Mind the writing gap: Rethinking pre-departure EAP support for international students in UK Higher Education

Mona Sabir (iD)

King Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia, msabir@kau.edu.sa

ABSTRACT

As higher education becomes increasingly transnational, questions of academic writing readiness take on new urgency, particularly for students entering Anglophone universities from linguistically and educationally diverse backgrounds. This mixed-methods study explores the writing preparedness of first-year international students at UK institutions, focusing on their ability to meet the rhetorical and disciplinary demands of English for Academic Purposes (EAP). A structured questionnaire assessed self-perceived competence across six dimensions: coherence, cohesion, argumentation, discipline-specific language, citation, and data presentation. Quantitative findings indicated moderate confidence overall, with notable challenges in data presentation and academic integrity. Thematic analysis of open responses highlighted three key needs: exposure to genre-specific exemplars, clarity on plagiarism detection systems, and orientation to dialogic feedback practices. These findings underscore the limitations of generic English preparation and support the development of exemplar-rich, feedback-literate pre-departure programmes. The study contributes to internationalisation policy by identifying critical gaps in EAP support across global academic transitions.

Introduction

The ability to write effectively is a foundational requirement for success in higher education. Among the various forms of writing expected at university level, academic writing plays a central role, as it enables students to express ideas, construct arguments, and engage critically with disciplinary knowledge. For international students transitioning into English-medium universities, particularly those from non-English-speaking educational contexts, developing this form of writing in English can be especially challenging. These challenges are often intensified by differences in linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical traditions between students' prior educational experiences and the expectations of their host institutions. For Saudi scholarship students studying in the United Kingdom, such differences can pose significant

hurdles when adapting to the rigorous rhetorical and disciplinary demands of academic writing in a second language (Alnufaie & Grenfell, 2014; Bacha, 2002).

The focus on Saudi scholarship students in this study is therefore intentional rather than incidental. Their largely teacher-led and memorisation-oriented educational background provides a particularly revealing context for examining how prior pedagogical socialisation shapes students' perceptions of academic writing, plagiarism, and feedback upon transition to an Anglophone academic environment. While such educational traditions may not align fully with those of all international student groups, particularly learners from more inquiry-oriented systems, the Saudi case allows for a focused exploration of how generic pre-departure training may fail to prepare students for the epistemic and rhetorical demands of university-level writing. The study does not claim that these experiences are universally shared across international cohorts; rather, it uses the Saudi context as a theoretically productive case through which to highlight structural misalignments in pre-departure EAP provision and to inform the design of more context-sensitive, discipline-aware preparation programmes.

This study addresses a key gap in the internationalisation of higher education by examining academic writing readiness during students' transition into Anglophone academic contexts. Focusing on Saudi scholarship students at the beginning of their studies in the UK, the research explores how learners perceive their preparedness to meet discipline-specific writing demands, including coherence, critical engagement, and adherence to academic conventions. Although the study is situated within a particular national and educational context, it does not aim to generalise about Saudi learners as a group. Rather, it seeks to offer transferable insights into how prior educational experiences and forms of pre-departure preparation shape international students' initial encounters with academic writing in English-medium universities. By identifying areas of misalignment and proposing targeted improvements to pre-departure English for Academic Purposes (EAP) provision, the study contributes to evidence-based policy and practice aimed at supporting more equitable academic transitions in an increasingly globalised higher education landscape.

Theoretical Background

Academic writing is inherently complex, requiring not only linguistic competence but also the ability to think critically, engage with scholarly discourse, and adhere to disciplinary norms. Hyland (2006) conceptualises academic writing as a social practice shaped by disciplinary norms, institutional expectations, and shared epistemological values. From this perspective, students' success in academic writing depends not only on language proficiency but also on their familiarity with the implicit conventions governing knowledge construction and evaluation in specific academic contexts.

This view has important implications for internationally mobile students, whose prior educational experiences may be grounded in different pedagogical traditions. Research has consistently shown that students' writing practices are shaped by the instructional norms and assessment cultures of their home education systems. In the Saudi context, secondary and tertiary education has historically placed greater emphasis on teacher-led instruction, memorisation, and knowledge reproduction, with fewer opportunities for extended argumentation or independent inquiry (Al-Nouh et al., 2014). By contrast, UK higher education

privileges critical engagement, originality, and dialogic interaction with sources and feedback, all of which are reflected in its academic writing expectations. These differences suggest that writing challenges experienced by Saudi students are not simply linguistic, but are rooted in contrasting academic socialisation processes.

Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory provides a useful lens for understanding this transition. From a socio-cultural perspective, learning is mediated through social interaction, cultural tools, and institutional practices. Students do not acquire academic writing competence in isolation; rather, they develop it through guided participation in disciplinary practices, including feedback, revision, and engagement with exemplars. When students enter a new academic environment without prior exposure to these mediational processes, their understanding of key constructs such as criticality, authorship, and disciplinary voice may still be emergent. This framework helps explain why international students may struggle with aspects of academic writing that go beyond surface-level accuracy, even when they possess adequate general English proficiency.

