

Faculty Perspectives of Undergraduate Student Academic Writing Underpreparedness

Master's Thesis

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Abstract

Underpreparedness among first-year university students, particularly in academic writing and academic engagement, creates challenges for students and instructors and raises questions about how students are supported when underprepared for university. This qualitative research examined first-year English instructors' perspectives to answer two questions: How first-year post-secondary students meet or do not meet the academic writing and adult learning expectations of first-year English instructors; and what do educators expect from university academic supports intended to address student underpreparedness in English university classes? Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 instructors from one Ontario university English department and data was analyzed using a combined theoretical model of Lea and Street's *Academic Literacies Model* and Knowles' *Adult Learner Theory*. The findings identified that the participants found argumentation quality, critical thinking and analysis presence, and clear and organized writing with evidence integration as key factors of exceptional academic writing, with student engagement and motivation as important characteristics of preparedness. However, instructors described gaps between these expectations and the abilities demonstrated by many first-year students, requiring support that is often misaligned, under-supported, and in need of better institutional communication. Concluding suggestions include institutional improvements and the potential of bridging Ontario grade 12 education with introductory university instruction. This would be a coordinated program encouraging student engagement, addressing topics including university expectations, high school to university transition, academic writing, and academic integrity.

Key words: academic support, academic writing, instructor perspectives, undergraduate, underpreparedness

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

“Thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence through them. Every thought tends to connect something with something else to establish a relationship between things” (Vygotsky, 1934/1962, p. 125).

Writing is an integral part of students' education from elementary school through university and into their careers. Student writing is not only a method to demonstrate knowledge attained, but also a form of expression that connects disciplinary theoretical knowledge with personal experience. Unlike Ontario colleges that offer a standard introductory communications course with their programs, Ontario universities do not always offer a separate and standard communications course. University introductory communications concepts are often integrated within disciplinary courses. However, do universities have expectations of first-year undergraduates that are not fully demonstrated during first-year studies related to academic writing? Statistics from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) in 2012 revealed that students are not adequately prepared for the level of academic writing required for success in university. The study identified 27% of university graduates, including 16% Canadian-born participants, still had low-scoring literacy levels (Hango, 2014). In 2016, a survey of Canadian faculty revealed that they perceived only 23% of university students had writing skills appropriate for university. A later 2017 study of four universities discovered that 30% of students showed “difficulty with writing a one-page summary of an article” (Grayson et al., 2019). From these studies, it seems that students are not adequately prepared for the demands of university.

As a university graduate assistant, I observed students struggling to incorporate effective academic writing practices that would enhance the success of their work in first- and second-year

university classes. This experience served as a reminder of my own failures in my first attempt at university studies. Although university academic learning centers aim to provide writing support during students' university studies, the need for remedial support in post-secondary education takes away time from engaging in discipline-specific studies and experiences. With many students arriving at university underprepared for academic writing expectations, it seems appropriate to ensure that support is in place to prepare them before their studies begin (Seçer & Çelikoğlu, 2017). Secondary school in Ontario is meant to prepare high school graduates, who have taken academic-level grade 12 preparatory courses for university studies (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2026). Within Ontario, secondary school literacy testing in grade 10 is required for graduation, but the assessment, called the *Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test* (OSSLT), assesses literacy skills based on grade 9 curriculum expectations only (EQAQ, 2021). With research showing that undergraduate underpreparedness exists, it appears that there is a gap between high school graduation requirements and the skills required for successful university studies, where potential university students need to become aware of and learn additional skills to make university a place where they can focus on their disciplinary studies, rather than catching up on foundational skills.

New undergraduate students are often underprepared for post-secondary studies in several ways, including literacy, and this underpreparedness persists through their university experience into their professional careers (Grayson et al., 2019; Rasinski et al., 2017). Research has found that the academic and literacy skills required for high school graduates and incoming university students are often inadequate for success in university (Grayson et al., 2019; Van De Wal & Ryan, 2014). At the same time, a decline in measurement scores internationally, such as the Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SATs), relates to underpreparation for higher education (Mulvey,

2008). Additionally, students entering university studies from high school encounter a transition from heavily directed and guided studies to a model of education expecting more self-direction. This expectation assumes students are responsible for their learning outcomes, but expectations between high school and university do not align, leaving many students struggling with this transition (Bolt & Graber, 2010). However, as Knowles updated Adult Learning Theory in 1984 in response to criticisms about adult learner assumptions, the distinction between teacher-directed and self-directed can apply to both children and adults on a scale of learning but describes an adult learner goal (Birkey, 1984; Knapke, 2024; Knowles, 1984; Merriam, 2001, 2017; Merriam et al., 2007). Thus, underpreparedness can look different based on the individual learner's positionality, age-based developmental level, and which determinants of academic underpreparedness may impact them. These determinants or influences can include foundational skills such as reading and writing, but also academic integrity and classroom engagement as part of the larger academic conversation, which influences the resulting academic writing submitted by students during their studies. For this thesis, I used specific terminology to distinguish between student academic writing and student behaviours, as well as the cumulative impact of these on student underpreparedness with: *features* used for academic writing; *determinants* or *influences* used for underpreparedness in general; and *characteristics* used when referencing student behaviour. The term *factor* appears in this thesis when it has been used by a referenced source. I also recognize that there are many sociocultural and economic factors that influence student success and preparedness for university studies, but this thesis does not deeply engage with these topics, as to remain focused on the purpose of this research.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this research was to understand first-year university instructors' perspectives about first-year undergraduate underpreparedness related to academic writing and student behaviours as emergent adult learners. This research specifically looked at features of academic writing and characteristics of adult learning demonstrated through students' participation and coursework submissions from the perspectives of instructors to expose gaps in instructors' expectations and students' academic writing output as a sign of underpreparedness. Additionally, the research investigated instructors' perspectives on academic support for underprepared students and their suggested changes to student academic support using theoretical frameworks.

Using qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with first-year undergraduate instructors, the aim of this research was to answer two research questions:

- 1.) How do first-year post-secondary students meet or not meet the academic writing and adult learning expectations of first-year English instructors?
- 2.) What do educators expect from university academic supports intended to address student underpreparedness in English university classes?

To answer these questions, my research considered the educators' perspectives as they shared their expectations and observations about the features of academic writing, undergraduate foundational academic writing practices, characteristics of adult learning demonstrated through students' participation and coursework submissions, and their observations of university academic writing support. The analysis outcomes of this research aimed to provide student support suggestions for the participating university department and for those who are focused on improving first-year students' academic writing outputs.

Although post-secondary underpreparedness involves more than academic writing skills, this research focused on questions about academic writing, exploring the role of underpreparedness determinants that converge with academic writing to affect students' academic success in post-secondary studies and beyond, including academic literacy, academic integrity, and student engagement. During the interviews, instructor participants were asked questions related to the identification of features for successful academic writing and student characteristics related to course engagement, their expectations of students' foundational literacies before starting their undergraduate studies, and their observations of whether first-year students demonstrated characteristics that they identified. Finally, as the interviewer, I sought to identify instructor perspectives about academic writing supports available to underprepared students and suggested improvements to these supports.

The resulting qualitative data from this research formed a thematic narrative about how first-year university instructors identify academic writing features of successful first-year student writing and student behavioural characteristics that encourage post-secondary success. This research also considered first-year instructor perceptions of students' abilities to meet or not meet their identified expectations. The resulting research findings also provided insight into what educators expect from university academic supports intended to address student underpreparedness in English university classes. The thematic analysis of the qualitative data gained from instructor responses explored their perspectives about academic writing underpreparedness determinants and the potential gaps between instructor expectations and student performance by drawing on the *Academic Literacies Model* (Lea & Street, 2006) and the transition from youth to adult learning, as outlined in *Adult Learner Theory* (Knowles, 1970; 1984). Lea and Street's (2006) *Academic Literacies Model* was chosen as one of the theoretical

models for this research due to its focus on student reading and writing, and how made ed from their reading and writing activities from a knowledge building perspective. The concept of making meaning from reading, writing, and knowledge building reflected some of the behavioural attributes of an adult learner, which connected the theoretical underpinnings of this research to *Adult Learner Theory*. Knowles' (1984) *Adult Learner Theory* was chosen as the other theoretical model to examine how student actions, as observed by the participants, may or may not reflect expectations associated with adult learners.

Significance of This Research

The significance of this research lies in its potential to shift the narrative from a deficit model, or a position that high schools are not preparing students well enough, to providing a framework for improvements, based on theory and evidence. The framework focused on the guidance and support processes for undergraduate students. It aimed to shift the focus of foundational academic writing from the first year of university studies to university preparation, allowing more time in that first year to build the required skills in their respective disciplines. The next chapter's literature review discussed university student underpreparedness as a persistent problem, and the significant body of research that has been dedicated to addressing students' underpreparedness challenges. Although this research fell within an extensive body of knowledge, its focus was directed at examining a specific university department through engagement with its faculty.

Theoretical Context and Connections to the Research Design

The transition from high school to university is also a transition from youth learning practices (i.e., pedagogy) to adult learning practices, also known as andragogy. The information gathered through this research was analyzed through the perspectives of Knowles' *Adult Learner*

Theory and Lea and Street's *Academic Literacies Model*, which contained three models for student writing and literacy (Knowles, 1970, 1984; Lea & Street, 2006; Merriam, 2017). The three models guided the analysis of where the features identified by instructor participants in this research fit within the three models, which include study skills, academic socialization, and academic literacies (Lea & Street, 2006). Their research also explained how the study skills model focuses on individual cognition but assumes the student will have no problem transferring their writing knowledge. They further explain that the academic socialization model is how students understand the disciplinary-specific discourse, and the *Academic Literacies Model* explores how identity and authority determine what constitutes meaningful knowledge within academia. However, they suggest that all three models are used together to bring students into the learning process, rather than viewing students from a deficit lens. They cautioned that using study skills and academic socialization models alone is limited when attempting to encourage student engagement, which requires students to build relationships within their learning community. As such, instructors should engage students collaboratively, as part of the third model, to help them build the relationships within their learning community, understand academic learning and contextual changes, and make meaning from their learning.

Adult Learner Theory, as introduced by Knowles (1970, 1978, 1984), distinguishes between pedagogy and andragogy (Merriam, 2017). Merriam (2017 and Knapke et al. (2024) are included in the theoretical context section of this thesis because they summarized and discussed *Adult Learner Theory* in a more recent context and the assumptions of adult learner characteristics. This summarization included adult learners as “self-directed human being[s]”, internally driven, or motivated, able to apply accumulated experience to their learning, and demonstrate learning readiness as directed by their ‘social role’” (Knapke et al., 2024, p. 23).

Furthermore, the theory suggests that adult learners continue to learn to solve experience-based problems. Establishing a purpose for learning is important; they need to know why they are learning something to understand the benefits and consequences of not knowing that information or “understand what they will do with the information in life” (Knapke et al., 2024; Merriam, 2017, p. 23). In contrast, the *Adult Learner Theory* assumes pedagogy relating to younger students learn only “what they are told to learn” (Knapke et al., 2024, p. 2), meaning that the learning goals are often externally controlled. Combining the characteristics of an adult learner from *Adult Learner Theory* with the three models within the *Academic Literacies Model* shows a relationship between these theoretical perspectives and the instructor participants' experiences about educating people who are transitioning from pedagogical learning to adult learning in university and how their academic writing reflects or does not reflect characteristics of adult learners or features of the *Academic Literacies Model*.

This research used a combined framework because the combination of adult learner characteristics and academic literacies features aligned with the questions and information sought from the instructor participant interviews. For example, instructor participants were asked to identify features of *exceptional*, *adequate*, or *poorly* written first-year student writing. From this question, I anticipated that the participants would provide features of successful or unsuccessful academic writing and those, when analyzed against the *Academic Literacies Model*, show where participants identified that students were able to transfer academic writing knowledge to university (study skills model), demonstrate disciplinary discourse (academic socialization model), or position their identity as a scholar with authority in their writing (academic literacy). The same responses also reveal how the instructor participants perceived student development as an adult learner through their writing. Where the participants'

perceptions about student writing identified student behaviours such as independence, writing motivation, and connecting experience to learning, those characteristics demonstrated alignment with *Adult Learner Theory*. Thus, the research combined theory and model because they are feature- and characteristic-specific, and aligned with the research direction of identifying determinants of preparedness and directly informing the development of the questions for this research. Educator perspectives were gathered to measure their alignment with the features of the *Academic Literacies Model* and characteristic assumptions of *Adult Learner Theory*, noting any discrepancies between the theory and model, as well as the perspectives gathered.

In the broader context of existing research, this research provided a qualitative example that combined the *Academic Literacies Model* and *Adult Learner Theory* to assess undergraduate preparation from the perspectives of undergraduate instructors. Using the *Adult Learner Theory*, a theoretical assumption existed upon starting this research that all adult learners should exhibit characteristics of *Adult Learner Theory*. However, most students entering university directly from high school are emerging adults between 18 and 25 years of age, who, in many cases, but not all, have not “taken on the responsibilities of adulthood” and are entering a period of transition between adolescence and early adulthood while they navigate the transition between institutions of high school and post-secondary education (Gaudet & PRI, 2007; Lally & Valentine-French, 2017, p. 479). Considering these students are emerging adults, the totality of *Adult Learner Theory* assumed characteristics may not be present, so the theoretical assumptions of *Adult Learner Theory* were not expected to be the case in practice for all learners, a discrepancy that was also identified by instructor participants.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

To provide the background for this research on the academic writing underpreparedness of Ontario undergraduates starting their university journey, this literature review examined determinants that contribute to or characterize academic underpreparedness and provides a supportive background for the recommendations that Ontario post-secondary institutions should consider supporting academic writing skills for underprepared students. The literature identified the perspectives and comments of educators and staff at a global level, which provided insight for the development of questions related to this Ontario first-year undergraduate instructor research.

The categories of information in this review were not only specific to academic writing features but also to a broader range of topics that impact students' academic writing. These included discussions of general literacy underpreparedness including information about foundational literacy skills, knowledge and perception of academic integrity, the high school to university transition with discussion of the measurements for student literacy and writing, sociological elements influencing student behaviours, identity, self-perception and engagement, and educator perspectives about support for students. Although this research focused on academic writing underpreparedness specific to the humanities, this literature review encompassed a broader range of disciplines that impact students' academic writing because academic writing is required in all disciplines in universities. Much of the literature in this review used a deficit perspective, and thus is presented this way, but it does not align with the perspectives of adult learning or *the Academic Literacies Model*, which moves away from deficit models.

Underpreparedness Literacy Determinants

Post-secondary underpreparedness is “not a new issue” (Rossouw, 2024, p. 71). Researchers described the long-standing issue of academic underpreparedness, noting that students requiring remedial or developmental help have existed in post-secondary education “as early as the 1700s” (Mulvey, 2008, p. 78; Rossouw, 2024). Mulvey (2008) noted that one of the determinants contributing to underpreparedness, English grammar, was identified as early as the 1800s. The author also noted that nevertheless, students were still admitted to post-secondary studies without the required skills and directed to remedial courses to bridge the gap. Even with the opportunity for remedial courses, university students’ writing in the mid-19th century were often deemed not suitable for higher education, even if they were considered “high scholars” (Rose, 1989, p. 5). Additionally, enrollment in remedial courses contributed to students’ self-perception of unsuccessfulness and a sense of not belonging (Mulvey, 2008). Where students and educators have not managed underpreparedness, its effects persisted for students’ entire academic journey (Scouller et al., 2008). As a result, students may also leave university underprepared for their careers because of the “absence of important skills, such as writing ability” (Grayson et al., 2019, p. 5). Building on this educational and career path connection, the Mungal and Cloete (2016) study of South African first-year post-secondary students found that students required the ability to apply learned knowledge in practical use to be successful. Hunker et al. (2014) identified communication, oral, and writing skills as part of their proposed “knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSAs)” as a guide for all post-secondary levels in nursing (pp. 341-342).

Literacy and Academic Writing Features

Academic underpreparedness elements were frequently identified throughout the literature and often focused on specific literacies and skills, including reading, writing, math, and critical analysis skills (Grayson et al., 2019; Hango, 2014; Hunker et al., 2014; Merchant et al., 2020; Mulvey, 2008; Perin, 2013; Rasinski et al., 2017; Scouller et al., 2008).

Foundational Literacy Skills. Focusing on the lack of humanities academic writing skills, some authors' research highlighted specific expectations of university instructors and the literacy shortcomings for underprepared students, connecting writing skills to reading skills (Ismayilli Karakoc et al., 2025; Rasinski et al., 2017). Furthermore, Jones-Mensah and Hilton (2024) found that academic writing skills within disciplines vary, showing some students require assistance with writing instruction. Specific to reading, a clear distinction is made by Olson (2009) in that literacy definitions go beyond simply being able to read and write but are dependent on what is read and how well students' reading comprehension aligns with their respective grade levels, which separates basic literacy from advanced or academic literacy, the latter of which is required for university studies. Rasinski et al. (2017) discussed how reading proficiency can be improved through oral reading fluency practice for post-secondary students, and they make connections between oral reading and the ability to recognize words quickly, and "as automaticity improves, students' reading comprehension should also improve with instruction" (Rasinski et al., 2017, p. 454). Yet, this skill needs to start development far earlier than university (Hango, 2014). If students' oral reading abilities are an indicator of students' ability to understand written content, a connection exists with the practice of reading research to develop student academic writing. In post-secondary studies, student writing assignments generally require students to read and understand course material and academic articles to

produce successful written work. This is telling, as researchers have also found that more than half of the students in their study could not understand the content of what they read in academic literature to identify arguments or to write book reviews (Grayson et al., 2019).

Research indicated that there are academic skill deficiencies when entering and leaving university, including writing skills and the ability to analyze and research for the purpose of responding to post-secondary assignments and papers (Grayson et al., 2019; Hunker et al., 2014). As a result, unless this is addressed in university, students may enter the workforce without the necessary skills (Grayson et al., 2019; Rasinski et al., 2017). Existing meta-analyses and developmental studies about underprepared student characteristics related to reading and writing indicate there is limited research for underprepared post-secondary students “related to current reading and writing theory” (Perin, 2013, p. 127). Perin (2013) noted that there are effective instructional approaches to help students make meaning from what they learn in their classes, such as creating learning communities, a form of relationship building, that connect post-secondary course content to developmental education. However, as noted in Gopaul et al. (2016), faculty perceived this as an obligation that takes time away from class-specific learning.

Criticisms of existing approaches to addressing reading and writing underpreparedness highlight the focused on discrete skills and, as an isolated activity, a “central theory or theme”, noting there is a lack of evidence about the effectiveness of this approach, which impairs teachers' ability to teach underprepared post-secondary students (Perin, 2013; Perin & Holschuh, 2019, p. 385). Burniske (1994) proposed an alternative approach to student writing instruction; specifically, encouraging students to experiment with writing rather than using it for grade-seeking purposes, with directed teacher feedback serving as an opportunity to initiate discussion with the student. This researcher also observed that students who see a page of red marks and

grades that have no meaning to the student can become disheartened in the writing process. By contrast, holistic feedback on the content of their writing, along with helpful tips on spelling and grammar, was well received and encouraged further writing. This phenomenon is the “psychological impact of red ink”, which places the onus on the teacher to provide appropriate feedback that advances learning instead of simply grading (Burniske, 1994, p. 85). Burniske's (1994) idea of encouragement, student engagement, and growth through providing fulsome feedback that the student can understand as part of their metacognitive development is echoed in the Perin and Holschuh (2019) article. Their article encouraged the development of metacognition as a means of improving writing strategies and point to Knowles' *Adult Learner Theory* as beneficial to change writing strategy instruction by “tailoring instruction to students' immediate learning needs, capitalizing on students' motivation to learn” (Perin and Holschuh, 2019, p. 373). However, if students are underprepared for their first-year of university studies, are they able to critically assess their learning through metacognition?

Critical Thinking Skills. Foundational literacy skills, which includes the ability to read and write, are central to academic activities, and students also need to understand and use critical thinking as they approach their discipline's subject matter to encourage original thought (Dagarin Fojkar & Berčnik, 2023; Meston et al., 2021). However, Grayson et al. (2019) found that more than half of the students in their study could not identify academic literature arguments, highlighting this as a factor of literacy underpreparedness. Critical thinking is equally valuable in oral communication among students who learn independently (Meston et al., 2021). Moreover, the need for critical thinking was also part of the analysis of isolated learning, especially in higher education environments (Hunker et al., 2014).

Knowledge and Perception of Academic Integrity

Academic writing literacies include understanding practices around referencing, which require critical thinking, making academic integrity an integral part of academic writing literacy. Researchers also find that academic integrity underpreparedness persists in universities and has increased with the proliferation of online information sources (Peters et al., 2019). Peters et al. (2019) argued, “there is clearly a divide between students' and professors' expectations which can result in a lack of student training in the three skills needed to write ethically and unfortunately in students being caught for involuntary plagiarism” (p. 2). With academic integrity knowledge and application necessary for success in university (Chow et al., 2021; Hossain, 2020, 2022; Peters et al., 2019; Sefcik et al., 2020), the difference in expectations pointed out by Peters et al. (2019) identified academic writing as a determinant of underpreparedness for post-secondary students. The concept of understanding academic integrity was another type of literacy incorporated within this literature review as a separate category, and communication skills were categorized under student engagement.

University studies require students to interact not only through conversation, but also through responsible academic research and writing. They are expected to employ critical thinking skills to interpret and analyze the information; ultimately learning how to extract their “inner words” into academically acceptable writing to join the written conversation with authors whose works they have read (Cazden, 1994, p.173; Dagarin Fojkar & Berčnik, 2023; Hossain, 2022; Peters et al., 2019). Peters et al. (2019) found that academic integrity literacy skills used in writing assignments go beyond finding and referencing researched material and “are much more than just the ability to search for information” (p. 3). Moreover, for students to be successful writers, they were also expected to read successfully, demonstrating what Freebody and Luke’s

(1990) *Four Resource Model* defines as four roles of a “code breaker (‘how do I crack this?’), text participant (‘what does this mean?’), text user (‘what do I do within this, here and now?’), and text analyst (‘what does all this do to me?’)” (p. 7). In these roles, students analyzed readings, distinguished their thoughts from what they read, and gave credit to those authors. This set of skills encompassed the ability to read literature and analyze its content to inform students' academic writing, which included clearly distinguishing between the student's ideas and those of the author's work that they read, as well as noting where credit is due (Festas et al., 2022).

Academic integrity and the associated post-secondary standards may be new information for students transitioning to a post-secondary environment, who may not have learned about it in middle or secondary school (Hossain, 2022). At times, even if the concept of academic integrity was not new and students learned about it in K-12, where they were usually associated with “Library Skills”, integrity learning was seldom assessed or measured. Without assessing student knowledge of academic integrity, students may not value it as part of their education (Hossain, 2022). To build this capacity, educators in post-secondary institutions must educate students about academic integrity, and in some instances, institutions establish seminars to share the necessary information on academic integrity (Bertram Gallant, 2017). Interestingly, even when taught academic integrity skills at the post-secondary level, some students chose to circumvent the integrity processes and engage in cheating or plagiarism (Hossain, 2022). The literature suggested that education about academic integrity may not be enough when students' perceptions of academic integrity are also built on their morals and ethical practices. Researchers also found that younger post-secondary students were more likely to use cheating resources and create a culture of cheating within their younger group (Connell, 2023; Miles et al., 2022; Walker, 2010). Yet, Walker (2010) clarified that it depends on the type of plagiarism, and Chapman et al. (2004)

found that the student culture of cheating may be based on a false consensus, where students think their peers cheat more than they do. Some of these studies also suggested that age is one of many elements contributing to students' perspectives of cheating and other elements may include social influences, perception towards risk taking, and cultural differences that also impact these perceptions (Chapman et al., 2004; Miles et al., 2022; Walker, 2010). The concept of cultural influence, as mentioned by Miles et al. (2022) and Walker (2010), is supported by Hossain's 2022 study, where 42% of the post-secondary students participating indicated that they were neutral or disagreed with the statement "plagiarism/academic cheating is considered unethical in my culture" (Hossain, 2022, p. 10). Further complicating the discussion about cheating cultures, with the use of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI), institutions must clarify and adapt AI usage policies and guidelines, originally developed as reactive measures (Moorehouse et al., 2023). They go on to explain that the current lack of clarity and standardization has "blurred the line between acceptable and unacceptable practices" and complicating how both instructors and students understand these guidelines (Moorehouse et al., 2023, p. 2). According to Madsen and Silva (2026), even the act of ensuring citations accurately attribute ideas to literature requires adaption. They stated that "traditional approaches to citation instruction are insufficient for AI-mediated research environments" and they introduced "critical citation literacy" as necessary for students to have a better awareness of what information they gather and attribute (Madsen & Silva, 2026, p. 8). Although technology made it easier for students to commit academic dishonesty due to the accessibility of generative AI (Lye & Lim, 2024), the literature also showed that most students in post-secondary studies want to learn and do not cheat; pointing to behavioural intent, rather than AI tools as the reason for cheating (Huang et al., 2025; Lye & Lim, 2024). Therefore, the complex contributors of why students challenge academic integrity

expectations and policies in post-secondary institutions and programs designed to address academic integrity need to address both teaching about academic integrity, managing the social and cultural influences contributing to it, and creating standardized rules on the use of AI.

