

## The State of Academic Writing in Kenyan Universities: Making a Case for Kenyan Universities to Re-conceptualize Their Approach to Teaching Academic Writing

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This study surveyed faculty and university students—both undergraduate and graduate—to find out how Kenyan universities approach teaching academic writing, the effectiveness of those approaches, issues with those approaches, and changes those institutions could make to effectively prepare students for the kind of writing they are expected to engage in at the university level. The study established that public universities and private universities in Kenya, except those with affiliation with American universities, teach writing through a Communication Skills (CS) course. The course has several limitations related to how it is structured (it is too broad) and how it is taught (the classes are too big). This study concluded that one CS course is inadequate to prepare students with the kind of skills they need to navigate academic discourse. The authors recommend that Kenyan universities retain the CS course as an orientation course focusing on study skills but introduce at least one course designated to teach academic writing. The authors also recommend Kenyan universities introduce a writing course within disciplines to familiarize students with writing conventions of their discipline. Universities should also offer a writing course for post graduate students.

Key words: Kenya, universities, academic writing, discourse, communication skills

## The State of Academic Writing in Kenyan Universities: Making a Case for Kenyan Universities to Re-conceptualize Their Approach to Teaching Academic Writing

David Bartholomae (1986), in his seminal article, “Inventing the University,” highlights the challenges university students face as they try to navigate the language of academia. This struggle is inevitable; these students are outsiders of the discourse community they are trying to master. It is the recognition of this reality that students joining universities in the United States of America are required to take First Year writing courses. Kenyan universities also offer some form of writing instruction. However, it was not until the replacement of the 7-4-2-3 system of education (seven years of primary, four years of secondary, two years of high school—also referred to as A-levels—and three years of university education) with the 8-4-4 system (eight years of primary, four years of high school, and four years of university education) that Kenyan universities started teaching first year students some topics on writing, through the newly created Communication Skills (CS) course. The course is designed to cover a myriad of skills and concepts—from study skills, to basics of oral and verbal communication, to basic topics on writing. This architecture of the course, compounded with its focus on teaching concepts of writing rather than students engaging in actual writing, in addition to large class sizes, raises concerns about its effectiveness. There is also no evidence that the course is designed to address specific academic writing needs that students are expected to master for effective communication in the various courses they enroll for at the university. This potentially makes the course lack sufficient relevance to the students’ learning needs.

By surveying students, both undergraduates and postgraduates, and faculty, this study sought to investigate the state of academic writing in Kenyan universities. The qualitative study focused on how Kenyan universities approach teaching academic writing, the effectiveness of

those approaches, and ways those institutions could reconfigure how they approach writing instruction to meet the writing needs of their students. Findings of the study led the authors to conclude that the way writing is currently taught in Kenyan public and some private universities is inadequate to equip students with the necessary knowledge and skills to make them proficient in academic discourse at both local and global levels. Universities need to reflect on the students' academic writing needs and restructure the design and delivery of writing instruction to ensure that students are equipped with hands-on, practical writing skills rather than just learning concepts about writing. This requires offering at least one course designated to teach academic writing. By incorporating an academic writing course, Kenyan universities would more effectively help students, as Bartholomae (1986) suggests, to “[locate] themselves within the discourse of a particular community,” which is the academic discourse community (p. 11).

### **Literature review**

Understanding the history of teaching writing in other universities in the world may help inform Kenyan universities on how to approach teaching of academic writing. For instance, the teaching of writing is an established field in American universities. Welch (1990) traces the American preference for “systematic” composition instruction to classical Greece. That Greece would consider writing crucial to their nascent democracy project is similar to how social justice is a major component in many composition course designs in America (Soles, 2007, p. 9). Teaching of writing was adopted across Europe, but it was Charles Eliot, the president of Harvard University in the United States of America, between 1869 and 1909, who created the first modern, “genuine” composition program (Brereton, 1995; Berlin, 1990). A confluence of factors informed Eliot’s commitment to composition. These factors included the desire to

counter the influence of the German university model that diminished the place of rhetoric and composition in academe, and the expansion of knowledge that allowed Eliot to elevate English to the level of traditionally esteemed disciplines. In addition, the exponential increase in student enrollment meant the university was no longer a preserve of a small elite. Eliot seized the opportunity to transform the university, with English composition being a central pillar to this transformation (Brereton, 1995).

Three of the factors stated above mirror the current Kenyan university situation. Interaction between Kenyan universities and foreign universities is unprecedented. The influence of the British university on the Kenyan university was inevitable considering Kenya was a British colony; in fact, the first Kenyan university, the Royal College of Nairobi, which later became the University of Nairobi, was a constituent college of the University of London (Mulinge and Arasa, 2017, P. 12). Influence of the American university, on the other hand, has increased over the years. The *Airlift to America* initiative cemented American influence in Kenya, including the Kenyan university. The goal of the project was to give Kenyan students an opportunity to obtain university education in American universities. It was a collaboration of Tom Mboya, the Kenyan charismatic labor movement leader and one of the prominent leaders in Kenya's struggle for independence, and influential African American personalities—namely Martin Luther King Jr., Jackie Robinson, Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier, and William X. Scheinman. J. F. Kennedy, the US president at the time, and the US State Department were integral players in the project. The US government was eager to eclipse British influence in Kenya in the waning days of colonization and to counter the emerging Soviet influence in Kenya, a common trend in the cold war era. About 800 Kenyans obtained education in American universities through the initiative (Shachtman, 2009). Even with the end of the *Airlift* project,

American universities continue to attract many Kenyans seeking higher education. American global influence due to globalization also plays a large role in the continued influence of American universities on Kenyan universities. Another effect of globalization is the shift to a knowledge based economic development paradigm. This has placed a premium on higher education in Kenya (Chege, 2015). Student enrollment in Kenyan universities has also grown exponentially since the year 2000 (Chege, 2018, 2015).

These paradigm shifts place a high demand on Kenyan university graduates to demonstrate academic abilities that match those of their counterparts from other parts of the world. Proficiency in academic writing will certainly have a major effect on the quality of such a graduate. Although there are many mediums and modalities of disseminating knowledge and participating in global intellectual discourse, the written medium remains the most predominant. As Canagarajah (2002) observes, one reason the Third World countries' voice continues to be marginalized in global intellectual discourse is failure by institutions in those countries to give academic writing the prominence it deserves, which would support them on the global stage (p. 44). Kenyan universities need to respond to these emerging factors in the same way Harvard did, by giving academic writing prominence to match these local and global dynamics.

