

THE ACADEMIC LITERACY GAP: FROM KNOWLEDGE REPRODUCTION TO KNOWLEDGE CONSTRUCTION IN STUDENTS' TRANSITION TO UNIVERSITY WRITING

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ABSTRACT

The transition from secondary school to university frequently exposes disparities between the literacy practices cultivated in school contexts and those required for success in higher education. This study examines how secondary school writing preparation shapes students' transition to university writing, with particular attention to the extent to which prior learning experiences equip students for the academic literacy demands of higher education. Drawing on an exploratory mixed-methods design, data were collected from 137 first-year university students through a survey comprising quantitative and qualitative responses. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative responses were subjected to inductive thematic analysis. The findings were subsequently integrated to generate a comprehensive understanding of students' writing preparedness and transition experiences. The results reveal that students entered university with a foundational understanding of general writing practices, including essay structure, paragraph development, formal language use, and the organisation of ideas. However, significant gaps emerged in areas central to academic literacy, particularly referencing, in-text citation, source integration, plagiarism avoidance, and independent research. Qualitative findings further indicate that students perceived university writing as fundamentally different from the writing practices emphasised in secondary schooling. While school writing was commonly characterised as guided, structured, and focused on knowledge reproduction, university writing required greater independence, critical engagement, and participation in disciplinary knowledge construction. Referencing emerged as the most significant point of discontinuity, functioning as both a technical challenge and a marker of unfamiliar academic conventions. Additionally, limited digital literacy amplified writing-related challenges for some students, highlighting the interconnected nature of academic and technological competencies in contemporary higher education. The study argues that students' difficulties with university writing are best understood as manifestations of an academic literacy gap arising from a structural misalignment between secondary-school writing preparation and university expectations. By illuminating how this gap shapes students' transition experiences, the study contributes to ongoing debates on academic literacy development, educational articulation, and student success in higher education. The findings underscore the need for stronger alignment between secondary-school writing instruction and the academic literacy demands of university study.

Keywords: academic literacy; academic writing; higher education transition; secondary school preparation; student preparedness