



PASSwrite

Final Report

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University of Western Sydney

University of Technology, Sydney

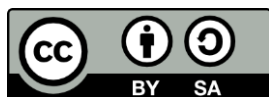
Project Team: Frances Williamson (Project Lead); Rosalie Goldsmith;
Clare Power; Joseph Yeo; Andrew Pyke; Sang-Eun Oh

Authors: Frances Williamson and Rosalie Goldsmith

<<http://uws.edu.au/passwrite>>

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Office for Learning and Teaching
Department of Education

GPO Box 9880,
Location code N255EL10
Sydney NSW 2001

<learningandteaching@education.gov.au>

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List of acronyms used

ALL	Academic language and learning
EAL	English as an additional language
FIF	First in family
HELPS	Higher Education Language and Presentation Support
IBP	Integrating business perspectives
INTERNAT	International student
LSES	Low socioeconomic status
MPO	Managing people and organisations
OLT	Office of Learning and Teaching
PASS	Peer Assisted Study Sessions
SHCA	School of Humanities and Communication Arts (UWS)
SI	Supplemental instruction
SoB	School of Business (UWS)
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Science
SSSP	School of Social Science and Psychology (UWS)
TEQSA	Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency
UTS	University of Technology, Sydney
UTSOnline	University of Technology, Sydney Learning management system
UWS	University of Western Sydney
VET	Vocational and educational training
MASUS	Measuring the academic skills of university students

Executive summary

With the increasing diversity of Australian university student cohorts and the inclusion of explicit English language benchmarks as part of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency's (TEQSA) teaching and learning standards, there is a heightened need to address current practices in regard to English language proficiency and academic literacy. PASSwrite is a strategic and sustainable approach to the development of critical and communicative capabilities among students, particularly underprepared and 'non-traditional' students (students who are mature age, from LSES backgrounds, or working full time). The project brings together the well-established and effective peer-learning model – Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) – with the best practice model of discipline-based academic literacy to create group learning environments in which students engage in critical reading, writing and dialogue related to concepts, language and conventions in their academic discipline.

The outcomes of the project include:

- development of discipline-specific student academic writing and critical reading capabilities
- engendering of 'educational resilience' to support students' progression and retention
- development of PASSwrite framework and supporting resources (training package, session resources, monitoring/evaluation procedures, administrative systems) that are readily scalable and adaptable by other institutions
- dissemination of project goals and outcomes via conference presentation, representation on education sub-committees and communication with university stakeholders
- continuation of PASSwrite at both participating institutions, the University of Western Sydney (UWS) and the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), in 2014.

The PASSwrite program has the potential to be adapted to a range of higher education institutions, and could be used at a subject, program or discipline level to assist students in developing discipline-specific academic literacies.

The recommendations from this project are based on the evaluation of the PASSwrite project at UWS and UTS. For institutions considering the implementation of the PASSwrite program they include:

- utilising the underlying principles of PASS to ensure that the PASSwrite sessions are peer-led
- recruiting appropriate PASSwrite facilitators: ensuring that they can facilitate peer-led sessions and that they have a firm grasp of the academic literacy of their discipline targeting appropriate units of study in which to run PASSwrite sessions
- differentiating the PASSwrite program from PASS sessions (particularly if PASS is already established at the institution).

The PASSwrite training package and associated resources can be found at:
<<http://uws.edu.au/passwrite>>

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Chapter 1: Project Outcomes and Impacts

This project has developed a new approach to the development of student language and academic literacy capabilities using a peer-facilitated, group learning environment. The background, theoretical underpinnings and contribution to knowledge of the project are introduced before details regarding the implementation and specific outcomes.

Background

There is widespread acceptance of the need to develop English language proficiency and academic literacies to ensure students understand the discipline teachings, respond appropriately in their assessment tasks, and develop the critical and communicative capabilities expected of a university graduate. As academic writing is used as the primary mode of assessment, inadequate academic literacy directly impacts not only retention and progression but also the potential employability of graduates (Birrell, 2006). This project responds to this need as well as to the perceived lack of effectiveness of the current delivery of academic literacy support for students in higher education in Australia. Despite the broad sector acceptance of the academic-literacies model (Lea & Street, 1998), with its emphasis on discipline-specific literacy (see DEEWR Good Practice Principles, 2009), university language centres predominantly offer generalised non-disciplinary specific workshops on study skills. Apart from the issue of generic skills workshops being divorced from the language and discourse practices of specific academic disciplines, evidence indicates this model is not working as well as it once did. Study skills workshops have seen falling attendance, doubts over the transference of skills (ABDC & ALTC, 2010) and a failure to attract those who most need the support (Arkoudis & Starfield, 2007). Many institutions also provide students with just-in-time, one-to-one consultations with academic language advisors. Such appointments, while effective in the short term, are very resource-intensive and can inculcate remediation and dependence in place of self-reliance and resourcefulness.

In recognition of these factors, PASSwrite was devised to recalibrate the type and mode of academic writing development to better meet the needs of current students and circumvent institutional constraints. The project utilised peer learning, specifically the PASS model, which has been successfully implemented and evaluated at 33 institutions across Australia. Peer learning is used here and abroad for effective discipline-based learning. In the US, it was developed as a response to widening access policies as the new non-traditional students were seen to benefit more from the collaborative peer-facilitated model of learning.

The delivery of academic literacy has also utilised peer learning models in universities across the US and UK (e.g. Washington State University, University of Texas, London Metropolitan, Kingston University) and increasingly in Australia (e.g. UNSW, QUT). However, almost all of these are one-to-one and just-in-time models, which, as argued above, can be problematic in terms of both sustainability and pedagogy. Through utilising group learning environments, PASSwrite presents a strategic and sustainable approach to the development of student English language and academic literacy.

Theoretical underpinnings

Collaborative

The social-constructivist perspective that knowledge and language are socially constructed underpins the collaborative nature of the PASSwrite project. According to this view, learners develop knowledge by interacting with other individuals. The verbalising and questioning that is integral to collaborative learning is especially effective when discussing the writing process (Lillis, 2006). Indeed, this social interaction works to demonstrably improve writing (Bazerman et al., 2006). Beyond the cognitive benefits of group work, collaborative learning also has obvious social benefits (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). In the current climate when many

students are spending less time on campus due to competing priorities outside of university (such as work and family commitments), collaborative peer learning models such as PASSwrite allow students to meet their academic and social needs in the one space, mitigating some of the obligations that students have on their time. Finally, group collaboration, rather than the mentor–mentee relationships typical of one-on-one peer writing programs, affords greater benefits for all participants. Not only is learner autonomy more likely to be fostered in such an arrangement, but collaborative learning spaces provide opportunities to promote greater equality and connectedness between diverse groups of students. It is not uncommon to have recent school leavers, mature age students, international students, and refugee and migrant students working cooperatively towards a common goal of academic success.