Typically, universities offer writing courses to train students to master the language of academia, to prepare students for the kind of writing they will be expected to engage in at the university (Bartholomae, 1986). Teaching of writing is also informed by the recognition that writing is an important tool for learning and demonstrating learning, for teaching critical thinking, for fostering personal intellectual and cognitive development, and for preparing students to write proficiently in the workplace (Maimon, Peritz, and Yancey, 2010; Soles, 2007; Emig, 1977). Achieving these objectives require, as was the case of Harvard University, creating

a “systematic” composition program. It, therefore, behoves Kenyan universities to design a writing program and writing courses that will facilitate achievement of these goals.

Kenyan universities did not teach writing, through a formal course for all students, until the first cohort of the 8-4-4 system of education joined the university in 1990. The new education system faced resistance from the onset, mainly because many educators felt that the two years of “A-levels”, or high school, were necessary for students’ academic maturity. They considered students who went through the 8-4-4 system underprepared for college education. Espousing this view, Muchiri (2002) argues that reducing the length of time students spent in high school contributed to poor writing standards among students joining the university because it is in high school where “academic English” is taught. However, this proposition is problematic for several reasons. First, it presupposes that high schools in the previous system taught academic writing, but there is no evidence to support that argument. It is probable students who went through A-levels were more proficient in academic writing, but it could have been due to more practice with writing longer papers at that level rather than being taught writing. Second, Muchiri’s argument also presumes that teaching academic writing is the responsibility of high schools, not universities. As Bartholomae (1986) demonstrates vividly, a view that is rooted in composition theory and research, the university is a distinct discourse community, and students joining the university need training to master the conventions of that discourse community. This means universities cannot outsource teaching college writing to high schools, no matter how well high schools can teach writing. The demands of academic writing at university levels are certainly at a different level than the high school level. This means that universities can only build on basic writing skills that students acquire at high school, but not abdicate the responsibility of continuing to teach writing skills students will be expected to master in order to write at the

university level.

In response to the misgivings educators had about the academic preparedness of the students graduating from Form Four in the 8-4-4 system, universities, in collaboration with the Kenyan government and the Overseas Development Administration agency of the British government (ODA), introduced a Communication Skills (CS) course in 1990. Many scholars have analyzed the capacity of CS to effectively equip students with academic writing skills. Muchiri (2002) is of the view that the course, as well as English for Academic Purposes (EAP), a variant of CS, are inadequate replacements of the time students should have spent in high school learning “academic English.” She discusses writing practices, attitudes, skills and concepts teachers need to embrace and inculcate in their students, as well as writing pedagogies teachers need to embrace; but her piece does not address what universities need to do to address the limitations of the CS course to make academic writing instruction effective.

Like Muchiri, Kurgatt (1995) begins his research on the writing needs of students enrolled in the Department of Agriculture at Egerton University by reviewing the history of CS. His review identifies circumstances that may have contributed to the challenges emblematic of the course. As he points out, the course faced resistance from educators since its inception—resistance to the way it was conceptualized, materials that were developed to teach the course, and how it was implemented. Secondly, it was designed to be a year-long course, but it has remained a one-semester course. Thirdly, it was to be complemented with writing instruction within disciplines, which was not implemented. Kurgatt, like Muchiri, focuses on the limitations of CS and students’ struggles with writing but not how to address those challenges.

Chege (2006) corroborates Muchiri’s and Kurgatt’s views on the limitations of how Kenyan universities approach teaching of academic writing. For his research project, he

interviewed graduates from Kenyan universities to find out their experiences with academic writing when they were students. He also interviewed university lecturers to find out what they thought about their students' writing proficiency. Most graduates interviewed stated academic writing was not taught at the university, particularly those who went through the 7-4-2-3 system. Those graduates reported that they were expected to figure out on their own how to write academic papers. The assumption was that they learned writing in high school. Some of those who went through the 8-4-4 system, on the other hand, indicated they were taught writing through CS, but that the course was not helpful. They were of the view that it focused on "theory" rather than "actual" writing. A participant characterized the course as "shallow" in scope and that it focused on "less important aspects of writing", such as how to write a bibliography, rather than how to actually "organize" a paper, "details of how to write well". The respondents attributed these issues to, among other things, the large number of students enrolled in those classes. Lecturers that were interviewed had similar sentiments. They characterized their students' writing as "wanting", which, like Muchiri, they attributed to the change in the Kenyan education system, particularly the elimination of the A-levels. A lecturer described the CS course as a "disaster" due to its focus on "theory" rather than "practice". Most lecturers also observed that large class sizes made the course ineffective (Chege, 2006, p. 186-187).

Kioko (2009) provides arguably the most accurate depiction of the state of academic writing in Kenyan universities. Her study reveals that only private universities, with affiliation to American universities—the United States International University-Africa (USIU), Daystar University (DU), and Africa Nazarene University (ANU)—offer writing courses in the style of First Year writing courses in American universities. She contrasts this approach with public universities that teach writing through CS. Her findings lead her to conclude that the CS lacks



the capacity to address the enormous challenges students have with writing. She recommends that all universities should offer at least two writing courses that focus explicitly on the writing process.

The challenges Kenyan universities are facing with academic writing are further highlighted in the 2013 Commission of University Education (CUE) Newsletter. The Commission decried the many cases of academic dishonesty in universities. Although the report focused on writing among postgraduate students, one can extrapolate that those challenges cascade to undergraduate writing. It is inconceivable that graduate students acquired academic writing skills at the undergraduate level and failed to demonstrate them at the graduate level. It was in this backdrop that this study was conceptualized: to not only investigate the state of academic writing in Kenyan universities but also to recommend specific ways these universities could address those challenges.

