



Academic Writing Challenges and Encouragements: Perspectives of University Teachers in Far Western University

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Abstract

While academic writing skills constitute a central place in master's level courses at universities, institutional support for students has often been lacking. As a result, students face challenges in producing scholarly writing. In this study, I attempted to explore the academic writing challenges and encouragements to enhancing academic writing of master's level students from the perspectives of university teachers at Far Western University of Nepal. This is a qualitative study. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Five university teachers from three different disciplines were selected as the research participants. The study shows that students' awareness of academic writing is very low. Additionally, the traditional role of supervisors has negative effects on students' academic writing. The study, however, reveals that training, workshops, virtual seminars and individual feedback have contributed to improving their academic writing. The study concludes that there is no adequate provision for research, and the university does not seem to have visible policies and plans for developing students' academic writing.

Keywords: Academic writing, writing challenge, thesis writing, university teacher, Far Western University

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Introduction

Master's level students in Nepali universities, as well as in other contexts, are required to engage in various forms of academic writing. Far Western University, a government-funded national university established over fifteen years ago, offers courses in academic writing, research methods, and thesis writing across nearly all of its master's programs. During their studies, students are expected to produce research papers, articles, review articles, analytical essays, and a dissertation by the end of the program. The master's programs at the university include a three-credit-hour course on research methods, designed to provide a general introduction to research methodologies specific to each discipline. Additionally, there is a six-credit-hour course focused on thesis writing, where students conduct research and compile their findings into a thesis document. The thesis writing process involves several stages, and students must adhere to both universal and institutional standards and formats. As a doctoral candidate in this university, I have had several opportunities to participate in both formal and informal discussions on the development of academic writing skills of the students particularly among researchers, university teachers and thesis supervisors. These discussions and the context of a growing university prompted me to explore how university teachers experience the process of developing academic writing skill of master's level students.

Academic writing generally refers to the writing used in the college and university-level writing courses (Johnson, 2016). Academic writing's most common types include notation, letter, resume, summary, annotated bibliography, paragraph, report, essay, research paper, and thesis or dissertation (Bailey, 2015) which follow certain universal conventions in structure, style and content. Academic writing is characterized by evidence-based arguments, specific vocabulary choice and logical organization. The tone of writing is mostly impersonal; even if the tone is personal, informed personal ideas and perspectives are articulated in academic writing. Regarding the language in academic texts, it tends to be "precise, impersonal and objective" (Hartley, 2008, p.3) in the sense that the writer avoids value judgments, biases and uses formal vocabulary and references. Thus, academic writing uses standard written language that is simple, clear, focused, and formal. It is also technical, logical, and well-organized.

Academic writing primarily allows researchers and students to contribute to the area of knowledge and scholarly debate. Greene & Lidinsky (2012) states that academic writing is what scholars do to communicate with other scholars in their fields of study, their disciplines. Therefore, academic writing has become the primary communication medium between scholars in academic subjects and disciplines in higher education (Greene & Lidinsky, 2015). Academic writing entails making an argument—text crafted to persuade the audience—often in the service of changing people's minds and behaviors. However, Academic argument is not about shouting down an opponent.

Instead, it is the careful expression of an idea or perspective based on reasoning and the insights garnered from a close examination of the arguments others have made on the issue (Greene & Lidinsky, 2012).

In the context of Nepal, master's level students and university teachers express their different experiences of academic writing challenges, and encouragements at the same time. For instance, Roka (2019) in her reflection of thesis writing expressed that during the journey of writing a thesis, she experienced most suffering and stressful time. She felt it like that a woman suffered during in labour pain. Likewise, Rai (2018) articulates her experiences of thesis writing this way:

My study was always focused on 'how to pass' the exam. I rarely voyaged beyond the prescribed books and rarely generalised the things in life that I have studied. ... I was like a 'broiler kukhura' (poultry chicken, not free range), who merely depends on others. Since I started writing my Master's thesis, I realised the real sense of reading and writing." (April 30, 2018, ELT Choutari)

Her reflection shows the real-ground challenges of thesis writing and the satisfaction experienced upon completing the master's program, particularly when she began writing a thesis.

