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## British International School Riyadh

### Essay writing trips up students

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New students often struggle with essays, but study skills departments are there to help

Many students struggle with the art of writing an essay, and study skills sessions are very popular. Photograph: Linda Nylind for the Guardian

"When I came to write my first assignment, I cried," says Daphne Elliston. "I just didn't know what I was doing."

Elliston graduated with a degree in health and social care from the Open University. Though she's hugely proud of her achievement, she says that in the early days she worked up to three hours a night for weeks on end to construct an essay she was happy to submit.

"At the beginning, the most difficult thing was just understanding the academic words," she says.

"Then putting my own words into academic language was hard. And it was difficult to believe I was entitled to my own opinion or to disagree with all these academics who'd done years of research."

Elliston started her degree after decades out of the education system, and with just one NVQ qualification to her name.

She believes the gap in her education was to blame but, according to some academics, many of the current crop of [students](#) gearing up to A-levels will feel exactly the same when they start university this autumn.

Margi Rawlinson, academic skills co-ordinator at Edge Hill University, says it is wrong to think that only so-called non-traditional students wrestle with writing essays.

"We have people with A-levels who are arriving poorly equipped for academic writing," she says.

"I think one of the issues at A-level is that they're not being taught to research independently, and [with essays] it's not just the writing – that's only part of it."

At Worcester University, Helena Attlee, fellow of the Royal Literary Fund and writer in residence, agrees.

"It seems to me there's a lack of interface between A-levels and degrees, so the thing that people are required to do to get very good A-levels isn't equipping them to do what is required to get a degree."

Over the last year, part of Attlee's role has been to offer one-to-one sessions with students to help them develop the skills needed to complete a well-written assignment.

"The absolutely common thing is they have no clue that there is a recipe for an academic essay. That can make life considerably easier for you if somebody bothers to tell you," she says.

"Students can have no idea of the concept of making an argument so their essays are entirely descriptive. You know, 'and then this happens, and such-and- such an academic says this about it, and then this happens, and so-and-so says that'."

With the ability to think or write analytically "there's no end of the reading you can do," she says. "And, at that point, students start to say they feel overwhelmed."

Kate Brooks, principal lecturer and student experience co-ordinator in the faculty of creative arts at the University of the West of England (UWE), has carried out research into students' experience of the transition between school and university, and says that essay writing featured strongly in their comments.

"One issue was time management – do they start writing weeks before or the night before?" she says.

In the workshop sessions she runs, she tries to explain that, in fact, writing is a small element in creating an essay.

"Students can have an idea that it's a linear thing – you do your reading, then you get a cup of tea and sit down to write. We try to get across that it's a much more cyclical process; do some research, draft a bit, read some more, think, consider what you've written, redraft... I'll explain that it's like that for academics, too – after all, I don't just sit down one day and think, 'Right, I'll write a book!'"

Some universities are now actively addressing the problem in individual faculties or by creating generic cross-subject courses delivered by their study skills departments. But some students resist the help on offer.

"The English department here put on a compulsory module called 'Writing at degree level', but dropped it because the students rebelled," says Attlee. "They felt it was remedial and offensive and they wouldn't go."

Attlee's one-to-one sessions are voluntary and very popular. Having individual attention, she says, can make all the difference to someone who is embarrassed to say that they're failing to master a basic – though far from easy – skill.

At Essex University, the head of philosophy, Professor Wayne Martin, is passionate about the voluntary module on essay writing he's created for MA and first-year undergraduate students – and he needs to be, because it sounds distinctly time-intensive and is not an official part of his job.

"Students do it because they want to. They're not assessed, but it's really hard work," he says.

"In philosophy, a particular skill that's needed, and which needs time to develop, is the representation of argument so you don't get tangled up in writing long, ugly sentences. And then, some very smart students can write, but they get to university and they overreach themselves, using phrases like 'hegemonic dialectical superstructure!'"

Sessions are run with all the students together in a room, so there's an element of having to cope with a bit of gentle public ribbing at some of the more desperate clangers. Creating an atmosphere of trust and constructive criticism is therefore essential to helping people feel safe and ensuring they want to come back.

Essays are due into Martin's inbox at midnight on Sundays. He is up the following morning at the crack of dawn reading them, so he can select excerpts for the entire group to discuss and rewrite together.

As he points out, this form of tuition doesn't appear to make economic sense, especially with universities under tremendous pressure to teach in more efficient ways. But, he says, it is more cost-effective than it sounds. "My strategy with that is for universities to be offering a combination of very high-efficiency lectures – [he means with hundreds of students] – but then use that efficiency to offer this kind of intimate instruction."

But is it realistic to think that people's essay-writing skills can improve significantly if they've not already been developed over years in a school setting?

"Yes, incredibly. And the biggest improvement is generally in the first five weeks," he says.

Elliston is living proof. By absorbing and working through all the feedback from her OU tutors over the six years it took her to get her degree, her marks went up from 56% on her first assignment to 84% in her last essay of her final year.

"That feedback, and the nice way it was given, was so important," she says. But she wishes she had been better prepared for the shock of leaping into an academic environment.

"I think an access course might have helped me, before I started, to get the skills that were going to be expected of me."