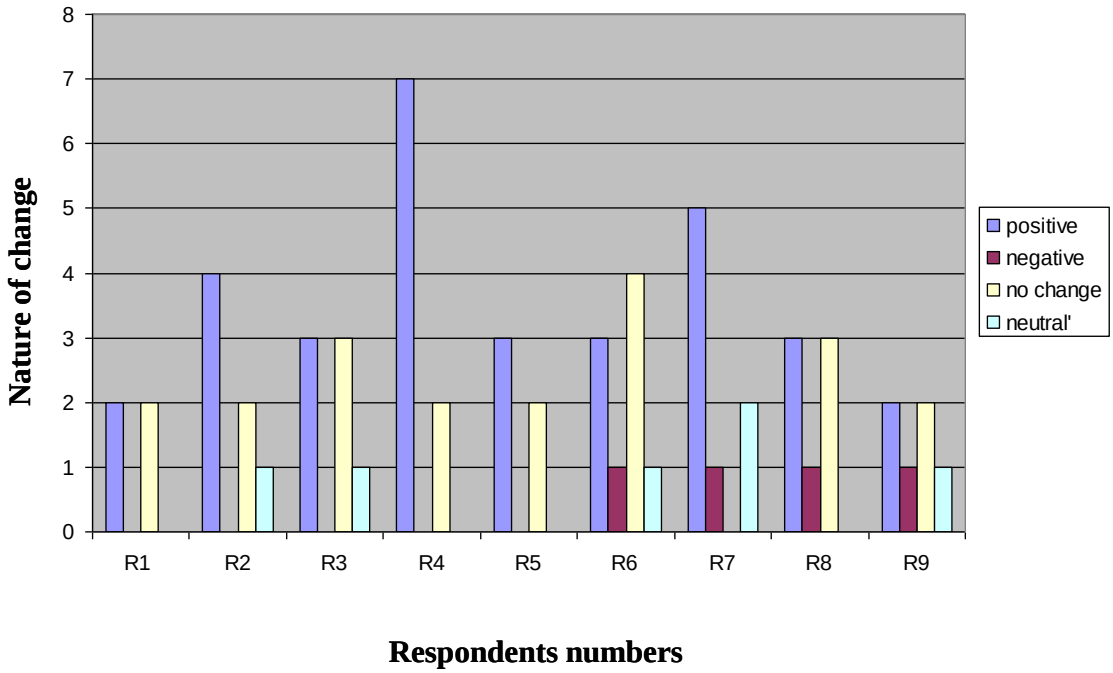


Figure 5.5

Here it is possible to see that some respondents have more 'mixed' experiences when the differences between time 1 and time 2 are analysed. It is clear for example that respondent four's experience seems to have been characterised by a lot of positive change in writing-related experience, whereas for respondents 6, 7, 8 and 9, there are fewer changes, and some of those changes are negative as well as positive.

The following chapter presents an analysis of these observed findings and changes. It explores both the issues and insights that such data can generate. Conclusions follow in chapter 7.

Chapter 6 Research Significance

6.1 Introduction

Student's experience of academic writing varies and seems to be influenced by quite a range of different factors. This chapter explores the insights from the data, and does so bearing in mind published literature in this field.

6.2 Student Experience

The data suggests that positive changes in writing-related experiences were more common than negative, neutral or no change (as outlined in figure 5.1). There seems to be little doubt that students struggle with the academic requirements associated with writing in higher education (Lea and Street, 1998). Even those respondents in this study who talk about their 'love' of writing, appear to experience a sense of restriction, constraint and challenge when it comes to responding to the requirements that seem to be inherent in academic writing within the humanities. This is in keeping with (Neumann et al. 2002) who also suggests that writing within the humanities brings its own particular challenges. In this study, it is interesting to note that in the time that passed between the two interviews occurring the student-experienced changes that can be observed as quite positive. Clearly, these students have experienced something either in terms of their own engagement or immersion, or because of supports and interaction, to make them talk about writing in predominantly more positive ways at the end of the year than they did at the beginning. This is a key insight because it raises the question as to what exactly it is that the students experience and what this might mean for writing development practice in higher education.

Evidence that supports and assistance do have a positive impact

The data suggest that the kinds of supports and teaching provided within this learning environment did seem to have some positive effects on students and their feelings about their writing. This reflects the work of Antoniou and Moriarty (2008) who also suggests support as an important facilitator of student academic writing.