The issue of preparedness can be further understood through Biggs' (1996) theory of constructive alignment, which emphasises coherence between learning objectives, teaching activities, and assessment practices. When applied to pre-departure English preparation, this framework highlights a potential misalignment between what students are taught and how their writing is later evaluated in university settings. While many preparatory programmes focus on general language skills or generic essay structures, they may not sufficiently align with the discipline-specific genres, epistemic expectations, and feedback practices characteristic of UK higher education. From this perspective, difficulties encountered by Saudi students reflect not individual deficit, but structural gaps between preparation and practice.

This concern is echoed in English for Academic Purposes scholarship, which has long argued against one-size-fits-all approaches to academic writing instruction. Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) stress the need for EAP programmes to be responsive to disciplinary variation, noting that writing in STEM fields often follows the IMRaD structure (Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion), and prioritises data presentation and procedural clarity, whereas writing in the humanities foregrounds argumentation, critical interpretation, and engagement with theory. Failure to address such variation risks leaving students underprepared for the specific rhetorical demands of their fields.

Overall, these theoretical perspectives suggest that academic writing challenges should be understood as the product of misalignment between students' prior educational socialisation, pre-departure preparation, and the situated practices of academic writing in UK universities. Rather than viewing writing readiness as a single, transferable skill, this study adopts a framework that foregrounds disciplinary context, feedback practices, and alignment between preparation and assessment. This theoretical positioning informs the study's focus on specific components of writing readiness, particularly feedback literacy and discipline-sensitive writing practices, as critical yet underexplored dimensions of international academic transition.

Summary of Previous Studies

Research on international students' academic experiences has consistently identified academic writing as a major challenge during transition into English-medium higher education. Rather than viewing writing difficulties as purely linguistic, this body of work highlights persistent problems related to argumentation, source integration, and adherence to academic conventions.

Andrade's (2006) synthesis of international student adjustment research identified academic writing as one of the most significant barriers to academic success, a finding later echoed by Zhang and Mi (2010), who reported widespread difficulties among non-native English-speaking students in constructing coherent arguments and managing referencing practices. Taken together, these studies suggest that writing challenges are not isolated skill deficits, but are shaped by students' prior educational experiences and by differing expectations regarding what constitutes effective academic writing.

Subsequent research has drawn attention to the role of educational culture in shaping students' writing practices and perceptions. Studies focusing on Saudi learners illustrate how transitions into Western academic contexts can intensify these challenges. Alharbi's (2021) mixed-methods study of Saudi postgraduate students found that, despite prior exposure to general English instruction, participants struggled with higher-order writing demands, including critical thinking, cohesion, and plagiarism avoidance. Similarly, Alhazmi and Nyland (2013) demonstrated that Saudi students' adjustment difficulties in Australian universities were closely linked to a shift from teacher-directed, gender-segregated classrooms to learning environments that emphasise independence, critical engagement, and self-regulation. These findings suggest that writing challenges among Saudi students are closely tied to broader processes of academic socialisation rather than to language proficiency alone.

Another prominent theme in the literature concerns the limitations of generic English for Academic Purposes instruction. Hyland (2012) argues that academic writing is inherently disciplinary, and that generic writing courses often fail to address the epistemic and rhetorical norms that distinguish academic fields. Empirical studies support this position. Evans and Green (2007), for example, found that international students across disciplines struggled with paraphrasing, summarising, and integrating sources, skills that are realised differently in disciplinary contexts. These studies collectively point to the need for discipline-sensitive approaches to writing instruction, particularly during periods of academic transition.

Despite these contributions, there remains a notable gap in research examining academic writing preparedness at the pre-departure stage, particularly for Saudi students entering UK higher education. Existing studies tend to focus either on general writing difficulties among international students or on broader cultural adjustment processes, without closely examining how pre-departure preparation aligns with the specific writing practices students encounter upon arrival. Moreover, limited attention has been paid to underexplored dimensions of writing readiness, such as feedback literacy and engagement with revision as a dialogic process. Addressing this gap, the present study examines Saudi scholarship students' perceptions of their academic writing preparedness, with particular attention to discipline-specific demands and feedback practices, in order to inform more context-sensitive and pedagogically aligned pre-departure EAP provision.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a primarily quantitative research design complemented by qualitative input in order to examine international students' academic writing preparedness at the point of

transition into UK higher education. Such a design is well suited to capturing both broad patterns in learners' self-perceptions and the contextual factors that shape those perceptions, particularly in transitional educational settings (Creswell, 2014). Using Saudi scholarship students as a focused case, the study employed a structured questionnaire assessing multiple dimensions of writing readiness, including coherence, criticality, and discipline-specific conventions. To enrich and contextualise the quantitative findings, the instrument also included an open-ended item inviting participants to reflect on their experiences and perceived challenges. Although these narrative responses do not constitute full qualitative interviews, they provide valuable insight into students' expectations, adjustment processes, and perceived gaps in prior preparation. This integrative approach enables a more nuanced interpretation of statistical trends and aligns with established mixed-methods principles that advocate combining numerical patterns with participant perspectives to strengthen interpretive validity.

