

# **Glasgow Caledonian University**

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## **University Profile**

Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) is a post-1992 university, which means that it “acquired university status as a result of the provisions of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992” (HEFCE, No date). Many of this newest group of UK universities grew out of former polytechnics, or, as in the case of GCU, the merger of different Further Education (FE) colleges. As a result, they tend to be more teaching focused than older institutions, and often specialise in applied programmes of study, often accredited by professional organisations. With over 75 undergraduate and approximately 80 taught postgraduate programmes being offered, GCU is no exception. These include: the BSc Hons Physiotherapy, accredited by the Chartered Society of Physiotherapists; MSc programmes in Human Resource Management accredited by the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development and the Society for Human Resource Management and the BSc Hons in Environmental Civil Engineering, accredited by the Institution of Civil Engineers. As a result, the three Schools at GCU are organised around different sectors of the economy, rather than traditional academic disciplines.

The biggest one, the School of Health and Life Sciences (SHLS), offer under- and postgraduate programmes in allied professions, such as nursing, midwifery, or physiotherapy, as well as social work, psychology and the life sciences. Similarly, the School of Engineering and Built Environment (SEBE) offers UG and PG degrees that prepare students for technical jobs, including different branches of engineering, construction related subjects, computing and computer-based design. Finally students at the Glasgow School for Business and Society (GSBS) can study interdisciplinary, vocationally oriented programmes related to business and management, as well as social sciences, media and journalism and law. The vocational focus of these programmes is echoed in GCU’s vision to “enrich[...] cities and communities [and] innovate[...] for social and economic impact” (Glasgow Caledonian University, 2016a) , i.e. to exert a direct, rather than indirect, influence on life beyond academia.

In addition to the subjects taught, this focus has an impact on the learning and teaching activities and the student body. For many of the almost 17000 students, especially in the allied health professions, placements are an integral part of their studies, and the other schools also establish close links with industry through placements, industry-sponsored prizes, projects run in collaboration with industry and industry speakers.

Just as the industrial links root GCU more strongly in the local community than the other Glasgow-based universities, our students tended to come, for a long time, from the local community. Many of them are also from non-traditional backgrounds, i.e. students who are the first in their family to go to university, students from areas of multiple deprivation in the West of Scotland and mature students returning to education after many years of work or care commitments. An important part of GCU's widening participation work (Glasgow Caledonian University, 2016b) are its numerous agreements with Further Education (FE) Colleges, which allow students to enter HE programmes of study immediately in year two or three after studying for a Higher National Certificate (HNC) or Higher National Diploma (HND) in the same subject in an FE college. For these 'direct entrants', university study is a particular challenge, as they often come from non-traditional backgrounds and have very little time to adapt to the different culture in HE if they start in the third year of a four year honours course, and their marks count towards their degree from the first semester.

Over the last two decades, GCU has increasingly become more active on an international stage through partnerships, such as the Grameen College of Nursing in Bangladesh or the Caledonian College of Engineering in Oman. It has also attracted more international students, particularly with specialised Masters' programmes, such as an MSc in Environmental Management (Oil & Gas) or the MSc Diabetes Care & Management. Interestingly these new groups often share the lack of familiarity with UK Higher Education and its conventions. For these international students, their experience of studying for a degree in the UK is thus likely to be transformative, too, and GCU explicitly sees this as its first and foremost goal: to transform lives through education (Glasgow Caledonian University, 2016a).

### **GCU Institutional Context: Development of Academic Writing Pedagogies**

The following discussion explores the ongoing development of academic writing pedagogies in the context of GCU as a widening participation institution. We then consider the shared, underpinning theory and best practice approaches that inform our teaching of writing as they continue to evolve in the university's Learning Development Centres (LDCs). Examples of the unique, discipline-specific writing initiatives that the centres each develop are then proffered as effective, developmental and participatory pedagogic models that create,

'... space(s) where students are able collectively [and individually] to decode the practices of writing, so that it is no longer mysterious and unknown to those who have not had access to the forms of literacy most privileged in academic spaces' (Burke, 2008: 208).