Discipline-specific

The discipline-specific approach has been adopted in part because the program builds on the PASS model, which targets specific (challenging) units of study and integrates content and study skills in the sessions. Equally important is the perspective that writing (as part of the development of literacy) is seen as a socio-cultural act, necessarily embedded in the social practices and social contexts in which it is used (Street, 2003). Becoming a skilled writer involves responding to the demands of particular cultural and linguistic settings; this acquisition of skills therefore needs to occur within a specific disciplinary context. The Good Practice Principles (DEEWR, 2009) recognised the disciplinarity of academic literacy (hence the increasingly accepted term ‘academic literacies’) and emphasised the need for “oral and written communication skills to be made more visible, accessible and, importantly, integrated within specific disciplinary contexts” (p. 2). This notion of visibility is also important as within different disciplines, contradictions arise, ranging from variations in the expectations of different tutors to different understandings of what a specific genre may require, particularly as these understandings are frequently not made explicit (Lea & Street, 1998). Students need support to negotiate what is expected of them within their discipline and to manage the often contradictory expectations. PASSwrite facilitates a discourse within the practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), hopefully leading to the development of student voices that are both individual and appropriate to the discipline.

Hands-on

The program also reflects the perspectives of situated cognition and of situated learning in a number of respects (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989; Kirshner & Whitson, 1997; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Both these perspectives see the learning context and the authenticity of (writing) tasks as critical, and posit that students learn by doing: “that knowing, thinking and understanding are generated in practice, in situations whose specific characteristics are part of practice as it unfolds” (Lave, in Kirshner & Whitson, 1997, p. 19). A key aim of PASSwrite is to nurture a culture of writing that values the process of writing as much as the final product (Aitchison, 2009). Not only does this approach present opportunities for students to practise the mechanics of writing but also the very act of writing helps develop cognitive skills and critical thinking (Emig, 1977). It is the authors’ belief that much of what constitutes unclear writing is a lack of clear thinking. We therefore posit that if students are provided with a space in which they can engage in constructive and facilitated conversations about the ideas contained in unit- related readings and then, crucially, test that understanding through writing, their writing will improve.

Peer-facilitated

PASSwrite is peer-facilitated to reflect the social constructivist view of learning as scaffolded exploration through social and cognitive interactions with a more experienced peer. Unlike experts in the form of lecturers and tutors who are likely to be outside students’ zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), near peers can provide frames of reference to understand new information, which may be in a new discipline, and “lend the students the capacity to frame meanings they cannot yet produce independently” (Norton &

Crowley, 1995, p.172). For this reason, many students view successful peers as more credible (Topping, 2005). However, it is not only a matter of being able to relate more readily to peers that makes peer-facilitated learning models effective. The trend away from attending lectures (McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000) may in part be due to the size and nature of this traditional form of instruction, both of which can be intimidating for beginning students. Beginning students report an unwillingness to ask questions; in addition, fear of exposing their ignorance or a lack of confidence in their own ability prevents students from seeking clarification or venturing their own opinions. Within the context of peer-led sessions, the role of the peer facilitator is not to judge or assess students' work, but to have a conversation around it, and it is this which is instructive. In this way, the PASSwrite facilitator inhabits a space somewhere between student and teacher (Harris, 1995), providing all-important face-to-face time in which students can articulate bewilderment, seek clarification, and speak and write in the discourse with a competent (if not expert) other.

Formative

The modern university has limited opportunities for students to engage in dialogue about their understanding of unit content and academic writing expectations. Such dialogues, when they do occur, tend to reflect the relationship of authority between tutor and student. Too often, it is the tutor or lecturer talking to or at the students, and in such contexts, it is difficult for students to challenge this dynamic. Similarly, opportunities to receive and discuss detailed, constructive feedback are insufficient; only around a third of students feel satisfied with the accessibility of and level of feedback they receive from teaching staff (Krause et al., 2005). Furthermore, any feedback received is frequently delivered long after the task has been completed, thus lessening its formative value; it is also acknowledged that much feedback is cursory, unclear, confusing or unnecessarily negative (Catt & Gregory, 2006). In contrast, the feedback in peer-led writing sessions is immediate and framed in language that students find accessible (Devet et al., 2006). The importance of receiving swift and purposeful feedback should not be underestimated, but is often logistically difficult to achieve by teaching staff. In peer-led sessions, students and facilitators learn through giving and receiving feedback, both in the process of considering their own work and in considering the work of others.

Engaging

Much of the literature around building student engagement speaks of fostering a sense of student belonging through supportive peer relations (Thomas, 2012). The establishment of such peer networks is particularly important in first year as the isolation experienced by many new students is a contributing factor in student attrition. Survey data and qualitative research from the UK identified feelings of isolation and/or 'not fitting in' as key reasons behind students' decisions to leave university (Thomas, 2012). Collaborative, peer-led sessions such as PASSwrite allow students to recognise that others are feeling similarly confused about what is expected of them in terms of university writing. This recognition can trigger a sense of belonging and help ameliorate the detrimental impact of isolation on retention and success. Another affective outcome of peer learning is a growth in confidence and willingness to identify as successful learners in the higher education context. This combination of belonging, confidence and identifying as a successful learner contributes to what Topping refers to as 'educational resilience' (2005, p.641).

Contribution to existing knowledge

Broadly speaking, the PASSwrite project can be seen as contributing to understandings of the nature of student tertiary literacy (both English language proficiency and academic literacies), both at the individual and institutional level. As such, the project can be viewed as building on the work currently being undertaken in two Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) fellowships: OLT National Senior Teaching Fellow, Associate Professor Sophie

Arkoudis' *Embedding English language learning in higher education curricula*; and OLT National Teaching Fellow, Associate Professor Carmela Briguglio's *Embedding English language development into the disciplines*.

The PASSwrite project also aligns with the priority area of strategic approaches to learning and teaching which enhance student access and progression through a direct response to student diversity.

Implementation

The following section provides details on the delivery of the program at both project sites.

Sessions

Sessions were run weekly, from the third to final teaching week across two semesters. Sessions went for 1.5 hours and the number of attendees was capped at 10 students, to allow for individual feedback. Student facilitators were provided with a highly structured session outline to ensure that all students attending the sessions had hands-on reading and writing practice as well as feedback. Each session had the following structure:

1. informal introduction including identifying areas of need (whole group)
2. deconstructing and annotating an exemplar of writing in that discipline (pairs of small groups)
3. round robin of different reading/writing activities selected based on needs of group (e.g. grammar in context, vocabulary, structuring longer pieces of writing, incorporating evidence into paragraphs, supporting arguments from text, analysing essay/assessment tasks, planning a piece of writing, evaluating sources, etc.) (small groups)
4. co-constructing a text in response to the reading (pairs)
5. peer-editing and feedback on a piece of writing just produced using a modified form of the marking criteria from units within that discipline (pairs)
6. feedback from facilitator on writing undertaken outside the session (takes place while students engage in small group activities) (individual).

Target disciplines and cohort/s

1. UWS

The decision was made to implement the program in the humanities and business disciplines. This was due to the comparatively high numbers of potentially underprepared and/or at-risk students as indicated by the proportion of English as an additional language (EAL) students, Vocational and educational training (VET) pathway students and the relatively low entrance requirements in the Bachelor of Arts (BA) and Bachelor of Business and Commerce (BBC) degree programs at the university. Furthermore, both of the aforementioned degree programs have a 'gatekeeper' literacy-focused unit with high failure rates.