Participants

The participants in this study were Saudi scholarship students enrolled across eleven UK universities. To ensure that responses captured recent and relevant experiences, eligibility was limited to students in their first year of academic study at the time of data collection. A total of 38 students completed the questionnaire, providing a focused yet diverse sample in terms of academic level, field of study, gender, and English language proficiency. Of the total participants, 58% were pursuing undergraduate degrees, while 42% were enrolled in postgraduate programs. The disciplinary distribution was as follows: 34% in STEM, 26% in the humanities, 24% in business, and 16% in the social sciences. Gender representation was relatively balanced, with 53% identifying as female and 47% as male. To supplement the quantitative findings, qualitative insights were drawn from the 28 participants (74% of the total sample) who provided written responses to the final open-ended question in the questionnaire. These respondents reflected the broader demographic and academic diversity of the full sample, offering perspectives across different fields of study, English proficiency levels, and stages of academic progression.

Instruments

To explore participants' academic writing preparedness, the study employed a structured questionnaire to explore participants' academic writing preparedness, combining scaled and open-ended items to generate both quantitative and qualitative insights, as previously outlined. The questionnaire was designed to assess students' self-perceived readiness across six key dimensions of academic writing encountered in UK higher education: (1) coherence and organisation, (2) cohesion and use of transition markers, (3) critical thinking and argumentation, (4) discipline-specific language and style, (5) citation, referencing, and plagiarism avoidance, and (6) data presentation and formatting. Each dimension included five Likert-scale items (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), adapted from established English for Academic Purposes (EAP) literature, including Hyland (2006) and Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998).

The questionnaire also contained a demographic section covering gender, level and field of study, and pre-departure English proficiency level. Content validity was ensured through expert review by three EAP specialists, and a pilot test with ten Saudi students studying in the

UK led to minor wording adjustments for improved clarity. To complement the scaled items, a final open-ended question invited participants to elaborate on any additional challenges or reflections related to their academic writing transition. These narratives enriched the quantitative findings by highlighting contextual, emotional, and cultural factors not captured through closed-ended items.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted over a two-month period. Participants were recruited through Saudi student networks and social media groups relevant to those studying in the United Kingdom. The questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms to maximize accessibility, with a brief cover page explaining the study's aims, the voluntary nature of participation, and assurances of anonymity and confidentiality. The form included both scaled and open-ended items. Respondents were asked to reflect on their academic writing preparedness upon entering UK higher education, as well as to share any additional reflections or challenges through a final open-ended question.

Data Analysis

A complementary analytical strategy was employed to address the research questions. Quantitative data from the questionnaire were entered into SPSS 28. Descriptive statistics means and standard deviations summarised students' self-ratings across the six dimensions of academic-writing preparedness. Inferential tests (independent-samples *t*-tests and one-way ANOVAs) examined whether perceptions differed by gender, field of study, or level of study. Internal consistency for the 30-item scale was strong (Cronbach's α = .89). For the qualitative component, the 28 narrative responses to the final open-ended questionnaire item were imported into NVivo 12 and analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2008) six-phase procedure: familiarisation, initial coding, theme construction, theme review, theme definition, and analytic write-up. Two researchers independently coded a quarter of the responses, achieving an inter-coder agreement of 85%, after which one researcher completed the full coding with regular peer debriefing to enhance credibility. Findings from the quantitative and qualitative strands were integrated during interpretation. The statistical results highlighted the most prominent areas of difficulty, while the emergent themes illuminated contextual and affective factors underlying those patterns. This integrative perspective informed targeted, evidence-based recommendations for strengthening pre-departure academic-writing provision.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in full accordance with established ethical research standards to safeguard the dignity, autonomy, and well-being of all participants. Ethical approval was secured from the relevant institutional review board prior to data collection, ensuring compliance with national and international guidelines, including the Declaration of Helsinki and the British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical framework. Participants received a detailed information sheet explaining the study's purpose, their role, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Written informed consent was obtained before participation.

Confidentiality and data security were maintained throughout. Personal identifiers were removed or coded, and all data were stored on password-protected devices accessible only to

the research team. Interview transcripts were anonymised during transcription and securely archived. Member-checking was conducted to allow participants to review and verify their transcripts. Participants were also assured that their responses would be used exclusively for academic purposes, with no identifying information disclosed in any outputs. Given the potentially sensitive nature of the topic, particular care was taken to ensure a supportive and non-judgmental interview setting. Steps were taken to minimise discomfort or distress and to avoid any form of coercion. Collectively, these procedures reflect the researchers' commitment to ethical integrity and to the respectful and responsible treatment of all participants.