### Centrality of writing for assessment purposes

While there is increasing diversity in how academic performance is assessed, and variations exist across its three academic schools, writing remains central to GCU's assessment strategies and practices. There are multiple forms of written assessment and related genres with which students are expected to engage successfully within their academic subject disciplines. In addition, preparation of students for writing in professional contexts is an essential element of our strong employability focus, especially as graduates' writing skills are often bemoaned by UK employers (The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2016; Kotzee et al. 2001). As a result, the text types students are given as assignments include more traditionally academic genres, such as academic essays, short exam essays, annotated bibliographies, research proposals, extended and systematic literature reviews or research-based dissertations, as well as genres more common in professional writing, or both of these areas: lab reports, case study and technical reports, reflective essays/commentaries, analytical practice and placement reports. Appropriate academic – and professional (Canton and Govan. 2015)- writing pedagogies that can support students to become confident writers in these forms of assessment are driven by, and continuously developed in the context of GCU's commitment to widening participation and recruitment of student groups who likely to be unfamiliar with the conventions of academia and its discourse communities (e.g. Leese, 2010).

GCU (2010) endeavours to 'Embrace diversity as a positive force [that] does not require participants to change before they can benefit from HE.' This aim recognises the need to respond to our students' social circumstances and backgrounds, while ensuring that an inclusive learning experience requires engagement in a two way process of change and development from both students and institutions (Layer 2005, 2005a; Tett 2000, 2004). In this, Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) emphasise the need for institutions to consider the level and type of support they offer to students, the extent to which their organisational arrangements and academic cultures could be exclusionary and the ways in which they might change to meet the needs of a diverse student body. The Learning Development Centres (LDCs) address these issues by playing pivotal roles in supporting widening participation and students from diverse backgrounds through 'academic writing support for home and international students, ICT support, advice on study skills and other academic support and guidance' (Glasgow Caledonian University, 2016c). In this, the Centres have a specific focus on the ongoing development of appropriate academic writing pedagogies in that staff aim to counter and demystify exclusionary academic writing practices and enable students to become confident, authoritative and critical writers in their chosen programmes and future professional/vocational contexts.

### LDCs' academic writing pedagogies: shared theory and practices

The centres' development of academic writing pedagogies is informed by a range of learning theories and approaches. These allow us to engage with the complex area of student academic writing and development in more creative, effective and critical ways. This finds accord with hooks (1994) and her adoption of a 'complex and unique blending of multiple perspectives' (p10), as a means of creating a powerful, critically engaged standpoint from which to work. The varied and often complementary background of staff in each centre (e.g. English for Academic Purposes, linguistics, adult and community development and lifelong learning, learning development and inclusive, additional needs education) allows for the application of potentially rich, inter-disciplinary perspectives to inform how they teach academic writing. Such a complement is reflected across the wider UK Higher Education (HE) sector. Canton (2016) provides a detailed breakdown of the academic backgrounds of 109 current writing practitioners across the UK Higher Education sector. They reflect a broad, multi-disciplinary field from which to teach academic writing: Linguistics; English Literature; Modern Languages; Applied Linguistics (incl. TESOL etc.); Humanities and Arts; Education; Psychology; Social Sciences; Information Science / Studies. Staff in the LDCs also come from diverse and specialist teaching backgrounds:.