However, it also seems clear that students have plenty to say about what supports work best and when, for example study skills workshops and feedback.

They clearly have useful opinions about how to structure support and about the timing of the provision of guidance. It is important that students inform higher education teachers in this regard, as it will create better responsiveness to the challenges that novice writers experience.

Immersion and adaptation naturally occurs

The exploratory data investigated in this study repeatedly indicates evidence that over a relatively short time frame, confusion and uncertainty about academic writing gave way to a stronger sense of competence and confidence. While learning about writing and feeling more positive about the academic nature of writing may simply take time as Ivanic, (1998) suggests as well as engagement with tasks, there may be specific insights provided by students that could accelerate the development of their competence. Therefore, it is essential that academic writing support is informed by the voice and experience of students which will aid the development of confidence and a sense of competence in academic writing.

Benefits of immersion are not a reason for institutional complacency

It is encouraging that this study seems to reinforce the benefits of immersion and of simply engaging in academic writing tasks. This does not however mean that institutions should be complacent about the writing related difficulties that students face. The data does suggest reasons for optimism and allows us to be reasonably confident that students in this sample were able, quite quickly to overcome some of the more negative experiences they tended to report at the early stages of their academic development. In this case, the exposure of these respondents to academic challenges seems to have had a positive impact on their development of academic confidence but we cannot assume that this will be the case for all students. Therefore, higher education institutions need to be sensitive to the importance not only of immersion, but immersion that takes place in a support and facilitative writing environment.

6.3 When students talk about academic writing it seems that emotions are important.

As can be seen from figure 5.2, one of the two most commonly cited categories of writing related experience focuses on emotion. It seems that the writing journeys of some students have a strongly emotional dimension (though clearly some respondents talk about emotions more than others do). This finding reiterates some of the established literature (notably Murray 2005 and Elbow 1998) which argues that practical, lexical, content related assistance with academic writing may be futile unless we address issues that are more closely associated with emotions such as confidence, self-concept, esteem, self-efficacy, stress, fear and anxiety. That this study further underscores this principle is therefore not particularly surprising, but it does serve to provide new, qualitative evidence that emotions, feelings and attitudes are real issues that impact on student academic writing as respondents have clearly articulated in this research.

It is also worth noting that despite the literature that recognises its importance, many writing-related supports within universities do not explicitly facilitate the exploration or recognition of emotionally relevant experiences and issues that students face (Lavelle and Guarino, 2003). Generating an academic climate that is itself characterised by comfort with the discussion of emotion related issues therefore is an important and logical implication of this study.

6.4 When students talk about academic writing, it seems that skills are also important.

While emotions are clearly important, also as frequently cited is the writing related category that focuses on the skills and knowledge associated with writing in academia. All of the skills that were mentioned by respondents and arranged into this category can be argued to relate to practical conventions. This reiterates the work of Lillis (2001) who also identifies these skills including IT and literature search skills, the use of 'academic' vocabulary and learning to comply with the features of academic writing. This is indicative of the process of, 'learning the rules and techniques of the game'.

Respondents clearly had differing experiences about how explicitly these rules and techniques were displayed to them in the early stages of their third level education. Many of the changes that occurred for them during their studies suggest that 'getting the hang of' the features of academic writing are an important part of the journey that most of the respondents had made progress on by the time they reached the second semester.

Therefore, as well as paying attention to how students feel about themselves and about their writing, it seems that the practical skills and knowledge that they appear to develop in the time between semester one and semester 2 are equally important. Indeed, it suggests (as will be discussed below), there may even be significant links between the practical and the emotional development of academic writing experiences among first year students in this sample.

6.5 Emotions and skills may be intrinsically linked with implications for a holistic approach to student support

The data (represented in Figure 5.3) show how the clusters of writing-related changes are experienced in evaluative terms (i.e. positive, negative, no change and neutral change). Most notably, it seems that there is a very similar trajectory of positive change in both writing-related emotions and skills. It is impossible to confirm with confidence the existence of a link between skills and emotions, but this data does provide us with a clue that such a link may indeed exist. In other words, there is a link, that as students gain new skills in academic writing, they may start to feel more positive and confident about their writing competence and tasks. These may be more interconnected than maybe initially assumed and may function in a reciprocal process of development. For example as they start to feel better about their writing they may be more positively disposed towards developing practical, cognitive and linguistic skills that will facilitate their writing performance. Providing practical, academic guidance in tandem with emotional support may therefore be the most effective way of ensuring effective writing development among students. Certainly, a holistic approach seems to be the obvious implication here.

