

ACADEMIC WRITING AND RE-ENGINEERING INNOVATION IN NIGERIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

This paper aims at discussing the relevance of academic writing to drive for innovation in the nation's institutions of higher learning. Academic writing is described as a unique writing skill which constitutes an integral part of research i.e. the process which learners undergo to arrive at eureka moments which lead to new discoveries which serve to expand the frontiers of knowledge and make vital contributions to national development. The curricula outlined by the various agencies for supervising higher education in the country i.e. NUC, NCCE and NBTE has been examined to determine whether there is provision for the teaching of academic writing beyond the entry level- where it is taught as part of general studies courses. The investigations show that the teaching of academic writing is accommodated within the general studies curricula and does not extend beyond the entry level. The researcher therefore advocate the inclusion of the teaching of academic writing beyond the entry level to reinforce the much needed skills in students and possibly the establishment of additional services such as academic needs centres and relevant websites to help students cope with the challenges of doing research in higher institutions.

In this paper, the researchers focus on academic writing and the re-engineering of innovation in Nigerian higher education. Our emphasis is on the relevance of academic writing as a resource for instilling the drive for innovation in learners engaged in the nation's institutions of higher education. The paper is organised under the subheadings: 'Academic writing: its nature and scope', here we describe the nature of academic writing both as a specific-subject and a subject across the curriculum whilst highlighting its pro-innovation qualities; 'expressions of the quest for innovation in Nigerian higher education curricula' which presents an overview of the various mission statements of the respective agencies responsible for developing the curricula implemented in the nation's institutions of higher learning and the extent of the inclusion of academic writing in their respective curricula; and 'implications of the assigned academic writing profile on the quest for innovation in higher education curricula', which makes inferences based on the provisions for the teaching of academic writing in the respective curricula.

Academic Writing: Its Nature and Scope

Writing is an essential language skill most especially within the context of the acquisition of formal education, but academic writing is distinguished by its unique application to studies in institutions of higher learning. Institutions of higher learning are designated the final stages in the process of acquiring formal education in most educational systems of the world. Academic activities at this stage usually comprise teaching/learning, supervision and research- from the angle of the teacher and the learner- mostly focused on production of needed man-power and expansion and new discoveries of the frontiers of knowledge in any discipline. Of all three academic activities already

identified, one could assert that research and research-related activities are keystones to the successful execution of teaching/learning and supervision goals. Here in lies the importance of academic writing.

Existing literature presents various definitions of academic writing. For instance, it is described as “structured research’ written by ‘scholars’ for other scholars (with all university writers being ‘scholars’ in this context)”. In this definition, academic writing is associated with writing tasks associated with research, meanwhile to align with the primary goal of this article, the term “university writers” is construed in a broad sense to include all stakeholders involved in the academic activities i.e. the university lectures/teachers and undergraduates of universities, polytechnics, colleges of education etc- undergraduates being scholars-in-training or trainee scholars.

In another thesis, Soles (2010:6-7) expansively elucidates qualities distinguishing academic writing from other types of writing tasks beginning with the abbreviation “ISCE” which means “intelligence, substance, clarity and energy”. An academic essay possesses “intelligence” if it contains insightful ideas and cites authoritative sources; substance if ideas are fully detailed providing the reader with adequate information; “clarity” if the “grammar, sentence structure, organization, punctuation, and diction are sound”; and “energy” “when the writer uses a strong and confident voice in a fluid and vigorous style.” The goal of writing an academic essay could be to “present the findings of a research study...[or/and] factual and objective information about a number of topics...make a case for or present an argument in favor of any given number of propositions.” In a nutshell, “academic essays almost always require research.” Here again Soles (2010) identifies academic writing- i.e. the process through which academic essays are written- as a research driven activity.

More interestingly though is the emphasis on “energy” which has been elucidated with the terms “strong”, “confident voice”, and “fluid and vigorous style”. These are qualities that are synonymous with the ability to assert authority, especially authority instantiated by the ingenuity associated with innovative thinking. Thus academic essays are expected to reflect as well as report innovative outcomes of well-defined and purpose-driven research. In the excerpt below the invaluable role of academic writing is aptly emphasised:

Choosing not to write in academia should not be seen as a principled stand to resist the increasing demands of the academy (...). Rather, choosing not to write can be conceptualized as an ... acceptance of an academic half-life in which one’s legitimate scholarly voice has not been sufficiently exercised, or respected. To put it more positively, choosing to write in one’s area of academic expertise is an affirmative choice that announces both your courage and active engagement in the world you have chosen to occupy (Defining and understanding academic writing, n.d. para. 5).