Research into the effectiveness of academic integrity programs at the post-secondary level found that the approach to improving academic integrity programs typically relied on the collaboration of stakeholders, including building trusting relationships between students, staff, and institutions, when it is taught (Sefcik et al., 2020). If educators guided students earlier on how to strategize their learning without cheating, especially as part of elementary school discussions between teachers and students who have cheated, they would be better prepared for post-secondary studies (Ferková & Zacharová, 2024; Sefcik et al., 2020). Therefore, some solutions to improving student perceptions of academic integrity involved starting awareness in earlier grades and maintaining its importance throughout secondary school (Hossain, 2022). Conversely, research indicated that it is beneficial when taught at both times, provided there is consistency in academic integrity teachings (Sefcik et al., 2020). An academic integrity teaching strategy for middle school and secondary students turned instances of cheating into teachable moments, rather than punishable ones (Bertram Gallant, 2017). Bertram Gallant's (2017) strategy of leveraging cheating instances to change teachers' perceptions of how they respond opposed a punitive approach, which can lead to "resentment, stress, negative emotions, and adversarial relationships between them [teachers] and their students" (p. 91). Bertram Gallant (2017) continue to express that when effectively taught, the teacher facilitated student realization of the impact of their cheating through facilitation "purposefully structured to allow the student to go through a process of reflecting, thinking, and acting based on their experience" (p. 92). In a recent study focusing on academic integrity at the elementary school level, researchers found that

it is more important for teachers to engage in dialogue with students to prevent future academic dishonesty, rather than punishing them (Ferková & Zacharová, 2024).

High School to University Transition

First-year post-secondary students were not only managing institutional expectations concerning academic integrity, but also transitioning to a new learning environment where they were expected to be fully responsible for their studies while not fully aware of what that means (Tlalajoe-Mokhatla et al., 2023). Students were often caught off-guard with university expectations because they were under the impression that what worked in high school or being “spoon-fed” to get good grades will work in university (Bolt & Graber, 2010; Tlalajoe-Mokhatla et al., 2023, p. 69). Thereby contributing to many students’ underpreparedness and difficulties during the transition emerge based on “self-management, alienation, confidence, and [poor] academic advice”, well before university entrance (Tlalajoe-Mokhatla et al., 2023, p. 65).

Grayson et al. (2019) addressed multiple areas of improvement to benefit post-secondary students and recommended that universities should, in the first year, introduce a mandatory course for all students about “university standards, criteria, and procedures; critical thinking; effective studying; time management; [and] improving writing” (p. 6). Besides determinants such as literacy, academic integrity, student perception, and student engagement and participation, other underpreparedness impacts were often interconnected and develop a cumulative effect that created barriers for these students (Grayson et al., 2019; Hossain, 2022; Perin, 2013). In addition to the determinants identified for this literature review, learning disabilities, language, motivation, and sociological influences also contributed to underpreparedness (Perin, 2013).

Inconsistent Writing Expectations. Within the purview of education before university, government and school boards used literacy testing to identify students whose education may be

at risk, ensuring that institutions and educators identify those in need of support (EQAO, 2021). However, not all measurements implemented met their goals, as emphasized in Burniske's (1994) study, which stressed there was an overemphasis with academic assessment and grading rather than encouraging student autonomy in writing activities. Burniske's view was that writing is personal to each student author's perspective, noting that not everything should be corrected. Ritland (2023) states that allowing students to write from their perspective also worked against the typical secondary school essay instruction to always avoid using the first-person, which may be appropriate for only some university subjects. Ritland (2023) goes on to explain that support for first-person scholarly writing "using 'I' was not only more prevalent as a writing convention, but also a distinctive mode for how humanities scholars build knowledge in 'conversation' with others" (p. 1). This situation raised the question of whether literacy measurements capture the nuances of first-person writing in humanities academic writing. In Michelle Fine's book *Framing Dropouts: Notes on the Politics of an Urban Public High School* (1991), the author highlighted two contrasting remedial classes where the teachers' interaction with students had an impact on whether student perspectives were silenced or encouraged and found, like in Burniske's (1994) article, that students who were provided encouragement are likely to engage in class participation.

Vogan and Plotnick (2025), from the University of Toronto, provided a breakdown of the differences between high school essay writing and what is required in university academic writing, showing that university writing moves away from the rigid structures and formulaic confines of writing taught in high school and encourages original ideas and critical thinking. Formulas such as the five-paragraph essay did not support university student writing, and teaching writing in this way in high school or in university did not promote "academic

argumentation skills” (Hirvela, 2017; Ismayilli Karakoc et al., 2025, p. 3024). As a compromise between the rigidity of the high school essay structure and university essay requirements, research found that a rhetorical essay writing course should be included in the curriculum before students begin university (Seçer & Çelikoğlu, 2017).

In Ontario, literacy achievement for high school graduation was assessed either through the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) or by passing the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Course (OSSLC), if the OSSLT is waived (Van De Wal & Ryan, 2014). It should also be noted that the OSSLT's pass-or-fail literacy assessment, which include reading and writing, is intended solely as a measurement of reading and writing skills up to the end of grade 9, and not to the level required for undergraduate reading, researching, writing, and critical thinking skills (EQAO, 2021). Although graduating from high school is generally considered a requirement for university enrollment, that is not the case for all, such as mature or middle adult students returning to studies. As such, the OSSLT/OSSLC requirement for high school graduation is not a prerequisite for attending university; however, passing a grade 12 university-level English course is a requirement for most programs (Lakehead University, 2025). Standard literacy testing usage notwithstanding, research has criticized the OSSLT approach, citing findings that students were negatively affected when they fail the OSSLT, with students experiencing harm to their self-esteem and adverse emotions, including “shame, humiliation, embarrassment, and/or degradation” (Kearns, 2011, p. 126). Students also reported experiencing stress from failing and feeling marginalized (Kearns, 2011; Merchant et al., 2020; Van De Wal & Ryan, 2024). Kearns (2016) argued that the OSSLT is a “culturally and socially constructed” test that labels students and disadvantages racialized students (p. 121). Furthermore, this researcher argued that education boards use it as a tool to control students' opportunities by testing

standardized literacy, without considering the emergence of new literacies. Bertram Gallant (2017) emphasized the importance of a learning-oriented environment that allows students to see the bigger picture of their learning and have input into how they are graded, thereby enabling “mastery rather than performance-oriented” tasks (p. 88). The OSSLT's performance testing may be part of a framework where “assessments are superficial” with no depth of mastery, to which Bertram Gallant alludes (2017, p. 88).

Rasinski et al. (2017) found a positive correlation with undergraduate entry-level reading rate abilities in oral reading fluency and increased ability to learn in college. They also suggested secondary school teachers “monitor students' growth in word recognition automaticity and provide targeted interventions to those students who manifest significant difficulties in automaticity” (p. 453). The researchers predicted a higher correlation if the target participants included high school graduates who had not yet attended post-secondary studies because “the magnitude of the correlation between fluency, as measured by word recognition automaticity, and overall academic achievement would be even greater” (Rasinski et al., 2017, p. 458).

Alternatively, Phillips et al. (2013) found that for preschool children, familial literacy levels were indicators of the success of young students' literacy levels, once again connecting social and cultural learning with literacy and to a greater extent than school assessments. Concerning higher education assessment tools, there is a need for assessments that go beyond “formative, summative, integrated, and diagnostic assessments”, which not only consider academic literacy skills but also theory application for employability after university (Mungal & Cloete, 2016, p. 206).

Sociological Labelling as Detrimental to Self-Perception of Underprepared Students

Sociological aspects of students' lives are a significant part of their learning journey, as articulated by Fine in *Framing Dropouts* (1991). Fine (1991) stressed that secondary students in disadvantaged areas face socioeconomic and sociocultural inequities that impact how they learn in public schools, which, in many cases, halt their ability to move on to post-secondary studies, or even graduate from high school. For students who intend to attend college or university, combining socioeconomic influences with students' ability to maintain higher grades and receive financial aid may affect their ability to continue in post-secondary education, but this assumes they have graduated from high school (Witkow et al., 2015).

Socioeconomic Status

In line with Fine's (1991) research on socioeconomic and sociocultural inequities, other researchers found that even if equity is achieved between educational institutions it “must also be solved concurrently with “ecological inequity” in order to achieve positive educational and societal outcomes” (Lamperez & Dereshiwsky, 2016, p. 10). They stated that inequality in funding for “socio-economically disadvantaged school districts” in American K-12 schools is a contributor to the underpreparedness of students entering post-secondary studies (Lamperez & Dereshiwsky, 2016, p. 1). Both Fine (1991) and Lamperez and Dereshiwsky (2016) conducted research in individual American school districts, and the latter recommended changes in early education and preschools, as well as health and social services. Fine also raised concerns about institutional and teacher assumptions that label students, noting the detrimental effect of this practice (Fine, 1991). Although Fine's book is an older source, the research used an intersectional framework, noting contributors such as race, class, socioeconomics, and geographical location impact students' opportunities as they are labelled by educators. Researchers still viewed

labelling, especially labelling students as “at-risk” using deficit language, along with previous educational experiences, as influential in students' self-perception about how they will learn in the future (Mulvey, 2008; Kearns, 2016). Mulvey (2008) critiqued systems that label students as “at risk” because it implies a failure on the part of the student to perform or engage in the academic activities necessary for success (p. 77). Additionally, since there is a difference between the terms remedial and developmental, as the use of the term remedial implies that the student requires a remedy for a weakness, they recommend considering learning as a developmental activity. Developmental education focuses on viewing learners as capable and building upon what is not deficient (Mulvey, 2008).

First-Generation Students

Another sociological influence was family experience with post-secondary education, where those with a family history may be more aware of what is needed to be successful in post-secondary education. The first-generation student label may not be used outwardly by teachers. However, it was often associated with students who are not as prepared as continuing-generation students for post-secondary studies, and first-generation students' self-perception has also been found to alter their post-secondary experience (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018; Patfield et al., 2020; Patfield et al., 2021; Penrose, 2022; Rose, 1989). LeMire et al. (2021) found that first-generation students scored “statistically lower than continuing-generation students” in four modules using t-testing to determine statistical significance between the two groups (p. 736). LeMire et al. (2021) suggested that first-generation students would benefit from “targeted and sustained information literacy instructional support” provided in collaboration with school libraries (p. 745). However, Stallworth and Maurici-Pollock (2023) also found debate within studies, as some showed little

difference between the literacy skills of first-generation students and those of continuing-generation students.

Documented experiences, like those of Mike Rose, illustrated how the experiences of a first-generation student, this self-perception of inadequacy, led to self-exclusion from peers and teacher resources available because, as the author expressed, “I felt stupid telling them I was ... well – stupid” (Rose, 1989, p. 43). For some first-generation students, negative self-perceptions and self-exclusion continued into graduate studies, despite understanding they have intelligence in their chosen discipline (Lovell-Johnston, in press). First-generation status may also interact with socioeconomic influence, as described in Rose's autobiography, where the author expressed living in a different world from peers and exhibiting resentment towards them (Rose, 1989). Research by Penrose (2002) in this area investigated the commonalities among first-generation students that impact their success, aiming to understand student preparation, performance, and perceptions in post-secondary education using quantitative data at both national and institutional levels. This researcher goes on to show that first-generation students indicated they were not as well prepared by their feeder schools for post-secondary studies as those who had come from more affluent areas. They also found a disconnect between the first-generation student and their families, who did not have the same opportunities (Penrose, 2002). However, focusing on first-generation status as a singular factor can be problematic because its definition varies across post-secondary institutions, and these definitions often do not account for the intersectionality of students' socioeconomic realities (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018). They argued that the term first-generation student should continue to be used as a category for understanding and addressing inequality in higher education. Nonetheless, it requires review and “it is more than the single and simple dominant narrative that the FGS [first-generation student] term currently offers” (p. 149).

Student Classroom Engagement and Academic Conversation

Students may also exhibit different class engagement behaviours than what is expected by post-secondary instructors, which can enhance underpreparedness, whether in academic conversations or engagement in participatory activities through classroom learning (Hunker et al., 2014; Meston et al., 2021; Perin, 2013; Tang et al., 2020). Tang et al. (2020) found that adjustments to undergraduate participation grading could impact student success, and research has found that students benefit from more frequent grading on participation, as evidenced by their improved grades. They further explained that a more frequent participation grading scheme, which required consistent and frequent class attendance and conversation participation, supported the finding that “more frequent classroom testing increases students' exam performance” (Tang et al., 2020, p. 253). Even if not all participation is verbal, participation is helpful to enhance writing skills, as Hunker et al. (2014) described, post-secondary education framework components of “writing to learn” which is “designed for the student to learn about a subject matter while engaging in a writing activity, such as discussion forums, reflective journals, and short essays” (p. 344).

Building strategies or habits for the required post-secondary classroom engagement and participation occur prior to post-secondary education and can influence post-secondary engagement and participation behaviours (Li et al., 2022; Sciarra et al., 2016; Witkow et al., 2015). It was reasonable to expect that behavioural engagement serves to motivate future academic outcomes (Li et al., 2022; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Sciarra et al (2016) noted when students develop beneficial academic work conventions in high school, some of these conventions are carried forward into post-secondary studies. For example, ensuring the completion of homework, discussing issues with teachers, and having extracurricular activities as

part of their routine were related to student persistence in post-secondary studies (Sciarra et al., 2016). Regarding students' classroom engagement behaviours, students needed to learn to recognize how to share their voice based on their experiences and understand their positionality to present their knowledge as credible, a practice that needed to start in earlier education (Lassonde, 2006).

Part of post-secondary engagement and academic writing involves learning to participate in academic conversation and discourse within one's chosen field of study. Through Meston et al.'s (2021) study of similarities and differences between teacher and student academic conversation concepts in earlier education, they found that differences occurred in how each group communicated based on student language skill development. Their research also revealed that students conceptualized academic conversations differently because they viewed the activity as an individual rather than a group learning activity (Meston et al., 2021). Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development, although primarily applied to children's interactions as a learning tool, can also be applied to adult learning in university, as students' understanding of discipline-specific information develops through interaction with other students who bring their experience-based knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). Suppose the student can understand their role and offer their experience-based knowledge to the group. In that case, they avoid the misunderstanding that they are there only to take in the information. Students do not always see that their input into the conversation is a piece of the learned information for others, or "they rarely saw it as a means of positioning them as authorial agents within the classroom" (Meston et al., 2021, p. 418). Meston et al. (2021) also noted that for students to understand the important role they play in academic conversations, they need to know the goals of the learning activity, which requires greater transparency on the part of teachers to share the larger picture.

Educator and Staff Support Considerations

At the secondary school level, remedial support was often geared towards passing the OSSLT, as observed in a study of an Ontario high school. In this context, teachers of applied English frequently focused the curriculum on the OSSLT and offered additional incentives to encourage their students to perform well. In this way, teacher care aimed to avoid the failure of the OSSLT and prevented students from having a poor perception if they have failed (Merchant et al., 2020). Furthermore, Van De Wal and Ryan's (2014) paper indicated that teachers encouraged students who had previously failed the OSSLT to enroll in the OSSLC. Teachers were effective when they were “diligent, caring, and compassionate” (p. 18). Yet, when teachers teach to a specific test, in this case the OSSLT which, as previously discussed, only focused on basic literacy (EQAO, 2021), the student did not gain lessons in other areas of applied English that could better prepare them for post-secondary, such as “organizational skills or responsibility” (Merchant et al., 2020, p. 822). In this case, they were narrowing the curriculum for the benefit of test scores, and students missed out on valuable information that can apply not only to later studies but also in their careers, making teaching to the OSSLT unethical as it invalidates the test (Copp, 2016; Haladyna et al., 1991). Although supports and care exist for secondary school students, those who have already left high school may not find the same support, and, in fact, research shows that it was more difficult for students to regain academic literacy skills once they have left school (Van De Wal & Ryan, 2014).

In contrast, Mulvey (2008) argued that universities have a responsibility to assess underprepared students and teach the skills they lack, noting that there are “special orientation programs, advisement sessions, peer mentors, etc.” to facilitate the transition from high school to university (p. 83). There were a relatively small number of students who participated in

developmental support programs and continued to complete their degree. As mentioned previously, post-secondary educators who covered this gap did so out of obligation and at the detriment of time spent on other job duties (Gopaul et al., 2016; Mulvey, 2008). Despite the impact that academic support had on students, there were many who did not actively use those supports but this research did not often come from the perspective of students (Li et al., 2023). Although Lamperez and Dereshiwsky (2016) identified funding challenges and Sithole and Gumede (2022) highlighted organizational challenges when offering gap support, successful short-term transition offerings as part of post-secondary programs exist, such as the two-week, first-semester transition course, “Step-up” for South African post-secondary commerce students noted by Rossouw (2024). Contrary to the program's suggested benefits, a limitation of the program was that it was not a mandatory course, and students chose to take it. This may imply that these students were already in the mindset of post-secondary preparation or saw the benefit of taking such a course for their success (Rossouw, 2024).

A large part of faculty duties is in preparation for teaching undergraduates, and this includes remedial support that faculty may feel obliged to address, which includes basic skills to succeed in university, such as academic integrity, knowledge and “study skills, evaluations, and academic writing” (Gopaul et al., 2016, p. 67). The reason for the remedial support need was because “there was a strong sense from faculty members that students were not equipped with basic skills prior to enrolling in a course/institution, which results in faculty members believing that they have to spend more time teaching basic skills due to student deficiencies” (Gopaul et al., 2016, p. 67).

There exists a high need for appropriately resourced remedial post-secondary developmental education through coordinated staffing, physical resources, and technological

resources, to address the underpreparedness gap between high school graduation and post-secondary studies. Systemic support would be more efficient, effective, and accessible than the piecemeal individual instructor model, which is indicative of a systemic problem in high schools and, at times, underfunded, requiring significant coordination (Lamperez & Dereshiwsky, 2016; Mulvey, 2008; Sithole & Gumede, 2022). Although not faculty members, many academic support centers employed non-faculty staff and peer tutors to guide students in academic writing and promote academic integrity (Garwood, 2022). This researcher investigated how student consultants provide academic integrity and writing support at the University of Guelph. The findings showed that, in most sessions, students engaged in discussions about citations, referencing, and paraphrasing, but were less often discussing plagiarism. When students discussed plagiarism, it was primarily about concerns related to accidental plagiarism and how it is defined (Garwood, 2022). Writing support centers in post-secondary institutions provided remedial support in basic writing skills and traditional assignments but did not always cover topics about new literacies which were included in classes more often. At the time of publication in 2021 and from research taken in 2019 of writing center websites in Canada, writing support centers were not always prepared to assist with digital writing projects (DWP), except for only two universities in Ontario (Bell & Hotson, 2021). In support of writing center and tutoring recognition, Sithole and Gumede (2022) pointed out that university tutoring programs' sustainability was dependent on the coordination of all people involved in the tutoring system, including “funding, coordination, tutors, and policy”, and they insisted that tutoring programs should be viewed as part of the university experience and not ancillary (p. 236).

Literature Review Summation

From the sources cited in this literature review, recommendations for addressing underprepared academic writing among undergraduates entering post-secondary studies emerged. On the topic of academic writing and literacy, research found that there was variation in suggestions for changes in responsibility to improve student literacy. Some researchers suggested that the responsibility should be with the provincial government to reform the post-secondary system; others suggested that, at the administrative level, school boards need to provide better professional development to teachers (Grayson et al., 2019; Van De Wal & Ryan, 2014). However, these could be considered standardized changes, and research has also suggested that such an approach is insufficient and that “standardization can no longer be viewed as a tenable response to the multiple, unique and different educational subjects in a democratic state” (Kearns, 2016, p. 139). Suppose responsibility is placed with the schools or post-secondary institutions. In that case, research suggested that this would take the form of changes to the structure of courses, such as integrating literacy-based courses into programs or including writing development plans as part of post-secondary education (Dagarin Fojkar & Berčnik, 2023; Hunker et al., 2014). The literature also placed responsibility with the teachers, suggesting they should be actively exploring pedagogies to help facilitate students' introduction into the academic community, monitoring student progress, and providing feedback on student writing assignments, which need to be more purposeful (Burniske, 1994; Penrose, 2022; Scouller et al., 2008).

By contrast, general suggestions for improving student literacy and academic writing recommended considering student perspectives on standardized testing and collaboration with school libraries and writing centers for literacy programming (Garwood, 2022; Kearns, 2011;

LeMire et al., 2021). Researchers have called on universities to acknowledge how writing centers provide interdisciplinary literacy support combined with student-centered learning. However, to take on new literacies or digital writing projects, writing centers needed to be adequately resourced (Bell & Hotson, 2021; Mungal & Cloete, 2016). One article reports on the potential negative outcomes of underfunding of support services, such as tutoring programs, which closely tied in with university writing centers, underscoring their importance in mitigating issues of academic literacy underpreparedness (Sithole & Gumede, 2022).

The research on academic integrity literacies recommended different strategies to mitigate or manage academic dishonesty in earlier grades, making good practices of academic integrity habitual for students before they begin post-secondary studies. Some strategies included using cheating as a teachable moment based on values, rather than focusing on technicality and punishment (Bertram Gallant, 2017; Ferková & Zacharová, 2024; Sefcik et al., 2020). Research has also suggested that policy and teaching include academic literacies for “facilitating academic development” to prevent academic dishonesty or plagiarism (Festas et al., 2022; Hossain, 2022). Once students had a solid foundation in literacy skills and understanding of academic integrity, they can engage in academic conversations through their writing. They may be more likely to participate in behavioural engagement. Specifically, reading skills, knowledge of academic conversation goals, and varying sociological influences were found in the literature as related to behavioural engagement (Li et al., 2022; Meston et al., 2021; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018; Patfield et al., 2020; Patfield et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2020; Tlalajoe-Mokhatla et al., 2023).

This literature informed this thesis on post-secondary underpreparedness, which aimed to investigate situations where Ontario university humanities educators identify their students as underprepared for university-level academic writing and course engagement. The purpose of this

thesis was to identify significant areas of disconnect between post-secondary educators' expectations of first-year students and their observational perspectives of students' underpreparedness. The literature highlighted areas where students are underprepared concerning academic literacy and student engagement with scholarly debate regarding when mitigation should occur and who is responsible for supporting these students.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Post-secondary students are sometimes underprepared for their studies, and university educators are left to fill the educational gap to help students catch up on basic skills and produce university-level writing (Gopaul et al., 2016) or to leave students unsupported and at risk of failure (Elmir et al., 2019). For this reason, first-year university instructors were the primary focus of data collection for this research, aimed at gaining insights based on their experiences in assessing students new to university-level academic writing. These insights and perspectives related to the features and foundational elements of academic writing were key in answering the question about how first-year post-secondary students meet or do not meet the academic writing and adult learning expectations of first-year English instructors. Instructor perspectives about the academic writing support at the university help to answer what they expect from university academic supports intended to address student underpreparedness in English university classes.

Research Approach

The research approach employed thematic analysis using hybrid coding for triangulation to examine the perceptions of instructors of first-year students within one university department. Both emergent themes from inductive open coding and theory-driven themes from deductive closed coding were analyzed to see how well these perceptions aligned with the *Academic Literacies Model* and *Adult Learner Theory*. The goal of the research, based on the data collected

and analyzed, was to identify areas for support improvements in academic writing literacies for new undergraduates. For this research, I conducted semi-structured interviews with the English department instructors from one Ontario university who were selected using specific criteria outlined below. The data gathered from these interviews sought instructors' perspectives about post-secondary academic writing preparedness, key literacy determinants, and appropriate academic supports they consider, based on their experiences, to be essential for *exceptional* and *adequate* first-year university students' academic writing and formed the basis for the thematic analysis.