In semester 1 2013, the target cohorts were commencing undergraduate students in the School of Business (SoB), School of Humanities and Communication Arts (SHCA) and School of Social Science and Psychology (SSSP). A link to an online registration form with a brief description of the program was placed as an announcement on the UWS online platforms of four core humanities units. A similar announcement was placed on the School of Business student portal. Students were directed to a newly created webpage on the existing UWS PASS website. In addition, all first year champions in the SoB and SHCA were contacted and advised of the program and its aims.

In semester 2 2013, the program took a more targeted approach, identifying and referring 'repeat fails'; that is, students who had failed and were reattempting either the gatekeeper unit, or one or another of the core writing-focused units in their degree program. This shift was the result of analysis of data from semester 1, including entry level writing samples, attitudinal surveys and feedback from PASSwrite facilitators, which indicated that a significant proportion of attendees had markedly low levels of preparedness and language-based skills. It was surmised that students with foundational language and literacy needs would very likely have failed one or more of the core literacy-focused units in their program. 'Repeat fail' students were identified using reports run by SoB and SHCA staff and then contacted by telephone in week 2 by student mentors who referred them to the program.

2. UTS

At UTS, it was decided to focus unilaterally on the Business School in semester 1 2013. The PASSwrite program was referred to as U:PASSwrite, to reflect its links with other student-facing programs run by the UTS HELPS team (such as U:PASS). The sessions were shortened to one hour each in order to fit in better with room availability and student timetables.

In semester 1, the first year core subject of Integrating Business Perspectives (IBP) was targeted (approximately 1600 enrolling students), as the cohort has a roughly similar profile to its counterpart at UWS in terms of high numbers of potentially academically underprepared students. The U:PASSwrite program was promoted via the subject coordinator, UTS online (UTS LMS) and in academic literacy workshops. Interested students were asked to send an email to a member of the HELPS team, who was also the U:PASSwrite contact person at UTS.

In semester 2 2013, the focus shifted to pathways students studying nursing in the Faculty of Health (those articulating into the degree program from TAFE: approximately 80 students) and commencing undergraduate students in the Business School enrolled in the subject Managing People and Organisations (MPO) (approximately 1200 students). The shift in focus was to address perceived needs of the pathways students in nursing, and because MPO was considered to be a better fit with the intended learning outcomes of U:PASSwrite. The program was promoted in lectures and via UTSONline. To streamline registration, an online registration system was set up within the HELPS booking system.

Recruitment of facilitators

Potential PASSwrite facilitators, where possible, were recruited from within the ranks of existing PASS facilitators. This enabled us to ensure that all PASSwrite facilitators had experience in peer facilitation and understood the underpinnings of peer learning pedagogy. Those facilitators who reported paying particular attention to the academic literacy needs of students in their existing groups were approached and asked to submit an expression of interest to be a PASSwrite facilitator. These facilitators were also required to submit at least two samples of recent assessable writing. Candidates were then shortlisted, based on reasons for wanting to join the program and the strength of their own academic writing. A half-hour interview was then conducted in which candidates were questioned about their own experiences reading and writing at university as well as their understandings of student literacy issues.

Training

Training consisted of two components: online and face-to-face.

1. Online

Facilitators were invited to participate in an online discussion. Five prompts (see Appendix A) were provided and students were required to compose responses as well as read and respond to other students' responses. The content covered included the theoretical

underpinnings of PASSwrite (see Williamson & Goldsmith, 2013, Appendix B), disciplinary conventions, common problems in student writing, and the art of giving and receiving feedback. Students had the two weeks leading up to the face-to-face training in which to participate.

2. Face-to-face

Five-hour face-to-face training sessions were held in February and July. In February, staff and student facilitators from UTS were involved. In July, the training consisted of UWS facilitators only. The training itself covered the more practical aspects of the program, including role playing, giving and receiving feedback on writing in real time, analysing authentic student writing samples in real time, the structure of sessions, the role of the facilitator, developing resources, and troubleshooting.

Ongoing support and evaluation

1. UWS

All facilitators were observed by the project leader at least once during each semester. The observation was for the entire 1.5-hour session (see Appendix C for observation sheet template). Facilitators were then sent the record of their observation, along with detailed and specific feedback, via email. Facilitators were also supported in the creation of resources, with a significant bank of activities, online resources, sample student essays and discipline-specific readings provided via a shared folder in Dropbox. Finally, Skype meetings were held midway through the semester with all facilitators and the project leader. These meetings were an opportunity to provide informal feedback, debrief, and share problems and solutions.

2. UTS

New U:PASSwrite facilitators were observed twice a semester and existing U:PASSwrite facilitators were observed once during the semester. Feedback was provided immediately after the session when possible. An email was sent to all the U:PASSwrite facilitators once a week to keep them posted on subject/assignment information; to provide suggestions on what to cover in the following week; to disseminate any essential information; and to maintain contact. U:PASSwrite facilitators were encouraged to share resources and participate in online discussion via UTSONline and to make contact whenever necessary, either via email or in person.

Summary and Achievement of Outcomes

The project was designed to achieve the outcomes listed below, as identified in the project proposal:

Outcome 1: Development of discipline-specific student academic writing and critical reading capabilities

Analysis of entry-level writing samples and attitudinal surveys indicated very low writing capabilities, confidence and preparedness among attendees. The development of such capabilities, especially academic literacies, is a longer-term process. This development is hampered by the fact that many students did not attend PASSwrite sessions regularly, reflecting a culture of just-in-time learning (see Chapter 4 for more details). On a practical level, inconsistency in attendance patterns made the measurement of any language- and literacy-based progression at the individual level very difficult. However, several studies have demonstrated improved writing performance and/or grades for students participating in peer-writing programs, as reported in Topping (1996). We similarly anticipate that tangible improvements in actual writing and reading capabilities of individual students will emerge over time.

Outcome 2: Engendering of 'educational resilience' to support students' progression and retention

It was anticipated that through opportunities to make errors and be corrected in a supportive, non-judgmental environment, students would have a greater sense of ownership of the learning process and greater control over the formation of academic voice. This sense of control would in turn lead to greater resilience. Survey results (discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4) indicate that students did indeed feel more confident in their academic reading and writing as a result of the program. Furthermore, students indicated that participating in PASSwrite sessions encouraged them to continue with their course.

Outcome 3: Development of PASSwrite framework and supporting resources (training package, session resources, monitoring/evaluation procedures, administrative systems) that are readily scalable and adapted by other institutions

The project has devised a framework for the implementation of a PASSwrite program, assuming the existence of a PASS program. The recruitment, training and support of student facilitators run parallel to comparable procedures in a PASS program. Additionally, the project has trialled three models of implementation: self-referral, unit-based (UTS); self-referral, discipline-based (UWS semester 1); and referral only, discipline-based (UWS semester 2). Other institutions will be able to make an informed determination about which model best suits their context.

In terms of resources, the project has developed:

- recruitment and training package (selection procedure, interview questions, pre-training online forum for facilitators, training manual, handouts, activities, demonstration film)
- session resources (session outline)
- evaluation tools (commencement and exit attitudinal surveys, commencement and exit discipline-specific reading and writing tasks, facilitator observation and feedback tool).

Outcome 4: Dissemination of project goals and outcomes via conference presentation, representation on education sub-committees and communication with university stakeholders

Please refer to Chapter 2 for details.