### **Methodology**

The primary instrument used in this study was a survey. Three categories of participants were targeted: undergraduate students, graduate students, and university faculty. A total of 508 participants were recruited—389 (or 77.3%) undergraduate students, 63 (or 12.5%) graduate students, and 59 (or 10.5%) faculty. The participants were recruited from six universities— four public universities and two private universities. The four public universities were the University of Nairobi (UON), Kenyatta University (KU), Moi University (MU), and Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (JKUAT). These were chosen because they represent the earliest established public universities, before the exponential growth of the sector to the current thirty-one public universities (CUE, 2018). Furthermore, most of the newer universities started as campuses of these six universities, and their traditions and practices mirror those of the

older universities. Besides, the four are larger than the newer ones. Egerton University is among the older universities but was not included because of logistical factors that made it inaccessible to the researchers. The United States International University-Africa (USIU) and Mount Kenya University (MKU) are the two private universities used in the study. USIU was chosen because it is one of the oldest private universities in the country and because it has an established writing program designed along the American model. MKU was chosen because it is indigenous in its founding and structure; it also has no affiliation with foreign universities. It is also arguably the fastest growing private university in Kenya in terms of student enrollment and academic programs.

The language background of students was not a factor in this study. Most Kenyans are multilingual. The first level of language use in Kenya is the mother tongue—most people speak their mother tongue at home. There are about forty ethnic languages in Kenya. Ethnic languages are also spoken outside the home in areas where one ethnic community is predominant. The second level of language use is Swahili. It is the national language, the language that unifies the country. It is the language of interaction among communities. It is also one of the official languages, although this status is yet to be entrenched. Although it is taught in schools, even people without formal education speak Swahili; they learn the language informally through its widespread usage. The third level is English. It is the official language; the language that is used for instruction in schools, government offices, and big business. English is taught as a subject throughout primary and high school, and it is also the language of instruction from Kindergarten. Since English is learned in school, people who speak the language are those who have received formal education. All students who join the university are expected to be fluent in English by having learned and used the language from Kindergarten.

The number of participants per institution and gender information is presented below in

Table 1.

Table 1

*Students Composition per University*

University	Number of participants	Percentage
United States International University-Africa (USIU)	94	24.1
Kenyatta University (KU)	79	20.3
Mount Kenya University (MKU)	76	19.5
Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (JKUAT)	65	16.7
Moi University (MU) (Nairobi Campus)	35	8.9
University of Nairobi (UON)	32	8.2
Other Universities	8	2.3
Total	389	100.0

As reflected in the table above, 24.1% of the undergraduate participants were from the United States International University-Africa, 20.3% from Kenyatta University, 19.5% from Mount Kenya University, 16.7% from Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (JKUAT), 8.9% from Moi University (Nairobi Campus), 8.2% from University of Nairobi (UON), and 2.3% from other universities.

## **Gender of Respondents**

Out of the 389 undergraduate participants, 174 (45.7%) were male, 200 (52.4%) were female, and 7 (1.9%) did not identify their gender. Out of the 63 graduate participants, 57.1 % were male and 42.9% were female.

## **Findings**

The survey sought to establish the state of academic writing in Kenyan universities—how the institutions approach teaching academic writing, the effectiveness of those approaches, and changes they could implement to make teaching academic writing more effective. Students' gender and the category of the school they attended—boarding versus day school; national, extra-county, county, or sub-county (what in the past were national, provincial, and district schools categories)—had no significant impact on students' responses. They were insignificant variables in the context of this study. The findings of this study are as presented in the following sub-topics.

### **Lecturers Assessment of Students' Writing Standards, and Undergraduate and Postgraduate Students' Perception of their Experience with Academic Writing**

Lecturer participants were asked to provide an assessment of students' academic writing standards. Similarly, student participants, both undergraduates and postgraduates, were asked to describe their experience with academic writing at the university. Figure 1 below presents participants' responses.



*Figure 1.* Lecturer's Assessment of Quality of Students Writing and Students Perception of Experience with Academic Writing

The findings show that the majority of lecturers (59%) rated quality of students writing as good or very good. Similarly, the majority of students (74% undergraduates and 94% postgraduates) described their experience in academic writing as good or very good. But, these numbers, when viewed in isolation, could be misleading. There are evident contradictions when these ratings are triangulated with participants' responses to other questions. For instance, as the following sections will demonstrate, even lecturers who rated students' writing as good or very good expressed concerns about students' writing in their commentary. Similarly, many of the students

who indicated that their experience was very good or good expressed issues they had to deal with regarding academic writing.

### **Lecturers' Commentary on Students Writing Standards**

Lecturers who viewed students' academic writing standards as very good or good indicated that students were able to: effectively convey the message; abide by the required standards of writing, which includes their papers having an introduction, body, conclusion, and well written references; use edited written academic grammar; show creativity; present logical argumentation; and have good documentation ability. Many students were also said to write fairly good proposals under the guidance of supervisors; they were able to reference their work using international standards, such as the American Psychological Association format; and had minimal cases of plagiarism due to strict adherence to originality, referencing and in-text citations. But, some of the same lecturers who rated their students' writing as very good or good qualified their assessment with concerns they had about their students' writing. For instance, a respondent who indicated students writing was very good stated the following caveat: "as students are in their final year they do better. However, there is much room for improvement". A lecturer who rated students writing as good added: "they require to be taught writing skills". Another lecturer stated: [good] "but needs a lot of improvement to reach university standards". These are just a few examples that demonstrate the contradiction between lecturers rating of students' writing and the concerns they expressed.

Lecturers who viewed the quality of students' academic writing as bad or very bad noted prevalence of grammatical, spelling, and punctuation errors in students work. They also pointed out lack of flow and coherence. Several lecturers felt that many of the students were not able to express themselves clearly and coherently.

Students' academic writing standards were also identified by lecturers to be insufficient because most students were said to lack the art of organizing and presenting their ideas logically with unity of thought and cohesion. Lecturers also noted that most students found it difficult to articulate their ideas precisely and coherently. They are mostly very brief in their writing, and most of the times the papers are neither structured, nor detailed enough. They also cited lack of depth in students' writing. Some lecturers indicated that students rely on "copying" and "pasting" of ideas without any indication of ability to understand and synthesize information they include in their writing. This, according to those lecturers, contributes to the students' tendency to plagiarize. A respondent noted that:

Most students just google then copy and paste or they also copy from each other. Some students are just parasites; do not do any research. Most student even fail to indicate the references and sometimes the term papers are shallow. They would write better if they read more.

