

Stakeholder Summary

Writing instruction at Ontario universities lacks a systemic approach

Ontario's university writing instruction lacks a systematic, coherent approach according to a new report by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO). The study examined sample programs in arts/humanities, sciences and applied fields at five Ontario universities and found that while many students are receiving opportunities to learn and practice writing in first- and second-year courses, many others have few opportunities to improve their writing skills. The study also found a wide range of teaching approaches and assignment structures that are likely to be based on professors' personal academic experiences rather than formal training in writing instruction.

Project description

Writing Assignments and Instruction at Ontario's Publicly Funded Universities: A View from Three Disciplines examined writing opportunities for first- and second-year students at five Ontario universities, looking at one representative department within each discipline: history for arts/humanities, kinesiology for science and business for applied fields. Data were collected from course syllabi and surveys distributed to university instructors. Focus groups were also conducted, although low participation produced results from only one institution.

Findings

University students wrote an average of 2.5 assignments per course, although there are significant differences between the disciplines, with history students writing almost twice as many assignments as those in kinesiology and business. On average assignments were five pages in length, approximately half specified desired learning outcomes and less than 2% identified an audience for the assignment other than the teaching assistant or professor.

While less than 5% of assignments on syllabi provided the opportunity for students to receive feedback, for example in peer review or an unmarked first draft, slightly more than half the surveyed faculty members indicated that they provided feedback to students prior to handing in assignments. The discrepancy between the syllabi and surveys appears to be in defining what constitutes an opportunity for feedback. The most common types of feedback faculty reported offering were voluntary office-hour consultations, responding to emails and in-class questions.

Professors use a wide variety of instructional strategies to improve student writing including online resources, handouts, in-class and extracurricular workshops and tutorials, sample texts and discussions of expectations and rubrics. Most faculty were aware of campus resources such as the library and writing centre, though they felt these were often for remedial purposes. The commitment to instruction, however, was counterbalanced by limitations in knowledge of effective writing pedagogy. Feedback was often focused on error identification and checklists rather than interaction with student authors. Also, many of the resources distributed to students were generic "tip sheets" and not genre-specific guides.

Faculty identified three main barriers to improving student writing. First, professors found writing instruction to be a labour-intensive and time-intensive activity and indicated that they felt institutions did not provide adequate resources for support. Specifically, large class sizes, limited numbers of TAs and rigid rules for use of available resources were said to be impediments. Second, professors noted the low level of student preparedness to write and their lack of engagement in academic activities. Instructors expressed concerns regarding students' failure to follow instructions, ignorance of basic language features and poor reading skills, which were potentially beyond professors' ability to address.

Finally, many instructors felt a lack of departmental support for teaching writing skills. While they felt competent as writers, few faculty had taken any courses in writing instruction and identified no opportunities within their department for this type of professional improvement. While some attempts were made to specify department writing expectations, professors did not consistently follow them, indicating that individuals, not departments, hold the balance of power in curriculum planning.

Writing Assignments and Instruction at Ontario's Publicly Funded Universities: A View from Three Disciplines is written by Jordana Garbati, Kelly McDonald, Lindsay Meaning, Boba Samuels and Cory Scurr, Wilfrid Laurier University.