Analysis of enablers and barriers to success

Existing culture and profile of PASS

The fact that both project sites have an established culture of peer-facilitated group learning through the prior existence of PASS programs proved a critical success factor. Such a culture meant that many students were primed to engage in peer learning support initiatives such as PASSwrite. Similarly, teaching staff, particularly those of large first year core units, were familiar with and generally supportive of peer learning and were willing to refer students to the program.

On an administrative level, the pre-existence of PASS programs meant that the implementation of the PASSwrite project was expeditious; procedures for the recruitment, training and ongoing management of casual student staff were able to be readily adopted with only minor modifications required.

However, the strong profile of PASS at UWS also acted as an impediment. Despite clearly

explaining the nature and intention of the program and using a distinct registration system, it is apparent that many students confused PASSwrite with PASS. There is also evidence that some staff remained unable to differentiate between the two programs. This meant that many students, particularly in first semester, registered for the program with an inadequate understanding of the program's goals and expectations. It also meant that many students who could have potentially benefited from the program were not referred by teaching staff.

Staffing

Again, the pre-existence of PASS at both institutions meant that there was a pool of peer facilitators from which to draw on in recruitment for PASSwrite. These were students who were already trained in facilitating PASS and in the majority of cases had at least one semester's experience in managing peer learning and group dynamics. In first semester at UWS we were able to recruit 50% of the student facilitators from within the ranks of existing PASS facilitators, and in second semester, 100% of the new PASSwrite facilitators were recruited from the PASS program. At UTS all the U:PASSwrite facilitators in both semesters were recruited from the existing pool of U:PASS facilitators.

Similarly, the project leader and most active team member had experience in coordinating PASS programs and were able to draw on this working knowledge of processes and key stakeholders to move the project forward.

However, staff and project team attrition was an issue. Students tend to be mobile and time poor, and it was inevitable that some students became unable to continue with the program. Accordingly, midyear recruitment and training was necessary due to three out of the six facilitators at UWS withdrawing from the program. At UTS there was also midyear recruitment due to the change in targeted cohorts and subjects. In terms of project staffing, there was a delay in appointing a suitable project officer. Therefore, a significant amount of the administrative, data management and analysis tasks required was undertaken by the project leader. Also, due to various restructures and workload allocations, only three out of the six members of the project team remained actively involved over the duration of the project.

Attendance

Despite using a registration system and advising students of the expectation to attend the majority of PASSwrite sessions over the semester, the number of students who attended on a regular basis was low and in general attendance fell off towards the end of each semester. Such a pattern reveals the pervasive culture of just-in-time learning. Most academic support programs reinforce this culture by operating on a drop-in basis. However, PASSwrite was designed to be an intensive, ongoing program in recognition of the developmental nature of literacy.

In the case of the second semester, in which repeat fail students were targeted at UWS, the reliance on self-selection also contributed not only to generally low attendance but also the relatively low uptake of the program by those students who were targeted. The lack of a system requiring students who fail to make minimum rates of progress to undertake extra programs such as PASSwrite at both institutions remains a barrier.

At UTS in first semester, U:PASSwrite ran in one subject: IBP. Attendance at U:PASSwrite sessions fell off dramatically after week 3 due to the nature and timing of assessment tasks in the subject. In second semester, two cohorts were targeted: pathways students in nursing, and first year business students enrolled in MPO. However, due to lack of take-up by nursing students, U:PASSwrite was only run in the business subject, where attendance was higher and much more consistent than in first semester. Based on discussions with team members and U:PASSwrite facilitators, it can be surmised that a number of factors contributed to the greater success of the program in semester two. By second semester students seemed to be more aware of the demands of the discipline in terms of academic

literacy; the type and timing of assessment tasks in MPO were more conducive to students seeing the developmental nature of academic writing and reading (individual essays and assignments spread throughout the semester); there was less competition from U:PASS sessions being run in that subject; and there was a more accessible registration system.

Possibility of successful implementation in other institutional contexts

The PASSwrite model has the potential to be implemented in a number of institutions, with the proviso that there is a strong understanding of the peer-led nature of the model, and ideally that there is a PASS-type program already in place. This allows for the recruitment of PASSwrite facilitators who are already familiar with the principles of peer learning and experienced in facilitating peer learning.

Chapter 2: Dissemination

The outcomes of the PASSwrite project were disseminated using the OLT-recommended strategy (ALTC, 2008), as outlined below:

- A peer-reviewed article written by Frances Williamson and Rosalie Goldsmith outlining the theoretical underpinnings of PASSwrite, the aims of the project and intended outcomes, was published in the *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice* (August 2013). This disseminates the key aspects of the program to a national and potentially international audience
- A presentation and workshop by Frances Williamson, Adrien Kamal and Maria Hatzistergos (UWS PASSwrite facilitators) on *PASSwrite: An Innovative and Sustainable Approach to Student Academic Literacies Development* were held at the National PASS forum in Sydney, 1–2 October 2013. The presentation and workshop disseminated the underlying principles of PASSwrite to the Australian PASS community. The presenters outlined the approach adopted by the PASSwrite program to developing student academic literacies in a discipline-specific context within the framework of peer learning. In addition, the PASSwrite facilitators provided the audience with their perspectives on the key elements of facilitating PASSwrite sessions
- A presentation on PASSwrite as part of a panel on peer learning within academic language and literacy was given at the Association of Academic Language and Learning (AALL) biannual national conference in Melbourne, 14–15 November 2013. The presentation reached an audience representing the academic language and learning (ALL) community in Australasia, and provided insight into the effectiveness and potential limitations of the PASSwrite program. The paper reported on early findings into the positive impact this initiative is having on student academic writing and the development of ‘educational resilience’ by drawing on data from registrations, attendance, student attitudinal surveys, entry- and exit-level writing samples, and progression rates at both project sites. The paper also reported on the extent to which PASSwrite is sustainable in the current funding climate
- A number of internal UWS reports were also written, including: *Impact of PASSwrite*, prepared for Student Engagement and Experience Committee (education sub-committee); a proposal prepared for the UWS Education Committee about the future direction of the program; a report for the Peer Learning Initiatives working group (of which Frances Williamson is a member); and a report and interview for the Student Learning Communities Pilot (via the UWS Library)
- An internal report written by Joseph Yeo for UTS Student Services is currently in draft form
- A report prepared as part of an external review of UWS student transition and academic support programs
- An article titled ‘Get it Write’ discussing the pilot project in *The Australian* (March 18 2013, online) by Bernard Lane
- A peer-reviewed article presenting the findings and a detailed evaluation of the project are being planned by the authors of this report; it is intended to target an international audience.

These dissemination activities have led to the program receiving ongoing funding at UWS and UTS for 2014 as well as significant interest in establishing similar programs at the University of Newcastle, the University of Wollongong, the University of Canberra, the University of Sydney and Macquarie University.

Chapter 3: Linkages

The project team has established links with a number of institutions that are interested in exploring the possibilities presented by the PASSwrite program. These include the University of Canberra and the University of Newcastle. There has also been an expression of interest from Macquarie University and the University of Wollongong to develop PASSwrite as part of their existing PASS programs. As part of our funding obligations, the project team will also be making available many of the training resources developed as part of the pilot. These will be available online at: <<http://uws.edu.au/passwrite>>

The members of the project team will be in discussion with interested parties, and look forward to advising other institutions how to make best use of the potential effectiveness of the PASSwrite model.