Most lecturers, including some who indicated students writing was good or very good, were of the view that many students struggle with most facets of using sources in their writing; such as incorporating and synthesizing sources, differentiating between quoting and paraphrasing, and citing sources in the text and reference section.

### **Determinants of Students' Writing Standards**

The survey sought to find out from the lecturers what factors they thought contributed to students' writing standards they had described in the previous question. Lecturers attributed good or very good students writing standards to: universities offering courses, not limited to the Communication Skills course, that gave students guidance and prepared them for academic writing. They also indicated that disciplines that require students to write reports gave students

an opportunity to improve their writing skills. Some lecturers attributed students' good writing standards to individualized mentoring and coaching from lecturers, while some credited the good foundation students received in high school, including the current 8-4-4 system.

Poor writing standards were attributed to poor training in academic writing at the university level, especially lack of adequate training in writing research papers. A lecturer noted that since universities do not emphasize teaching academic writing, lecturers do not expect high writing standards from students. Another lecturer felt that the research methods unit usually comes in the final years of study, hence it is not fully utilized in the early years of study. Most lecturers also attributed lack of proper writing training to the large class sizes. They were of the view that large class sizes made it logistically difficult for in-depth writing instruction.

Other factors lecturers cited to account for poor writing standards included a poor foundation in the teaching of writing in primary school and high school. Lecturers noted that most of the challenges that students exhibited are carried over from high school. This problem, in their view, is further compounded by lack of opportunity to learn the mechanics of academic language, including academic English grammar, at the university level. Some lecturers suggested that exposure to how to write academic papers should begin at the high school level, which is not the case in the current system.

Lecturers also cited too much use of informal language expressions, which is usually acquired through the social media, and influence of students' mother tongues as impacting students' academic writing. In addition, lecturers cited lack of reading culture to help students expand their writing skills as a contributor to poor academic writing standards. Lecturers were also of the view that some students have a poor work ethic and don't like taking their time to read



and study keenly to improve their writing. They cited students' tendency to "copy and paste" and to plagiarize as evidence that students did not value writing. A respondent noted: "Most students do not like writing so when their schedule is full, they give writing less effort. Since academic writing is a tedious process, many students opt for shortcuts and do shoddy work." Clearly, there is a perception among the lecturers that student motivation is a significant influence on the quality of college writing. An important question this highlights is what role the content or style of the writing course plays in student motivation to write.

### **Cause of Students Experience in Academic Writing According to Students**

Students who rated their experience in academic writing as good attributed their experience to being tested on what they had learned, which made them feel comfortable writing those papers. They also attributed their experience to continuous assessment tests that require writing expertise. Doing these tests gave them exposure to academic writing. Some students attributed their good experience to getting assistance from friends in senior classes and their peers, especially when working on group assignments. Some students identified availability of resources, such as books in libraries, and good internet connection as contributing to their good experience.

Many students also attributed their good experience to courses they had taken that helped them with academic writing. For instance, the Communication Skills course was said to have helped them develop verbal and communication skills, which, in their view, greatly aided their academic writing, such as how to reference sources. To some students, having that course taught in the first year exposed them to academic writing. A respondent observed that:

I have had a great experience with academic writing because the university has offered courses [Communication Skills] which has given me enough experience in writing term

papers and other academic papers. The courses explain to us on the best ways to write the report, including the format and the marks awarded for the paper. I also learned much on how academic papers are prepared and what really constitutes the academic paper.

Some students also cited a strong foundation from high school as a contributing factor to their good experience in academic writing at the university. Some of the students felt academic writing was taught more extensively and taken more seriously in their high schools than was the case in their university. Some of the students also attributed their good experience in academic writing to commitment, guidance, and support they received from lecturers. Those students described their lecturers as very committed and friendly. A respondent stated that:

My experience in writing term papers was good because I have been interacting in class with competent lecturers who have done their best and have been of great assistance. They encourage use of wide range of literature sources and I can confidently say that foundation they have given me has been of great value to me.

Other students identified their own initiative and personal attributes as the reason they had a positive experience with academic writing. These included hard work, taking their studies seriously, having a good attitude toward academic writing, and being focused, principled and determined. A respondent noted, “I love writing as part of spending my leisure time and apparently I find no big deal when dealing with one... I feel am good at starting such competitions [sic] to at least further my capabilities.”

On the other hand, students who indicated they had bad experience with academic writing attributed their bad experience to having no prior preparation or guidance by professors on how to write academic papers. They indicated that some lecturers hardly gave them enough information on how to write an academic paper. Some students felt that the Communication

Skills course was not helpful, yet courses that could have helped them with writing, such as the research methods course, were introduced late into their university education. A student noted, “the unit on Research Methods for most of the students is introduced much later during their learning thus little exposure to academic writing. It should be taught in the first year, first semester.” Another respondent observed that:

We are pushed to write term papers in the first semester when we barely have an idea on how to do it being freshmen. Some lecturers are not helpful either. They assume that you are familiar with referencing and formats of term papers.

Some undergraduate respondents also expressed concern in the way teachers taught, or even their teachers’ competence to teach writing. There were also students who indicated that academic writing was not taught in their discipline. A student pursuing medicine observed that they did not write academic papers but reports, which are not so easy to write because they had not had formal classes to learn how to write such reports. Other students indicated that there was inadequate supervision and specific guidelines on how to conduct all activities associated with academic papers, and that, in some cases, appropriate formats were not taught. A respondent stated, “we barely had any term [or academic] papers to do. Our exposure in terms of academic work was limited to the curriculum which gave no room for term papers, presentations or academic papers.” Some students also cited lack of resources at the university as a contributing factor to their bad experience with academic writing. They gave the example of unavailability of reference materials within the university to act as a guide.

### **Cause of Post Graduate Students' Experience**

Like their undergraduate counterparts, some postgraduate students who were having a good experience attributed it to courses universities offered that taught or guided them on how to write academic papers. They noted that their universities taught writing to post graduates through the Research Methods course. Some credited their lecturers for their good experience; lecturers who provided guidelines, such as specifying the required format and citation style, in assignments. Mentoring from lecturers as well as good relationship between lecturers and students were also cited as having contributed to postgraduate students' good experience in academic writing. A respondent noted that "my academic writing has improved significantly thanks to the guidance I received from my instructors and discussions with colleagues." Other postgraduate students attributed their good experience to the writing experience they had gained in their educational and professional careers. For instance, a student cited being a Masters student and having taught for five years as contributing to his good experience with academic writing. Availability of resources was also cited as a reason for good experience in academic writing. A respondent observed that "the university offers a wide range of resources although at undergraduate level I did not know how exactly to use them, especially the online sources such as journals and e-books."