Results

All analyses were run in SPSS 28 and R 4.3.1. Means (M), standard deviations (SD), Cronbach's alpha (α), 95% confidence intervals (CI), and exact *p*-values are reported in accordance with APA 7. This section presents a detailed account of the participants' background, followed by the main patterns that emerged from the questionnaire responses. The analysis is organised around three strands: descriptive findings related to the six components of academic writing, comparisons across key participant variables, and insights derived from the open-ended question. The strands offer a grounded understanding of how Saudi scholarship students viewed their academic writing preparation when they first arrived in the UK.

Participants

Thirty-eight Saudi scholarship students studying at eleven UK universities provided usable questionnaires (completion rate = 95%). Female participants represented 71% of the sample and male participants 29%, and most respondents were in the 18–24 age range. Slightly more than half had begun their UK studies at undergraduate level, while the remainder were enrolled in master's and doctoral programmes.

Table 1. *Demographic characteristics of respondents (N = 38)*

Characteristic	N	Mode
Gender		
Male	11	29.0
Female	27	71.0
Age group		
18–24 yrs	20	52.6
25–30 yrs	10	26.3
31–35 yrs	4	10.5
36 + yrs	4	10.5
Entry-level English		
Beginner	9	23.7
Intermediate	11	28.9
Advanced	18	47.4
Prior writing course		
Yes	18	47.5
No	20	52.5

Although nearly half of the respondents rated their English proficiency as advanced when they first arrived, only a minority had received formal instruction in academic writing in Saudi Arabia before beginning their studies. Business, STEM, and Humanities/Social Sciences were

all represented, with STEM and health-related fields accounting for the largest proportion. These characteristics reflect the diversity of scholarship recipients while also pointing to potential variation in writing preparation across fields. Full details appear in Table 1 above. The dataset was inspected for missing or extreme values; no anomalous patterns were found and the small amount of missing data (under 2% of total cells) was handled with pair-wise deletion.

Scale structure and reliability

The thirty Likert statements were grouped, in advance, into six components reflecting key dimensions of academic writing. Internal-consistency estimates ranged from $\alpha = .28$ to $\alpha = .70$ (see Table 2). *Coherence & Organisation* and *Citation & Referencing* reached the conventional threshold for reliability, whereas *Critical Thinking & Argumentation* and *Discipline-specific Language & Style* showed weaker coherence, suggesting that views on these higher-order skills were still unsettled when students first arrived in the UK. While internal consistency was acceptable for some components, reliability was lower for constructs such as critical thinking and discipline-specific language. These results should therefore be interpreted as indicative of emerging perceptions rather than stable, fully formed constructs.

Table 2. *Component means, dispersion, and reliability*

Components	A	M	SD	95% CI
Coherence & Organisation	.70	3.16	0.83	2.88 – 3.44
Transitions & Cohesion	.54	3.38	0.68	3.17 – 3.59
Critical Thinking & Argumentation	.32	3.07	0.58	2.88 – 3.27
Discipline-specific Language & Style	.28	3.16	0.57	2.97 – 3.36
Citation & Referencing	.65	3.03	0.81	2.75 – 3.32
Data Presentation & Formats	.50	2.96	0.67	2.75 – 3.17

Overall pattern of perceived preparation

The questionnaire was structured around six core components of academic writing: coherence and organisation, use of transitions, critical thinking and argumentation, discipline-specific language, citation and referencing, and data presentation. Each component consisted of five items, and responses were scored on a five-point scale.

Overall, the reported level of preparation across the six components was moderate. Mean scores ranged from 2.96 to 3.38, suggesting that students felt somewhat prepared in general terms, but less so when it came to the more specialised demands of academic writing. The grand mean across all thirty statements was 3.12, indicating a middle-of-the-scale sense of readiness. Students felt most confident in using transitions and cohesive devices, which included familiarity with linking words such as "however" and "therefore," and with maintaining flow between ideas and paragraphs. This aligns with their comfort in handling the mechanics that keep a text flowing, such as transitions, cohesive devices, and paragraphing. Conversely, they reported the least confidence in handling discipline-specific formats or

integrating visual data. The lowest-scoring component was data presentation and discipline-specific formatting, which involved tasks such as incorporating visuals or figures and adapting to field-specific genres like lab reports or case studies. Citation and referencing also received relatively low scores, particularly in relation to understanding institutional expectations around plagiarism. Notably, the highest-rated individual item concerned recognising the need for more guidance on structuring longer texts (M = 3.77, SD = 1.09), whereas the lowest concerned understanding UK plagiarism expectations (M = 2.58, SD = 1.18). Given the lower internal consistency of these subscales, findings related to critical thinking and discipline-specific language should be interpreted as indicative of students' emerging perceptions rather than as precise measures of established competence.