Collectively we are concerned with how the educational experiences of diverse learners can be transformative and empowering, and thus achieve greater educational equality. In relation to academic writing practices we recognise that they demand mastery of a complex set of processes: producing an informed, critical and authoritative voice and writing within the parameters of a set of seemingly fixed and often alienating linguistic conventions. Therefore, to support students' engagement with academic writing processes and construct appropriate teaching and learning strategies the three centres have adopted and adapted the principles of constructive developmental pedagogy CDP (Baxter Magolda, 1999; McCusker, 2013) and ongoing work in the field of academic literacies (AL) (Crowther et al., 2001; Lea and Street, 1998, 2006; Leung and Safford, 2005; Street 2004). These understandings have had significant implications in shaping our work in the LDCs with students as peripheral members of discourse communities (Lave and Wenger, 1991). We are able to explicitly address the multiple text forms and conventions dominant in HE that can create significant barriers to new members: the traditional 'essayist literacy' practice (Lillis 2001: 39) or scientific genres (Kelly and Bazerman, 2003) and similar practices of professional groups.

Constructive Developmental Pedagogy's central concern is with learner-centred approaches that develop students' self-authorship: their evolving awareness of how they create meaning, question

and develop knowledge (Baxter Magolda, 1999). Questions of self-authorship in multifarious forms of discipline specific written assessment and how writers locate themselves in the text in relation to other authorial voices are key writing issues we aim to address in meaningful and accessible ways. CDP provides three guiding principles with which to promote students' self-authorship in learner-centred contexts: validating the student as a knower; situating learning in the student's experience and a view of learning as mutually constructed meaning (Baxter Magolda, 1999). We apply these principles and develop such learner-centred environments through adaption of AL research, pedagogic practices and values. They offer us a sophisticated, flexible framework through which we can develop students' writing and self-authorship in the diverse disciplinary fields in which they engage. Furthermore, AL perspectives provide valuable insight into the complex literacy demands of HE curricula as encompassing a range of communicative practices, inclusive of genres, fields and disciplines, and switching in relation to linguistic codes (Lea and Street, 1998). It allows us to develop a range of supportive writing pedagogies which are embedded within the subject discipline, often developed in partnership with subject specialists (Jacobs, 2005). We can thus maintain an appropriate focus on writing that does not separate it out from the student's academic discipline as a discreet, straightforward and transparent activity.

We pursue this aim of embedding writing pedagogies not just in our teaching within modules, but also our one-to-one appointments, small group sessions and the learning and teaching materials we generate for face-to-face and online academic support. Through the range of embedded writing pedagogies we develop, we can actively counter assumptions that students can/should be able to write effectively and if not they will pick it up along the way; that problems with students' writing are located solely with them and de-contextualised, generic study skills approaches assist in development of academic writing. In short, in our teaching we adopt AL pedagogy whereby we:

- extend beyond a narrow focus on the mechanics of 'good' referencing to facilitate discussion of why referencing is necessary, how it develops critical discussion and that listening to students' perspectives helps to think critically about academic practices (Magyar, 2012);
- focus on the complex inter-relationships between reading and writing;
- deconstruct what is involved in the processes of *being critical* in particular subject-disciplinary areas;
- align with constructive developmental pedagogy to scaffold students into academic writing practices through enquiry-based, collaborative and dialogically based approaches.

This focus on the adoption of dialogues of participation recognises the centrality of collaboration and negotiation in teaching academic writing (Lillis, 2001). Dialogical approaches enable us to work with students to deconstruct and make explicit and meaningful, implicit and taken-for-granted academic practices. This involves demystifying the dominant 'essayist literacy practice' of HE (Lillis, 2001), therefore exploring the genres, styles and discourses associated with writing for specific disciplines. In so doing, we aim to support students' academic development by empowering them to gain new, critical insights into how to write and undertake all aspects of academic study, effectively and confidently, and become agents in their own learning. The following sections provide some examples of the contextualised and collaborative approaches we develop, as grounded in these principles and informed by ongoing educational research.