Those with bad experiences, on the other hand, cited lack of training in academic writing when they were undergraduates as the cause. They stated that academic writing was not emphasized, nor was it taught as an independent unit. A respondent stated, "we have little exposure to academic writing because no teaching was done on academic papers in undergraduate." Another noted that "in our university, academic writing is just taught as a by-the-way topic within the course; as an introduction of what it is and nothing beyond that."

### Whether Universities Offer Courses on Academic Writing

The survey sought to find out from the lecturers, undergraduate and postgraduate students whether their universities offer specific courses on academic writing. The results are as presented on Table 2.

Table 2

#### *Whether Universities Offer Courses on Academic Writing*

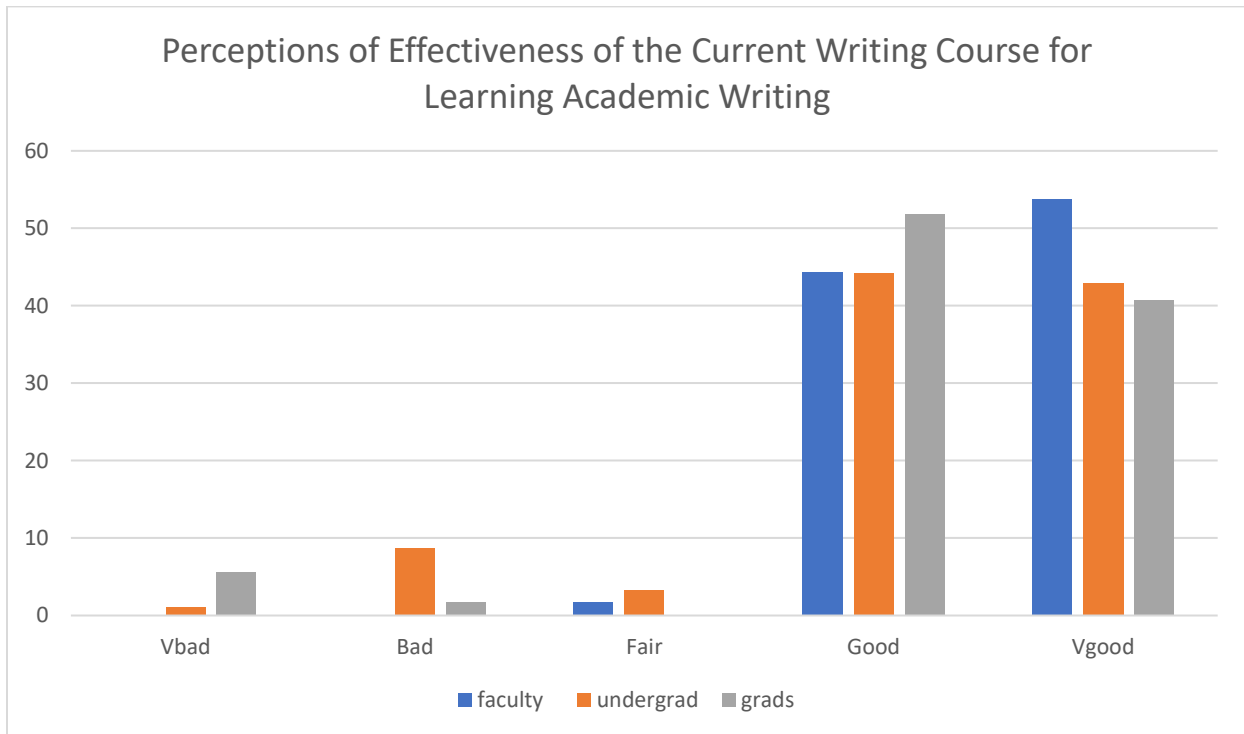
	Lecturers		Undergraduate students		Postgraduate Students	
Response	Number of responses	%	Number of responses	%	Number of responses	%
Yes	42	71.1	240	61.6	54	85.7
Not sure	2	3.3	0	0.0	0	0.0
No	15	25.6	149	38.4	9	14.3
Total	59	100.0	389	100.0	63	100.0

The results show that 71.1% of the lecturers, 61.6% of undergraduate students, and 85.7% of the postgraduate students indicated their university offered courses on academic writing. Only a small minority indicated their university did not offer courses on academic writing.

Communication Skills was identified by most of the lecturers (42.8%) as the course offered by their university to teach academic writing, while 21.4% of the lecturers identified Research Methods. Most postgraduates (46.2%) cited Research Methods as the course their universities use to teach academic writing to postgraduates. 12.9% of postgraduate students cited special seminars. As for undergraduates, 32.5% cited Communication Skills as the course their university offers to teach undergraduates academic writing, while 16.5%, mostly from USIU, cited English.