Although, the writer probably has the professional scholar for example an academic staff in an institution of higher learning in mind, the equation of academic writing with the ability to assert one’s authority and relevance is of vital essence to the primary objective of this paper. Based on the a

priori understanding that academic writing goes hand in hand with research, one could infer that academic writing affords scholars as well as trainee scholars the opportunity to generate ideas, ask questions about an existing accepted status quo, make propositions, carry out investigations and communicate verified findings.

Academic writing has the dual status of being both a specific-subject and a subject across the curriculum. As a specific-subject, it is concerned with the application of writing skills in the production of academic essays and normally taught as part of the general studies course units in the Nation's institutions of higher education. As a subject that cuts across the curriculum, universities, polytechnique, and colleges of education, academic writing is an activity used to apply and reinforce the knowledge taught and acquired in various academic disciplines. Having explained the nature of academic writing, the next section examines the provisions for the teaching of academic writing within the respective curricular of higher institutions in Nigeria.

Expressions of the Quest for Innovation in Nigerian Higher Education Curricula

In this section we consider the provisions for the teaching of academic writing in the various curricular outlined for the respective institutions of higher learning in Nigeria. Currently, institutions of higher learning in Nigeria comprise the respective universities, colleges of education and mono/polytechnique. The National Universities Commission (NUC), National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) and the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) are the respective agencies vested with the responsibility of overseeing activities in the various universities, colleges of education and mono or polytechnics, respectively.

The mission statements- or their equivalents- posted on the respective web sites of the aforementioned agencies express the mutual recognition of the need for the various institutions of higher learning to inspire and encourage students to strive to experience eureka moments at the end of any academic task in any given subject or discipline:

- i. The vision of the commission is: To [sic] be a dynamic regulatory agency acting as a catalyst for positive change and innovation for the delivery of quality university education in Nigeria (www.nuc.edu.ng).
- ii. Since inception, the Commission has continuously pursued goals of quality assurance in teacher education. The pride of the commission is based on the seminal philosophy in the National Policy on Education (NAPE) which states that “no education can rise above the quality of its teachers” (www.ncconline.edu.ng)
- iii. To promote the production of skilled/semi skilled technical and professional manpower, to revitalize, and sustain the national economy, reduce unemployment and poverty through the setting of appropriate quality assurance instruments for TVET[technical and vocational education], provision of current and reliable information for planning and decision making, sourcing and disbursing of funds and establishment of adequate linkages between TVE Institutions and industry(www.nbte.gov.ng).

From the angle of the NUC, it is pertinent to improve university education through expediting the process for much needed change through new discoveries; the NCCE maintains the same point of view vis-a-vis sustaining continual enhancement of the quality of teacher education. The NBTE articulates the quest in more specific terms, providing practical solutions with direct bearing on the nation's economy, poverty alleviation via employment, etc, a successful realisation of which is largely subject to quality assurance. Thus, all government agencies acknowledge how vital it is to encourage students to attain those eureka moments of academic success in the various institutions of higher education.

Eureka moments include all instances when students and researchers encounter discoveries in the course of undergoing, diligently, the rigours of researching in their various subjects and disciplines. Writing by virtue of its nature affords the one who is engaged in writing the opportunity to think, generate, gather and regenerate ideas, opinions etc over observable phenomena in our world. And invariably, remains the most viable means of compelling students to coordinate themselves in order to search, discover and report those eureka moments for others to read and to expand the frontiers of knowledge.

If writing most especially academic writing is vital for instilling the drive for innovation in students, it is expected that the various curricula developed by the respective agencies would make adequate provision for academic writing to be taught and practised as a subject and across the curricula. In order to determine the extent of the inclusion of academic writing in the curricula of the various institutions of higher learning, the curricula outlined for various academic programmes was examined. These are presented in the following tables 1 to 3.

Table 1 NUC Provisions for the Teaching of Academic Writing in Undergraduate Programmes

S/N	Faculty/College	Entry Level: GST/GNS	Beyond Entry Level
1	Arts	*	-
2	Administration & Management	*	-
3	Education	*	-
4	Engineering & technology	*	-
5	Environmental Science	*	-
6	Law	*	-
7	Medicine & Dentistry	*	-
8	Pharmacy	*	-
9	Science	*	-
10	Social Science	*	-
11	Veterinary Medicine	*	-

Table 2 NCCE Provisions for the Teaching of Academic Writing in NCE Programmes

S/N	NCE Programme	Entry Level: GST/GNS	Beyond Entry Level
1	Adult Education	*	-
2	Arts	*	-
3	Agriculture	*	-
4	Languages	*	-
5	General Education	*	-
6	Science	*	-
7	Pre NCE	*	-