Thematic analysis was selected for this research because it allows for more systematic coding based on the participants' discussion points to minimize researcher bias. As stated previously, I have experience both as an underprepared student and a graduate assistant who has observed and read the work of other underprepared students, but this research was meant to focus on instructors' perspectives and their perspective alignment or misalignment with the theoretical framework. However, I recognized that even in the creation of themes, there is researcher interpretation in thematic grouping. Additionally, the choice of thematic analysis assumed that instructor perspectives will either come together or show distinct opposition. The decision to use both open and closed coding (inductive and deductive) was to initially focus on the themes created from the coded data of the participant responses and triangulate that data with codes created from the theoretical framework. The chapters of this thesis observed the six-step process described in Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework to ensure it "contains an account...of what was done, and why" (p. 86).

Participant Selection

The participant group of university instructors from one university's English department was selected through a purposeful process based on specific inclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria for this purposeful sampling of participants include:

- 1.) The participants are instructors who have instructed first-year university students in the English department of the selected university.
- 2.) The participant instructors have at least three years of experience teaching university English courses for first-year university students.
- 3.) The participant instructors are either tenured full-time faculty, non-tenured full-time faculty, or contract staff.

These selection criteria were meant to intentionally include a mix of tenured faculty, full-time faculty, and contract teaching staff to gain diverse teaching perspectives, which was attained. The three years of experience requirement for the instructor participants was imperative for the research these instructors are likely to have developed standards for a well-written academic English paper in their classes that have been tested and refined during their teaching. The original research design involved interviewing at least five instructor participants with up to an additional three instructor participants, in addition to those contacted, through snowball sampling, provided they also met the inclusion criteria stated above. There was a positive uptake in participants and 10 instructors participated in this research.

Participant Recruitment

Following ethical approval to conduct the research, I contacted the English department at the selected university to request permission to contact potential instructor participants for the research. To encourage participation, I identified that the resulting student support

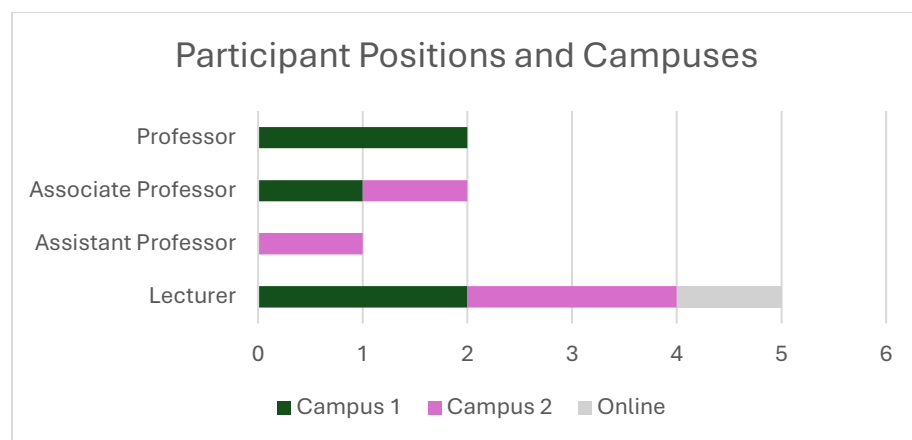
recommendations from this research would be shared with the English department. Once I obtained approval from the department and the necessary contact information through the university directory, contact with the potential instructor participants was completed via email. The email to potential participants contained an information letter and consent form (see Appendix D), both of which were approved by an internal research ethics board. The instructor participants responded via email, indicated their interest in the research, and consent forms were received from all participants before conducting the interview. As part of the information provided to participants, I informed them that the semi-structured interviews would be recorded for transcription purposes, and I would remove all instructor names, and pseudonyms would be used to identify participants. Before conducting the interviews, instructor participants received an outline of the questions in advance of the interview (see Appendix A).

Participant Description

Outreach to the English department resulted in 10 participants, with half being professor participants and half lecturers and a close to even split of instructor locations between two campuses, as described in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

Chart of Participant Positions and Campus Locations



The instructor participants in this research are identified by the pseudonyms Belinda, Ben, Cambria, Danielle, Florence, Floyd, Madeline, Pearl, Robert, and Ramona. The professors in this research are Cambria, Madeline, Pearl, Robert, and Ramona.

Data Collection

The data collection consisted of a semi-structured interview booked for one hour with each instructor participant. The times varied by participant from a half-hour interview to a one-and-one-half-hour interview to capture all the responses to the 13 questions asked. The interviews were conducted via the Zoom platform, which captured the audio recording and provided an initial transcription document, while I took separate notes for later verification. The choice to use a semi-structured interview was to capture complete responses that the participants could elaborate on, which might be constrained if the response was submitted in writing. At the start of each interview, I acknowledged the instructor's participation and reminded them that the interview would be recorded, as per the consent form. Following initial discussion with the participant unrelated to the research, the transcribed audio recording started when the first of 13 questions were asked and the remainder of the interview focused on the structured questions to categorize instructors' teaching experiences with the characteristics of adult learners and models of academic literacy.

The choice to conduct interviews via Zoom allowed for the ability to record the audio and create an initial transcript as well as conduct interviews with participants who might be in other cities. The interviews were dedicated to asking specific questions that aligned with the theoretical framework and model described in Chapter 1. The list of 13 questions and the links between the questions and theoretical frameworks are detailed within Appendix A: Interview Questions and Theoretical Alignment. The purpose of the questions was to determine instructors'

subjective perspectives on what distinguishes an *exceptional*, *adequate*, and *poorly* written paper, with potential alignment with the literacy determinants from the literature review, characteristics of adult learners assumed by the *Adult Learner Theory*, and alignment with the *Academic Literacies Model*. The theoretical categorization that aligns questions to theory for this paper is listed in Appendix A, Table A1, and the theoretical alignment for each question is detailed within Appendix A, Table A2, below.

Although the questions were developed based on the two analytical theories, they were also grouped in a way that would respond to the two research questions from the perspectives of the participants. For the first research question of how first-year post-secondary students meet or do not meet the academic writing and adult learning expectations of first-year English instructors, Questions 1 to 3 sought to first identify what expectations instructors had for exemplary academic writing, the foundational literacies that lead to this exemplary writing, and what types of literacy skills should be developed before university studies that would be beneficial for academic writing. Questions 4 to 10 and 13 were to identify what the participants found as behaviours of preparedness based on *Adult Learner Theory*. From the responses to these 10 questions, it was expected that themes would emerge about instructors' expectations of prepared students and their discussion would expose what they have observed as underpreparedness against these expectations. Questions 11 and 12 were formed to answer the questions about what educators expect from university support intended to address student underpreparedness. The responses were expected to provide instructors' perspectives about what they see as the role of academic writing support currently in the university and how that meets their expectations. The responses to these questions were also anticipated to form themes based on the responses through deductive analysis. The data collected from the responses formed

emergent themes, as intended to answer the research questions and provided an unexpected list of suggestions for improvement from these participants, which was analyzed against the two theoretical frameworks.

Thematic Data Analysis

The first phase thematic analysis (as per Braun and Clarke's [2006] method) began with a familiarization with the data, which included the open coding process while reading through the transcripts that had undergone quality assurance checks, including updates from member checking, and I began noting common themes, words, phrases, and quotes related to the research purpose and text. The second phase generated initial codes at the phrase, sentence, and group of sentences levels, which were assigned a code category using NVivo. The coding included 100% of each interview, and the coding was completed one interview at a time before proceeding to the next. As coding progressed, where similar codes already existed from open coding completed, text would be coded to the existing codes. During this open coding process, as themes emerged, codes were grouped under the emergent themes, and while these codes were created, I grouped them topically for a preliminary theme structure; thus, initiating the third phase of thematic analysis in search of themes through code collation. Then I reviewed the codes within MS Word from a downloaded codebook I developed to group repetitive or closely related themes and further grouped the topics into higher level themes, in order to clean and align the coding. The resulting coding process resulted in 339 separate codes.

Next, I completed further axial coding from the emergent themes and a refinement of those themes, as the fourth phase of Braun and Clarke's (2006) theme review step. This phase resulted in three overarching topics related to the research purpose, which were edited and provided within the detailed results within Appendix B: Detailed Findings Tables as:

- Table B1: Instructor perspectives about academic writing features and foundational expectations;
- Table B2: Instructor perspectives about adult learning characteristics and foundational expectations; and
- Table B3: Instructor perspectives identifying academic support types and sources.

The resulting codes grouped into themes are illustrated in Appendix C. However, due to the length of the codes, some text is truncated in the chart.

As part of this thematic refinement process, I discovered that additional foundational requirements were included in the Table B2 responses. These remain in the Table B2 response because they were identified as adult learner characteristics and were also added to Table B1's foundational requirements sections because they apply in that location as well. Discovery of sub-themes within the established main topics and themes was developed from the findings and contributed to the fifth phase of defining and naming these for presentation in this thesis.

Following the inductive coding process, establishment of the research themes, and subsequent analysis, a deductive coding process was completed to triangulate the data. This additional coding included codification of the transcription texts against the 11 *Adult Learner Theory* characteristics and the *Academic Literacies Model* features in Table A1: Theoretical Categories for Questions and aligning these theoretical models within Tables B1, B2, and B4. Finally, in alignment with Braun and Clarke's (2006) sixth phase, the thesis discussion was written based on the established themes, with a high frequency of related responses from the instructor participants being analyzed against the two theoretical frameworks: *Adult Learner Theory* and *Academic Literacies Model* and the findings were considered in Chapters 4 to 7 of

this thesis. The areas where participants made improvement suggestions to better prepare students for university were captured in Table B5.

Ethical Considerations

The data obtained during the semi-structured interviews with the instructor participants will remain confidential, where my supervisor and I, will know the information contained in the confidential data. The data from this research was initially saved to my university email and Zoom account, as well as the institutional server, via email and Zoom, accessible only to me. The recordings were retrieved from the Zoom recording cloud, deleted from the cloud, and stored within my password-protected Lakehead University Google account. Once the transcriptions were completed, the recordings were deleted and removed from this account. The transcriptions will be stored on my password-protected Lakehead University Google account for a period of seven years, as outlined in the Lakehead University policy, from the date of thesis submission. Once the seven years have elapsed, this information will be deleted from the password-protected Lakehead University Google account and will no longer be accessible. I completed a quality assurance check of the transcriptions and sent the instructor participants' interview transcriptions to them via email for approval and clarification as part of the member checking process.

Chapter 4: Academic Writing Features and Foundations Findings

Chapters 4 to 7 Structure

Chapters 4 to 7 highlight the emergent themes from semi-structured interviews' findings and instructor perspectives as Academic Writing Features and Foundations, Observations of Student Behaviour, Guidance Types and Sources, and Participant Recommendations. I elected to separate the findings into separate chapters because of the distinct nature of the themes within each of my thematic categories. Chapters 4 and 5 responded to the first purpose of this research

which was to identify what first-year educators perceive as features of exemplary academic writing and characteristics of adult learning that do not align with what they observe in students, based on student participation and coursework submissions and aims to answer the question *How do first-year post-secondary students meet or not meet the academic writing and adult learning expectations of first-year English instructors?* Chapters 6 and 7 were connected to the second purpose of this research, which was to identify instructor perspectives about academic writing support available to underprepared students and what they feel improvements should entail. These instructor perspectives in Chapter 6 aimed to answer the question *What do educators expect from university academic supports intended to address student underpreparedness in English university classes?* Meanwhile, the instructor perspectives in Chapter 7 added to this conversation by extracting participant suggestions for improvements to the academic support discussed in Chapter 6.

Although the information presented in the Student Behaviours chapter was intertwined with the outcome of producing a student paper, as described in Academic Writing Features and Foundations, these chapters were separated to delve deeper into each of the behaviours noted in Chapter 5. These four chapters present the findings of data that was organized as emergent themes through the inductive coding process. The findings in each chapter were followed by a thematic analysis through the theoretical lens established using the *Academic Literacies Model* and *Adult Learner Theory*.

Chapter 4 herein outlines the participant perspectives about academic writing features that align with *exceptional*, *adequate*, and *poor* first-year student writing and what participants perceived should be demonstrated as foundational skills by successful first-year undergraduates.

Academic Writing Features and Foundations Findings

First-year educators' perspectives on academic writing features and their observations of first-year student work were primarily discussed when responding to Questions 1, 2, and 3, as detailed in Appendix A, Table A2. From these responses and based on the frequency of discussion, three themes emerged: *Argumentation Quality*, *Interaction with Research Sources*, including evidence of academic integrity, and *Dialogue Organization and Clarity*. Topics about critical thinking and analysis, thesis development and answering the 'So What?' question were also closely related to students' argumentation quality, making the broader theme of argumentation quality and development a significant area of importance for university academic writing. These major themes, based on discussion frequency, were then followed by *Grammar and Writing Communication Skills*. Finally, themes such as Student Voice, Disciplinary Understanding and Use of Instruction were identified within this part of the discussion but fit more closely with Student Behaviours and are discussed in the Section 2 of the chapter. For details about the academic writing perspectives identification of *exceptional*, *adequate*, *poor* and foundational requirements for university, see Appendix B, Table B1.

Argumentation Quality

Argumentation quality as a single feature, not including supporting features such as thesis development and critical thinking and analysis, resulted in the highest frequency (19 instances) distinguishing feature overall and for *exceptional* papers (eight instances) introduced by the instructor participants. Instructor responses that strongly indicated argumentation quality as a major distinguishing feature of student academic writing focused on coherence and uniqueness or originality. Including the related discussions of critical thinking and analysis (11 instances), thesis development (nine instances) and answering the 'So What?' question (three instances), the

argumentation quality topic had 42 instances of discussion. For example, one participant, Danielle, expressed that *exceptional* papers have “a unique angle for whatever the student is arguing, just something that pushes it a little bit beyond what the question prompt was.”

However, an observation shared by a few participants found that student papers are missing argumentation, without getting close to the desired thought-provoking argumentation needed to obtain a high-grade paper. These *poorer* papers often miss demonstrating that students have an understanding of what an argument is. Florence’s experience with this is described as, “This is where I run into, ‘I will demonstrate’, ‘I will show’. I’m not going to do a science experiment. I don’t need you to demonstrate or show me anything. I need you to argue something.” Thus, it is apparent that there is a disconnection between the *exceptional* paper and student submissions.

The papers that fall in between *exceptional* and poor attempt the argument, but it is not fully developed. Half of the participants provided insight into student foundational skills needed for argumentation development when starting university studies. These comments indicated students should know what an argument is and how to write one, or if they cannot write one, they should at least understand how to develop good analytical questions. To connect these foundational requirements to what students could learn before university, some participants clarified that when students learn essay structures in high school, which at times is more summary than analysis, meta-cognition is being used as a form of learning. Meta-learning about why they learn specific structures can help students understand that essay building is to collect evidence to support an argument, and the structure is a tool for that. Not all participants agreed that students must understand how to develop an argument by the time they arrive for university studies. Instead, these participants felt that students need to have the writing skills and ability to think about how to write a research question and be ready to practice argumentation writing. Cambria expressed

academic writing and argumentation as, “It’s a bit of a different animal, and different disciplines do it differently. What would be ideal is having them come in with really good writing abilities, and then learn how to build the argumentation, in class.”

Critical Thinking and Analysis Presence

Generally, critical thinking and analysis features were scaled so that *exceptional* meant that the student combined deep critical thinking and analysis with the research sources, *adequate* meant that they had some analysis, and *poor* meant that there was either minimal or no analysis. Most participants mentioned critical thinking and analysis as either a needed feature in student papers or as a foundational requirement for university studies but expressed this through different methods. For example, Ramona called out the need for students to understand analysis through close reading and described this as being able to read a text and understand the rhetorical devices that produce meaning. This participant further expressed that students require “Critical thinking skills and being able to generate topics on their own” (Ramona). Contrary to Ramona’s perspective about close reading, Florence stressed that “close reading is good, but in high school they need experiences; more experiences with authors and texts and people that make the text come alive.”

However, again, many participants shared that students are not performing critical thinking and analysis in their work. Florence expressed,

I think I was really shocked, especially this year, when I did my opening writing, just how low the quality of writing was for students. I was looking at their initial submissions that weren't for marks but to just see where we're starting from. I remember thinking to myself, this feels like grade 8 level. This doesn't feel strong, especially since a lot of them are in the Con Ed [Concurrent Education] program,

and they are future teachers, I'm a little alarmed at the writing level that they're entering into university with. (Florence)

Participants described papers that were *poor* and lacked critical thinking with an overreliance on large language models or generative AI to develop them.

Evidence Integration and Interaction

For participant responses concerning students' interactions with sources, each of the *exceptional*, *adequate*, and *poor* categories showed similar perspectives with at least half of the participants. Overall, this feature of academic writing had the second highest frequency (18 instances) of responses from participants and was tied in frequency (five instances) with dialogue organization when describing what an *adequate* paper demonstrates based on evidence integration and interaction. *Exceptional* student papers demonstrated a level of complex engagement with supporting research and students' ideas, through their choice of words and phrases for integration. Floyd summarized these points, describing *exceptional* papers as "if a student takes the initiative to include lots of research and is doing lots of complex work in terms of integrating sources and providing citations." Meanwhile, *poor* papers were vague, summarized instead of integrating research, and provided no analysis of quotations or left out quotations entirely. Pearl explained that a *poor* student paper does not show support for the student's ideas, expressing that "A weak paper either summarizes, has texts with no direct quotation or analysis of the text, talking around or talking about ideas, but having no support for those ideas." Some participants also mentioned that *poorer* papers also did not use citations properly, but citations have been included as part of the academic integrity section later in these thesis findings. *Adequate* papers were described as not quite meeting the description provided for *exceptional* papers, as identified by Danielle:

An *adequate* first-year writing paper is going to have some mistakes. It's going to maybe not do anything with a lot of finesse, but it's still going to have all of its parts. It's going to show evidence of research and synthesis of the material, and then also expansion on those ideas. (Danielle)

Here the participant's perspective is that *adequate* fell lower on the grading scale than *exceptional*, but many noted that the differences between these two types of papers is not significantly different.

Foundational requirements for integration of evidence were only mentioned by a few of the participants, but it was indicated that students should have some experience in doing research, including understanding how to paraphrase, summarize and explain sources, before they come to university. Considering that many described experience with research as support for student ideas, these connected features are closely related to the previously mentioned argumentation quality, wherein students are using their ideas to generate an argument. However, in the case of argumentation, the foundational requirements did not need to be fully developed when starting university studies. Further responses about knowledge production demonstrate a widening of the gap, as some participants expressed that students struggle with the synthesis of sources and knowledge production and, as a result, they are provided the opportunity to explore this in their post-secondary studies.

Knowledge Production. Source integration with student ideas and analyzing those sources within that context raised the question of whether students demonstrate knowledge production as they synthesize sources that align with or question their ideas. While the ability to synthesize sources and produce knowledge touches on student behaviour, its connection to the integration of sources should be shown in this section. One of the participants described this

ability as a characteristic of an adult learner, where they find students struggle with “doing some kind of knowledge production and is trying to get to the point where they're synthesizing or producing new ideas” (Pearl). Another participant, Robert, expressed that they actively promote space for this type of understanding and knowledge production. The concept of knowledge production will be further detailed in the section below on AI and academic writing because participants provided comments on the impact that AI has on student writing.

Dialogue Organization and Clarity

The academic writing feature of dialogue organization and clarity ranked third in overall frequency of participant responses (17 instances), the highest frequency for how papers are *poor* (six instances), and tied for the highest frequency on how they are *adequate* (five instances). Most participants found that *poor* student academic writing has no clear structure or organization, which loses the message that the student was trying to put forward. To elaborate on the lack of structure, Florence mentioned that “This is where we get into the essays that are not defined in terms of paragraphs, and so it's all one paragraph.” On the other hand, *exceptional* papers provide that missing structure with an introduction and signposts to guide the reader. Ben discussed why this is important by stating, “Smoother transitions, topic sentences that are sort of like signposts to remind the reader that everything does go towards proving the thesis.”

When the discussion transitioned from what descriptions were *exceptional* to *adequate*, Ben illustrated that *adequate* is like *exceptional* but on a lesser scale. For the discussion of dialogue organization and clarity, Ben expressed this as, “On that topic and the integration of coded material, and paraphrased material as well, is the facility with which the student does that maybe makes the difference between a paper being either *adequate* or *exceptional*.” Essentially, there is less clarity and development in *adequate* papers than in *exceptional* papers and as Danielle

stated, “The sentence structure might be a little bit less varied. The material might be less dynamically and interestingly integrated, but it's going to still have all of the parts.”

Organization and the Five-Paragraph Structure: Participants also described *exceptional* dialogue organization and clarity as moving beyond the five-paragraph structure. This paragraph structure, often taught in high school, was a topic source for most of the participants, with most expressing the structure as not helpful or even detrimental to how students should understand essay writing when they come to university and some stating it was unnatural.

The vast majority of well-prepared students write mediocre papers because they're following a formula they were taught in high school called the five-paragraph essay, which I am sure you know about. They're following it in ways that actually flatten everything. They're following it in ways that make it into a bad paper. (Madeline)

However, two (2) participants clarified that the five-paragraph structure should be taught with the understanding that it does not apply in university. Belinda noted that, “People don't like the five-paragraph structure. I think it's worth knowing. Only because it gives you a structure. You don't have to keep it. Like, here we're sort of undoing some of that work and that's great.”

Support of the five-paragraph essay was expressed as a foundational requirement for university with the understanding that it can teach students how to develop a thesis and argumentation.

Ramona identified this nuance in the five-paragraph essay as,

Usually high schools, in terms of papers, they will give a cheat sheet type “this is how you do it”, like a hamburger or sandwich thesis. That still gives students a framework for what it means to organize an essay, and what argumentation is. I think they should understand that argumentation at some level. Why you're doing it. What you have to do to collect the evidence to make your argument. (Ramona)

This expression of building students' knowledge of argumentation brings us back to the comments made earlier about the need for understanding argumentation quality as a foundational requirement.

Grammar and Literary Understanding

Although grammar was still ranked high for frequency (15 instances) of participant responses, there were some considerations as to how grammar is assessed in university with students more frequent use of AI grammar tools such as Grammarly. Literary understanding as a feature of academic writing was grouped with grammar in the current research because it came up naturally in the participant responses when discussing grammar features of academic writing. The grammar and literary understanding foundational requirements that participants thought were needed when starting university included parts of speech, punctuation, and figurative language. However, at the most basic level, students should “articulate their ideas in grammatically correct sentences” (Floyd), which should be a basic literacy going into high school rather than upon leaving it (Madeline). According to participants, *poor* papers demonstrate that formatting standards are not met in such a way that it makes the paper difficult to read. For *adequate* papers, the grammar was expressed to be better than *poor* writing but still produces logical gaps and reading through the paper does not flow or is choppy. Additionally, “There's not a clear wrap-up, in terms of checking for formatting, or grammar, or citation style” (Florence). Like what was stated previously for the organization of papers, when grammar elements are not executed well, that becomes very apparent in the writing.

Ben expressed the impact that poor grammar has on otherwise *adequate* papers. “You don't see that so much anymore but you're still liable to, and maybe even more likely to see, papers in which you get the sense that the sentences don't really mean what the writer is

intending to say” (Ben). *Exceptional* papers, on the other hand, are easier to read because of how the paper progresses grammatically and organizationally at all levels of the writing. Ramona detailed that for *exceptional* papers there are no errors “at a sentence level, at the paragraph level, and at the word level.” Not all participants stressed the no-error concept when it came to grammar, especially with the increasing use of AI. Although they generally found that spelling, grammar, and mechanics should be well done for *exceptional* papers, several participants alluded to perceiving the presence of grammatical errors as an indicator that AI was not used by the student and they are putting original thought into the work, which was found to be more valuable in the learning process. Yet, the university where these participants teach allows for the use of AI Grammar checking tools, having previously purchased licensing through the university and now through student governance organizations, which is contrary to the perspectives of some instructors, potentially creating confusion for students. The discussion between AI and original work were presented in the student behaviours section of this thesis. Finally, a few participants identified a lack of readability in students’ work when the student did not follow formatting instructions. It was not clear if those instructions were purely grammar-based instructions or instructions in general. However, the findings section of this thesis will discuss the impact of students following instructions in the context of student behaviours in later sections.