In their research Antoniou and Moriarty (2008), adopted a holistic approach to teaching writing in their University. They advocate stepping back from the mechanics of writing and inviting their student writers to examine questions such as Who am I? What are my values? What are my passions? What is my own experience of the creative process? What does writing mean for me? Only after that: What do I have to say and how do I want to say it? They suggest adopting a broader approach to academic writing.

This includes creating a respectful and nurturing environment where students feel able to take risks and thus empowers students to take charge of their own learning. In fact it may facilitate more sustainable and lifelong attention to writing for students. It seems that the holistic approach recommended by Antoniou and Moriarty (2008) as outlined in the literature review earlier, is an approach that makes sense in the light of the student voices represented in this study.

6.6 Idiosyncratic and individualised writing journeys need to be recognised – one size does not fit all

There may be 'types' of writing related orientations that could be revealed in larger samples, but staying within the boundaries of this small scale study it seems at least reasonable to assume that different people are likely to invoke different types of writing-related concerns and concepts as they move through their first academic year. This confirms Fletcher's, (2000) assertion that there is no one-size-fits-all writing formula. Each student has their own individual manner of writing and they move in and out of the writing stages at their own pace and in their own unique ways. Certainly even in this small sample, it seems clear that one type of academic writing support will not be appropriate for everyone. The provision of customised, one-to-one work with individual students seems to be the obvious implication here. This of course has resource implications especially in contexts where class sizes are large and individual attention is difficult to provide. However, many universities in Ireland are attempting to engage at this level with the development of writing centres, which provide both individual and group tuition.

The data in this study, (as presented in fig 5.5) suggests that mixed evaluative experiences seem common among novice writers and this implies a need to create room for learning from positive and negative writing-related experiences as the development of writing centres attempts to do.

6.7 Conclusion

While the sample for this study is small there are none the less some key insights that can be extrapolated. The practical and emotional dimensions appear to coincide in the process of students developing as writers.

The voices in the study have a contribution to make in terms of encouraging higher education practitioners to respond to the set of challenges that students face during their academic journey.

The final chapter will identify conclusions and make recommendations for potential ways forward.

Chapter 7: Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1 Introduction

This study is tentative and exploratory in nature. The primary value of an exploratory study lies in its role of identifying and mapping out the parameters of a new terrain, in order to provide some insight into fertile ground for further research, and to establish tools that might be useful in this endeavour.

This study has been concerned with the narration, interpretation and documentation of nine individuals and has provided insight into the writing experiences of a sample of first-year students at the University of Limerick during their first and second semester. It offers a profile of these first-year students, it explores the manner in which they adjust to their new environment and their roles, and it investigates the ways in which their writing-related activities develop. As part of this investigation, it examines the institution's influence on individual progress, and for this reason should be of particular interest and use to those within the university system who wish to support and encourage first-year academic practice.

This study represents an initial foray into the area of student academic writing. The articulation and depth of participants' disclosures have yielded insights into the complex dynamics that take place for first-year students when approaching academic writing. Clearly, there is considerable scope for future research in this area of enquiry both within the University of Limerick and on a broader scale across the third level sector as a whole.

7.2 Did this research study achieve the aims?

From this research the experience of first-year students and the approaches they adopt when asked to produce their first piece of academic writing have been identified. The key issues and challenges for first-years students in their early academic writing were identified and analysed. Crucially, changes in writing experiences and approaches were tracked and analysed.

The study has yielded a strong, fine-grained picture of the writing-related experiences of new undergraduates and has given rise to evidence-based insights that have the potential to inform students, teachers and educational developers in the field of academic writing.

7.3 Generating an academic climate that is itself characterised by a comfort with the discussion of emotion related issues.