Confidence in critical thinking and academic argumentation was neither particularly high nor particularly low, reflecting perhaps that while students were aware of the need to express a point of view and support it with evidence, the standards for doing so in a UK academic context were still unclear at the start of their studies. The same could be said for the use of discipline-specific language and tone, where responses suggested an awareness of expectations but limited familiarity with how to meet them. These trends are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. *Mean scores across writing components (N = 38)*

Writing component	Mean	SD
Transitions and cohesion	3.38	0.68
Coherence and organisation	3.16	0.83
Discipline-specific language and style	3.16	0.57
Critical thinking and argumentation	3.07	0.58
Citation and referencing	3.03	0.81
Data presentation and formatting	2.96	0.67

Influence of Proficiency and Prior Instruction

Composite means were compared using independent-samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA. First, Gender was not associated with differences in perceived preparation, $t(36) = -0.70$, $p = .49$. Second, field of study showed a modest, non-significant trend, $F(2, 35) = 2.56$, $p = .091$; business students expressed slightly higher confidence than their peers in STEM or Health disciplines. Third, entry-level English proficiency emerged as a clear predictor of perceived preparation, $F(2, 35) = 7.21$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .29$. Students who rated themselves as advanced (*M* = 3.35, *SD* = 0.55) felt more prepared than those in the intermediate (*M* = 2.72, *SD* = 0.53) and beginner groups (*M* = 2.71, *SD* = 0.50), with post-hoc contrasts significant at the .05 level. Finally, prior academic-writing instruction positively influenced scores on Citation & Referencing (*M* = 3.29 vs. 2.79) and Data Presentation (*M* = 3.17 vs. 2.76), though it did not significantly affect other components. No interaction was found between field of study and English proficiency.

Two background factors (self-rated English proficiency and prior academic writing instruction) were associated with differences in students' reported preparedness. Participants who identified themselves as having an advanced level of English when they arrived in the UK expressed greater confidence across nearly all components of writing. These differences were particularly marked in citation practices, argumentation, and data presentation, suggesting that stronger language skills helped students navigate the more complex features of academic writing more easily.

A similar pattern emerged for participants who had previously received writing instruction in Saudi Arabia. Although overall levels of confidence were not significantly higher, these students expressed more comfort with citation and referencing, and with tasks involving structured presentation of information, such as using charts or writing in specific formats. By contrast, neither gender nor field of study appeared to influence students' perceptions in a consistent way. Business students showed slightly more confidence on average, particularly in relation to structuring texts and using formal academic tone, but the differences were not large enough to suggest distinct patterns across disciplines.

Qualitative Insights

Participants were invited to elaborate on any additional challenges they had encountered and to recommend elements they felt should be embedded in future pre-departure training. Nearly every respondent took advantage of this opportunity, producing a corpus of reflective comments that deepened, and in several cases clarified, the quantitative trends. Three closely intertwined needs emerged. These themes mirror the lower confidence scores for citation practice and discipline-specific writing, underscoring how technical skills are entwined with broader academic acculturation.

First, students called for discipline-specific genre models that go beyond generic essay templates. Across all fields, respondents requested concrete exemplars of "proper UK-style lab reports," "case-study write-ups," and "annotated humanities essays marked up with tutor feedback." Several health-science participants noted that, while they were accustomed to recording experimental procedures, they were uncertain how to transform those notes into a report that aligned with British conventions for rhetorical structure, tense usage, and citation of clinical guidelines. Humanities students, in turn, expressed a desire for side-by-side "good" and "developing" essays illustrating how evidence is woven into argument and how critical voice is signalled. Others wanted annotated essays or writing samples that showed what "good writing" looked like from a tutor's perspective.

Second, the narrative data underscored a persistent anxiety about academic integrity and source use. Many students admitted confusion over how to paraphrase effectively or how to interpret similarity scores in Turnitin reports. The anxiety around unintentionally committing plagiarism was especially strong among students with limited prior exposure to referencing systems. Many respondents described a "fear of plagiarism" anchored in two uncertainties: how rigorously UK institutions police originality, and how to interpret similarity percentages generated by Turnitin. One student confessed, "I spent more time reducing the similarity score than improving my argument because I didn't know what was acceptable." Several noted that,

despite previous exposure to reference lists, they had never practised the paraphrasing techniques required to synthesise multiple sources in a single paragraph. This concern resonates with the comparatively low component mean for Citation & Referencing and suggests that students regard plagiarism avoidance not as a peripheral skill but as an integral part of disciplinary identity.

Third, respondents highlighted the need for explicit orientation to the dialogic feedback culture characteristic of UK higher education. Whereas feedback on written work in their prior experience was "final and summative," students were often surprised to discover that UK lecturers expect multiple cycles of revision in response to marginal comments and rubric-based guidance. One participant remarked, "In Saudi, feedback was the end of the process; here it feels like the beginning of a negotiation." The same student linked this unfamiliar expectation to heightened pressure: "I wasn't sure whether I was allowed to push back or just accept every note."

These qualitative insights reinforce the quantitative pattern of moderate overall confidence coupled with specific gaps in genre knowledge, source management, and academic socialisation. That is, students felt they had a general foundation in writing, but lacked familiarity with genre expectations, source use, and the conventions of academic engagement in the UK.They also emphasise that writing preparation cannot be confined to surface-level mechanics; rather, it must address the tacit conventions, discipline-specific textual forms, ethical intertextuality, and iterative feedback practices, that shape scholarly communication in the in the UK context. Without targeted support in these areas, students may continue to experience academic writing as ambiguous, emotionally taxing, and misaligned with their prior learning experiences.