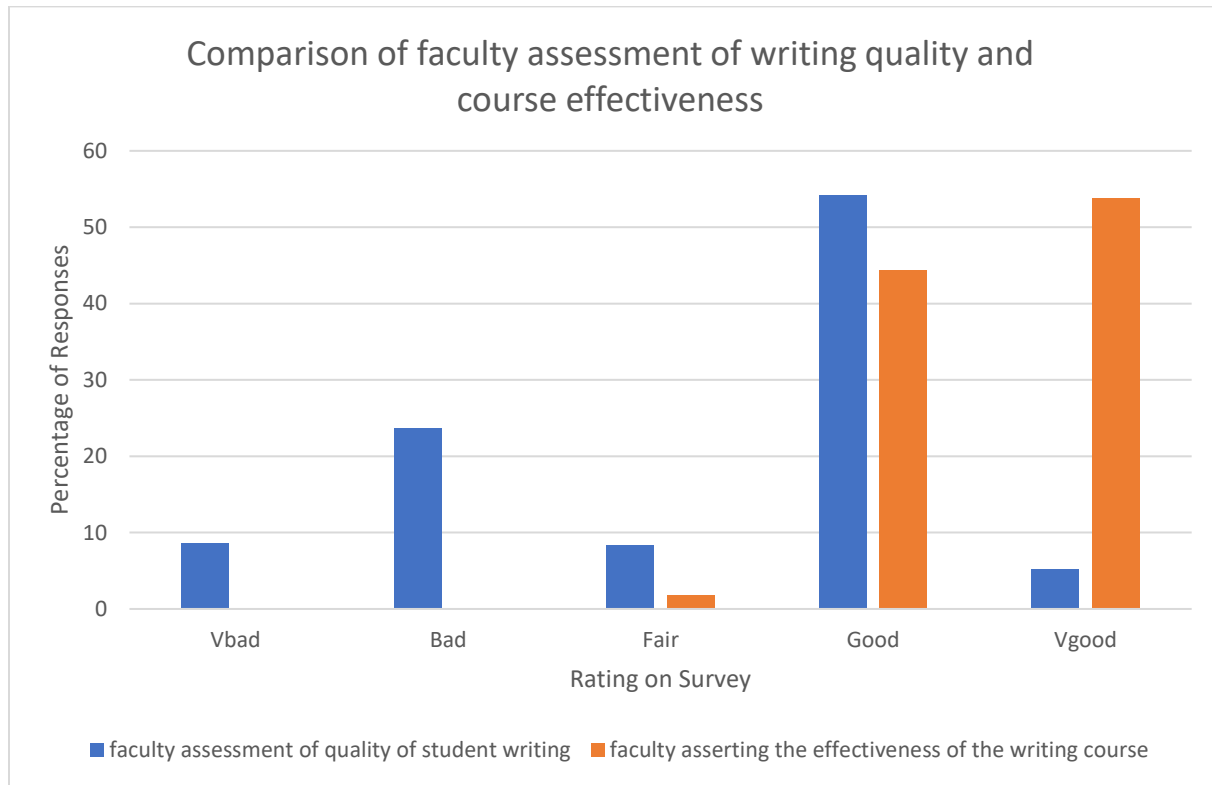
### Effectiveness of Courses Universities use to Teach Academic Writing

The survey also sought to establish what participants thought about the effectiveness of the course(s) their university offered to teach academic writing. The findings are presented in Figure 2 below.



*Figure 2.* Faculty, undergraduate student and graduate student perceptions of effectiveness of courses offered to teach academic writing.

As reflected in the chart above, most participants, both faculty and students, expressed a favorable view on the effectiveness of the courses universities use to teach academic writing—98.2 % of the lecturers, 92.5% of the postgraduates, and 87.1% of the undergraduates viewed the courses as being good or very good. This is yet another case of ratings not matching participants' response to related questions. For instance, Figure 3 below encapsulates this contradiction by comparing lecturers' perception of the effectiveness of courses used to teach academic writing and the quality of students writing.



*Figure 3.* Comparison of lecturers (faculty) perception of course effectiveness and assessment of students writing.

The comparison brings to question how a significant number of lecturers would have issues with students' writing yet at the same time consider the courses used to teach academic writing to be effective. Were they implying that the concerns they had with students' writing were unrelated to writing instruction? The basis for this conflict of assessment is unclear.

### Whether Universities Should Teach Academic Writing

The survey also sought to find out whether participants thought universities should teach academic writing. Students' responses are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3

#### *Participants Response on the Need to Learn Academic Writing*

Response	Undergraduate Students		Postgraduate Students		Lecturers	
	Number of Participants	%	Number of Participants	%	Number of Participants	%
Yes	364	93.5	63	100.0	59	100
No	25	6.5	0	0.0	0	0
Total	389	100.0	63	100.0	59	100.0

The findings show that the majority of participants—93.5% of undergraduates, 100 % of postgraduates, and 100% of lecturers—were in favor of universities offering courses in academic writing. This finding is at the core of this study because it points to an aspect of learning that almost every participant felt needed to be addressed by their university.

### Offering of the Communication Skills Course in Universities

Since literature on academic writing in Kenyan universities showed that most universities use Communication Skills to teach writing, the study sought to investigate what undergraduate students thought about the course, beginning with whether their university offered the course. 359 of the undergraduate students (92.8%) indicated that their school offered the course. Most of those who indicated the course was not offered in their university were in their third or fourth year and could possibly have forgotten that they had taken the course. The researchers speculate students may have forgotten they took the course because they did not pay attention to the course, or they did not find the course useful.



### Undergraduates Perceptions of the Effectiveness of the Communication Skills Course

Undergraduate students who indicated that their university offered the Communication Skills course were asked to state whether they thought the course enhanced their academic writing skills. The findings are as presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4

*Undergraduates' Perception on the Usefulness of the Communication Skills Course*

Response	Number of Participants	Percentage
Very helpful	181	50.4
Helpful	133	37.0
Not sure	25	6.9
Not helpful	20	5.7
Total	359	100.0

The findings show that about 87% of undergraduate respondents found the Communication Skills course helpful or very helpful.

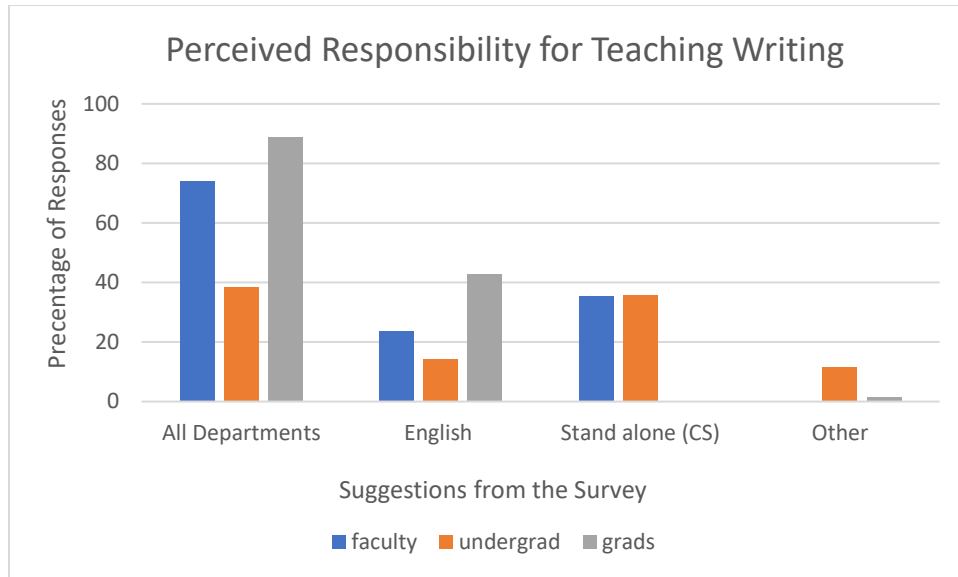
When asked to give reasons for their positive perceptions of the course, some students noted that the oral and communication skills they learned in the course helped them develop confidence and effectiveness in communication. Regarding writing, they indicated that they were taught elements of report writing and basics of writing research papers. They learned skills such as how to conduct academic research, writing citations, formatting academic papers, and writing skills for the workplace. However, many students noted that although it was a good introductory course for academic writing, it was not adequate; that other writing courses were needed to build on skills they learned in the Communication Skills course.