First-year students do not just need information about the academic writing process. They also need emotional support, encouragement, structure, and connectedness with others in addition to frequent feedback on their progress. An idea that might be considered here is the provision of an online 'Writing Club' where first-year students can log on to a unique website where they can post information about their daily writing progress, receive feedback from academic writing experts and from other participants in their faculty. This system could serve to make the writing process less intimidating and create a comfortable forum for discussing the writing process in academia.

7.3.1 Research/IT Skills

Greater emphasis should be placed on developing IT and research skills of the students at a much earlier stage. This needs to be investigated within the institution. Interestingly the students do not view their IT skills as being sufficiently academic to use. Adopting the strategy of ensuring that all first-year students are required to use the University's virtual learning environment (Sakai) in order to follow a personalised study programme would ensure that the students developed both the academic and computer-related skills that are necessary to succeed in higher education. An effective Information Literacy programme delivered at the very beginning of the first-year in university could contribute significantly to students' ability to find, use and record information and increase their confidence regarding academic performance.

7.3.2 Induction

One key area for support of first-year students is induction, which is seen as important by researchers in the area of retention for enabling adjustment to the higher education culture. Induction of first-year students is often criticised for being confusing, sometimes overly bureaucratic and, whilst providing information, not providing it in a user-friendly way and in a context that can be readily assimilated. It would enhance the first-year student experience at the University of Limerick if the induction process extended beyond the traditional period of up to a week.

7.4 Emotions and skills may be intrinsically linked with implications for a holistic approach to student support.

It is possible that emotions and skills may be intrinsically linked therefore the value and validity of embracing the emotional dimension in first-year academic writing is important. This requires concerted effort to provide a carefully structured pathway between a 'sink or swim' approach to support for learning and a 'spoon feeding' one that stifles creativity and autonomous learning.

7.5 The provision of customised, one-to-one work with individual students.

Providing tailor designed one-to-one sessions to suit the individual students' learning style and educational needs helping the student to use their strengths should be considered. Assistance with content-specific writing skills be made available to first-year students. This of course has resource implications especially where class sizes are large.

7.6 Recommendations and Directions for Future Research Emerging from the Research Analysis

Upcraft and Gardner (1989) have pointed out that success for the first-year student is much more than earning a sufficient degree classification but is also about making progress on educational and personal development. Although this study has presented an informative snapshot, changes in students' attitudes and strategies in academic writing need to be chronicled over the course of their transition process. This would provide invaluable information on the transition process that takes place in student academic writing at the very early stages in higher education.

7.7 Directions for future research

7.7.1 Larger sample

Future research in this area of first-year academic writing could benefit from using a larger sample of students from both within the University of Limerick an on a broader scale across the third level sector. Such a study would provide more transferable and generalisable insights into how first-year students approach early academic writing.

7.7.2 Link to performance

Students' beliefs about their own academic writing capabilities and their judgements of their own self-worth are very important factors in motivation and influence their academic achievement. Future research to try to establish the degree to which actual academic performance can be linked to levels of self-awareness and other categories of writing-related experiences would be valuable to explore the relationship between writing confidence, writing competence and writing performance.

7.7.3 More longitudinal tracking

This study has provided only a snapshot of the first-year experience with academic writing at two particular points in time that were temporally very close together. Longitudinal research which tracks the progress of a particular group (or cohort) of first-year students over a longer time would provide more in-depth information on their experience.

It could also inform us on the specific issues of concern at the various stages of the students' writing experiences. This longitudinal data is required to develop a more robust evaluation of particular interventions and initiatives aimed at addressing the smooth transition from second level essay writing to university academic writing.

7.7.4 Possibly gendered aspects of academic writing

Future research might identify if there are gender differences in writing experiences and achievements of first-year students. This research could identify if there is a need to pay more attention to any gendered aspects of the teaching and learning practices as well as the educational context in general. It could also add to some of the existing literature on academic writing that suggests that there are strong gendered related dimensions associated with academic writing (e.g. Murray and Moore, 2006).

7.7.5 Relate these early writing related experiences to other aspects and dimensions of learning

Research that would compare the early writing related experiences of first-year students with other aspects and dimensions of learning could help to explore what wider learning dynamics and approaches impact on students' academic writing.