Writing Communication Skills

Writing communication skills are the demonstrable product of the academic writing findings specified above. If features like argument and thesis development, critical thinking and analysis, integration of evidence, dialogue clarity, and grammar are unclear, the writing does not communicate its intended idea. Demonstrating writing communication skills as a feature of academic writing was communicated by half of the participants during the interviews. They

indicated that *exceptional* papers are well-written but as a subjective term these points relied on the descriptions of *exceptional* features that impact good writing. One participant described well-written as “conveys its point well, which is often a fundamental skill that is not necessarily evident in first-year papers” (Cambria). This same participant also defined *exceptional* as only meeting basic writing skills and not necessarily being able to convey points well. Although stated as a foundational skill, the observation of student academic writing is that it is not always a foundational requirement that is met but may be developed in university when students have basic writing skills, focused on the areas previously mentioned. The writing communication feature also highlighted that sometimes *exceptional* and *adequate* papers are not very different. In the case of writing communication skills, there were not many responses to indicate any specific *adequate* features except that the ideas are communicated “in a way that is coherent enough” to allow for them to understand the idea put forward (Floyd). Meanwhile, *poor* papers “articulate their ideas in a way that is incoherent or otherwise fails to adhere to other lessons” (Floyd). A distinction was made in the interviews between plain reading and writing and academic writing, where students may have been exposed to plain writing as described in the foundational requirement discussion above, but they have not been exposed to more formal, sophisticated academic writing. “That's something that they give indications that they haven't really been exposed to much in the course” (Ben).

Reading as the Primary Foundational Requirement. Students' reading abilities were not specified by participants as a feature for written work because they would not be evident in writing, but participants were unanimous in expressing that it is a foundational requirement that all students should have when they begin university studies. Comments from the participants specified that reading earlier, with fluency, and with stamina is the cornerstone for developing

the aforementioned foundational requirements. A few participants also noted that learning to read things that are difficult (i.e., in terms of vocabulary, language structures, argumentative structure, theoretical concepts) to push reading skills further than what a student is typically comfortable with in their recreational reading is useful practice to develop advanced literacy in preparation for university.

So, a piece of advice that I always give to my students on the first day of every semester in my first-year writing classes is that the students who tend to read more in their free time tend to have by default, more sophisticated literacy skills, and tend to have a much easier time learning how to communicate or interpret language in any topic or any discipline. (Floyd)

Another comment noted the reduction in reading comprehension observed over the past several years due to changes in how students were taught to read, which influences how well students interpret texts. “They really aren't strong readers, and that is heartbreaking. I'm glad that there have been changes in how we teach” (Pearl). This same instructor noticed the residual effect that teaching methods had on students who seek whole language linguistic cues rather than focusing on the text or other more sophisticated strategies.

The participants generally maintained a similar perspective about the importance of reading ability and recognized that it takes a long time for students to develop this skill to the level required in university. Some were more specific about reading abilities and what is needed foundationally for university. “Reading comprehensively, reading stamina, able to understand reading, able to read long texts, and able to read texts that are boring, and understand texts that are boring” (Cambria). Some found that reading complexity, pushing the student further, was an important aspect of reading to learn. “All readers need to be reaching up so that they're learning

from what they're reading, if it's in an academic context, and using that in their writing” (Danielle). Others thought about what is realistic for students today as a foundational requirement for university, expressing that students should be able to “read an article and understand its main points, or read a short article and understand its main points” (Floyd). This participant indicated their concern for students’ success if these reading abilities were not developed, with others noting that reading skills are developed over a long time and done outside of school learning.

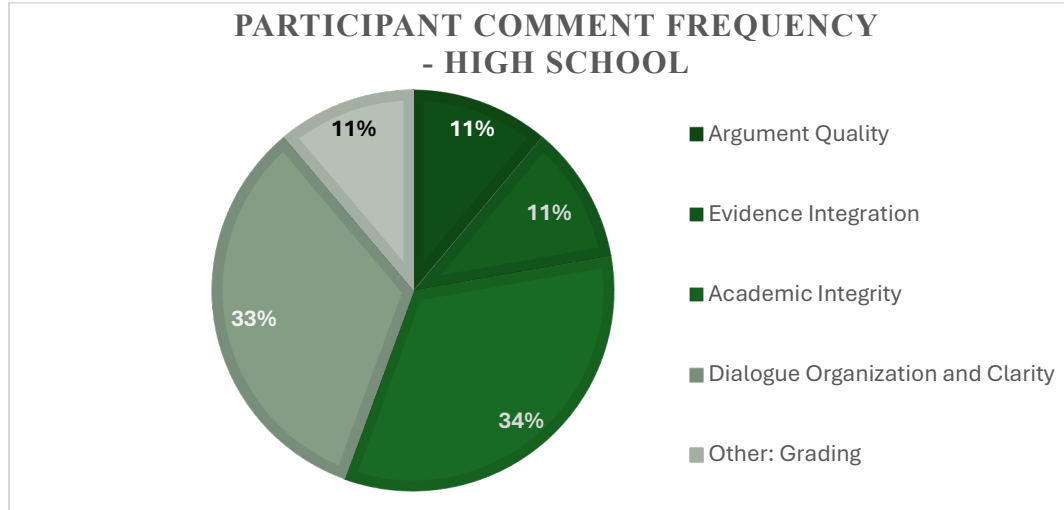
High School to University Transition Relative to Academic Writing Observations

The academic writing features and foundational requirements identified do not always point to student deficiencies but to potential for improvements institutionally, whether that be in high school or university. Considering this thesis seeks improvements rather than deficiencies, this section will be written in that context. Figure 2 shows the instances where high school is referenced in relation to the academic writing features presented. The comments addressing high school progress before university primarily referred to Academic Integrity, Dialogue Organization, Argument Quality, and Evidence Integration. Participants mentioned the non-standard approaches between the two types of institutions regarding academic integrity and AI related to academic integrity. Comments about dialogue organization focused on the misalignment of the five-paragraph essay with how student papers are written for university. Argument quality and evidence integration were related in that they discussed how students struggle with argument and thesis development because they are more familiar with summarization rather than incorporating their ideas.

Figure 2

Participant comment frequency when mentioning high school-related to academic writing

features



Some professors were also mindful of the different student experiences from high school. For example, Floyd suggested that “the reality is plenty of students have different experiences in terms of the skills that they're able to accrue in high school”, and Madeline expressed that students who come from remote communities have different experiences, such as having “to fly in to high school and then end up being separated from their community.” This participant noted that their personal narratives help make meaning with certain course texts. Finally, an overall comment about high school and the foundational literacies discussed within the academic writing features was provided by Robert, who expressed the importance of this research as valuable, so that students are better prepared when they come out of high school. “I think that can be valuable to high school educators and curriculum specialists because I think the biggest area of need seems to stem from teacher training and curriculum design for literacy and writing at the high school level” (Robert). Only one participant noted a significant gap in grading structures between high school and university, suggesting that high school grading needs to better prepare students for post-secondary grading.

Observations of Institutional Responsibility Relative to Academic Writing Ability

From an institutional perspective, the findings for academic writing features show there are some gaps between instructors' expectations of student academic writing in first-year undergraduate studies and what they have observed from most students. However, the participants were divided on where responsibility lies when it comes to ensuring students have the foundational skills required to meet the *adequate* or *exceptional* level of academic writing features such as argumentation quality, evidence integration, dialogue organization, grammar and literary understanding that make up student writing communication. There is a distinguishable difference between how the instructors perceive their expectations. Some see the expectations as an ideal that university students can work towards, while others see it as something students need to already have before starting university studies; learned through preparatory courses for post-secondary studies in high school.

Suggestions to improve the skills between high school and university, related to academic writing features and foundational skills, were raised by participants as they provided their responses to what they perceived as foundational skills for university and academic writing features. Participants who discussed argumentation quality suggested there is a responsibility at the high school level to either teach argumentation or teach how to write good research questions that require analysis. They also identified that students need to start learning to use critical thinking skills and understand how to engage with research sources in preparation for university. Concerning dialogue organization, students need to be taught that essay structures will vary in university and will not rely on the five-paragraph structure, but are based on creating the best argument for the content the student is producing along with their research materials. Finally, the

practice of regular reading, whether for school or personal interest, was highly valued in its connection to learning how to write.

Chapter 5: Student Behavioural Findings

Chapter 5 presents the findings associated with student behavioural expectations and observations, including those related to academic integrity, that the instructor participants see as foundational for university.

Student Behaviour Findings

First-year educators' perspectives on student behavioural expectations and observations respond to Questions 4 to 10 and 13 as detailed in Appendix A, Table A2. From these responses, four major themes emerged, based on the frequency of discussion across the participant group with nearly all addressing at least one topic with the major theme, including Student Engagement, Student Voice and Ideas, Student Autonomy, and Academic Understanding. Within each theme, based on the frequency of responses by participants, further topics were presented and where applicable, additional follow-up information from participants was provided. For example, within the Student Engagement theme, topics about low student engagement and the reasons for it were presented based on frequency, but instructor participant responses about how they encourage engagement were provided in follow-up responses, although it was not a high frequency topic. The Student Voice and Ideas theme within Student Behaviours overlaps with the theme of Original Ideas and Student Voice in the section Instructor Perspectives of Academic Writing because the behaviours involved in student voice impact the results noted within student writing. Thus, the Student Voice theme uses information from Appendix B, Table B1 and Table B2. Student Engagement is addressed as a stand-alone theme and uses Table B2. Student Autonomy also incorporates Use of Instruction, Academic Understanding incorporates topics of

Disciplinary and Academic Integrity understandings, so these themes use information from both Tables B1 and B2. Lastly, this section looks at participant perspectives about the transition from high school to university and institutional responsibilities related to student behaviour.

Student Engagement

All participants had something to say about student engagement with most expressing a low uptake or buy-in of student engagement in first-year university classes, while one participant felt it was moderate but to ensure they checked the box to get the marks for that engagement. None of the participants indicated there was student engagement or participation for the sake of being a part of the conversation. A couple of participants mentioned that if students did engage in that manner, those students would be more likely middle adults or mature students. Some of the interviews identified that, of the small number of students that participate in classes, there tends to be one or two that do so based on their unsupported opinions. Although students who engage are welcome change in class, they also need to recognize the difference between opinion and knowledge as a credible source. “So, you have some students who come to class having read a lot or absorbed a lot of media that's not necessarily accurate, and then they can have big opinions about that” (Cambria). Again, this comes back to points made earlier about critical thinking and analysis on the part of the student. If they are not critically examining what they know and determining if it is accurate, then it may not be a knowledgeable or supported source of information.

Within the theme of low uptake of student engagement, a major topic emerged about whether students chose not to participate due to their confidence level. Students’ lack of confidence could be from lack of preparation, the transition of being in a new environment, or fear of not having the right answer and being embarrassed. Some participants provided

observations about what they think or assume the causes of students' lack of preparation may be, but Floyd pointed out that it would not be appropriate to guess. Of the three reasons, lack of preparation is the one that is within the student's control but if the class is set up for it, even students who show up unprepared for class can connect with other students and learn something. For example, Belinda discussed how student conversations in smaller groups for literature discussions end up talking and become engaged as a small group even when students are unprepared for class. They share conversations within the smaller groups about how they did not read or prepare, but it is still engagement and conversation that the instructor is still able to hear even in these small groups. "There's just so much that they're getting out of talking to each other in these tiny groups" (Belinda). However, not all reasons for lack of confidence are within the student's control.

The transition to the university environment, whether the student is coming from high school or is a mature student returning to education after several years impacts some students' confidence levels. Of both student groups, Ramona stated, "I think it's just a sense of discombobulation, when you go to a new space with a set of criteria that is different from what you're used to, and you have to quickly adjust." However, there is some hope that these students may still succeed in this new space, if they are self-motivated enough to do so. Belinda shared that instructors recognize the transition is difficult but that students over 17 years of age are largely self-motivated and "they are now taking a responsibility and buying in, to a certain degree." Florence tied in the discombobulation or unsettlement of being in a classroom with the fear of saying something wrong, which can diminish their confidence to engage in classes. Florence highlights this well in the comment,

What's important is you're confident, you have a position and you have a perspective. It's great that you want to show it and so let me help you show it.

That's probably the biggest thing that I notice, and then everything else would probably be a repeat, but I think it all comes back to confidence. There is just this very clear mix of fear and unsettlements when they come into a classroom, and they recognize that there are huge age divides. I find that some adult learners will be like, ugh I don't know if what I'm writing or what I'm saying, is it politically correct? Am I allowed to say this? (Florence)

Although there are instructors, like Florence, who are willing to guide students through this fear, shown in their varying methods to seek engagement from students which I will touch on shortly, it was not clear in the findings if students are aware that instructors want to provide this help.

Another form of reaching out to students to help guide them through this fear can be seen when instructors share their lived experiences on the subject. For example, when students say they are afraid of public speaking instructor participants like Ramona recognize “If you practice public speaking, you become better at it. I mean, it's still difficult for me. Of course, it makes you scared, it makes you a little worried, but if you practice it, you can do it” (Ramona).

However, Ramona also qualified this statement that student accommodation would also be considered if the student has been set up with student accessibility services. Where the situation with accommodation becomes unclear is when the student has not registered for accommodation but is claiming the need for accommodation to the instructor so they do not need to participate. Ramona expressed this as, “it’s just something that makes them scared, they can say, well, I have anxiety, and then, you know, and you're making me do this, but I have anxiety.” Even in Belinda’s example about speaking in smaller groups, which as an instructor is beneficial

for most, and clarified that a relatively small “2 out of 500” students could not remain in the class because they were “so socially anxious where they are like ‘I cannot do this’” (Belinda). Although students may fear saying the wrong thing, it is not necessarily the professor they fear will provide judgment over them but other students.

It is a university, we should, we're talking, we're doing a pop culture course, we should be able to debate pop culture topics. They've made it clear, and they're like, it's not you. It's the other students. They are really afraid of being canceled by their other students or just saying the wrong thing. (Pearl)

It was clear in the findings that most participants identified student confidence as a significant part in why students do or do not engage in class or have a voice in class.

Instructor Strategies. In addition to the methods provided by Ramona and Belinda on how they work to engage students, through sharing experiences, or breaking the class into smaller groups, other methods of trying to encourage student engagement were provided by the participants. A few participants recognized that creative and reflective projects help students personalize their learning activities and incorporate positionality and empathy into their engagement. “I always try to have a reflective component, even before AI. Now they tell us we should have a reflective component because AI is bad at reflecting. Even before that, I had a lot of reflection in my courses” (Danielle). Other strategies mentioned to encourage engagement included setting a standard of verbal communication being a part of every class on the first day of class, using the *Think, Pair, Share* model (e.g., students are provided a prompt, discuss it in small groups, then share with the larger class), using in-class writing assignments for grades, and making sure participation holds a significant percentage of the student’s grades. Pearl articulated the reasoning for the use of engagement methods (think, pair, share) as “it does better

with many diverse voices speaking. If it's the same two people speaking all the time, even though I support those people, we don't learn as much as we do when we hear from everybody.” Some instructors consider that even note taking can be a form of engagement, which could help with the fear of participation previously mentioned and may be more practical in larger classes. Even with this alternative form of engagement, one instructor pondered whether a change in student engagement is potentially a product of how people now engage.

I had the first row, they took notes. Everyone else, no one's taking notes. It's unnerving, because they're just sitting there. They're paying attention. They're not doing other things. They have this laser focus on me but they're not writing anything down. I just don't know what's going on in their heads. They're hearing my voice, and they're paying attention, but I don't know what's sticking and when they walk out the door, I don't know if they've retained anything. So, they don't seem to have a concept of classroom engagement as being one of the reasons that they're there. I do talk about expectations, about preparation and classroom engagement and contributing but I think, again, a lot of speculation going into my answers, but I just think that they spend so much of their time just watching and looking and passively consuming that that's kind of their main mode of engagement. (Robert)

Yet, it remained unclear whether the lack of engagement through notetaking is related to how students now engage; whether they are provided enough instruction about this expectation; or whether they are not interested. With all these efforts, according to the participants' statements, students are still relatively silent, and it takes a lot of effort on the part of the instructor to encourage the confidence needed in those students to engage in the class.

Student Voice

Participants identified the student voice as an expression of student ideas and the ability to share their knowledge both in their writing and through their class discussions. Since academic writing features make up part of this theme, Appendix B, Table B1 content identified the academic writing features and Appendix B, Table B2 discussed behavioural topics that impact student academic writing and behavioural topics about student voice in class.

The academic writing features of student voice within student writing showed that most participants considered an *exceptionally* written paper prominently highlights the student voice and ideas showing a writing style that makes the reader think deeper. Madeline articulated that *exceptional* student papers do not regurgitate lectures and material students have read, but instead are a combination of, “research with student thinking and student analysis. It also has a certain amount of liveliness in the student's own voice.” This participant was also the only one to point out the concept of code-switching as a tool to make their knowledge applicable to academia. Papers that did not demonstrate the student voice, had been AI generated or simply presented facts were found to be poorly written.

On the concept of AI generation as detrimental to the student voice in papers, Ben shared that “AI has introduced a new way in which papers can be *poor*. I mean, obviously, they're *poor* if they're just, not written by the student.” The participants did not describe what an *adequate* paper would demonstrate regarding student voice, nor did they specify any foundational requirements for students about using student voice in their papers. Through the participant discussions about AI's impact on the student voice within student writing, connections with behavioural topics about student voice and the reciprocal respect of one another's voices also

emerged. Pearl discussed experiences with shocked students when discussing disapproval of using AI as a learning and writing tool.

In English, we expect you to use my ideas. You can use my ideas to do whatever you want with them. You can quote me and say, “Professor Pearl sucks.” That is allowed, but I want you to quote me and acknowledge that I said it. You don't have to respect it, and you don't have to agree with it, but you do have to say that I said it. So, I do sort of start that culture of, “I would never do it to you, here’s why I respect your ideas, and I want you to respect the ideas of the people you're quoting and not take someone else's”. (Pearl)

Florence echoed the respect for people’s ideas as an “attribution of ideas people want their ideas to be celebrated, just like if they were writing a paper, they would want their ideas to be, to be cited” The participants that raised the idea of celebrating a person’s ideas were clear that they considered student ideas something to be celebrated and even if the writing was not perfect, it was a pleasure to read students’ original ideas and thoughts, as opposed to AI generated material.

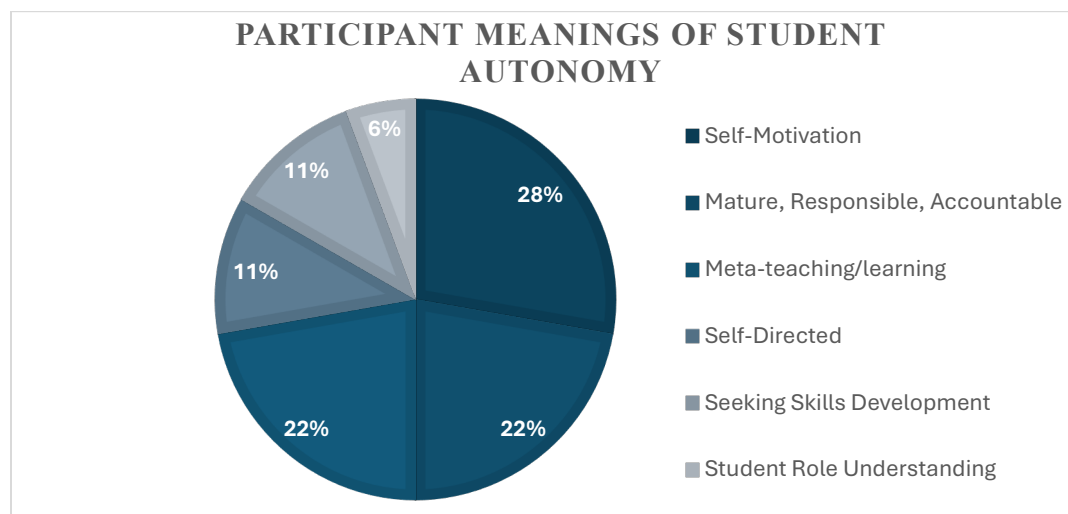
Whether from the use of AI to generate student writing or students’ lack of confidence in presenting their ideas, participants expressed that the student voice does not appear often enough in their observations of students’ work. Robert expressed that the transition from high school to university may carry with it the remainders of authoritative learning that should not appear in a university context and may impact student confidence and student voice. “I don't fully understand what the issue is. I think it's partly just the idea that they're in university now, and the professor knows everything, and they know much less to nothing.” (Robert). This quote and further conversation with Robert revealed the perspective that education before university often forms a type of authoritarian understanding of the teacher and how education works. Supporting

comments were also made by other participants about how students use summarization, but that critical analysis is a missing part of their work.

When discussing student voice during in-class discussions, the participants primarily focused on students' understanding of their knowledge and critical literacy as important so students can understand how to critically examine their opinions and recognize their intersectionality and positionality. If students understand they have shareable knowledge, they can use it but need to understand how to share that information appropriately for class discussions. "You need to learn to code switch to put it into forms that are acceptable in an academic context or to change the academic context so that it's fitting the ideas you want to present." (Madeline). Yet, participants still insisted that although there is room for student knowledge presentation in class, they do not recognize themselves as a source of valuable information, which goes back to Robert's comment about authoritarian teaching remnants from previous educational experiences.

Student Autonomy

The theme of student autonomy varied in responses from the participants on what that means from their perspective and is illustrated in Figure 3. At least half of the participants attributed student autonomy to self-motivation, while nearly half of the participants saw expressed that student autonomy is related to mature and responsible attitudes. Additionally, just under half of the participants also identified concepts about *meta-teaching* or at least talking about assignments in a way that forms a discussion between the instructor and teacher that is not just taking prescribed direction but encourages student autonomy. The remaining topics identified by a smaller group of the participants included students' self-direction, understanding of their role, and skills development seeking, which relate to student autonomy.

Figure 3*Participant Understanding of Student Autonomy*

Self-Motivation. Although most participants saw self-motivation and control as a component of student autonomy, they recognized that the desire for a student to take control of their education is not always present in their observations of first-year students. Further, some students who are motivated to learn and understand why it is important that they are present in class, may still be hesitant to take that control. Danielle highlighted this in comments about the desire for control, in that, “The desire for control over what they're learning comes through a little bit more, though some students are also hesitant and kind of intimidated by that as well.” The hesitancy in self-motivation can also be connected to the high school to university transition, as stated by Belinda, “They have to be self-motivated in a way that they didn't have to be in high school.” Generally, in these findings, where the concept of self-motivation was raised, it was often linked to maturity or responsibility; highlighting a difference between emerging adults and mature adults as students.

Mature, Responsible, Accountable. Participants expressed mature attitudes and responsibility as positive characteristics demonstrated by students in class communications,

delivery of assignments, or in communications outside of class with the instructor via email.

Many times, these characteristics were connected to mature students, defined as those who were not youth directly out of high school and may have additional work experience and more at stake due to their social situations and lived experiences. There was a participant divide when discussing this topic, some opting to highlight the positive characteristics they have experienced with students and others describing how these are not met. Some chose to describe both for balance. For example, Ben focused on descriptions of what mature and responsible attitudes look like when teaching mature students. “If they don't do that well on an assignment, they want, first and foremost to know where they went wrong, rather than how can I get a higher mark?” (Ben). In opposition to these positive characteristics, Ben described the same question but from a student that did not demonstrate a responsible attitude because they asked what the instructor will do to change their mark. Ben expressed,

When they say, “What can I do to get a higher mark?” the way I hear it is “What are you going to do in order so that you can give me a higher mark?” or “Can I do the assignment over?” when we haven't had a chance to talk about what was wrong with it in the first place and there's no sense that if they did it over, it would be any better. (Ben)

Through this perspective, the responsibility is either placed on the student, as mature and responsible, or placed on the instructor when the student does not demonstrate that characteristic. Ramona also discussed this concept of responsibility for grades, noting experiences where students become angry and threaten professors when grades are not as they anticipated. They place the blame of lower grades on the instructor rather than taking responsibility for their work. The instructor perspectives show that students “have an understanding, generally, of the

responsibilities (and enthusiasm) that they need to have” and are not at these two extreme ends of the scale of responsibility but exist somewhere in between based on their maturity level (Cambria).

Encouragement through Meta-Teaching. Some of the participants in this research shared their approaches to encourage student autonomy, enthusiasm for self-direction, responsibility, and an understanding of the student role. Madeline stated that practicing meta-teaching by explaining why assignments may seem odd to students but also explaining, “here's why we're doing it, here's what I'm trying to teach you by doing it, here's what I'm trying to measure.” Robert’s approach takes students back to the purpose and origins of university studies leading to why disciplines ask for different things from students. “Universities were organized according to categories of knowledge, and they became disciplines, and then we developed practices and conventions within those disciplines. It's a way of generating knowledge and it's communal” (Robert). Instructors, like Cambria, add that they teach why it matters in the context of looking past credentialing because a degree may take them in other unplanned directions.

Other participants supported the concept of meta-teaching, without providing further details of their strategies. “It is a good way of getting a sense that they understand why they’re in a university space. Not just because they have to go to university but there is something bigger” (Ramona). A few participants made connections between mature students and the concepts of responsibility, self-direction and meta-learning than younger first-year students.