Having served as an adjunct faculty member for a decade at two Nepali universities, I have observed that university teachers who facilitate various academic courses and supervise master's level students often struggle to support students effectively in the academic writing process. Students perceive different forms of academic writing as the part of requirement for degree completion rather than as scholarly activities. Many of them believe that research papers, academic essays and course assignments can be completed in any manner to complete the degree requirements. Furthermore, thesis writing, which is an important form of academic writing, has merely been taken as just another requirement to receive the degree for many students in Nepali universities, rather than learning research and academic writing skills (Khatri, 2020). Therefore, the primary issue seems to be a widespread misconception that all forms of academic writing are merely requirements for degree fulfillment, whether as part of internal assessments or final evaluations.

On the one hand, many students come to join the master's program with no prior experience of writing anything except in the examination. They do not make themselves well prepared and creative enough to begin the thesis writing process. University teachers blame the thesis students for not being serious on the task, not reading much on the area study, not consulting during the writing process so on. They conceive supervisors as the topic providers that is easy and less time taking (Paudel & Bhandari, 2020). Furthermore, students do not enjoy several comments and feedback on their writing; rather they

want to finish their writing project as early as possible in any manner. In a similar vein, Tardy (2010) observes that students in higher education face several academic writing challenges as they require to select, evaluate, report, summarize, paraphrase, conclude, argue, select words and grammatical patterns and avoid plagiarism. It implies that students have to go through several academic activities to produce a required level of academic writing. At the end of their journey, they are supposed to become student writer to an academic writer.

Some studies (Sharma, 2017; Tiwari, 2019) highlight the less empowering experiences of students in writing due to a lack of collaboration between university teachers and students. While recent research has investigated academic writing challenges in various international contexts, both the challenges and encouragements related to academic writing have not been well explored in the Nepali context. Therefore, recognizing that each research context is unique, I attempt to explore the academic writing challenges and encouragements from the perspectives of university teachers at Far Western University in Nepal.

The study is guided by following research questions:

1. What are the academic writing challenges of the master's level students from the perspectives of university teachers?
2. How do university teachers explain the areas of support and services (encouragements) provided to improve students' academic writing during master's program?

Research Methodology

Qualitative research aims to understand peoples' experiences and the meanings attached to their experiences (Merriam, 2009). In this study, I attempted to explore the academic writing practices in the university departments and its constituent colleges from the perspectives of university teachers. For this purpose, I selected central departments of education, central department of humanities and social sciences and three constituent colleges of Far Western University as the study sites. The constituent campuses are Tikapur Multiple campus, Tikapur, Jaya Prithivi Campus, Bajhang and Kailali Multiple Campus, Dhangadhi. I purposively selected Far Western University as the research site as I have three-year long engagement in the university as a doctoral student. Since the participants are typically very small in this research design, I selected five university teachers from three different disciplines. Primary data collection method was the semi-structured interview and interview guidelines were the tool. I recorded conversations of participants related to the phenomenon and also analyzed personal texts and observations from participants related to the phenomenon. Collected data were transcribed, translated and made codes. Then, different themes were generated and analyzed using previous

literature and the theory.

Theoretical Orientation: The Notion of Scaffolding

This study is theoretically guided by social perspectives of academic writing. It draws on the notion of scaffolding. The concept of scaffolding, as originally introduced by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) and later embedded within Vygotskian theory (1978), has proven to be extremely valuable in its application to educational and psychological theory and practice. Wood et al. (1976) conceptualized scaffolding as a process that enables a child or novice to solve a task or achieve a goal beyond his/her unassisted efforts. In other words, the term scaffolding used as to refer to a process whereby an adult assist a child to learn how to perform a task that she or he cannot perform alone. Wood et al. (1976) describe the process of scaffolding as involving “the adult’s controlling those elements of the task that are initially beyond the learner’s capacity.” (p. 90). In this study, I argue that students develop their academic writing as a result of interaction and collaboration with their teachers and supervisors. Teachers primarily support students to develop their academic writing skill through providing writing samples and constant feedback on their writing.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the critical analysis of the participants’ stories and experiences on academic writing challenges and encouragements in Far Western University.