Chapter 4: Evaluation

The project was evaluated using a combination of qualitative and quantitative instruments. The following section begins by detailing both formative and summative evaluation tools, and then summarises key findings from the project.

Evaluation tools

Formative

Collection and analysis of:

- demographic data
- commencement point student attitudinal surveys (see Appendices D and E)
- commencement point student writing sample
- registration data
- session observation records for each facilitator (see Appendix C)
- online posts and discussions among facilitators and team members
- records of meetings with facilitators and project team members.

Summative

Comparison of:

- results of attendees and non-attendees in individual units.

Collection and analysis of:

- exit evaluative survey
- facilitator written feedback
- attendance data.

Key findings

Demographics

Demographic information about the student attendees was compiled using student IDs. The information was used to ascertain who was attending the program and to inform changes from the first to the second semester of the project.

UWS PASSwrite student demographics in percentages (%)									
	EAL	INTERNAT	LSES	FIF	VET	SCHOOL-LEAVER	MATURE-AGE	FEMALE	MALE
Autumn 2013	56	9	24	69	31	22	27	70	30
Spring 2013	48	15	38	73	37	13	20	70	30
UWS UG (2013)	35	6	25	63	14	24	24	54	46

Table 1: Demographic profile of PASSwrite attendees

As shown in the above table, a high proportion of attendees had English as an additional

language (EAL). The program also attracted significant numbers of VET pathway and First in family (FIF) students. In these three categories, representation was higher in the program than in the general UWS undergraduate student population. Anecdotal and empirical evidence suggests that students in these categories may experience more difficulties with the transition to university study and can be associated with lower than average grade point averages (GPAs) (Grebennikov & Skaines, 2009).

Registration and attendance data

1. UWS

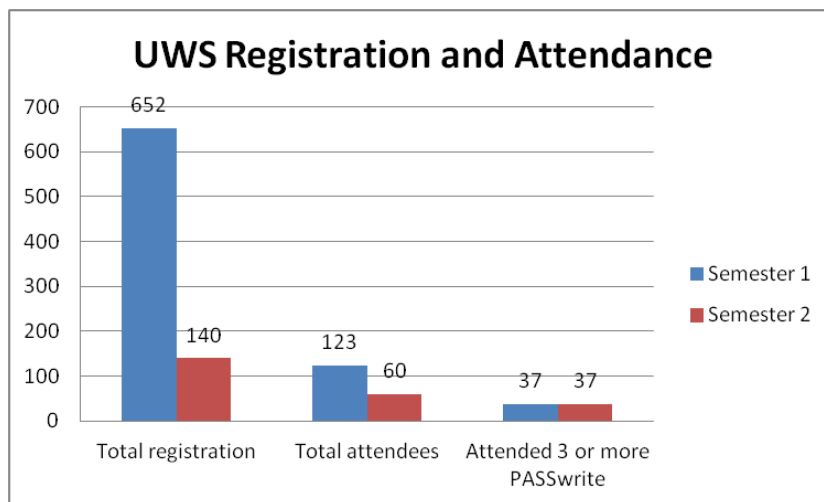


Figure 1: Numbers of PASSwrite registrations and attendance at UWS

In first semester, despite limited promotion of the program to commencing students in target first year core units of the BA and BBC, many students in other disciplines of study registered. As the program was discipline specific, a large proportion of these students were not offered a place in PASSwrite sessions. In addition, a number of registrations were from students seeking a different kind of academic support to that offered by PASSwrite. As discussed in Chapter 1, many students fail to distinguish between the various academic enrichment programs, confusing workshops, PASS and PASSwrite.

In the second semester, the lower levels of registration and attendance reflect the change in direction of the program, targeting at-risk students who were referred to the program. There was no additional promotion of the program.

2. UTS

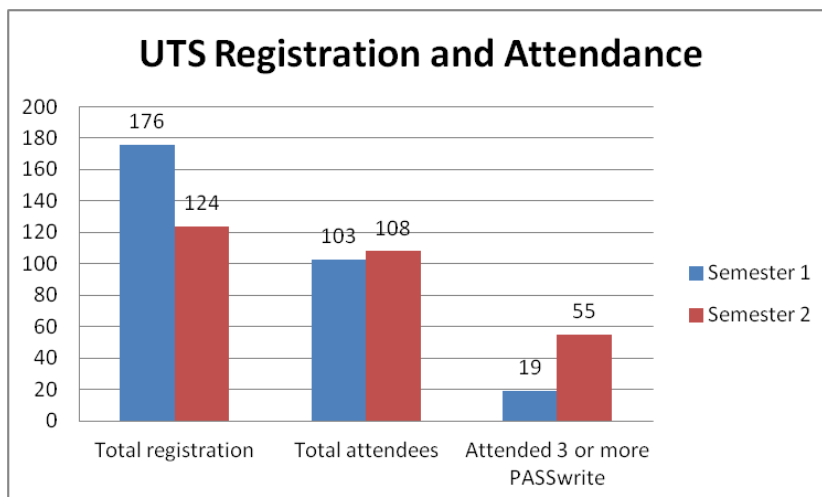


Figure 2: Numbers of PASSwrite registrations and attendance at UTS

At UTS, in first semester the program was offered in the subject IBP, as it was a first year core subject with a large cohort. The initial attendance was quite high, but fell off dramatically after week 3, due to the timing and nature of assessment tasks in that subject. The first assignment was an individual essay due in week 3; the second assignment was a group report due at the end of semester.

In second semester, PASSwrite was offered in the subject MPO, which was also a core first year subject with a substantial cohort, but with individual assignments spread throughout the semester. This probably explains the stronger relationship between registrations and (regular) attendance by students in this semester.

Commencement data

UWS

1. Students' attitudes and practices

During the first or second PASSwrite session, students were asked to report on their attitudes and practices via a commencement survey. Data from the two commencement surveys (first and second semesters) were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). The analysis revealed that students reported only moderate levels of confidence about their ability to manage university-level reading and writing (averages of 2.96 and 2.34 on a Likert scale out of 5 respectively). In terms of affect and actual practices, students reported enjoying reading to a reasonable degree (3.33) but reading less frequently (3.18) and of particular concern, nearly a quarter of all students never read university readings (textbooks, articles) (24.1%). Students enjoyed writing even less (2.84). Not surprisingly, nearly 60% of students participated in paid work outside university (59.5%), averaging 4 hours per week. Students also reported a similar expenditure of time on university study each week (4–6 hours on average).

The data above indicates that at the start of the program, practices and dispositions towards reading and writing at university contributed to a significant level of underpreparedness among students.

2. Students' writing capabilities

To verify whether this self-reported data was giving us an accurate picture, we assessed and analysed entry-level writing of UWS students. The Measuring the Academic Skills of University Students (MASUS) marking criteria for academic advisors was modified for this purpose (see Appendix F) with four criteria each rated from one to four, with one being the lowest possible attainment and four being the highest. Students were given a reading, allowed to read and discuss it in pairs and then asked to write a one or two paragraph summary of the text. Figure 3 below shows the results of the writing task for the UWS cohort. What emerged as the weakest area of the writing task, as determined by the highest percentage of level one and two rankings, was comprehension and integration of the reading material. This indicates that many students participating in the program had foundational and literacy needs and that their reading level on entry to the program was likely insufficient to meet the demands of university-level reading, both in terms of complexity and volume. This data, combined with the results from the attitudinal survey, shows that those accessing PASSwrite were potentially some of the most academically underprepared students.