The majority of students who felt the Communication Skills course was not helpful expressed that it is taught as a common course and classes are usually very large. They noted that the large number of students per class, in some cases over 400, makes it difficult for the lecturers to be effective in content delivery and assessment. Most students also observed that the nature of the course, considering it combines general communication and writing skills, makes it too broad, and therefore, inadequate to teach academic writing. Students expressed that the course is shallow and that most of what was taught feels barely relevant to writing. For instance, a respondent observed that only one topic in the entire course covered academic writing. Many of them did not consider the course helpful to their writing and instead concentrated on passing the examination in the course, which mainly assessed how well students could state and describe concepts related to writing they learned during the course lectures. The students highlighted there was barely any significant writing component in the coursework and examination. Furthermore, the students felt the lecturers equally put focus on students passing the examination rather than students learning and applying academic writing skills.

It is evident from the students' responses that many of them had concerns with the way the Communication Skills course is structured and taught; yet the majority of them indicated that the course was helpful of very helpful. It, therefore, begs the question why these participants would characterize the course as effective for teaching academic writing with all the constraints they pointed out about the course. This finding further exemplifies the contradictions in participants' responses.

### Reconfiguration of Teaching of Academic Writing in Kenyan Universities

The survey also sought to establish what participants thought about universities restructuring how they teach academic writing, particularly where they thought academic writing should be domiciled. The findings are as presented in Figure 4 below.



*Figure 4:* Participants suggestions on how universities should restructure teaching of academic writing according to university status of the course.

The findings show that most participants (38.4% of undergraduates, 88.8% of postgraduates, and 74% of lecturers) preferred academic writing be taught within academic disciplines. On the other hand, 35.7% of undergraduates, and 35.5% of faculty preferred academic writing be taught through the Communication Skills course. A small percentage (14.2% of undergraduates, 42.8% of graduate students, and 23.7% of faculty) suggested English be used to teach academic writing. Most participants were of the view that academic disciplines have unique writing conventions, hence the reason they preferred teaching writing within disciplines. Although this is a plausible reason, it could also be driven in part by their unfamiliarity with having full-fledged

academic writing courses offered in the English department. To reiterate, only USIU offers writing courses through the English department among the universities used in the survey. The USIU's writing mega-course is titled "Written, Analytical, Critical Thinking Skills", offered in a sequence of two courses, Composition I and Composition II, over two semesters (USIU, p. 65).

### **Lecturers Envisioned Changes in How Universities Approach Teaching of Academic Writing**

Lecturers were asked to suggest changes universities should make in the way they approach teaching of academic writing to undergraduate students. Some lecturers indicated the need for universities to pay more attention to teaching academic writing to meet the needs of students. A respondent noted that:

Each university should develop a detailed curriculum and ensure its full implementation.

Preferably, every unit or course should have a topic on writing skills. This is the only way the students could be expected to develop strong ideas and put them in good practices that could be accepted for publication.

Similarly, some lecturers felt that the Commination Skills stand-alone approach was inadequate considering the course tries to cover very broad content within a short time. They proposed restructuring the course into two levels. As one respondent observed, "Clearly we need a two-tier curriculum where the first tier focuses on general writing, while the second tier focuses on technical writing of reports." Another respondent suggested that:

The academic writing course should be delivered in an instructional way where both theoretical and practical skills are provided. It should be introduced as a full course in the first year of study and later done every academic year, starting with theory [teaching

concepts of writing] in the first semester and practicals [students practicing writing by writing papers] in the second semester.

It is evident most lecturers felt that the stand-alone Communications Skills course is inadequate to equip students with the competencies required for academic writing.

There were also lecturers who felt that the writing curriculum also needed to be restructured such that students would write academic papers every semester to develop their technical writing skills. A respondent stated that “undergraduate students should do courses that require them to do mini versions of research to help them understand the language and vocabulary used in academic writing and the reporting structure”.

Regarding academic writing for graduate students, some lecturers suggested that all departments should offer academic writing courses tailored to address discipline-specific needs of students; including how to conduct research, how to write a research proposal and thesis, and discipline-based academic papers in general. They recommended such a course be offered to both Masters and PhD students. For instance, a respondent stated, “academic writing should be taught at the level of an academic department as each academic field has its own needs. This should be mandatory for students in universities to express themselves well through writing.” Another respondent suggested that “[Post graduate] students should be taught how to write academic papers, including referencing, plagiarism and generally what qualifies as good academic paper.” In the same vein, some lecturers suggested that all schools [e.g. the school of humanities, the school of Engineering] and departments should hold regular seminars designed to teach postgraduate students how to write academic papers.

### **Graduate Students' Challenges with Writing Academic Papers**

Postgraduate students were asked to identify the challenges they faced when writing academic papers. They stated the following challenges: finding a research topic; lack of adequate resources, such as current books and journals, and lack of access to the internet; lack of research funding; and difficulties balancing work and studies. Others cited challenges with actual writing, which they attributed to lack of adequate writing training and guidance at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels of education.