Summary and Synthesis

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative findings offer a coherent picture of the writing challenges encountered by internationally mobile students as they enter Anglophone higher education systems. Using Saudi scholarship students as a representative cohort, the study highlights a clear pattern: while students typically arrive with a sound grasp of general essay mechanics, they have limited exposure to the more complex, discipline-specific dimensions of academic writing. Those with stronger entry-level English proficiency and prior writing instruction reported greater confidence, particularly in citation and source use. However, even within this subgroup, persistent challenges emerged across three interrelated areas: (1) mastering discipline-specific genres, (2) meeting UK standards of academic integrity, and (3) engaging with the dialogic, feedback-driven nature of academic writing in British higher education. These patterns underscore the need for more targeted, pre-departure preparation as part of a broader internationalisation strategy aimed at supporting equitable academic transitions.

Higher self-rated proficiency softens, but does not eliminate, these gaps, while disciplinary background exerts only a modest influence. The comparatively low reliability observed for the critical-thinking and disciplinary-style scales suggests that these constructs are still taking shape at the pre-departure stage and will therefore benefit from example-rich, multi-modal preparation. That is, the results underline the need for early, targeted training that offers

concrete genre models, explicit guidance on plagiarism protocols, and rehearsal of feedback-driven revision practices. Such insights provide a strong foundation for designing context-sensitive, in-country programmes and for refining cross-disciplinary EAP provision (issues taken up in the Discussion).

<div align="center">**Discussion**</div>

This study set out to investigate academic writing preparedness in the context of internationalisation, using Saudi scholarship students as a focused case to explore broader transition challenges faced by students entering UK higher education. The findings reveal a nuanced picture: while participants expressed moderate confidence in foundational skills such as coherence and transitions, they encountered greater difficulty with higher-order academic competencies, including critical thinking, source integration, and discipline-specific language. These patterns point to a misalignment between general English preparation and the rhetorical demands of UK academic writing. The results not only extend existing research on international student adjustment (Andrade, 2006; Zhang & Mi, 2010), but also offer a context-rich account of how nationally situated cohorts can illuminate broader dynamics of academic transition, with implications for EAP pedagogy, institutional support, and internationalisation policy.

While challenges related to critical thinking and plagiarism have been widely documented in EAP research (e.g., Hyland, 2006; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998), the contribution of the present study does not lie in reiterating the existence of these difficulties. Rather, its originality lies in identifying a specific form of misalignment between pre-departure English preparation and the epistemic and dialogic demands of UK academic writing. In particular, the findings foreground feedback literacy and revision as under-examined transition points, revealing how students may be prepared to produce texts, but not to engage with writing as an iterative, feedback-driven process embedded within disciplinary practice. To better understand the underlying causes of these patterns, the following section interprets the findings through established theoretical frameworks that illuminate the relationship between prior educational socialisation and academic writing development.

Interpretation in Light of Theoretical Frameworks

Framing the results through Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory reveals that many of the observed difficulties stem from a misalignment between the cultural and pedagogical expectations embedded in Saudi education and those operative in UK higher education. In particular, the emphasis on teacher-directed learning and rote memorisation in the Saudi context (Al-Nouh et al., 2014) does not adequately prepare students for the dialogic, evidence-based, and critical writing required in UK universities. This explains the reported discomfort with revision cycles, source use, and the articulation of a critical voice; features central to British academic discourse but unfamiliar to many students in their pre-departure experience. While a socio-cultural perspective helps explain how prior educational practices shape students' writing experiences, it does not fully account for how preparatory instruction aligns with the specific demands students later encounter.

Moreover, the disparities in students' preparedness across different components of writing suggest a lack of constructive alignment (Biggs, 1996) in existing preparatory programs. While general writing mechanics are often addressed, more cognitively demanding tasks, such as integrating sources, employing disciplinary rhetoric, and interpreting feedback, are largely neglected. This misalignment compromises the efficacy of pre-departure training and leaves students underprepared for the demands of their degree programs. This lack of alignment is further compounded when academic writing is treated as a generic skill rather than as a practice embedded within disciplinary communities.

The weaker internal consistency observed for constructs such as critical thinking and disciplinary style supports Hyland's (2006, 2012) argument that academic writing is deeply embedded within disciplinary cultures and cannot be effectively developed through generic instruction alone. The findings suggest that learners do not arrive with fully developed schemata for higher-order academic writing; rather, their understanding of criticality and disciplinary discourse is still forming and remains sensitive to context, genre, and institutional expectations. From a socio-cultural perspective, this pattern is consistent with the view that such constructs continue to develop through mediated participation and exposure, particularly during the early stages of transition into Anglophone higher education. Viewed together, these theoretical perspectives provide a framework for situating the present findings within, and in dialogue with, existing empirical research on international students' academic writing experiences.