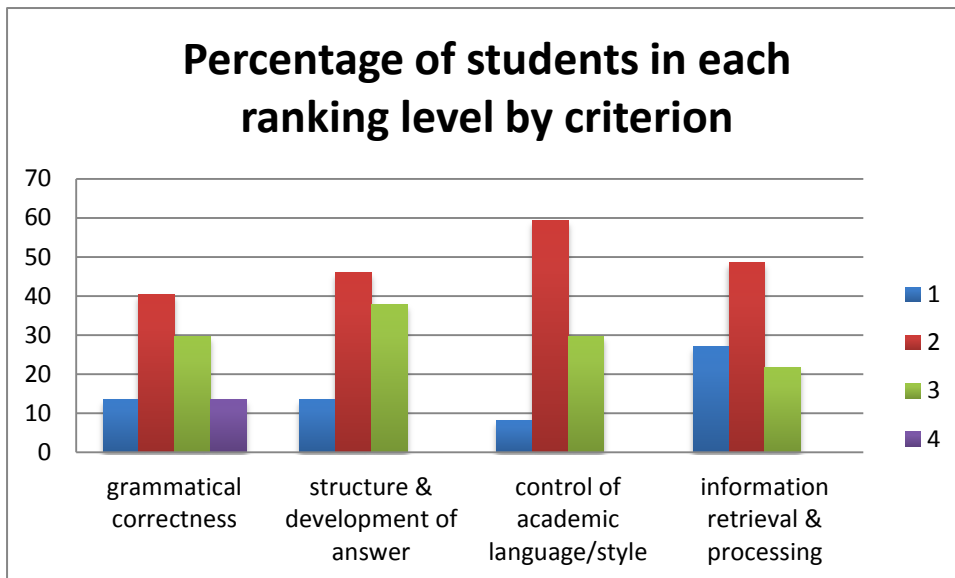


Figure 3: Performance of UWS attendees in entry-level writing task by criterion

At UTS, students' academic literacy capabilities were also evaluated via a self-reported mechanism. Students were asked to complete a 10-item questionnaire in the first session in order to gauge their self-evaluation of their knowledge and confidence of academic literacies (see Appendix E for the questionnaire). The same questionnaire was administered in the last session to determine if there had been any changes in the students' self-evaluation (see the exit data section below). The initial responses indicated that the majority of students were unsure of many aspects of academic literacy. For example, 47% of students were not sure how to integrate information from other sources into their assignments, nor were they clear about how to structure an essay. A larger proportion of students (53%) expressed uncertainty in critically evaluating a text or source. In addition, 48% of students were unsure how to write academically and were not confident about writing in their discipline.

Exit data

1. Students' perceptions of the PASSwrite program

In terms of qualitative data, results from the two evaluation surveys conducted at UWS (one per semester) indicate that from the point of view of participating students, the program was successful in developing students' understanding of and confidence in reading and writing at the tertiary level:

- 90.5% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that as a result of attending PASSwrite, they understood the expectations of university reading and writing better
- 91.3% agreed/strongly agreed that they understood the expectations of writing in their discipline better
- 81.2% agreed/strongly agreed that the sessions helped develop their confidence in reading and writing
- 87.5% agreed/strongly agree that they were able to apply the reading and writing strategies/techniques learned in PASSwrite in preparing their assignments.

The UTS students had similar responses regarding the effectiveness of the PASSwrite program overall as well as the various aspects of academic literacies:

- 100% of students agreed that they now knew how to write academically
- 40% of students strongly agreed that they knew how to structure a report or essay
- 60% of students agreed that they knew how to integrate information from their readings into their assignments.

2. Facilitators' perceptions of PASSwrite program (both institutions)

The student facilitators who ran the weekly sessions provided insightful and constructive feedback. Facilitators from both UWS and UTS were asked to respond to four questions regarding the overall effectiveness and impact of the program. A total of eight facilitators responded. Their comments are summarised below.

Overall effectiveness

Facilitators were generally of the view that the program had been effective; however, many commented that the outcomes for students were very much dependent on attendance. Another facilitator also highlighted the difficulty of measuring improvement in student writing commenting that "the overall effectiveness has been difficult to establish due to the drop in numbers in the final weeks. This has meant I have been unable to compare end-of-semester work of students with their work at the beginning" (Facilitator D).

Several of the facilitators also raised the notion of differentiated sessions, for example, by language background:

I wonder whether it would be possible to have levels of PASSwrite that are more fashioned to students' needs? It seems to me that international students or those with a LOTE background need a session of their own geared towards filling the gaps in their English skills ... a regular session on academic writing [is not suitable for] these students ... Similarly, I found that working at the pace of the students (plus the issue of irregular attendance) meant that we were wrapping up our semester with a lot of improvement still possible. Perhaps there could be an understanding that PASSwrite not be limited to a single semester (which in the end was only 9 weeks) but open to struggling students for as long as they need to get their writing up to standard. For the few students that stuck it out, they have a better foundation to build on but I think they would benefit from further support. It would be great to know they were graduating to another level of PASSwrite where this could happen. (Facilitator F)

Awareness of assessment requirements

All facilitators agreed that PASSwrite had clarified students' understanding of their assessment requirements. As one facilitator reported:

The most significant improvement I have seen is in students learning how to think and write critically. Students often read that requirement in assignments and have no idea how to practically show critical and analytical thinking in their response; PASSwrite has provided a great opportunity for students to learn these skills in a supportive environment. Another great activity has been going through marking criteria with students so that they better understand what is required in their assignments. This has helped students to consider often-ignored criteria such as 'reflection' and 'critical analysis', which has improved the quality of students' work. In addition, students have benefited from reading academic articles and discussing them as a group in sessions in order to learn from what they have read. By analysing examples of good and poor writing, students have observed what works well and what does not, and often I have had students say 'I do that ALL the time, and now I see how it doesn't work/isn't appropriate'. (Facilitator C)

Textual coherence

Most facilitators reported small improvements in students' ability to write more coherent texts, that is, compositions that can be understood by others and benefit their purpose. Specifically, facilitators noticed improvements in macro-structuring of texts (i.e. essay and paragraph structure) but felt that improvements at the sentential level were still progressing:

Having read through some of the students' introductions for assessment one, and reading their introductions for assessment two, the students have certainly developed their essay structure technique. In terms of grammar, expression and punctuation I feel that there is certainly still room for improvement, particularly for those students with English as a second language – this I found the hardest to help students with as learning another language is certainly a difficult thing to do, let alone writing in that language in academic form. (Facilitator A)

Textual cohesion

Facilitators repeatedly commented that while improvements were made, the fact that many students participating in the program had foundational English language and literacy needs meant that these improvements were modest. Also, the lack of regular attendance further limited gains in terms of basic written and cohesive expression:

Some students did show improvement in their ability to write a more cohesive text; however, this was dependent upon how many sessions they attended. For those who attended consistently, their sentences and paragraphs showed great improvement, which also allowed these students to develop and expand their ideas. (Facilitator G)

3. Students' writing capabilities

As noted, the development of students' academic writing was hindered by the fact that many students did not attend regularly, reflecting a culture of just-in-time learning. On a practical level, inconsistency in attendance patterns made the measurement of any language and literacy progression at the individual level very difficult. However, as many of the comments by facilitators above attest, students who attended regularly made observable improvements in macro and micro aspects of their written expression.