Skills Development. One participant explicitly stated that older or mature students are the ones who “are looking to fine-tune their skills in writing certain types of documents” (Ben). Continuing the topic of skills development, Pearl connected simply “learning something” through intellectual risk taking is part of skills development and even if a student fails while

taking the risk, grades are minimally affected. Further, this participant stated that students “influence [their] intellectual development if [they] took a risk and tried something that didn't work out, which is better than doing a safe paper, that somebody told [them] how to write” (Pearl). Like Ben’s comment about mature students, a few participants in this research indicated that moving past templated structures to more creative and risky writing in academia is a characteristic of mature students because they are applying what they know to what they learn. Additionally, these groups of students tend to place more emphasis on what they are learning rather than the grade or credential they will attain. “What they're getting is skills and knowledges, and not a credential. The credential might get them the job; the skills and knowledge will let them actually do the job and last more than 2 months in it” (Madeline). Pearl supported the idea that students are completing their education as a credential only, when discussing why they are not motivated to adhere to academic integrity rules, as discussed later in this thesis section. “These are just hoops that we have to jump through because they have no meaning, and the education is just a degree that I use to get a job” (Pearl). An explanation about the skills development focus between mature and younger students out of high school was put forward by Ben, clarifying that mature students may already be engaged in their careers or have a clearer career path to help contextualize their skills development learning.

Academic Understanding

The findings in this *Academic Understanding* section include instructor perspectives of how they view the topics of Disciplinary Understanding and Academic Integrity Understanding in first-year courses and their experiences with students in the context of these two topics.

Disciplinary Understanding. Participants were somewhat split on whether the reproduction of discipline specific material was important for first-year students. Some felt that it

was not important in some areas or useful since many students tend to use AI to create reproduced material. It was clear across the participants that reproduction of specific discipline material is not something that first-year students are particularly adept at or if they are attempting to reproduce disciplinary material it comes across as superficial. From the responses, it appears that students begin to develop specific disciplinary understandings in university rather than in preparation for university “because they can’t seem to wrap their minds around, just academic writing in general and the kind of quality that the various disciplines of academic writing would share” (Ben). Only two participants presented variations of disciplinary understanding as a measure of an *exceptional*, *adequate*, or *poor* paper but only as a concept of applying course material to academic writing. There were no indications of disciplinary understanding as foundational when starting university studies and the impression from the data indicated this is as more of a learned component of university studies or not as important for some courses. Participants’ observations of student disciplinary understanding spanned a scale from absolutely no disciplinary understanding to stating that they “emulate it in more than a basic way” (Belinda). Danielle shared the perspective that some students do pay a lot of attention to discipline-specific learning.

Two participants could not comment on disciplinary understanding because they felt this was either part of upper-level courses or could only speak from the English discipline perspective. Two participants found that students do not understand what disciplines are, while the other three participants identified that it may be possible for students to understand but this is either not a complete understanding and application or students struggle with it. Disciplinary thinking even provides challenges to English instructors, when students are from different disciplines “If a student's writing a good social science paper, I have to recognize this literature

review strikes me as a little bit repetitive and boring, and not adding your own ideas as much, but it's part of that discipline” (Madeline). Finally, Florence and Belinda shared that disciplinary application may be possible for students, but it is in a basic way that may only apply to discipline-specific terminology as repetition rather than analysis or only apply it well if already part of a template or structure.

The research also asked about instructor perspectives of how students make meaning which can be connected to disciplinary understanding depending on the topic of the learning activity. The data highlighted that students could make meaning through more creative assignments that allow for integration of personal experience, but some have challenges applying broader theoretical concepts with real-life because critical thinking is not always present in their work. Additionally, some participants found that once again this is more likely to be understood and actioned by mature or middle adult students. One of the participants expressed that making meaning through real life was not always relevant depending on the course.

Understanding of Academic Integrity Expectations. Concerning Academic Integrity, there were three topics raised by the majority of participants in this research: Student application of academic integrity is relatively low; perceived student beliefs regarding academic integrity; and AI performs a disservice to students and has complicated the application of academic integrity rules further because AI makes it harder to understand what is acceptable in academic integrity at all levels, whether student, instructor, or institution. When asked about students understanding academic integrity, the responses from all participants indicated that student application of academic integrity was not sufficient for university studies.

Low Application of Academic Integrity Rules. There was also little variance in perspectives about the reasons for the low application of academic integrity rules, but nearly all

the participants indicated students understand academic integrity but chose to go against academic integrity guidelines because they are either in a panic or rush to complete work.

A few participants that felt students did not understand academic integrity rules to be able to apply them. Pearl attributed students' lack of academic integrity awareness to how these younger students out of high school have grown up. "They're growing up in a culture where, you pirate videos, ChatGPT is right there, they have a phone, so why do they need to know this information? I think they see a lot of it as arbitrary" (Pearl). Madeline expressed the arbitrary as "jumping through hoops" while trying not to get caught, showing that students may have some knowledge of academic integrity, but that does not outweigh their need to just get things done.

Most participants indicated that students have a basic knowledge that they should not cheat, but do not recognize the *gray* areas in academic integrity, particularly around AI usage. Danielle supported the idea that students have a basic understanding of academic integrity and Cambria distinguished old ways of cheating and how technology has changed the definitions of cheating. "They know that they can't cheat in specific ways, but even the old-fashioned copy and paste from Wikipedia into an essay, there are much more advanced ways of doing that now" (Cambria).

However, other participants felt that although they may know they cannot cheat, they do not understand the importance of academic integrity, even when they feel "desperate" to just complete the work or feel they have no other choice but to cheat (Florence and Floyd). Florence illustrated this as student concerns of "Did I hit the word count? Is it done? Is it submitted?" Robert clarified that students understand academic integrity, but it is out of fear that they make the choice to cheat.

I'm pretty confident that every student understands that it is bad to cheat or that it is bad to have ChatGPT write their homework for them. I think that they all know that. In instances when we do catch students cheating or using AI to do their work, I don't think that that's ever because the student didn't realize that it was wrong. I think that it's always because the student ended up in a situation where they felt like cheating was the only way to get out of the situation they were in. (Floyd)

These situations change the question of whether the student understands academic integrity to whether they will make the choice of applying academic integrity rules. As Belinda summarized, "Some people are very passionate about academic integrity, at all levels. The majority are not." The idea of choosing to apply academic integrity rules touches on the concept of belief in those rules and belief in their importance.

Student Beliefs of Academic Integrity. Whatever students' rationale for cheating, from desperation or fear or not understanding academic integrity's importance, there is a belief structure that students have concerning cheating. According to the participants, beliefs about the importance of academic integrity and the repercussions of academic dishonesty are individual beliefs but these can at times be derived from social practice. Individual beliefs highlighted from the participants center around the actions of the student. For example, Robert indicated that academic integrity, when it exists for students, is based on fear and is not "informed by an understanding or a belief in the importance of independent thought and why we do what we do" (Robert). Supporting the concept of belief as a driver for whether students cheat or not, Ben agreed that "it is more a question of belief than it is of knowledge." In Ben's explanation as to why some students may not believe academic integrity is important, the concept of social input into the student's belief became more apparent. For those students, who are pressured to attend

university, “you couldn't expect them to necessarily subscribe to the value of academic integrity, or any other values that might characterize the academic world because they are just sort of interlopers or something in the academic world” (Ben). Then there is a belief that even if they cheat, they will not get caught. “I think they understand overall ... I don't think they understand that it can happen to them” (Ramona). Ramona’s comment raises questions about why students may think they will not get caught. Finally, cultural context as a social input into students’ beliefs about academic integrity was raised by Floyd in the following comment:

I remember having a conversation with the chair of a department about old-school plagiarism, like copy-pasting from undocumented sources. The chair at the time suggested that in the case of international students, there was maybe sometimes an issue of different expectations across cultural contexts. The implication was, maybe some students are coming from a context where it's more acceptable to not credit other people's ideas. I don't necessarily know if that is true. I haven't done a lot of research into other parts of the world, so I have no idea if that perspective is true or not. (Floyd)

Floyd’s comment considers that there is variability in students’ beliefs about academic integrity that may be socially and culturally based. Overall, participants’ comments about student belief in academic integrity help to shed light on reasons for the low application of academic integrity rules in the previous sub-section of this thesis.

Academic Integrity and AI. AI was a major topic within the discussion of academic integrity primarily focusing on how AI is detrimental to students’ learning and to their application of academic integrity. Despite the negative impact, instructors are trying to adapt to the use of AI in their classes. Danielle expressed this as,

Some instructors are embracing AI and leaning into it, because they believe that that's, in general, across disciplines, across institutions, the way the world is going, and those tools are going to be there if students want to use them. We need to find ways for students to use them ethically and responsibly in our classrooms. (Danielle)

In addition to Danielle's comment about adapting learning to AI, there were two positive comments about using AI as a learning tool or using it to create assignments on how to critically assess information available online. These statements were qualified, indicating there needs to be an ethical and responsible way to use AI. However, these positive comments were outweighed by the overwhelming negative comments about AI. Half of the participants explicitly stated that AI changes how student papers are *poor* and can range from using materials found online with no citations, or having AI write parts or even all the student's paper. The quotes from participants highlighting features of AI generated paper as being "perfectly written but say nothing" (Cambria), "the sentences don't really mean what the writer is intending to say" (Ben), and "there is a version the AI paper, which is lovely analysis, no evidence" (Belinda). In addition to these features of what an AI paper looks like, the participants shared that these papers at times contain all fact and no argument, with even the facts being questionable. Madeline shared that, "One of the biggest flags for AI-generated stuff is it's handed in four weeks early. It's this flat blandness with a lot of generalizations. It's perfectly grammatically correct, but there's no life behind it" (Madeline). Many participants also felt there was an inconsistent application of academic integrity rules concerning AI that has made it difficult for students, instructors, and the institution to understand how to handle it. This lack of clarity on how to treat AI, which disrupts the application of academic integrity rules because, as Cambria stated, "The institution doesn't quite know what to do with AI yet... I would say, with AI, [academic integrity] has kind of gone

out the window because of the nature of AI, which pretends that plagiarism isn't plagiarism” (Cambria). Others agreed that instructors and universities as an institution “have not figured out how to use AI yet” (Belinda). In addition to not knowing how to use AI in this context, Ben raised the point that there are different products and scales of how AI is used when indicating that “It’s not just ChatGPT. How does Grammarly fit into it? What I tell the students is, if you use Grammarly, the writing is less yours than if you didn't use Grammarly.” With a whole host of other AI generation services online that were not mentioned by participants, this comment only touches on the complexity of students’ AI usage.

Considering the university has previously approved Grammarly and has provided Grammarly licenses to graduate students, the negative connotations of using Grammarly, align with participants’ comments that the university does not know what to do with AI. In the context of AI’s ambiguity, two participants described how for cases of academic misconduct using AI, the misconduct needs to be blatant. Even if they can see AI has likely been used, they need clear proof that AI was used for cheating, so they can submit a case for academic misconduct.

Florence described these occurrences as,

Sometimes you know, as a professor there's just an undercurrent. You're like, this doesn't sound like you, this doesn't sound like your other assignments, and you're doing the due diligence as a professor to check all the sources and to but you can't submit an assignment based on a feeling. It has to always be with clear-cut evidence and proof. I think AI is making life hard for this academic integrity conversation. (Florence)

Florence’s comments about the struggle with AI and proof of academic dishonesty identifies that without that clear proof, it makes it increasingly difficult for instructors to defend their cases of

academic misconduct. As a result, some of the participants have altered their assignments for students to avoid the possibility to use AI altogether. Danielle describes this phenomenon as “instructors, really, are moving towards more and more in-class assessment. So, testing and in class exams, or short in-class writing assignments. Because those, that gives us a bit of a buffer against the generative AI use” (Danielle). However, this participant also acknowledged that there is a movement away from research and writing assignments, stating, “it’s a lot of work to deal with the potential integrity violations that come with out-of-class assessment”, and that there are some instructors who struggle “with how to manage or scaffold an assignment to minimize AI use” (Danielle). It was clear from the participant comments that grading, assignments, and learning goals have been impacted by the student’s use of AI but, as this thesis discussed in a later section, these changes have become detrimental to student learning and graduate job performance.

As mentioned previously, many students are growing up with technology that enables quick access to information that could be used for cheating. With the growth of AI in that space, students can be tempted to lean on AI to do their work for them. This thesis presented the findings concerning instructors’ perceptions of student belief and understanding of academic integrity but not delving into AI specifically. During the participant interview, Pearl discussed how students’ understanding of AI can shift when instructors address reasons to avoid AI clearly. Pearl also illustrated this through the following approach example,

So, I do spend time talking about it and made a plea to my students last class, and you could see the shock on their faces. I was like, please do not feed my slides into ChatGPT to make a quiz for yourself because I work so hard on those things, and I

don't want ChatGPT to steal it from me. I would never feed your essays into it,
because I respect how much work and you could see it occurred to them. (Pearl)

In this case, Pearl made an appeal to the class not to do something that would cause AI to steal instructors' ideas. This quote is highlighted because it takes the conversation away from students stealing ideas for their assignments and flips it to AI as performing the act of misconduct against teachers, even when students are trying to use AI as a learning tool. The impression this comment leaves is that students should be going to instructors and graduate assistants with questions about the course material, rather than feeding it into AI. This quote also makes a second point, that the instructor respects students' work and that instructors are only looking for mutual respect from students. This participant's views were further stated as, "I actually care what you have to say, and so I want to hear from your brain, not somebody else's" (Pearl). These comments work to restructure the student-instructor relationship from authoritative learning, which Robert found was a remnant of high school learning, to a more collegial relationship.

Job Market, Lack of Critical Thinking and AI. This thesis focuses on the practices of students in their first-year of university studies that show an overwhelmingly low uptake of academic integrity practices. The participants in general gave the impression that some of the low-uptake items of first-year students may gradually improve as students move into higher-level courses. However, this may not always be the case and some students eventually graduate university without the appropriate skills for the job market. For example, Florence shared knowledge of someone in a larger corporate company that hired someone to conduct research analysis. However, "This person put all their research through AI for their full-time job, and everything that AI presented was hallucinated. They're putting out these documents to paid partners. Paid partners do not respond well to hallucinated information" (Florence). Problems

like these hearken back to a lack of critical thinking and analysis as earlier presented in these findings.

High School to University Transition: Student Behaviours

Student attitudes and behaviours in the context of academic integrity and the transition between high school and university also have a significant impact on student success. Ramona shared that, “There's also a lot of entitlement, that they don't want to get caught and feel like they shouldn't bear any kind of repercussion for doing things that maybe helped them through high school”. This participant considered how academic misconduct does not hold serious repercussions in high school, which could give a false sense of what the limits are for academic misconduct will be in university.

Further topics of misalignment between high school and university shared by the participants were presented in earlier sections of these findings. These topics are interrelated and include self-motivation, time management, taking responsibility, meta-learning, and highlighting their voice in engagement and in writing. Self-motivation between high school and university was already discussed earlier in these findings but essentially there is more need for self-motivation than in high school, because a lot of what will be completed is within the student's realm of responsibility, referenced above in the *Student Autonomy* section of these findings. Student responsibilities and meta-learning were also identified as part of the *Student Autonomy* section. Time management emerged as an underlying reason why some students may cheat rather than apply appropriate academic integrity rules, as presented in the section *Low Application of Academic Integrity Rules* above. Additionally, participants noted that students do not understand the time commitment required out of class for university studies (Cambria). The participant comments for these highlighted that there is a shared responsibility between students and

instructors to help students achieve success. However, some of the participants tended to present the information in a way that focused on what could be possible. Robert indicated that students generally do not understand why they are taking on specific tasks and materials as part of learning in university, expressed as,

I don't think they have something that came from high school, but if you explain it to them, they tend to get it. I think it needs to be explained, and I don't think teachers should take it for granted why they're asking students to do things. (Robert)

Like Robert's approach to explaining why students are learning, other instructor participants actively perform meta-teaching in their classes and go a little further to provide in-class support to students.

Chapter 6: Guidance Types and Sources Findings

Chapter 6 examines what instructors see as appropriate guidance or support types and sources for first-year students and their impressions of those supports.

Guidance Types and Sources Findings

Students need guidance during university studies and especially in the first year when they have transitioned to a new learning environment with rules that do not align with how they are used to learning, as previously presented. It is also important to help students further their foundational writing skills and gain an interdisciplinary understanding of writing in academia. Most participants identified that this guidance should come from their professors both generally and within their specific disciplines, followed by university support centers. However, providing support is only part of the picture when implementing student support services. Those supports must be free of barriers which are adequately resourced and funded and students must use them. The participants in this research identified many sources of support for students. However, the

most frequently mentioned source was students' professors and university support centers or writing centers. However, they also mentioned academic advisors, graduate assistants, peer support and written materials as sources of guidance for first-year students. The findings focus on the high frequency sources which were professors and writing or academic support centers. Graduate assistants were added to the category of professors as they support professors in classes.

Instructors and Graduate Assistants

The data shown in Appendix B, Table B3, indicates that nearly all participants found that professors in all courses are and should be the first line of support for student guidance, as supported by Ben's comment, "Ideally students would be given lots of guidance as to writing in whatever discipline they are in by the professors that instruct in that discipline." Floyd added that students should take an Introduction to Academic writing course. Floyd and other participants supported taking this course through either the English department or students' disciplinary departments. Although most indicated that instructor support should come from the student's course instructors, half of the participants stated professors within students' disciplinary subjects can provide more support on how to write for that specific discipline. This is followed closely by English professors in English courses who teach the requisite skills for university and provide standard guidelines, including formatting, sentence and paragraph structure, grammar, and how to incorporate research. Pearl suggested that English professors have a specialized knowledge about writing and suggested, "Obviously, as an English professor, I'm probably going to say this. I still think there's a lot of value in English classes being required for a lot of people" (Pearl). Cambria agreed and stressed that as instructors, "we are trained in this, and we have a lot of knowledge in it, so it's our job to share that with students." Two participants added that graduate

assistants working with instructors can provide advice to students about specific course assignments because these two resources are “the people responsible for doing the work are the best people to get advice about doing that assignment” (Madeline). Yet, one participant cautioned that in their experience with larger class sizes in other universities, which are not part of this research, these larger class sizes tend to have more teaching assistants, who may not necessarily be experienced in the teaching of writing.

However, the findings show there was not unanimous agreement about instructors as the first point of guidance and support for students. In the findings, Ramona argued that although instructors are providing support, students should be referring to the syllabus for guidance. Ramona continued to point out that,

It’s every individual teacher's decision to do more than what's expected of them, because most syllabi have all that information that's necessary, in terms of completing writing assignments in their first year... That's embedded into the course structure, in terms of completing writing assignments and learning how to write.

(Ramona)

Through the use of the syllabus, this participant also argued that students should have the information they need, and direction from the instructors is at their discretion. One participant also commented that Graduate Assistants may not be able to help students and the support should come from instructors.

Academic and Writing Support Centers

Although written materials, such as syllabi, were mentioned as a potential support type, this was only mentioned by two participants. Following the highest frequency source support of instructors/professors, the next highest frequency support source was identified as

university support centers, like a writing center or teaching commons to help provide writing support and reviews. Belinda shared that besides going to the writing center and academic support center, there are other groups formed to help students. For example, this participant shared that, “I know that the English department is doing these ‘Lit Happens’ extra help about your applications, and extra help about applying for scholarships, and extra help with formatting your paper, just come to the club” (Belinda). The participants generally supported and praised the efforts of those working in university support centers, but one participant added that it is not the writing center’s job to teach students; only to provide support.

Barriers to Support

Of the 10 participants, eight found that guidance should be coming from professors and in classes. However, when writing support services were mentioned as a potential source for support, many comments about structural issues that created barriers to support were raised with suggestions for improvements. Looking at the areas of responsibility, which are institutional, professors, peers, and students, most of the areas of improvement fall under the institution and students. Nearly all, eight out of 10 participants raised that a major concern with student academic and writing support is getting the students to take advantage of the services. The second and third highest frequency barriers presented by the participants, along with several low frequency barriers, fit under the institutional area for improvements.

Student Responsibility to Seek Support

A major concern with students’ academic and writing support is that instructors cannot make students seek out that support when needed. Belinda noted that first year students struggle to seek that extra help by stating, “I think first years in particular struggle with the buy-in of, here

are the extra services. Unless they were already the people who were going to come to your office hours anyway. They may not really need your help.” (Belinda). Belinda’s point about student buy-in, connects to student engagement fear and high school to university transition struggles. Some students struggle to adapt to the new learning environment and may not be self-directed to those services available, or they may have hesitation or fear of asking questions or engaging with the services. Robert pointed out that the university has gone through the effort to put those services in place, but clarified that, “It’s hard to get the uptake that you need. Sometimes students have their head down, and they’re not necessarily accessing what they need to.”

Participants proposed methods to incentivize student engagement with academic and writing support services at the university to address the underuse of these services. Floyd saw the potential for mandatory writing services support by asserting, “A lot of students really benefit, especially at the first-year level, from having this guidance just forced upon them, whether they want it or not” (Floyd). The concept of making writing support services mandatory was also entertained by other participants. Danielle supported this idea and shared experiences of providing bonus marks as an effective incentive to use the writing center. Danielle also described experiences with mandatory support as, “I’ve seen some instructors do things like, students get a bonus mark if they see a writing instructor, or they get help from the Writing Center anytime throughout the semester. I’ve seen instructors work that into their assessment.” Through these strategies, participants felt that the motivational component to seeking support could be alleviated, if made part of the requirements for their course. Although there is a motivational component that stops many students from using these services, student uptake of the services was not the only significant barrier.

Institutional Structural Deficiencies

During the interviews, the participants made it clear that they respect the work being done by those external to the English department in providing extra support and services to students. However, structural deficiencies were cited as the most significant area of improvement required to make academic and writing support services, as well as courses, more successful at helping students with their academic writing. The findings for institutional improvement contained structural deficiencies, such as adequate funding, resources, and discipline-specific support for writing and academic support services as the highest frequency item with half of the participants making note of this barrier. The second highest frequency improvement areas were tied as course improvements with one-on-one support and faculty communication with support areas, signaling communication within the university needs improvement. Meanwhile, course improvements suggested smaller class sizes with lab segments would be an improvement. A few of the participants pointed out that the English department has already developed standard grading systems for academic writing, extra help as a writing club within the department to help students with applications, and paper formatting, and have committees to brainstorm and find ways to provide extra resources and guidance to students. These groups are external to the academic support center and writing center and provide supplementary support.

Inadequate Support for Academic and Writing Services: Somewhat contrary to the participant comments about students not using the support services when directed to use them, Danielle expressed concern with sending students for support when not adequately staffed or funded by sharing that “I’ve also seen scenarios where students can’t get a writing center appointment for two weeks. So, we tell them to book early, but the services are so well utilized and under-resourced that they’re not available to all students” (Danielle). This participant’s

comments about under-resourced support centers relate to the services being underfunded, and an institutional issue to resolve. This participant further illustrated, “It’s a chicken and an egg problem, because [if students] use it, then it needs more money, but if they don’t use it, then the funds get taken away because it’s not being used.” (Danielle). This comment points to the institutional responsibility from a policy perspective in how they allocate funding for academic support services. Most participants made a point of saying that regardless of their other comments about efficacy, the academic support and writing center at the university should be acknowledged in this thesis for their work and effort to support students and want to see them supported to continue. Their support for the academic support and writing center is summed up in Belinda’s comment of “I feel like that they are really effective and very useful, and I want to make sure that I’m indicating my support for them, because I do not want anyone to take funding away from them” (Belinda). Ben further supported the efforts of the current academic supports by emphasizing, “There are dedicated people, but I think they are really overworked trying to deal with the students and the unique problems that they have. I talk to lots of dedicated people, and I know they’re doing their best.” (Ben). From the participants’ comments, it was clear that the academic support and writing center currently in place at the university are valuable and need more support from the university. In addition to ensuring this thesis acknowledged the work of the writing center, Florence made suggestions for additional programs and services through the writing center, which are included in the *Participant Recommendations* section below.

The topic of the writing center having inadequate funding and some suggestions for adding more services, carried forward into comments about the need to add more disciplinary support to the writing center. Madeline asserted that the writing center is underfunded and should have more disciplinary resources in stating, “A lot of the people working in the writing center

aren't necessarily in a position to teach writing across a variety of disciplines. So, even really good English graduate students can't necessarily give good advice for a sociology paper.”