Linking to Prior Research

Consistent with recent research on Saudi EFL learners, this study found that students frequently lacked explicit instruction in core academic writing tasks, particularly in citation and referencing. Although nearly half of the participants reported having received some form of writing instruction in Saudi Arabia, their low confidence in avoiding plagiarism and interpreting Turnitin reports suggests that this prior training was either insufficient or not well aligned with UK academic expectations. Similar concerns were raised by Alsaedi and Alhumsi (2024), who reported that Saudi undergraduates demonstrated limited understanding of plagiarism and struggled with source integration during e-learning sessions. This finding aligns with Issrani et al. (2021), whose cross-sectional study revealed significant gaps in Saudi students' knowledge and attitudes toward plagiarism, highlighting the need for clearer, context-specific academic integrity training within higher education. These findings not only resonate with earlier studies on Saudi learners, but also reflect broader challenges documented across diverse international student populations.

This concern mirrors Keck's (2006) findings that L2 writers often struggle to paraphrase effectively when integrating sources into academic summaries. It also echoes Zhang and Mi (2010), who reported widespread confusion around academic integrity practices among international students. Notably, in the present study, citation and referencing received some of the lowest component scores, reinforcing that students perceived these as particularly challenging aspects of their academic transition. However, quantitative patterns alone do not fully capture how students experience and internalise these challenges during transition.

The qualitative data add richness to these findings by showing how emotional responses (e.g., fear of plagiarism, confusion over feedback, uncertainty about genre conventions) shape students' academic identities and performance. As Hyland (2012) argued, academic writing is not merely a technical skill but a form of identity work. Saudi students' apprehensions highlight their struggle not only to learn new conventions but also to internalise new academic values. Collectively, these quantitative and qualitative insights point to the need for targeted pedagogical and policy interventions that address both the technical and experiential dimensions of academic writing transition.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings point to several interrelated priorities for policymakers, programme designers, and UK-based practitioners who support Saudi scholarship students. First, pre-departure writing provision requires a fundamental shift in focus. Classroom time should move beyond decontextualised grammar drills or generic five-paragraph essays and instead immerse students in annotated exemplars that mirror the rhetorical and formal demands of their future disciplines, such as UK-style lab reports for science students, case-study write-ups for business majors, and tutor-commented critical essays for those entering the humanities. Such discipline-sensitive materials respond directly to Dudley-Evans and St. John's (1998) call for English for Academic Purposes instruction that is aligned with authentic genre expectations. Taken together, these findings suggest that the central issue is not a lack of awareness of academic writing expectations per se, but a misalignment between generic pre-departure instruction and the situated practices through which academic writing is developed and evaluated in UK higher education. Beyond genre awareness, the findings also raise important concerns about students' understanding of ethical writing practices within UK academic contexts.

A second implication concerns ethical writing practice. Participants' uncertainty about paraphrasing and Turnitin similarity scores demonstrates that academic-integrity training cannot wait until students arrive in the UK. Modules on source synthesis, responsible citation, and the interpretation of originality reports need to be embedded in Saudi-based preparatory courses so that students depart with a clear, confident understanding of plagiarism norms and the reasoning behind them. Closely related to ethical writing is students' ability to interpret and act upon feedback, a dimension that emerged as particularly challenging in the present study.

The results also highlight the importance of feedback literacy. Many students regarded tutor comments as final verdicts rather than invitations to enter a drafting dialogue. Pre-departure programmes should therefore familiarise learners with the iterative nature of feedback in UK higher education and give them guided practice in revising, querying, and negotiating their responses. This cultural recalibration is central to developing the independent and reflective stance expected at British universities. These pedagogical challenges are further intensified by the emotional and psychological pressures associated with academic and cultural transition.

Equally important are the affective and psychological dimensions of transition. Fear of plagiarism, uncertainty about 'speaking back' to lecturers, and the broader anxiety of cultural adjustment can impede writing development. Institutions can mitigate these pressures by

coupling skills workshops with mentoring schemes that pair new arrivals with senior Saudi or UK students; post-arrival writing clinics co-taught by UK academics and Saudi instructors can further contextualise expectations in a culturally resonant manner. At the same time, the data indicate that students do not experience these challenges uniformly, underscoring the need for differentiated forms of support.

Finally, the data make it clear that one-size-fits-all training is inadequate. Self-rated English proficiency strongly predicted perceived readiness, so support needs to be tiered: intensive, scaffolded instruction for beginners and intermediate students, and more advanced, discipline-specific writing development for those who already possess higher linguistic competence. Differentiated pathways will ensure that each subgroup receives the depth and complexity of preparation it requires, rather than a uniform curriculum pitched at the middle.

In a nutshell, these implications call for a cohesive international policy framework that connects national pre-departure provision, such as the Saudi model, with in-sessional support at host institutions. This approach ensures that students' academic writing development is continuous, context aware, and aligned with the disciplinary and rhetorical demands of global higher education.