Academic Writing Challenges

Academic writing challenges at master’s level program in the university are further discussed in following two subheadings: unaware of writing as an integral part of higher education, and traditional supervisory role and institutional inefficiency.

Unaware of Writing as an Integral Part of Higher Education

Many students are unaware of writing as an integral process of higher education as many of them come to the master’s program without any previous training on academic writing. At master’s level, the program indeed requires very different forms of writing from those used by students previously at bachelor’s level. The new practices of academic writing demand students’ mastery of a wide range of competences and procedures. They must know the discursive characteristics that necessarily involve the production of texts, taking into account the specificity of the disciplinary knowledge and the features of the genres they are asked to produce. New forms of literacy practices and an appropriate use of texts demand using language properly in a given academic and disciplinary field (Hyland and Sancho, 2012).

To begin with the academic writing challenges, flexibility during admission of

students at master's level program has been evident as a challenge in the study. Campus administrations enroll the students as they were convinced to be supported in several courses with flexible deadlines and course requirements. One of the university teachers of a constituent campus articulated his views this way:

During the admission period, we compromise with the students in a way that we will make manageable and possible support to them during their study. Then, many students do not attend the classes regularly as they consider the degree as to cross a three-hours final written test rather than going through several academic writing requirements. So the flexibility in different requirements have made us to compromise with students in meeting deadlines, number of submissions and even in terms of quality of submitted assignments.

I realised that the participant was sharing a bitter reality in the university. He pointed out that this kind of administrative aspect has posed significant academic challenges in developing students' academic writing skills. Students often prefer to pass their degree by simply attending a final written test rather than fulfilling numerous requirements. In the similar line, another university teacher expressed his views this way:

It is quite challenging to follow the university procedures as it disturbs the enrollment of the students in our campus. In other TU (Tribhuvan University) affiliated colleges, there are no any requirements as in the Far Western University (FWU); students just appear final examination and crossed the degree.

It implies that students consider writing assignments as a burden within the program. They see degree completion as the primary goal, similar to the annual system used in other universities. The participant indicated that students are often focused on completing their degree at any cost to obtain their master's certificate.

On the other hand, students those enrolled in the program were not aware of academic writing as an integral process of higher education. The third participant in the study who has been teaching for fifteen years put his view this way:

Many students come in the master's program with exam based writing experience and they are not aware about writing assignments, internal assessment system, participation in quizzes and mid-term exams. However, student from FWU from bachelor's program are somehow aware about these all areas. So, changing the students' mentality on writing requirements is another challenge.

The participant emphasized that there has been no or little training on academic writing at bachelor's level in the university. In this line, Min (2013) highlights that it is crucial to equip the novice researchers with the knowledge of academic or

scientific writing skills. This can be done through formal training in undergraduate and postgraduate programs. Other ways to help the novice researchers to produce a good quality academic writing include the use of a checklist, collaborative writing with experienced writers, integrating writing activities in mentoring process, and engaging in scholastic reviewing pools and networks. These are some ways to develop academic writing skills though they do not happen overnight.

One of the university teachers shared that with a fear of writing, students did not like to join the regular classes and they tried to escape from writing activities. Ultimately these writing requirements cause dropout of the students from the program. At the same time, the stories of the participants also revealed that students who were regular in the college write as compulsion because they have to write. However, they write several papers using non-authentic sources. A participant put his views as follows:

Students do not use authentic articles, books, and research reports in their work. Instead, they rely on just four or five readymade works or dissertations. Due to their limited reading proficiency, students often turn to non-authentic resources. Although we provide training in APA (American Psychological Association) style and proper sourcing techniques, students frequently attempt to complete their projects in any manner.

Such practices may lead to issues with plagiarism and copyright violations. The participant further shared an incident as following:

A student submitted a thesis after completing the project in just 15 days. I informed him that the plagiarism check should be below 20%, and that exceeding this level would result in disqualification and potential charges. He requested to return in a few days. When he returned with a revised thesis five days later, the plagiarism check revealed 97% similarity. I called him to inform him that he would be penalized for the plagiarized thesis. In response, he shouted that plagiarism checks were conducted only for his batch and not for previous ones. Since then, he has not been in contact with us for two months.