4. Students' results

While impacts of the program at the individual level have been difficult to measure, comparison of mean performance in the core units of the UWS BA and BBC between those students attending 3 or more PASSwrite sessions and the rest of the unit cohort indicates that PASSwrite participation produced a positive effect on achievement. As these units' assessment is writing-dominant and the marking criteria focus explicitly on issues of linguistic structure and accuracy, it is significant that students attending PASSwrite as a cohort have consistently achieved better than the rest of the unit cohort on average.

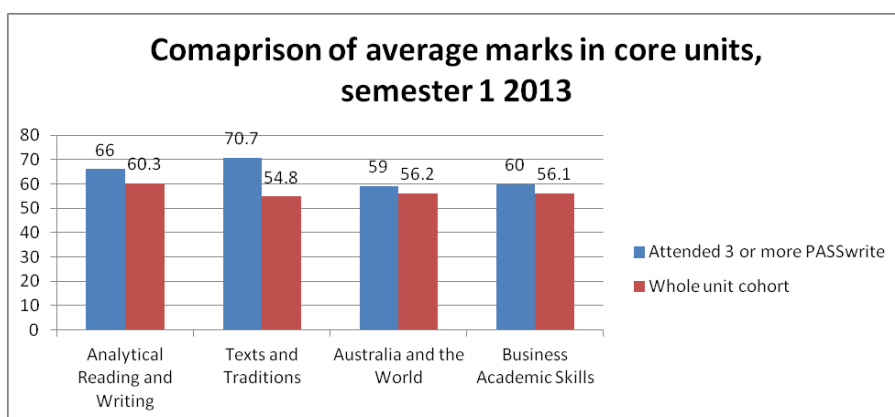


Figure 4: Comparison of UWS PASSwrite attendees and whole unit cohort, semester 1

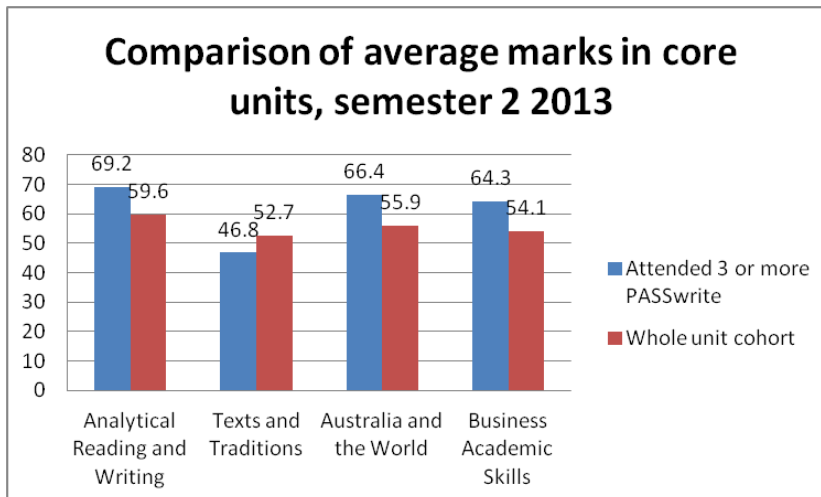


Figure 5: Comparison of UWS PASSwrite attendees and whole unit cohorts, semester 2

At the time of writing, the results from the UTS subject MPO were unavailable, but they will be analysed and included in an internal report for UTS.

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Appendix A

The following prompts were posted online (using *Basecamp* – a project management site).

Prompt 1: Learning to write academically

Reflect on your experience of learning to write academically:

- were you taught explicitly or did you 'pick it up'?
- was learning to write academically a positive or more challenging experience?
- what helped or hindered your development as an academic writer?
- what conclusions can you draw from your own experience about effective writing pedagogy?

Prompt 2: Academic reading

Reflect on your experience of reading at university:

- what have been some of the challenges?
- what do you still struggle with?
- what strategies have you employed?

Prompt 3: Writing in the disciplines

Read the attached paper. The most relevant section is from p. 549 (but you can read it all if you're keen). How can you use this information in your PASSwrite sessions?

(attach ref: Hyland (2008) Genre and academic writing in the disciplines)

Prompt 4: PASSwrite theoretical underpinnings

Read the attached paper and comment on your experience of:

- receiving feedback from tutors/lecturers
- learning from peers
- differing expectations of assignments/academic writing/reading at university.

(attach ref: Williamson & Goldsmith(2013) PASSwrite: recalibrating student academic literacies development)

Prompt 5: Feedback on students' academic writing

Visit the feedback toolkit at:

www.uws.edu.au/qilt/qilt/blended_learning/resources/teaching_practice/staff_feedback_toolkit

Look especially at the common weaknesses section. Be prepared to apply this information in your face-to-face training.

Appendix B

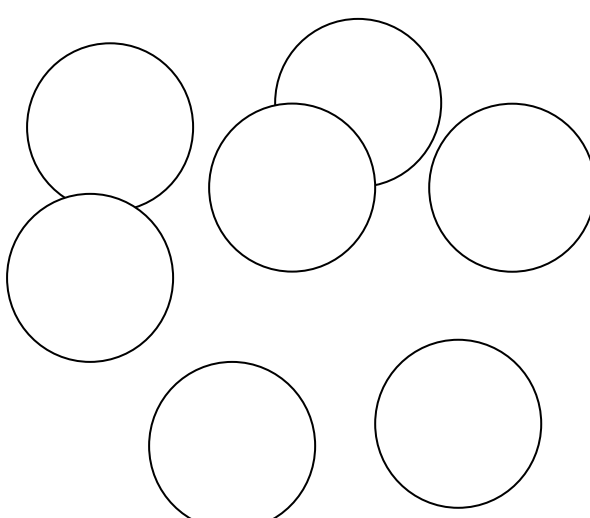


Williamson, F.& Goldsmith, R., 2013, PASSwrite: Recalibrating student academic literacies development, *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, vol. 10, no. 2, <<http://ro.uow.edu.au/jutlp/vol10/iss2/5/>>.