7.7.6 Compare early student writing journeys to later students (3rd and 4th year) or to postgraduate experiences

It would be interesting to compare the writing journeys of first-year students to that of 3rd or 4th year and even postgraduate students and such a comparison could be useful in curriculum and programme development, assisting for example with the identification of writing-related learning outcomes that are appropriate at different stages of undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

7.8 Reflection on the Research Process

This study used a qualitative research instrument to collect data on the writing experiences of first-year students. The semi-structured interviews that were carried out provided a rich source of data on the profiles and experiences of nine first-year

students at the University of Limerick. Although this study was primarily concerned with how the first-year students recounted their experiences with academic writing, the findings could also have been informed by additional statistical data.

This has been argued by Hartley and Chestworth (2000) that issues arising from qualitative studies need to be followed up by quantitative ones.

In the present context, the students who were interviewed provide views of different perspectives on academic writing. It should be noted that this study employed a convenience sample and, therefore, cannot claim to be representative of the views of all first-year students, regarding the whole of first-year academic writing in higher education.

These interviews can point to important questions and connections that might not otherwise be raised. The findings clearly show that this particular sample of students interviewed did not regard themselves as poor, reluctant, or unpractised writers. Many of the students reported that they 'loved' to write and identified their own writing difficulties as part of an emotional and cognitive adjustment to the rigors of academic writing. Readers often misrepresent perceived writing problems as grammatical and syntactic when they are rhetorical (Harris and Witte, 1980). Interestingly while technical and rule-bound aspects of the academic writing process were mentioned as problematic, the research interviews revealed that the more substantial issues for students as they tackled their first writing task in a higher education setting, related to issues of confidence, adjustment, immersion, practice and feedback.

The use of a survey method such as a questionnaire would undoubtedly have allowed for responses from a larger sample of first-year students. However, because interviews provide more in-depth information and also allow for the interviewer to probe more deeply into certain topics, it was selected as the research instrument for this study. Participation in the study was voluntary. The students were enthusiastic and keen to talk abut their experiences, both positive and negative.

In recognition of the significant role they played, each student was contacted personally at the start of their second year and the researcher is happy to report that all students completed their first-year and were starting their second year at university.

7.9 Summary

For this sample of students many factors are involved in influencing the academic writing-related experiences, processes and activities and from the data explored in this study, these factors seem to be both emotional and cognitive in nature.

In particular, the study suggests that students in this sample underwent predominantly positive changes in their writing-related experiences that writing related emotions are as important as writing related skills and supports and that writing experiences are individualistic and idiosyncratic.

Despite these idiosyncrasies, the findings indicate that for the sample of students studied, a number of common and interacting influences shape academic writing. These include struggles with finding one's voice in academic writing, issues associated with lack of confidence and uncertainty about the nature of the writing tasks, the role of writing related feedback, the importance of enjoyment and motivation, as well as that of parameters, clear guidance and instruction. The adoption of time management strategies, the achievement of both subject-related and mental focus, and the development of emerging competence all clearly have played a role in the experiences that these students described and discussed while this research was being gathered.

It is hoped that this research will stimulate a broader and more contextualised debate around the role of these factors in academic writing. Certainly, there remains more to be explored about the nature of the benefits and challenges associated with students' early writing experiences, only some of which have been investigated and illuminated in this study.

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Appendix A: 1st Year Writing Questions

In general do you like to write?

Tell me about a time when you wrote a good article? What was it like for you? Why do you think you did so well?

1. What is your attitude to writing?

    - Confidence
    - Motivation
    - Self-knowledge

2. What Strategies will you use?

    - Deadlines
    - Sharing
    - Discipline
    - Write a plan

3. What do you think will be the barriers for you to write?

    - Lack of time
    - Pressure of work
    - Lack of motivation
    - Anxiety

4. What skills will you use for writing?

    - Planning
    - Understanding criteria
    - Writing efficiently

5. What is your understanding of research? Do you think it will be relevant to your first written assignment?

6. Where do you think you might go to get information to help you find out more about the topic you're writing about?

    - Library
    - Internet (Academic creditability)

7. What do you know/think about the rules of writing? (Referencing, Bibliographies, Plagiarism)

8. How do you feel about the use of grammar, styles, and tenses?

9. How confident do you think you will be in presenting your own opinions and ideas in assignments?

10. How important are good grades to you?

11. What do you feel about the prospect of assessment and your own sense of worth? What do you think your reaction will be to assessment?

Appendix B: Information Sheet

Are you interested in participating in a research study on the experiences of first-year students in approaching early academic writing at the University of Limerick?