The incident indicates that many students of master's level think that thesis writing can be done overnight and they come up with readymade product by copying from available online resources. It further causes issues of unethical practices such as plagiarism. Thesis writing is a higher-level academic activity. Everyone who wants to be awarded with the graduate degree needs to accomplish. It is not the activity that can be completed over night; rather one has to pass the long and rigorous process (Paudel and Bhandari, 2020).

On the other hand, with the fear of writing requirements, it made the students' drop out from the program. The study shows that writing has been a least preferable activity of

the students. In this line, one of the participants stated his views this way:

While collecting expectations of the students in an orientation program, they reported that they were at zero level in academic writing and writing was their least favorite activity. Most of them asked for the title of the thesis: 'I need a title sir'. 'Would you please provide me a title?' 'I have come to take a title sir.'

This participant shared that teachers even prepared and provided them around fifty different topics for ten students of English education to write thesis proposals. The study revealed the fact that students are not aware on the sources of topic selection for thesis writing and had many expectations from the teachers. Paudel and Bhandari (2020) explored that thesis writing students are compelled to limit themselves within traditional content area because of resource constraints. Their study also concludes that supervisors' perspective highlights students' lack of seriousness, rigorous involvement, lack of reading culture, insufficient logistic support as the problems in the overall process.

In the study, I have also attempted to capture the rural context of the university. One of the participants from rural context expressed his views this way:

In my view, there is a lack of academic culture in the rural parts of this region. When analysing the master's programs, it becomes apparent that students are irregular for two main reasons: they are engaged in employment and face geographical barriers. As a result, they do not attend regular classes; instead, they only come to appear the written examinations. Topics for papers and dissertations should be provided by teachers. One of the most challenging issues is that students often copy ideas from online resources, rename the documents, and submit them as their own work.

I found that this university teacher was very concerned about the academic culture in his or her area. Students are not aware of the true value of academic writing at this level. They have little or no understanding of research and academic writing. The participant further states that:

We recently made the viva voce of seven students and provided individual feedback to them. But, the students did not have sufficient resources in writing. Moreover, though we sent them useful resources through email, they did not even open the emails and nor they go through the resources to revise their dissertations.

The study points out the bitter reality in rural research and writing context of the university. The writing issues of novice scholars observed that this group of writers not only lack awareness about research considerations, but they also lack of awareness about the standard and requirement of scientific writing (Jaroongkhongdach et al., 2012). The lack of awareness ultimately results in appropriateness, justification, clarity and coherence

issues in their writing (Min, 2013).

Traditional Supervisory Role and Institutional Inefficiency

The role of teachers and thesis supervisors is very crucial in developing academic writing skill of the students. The supportive role of the supervisor makes scaffolding in writing of students. In Arabian context, AlMarwani (2020) investigated that feedback from supervisors is a key support to contribute to their success at this (master's level) stage. Through feedback they are informed if they met the accepted level of academic writing to fulfill their degree requirements. But in the study, traditional role of supervisor has also made the students discouraged in some cases in the university. A teacher made his points this way:

In students' writing, some teachers just underline with red pen and comment: *'revise, rewrite, no sufficient content, improve language, follow APA 7th edition strictly'*. There is no specific feedback (to the point comments) on the students' writing so that the students could learn and improve the writing.

I noticed that this university teacher believed that writing development comes from the encouragement of teachers. Neupane Bastola and Guangwei Hu (2020) pointed out in their study that the students desire directive and informative feedback on the content and discipline-specific components of their thesis. In the similar line, another university teacher expressed his dissatisfaction on the detached relationship of students and supervisors this way:

In my experience, students are intimidated by comments like "follow APA," "revisit the language," etc. If teachers do not understand the level of their students, the students may not progress in their writing due to a lack of positive feedback and encouragement from their teachers or supervisors. Some teachers expect excessive humility, numerous requests, and a high level of deference from students. As a result, students do not receive the support and encouragement they need.