(Madeline). There was agreement with other participants that disciplinary focus is needed in this academic support, such as Robert’s claim that,

If there's anything else to say about that, there are structural deficiencies in those kinds of services, in that, learning and is so discipline-specific that it's hard to cater to the real needs of a student with a specific assignment. I don't know if there's the coverage and the interdisciplinary, or even just discipline-specific kind of guidance that a lot of students need. (Robert)

Despite this noted shortcoming of the academic support at the university, Robert also made a point of saying that it is a lack of resources and “not the fault of the people in the Learning Commons.” This participant went on to say that there are resources that the writing center should be using guidelines to help students, even if it is “in a general way because academic discourse is discipline specific” (Robert). From these comments, although they support the current academic supports, they acknowledge the need for disciplinary guidance and structures, to enable support that is useful to students’ programs.

Course-Level Improvements: One of the second highest frequency areas for improvement deals with course improvements at the structural level to have smaller class sizes with more class time, one-on-one professor support and the inclusion of lab segments for writing. Ben described how classes have changed from previous years, in that “There were way fewer students back then...when you really don't have a whole lot of students at all, professors devote more attention.” Ben’s comments about changes in class sizes were also coupled with changes in

what is expected of teachers; describing that, “In those days, there wasn't as much emphasis on professors having to publish. Their primary job was to teach, and they didn't have that many students” (Ben). These comments express instructors’ division of time between teaching and publications and class sizes as obligations that reduce instructors’ ability to support to students. Additionally, Cambria expressed that class time is lacking as a means of academic support by pointing out that, “More class time would be good, and I know that would be a big institutional kind of change thing” (Cambria). Further to the comments about more necessary class time, Cambria expressed this was important, especially with the use of AI by students. This same participant also suggested expansion of English courses to include English writing lab segments of courses. Cambria asserted,

What would be really useful would be to have writing labs attached to classes, so they could work on writing in AI-free spaces. I've talked about that a bit with other professors in the department, and it's obviously a large institutional issue that no one is going to touch, but it would be ideal. We need English labs, like they have science labs. I've integrated a lot of in-class writing, and it takes up too much time. We only have three hours in class a week, so spending 20 minutes a week writing is a huge amount of lecture time. If you do that every week it takes a ton of time. Ideally, I would have them write their essays in class, so they aren't using the many technologies that are being forced around their throats all the time, so that they can actually produce, do the critical thinking, do the critical writing. (Cambria)

The concept of having English writing labs directly connects the issues raised earlier about the avoidance of AI in assessments though tests and quizzes that miss assessing student critical thinking and analysis in writing.

Internal Communication: The other second highest frequency barrier in these findings is the lack of internal communication between departments at the university, particularly between how departments communicate with support services. Three participants made it clear that faculty does not have knowledge of what goes on in the support service offices. As articulated by Pearl, instructors, “Have no idea what's going on in the Writing Center. Do we know what's going on in student success in terms of the advising or the help that students are getting? Probably not.” Those support services also do not know what professors are doing and perhaps there is a reason for that at an institutional level. However, some participants expressed that the “communication across the university is not great” to be a cohesive service for students (Pearl). The findings also showed that there are departments in the university creating academic writing courses for their discipline, such as the Faculties of Business Administration. “Engineering for a while had technical writing of their own, and then they put it back into English, and now they're taking it back again” (Madeline). It was unclear if information about developing disciplinary academic writing courses is shared across the university from the departments that have already done this. It is also not clear from the findings whether these are mandatory courses.

Chapter 7: Participant Recommendation Findings

Chapter 7 presents the recommendations put forward by the instructor participants, extracted from the interviews, as ideas to improve first-year student underpreparedness. When participants were asked what they felt should be improved so that first-year students could achieve success with their academic writing support, three themes emerged for improvement, some of which were touched on in previous chapters but are summarized here to present and discuss the recommendations.

- 1.) University Programs and Courses
- 2.) University Services
- 3.) High School to University Connections

The first two themes suggested changes in university, while the last theme contains suggestions for high schools or those building high school curricula.

University Programs and Courses

The participant ideas for university program, course, or teaching method changes are presented as thematic groups, rather than pointing out specific participants ideas. The ideas were combined based on similarity. The program changes suggestion focuses on making an academic writing course mandatory to attain a degree across the university. The course would either be delivered through the English department or through other departments as a discipline-specific academic writing and communication course. Two of the participants stated the importance of understanding and incorporating disciplinary differences when teaching students writing skills that they will carry forward through their studies and into their future careers. Ben suggested that overview or “crash” courses in academic writing are not as successful as courses that incorporate student interests. “It's not a substitute for a kind of a learning of academic writing that is driven by academic interests that the student actually has” (Ben). If students are entering university within a specific program, teaching to their interests could include teaching to that discipline. These related ideas form the first participant suggestion to make the Introduction to Academic Writing course a mandatory requirement for university programs, whether this is through the English program or a similar course is developed within the program’s department as a disciplinary academic writing and communication course. Some participants also suggested adding some topics within the academic writing and communications course to help students

understand their role at the university and how to engage in that role. These topics include teaching what university is and why it is important for students to participate in the academic discussion (Robert) and teaching scholarly engagement in class and in writing. Scholarly engagement was noted by Pearl as an “essential skill that we are giving you in this degree. We have assignments based around it, and so I model ‘What does scholarly engagement look like?’”

The participants also suggested some structural changes to how these courses are delivered. For example, one third of the participants expressed the need for having more time in English courses to conduct in-class writing for assessment. The extra time would allow for more instructional support for students in developing their academic writing skills related to the course topics. The additional time can also allow time for in-class writing without AI interference, so that instructors can assess more accurately where students are at with their academic writing skills. Additionally, the concept of writing labs for English courses were suggested, similarly to how the sciences have lab components to courses.

Another participant recognized the courses of future high school educators and made suggestions specific to the Faculty of Education. They suggested that teacher training and curriculum design should consider the foundational skills noted in this thesis. In providing general commentary about this research and teaching future educators, Robert noted,

I think it's valuable research, and I'm delighted that you're doing it, and focusing on the things that you're focusing on. I think, especially the questions about literacies and some of the early questions. Foundational literacies, the nuts-and-bolts things about student writing. I think that can be valuable to high school educators and curriculum specialists because I think the biggest area of need

seems to stem from teacher training and curriculum design for literacy and writing at the high school level. (Robert)

These comments highlighted the importance of this research and the need to look at how university programs can still benefit from improvements. Some participants also suggested changes to make an academic literacy and writing course mandatory for degree attainment, if it is not already in place, and the modification of courses required for degree attainment.

University Services

Participants identified structural concerns within the university that included the inadequate funding and resources for the writing center, communications within the university, and the demands on instructors' time outside of teaching students. Regarding the writing center, one participant suggested that graduate assistants could continue volunteering some of their hours to provide disciplinary academic writing support at the writing center. Meanwhile, other participants suggested that the funding provided by the university to the writing center and potentially other student academic supports were not enough to manage student need. As previously mentioned, Danielle noted that it takes too long for students to get an appointment with the writing center, but funding is dependent on usage, and they can only encourage students to use resources that are funded so they can function. The messaging from participants is that they have noted students do not take advantage of student academic support services, like the writing center. Yet, they also stated that the writing center struggles with the influx of students it does see. So, if more students were to use this service it would be further strained, once

again pointing out the need for more consistent and sustainable funds and support, especially if more students should take advantage of the services.

There were conflicting opinions between participants about adding more services to the writing center. Some suggested adding new services through academic support centers, like peer or writing groups. Florence suggested using link crews, which were described as managed by a link leader, who would be a higher year student, or Graduate Assistant. Florence described this process,

If students sign up for a first-year English program, you're put into your first-year writing group, and then every week, your link leader just sends you an email and says "Hey, we're meeting every Friday at 6 p.m. in the library bring your writing materials. Bring whatever you're working on." I think that would just maybe help people in terms of asking, and create a little bit more community. (Florence)

Florence's comment suggested that creating relationships through the link crew can be a form of support. However, Floyd mentioned that the problems are not solved by adding new services but structural issues within the university in that "The academic support is probably lacking overall, and that that's probably something that needs to be addressed on a much more structural level than just adding specific services to the academic support zone" (Floyd).

There were several comments by participants about the structural deficiencies in the university, as well as communication across the university. Participants noted that better university communication between departments and academic support could provide a more cohesive structure for students. Suggested improvements in communication included discussion between faculties and academic support areas, such

as the writing center. The suggested communication could discuss “what good writing is”, share writing standards including building argumentation and discipline-specific writing guidelines with support services (Pearl). Another topic of discussion could include a common AI approach across the university because as expressed by Cambria “The institution doesn't quite know what to do with AI yet, so we're just, all in the dark here, and no one knows what to do.”

High School to University Connections

Moving away from participant suggestions in university, participants also considered what improvements can be made for students before they enter university. These suggestions focused on high school students' final year before graduation and how they can be better prepared for university studies.

The first suggestion focused on the grade 12 English course needed to enter university, where participants suggested adding to the curriculum of that course. The additions included university foundational skills, like those mentioned as foundational skills in Chapter 4 and instead of focusing on the five-paragraph essay, teach “how to write a coherent paragraph with an argument and textual analysis” (Pearl). These suggestions also connect with the suggestions to change teacher education and curriculum design in university, in that these could also be included suggestions for the teacher education courses.

One suggestion included setting up a bridging program and described it as presentations or workshops where “University teachers would come into high school classrooms and present: ‘This is how you write a thesis’, or ‘This is what we're expecting’, or ‘This is how I teach it’” (Florence). The bridging program description also

described the workshops as only 20 minutes. Florence also suggested introducing critical engagement with texts with a suggestion that looks at:

Bringing students to those, author talks, those book events, those book talks, and showing, actually, well, why the authors constructed that text to begin with, and that has such deep roots. When you're listening to an author say I wrote this from my family perspective, or these are the themes that I really wanted to integrate, or this was the political or social situation that I wanted to critique. Then that text doesn't remain as an isolated, dusty cinder block on the shelf, that you actually see it as a form of discourse and dialogue that matters. (Florence)

Florence's idea of book events and author talks once again raises the idea of building a relationship as a supporting structure for students. Through Florence's explanation of how the author talks, and the bridging program idea could come with analysis through evidence.

The final suggestion from Ramona, focused on the grading differences between grade 12 and university, in that grade 12 grading in courses should be in preparation for university and should align more closely with grading in difficulty, so that students are not shocked when they arrive at university and do not achieve the same grades they did in grade 12.

Chapter 8: Discussion and Conclusions

This research aimed to examine first-year undergraduate instructor perceptions of academic writing expectations, student preparedness and instructor perspectives of academic support for students, with the goal of reaching recommendations for improvements to student

support. To achieve this purpose, the research questions focused on how first-year university instructors' expectations impact their perception of:

- first-year post-secondary students' abilities to meet or not meet first-year English instructors' expectations.
- university academic supports intended to address student underpreparedness in English university classes.

Within this discussion chapter, three major themes discuss academic writing expectations as knowledge-building opportunities, students' transitional behavioural development, and educational institutions' misalignment. Following these themes, the recommendations put forward by participants are discussed in this thesis within a separate section through the lens of two theoretical frameworks: The *Academic Literacies Model* and *Adult Learner Theory*.

This research showed that instructors define features contributing to successful academic writing as clear and organized writing that integrates existing sources and has good argumentation quality. Student characteristics and behaviours that lead to post-secondary success were described as being engaged, motivated, exhibiting some maturity and having a general understanding of why they are there to learn, which aligned with Knowles' *Adult Learner Theory* (Knowles, 1978, 1984; Merriam, 2017; Merriam et al., 2007). It was clear that there are a small number of students who were well prepared for first-year university studies, but that is based on what the instructors defined as necessary characteristics and literary practices required at the start of first-year studies. In this regard, instructors' opinions were divided as to whether the above-noted academic writing features and student behaviours must be present at the start of first-year studies or if they can be learned as part of first-year studies. When instructors allowed flexibility to learn what is expected in students' first-year studies, they expressed that this is not ideal, but it

is where they have adjusted their expectations to meet the newer influx of students arriving at university underprepared, based on their previous standards. From an *Academic Literacies Model* perspective, these expectations were positioned as potential methods for students to build knowledge, whether before university or in the first year of studies, rather than viewing students as having a deficiency. This only speaks to the above noted features and characteristics and does not address basic literacy skills required for high school graduation as tested through the standardized testing in high school or the OSSLT. Based on this research, there are further skills and behaviours required beyond what is needed to graduate from high school to be successful in their studies.

From this information, questions were raised about when these skills and behaviours are best developed in order to make better use of students' time in university. Again, the ideal is that they would have developed the skills and behaviours identified in this research before university begins. Regardless of changes over time to educational studies and curriculum design, the long-standing issue of students' underpreparedness for their first year of university studies remained a multifaceted ongoing problem. This thesis supported the idea that there are gaps or misalignment between instructor and institutional expectations and students' performance (Elmir et al., 2019; Gopaul et al., 2016; Grayson et al., 2019; Hango, 2014; Ismayilli Karakoc et al., 2025; Meston et al., 2021; Scouller et al., 2008). Through a review of the effectiveness of university supports to help with the underpreparedness issue, this research also expanded on similar studies, like the Ismayilli Karakoc et al. (2025) study in New Zealand, which also reported misalignment of instructor expectations with the realities of students' work due to underpreparedness.

To help bridge the underpreparedness gap and guide students based on instructors' expectations, students should have the necessary support in place. This research aimed to make

recommendations for a specific university by investigating instructor perspectives about where students should receive the required support and the effectiveness of current university support services in this area. University academic supports intended to address student underpreparedness in English university classes fell short of the participants' expectations. This was not from a lack of effort and work on the part of the support staff, but from the universities' structural issues. It was clear in this research that people working in student support and the writing center are doing their best with what they have to work with, which is often underfunded, under-resourced and structurally unable to connect with faculty to work together to solve issues like the ones raised in this thesis. Therefore, this chapter synthesized the findings with the goal of making recommendations to address the student underpreparedness, considering the perspectives of English instructors within the university. The synthesis also considered findings from this thesis aligning with the *Academic Literacies Model* to avoid seeing student underpreparedness as a deficiency and provide an opportunity to reframe as a site for student development through the *Adult Learner Theory* to assess how the recommendations encourage student development in the transitory phase from high school to university.

Academic Writing Expectations and Knowledge Building

Understanding what instructors judge as the baseline ideal for students' academic writing helps to interpret what student success looks like as an output from student behaviours. However, these academic writing outputs and skills are beyond the standardized testing framework, which studies have shown to be poor indicators of learning improvements based on test preparation strategies (Haladyna et al., 1991). Basic literacy skills measured by standardized testing in high school and strong reading skills, including reading comprehension, stamina, and fluency, are the starting points for the basis of academic writing skill development, yet the ability to develop

advanced academic literacy skills, as defined by Olson (2009) was required for university studies. As such, these skills were determined by participants as either being present, deficient, or in development based on student writing and engagement.

Although expectations may have been more rigid in the past, most instructors today, as sampled in this research, considered technological changes, sociological changes, and institutional limitations at both the high school and university levels, making their approaches more flexible to students' developmental stages and part of the participatory nature of the classroom environment. However, there were some instructors who still adhere to the more rigid set of standards, which align with a deficit model approach to student learning, contrary to Lea and Street's (2006) *Academic Literacies Model*. Lea and Street's view of developmental and participatory learning aligns more with the perceptions of most participants in this research. The academic writing features and student behavioural expectations in this research moved beyond the foundational skills required for university and were part of a developmental process reaching toward an ideal, rather than being deficient on Day 1 of university studies.

Reading development as an area within the basic or foundational skills could be seen as *in development* with encouragement to read more often and with consistency, supporting reading as a long-term development process starting well before and ongoing in university studies and supported the view of obtaining skills as a learning development process (Hango, 2014; Lea & Street, 2006). The importance of reading comprehension in supporting the writing process could not be understated and aligned with the literature on how students' essay writing is improved with critical reading practices (Rasinski et al., 2017; Seçer & Çelikoğlu, 2017). However, there was a distinction between reading and writing generally, university academic writing, and disciplinary writing, which meant that reading comprehension changes depending on the type of

writing connected to the reading practices. Although English academic writing was considered a transferable skill to other disciplines, not all instructors viewed disciplinary reading and writing in the same category as general academic reading and writing for university. Disciplinary reading and writing required more attention as a distinct reading and writing practice, which was supported by existing literature (Hunker et al., 2014; Jones-Mensah & Hilton, 2024).

Disciplinary writing education across all disciplines is a need that is often left to introductory classes because English courses cannot teach all disciplinary writing nuances that are not applicable to all students, and the disciplinary writing gap is also not taught in high schools. With disciplinary considerations, decisions about student underpreparedness should be made based on whether the underpreparedness is related to general academic writing or if students are working towards disciplinary skills in development, as supported by Lea and Street (2006). Students in first-year studies should be primarily focused on disciplinary learning, but they are also trying to learn how to align with university practices and, at the same time, being told to unlearn practices they have been taught in high school (Vogan & Plotnick, 2025). The literacy practices they bring from high school are more focused on summarization and reproduction than on knowledge construction that incorporates students' ideas and the student voice, aligning with Ismayilli Karakoc et al. (2025). For example, in high school, many of the writing features expected by university instructors are taught differently, such as the five-paragraph essay writing in high school, which is not used in university. Additionally, the high school lessons of summarization using limited structures rather than analysis and open analytical writing leave little room for the student voice, deep critical thinking of the summarized sources, or allowance for the student to learn how to apply their voice to a disciplinary context. As supported by Vogan and Plotnick's (2025) outline of the high school to university academic

writing transitions, these misalignments in educational practices between the two institutions leave many students struggling to meet academic writing expectations as they transition from high school to university.

Critical thinking and strong reading skills were interwoven through the academic writing features and behaviours outlined in this research, which showed their impact on the success or struggle of how students interact in classes and how they write. The argumentation feature of *exceptional* academic writing supported existing research and touched on students' ability to develop clear research questions and critically assess their own position of a topic based on the perspectives of others. These perspectives include source material that students also critically assess, and present information clearly to a reader, so long as that argumentation is clearly written and organized (Hirvela, 2017; Ismayilli Karakoc et al., 2025; Perin, 2013). Although students may have ideas to share, without the practice of argumentation, those ideas may not present as the student intended. Thus, the features of argumentation, critical thinking and analysis, integration and interaction with research sources and evidence, and clear, coherent, and organized writing are imperative for student interaction through their writing. However, due to underpreparedness, students are not always able to demonstrate their ideas or knowledge to the instructor and often learn as they go in first-year classes through participation in their university studies. Participation is key for understanding at the university level for students to have a connection to the material, yet, as will be discussed later, participation does not often happen as expected by instructors in classes. Reading and writing at the university level include the interaction and inclusion of research, and students' critical assessment of source materials to support the creation of strong arguments, but as previous studies have demonstrated, there was little evidence that this connected way of teaching has prepared students for university studies

(Ismayilli Karakoc et al., 2025). However, when students took the time to learn foundationally expected skills during their university studies, like critical thinking, critical analysis, and argumentation, they used time that could be spent on disciplinary learning in their respective programs. Again, this finding presented timing concerns between teachings on how to align with disciplinary and university writing expectations and practices.

Applying Lea and Street's (2006) *Academic Literacies Model* to this discussion, nearly all instructors' expectations were framed as information and skills that can be taught to students, rather than mandatory requirements to start their university studies. Where there was a deviation from this perspective, the focus was on requiring basic reading and writing skills at university entry that could be demonstrated in *adequate* papers. This deviation depended on how the participants viewed the expectation. If the instructor saw the expectation as only their ideal for successful academic writing and a goal that the student can work towards in their first year of studies, then all three models aligned. For those who saw an expectation as mandatory to enter university studies, or necessary so that they can understand their first classes, this leaned towards what the student lacked or a deficit model that did not support the *Academic Literacies Model*. Lea and Street's model did not necessarily explain the findings, but the theory was supported by most participants who saw students in a state of transition, ready to adapt to a new way of learning.

Ultimately, although instructors found it ideal if students were to meet foundational literacy expectations by the time they start their university studies, most were not expecting students to learn based on an overly authoritative instructional model, in which they were passive and absorbed information. They did not see the students as deficient, but as in need of adaption to build new knowledge in university, as active learners. The issue was that for students to

continue building their knowledge, they must learn academic and disciplinary skills concurrently. An insight to take away from these discussion points was a need for a university introductory education that combines disciplinary and foundational skills to ensure students are prepared to immerse themselves in the disciplinary information of their programs.

Transitional Behavioural Development

Some students become disillusioned upon receiving grades in university, only to discover that they were significantly lower than in high school. If they finished university, they still may not hold the skills required for the workplace. Additionally, there was a systemic issue underlying grading in high school and university, that made education into a vendor-consumer relationship rather than maintaining the educational institution (Grayson et al., 2019). Although some instructors in this research indicated that they have become more flexible in their approach to working with underprepared students, this was not the only reason for mismatched grading expectations. Parents and students pushed back on instructors when student grades are not what they want and, (Grayson et al., 2019) and in some cases, instructors were threatened or sued over lower student grades. This demonstrated a lack of maturity on the part of the student, as the responsibility of good grades shifted from the student to the instructor, which did not align with the developing behaviours of an adult learner, who would seek to know how they can do better and not what the instructor can do to make things better for them.

Students also carried forward behaviours learned in high school to university that they should *unlearn* or at least meaningfully attribute past learning experiences that cannot be used in university. Ideally, student behaviours should align with the *Academic Literacies Model*, to show they were in control of their education, were motivated to learn, and determined what is important for them to take away from learning (Lea & Street, 2006; Merriam, 2017). Their

behaviours should also reflect the characteristics of adult learning according to the *Adult Learner Theory* if they had developed a sense of independence (Knapke et al., 2024; Knowles, 1970; Merriam, 2017). If this were true, students should already exhibit behavioural characteristics of *Adult Learner Theory*, such as self-direction, self-motivation, and autonomy before university. However, behaviours and habits built around how to be successful in high school did not always translate to the same success in university, and, unfortunately, high schools did not always provide the ontological discussions necessary to *meta-teach* students (Meston et al., 2021). In such cases, students were often left frustrated with their progress in university because their behaviours did not adapt to the expectations of instructors and the university institution. The problems with student writing in the previous section were also attributed by the participants to this behavioural mismatch in university, particularly in student class participation or engagement, followed by self-motivation, maturity, and understanding why they are learning or meta-learning.

Post-secondary education also relied on student self-motivation and responsible attitudes towards their education (Knapke et al., 2024; Knowles, 1978, 1984; Merriam, 2017; Merriam et al., 2007). However, this student autonomy was lost in the transition from high school to university, as students were changing from education models from heavy guidance and instruction to very little, and relied on internal mechanisms to move the student forward. According to Skinner and Pitzer (2012), elementary and secondary school teachers shape student engagement when they support student autonomy. So, what happens when that education is a more authoritative model than Skinner and Pitzer's suggested motivational development model? The findings of this thesis exposed students' lack of their own voice within their written work and in classroom engagement and a lack of practiced student autonomy. As participants raised issues with student voice not being prominent when students arrive at university classes, some

pointed to authoritative models of learning as still present in teaching and it resulted in a lack of practiced student autonomy in students entering university. They needed more specific instruction, asked for templated structures to follow, did not understand that time out of class did not mean free time and were generally *thrown off* when asked to complete work that was not structured. A surprising finding in this research was the effort from university instructors to encourage student autonomy through metacognition, so students understood why they were learning specific topics and why university studies required academic writing to follow specific guidelines. Therefore, to help bridge the gap between authoritative learning and participatory learning, an effort was required before university studies to help students not only change their behaviours towards their education but also understand the change in power dynamics so they could take more control of their learning.

Student engagement in university was unsurprisingly low and attributed by the participants to a lack of confidence, fear of being wrong, peer judgement, and educators' struggle to raise student engagement. This was not a new phenomenon and, as the literature points out, developed from many determinants which were not just attributed to underpreparedness, but also confidence, self-direction, and guidance before students reach university (Tlalajoe-Mokhatla et al., 2023). In this research, instructors found that students were also learning to navigate the new instructor-student relationship dynamic. Unlike in high school and earlier grades, university did not adhere to an authoritative and heavily guided learning structure, and students were learning to rethink how they see learning. This supported the literature's concepts that some students were unable to transition from the authoritative learning from high school, which focused more on student retention of information rather than students learning to share information (Mungal & Cloete, 2016).