I work at the Centre for Teaching and Learning and I am currently a studying for my Masters degree and would like to talk with you about your experiences with academic writing.

Participation in this study will involve being interviewed on two occasions during this academic year, early in the autumn semester and again early in the spring semester.

Interviews will be held at a time and venue to suit you and will take no longer than one hour. Confidentiality is assured at all times.

If you are interested in participating and would like further details please contact:

Maura Murphy
Postgraduate Researcher
Centre for Teaching and Learning
Millstream Courtyard Building
Tel: (061) 202034 or Mobile (087) 6578841
Email: maura.murphy@ul.ie

Appendix C: Consent Form

Project Title: 'Exploring the experience of first-year students in approaching early academic writing'.

Researcher:
Maura Murphy **Tel: 061 – 202034**
Masters Student **Mobile 087 – 6578841**
Centre for Teaching Email: maura.murphy@ul.ie
And Learning
University of Limerick

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study which will take place between November '05 and March '06. This form outlines the purposes of the study and provides a description of your involvement and rights as a participant. A copy of this form signed by you and by the researcher will be kept by both parties.

The purpose of this study is to look at the experiences of first-years in approaching early academic writing. In order to collect information for this study, I intend to carry out two interviews with each participant the first interview, early in the Autumn Semester and the second interview early in the Spring Semester.

You are encouraged to ask any questions at any time about the nature of the study and the methods that I am using. Your suggestions and concerns are important to me so please contact me at any time at the address/phone number/email address listed above.

I guarantee that the following conditions will be met:

- Your real name will not be used at any point of information collection, or in the thesis. Pseudonyms will be used in all verbal and written records.
- The interview will only be audio taped if you give written permission to do so.
- Your participation in this research is voluntary. If at any point during the course of either of the interviews you wish to withdraw or not answer a particular question, you have the right to do so.
- A copy of the interview transcript will be made available to you should you wish to check it for accuracy.

Do you give permission to be quoted directly?

Yes _____ No _____

Do you give permission to be audio taped?

Yes _____ No _____

I agree to the terms
Interviewee _____ Date _____

I agree to the terms
Researcher _____ Date _____

Appendix D: University of Strathclyde

APPLICATION FORM FOR UNIVERSITY ETHICS COMMITTEE

This form applies to research with human participants undertaken by staff or students of the University of Strathclyde which falls within the remit of the University Ethics Committee (see Code of Practice, para 5.1) or the Departmental Ethics Committees (see Code of Practice, para 5.2).

However, this form should NOT be used for any research involving clinical trials (see Code of Practice, para 2(vii)) or medicinal products, nor for research involving staff, patients, facilities, data, tissue, blood or organ samples from the National Health Service. Applications for ethical approval for research involving the National Health Service in any way must be made under the governance arrangements for National Health Service Research Ethics Committees (see Code of Practice, para 3.2(d)) using the form issued by COREC (see Code of Practice, para 6.1).

Information sheets for volunteers and consent forms to be used in this study should be submitted with the application form for consideration by the Committee.

The application will be judged entirely on the information provided in this form and any accompanying documentation - full grant proposals to funding bodies should not be attached.

1. <u>Chief Investigator</u>

Name: Dr Rowena Murray
Status: Reader
Department: Educational and Professional Studies
Contact details: Telephone: 0141 950 3066
E-mail: r.e.g.murray@strath.ac.uk

2. <u>Other Strathclyde Investigator(s)</u>

Name(s): Dr June Mitchell

……

Status (e.g. staff, post/undergraduate):

……..

Department(s): Educational and Professional Studies……...

If student(s), name of supervisor:

……..

Contact details: Telephone: ……..

E-mail: ……..

Please provide details for all researchers involved in the study

3. Non-Strathclyde collaborating investigator(s)

Name(s): Maura Murphy
Status: Centre for Teaching and Learning
Department/Institution: University of Limerick, Limerick Ireland
If student(s), name of supervisor: Dr Rowena Murray
……..
Contact details: Telephone: +353-61-202034
E-mail: maura.Murphy@ul.ie

Please provide details for all researchers involved in the study

4. Title of the research:

'An exploratory study of the first-year student experience of academic essay writing and individual strategies pursued'.