### Contextualised and collaborative approaches

Contextualised writing classes are at the heart of writing development in all three schools, as this has proven to be the most effective way of countering the deficit model. It emphasises the understanding that writing is a socially situated practice (Gee, 1999) governed by external and internal constraints (Alamargot and Chanquoy, 2001) and indicates that participating in a new discourse community and navigating through these constraints can be a challenge to all students. As an enhancement to students' normal curricula, these classes are developed in collaboration with subject lecturers. They range from one of interventions to a series of classes that develop specific skills, for example classes that help students on an Ethical Tourism module in GSBS to read, plan and write critically for assignments. Other longer interventions are co-taught with subject lecturers (e.g. academic, reflective and critical writing for level 1 Podiatry students in SHLS), delivered across different modules of the same programme of study (e.g. critical writing for the BA Accountancy in GSBS). The collaboration with subject lecturers is more formalised in SHLS where each staff member of the Learning Development Centre is responsible for specific programmes of study, whereas in SEBE the smaller number of writing developers and their part-time work pattern require a more flexible approach, depending on availability. While this offers slightly less continuity across programmes, students benefit from different approaches to teaching writing.

Developing the curriculum together with subject lecturers offers the advantage that experience from marking the students' work and knowledge of the challenges they face can directly impact on the teaching of writing. Across the three schools, these challenging areas include:

- Deconstructing assessment briefs, identifying the macrostructures available for specific text forms and examining readers' expectations;

- Developing a structure for a text based on their insight into the readers, text types and the specific brief;
- Reading for assignments and using their reading to build an argument;
- Developing an appropriate writing style (register), using the conventions of academic text forms;
- Using sources in text and marking them in an appropriate way;
- The writing process;
- Writing for different audiences and in different contexts (professional writing);
- Writing about research and dissertations.

Embedding these classes into students' curricula and collaborating with subject lecturers also makes it possible to use exemplar texts - extracts from previous essays, reports, research articles and dissertations. These allow participative dialogue about academic writing and explain, demystify and model appropriate use of language to create key characteristics of critical academic text.

In SHLS these embedded classes are complemented by an open workshop programme across Trimesters A & B, covering generic writing areas such as academic writing conventions, using evidence, critical writing and reflective writing. These are targeted mainly at UG students, although they are also popular among Masters' students who want additional opportunities to work on their writing.

International MSc students are also among the groups for whom the LDCs offer further transition support to bridge the gap between their previous writing and learning experiences and the expectations at UK universities. SHLS' Cultural Awareness and Knowledge Exchange Scheme (CAKES: McKay et al; in press) is one example of this. Other groups include direct entrants articulating directly from college: a recent SEBE project, for example, focused on developing materials to ensure that all direct entrants received writing classes as part of their curriculum when they were given their first university assignment, while an annual 'Bootcamp' in SHLS supports the transition to higher education among pre-entry students. The focus on specific groups is based on their different levels of exposure to the forms of writing prevalent at university, but all LDCs emphasise that it follows the same developmental, rather than remedial model. In some cases, such as the SEBE direct entrant project mentioned above, this has meant that the materials developed originally for direct entrants were mainstreamed to all students on their programmes and additional materials were made available for self-study to these cohorts if they felt this was necessary.

The materials developed for construction and engineering students are available through GCU's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Further materials developed for specific student cohorts are available on open websites, such as materials for students studying social work (GCU and Greater Glasgow Articulation Partnership, 2013a) or for students and prospective students of bio sciences (GCU and Greater Glasgow Articulation Partnership, 2013b). In addition to this, each LDC is represented on the VLE through a community page, which gives information on our work and offers further materials, such as online guides, vidcasts on writing (Shapiro and Johnston, 2010) and learning and top-tip sheets, which are useful for independent study and in preparation of following one-to-one appointments.

These are available to students in all three Schools through an appointment system, booked by email (SEBE, GSBS) or online (SHLS). The preferred and most popular reason for engagement is students' own initiative, as it supports the developmental model on which our work is based. This allows students to work on aspects they wish to improve, but also offers the opportunity to bring a piece of writing and receive feedback on it, which identifies strengths and weaknesses that require further work. Weaknesses that become apparent in marked assignments sometimes lead subject lecturers to recommend further LDC support to particular students, but any such recommendation has to be made transparent to the student, i.e. the LDC never approaches students based on a lecturer's recommendation. Instead lecturers can encourage students to contact the LDC. Similarly partnerships between the LDCs and the disability team mean that students meet staff from their LDC in a summer school offered to students who declare a disability and are encouraged to continue making use of LDC support (Shapiro, McShane, Marshall Bhullar and Dunbar 2016).