Perhaps if students had more collaborative and engagement-focused learning in high school, they would already be in the mindset of academic engagement as important to their role as a student. Sciarra et al. (2016) supported this model of teaching and suggested that supportive education works better as a longer-term effort. For the most part, instructors made efforts to create a supportive environment in the university, but students struggled with the unfamiliar collaborative environment, which was also compounded by the generational divide between instructors and students. The generational divide contributed to the potential for misunderstanding of how students in academia should participate in classes versus how they were used to participating in high school. In addition to the generational differences, technological and sociological changes encourage this misalignment of behavioural expectations in class. For example, when one of the instructors expressed that they are trying to understand why students have a *laser focus* on them but do not take notes or engage in class that mirrors their engagement in general and perhaps there was class engagement shift that is not what instructors in previous generations expect. Are these students emotionally engaged or invested, absorbing and using the information in different ways? Even considering Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development, which required interaction between the two parties to learn, what if students saw this silent engagement as an interaction with their instructor, while the instructor did not perceive it as such? Since student disengagement had such a long history of being a challenge in classes, we may want to consider if something was constantly changing that moves too quickly for the new methods of encouraging student engagement. Regardless, students were still struggling with engagement despite the efforts of instructors who were trying to change how they engage with students to encourage engagement.

Some of the research suggested that when students were not engaged in class discussion, educators may have reacted negatively towards those students rather than looking at the reasons for students' motivations (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). In contrast, one of the surprising findings in this research was the adaptability of instructors in their efforts to seek student engagement through various methods. Instructors in this research considered what prevents students from participating and modified their classes. For example, instructors:

- updated class guidelines for judgement-free language;
- provided in-class and creative writing assignments;
- placed heavier weighting on participation grades;
- separated the class into smaller discussion groups;
- used methods like Think, Pair, Share; and
- ensured normalization of student discussion on Day 1 of class to establish communication as standard for all classes going forward.

Not all students needed encouragement to speak. Those students who actively engaged in class are seen as a welcome voice and enhanced the quality of education for the entire class if they exercised critical thinking in their own voice. Students needed to critically analyze their opinions to use them, as part of code-switching, to apply their personal knowledge to their university studies. Unfortunately, this was not often the case because first-year students had not learned the necessary critical thinking and analysis skills before starting their university studies. Even with all these modifications to classes and the minimal number of students who did participate, most students still resisted engagement in classes, which made it even more evident that there was a systemic issue with encouraging student critical thinking and engagement (Grayson et al., 2019). Although this research looked at student academic underpreparedness,

students were also underprepared for behavioural transitions in university to discover their ability to engage in the academic community, understand the institutional changes they need to navigate, and find their self-direction.

Educational Institutions' Misalignment

Students' time in university should be focused on their specializations through disciplinary learning, and it matters if they have developed foundational academic skills and related behaviours to support their disciplinary learning. Although some discipline-specific writing instruction was not required in the first year of university studies, the general concepts of academic writing should have been known to students in their preparation to attend university. Like Vogan and Plotnick's (2025) description of academic writing misalignment between high school and university, academic integrity instruction was also mismatched between the two educational institutions. The importance of improving academic integrity could not be understated, as this research's findings also supported the literature showing that students whose performance was lacking in university carried this forward into their future professions (Chapman et al., 2004). However, there was an opportunity for students to learn how to apply academic integrity guidelines before university in a way that encouraged students to be part of an academic conversation, rather than seeing academic integrity as an arbitrary task. For the most part, academic integrity was viewed as a set of rules to be followed or broken, with consequences for breaking them. Students were not familiar with the concept of being part of an academic community, and that academic integrity practices helped promote their credibility and the strength of their voice. If students' education introduced the importance of academic integrity and ethical scholarship that was taught and modelled by educators, there was a greater focus on the importance of academic integrity as a respectful conversation, that acknowledged others' ideas,

rather than a punitive exercise that led to students' disbelief in academic integrity's purpose (Bertram Gallant, 2017; Ferková & Zacharová, 2024; Festas et al., 2022; Fojkar & Berčnik, 2023; Hossain, 2022; Sefcik et al., 2020). This lack of understanding fostered a lack of belief in academic integrity, as students saw the application of academic integrity rules as a meaningless task towards completing their work to earn a credential, rather than as a meaningful part of the academic community. Whereas belief in academic integrity was one area of its lack of use, fear fueled the other primary reason for students' lack of adherence to academic integrity.

Again, this revealed another mismatch between high school and university because students were unfamiliar with the expectations of university, especially the expected time commitment required for their university studies. Students may have felt that time not in class was free time, and while that may have been the case in high school, it was not true in university; the time outside of class required self-motivation to complete readings and assignments. Time management was often cited in this research as a reason why students cheat, and was also supported by the literature, which saw poor time management as a source of students' poor grades, which can be connected to a lack of academic integrity (Chow et al., 2021; Elmir et al., 2019). Academic integrity issues were compounded by the growth of AI, which made concepts of academic integrity unclear across all levels of education (institution, instructor, student).

When students were taught about academic integrity, they should also learn about the use of AI and how that impacts others' work in the academic community and their own voice, including how to properly evaluate and attribute ideas discovered online (Madsen & Silva, 2026).

Widening this focus to the institutional level would require some standardization on how education sees AI in the context of academic integrity, which can be difficult to establish with something that is constantly changing. Regardless, more effort to form guidelines about AI usage

needed to be consistently undertaken at all levels of education (Moorehouse et al., 2023). Again, allowances for certain AI in high school that were not allowed in university contributed to students being caught off guard when they think it is still appropriate to use. As students not only learned but applied university concepts, they adopted more mature attitudes and gained a sense of responsibility, both of which were adult learner characteristics.

Theoretical Support for Change and Implications

This section presents and reviews the suggestions stated by participants in this research, considering the *Academic Literacies Model*, *Adult Learner Theory*, and existing literature in support of or in contrast with the recommendation. The participants' suggestions focused on (1) student support services, including how they are used and supported, and the potential for cross-communication with faculties; (2) university courses and program adjustments at the faculty level; and (3) bridging the gap between high school and university.

The most consistent required change noted in this research was for students to actively seek out support when needed, which, according to this research, was connected to adult learner characteristics. However, this requires students to be able to take initiative to integrate within the university community. Considering what has already been discussed about the difficult transition to university, with the mismatch of environments between university and high school and the internal struggles of fear and lack of confidence, it does not seem likely that most students will seek this help when needed, showing their movement towards being an adult learner is likely still in development during the first-year of university studies as it was when they left high school. Sciarra et al. (2016) noted that even in the high school setting, reaching out to teachers is difficult for students. Tlalajoe-Mokhatla et al. (2023) and Bolt and Graber (2010) argued that it is more appropriate to place the onus on students to seek out the support, noting they are used to a

learning environment that is heavily directed, or, as expressed, students are “spoon-fed”. Some of the participants in this research also found that students need to quickly adjust to the unfamiliar university environment, which expects them to seek out help but may not recognize how difficult it is for students to do so. According to the *Adult Learner Theory*, students who are adult learners should demonstrate self-direction by exhibiting a strong sense of responsibility and drive to do better, which would include seeking out support. However, first-year students are in a transitional period and may not always perform this self-direction.

The perception of support for underprepared students, as heard in this research, showed that the university operated on the assumption that because the support services were there, students know how and when to seek out those services. This research also showed students may not understand when and why they need help to begin with because, as previously mentioned, some students think they were doing well by applying strategies that served them well in high school only to experience frustration when they discovered they were not doing as well as they thought. Students' learning habits, study strategies, and writing practices learned in high school do not work well in university (Bolt & Graber, 2010; Vogan & Plotnick, 2025). There is a misalignment of assumptions of both the university (as an institution and also its instructors) and students, which points to more of a need for explicit instruction from academic supports in disciplinary learning and to encourage student engagement (Bell & Hotson, 2021; Garwood, 2022; Lea & Street, 2006). Thus, helping students understand and develop a willingness to seek help would be of benefit to first-year students. Although students' ability to seek support is a behavioural characteristic, which was reviewed against the *Adult Learner Theory* above, there is also a connection with the *Study Skills Model* of the *Academic Literacies Model*, where students may demonstrate individual cognition skills through seeking this support and using that support

to develop their literacy skills further. However, if they are not seeking that support, there is no advancement in individual cognitive skills in this regard.

Other suggestions related to academic support services were changes at an institutional and faculty level. At the institutional level, support funding was central to the suggestions presented, which was supported by existing literature (Grayson et al., 2016; Sithole & Gumede, 2022), followed by communication between the faculty and support services. Coupled with the challenge of having students engage with support services, suggestions that institutional academic supports, such as the writing center, needed more attention from the university through an increase in funding and resources, were prominent in the discussions. When writing centers are well funded, they can bring on more people to serve the student population. There, students can not only get support with basic academic writing skills for which they may be underprepared, but perhaps there can be resources to help guide students on some of the behavioural misalignments noted earlier and talk to them about transition issues that they may be facing in university. Additionally, funding can provide more discipline-specific instructor or graduate assistant time for disciplinary tutoring. All these areas were noted as potential areas for improvement in the writing center. However, with additional funding comes additional oversight, so again, it is on the institution to create standards by which more funding can be allotted where it is needed most and processes for how the support should be delivered. Although researchers like Bell and Hotson (2021) and Garwood (2022) support academic writing centers, others like Lea and Street (2006) and Meston et al. (2021) found that the information should come from curriculum, courses, and teachers, aligning with this research's finding that instructors are the first line of support. However, with the larger class sizes due to underfunding (Grayson et al., 2016), students still need academic writing support because instructors' capacity may be too thin.

There was an importance placed on instructor feedback and engagement (Meston et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2020). The suggestion to improve funding and resources for university academic supports does not touch directly on the *Academic Literacies Model* or *Adult Learner Theory* because it is based on the institution and not the student. However, looking at these theories in the context of what improved academic supports can change for students in alignment with the theories could mean that students who engage with adequately funded and resourced supports are given the opportunity to learn how to transfer writing and literacy knowledge between contexts and improve cognitive skills in alignment with the *Study Skills Model*. Particularly if the supports are improved to include disciplinary support, students may learn in a support setting how to adapt and reproduce disciplinary discourse as part of the *Academic Socialization Model* and make meaning of academic information, as per the *Academic Literacy Model*.

The suggestions from participants also expressed that communication among faculty, academic support staff, and those who make major decisions at the university needed to be improved. This communication was mainly between the academic support areas and departments, not to share information about specific students, but to share information on disciplinary standards, academic writing standards, and how to ensure students who need academic support receive those services. In support of this communication, the existing literature pointed to the importance of collaboration between faculties and support services to align approaches to writing standards and academic integrity, with faculty providing guidance on standards (Garwood, 2022; Peters et al., 2019; Sefcik et al., 2020). Like improvements in funding, the theoretical connections in this thesis would consider that improvements to academic support services, to bring in faculty and disciplinary standards, would improve what students take away from academic support services. This could include improvements to their academic

writing skills based on disciplinary writing structures and the ability to make meaning of disciplinary context, aligning with the *Academic Literacies Models*.

At a faculty level, course adjustments in programs and course structural changes were suggested. There were also concerns about how the faculty structured programs and classes and how it viewed the roles of instructors. Requests for more class time or separate writing labs to include writing assignments to avoid AI-generated work were raised as desirable methods to help engage students and have them learn academic writing that would involve critical thinking and analysis. Writing labs are generally supported in the existing literature because they are integrated with course instruction and can be discipline-specific (Lea & Street, 2006). However, the literature did not always distinguish between a writing lab as it is meant in this thesis and a writing center. In doing so, students can develop adult learner practices aligning with *Orientation* as they use developed critical thinking abilities for independent problem solving and discerning arguments. They would also develop *Experience*, aligning with the *Adult Learner Theory*, through the practice of writing, while incorporating feedback and gaining a better understanding of literary devices. Through writing labs and extra writing time in class, students can further develop individual and cognitive skills under the *Study Skills Model* and learn to situate their identity as a producer of knowledge through critical writing. Likewise, requesting smaller class sizes to allow for more one-on-one teaching for courses would benefit students, whether underprepared or not. However, the impression from this research is that these options may have been requested in the past but not deemed pursuable options by the university administration.

To a lesser extent, some participants questioned how the role of professors was becoming more focused on research and publication than on teaching students. Instructors' teaching efforts directly impact how students learn and factor in students' development of academic literacies

skills and adult learner development. Although not a frequently raised point, there are some questions raised about the standards of teaching in universities, when professors are not as practiced with student instruction, especially at a time when students seem very underprepared for studies. The role of the instructor ties closely with the structural changes requested in courses because both deal with the limited resource of instructors' time.

Further expanding on the earlier mention of communication as a means to share information and ideas, communication between university institutions on developing standards for some of the problematic areas noted in this research, such as academic support improvements, academic integrity and AI, academic writing standards, and student engagement, could be beneficial to improve how these areas are handled in universities overall. Such consistency in standards could then be counted on by high schools to better prepare students for post-secondary education. It is in this communication that a potential bridging program between high schools and universities could provide the necessary information and teaching about being part of the academic community and talking about academic integrity, engagement, and really all of the topics that have emerged in this research as an underpreparedness issue, to clarify to students what expectations look like in university. Collaboration between university institutions and secondary education is well supported in the existing literature to ensure students are aware of university expectations (Bolt & Graber, 2010; Scouller, 2008; Vogan & Plotnick, 2025).

The participant's suggestion of a bridging program involved the creation of workshops or a course for high school students in grade 12 who are planning to attend university. The workshop or course would be delivered by a university instructor and perhaps supported by a graduate assistant to help students understand how to write for university assignments, including what the standards are for academic integrity and why. They would also provide information

about the importance of student engagement and self-direction, perhaps utilizing common university methods for student engagement in this workshop or class, which would give students practical experiences of a university class before they arrive. Such experience is valuable for students to develop *Adult Learner Theory* characteristics of *Self-Concept* in understanding their role in controlling the trajectory of their education, *Experience*, *Orientation*, and *Readiness* in the transfer of knowledge learned in this workshop or course when they arrive in their university courses, and *Meta-Cognition* in understanding how their education works for them. The only *Adult Learner Theory* characteristic not connected with this suggestion is that of internal *Motivation* which is solely placed on the student's actions. Through this method of bridging the gap, students can also benefit from advanced literacy learning connected to the *Academic Literacies Model*, in that they will further develop individual cognition skills and will transfer knowledge between contexts upon arrival at university classes, aligning with the *Study Skills Model*. If the workshop or course can be provided in a way that is specific to the discipline or has a disciplinary focus for each session, students can also develop skills under the *Academic Socialization Model* to learn the adaptation and reproduction of disciplinary discourse. In fact, it may be helpful for students of one discipline to know the nuances of other disciplines to be able to see how academia functions as a whole. Lastly, students begin to make meaning of academic information and understand their role as a university student, aligning with the *Academic Literacy Model*.

Aligning the *Academic Literacies Model* and *Adult Learner Theory* with the areas of concern and suggestions put forward in this research helps to situate the overall recommendations to address underpreparedness by encouraging students' development as adult learners and academic writers. Apart from the bridging program suggestion, which covers most

of the theoretical criteria of this thesis, most suggestions only touch on a few of the theoretical criteria. Yet, this does not detract from their importance, as suggestions may be combined to create a more holistic recommendation, and there is still consideration needed into the practicality of each suggestion. The existing literature suggested that single suggestions as a recommendation would not cover the scope of the solution for undergraduate underpreparedness in Ontario. However, a combination of some of the suggestions would be a step in the right direction. Therefore, the primary suggestion would be to have a grade 12 bridging program that can teach prospective university students the standards expected in university with respect to academic writing, academic integrity, and student engagement, which were the top discussion points in this thesis. A similar type of program in Western Australia supported students' university transition through a free university credit program that gave them exposure to university standards and expectations (Bolt & Graber, 2010). Although the bridging program would be based on English academic writing, discipline-specific modules should be part of this learning experience because students may change programs and having this holistic view of university can make them more aware of other disciplines, encouraging an interdisciplinary approach to their education. As this recommendation does align with both the *Academic Literacies Model* and *Adult Learner Theory*, further research should be conducted to develop such a program, investigating its feasibility and potential from a socioeconomic perspective, and from the perspectives of students, teachers, university instructors, and governance at both levels of education to see if this program is warranted.

In addition to such a program, imperative suggested improvements should be further reviewed by universities, including better funding of academic support services, collaboration and communication between multi-disciplinary faculty and academic support staff to establish

writing standards and responsibility roles, as well as allowing more opportunities for instructors to have writing practice and feedback with students either through additional class time or writing labs. Further research could also find established similar improvement strategies used in other institutions for viability in an Ontario context.

Strengths and Limitations of this Research and Future Research

This research was developed to gain in-depth perspectives from a sample of instructors within one department of one university. The small sample size of participants and the narrow focus of one department in one university are limitations that do not allow the information in this thesis to be generalized. Yet, this small sample size allows for specific recommendations to be provided to this particular department in a way that is applicable to their environment and might provide a starting point for discussions amongst other faculties within the same university or other universities. Additionally, the smaller sample enables more of the participants' perspectives to come through in the results to provide meaningful feedback to the department. The qualitative analysis structure is suited to a smaller sample size, but again limits perspectives to the positionalities of a small number of people, which may not be indicative of the instructors throughout the university. Another limitation is the focus on one department, which showed that the ways of teaching in different disciplines could not be spoken to in this research, but would be useful information, particularly because there was mention of at least two other departments in this university that have implemented disciplinary writing courses that do not appear to be mandatory courses for their programs. Feedback from those departments could have potentially differed based on their implementation of a disciplinary writing course. A larger quantitative research could have provided a better triangulation of data in areas that could be generalized.

Lastly, seeking instructor-only perspectives is a limitation because they form part of the picture, and there are other perspectives and considerations that instructors might not know or recognize. For example, instructors can only guess at student motivations around AI use and their thinking about academic integrity but may not have a complete picture. Seeking the perspectives of students, administrators, and parents of first-year post-secondary students could provide a bigger picture of the underpreparedness issue facing first-year undergraduates today. Therefore, areas of future research could include repeating the research focusing on instructors, administrators, and students in different departments of the same university, English departments at other universities, or multiple departments in multiple universities to expand or contrast the information in this thesis. Quantitative or mixed methods studies could be conducted to broaden the scope of this research or generalize findings more broadly. Lastly, a study could be conducted with students who are getting ready to start university studies to see if the areas of underpreparedness are of concern to these students. Overall, there is a broad range of studies that could expand on this research.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions and Theoretical Alignment

Table A1:

Theoretical Categories for Questions

Theory	Theory characteristic/feature	Question Category
<i>Academic Literacies Model:</i> Study Skills Model	Demonstrating Individual Cognition Skills	A
<i>Academic Literacies Model:</i> Study Skills Model	Transfer writing and literacy knowledge between contexts	B
<i>Academic Literacies Model:</i> Academic Socialization Model	Adaption of disciplinary discourse	C
<i>Academic Literacies Model:</i> Academic Socialization Model	Reproduction of disciplinary discourse	D
<i>Academic Literacies Model:</i> Academic Literacy Model	Making meaning of important information in academia	E
<i>Academic Literacies Model:</i> Academic Literacy Model	Situating their identity as a producer academic knowledge	F
<i>Adult Learner Theory</i>	Is self-directing, internally motivated, and displays readiness	G
<i>Adult Learner Theory</i>	Brings experience to learning	H
<i>Adult Learner Theory</i>	Problem centered learning rather than subject centered	I
<i>Adult Learner Theory</i>	Incorporates meta-cognitive learning to know why they are learning the material	J

Table A2:*Questions for Instructor Participants*

Instructor Questions	Research Question	Category
1. Based on the writing examples: “Please walk me through the factors that make these writing examples <i>exceptional</i> , <i>adequate</i> , and <i>poor</i> .”	1	A, B
2. What foundational literacies should students have before university studies?	1	A, B
3. What could help students prepare their literacy skills before they start their first year of university studies, and why would this be of benefit during their university studies?	1	A, B
4. In your observations of first-year students, in what ways do they exemplify the characteristics of an adult learner?	1	A, B, G, H, I, J
5. What are your impressions of first-year students’ ability to understand and reproduce written material that is discipline-specific?	1	C, D
6. What is your perspective about how first-year students make meaning from the course materials and apply theoretical concepts to their experiences?	1	E, H
7. In what ways do you see first-year students raise real-life scenarios to associate theoretical concepts learned in class as a way of making meaning?	1	E, I
8. In what ways do you see first-year students demonstrate that they believe their knowledge is a credible source of information within academic conversation in your classes?	1	F
9. What are your impressions of first-year students’ knowledge about the importance of classroom engagement?	1	F, H, I, J
10. What are your impressions of first-year students’ knowledge about the importance of academic integrity?	1	C, D, E
11. What kind of guidance should be provided to first-year students when completing writing assignments in their first year of studies, and where should this guidance come from?	2	G
12. As a follow-up question, what are your thoughts about the effectiveness of the current academic support for students at the university?	2	G
13. What indicators do first-year students show that indicate they have a broader understanding of why they are learning specific materials in class?	1	J

Appendix B: Detailed Findings Tables

Table B1:

Instructor perspectives about academic writing features and foundational expectations

Inductive Theme and Participant Frequency	<i>Exceptional</i>		<i>Adequate</i>		<i>Poor</i>		Foundational before University	Overall Frequency	Academic Literacies Model Alignment	Adult Learner Theory Alignment
Answer the “So What?” question	Addresses the “So What?” question.	1	Underdeveloped attempt to answer “So What?”.	1	Does not address the “So What?” question.	1	Not Stated / Not Applicable.	3	Study Skills: Demonstrating Individual and Cognition Skills	N/A
Thesis Development	Has a clear thesis that makes an argument with a well-articulated purpose.	2	Has a thesis but is it observational or descriptive rather than making an argument.	3	The thesis is absent, <i>poorly</i> written or is just a topic rather than a thesis.	3	Students should come to university already knowing how to write a thesis statement.	19	Study Skills: Demonstrating Individual and Cognition Skills Academic Literacies Model: Situating their identity as a producer academic knowledge	N/A
Argumentation Quality	Strong Argument that is coherent, original, and thought-provoking. The argument demonstrates unity and coherence and finds a unique angle that pushes beyond the question prompt.	8	Makes a good faith attempt at building an argument but may be lacking adequate development, specificity or coherence. It may also only be partially successful as an analytical argument.	3	There is no argument, or the paper is stating a fact in place of an argument. There may be an idea that is vague or hard to understand.	3	Students should understand what an argument is, how to write one, and how to develop good analytical questions. Students should also understand why they are learning essay structures in high school, which is to collect evidence to support an argument.	19	Study Skills: Demonstrating Individual and Cognition Skills Academic Socialization: Adaption and Reproduction of disciplinary discourse Academic Literacies Model: Situating their identity as a producer academic knowledge	Orientation

Inductive Theme and Participant Frequency	<i>Exceptional</i>		<i>Adequate</i>		<i>Poor</i>		Foundational before University	Overall Frequency	Academic Literacies Model Alignment	Adult Learner Theory Alignment
Writing Communication Skills	Communication is clear, concise, well-structured and conveys its point well. The writing may also be persuasive and show competence with rhetorical devices with an interesting writing style.	5	Communicates ideas coherently enough to be understood.	1	Writing clarity does not coherently or concisely articulate ideas. The paper is not comprehensible.	4	Students require basic writing skills and some knowledge of academic writing, which is different from ordinary writing. Students should also be able to incorporate feedback and take notes.	4 14	Study Skills: Demonstrating Individual and Cognition Skills	N/A
Critical Thinking and Analysis	Combines deep critical thinking and student's analysis with the research sources. There is an effort to go beyond surface observations.	4	Has some analysis.	1	There is minimal analysis or no analysis.	1	Students require critical thinking and analysis skills to help them generate their own topics, solve problems, and include their own voice to position themselves in a greater conversation. Students need to know how to negotiate with opposing ideas in good faith.	5 11	Study Skills: Demonstrating Individual and Cognition Skills Study Skills: Transfer writing and literacy knowledge between contexts Academic Socialization: Adaption and Reproduction of disciplinary discourse Academic Literacies Model: Making meaning of important information in academia. Academic Literacies Model: Situating their identity as a producer academic knowledge	Orientation