5. Where will the research be conducted? (Note that the Committee reserves the right to visit testing sites and facilities)

At the University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland

6. Duration of the research (years/months): 2 years
(Expected) start date: September 2005
(Expected) completion date: September 2007

7. Sponsor:

8. Funding body (if applicable):
Status of proposal – if seeking funding (Please tick as appropriate):
i) in preparation ……..
ii) submitted
iii) proposal accepted by funding body:

Date of submission of proposal:

Date of commencement of funding:

9. Research objectives:

Brief outline of the background, purpose and possible benefits of the research.

Background

Essay writing remains a common feature of undergraduate coursework assessment and requires a considerable amount of effort and skill on the part of students. The qualities of good writing are assumed to be self-evident, and largely a matter of learning and mastering universal rules of, for example, grammar, usage and text organisation.

Purpose

The aim of this study is to explore and understand the complexity and diversity of first-year student writing in university contexts.

Possible benefits

A further objective of this research will be to contribute towards a richer, more comprehensive understanding of students' difficulties with interpretation of what is expected of them in essay writing.

10. Nature of the participants:

Number: 9

Age (range): 18-50 years

Gender of volunteers: M and F

Recruitment method(s): Contact by researcher

Inclusion/exclusion criteria (if appropriate): All first-year students

Screening procedure (if appropriate): NA

Any special skills, attributes, medical conditions?: None

Any vulnerable participants (see Code of Practice, annex 2)?: None

Justifications for sample size (e.g. power calculations)?: NA

11. <u>What consents will be sought and how</u>?

(Consent forms and participator information sheets (and questionnaires where used) should be appended to this application or forwarded to the secretary of the University Ethics Committee when they are prepared and before the research begins. Ethical approval for the project will only be conditional until the Committee has approved the consent forms and information sheets as well).

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12. <u>Methodology</u>

Design: What kind of design is to be used in the research (e.g. interview, experimental, observation, randomised control trial, etc.)?:

Interviews

Techniques: What methods will be employed and what exactly is required of participants?

Each participant will attend two interviews.

Reference should be made to any of the following to be used in the research:

Invasive techniques

Use of drugs, foods, liquids

Any deception

Physical exertion

Manipulation of stress/anxiety

Intimate and/or confidential information being sought (see Code of Practice, para 5.1).

Acquisition of bodily fluids or tissue

Access to confidential data (e.g. medical reports)

None

The duration of the study for participants and frequency of testing (if repeat testing is necessary)

2 x 1 hour (in four months)

13. Potential risks or hazards:

Full details should be given of any potential risks or discomfort for participants, any burdens imposed and any preparatory requirements (e.g. special diet, exercise), as well as any steps/procedures taken to minimize these risks and/or discomforts.

NA

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14. Any payment to be made:

Include reference to reimbursements for time or expenses incurred, plus any additional fee/incentive for participation.

NA

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15. What debriefing, if any, will be given to volunteers?

Researcher will discuss findings with participants.

16. What are the expected outcomes of the research? How will these be disseminated?

Will you seek to publish the results?

Expected outcomes: Insights in student approaches to early academic writing.

Dissemination and publication: Future conference paper and journal article

17. Nominated person (and contact details) to whom participants' concerns/questions should be directed before, during or after the research.

Dr Rowena Murray

18. Previous experience of the researcher(s) with the procedures involved.

Participation in qualitative study of similar topic

19. <u>Generic approval</u>: if approval is sought for several separate pieces of research, all employing the same basic methodology and serving the same overall objective, then generic approval can be sought for a 3-year period. Give, <u>on a separate sheet</u>, further details about additional studies to be covered by this approval application, using the relevant headings (1-16 above), and drawing attention to any variations in methodology, participants, risks, etc. Student projects can also be submitted via Generic approval – see Code of Practice on Investigations on Human Beings, Section 6.3.

20. Sponsorship

This application requires the University to sponsor the investigation. I am aware of the implications of University sponsorship of the investigation and have assessed this investigation with respect to sponsorship and management risk. I agree on behalf of the University that the University is the appropriate sponsor of the investigation and there are no management risks posed by the investigation.

Signature of Head of Department

………………………………………………..

Date: ………………………

21. Declaration

I have read the University's Code of Practice on Investigations on Human Beings and have completed this application accordingly.