This situation highlights the distant relationship between students and their supervisors, with the supervisory role being highly traditional. This ultimately discourages students from writing. One surprising finding of the study is that some thesis supervisors themselves are not satisfied with the quality of the dissertations they supervise. A participant in the study articulated that:

There are not enough copies of master's dissertations in the library because we (teachers) believe that some dissertations have not met the required standards. Teachers themselves are not satisfied with the quality of the dissertations they have supervised, so they do not make these copies available in the library.

It shows that students do not receive sufficient sample copies of the theses in the library and teachers do not think they are as per the standards.

Next level of analysis in the study is the institutional practice. The institutional practices also have greater impact on developing academic writing of the students. Negative practices always encourage flexibility and low quality of the students' writing. One of the participants put his views this way:

Regarding meeting deadlines, we are not strict. Nobody has been disqualified or marked as NQ (Not Qualified), even though this is part of the university's policy. No teacher has enforced this in practice. Students often become "tourist students," attending only during mid-term exams, yet they are still considered full-time students by the university. This is our current reality.

He indicates that the policy, practice, the current trend and flexibility have some types of negative impact in developing academic writing of the students. On the other hand, high level university authorities are unsupportive in terms of policy formulation and delivery of support. Another participant expressed his views as follows:

Recently, we completed a faculty research project in which student participation was mandatory. We awarded several faculty research projects. The Research Management Cell (RMC) decided to provide research grants as an incentive for each project, but the university authorities reported that there is no provision for providing grants per research.

The study indicates that higher level policy do not encourage those good practices to develop research and academic writing skills of students and professional growth of teachers. I understood that they have budget but they could not spend it in creative works and academic enhancement of the teachers and students because of the macro level policy gap. The participant critically put the views that at the higher level university authority, there should be research culture and a sense of research and publications.

The study reveals institutional inefficiency and a weak research mechanism, raising questions about the university's capacity. The data shows that the research division at the center has not been effective in generating scholarly conversations, connecting academic communities to the university, or organizing seminars and conferences. This raises concerns about awareness of disciplinary and institutional discourse and practices. In fact, in many cases, academic writing is a socially situated process that happens in social discourses and is based on intensive interactions with the text and scientific communities (Gupta et al., 2022). Therefore, the findings of the study suggests that macro level research institution in the university must have a new rigor, strategies and strength of research and writing which can make paradigm shift in the university.

Academic Writing Encouragements

This section discusses the analysis of the participants' voices in terms of encouragements master's level student received at individual and institutional levels to develop academic writing in two main subthemes: student oriented support program and the growing academic engagement of university teachers.

Student Oriented Support Program

Academic writing grows when the students are engaged in several writing activities and they are well supported at individual and institutional levels. They need to learn disciplinary and institutional academic discourses. University authority and its constituent campuses primarily RMCs (research management cell) seemed to organize several student focused support program to promote writing skill and research based activities in Far Western University. In this line, one of the participants states as follows:

We have organized many guest lectures and seminars, but they have not been highly effective because some of the lectures did not meet the needs of the students. To address this, we initiated in-house training sessions facilitated by campus faculty, who better understand the students' needs and the support they require. We also have a teacher-student conferencing system and have established an 'incubation center,' where students can discuss writing projects and various academic and professional issues with both teachers and fellow students.

This suggests that the campus authorities did their best to support master's level students by organizing training sessions and arranging guest lectures based on their needs. The training and student-teacher conferencing certainly help students grow academically. In this connection, Herber and Herber (1993) discuss scaffolding, a process involving frequent teacher-student interaction where the teacher provides support to students. Initially, students work together in small groups, with the teacher guiding them through activities that encourage interpretation by teaching when and how to use specific strategies to solve writing-related problems. Finally, students continue to work collaboratively and independently, applying the knowledge they have gained to new ideas and concepts.

Another participant mentioned that they organize seminars and provide counseling on academic writing and other areas of need. She further emphasized the thesis viva voce as an opportunity to help students improve their thesis writing. She expressed it this way:

We organize students' viva voce sessions as valuable feedback opportunities. Recently, we spent three hours with a student. We read their dissertations, made numerous comments, and provided feedback on each area of writing. Now, they are in the process of improving their dissertations. Similarly,

we offer individual assistance to students in person, via email, and through virtual modes.