Inductive Theme and Participant Frequency	<i>Exceptional</i>		<i>Adequate</i>		<i>Poor</i>		Foundational before University	Overall Frequency	Academic Literacies Model Alignment	Adult Learner Theory Alignment
Dialogue Organization and Clarity	The paper has a logical organizational structure with a clear roadmap for the paper that goes beyond the five-paragraph template. The topic is within the introduction with supporting paragraphs that are unified, coherent and have smooth transitions with signposts.	4	The paper has all the required parts and shows some coherent language, logical structure, and organization, but is more formulaic. Sentences are less varied, material is less integrated, the paper may veer off course, paragraphs have poor transitions, and the conclusion just ends with no development.	5	No clear structure or organization. The paragraphs are not defined and required components of the paper are lost. The paper does not carry a coherent message or topic.	6	Students need to understand that there are different writing structures in academic writing and understand the components of writing.	217	Study Skills: Demonstrating Individual and Cognition Skills	N/A
Disciplinary Understanding	Demonstrated understanding of course concepts and has content with a consistent point of view for a consistent audience.	2	Demonstrates a somewhat acceptable level of understanding of the concepts discussed in class but it may get off track.	1	Does not demonstrate that a student understands foundational concepts discussed in class.	1	Students do not have a disciplinary understanding when coming to university and how they are taught to write is not helpful.	15	Study Skills: Demonstrating Individual and Cognition Skills Study Skills: Transfer writing and literacy knowledge between contexts Academic Socialization: Adaption and Reproduction of disciplinary discourse	N/A

Inductive Theme and Participant Frequency	<i>Exceptional</i>		<i>Adequate</i>		<i>Poor</i>		Foundational before University	Overall Frequency	Academic Literacies Model Alignment	Adult Learner Theory Alignment
Interaction with Research Sources	The student's writing demonstrated engagement with the word choices and phrases of research to integrate and dialogue with the sources. The writing articulates complex topics through integration of supporting research sources. The writing demonstrates that the student understands the concepts and takes the extra step to apply them to their work in different ways.	5	Although the student writing shows evidence of research and synthesis of the material with some expansion on those ideas, there is more focus on summary and may not engage deeply with the material. Attempts to integrate research into the paper may also lead to some incoherent paragraphs.	5	The evidence integration isn't smooth, and the paper only summarizes the sources with no clear logic between use of primary and secondary sources. The paper also generalizes, is vague, and doesn't engage with the material with any specificity. There are no direct quotations or analysis of the text. Claims may also be made without support. Sources are selected only to align with the argument instead of supporting a point put forward.	5	Students should have the ability to or have some experience in doing research, including paraphrasing, summarizing and explaining sources. Students should also understand how media literacy works including rhetoric.	3 18	Study Skills: Demonstrating Individual and Cognition Skills Study Skills: Transfer writing and literacy knowledge between contexts Academic Socialization: Adaption of disciplinary discourse Academic Literacies Model: Making meaning of important information in academia	N/A
Grammar and Literary Understanding	There is a clear build of concepts in the paper without repetition and writing makes the paper easy to read. Spelling, grammar and mechanics of the paper are well done at the sentence, paragraph, and overall level with sentence variety and good examples.	4	Although some spelling, grammar, and mechanics are present, the sentences are choppy with logical gaps, paragraphs may not be coherent, and the formatting, or grammar.	2	Formatting standards are not met. The sentence and paragraph problems make the writing incoherent, and it contains some developmental problems, grammar and spelling problems.	4	Students should be able to articulate their ideas in grammatically correct sentences and understand sentences, paragraphs, and longer writing structures, and how those look across different genres. Students should understand grammar and parts of speech that include identification of verbs, nouns, phrases, clauses, punctuation usage, and literary devices.	5 15	Study Skills: Demonstrating Individual and Cognition Skills Academic Literacies Model: Making meaning of important information in academia	N/A
Academic Integrity Application	There were no specific comments that identified academic integrity and <i>exceptional</i> papers.	0	Citation style is unclear but present.	1	Artificial Intelligence (AI) changes how papers are <i>poor</i> . There are no citations or the	5	Students should be able to cite sources.	1 7		

Inductive Theme and Participant Frequency (Also see interaction with research sources)	Exceptional		Adequate		Poor		Foundational before University		Overall Frequency	Academic Literacies Model Alignment	Adult Learner Theory Alignment
					paper uses some citations and misses some.						
Use of Instruction	Not only did they follow the instructions, but they also applied concepts learned in class.	1	Has followed the instructions.	1	Has not followed the assignment or formatting instructions to make the document readable.	3	Not Stated / Not Applicable.		5	Study Skills: Demonstrating Individual and Cognition Skills	N/A
Original Ideas and Student Voice	The writing prominently highlights the student's voice and ideas, as opposed to presenting what they think instructors want to see or regurgitating what they read. The writing style is clear, creative, intelligent and makes the reader think deeper.	6	No Mention of <i>adequate</i> in this area, which could be assumed as somewhere in between prominently highlighting the student's voice and not at all.	0	The writing does not include the student's ideas or voice, but instead presents observations, facts, or has been generated with AI.	4	Not Stated / Not Applicable.		10	Study Skills: Demonstrating Individual and Cognition Skills Academic Literacies Model: Situating their identity as a producer academic knowledge	Experience
Reading Practices	Noted as a Foundational Requirement.		Noted as a Foundational Requirement.		Noted as a Foundational Requirement.		Students should have practice in reading stamina, fluency and attempted reading information related to their discipline. Students should also practice note taking from reading.	8	8	Study Skills: Demonstrating Individual and Cognition Skills	N/A

Table B2:

Instructor perspectives about adult learning characteristics and foundational expectations.

Inductive Theme and Participant Frequency		Adult Learner Theory Alignment	Topic		Participant Observations	
Student Autonomy	9	Self-Concept, Motivation, Meta-Cognition, Readiness	Mature, Responsible and Accountability in attitudes	4	Depends on the maturity level of the student and is generally seen more with mature students. They want to know how they can do better. Split observations – some students do this and some don’t.	4
			Understand their Role as a Student	2	It is evident who is taking their education seriously and who is not by their attitudes towards the course and teacher.	2
			Self-Motivation	5	Motivated students use code-switching and applying learned material to difference contexts with an interest in the material. Motivated in a different way than in high school and have an interest in what they are learning.	5
			Meta-Teaching	4	Instructors use Meta-Teaching to encourage student autonomy.	4
			Self-Direction	2	Not Achieved for some students who tend to focus on the minute details of instructions, like format style over content of their work.	2
			Seeking Skills Development	2	Some students’ education shifts to an understanding of learning skills for future work.	2
Student Engagement	10	Experience, Readiness, Motivation	Class Participation	9	Low student engagement in classes and instructors want more understanding about why they are not participating. Some speculation by participants is that they don’t understand the importance of engagement in university.	7
					Moderate engagement, which is based on marks.	1
					Mature Students are more likely to engage.	1
					Student engagement importance may be understood but if students are not confident, are unsure of their response, or don’t believe it is important. Engagement is dependent on confidence level and preparation level. (Ramona) Students are scared to lift their voice.	4
					One participant (Cambria) noticed that students in general are less confident than they used to be.	
					*This section is a cross over with Student Voice – in class.	
					There are a relatively small number of students who are overconfident even when they are wrong	1
					Students who cannot participate should go through Student Accessibility Services, so the instructors are aware that they cannot participate in the same way.	1
			Topics of Interest	1	Topics of Interest generate better engagement.	1
			Note-taking as Engagement	2	One participant noted that student note taking can be a form of engagement.	1
Student Voice and Ideas	8	Orientation, Readiness	Student Voice– In Writing (Also see Original Ideas and Student Voice in Table 2)	10	Within student writing, the expectation is that the student will feature their voice and ideas. However, their observations show they have encountered student work that does not demonstrate this.	5
					Observation that there is no clear voice in student writing and that critical literacy and analysis is missing so they cannot position themselves in the academic conversation.	3

Inductive Theme and Participant Frequency		Adult Learner Theory Alignment	Topic		Participant Observations	
					AI performs a disservice by replacing the student voice for AI and leaving less room for critical thinking. The instructor’s job is to assess the student’s work and not AI generated content.	6
			Student Voice–In Class	4	Students need to understand that having a student voice is not just having an opinion but that the student can critically examine their opinions and support them to be a credible source of knowledge. This needs to recognize intersectionality and positionality. However, observations noted that they do not always understand their positionality or positions of privilege (Florence) or they don’t understand the value of their voice (Florence, Robert).	4
Understanding Academic Integrity	9	Meta-cognition, Readiness	Students understand Academic Integrity	6	Students understand academic integrity, but their actions determine how that is applied or not applied. “They know they can’t cheat”.	6
			Students do not understand Academic Integrity	4	Students do not understand how to apply Academic Integrity rules or do not understand its purpose.	4
			Observed reasons for non-application of Academic Integrity rules	5	Panic from lack of time to complete the work. Academic Integrity expectations differ across cultural contexts. Students don’t believe it is important and don’t think it will happen to them but they are cheating themselves.	5
			Observed reasons for application of Academic Integrity rules	6	Rules are applied out of fear of getting caught or the students see it as a “hoop to jump through” to complete their work and get the credential. It is not done from an understanding of its importance.	6
			Observations of trends	2	There is an increase in academic misconduct cases than in previous years. Noticed an increased knowledge of referencing.	2
			More education required	2	Generally, more teaching and discussion needs to happen concerning Academic Integrity including why citations are required and they are not for reducing student marks.	2
			Artificial Intelligence (AI) impact on Academic Integrity	6	Inconsistent application of academic integrity rules about AI, makes it harder to understand at all levels. AI has provided gray areas applying to academic integrity that are not fully understood by instructors, universities or high schools to provide a consistent guideline.	4
					Cases of academic misconduct involving AI have to be blatant or explicit. There needs to be clear proof and AI is making that difficult.	2
					Some see the value of incorporating AI, but there needs to be an ethical and responsible way to do that.	2
					AI avoidance practices now include using class time to write essays in class, but that takes time away from other parts of the lessons and does not allow for research.	1

Table B3:

Instructor perspectives identifying academic support types and sources

Support Source	Support Type	Participant Frequency of Support Source/Type
Professors (All courses)	Professors are the first line of support. <i>However, one participant noted that it is the individual teacher's decision to do more than is expected of them.</i>	8
Professors (Discipline Specific)	Guidance on how to write for the discipline including writing guidelines.	5
University Support Centers	University support centers, like a writing center or teaching commons, can help by providing writing reviews. <i>Two participants noted the possibility of mandatory use of support centers as part of some courses.</i>	5
Professors (English Department)	English department writing courses to demonstrate the requisite skills for university and provide standard guidelines, including formatting, sentence and paragraph structure, grammar, and how to incorporate research. The department has standard grading for courses to provide consistency.	4
Academic Advisors (Discipline specific)	Discussing Papers with an academic advisor.	2
Graduate/Teaching Assistants	Graduate Assistants working with Professors can provide assignment advice. <i>However, one participant noted that graduate teaching assistants need adequate training for this.</i>	2
Peer Support	Peer support from other students in courses and through a peer writing group.	2
Written Materials and Orientation	University provided written materials as part of orientation about university supports, or courses information through syllabus and instructions.	2
University Library	Librarians can help with research assistance.	1
Humanities 101 course	Introductory course for new students.	1

Table B4:

Instructor perspectives of adult learning characteristics with alignment to theoretical frameworks

Analysis of Connection to <i>Adult Learner Theory</i>	Analysis of Connection to the <i>Academic Literacies Model</i>	Participant Frequency of Identification as explicitly an Adult Learner characteristic	Adult Learner Characteristic Expressed by Participant as:
Self-Concept as self-direction	Study Skills: Demonstrating Individual and Cognition Skills Academic Literacy Model: Situating their identity as a producer academic knowledge	7	Does not rely on a set of structures and templates but takes initiative
			Demonstrates confidence
			Desire to take control of their education
			Strong sense of responsibility and how to do better
Motivation as internal motivation and drive	Study Skills: Demonstrating Individual and Cognition Skills	3	Motivation to be present and eager to learn
Orientation as problem centered learning rather than subject centered to apply knowledge	Study Skills: Demonstrating Individual and Cognition Skills	3	<i>Critical Thinking Ability</i>
	Academic Literacy Model: Making meaning of important information in academia		<i>Independent Problem Solving</i>
	Academic Socialization: Adaption and Reproduction of disciplinary discourse		<i>Able to Discern and evaluate arguments</i>
	Study Skills: Transfer writing and literacy knowledge between contexts		Knowledge production and synthesis
Meta-Cognition as the need to know why they are learning.	Academic Literacy Model: Situating their identity as a producer academic knowledge	3	Questions learning relevance against their goals
	Study Skills: Demonstrating Individual and Cognition Skills		Know why they are there and why they are learning
Experience as the student brings experience to learning as a resource	Study Skills: Transfer writing and literacy knowledge between contexts	1	<i>Ability to formulate questions as a research skill</i>
			<i>Ability to paraphrase, summarize, and explain</i>
			<i>Able to find, evaluate, quote, and cite sources</i>
			<i>Understand media literacy and rhetoric</i>
			<i>Able to incorporate feedback</i>
			<i>Ability to take notes</i>
			Are more invested in the outcome of their education

Table Notes: Characteristics in italics were noted as foundational for university studies and relate to Adult Learner assumptions of experience, orientation, and motivation. 3/10

participants defined Adult Learner as Mature Students and not inclusive of 18+ out of high school students.

Table B5:

Instructors’ suggested improvements to academic support for underprepared students.

Improvement Area Level	Improvement	Participant Frequency of Suggestion
Institution	More one-on-one support and smaller class sizes to deliver this support	3
	More class time for writing to avoid AI-generated work	1
	More Writing Labs	1
	Faculty members do not have communication with the support areas. Communication within the university needs improvement	3
	Students need a first-year handbook and orientation day	1
	Structural deficiencies with Student Supports, including adequate funding, resources, and discipline-specific support <i>(Noting that 8 out of 10 people indicated positive support for the writing center staff’s efforts)</i>	5
	More international student support	1
	More emphasis on professor teaching instead of publication	1
Professors	Noted that not all professors are helpful, but it is noted by many that professors should be providing support	1
Peer-Level	First-year groups with a higher-level student as a leader to support weekly meetings and writing groups	1
Students	Students need to seek support or at least go to the supports directed to them	7
Preparatory Course for High School Students	University Instructors providing information to high school students and offering author workshops	1

Appendix C: Illustrative Chart of Codes to Themes

Theme 1 Academic Writing Feature and Foundations										
Understanding and Integration of Theory, Resources, Experts										
Application of Theory to Reality to Make Meaning	Student Voice Usage and Un...		Exceptional - Cr...	Poor - Does ...		Dialogue Clarity and Organizational Quality		Argumentation Quality		
						Exceptional - Cl...	Poor - Paper...	Adequate - ...	Poor - No argument, no thesis...	
Exceptional - Dialogue wi...		Poor - D...	Exceptio...	Adequat...		Poor - Unclea...	Exceptional - ...	Exceptional - ...		
Poor - Paper is only summa...										
		Adequate - Ma...	Exc...	Adeq...		Poor - Paragraph s...	Poor ~...	Poor - ...	Except...	
Exceptional - Engaging wit...						Poor - Logical Gaps...	Exceptional ~...	Adequa...		
		Exceptional an...		Adequate - Ha...			Adequate ~ u...	Adequa...		
Foundational Literacy Knowledge and Preparation Before University										
Foundational - Literacy in Own Voice	Foundational - Reading ...	Preparatio...	Preparati...	Foundati...	Foundatio...	Grammar Quality		Challenges in Writing Pa...		
						Poor - Formatting hinders ...	Adequate - Less ...	Exceptio...		
Foundational - Critical ...	Foundatio...	Foundatio...		Foundatio...	Foundatio...			Exceptio...	Gr... Exc...	
Foundational - Argume...						Poor - No clear paragraphs...				
		Close Reading a...	Prep...	Prepa...	Foun...	Foun...				
Foundational - Underst...		Preparation - Wri...		Foundatio...	Foundatio...	Fo...				
Foundational - Realistic ...		Preparation - Wri...		Foundatio...	Foundatio...					
		Preparation - Pa...			Foundatio...					
						Critical Thinking and Critical Analysis		Challenges in Writing Pa...		
						Exceptional - Demonstrat...	Writing Qu...	Author-te...	Ad...	
							Poor - No c...	Artificial In...		
									Students ... Adequat...	
Theme 2 Student Behaviours										
Adult Learner Characteristics Observed										
Indicators of broader understanding why they are learning specific m...			Interpretat...		ALC - Posi...		Academic Integrity Adherence			
							Artificial Intelligence in Acad...	Students understand ...		
ALC - Negative - Lack of confide...			ALC - Negative - ...		ALC ~...	ALC ~...				
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Appendix D: Participant Information Letter and Consent Form



Education Department

Dear Potential Participant:

I am requesting your participation in a master's thesis research project about faculty perspectives of undergraduate student academic writing underpreparedness and your name has been identified as a potential participant as a first-year English course university instructor.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Before deciding whether you want to participate, please read this letter carefully to understand what it entails. After reading the letter, feel free to ask any questions you may have.

PURPOSE

This research examines the perspectives of instructors regarding academic writing underpreparedness factors among first-year undergraduate students. The research analysis aims to identify potential improvements to support the academic writing success of first-year university students. The research is supervised by Dr. Meridith Lovell-Johnston and conducted by Rebecca Toman, a Master of Education student, for the purpose of completion of my thesis. There is no funding provided for this research.

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

The participant group of university instructors are selected through a purposeful process based on specific inclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria for this purposeful sampling of participants include:

1. The participants are instructors who have instructed first-year university students in the English department of the selected university.
2. The participant instructors have at least three (3) years of experience teaching university English courses for first-year university students.
3. The participant instructors are either tenured full-time faculty, non-tenured full-time faculty, or contract staff.

Ideally, this proposed research will include a mix of tenured faculty, full-time faculty, and contract teaching staff to gain diverse teaching perspectives. The three (3) years of experience requirement for the instructor participants is imperative for the study because these instructors are likely to have developed standards in their classes for a well-written academic English paper that have been tested and refined during their teaching.

WHAT INFORMATION WILL BE COLLECTED?

The method for collecting data for this research will be through an approximately one-hour semi-structured interview held over the Zoom platform as a meeting with the researcher and the participant. The recording and transcription of the meeting will be an option available with participant consent. Data collection will consist of notes taken by the researcher during the semi-structured interview or, if participant consent is received, recorded and transcribed participant responses. The data will contain the participant responses to specific questions and



discussion about the factors that, from the participant's perspective, are characteristic of well written, adequately written, and poorly written first-year student papers.

Consent for the recording of the interview will be reaffirmed prior to the interview.

The transcribed interviews will be used for analysis to identify the descriptors and rationale used by the participants to distinguish these three types of papers with potential alignment with the literacy factors from the literature review, characteristics of adult learners assumed by the *Adult Learning Theory*, and alignment with the *Academic Literacies Model*. The data obtained during the semi-structured interviews with the instructor participants will remain confidential and will be known only to the researchers.

WHAT IS REQUESTED OF ME AS A PARTICIPANT?

Participants are asked to engage in an approximately one-hour semi-structured interview with the student researcher to discuss the factors of well written, adequately written and poorly written papers and to answer pre-determined questions presented by the student researcher. Participants may decline to answer any questions.

The student researcher will re-affirm the request for consent to record the interview session. If no consent for recording is provided the interview will stop. If consent for recording is provided, the student researcher will start recording via the Zoom platform. The student researcher will start the interview with the discussion about the three types of papers to gain the participant perspectives and insight about successful factors to characterize English academic writing and, the ranking factors attributed to first-year student papers.

The second segment of the interview focuses on structured questions that will help categorize the instructors' teaching experiences with the characteristics of adult learners and models of academic literacy. A list of the anticipated questions will be provided to all participants prior to interviews and a transcript of a participant's interview will be provided to them for clarification and member-checking prior to analysis for the thesis.

WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS AS A PARTICIPANT?

As a participant of this study:

- You are under no obligation to participate and are free to withdraw all of your data at any time without it affecting any entitlements or access to recommendations from the completed thesis.
- Your decision to participate will not affect your academic status/employment
- You will receive important updates about the study while it is happening, so you can decide if you want to continue participating or if you want to withdraw.
- You have the right to remove any contributions you have made and all of your data to the study if you decide to withdraw up to and including deletion of video files, transcripts, or other research artifacts, up to the point at which member checking is completed and



the data analysis commences. You may request removal of the contributions by contacting the student researcher or her supervisor.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS AND BENEFITS?

The researchers do not perceive any harm or potential risks to participants from this study.

The student researcher will share the analysis and recommendations from this study with the participating English Department and the instructor participants including suggestions arising from the research on how to support first-year students with their academic writing. If the recommendations are found to be helpful, they could be used more broadly as a source of general knowledge for the Department of English, its instructors, or other departments or faculties within Lakehead University.

WILL I RECEIVE AN HONORARIUM/INCENTIVE/COMPENSATION?

There is no honorarium or financial compensation associated with participation in this study.

HOW WILL MY CONFIDENTIALITY BE MAINTAINED?

Participant identities will be known to the researcher and her supervisor but kept in confidence and for the purpose of analysis and thesis development, participants will be de-identified. To ensure confidentiality, the only indication of the participant's name will be through email communication with the researchers and in the meeting invitation via Zoom. The transcription will not contain the name of the participant. The student researcher will remove all instructor participant names, and pseudonyms will be used to identify participants once the member checking has been completed for participants who have not withdrawn all their data. Those who have withdrawn all their data by the end of the member-checking period will not require a pseudonym, as their information will no longer be part of the participant data set. Once the pseudonyms have been used, there will be no information linking the participant's name to the pseudonym, in the data or in any future presentation or publication of this research.

WHO WILL HAVE ACCESS TO MY DATA?

The student researcher will have access to the contact information of participants, recorded interviews, and transcription data. The research supervisor may also gain access to the information, if required for review.

Disclaimer: The research team will not share any personally identifiable information with anyone outside the study, except in the following cases and only if required by the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board. The Research Ethics Board may review the study records to ensure compliance with the approved research ethics guidelines. All information collected during this study, including your personal information on the consent forms, will remain confidential. To maintain confidentiality, the university will not be named in the reporting of the results.

WHERE WILL MY DATA BE STORED?



Information will be attributed to the researcher's Lakehead University email and Zoom account, as well as the institutional server, via email and [Zoom](#), accessible only to the researcher and her supervisor if necessary. The recordings will be retrieved from the Zoom recording cloud, deleted from the cloud, and stored on the researcher's password-protected Lakehead Google account. Once the transcriptions are completed, the recordings will be deleted and removed from the researcher's password-protected Lakehead Google account. The transcriptions will be stored on the researcher's password-protected Lakehead Google account for a period of 7 years. Once the 7 years have elapsed, the information and other identifiers are removed, including which courses the instructor teaches, their area of study and research, participation with teaching and learning week, etc. All of this information will be deleted from the password-protected Lakehead Google account and will no longer be accessible.

WHAT WILL MY DATA BE USED FOR?

The data will be used for analysis to support writing the student researcher's master's thesis submission.

HOW CAN I RECEIVE A COPY OF THE RESEARCH RESULTS?

The analysis and recommendations of this study will be proactively shared with the Department of English and the Master's thesis will be made available through the Graduate Studies office after submission.

WHAT IF I WANT TO WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY?

To withdraw from the study please submit an email to Rebecca Toman at rtoman@lakeheadu.ca and indicate that you wish to withdraw from the study.

The participant may withdraw all responses to the study.

RESEARCHER CONTACT INFORMATION:

Student Researcher:
Rebecca Toman
rtoman@lakeheadu.ca

Supervisor:
Dr. Meredith Lovell-Johnston
mlovell@lakeheadu.ca

RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD REVIEW AND APPROVAL:

The Lakehead University Research Ethics Board has reviewed and approved this research study <pending>. If you have any questions related to the research ethics and would like to speak to someone outside of the research team, please contact Sheena Beach at the Research Ethics Board at [807-343-8010 ext. 8933](tel:807-343-8010) or research.ethics@lakeheadu.ca.



Consent Form for Potential Participants

Faculty Perspectives of Undergraduate Student Academic Writing Underpreparedness Master's Thesis Study

MY CONSENT:

I agree to the following:

- ✓ I have read and understand the information contained in the Information Letter.
- ✓ I agree to participate.
- ✓ I understand the risks and benefits of the study.
- ✓ I am a volunteer and can choose not to answer any question.
- ✓ I understand that I can stop participating and leave the study at any time. However, there may be limitations to removing data already collected (e.g., after the member checking period). Up to the end of the member checking period, all participant information and data can be withdrawn from this study.
- ✓ The data will be securely stored on the researcher's password-protected Lakehead Google account for a minimum period of 7 years following completion of the research project.
- ✓ I understand that the research findings will be available to me upon request.
- ✓ I will remain confidential and my information will be de-identified.
- ✓ All my questions have been answered.

By consenting to participate, I have not waived any rights to legal recourse in the event of research-related harm.

Audio/Video Recording

☐ Yes ☐ No — I consent to being audio and/or video recorded during this study.

Signature

Date