Signature of Applicant/Chief Investigator

………………………………………………..

Signature of Head of Department

………………………………………………..

Date: ………………………

* *

Notes

1. If there is any variation to any aspect of the research (location, investigators, methodology, risks, etc.) then the Secretary to the Ethics Committee should be notified in writing immediately.

2. Should anything occur during the project which may prompt ethical questions for any similar projects the lead investigator should notify the Ethics Committee.

3. Insurance and other approval requirements from appropriate external bodies must also be in place **before** the project can commence.

* *
* * * *

For applications to the University Ethics Committee this completed form should be sent (electronically or hard copy) to Research and Consultancy Services in the first instance.

Appendix E: Integrating learner support, skills and orientations for new Humanities students: a joint proposal from UL's CTL, Humanities CTB and The Regional Writing Centre

Introduction

This brief document outlines the key proposed components of an eight-hour programme for new students in the College of Humanities and Social Science. It is designed to be delivered during the first 2 weeks of semester as a compulsory programme for new Humanities students, and aimed to provide and develop some of the key skills and orientations required for students making the crucial transition from second to third level education. The plan is that the eight hours will be delivered during scheduled tutorial times by trained postgraduate students who will be recruited and trained to deliver this programme during the summer months.

Programme content

Autumn Semester '08

Session 1: Learning styles and orientations (gauging own learning styles, exploring what this means for own learning activities and techniques, generating stronger self awareness of study and learning preferences)

Session 2: Becoming a critical thinker (asking the right questions, learning how to look for issues, conclusions, reasons, values, assumptions etc and learning to evaluate the effectiveness of arguments and evidence)

Session 3: Information Management (navigating the library, using online information gathering resources, differentiating between different types and quality of information, citation, referencing and plagiarism)

Session 4: Becoming an active learner (analysing own motivation levels, understanding the difference between active and passive learning, taking ownership of autonomous and self directed approach to learning)

Session 5: Learning to work collaboratively, setting up peer partnerships and generating your own learning strategy and time management plan.

Spring Semester '09

Session 1: Exploring the career options relating to your degree. Finding opportunities to develop the skills required by employers. Using the Careers Service and online resources to help you assess your own interests, skills, abilities and personality style as part of your career planning.

Session 2: Academic writing 1 (learning to associate writing with self expression, creativity and fun – freewriting ?)

Session 3: Academic writing 2 (developing a stronger understanding of the qualities of academic writing –
referencing, drafting and redrafting, argumentation, academic writing style, coherence and academic rhetoric).

Session 4: Academic writing 3: How to write outstanding essays in any topic.

Session 5: Becoming an independent/autonomous language learner (discovering the services and support offered to language learners – Language Resource Area, Language Support Unit, learning to select appropriate material both in the resource centre and online, introduction to the LSU Virtual Learning Environment).

Process of delivery

It is envisaged that each session would be accompanied by an active learning exercise in which all students will participate.
'Take home' resources will be provided for each session and these materials will focus on creating a 'scaffold' for each student to use throughout the first semester. *The aim will be to deliver a highly focused, engaging and effective learner skills programme which would orientate students towards learning in higher education more swiftly, ensure that they become socially and academically integrated in the very first weeks of their time at UL, and inform them of learner supports that they can avail of throughout their time at UL.*

An additional effect will be the development of a trained cohort of postgraduates whose new expertise in facilitating engaging learning sessions and basic principles of pedagogy will enhance the subsequent teaching and learning activities in which they will be involved, with clear benefits for their students.

Next steps:

Once the key components (see 1 to 10 above) have been agreed and elaborated, the project can proceed to detailed design phase. This will involve:

1. Identifying those who will design and write up each of the 10 components (e.g. CTL can design 1, 2, 4 and 5; regional writing centre can design 5, 6 and 7 – will need perhaps some input from angelica risquez and the library for session 3)
2. Finalising, editing and printing programme materials (editorial input from Brian Goggin of wordwrights - to be confirmed) – printing of materials for teachers – SNAP printing.
3. Drafting a schedule for the recruitment and training of postgraduates.

4. Aim to deliver first pilot of this programme in the first two weeks of the autumn semester to all first-year students on humanities programmes.
5. Further possible developments to be discussed (e.g. evaluation of pilot and follow-up programme for same group of students in semester 2).