To address these writing challenges, some of the postgraduate students recommended each department introduces a writing course to teach discipline-specific standardized templates and formats of writing, research methodology, and other aspects of academic writing. However, some students felt writing seminars and workshops were more effective than a full-fledged writing course. Some postgraduate students also suggested that universities should sponsor graduate students to attend academic conferences, workshops, and seminars to help them gain experience on academic writing and publishing.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The research findings of this study paint a paradoxical portrait of the state of academic writing in Kenyan universities. There are apparent contradictions in participants' responses. For instance, the majority of lecturers rated quality of students' academic writing as good or very good, yet they expressed concerns about elements of students writing. It is, therefore, not clear what metrics the lecturers used in their assessment of students' writing. The same applies to students; the majority of them indicated they had a good experience with academic writing, but in subsequent questions they expressed concerns they had with the way their universities handled academic writing. The same case applies to participants' response on the effectiveness of courses

used to teach academic writing. Most participants characterized the courses as effective or very effective. For many participants, that course would have to be Communication Skills, yet most participants cited significant concerns about the way the course is designed and taught, such as the scope of the course and class size. Furthermore, if the Communication Skills course was as effective as participants indicated, why would the majority of them prefer the current system be changed so that writing is taught within disciplines?

Second, most participants from all three categories supported universities teaching writing. Most of them actually indicated that their universities teach writing. However, the participants expressed different views on how it should be handled. The irony is that most lecturers recommended writing be taught within disciplines yet most of their concerns with students writing relate to grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors. It is not clear whether those concerns would be addressed if writing was taught within disciplines. Do academic disciplines have the capacity to teach those topics?

Third, lack of a strong writing foundation from high school emerged as a major factor when looking into students' writing proficiency at the university. Many respondents attributed university students' struggles with academic writing to inadequate preparation in high school. Although how writing is taught at lower levels of education was outside the scope of this study, and even though there is need to look into improving teaching of academic writing in high school, there is no evidence based on composition theory to support the notion that good writing instruction in high school would be a substitute to writing instruction at the university.

### **Recommendations**

The study has revealed that students and lecturers recognize the importance of universities offering courses to teach academic writing. Indeed, Kenyan universities offer some

form of writing instruction to both undergraduate and post-graduate students. However, it is evident from responses from the participants, and the literature review, that the current configuration of writing instruction, especially in public universities and indigenous private universities, has many structural limitations. In view of these limitations, and in recognition that universities have an obligation to train their students to master skills of academic discourse, this study recommends that universities conceptualize and restructure how they approach the teaching of writing. Universities can retain but restructure the Communication Skills course. This restructuring would entail removing the writing component from the course. This way the course can serve as an orientation course with a focus on teaching general study skills. The rationale of retaining the course is that it has a long tradition and is entrenched in these institutions. Furthermore, many students and lecturers surveyed in this study found the topics taught in the course helpful. The purpose of the course would be to acclimate students to their new university discourse community. Many topics in the current course are already serving this purpose.

The next step would be to introduce at least one writing course designed to teach academic writing. This study concurs with Kioko (2007) that the ideal scenario would be for universities to introduce two writing courses; the first course to introduce students to academic writing while the second course would build on the foundation laid in the first course, culminating in students writing longer research projects. This is the model adopted by USIU. However, this study is cognizant of the constraints universities, especially public universities, would have to surmount to introduce an academic writing course. These constraints include facilities and the high number of teachers it would require to teach the course. That is why the study recommends universities start with creating one course and then introduce other courses in



phases. The proposed academic writing course would be housed in the English department, or a writing program be created staffed with the English department faculty and other qualified college English instructors. The focus of the course should be academic writing, with students enrolled in the course learning academic writing by completing writing assignments to help them learn and hone writing skills. This calls for universities to ensure class sizes are manageable so that teachers can adopt a *process* approach to teaching writing. A process approach involves engaging students in interactive and recursive activities of brainstorming, drafting, and revision as they write papers.

A third facet in this envisioned restructuring of writing instruction would be for universities to introduce a writing unit in each discipline. The majority of participants surveyed in this study recommended writing be taught within disciplines since, as they pointed out, each discipline has its own distinct writing conventions. This study concurs with that proposition. As Russell (2002) points out, academia is not a monolithic discourse community but “a collection of discrete communities, an aggregate of competing professional disciplines, each with its own specialized written discourse” (p.5). However, teaching writing within disciplines does not negate the recommendation that a foundational academic writing course be taught by the English department. To the contrary, discipline-specific writing units will complement the writing course offered by the English department. Whereas writing instruction within disciplines, taught by faculty from respective departments, would focus on disciplinary-specific writing, the academic writing course taught by English faculty will focus on foundational academic writing skills; such as how to structure different genres of writing, basic research, incorporating sources, citations, critical reading and critical thinking, grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Sequencing-wise, the Communication Skills course could be offered in the first semester, the academic writing course

in the second semester, and the discipline-specific writing unit in the first semester of second year. The research methods course that is already being offered in most institutions would still be offered in the fourth year.

Universities should also consider offering a graduate writing course. Since most departments already offer a postgraduate research methods course, and considering the small size of some of the graduate programs, not every department needs to offer a writing course. Instead, the course could be offered as a graduate writing seminar for students across departments. The writing seminar would address general principles of writing that postgraduates need but have them work collaboratively on projects related to their disciplines in a workshop setting.

### **Conclusion**

The study has shed light on how Kenyan universities approach the teaching of academic writing. It has revealed that although the universities offer some form of writing instruction, there are shortcomings with the current system, even though superficially participants' responses mask those shortcomings. In particular, the Communication Skills course, the course most universities use to teach academic writing has many constraints that makes it difficult to teach students how to *actually* write, which should be the fundamental goal of a writing course. University policy makers, students, and lecturers recognize the need for universities to teach writing. However, the history of writing instruction in those institutions reveal that writing instruction was conceived on a problematic premise; it was designed as a bridge course to compensate for the two years of high school that were eliminated in the current education system. Instead, it should be recognized that students joining universities, regardless of the structure of the education system, need training to prepare them for the kind of writing they are

expected to engage in at the university level. The Communication Skills course, on its own, is inadequate to achieve that goal. It is for that reason that the study recommends universities offer at least one course designated to teach academic writing, to be complemented with writing instruction to be offered within academic disciplines. Writing courses within disciplines would give students the opportunity to apply skills learned in the academic writing course to the writing required in their disciplines.

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