Comments and feedback on students' writing are crucial for enhancing their writing skills. The study shows that teachers and campus authorities are making every effort to support students in thesis writing, including guest lectures, individual support, and comprehensive feedback on every aspect of the thesis. In this case, Khati (2020) argued that thesis writing as a socio-cultural practice involves several collaborative activities of reading and writing. Thesis writers collaborate with teachers, supervisors, department heads, peers, upper-grade students, conference organizers, and even publishers. During this dynamic process of academic socialization, they learn institutional and disciplinary conventions of reading and writing, and increase their participation in different activities.

Teachers' Growing Academic Engagement

University teachers need to engage themselves in several academic and research based activities. They are continuously supposed to work on research projects and collaborate with students in many writing and research projects. In the study, the situation is encouraging as many teachers seem to be participating in several conferences, writing academic articles and pursuing MPhil and PhD degrees. One of the participants primarily focused on the academic growth of the teachers through training and research based activities. He shared his words in following ways:

At an institutional level, we have been organizing seminars on academic writing, research methodology and use of endnote, referencing and citation. We have an annual publication, a research based journal from the campus. Teachers in the campus have been regularly publishing the articles and even carrying out researches in collaboration with master's level students.

This is a good practice of university teachers by involving themselves in such academic and research based activities which help them to grow professionally and can better support their students. He further says that:

We have tried our best to support students as the faculties are qualified enough to support them. 65 % teachers have made research based publications including coauthorship with students.

The study indicates the instrumental motivation behind writing, such as the promotion of teachers through publications. Another participant mentioned that the majority of teachers have been pursuing MPhil and PhD degrees, which is a positive indicator of professional development among university teachers. This demonstrates that teachers are highly motivated to obtain advanced research degrees. This trend is encouraging at an institutional level, as it will have a long-term positive impact on research-related activities and promote the academic culture within the university.

Conclusion

Academic writing is a core element of a successful academic program in higher education. The ability to present information and ideas effectively in writing is crucial for students' academic and professional success. However, academic writing skills do not develop overnight, and novice researchers face several challenges. This study indicates that students' awareness of academic writing as an essential component of higher education is very low. Major challenges include a lack of research considerations, reliance on non-authentic sources, and plagiarism. Many students at this level are more focused on obtaining a degree certificate than on developing academic writing and research skills. Additionally, many students do not receive academic writing training at the bachelor's level, which results in difficulties even with basic writing tasks during the initial phase of their master's program. The study highlights that flexible enrollment policies at the institutional level hinder regular submission of writing assignments. Departments and teachers often provide lenient requirements regarding the quality of submissions and deadlines. Furthermore, the traditional roles of supervisors and an unsupportive institutional mechanism negatively impact the development of students' academic writing skills. The study also points out that the research foundation at the central university level appears weak, lacking visibility and institutional support through competent human resources, policy formulation, and regular implementation of research and writing projects.

Regarding encouragement for academic writing, the study shows that students receive support through training events, workshops, virtual seminars, and intensive individual feedback on their writing. Campus authorities are supportive and flexible in organizing various academic writing events tailored to students' needs. Research Management Cells (RMCs) and teachers encourage students to use authentic resources. On the other hand, teachers are involved in several professional development activities, including training sessions organized by RMCs, seminars funded by the University Grant Commission, and other collaborative workshops. University teachers attending conferences, presenting papers, publishing research, and pursuing higher degrees (MPhil and PhD) contribute significantly to research and academic enhancement at the university. This indicates a growing engagement in academic writing among university teachers. Therefore, involving university teachers in research projects and publications, and prioritising student-centered activities to enhance academic writing, can help address writing challenges at the university.

Although the university does not appear to have visible policies and plans for developing students' academic writing, various university departments and constituent campuses have initiated several student-focused programs aimed at enhancing academic writing. The study indicates optimistic prospects for academic writing at the university,

as there has been increasing academic engagement among both students and university teachers in research and publication.

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