Table 3 NBTE Provisions for the Teaching of Academic Writing in National Innovation Diploma (NID) Programmes

S/N	NID Programmes	Entry Level: GST/GNS	Beyond Entry Level
1	Agriculture	*	-
2	Banking	*	-
3	Child care	*	-
4	Computer	*	-
5	Cosmetology	*	-
6	Film & TV production	*	-
7	Marine Engineering	*	-
8	Media Technology	*	-

Tables 1, 2 and 3 present the extent to which the teaching of academic writing is included in the curricula outlined by the respective agencies for the various programmes offered in the various tertiary institutions. The determining criteria in the tables are to identify the extent to which academic writing is incorporated in the curricula that is whether it is limited to the entry level and/or beyond the entry level. The information provided in all three tables is based on the information gleaned from the websites of the respective agencies (*www.nuc.edu.ng*, *www.ncceonline.edu.ng*, and *www.nbte.gov.ng*).

Apparently, details provided in all tables show that the teaching of academic writing as a subject is limited to the entry level where it is taken as part of the contents of the appropriate general studies course unit, commonly labelled Use of English, Communication in English, Communication skills and English or General English. Hence, students are not taught academic writing beyond the entry level across the curriculum; the implication of the status quo depicted in tables 1, 2 and 3 are examined in the next section.

Implications of the Profile Assigned Academic Writing on the Quest for Innovation in Higher Education Curricula

Including a subject in a curriculum underscores the need for the skills and /or its contents to be imparted in the learner. The respective General Studies course units for teaching vital language skills for instance Use of English, Communication in English, Communication skills and English or General English usually include the teaching of academic writing as part of their contents. However, the urgency to redress deficiencies not corrected at the secondary school level tends to reduce the depth of attention given to the teaching of this vital skill. Academics assigned to teach the respective general studies course units constantly complain about the absence of basic foundation skills or requisite knowledge-base in the English Language, which students need to cope with challenges of trying to apply their mastery of the language to solving practical problems. It is difficult to teach a student, who has a poor command of the tenses and cannot write in paragraphs, how to write a long essay.

The fact remains that while the students may be short changed at the entry point level, the GSTs or GNSs provide the students the only opportunity to learn and be guided in the acquisition of the skill of academic writing. Beyond the entry level, they subject to the disposition of the other academics not assigned the mandate to teach language skills. The teaching of academic writing could then be treated as a mere accidental undeserving of detailed attention that ought to be given to delivering the core contents of the other course units with immediate and direct bearings on the course option or the programme being studied.

Many of the problems students encounter as a result of this gap i.e. limiting the teaching of academic writing to the entry level, are evidenced by the difficulties they (i.e. the students) face when writing project reports at the terminal stage of their programmes. In fact it is as a result of these difficulties that many students in higher institutions opt for plagiarism in the most blatant and unpretentious manner. Indeed, the factor of laziness could not be overlooked but it could be possible that a student might resort to academic theft because he/she cannot remember how he was taught to write research reports in his or her first year. The teaching of academic skills need not be limited to the entry level; academic skills need to be constantly reinforced in students.

Quiet understandably though, the inclusion of academic writing beyond entry level may be unfeasible because of credit loads carried at the subsequent levels. Such a challenge could be overcome through the establishment of students' academic support centres which could provide additional assistance to students: these could alternatively be regarded as extra murals or academic clinics for redressing deficiencies. Gosling (2009: 113) observes, with respect to the diversity of the fast growing higher education 'industry' in the UK, that [there] is a recognition that the system is recruiting more students who need significant help if they are to succeed in their studies. Students are increasingly heterogeneous and have multiple identities which in turn create a multiplicity of learning needs. We can no longer assume that there is a common understanding by students of the purposes of higher education or of the nature of studying at higher levels. Many students come from backgrounds

without the cultural capital that would enable them to have an understanding of the key demands being made on them by their teachers at the point of entry.

The Nigerian reality is not different from the situation depicted by Gosling (2009) in the preceding excerpt. Our students in the tertiary institutions come from different cultural backgrounds with varied socio-economic indices amongst several others. The pre-tertiary orientation could vary greatly too, for example the gap between students who attended elite private secondary schools and those who attended public secondary schools probably situated in remote rural areas. It is unfair for the system to assume that both categories of students have equal level of preparedness, abilities and expectations. There is every need to address the needs of every student at least to strive to provide access to that much needed remedial attention, where necessary.

Accordingly, the mindset behind this paper is advocating the additional provision for the teaching of academic writing in higher education curricula. Where this is not feasible, students support centres could be established solely for offering extramural services. The facilities of ICT could be explored via the creation of websites specifically dedicated to addressing students' academic needs.

References

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