This strong focus on students' own initiative and responsibility is also reflected in the nature of our one-to-one work: we do not simply edit/correct text. We teach critical academic writing, focusing on the areas below and encourage students to act on any feedback provided for subsequent coursework. Asking students to take responsibility for their learning is an essential part of helping them develop as critically informed writers who can put their understanding of the key areas addressed in our workshops (see above) into practice in their own writing.

### **Successes and Struggles**

One of the key successes of the Learning Development Centres' writing initiatives is the extent to which they engage students. Data from the University's electronic attendance and engagement monitoring system indicate that since the inception of the Learning Development Centres, students'



engagement with writing initiatives has increased year on year. Furthermore, not only are engagement levels high, all sectors of the student population are engaged - undergraduates, postgraduates, traditional and non-traditional entrants – thus demonstrating our success in moving away from the dominant deficit model and promoting writing as a development necessary for all students. This successful engagement might be considered quite an achievement given that students are often reluctant to draw upon support mechanisms and that encouraging engagement is typically problematic (Clegg et al., 2006). Engagement with Learning Development Centres, among both students and staff, is further demonstrated through the successful partnership work we commonly undertake. This includes, for example, giving students a sense of ownership and voice through co-creation of learning resources, and collaboratively planning and delivering teaching with discipline lecturers.

In addition to student uptake, student feedback is systematically collated and analysed via electronic questionnaires and face-to-face interviews. Here qualitative data is particularly insightful, providing rich understandings of students' experiences of engaging with interventions and illuminating the underlying processes that explain how they work. Key themes from this feedback reflect the principles and pedagogies to which we are committed, including:

- the active involvement of students in the learning process
- the sense that learning is a partnership, where notions of power are less dominant than in other learning contexts
- the deeper forms of learning achieved by highly contextualised teaching
- the ways in which tacit features of the learning environment and linguistic conventions are explicated

The success of the model is evident not only in student feedback, but in National Student Survey reports and outcomes from institution-wide internal and external reviews. Indeed, a recent external review commended the enhancement-led model and its commitment to supporting student confidence and success (Enhancement-led Institutional Review of Glasgow Caledonian University, 2015). The Learning Development Centres' achievements have been recognised elsewhere, such as in the 2015 Scottish Herald Higher Education Awards and an invitation to present our work at a Scottish Parliamentary Reception in 2014.

Whilst there are numerous successes associated with our writing interventions, there are also significant challenges. As previously discussed, ensuring that writing support is embedded within the

context of programmes is key to success, as is careful timing to ensure delivery when students are most likely to require it. Achieving this is dependent on collaboration with discipline lecturers who can, for example, advise on when within the curriculum support is likely to be required, and provide highly contextualised input to inform the development of contextualised learning materials. However, the extent to which discipline lecturers participate in these processes varies and engaging all staff members, many of whom are constrained by time, remains a challenge. Perhaps the biggest challenge, however, relates to evidencing overall impact of writing interventions. Considering the numerous confounding variables and complexity of writing itself, it is, of course, impossible to draw causal inferences with academic outcomes. Furthermore, there are inherent problems associated with the exclusive reliance on self-reports to evaluate potential improvements in writing quality. In arguing that effective communication takes place between the writer *and* reader, Canton and Govan (Under Review) suggest that one way of overcoming the problems of self-report is to involve the reader through text evaluation, as described by Wardle and Roozen (2012). As we, and other learning developers, continue to grapple with the challenge of evaluating our work in meaningful ways, this method might provide a potentially fruitful avenue for consideration.

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