Appendix C

PASSwrite Facilitator Observation Record Template

FACILITATOR'S NAME:		OBSERVED BY:
OBSERVATION #		SESSION DAY/DATE/TIME:
CAMPUS/ROOM:		Notes
Structure		
1	Room arranged and used appropriately for small group work	
2	Facilitator prepared and admin completed: planning sheet, resources, PASS in progress sign on door, attendance taken	
3	Explicit, written agenda used	
4	Stage 1–2: explicit introduction and some kind of warm-up activity, such as free-writing, reflection, etc.	
5	Stage 3: reading material appropriate and activity set up clearly. Student dialogue encouraged; opportunity for whole group clarification of text; appropriate features of text elicited	
6	Stage 4: individual or co-constructed writing effective. Writing actually done. Facilitator monitored pairs/students	
7	Stage 5: feedback given to all pairs/students. Suggestions appropriate and relevant to students' concerns. Session closed effectively (review/wrap up of main content, opportunity for feedback, request for ideas for following week's stage 6 resources)	
8	Stage 6: workstation material appropriate for self-access. Activities clearly described/identified. Students encouraged to move between stations	
9.	(if used) Stage 7: peer-editing process supported and monitored by facilitator	
10.	Stage 8: explicit close incorporating some degree of summary, reflection and invitation to suggest items for following week's workstations	

Rapport	
11.	Facilitator consistently used students' names
12.	Facilitator established supportive and positive atmosphere among peers, particularly during feedback/peer-editing activities
13.	Facilitator able to direct activities and students' attention
Group dynamics	
14.	Facilitator able to generate and sustain pair dialogue/small group discussion about texts
15.	Facilitator able to respond to different ability levels/personalities by using different groupings of students
16.	Facilitator encouraged participation by all (e.g. appropriate reaction to quiet or dominant students)
Content and strategy	
14	Time effectively managed; session began and finished on time (note: this item recognises that flexibility is important)
19	Content relevant to students' concerns, needs, level, time of semester and time available for activity
20	Students actively and cognitively engaged with material and activities

<p>Sociogram (predominant pattern of session)</p> 	<p> Flagged for immediate follow-up</p> <p>Aspects to follow up next observation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • • • <p>Going well:</p> 
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Appendix D

UWS PASSwrite Commencement Survey



Student ID: Year of study:
 Degree program:
 Campus:
 DoB: Postcode:
 Mother's highest qualification:
 Father's highest qualification:
 Are you the first in your family (parents, grandparents, siblings) to attend university?
 Yes No
 Do you speak a language/s other than English? Yes No
 If so, what language/s:

1. a) If you did the HSC, what level English did you complete? (select one)
 Fundamentals ESL Standard Advanced Extension 1 Extension 2

b) How long ago was this?
 Within the last two years
 3–5 years ago
 6–10 years ago
 More than 10 years ago

c) What final grade or band did you achieve? (Please specify)

2. How did you enter university? (select one)
 As a School leaver via UAC
 Via TAFE/VET
 As a Mature age student
 Via Unitrack
 Via UWS College
 As an International student
 Other please specify _____

3. During semester I am engaged in paid work:

<input type="checkbox"/>	0 hours per week
<input type="checkbox"/>	1–3 hours per week
<input type="checkbox"/>	4–8 hours per week
<input type="checkbox"/>	9–12 hours per week
<input type="checkbox"/>	13–18 hours per week
<input type="checkbox"/>	19–25 hours per week
<input type="checkbox"/>	26–30 hours per week
<input type="checkbox"/>	30–38 hours per week

4. The following question requires you to rank **how much you enjoy reading in general** (i.e. all kinds of reading including reading for pleasure and reading for uni/work). Circle a number between 1 and 5 on the scale below:

1	2	3	4	5
Not at all			Extremely	

5. The following question requires you to rank **how much you enjoy writing in general** (i.e. all kinds of writing including writing for pleasure and writing for uni/work). Circle a number between 1 and 5 on the scale below:

1	2	3	4	5
Not at all			Extremely	

6. The following question requires you to rank **how often you read**. Circle a number between 1 and 5 on the scale below:

1	2	3	4	5
Never			All the time	

7. If you read, **what kinds of material** do you read? (select all that apply)

- Letters/emails from family and/or friends
- Websites
- Text messages
- Newspapers/magazines
- Nonfiction books
- University readings (textbooks, articles)
- Fiction/literature
- Comics or other forms of graphic entertainment

8. The following question requires you to rank your **preparation and confidence with reading and writing at university** by choosing a number between 1 and 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is extremely. **Please write the number next to each question.**

- _____ How well **prepared** do you feel for university **reading**?
- _____ How well **prepared** do you feel for university **writing**?
- _____ How **confident** are you in **reading** university material (e.g. articles, textbooks)?
- _____ How **confident** are you in **writing** university assignments?

9. Please indicate if you **do any of the following regularly** (select all that apply):

- Complete tutorial/weekly readings
- Revisit readings (e.g. after lecture/tutorial)
- Attend lectures and tutorials
- Ask your lecturer/tutor questions
- Use the library
- Study in groups
- Study alone at home (no. of hours/week: _____)
- Attend PASS
- Receive additional support in English

10. The following question requires you to rank **your concerns with aspects of academic writing** by choosing a number between 1 and 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is extremely. **Please write the number next to the aspect of writing below.**

- _____ Discipline vocabulary (the particular words common in your area of study)
- _____ Sentence construction
- _____ Paragraph construction
- _____ Essay construction
- _____ Grammar
- _____ Spelling/punctuation
- _____ Constructing an argument
- _____ Incorporation of other sources (evidence, references)

11. Are there any people ***apart from teaching staff*** who can help you with your written university assignments? (select all that apply)

Family

Friends

Other please specify

.....

12. What are you hoping to gain by attending PASSwrite?

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Thank you

Appendix E

UTS Entry and Exit Questionnaire for U:PASSwrite Participants

1. I know how to write in an academic style
2. I know how to read and evaluate a piece of text critically
3. I can tell if a piece of text is relevant to an assignment
4. I know how to structure an essay
5. I know how to structure a report
6. I know how to organise my arguments logically and coherently in a written assignment
7. I know how to write critically with arguments supported by sound and objective evidence
8. I know how to integrate information, evidence and examples from my readings in my writing
9. I know how to acknowledge the sources in my writing using Harvard (UTS) referencing style
10. I am confident as a writer in my discipline

Appendix F

Modified MASUS marking guide used to evaluate UWS student writing samples.

PASSwrite | writing assessment criteria¹

RATING SHEET

S.I.D: _____

KEY TO RATING:

4 = excellent / no problems / accurate / very appropriate

3 = good / minor problems / mainly accurate / largely appropriate

2 = only fair / some problems / often inaccurate / often inappropriate

1 = poor / major problems / inaccurate / inappropriate

N/A= not applicable

CRITERIA

A. *Use of source material – information retrieval and processing* overall 4 3 2 1

Consider:

- main ideas/key points identified
- information integrated into the answer
- free from plagiarism

B. *Structure and development of answer* overall 4 3 2 1

Consider:

- structure appropriate to the task
- identifiable and appropriate paragraph structure (topic and supporting sentences; unity)
- statement of purpose of text
- some evidence of critical evaluation
- overall coherence of response

C. *Control of academic language/style* overall 4 3 2 1

Consider:

- vocabulary appropriately abstract, formal and technical
- generalisations qualified where appropriate
- use of passive voice, nominalisation
- appropriate and sufficient use of discourse markers
- use of other cohesive devices (substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, reference)

D. *Grammatical correctness* overall 4 3 2 1

Consider:

- accurate sentence structure (including punctuation to support this)
- agreement (subject/verb; number)
- consistent and appropriate tense choice, correctly formed
- appropriate use of word form
- accurate spelling

¹ Based on Sydney University MASUS assessment criteria.