Limitations

This study contributes to the growing body of research on international student preparedness by offering a context-specific account of Saudi students' academic writing transitions into UK higher education. By integrating quantitative and qualitative data, the study provides a nuanced understanding of writing readiness that extends beyond surface-level language skills to include socio-cultural, disciplinary, and affective dimensions of academic writing. In doing so, it demonstrates how students' perceived preparedness is shaped not only by linguistic competence but also by prior educational socialisation, feedback practices, and alignment between pre-departure instruction and institutional expectations. This integrated perspective allows the study to generate actionable insights for EAP pedagogy and policy, while also reinforcing the argument that academic writing development during transition is a situated and multi-dimensional process rather than a uniform or transferable skill.

Nevertheless, the study is not without limitations. The sample size, while adequate for exploratory analysis, constrains the generalisability of the findings, and the reliance on self-report measures may introduce bias, as participants may overestimate or underestimate their actual level of academic writing preparedness. In addition, the quantitative component of the study is subject to statistical limitations. The modest scale of the dataset and the lower internal consistency observed for some subscales indicate that these findings should be interpreted with caution and treated as exploratory rather than definitive. As a result, conclusions drawn from these specific dimensions are framed cautiously and are intended to highlight areas for further investigation rather than definitive claims about students' writing competence.

In addition, the uneven disciplinary distribution of the sample, particularly the limited representation of students from the social sciences, constrains the extent to which disciplinary differences can be interpreted. Any patterns related to field of study are therefore framed as exploratory and indicative, rather than as definitive comparisons across disciplines. Future research would benefit from longitudinal designs that follow students across stages of

transition, as well as from the inclusion of direct analyses of student writing evaluated against discipline-specific rubrics, in order to provide a more comprehensive and empirically grounded account of academic writing development.

Conclusion

As universities continue to expand internationalisation agendas, academic writing preparedness remains a central factor in students' academic success. This study shows that while Saudi scholarship students often arrive in UK higher education with confidence in general writing mechanics, they experience difficulty with higher-order academic practices, particularly ethical source use, genre adaptation, and engagement with dialogic feedback. These findings indicate that academic writing challenges are shaped less by linguistic deficiency than by misalignment between pre-departure preparation and the rhetorical, disciplinary, and ethical expectations of UK academic contexts.

Interpreted through socio-cultural and constructive-alignment perspectives, the findings reinforce the view that academic writing is not a detachable language skill but a socially situated practice developed through guided participation in disciplinary communities. Generic, grammar-focused preparation is therefore insufficient; students require mediated exposure to genres, feedback practices, and academic integrity norms that structure writing in UK higher education.

From a policy perspective, the message is unequivocal. Ministries and scholarship bodies that invest millions in overseas tuition must also invest in the intellectual "soft infrastructure" that allows students to exploit that tuition fully. Exemplar-rich, discipline-sensitive writing modules (delivered in Saudi Arabia but co-designed with UK academics) would give students a rehearsal space for the textual and ethical moves they will later perform under assessment pressure. Parallel reforms are needed in UK institutions: arrival-week orientations should move beyond campus tours and IT log-ins to include explicit coaching in feedback literacy and source management, preferably in collaboration with Saudi cultural societies to ensure relevance and psychological safety.

The study's limitations, including reliance on self-report data, a modest sample size, a cross-sectional design, and the lower internal consistency observed for some quantitative subscales, do not blunt its central claim; rather, they help chart a research agenda. These constraints indicate that the quantitative findings should be interpreted as exploratory and perception-based rather than as definitive measures of writing competence. Future research should adopt longitudinal and mixed-method designs to trace how genre knowledge, citation practices, and feedback engagement develop over time.

Overall, the study argues that supporting international students' writing development requires moving beyond assumptions of awareness or ability and toward addressing structural gaps between preparation and practice. Bridging these gaps is a shared responsibility across sending and receiving institutions and is essential for enabling international students to participate fully and confidently in global academic communities.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Artificial Intelligence Statement

AI tools were used solely to support language refinement and clarity. All content was generated under full human supervision, with the author maintaining responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the work. AI served as a writing aid and did not replace scholarly judgment or original intellectual contribution.

References

Alharbi, N. S. (2021). Proposed model to assist Saudi postgraduate students in their English academic writing. *Arab World English Journal, 12*(1), 527–542. https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol12no1.34

Alhazmi, A., & Nyland, B. (2013). The Saudi Arabian international student experience: From a gender-segregated society to studying in a mixed-gender environment. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education, 43*(3), 346–365. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2012.722347

Al-Nouh, N. A., Abdul-Kareem, M. M., & Taqi, H. A. (2014). EFL college students' perceptions of the difficulties in oral presentation as a form of assessment. *International Journal of Higher Education, 3*(2), 51–69. https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v4n1p136

Alnufaie, M., & Grenfell, M. (2014). EFL writing apprehension: The macro or the micro? A case study of Saudi EFL students. *Modern Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 6(2), 38–56.

Alsaedi, N. S., & Alhumsi, M. H. (2024). Saudi undergraduate students' perceptions of plagiarism: A case of EFL research writing tasks during e-learning sessions. *Heliyon, 10*(22), Article e39804. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e39804

Andrade, M. S. (2006). International students in English-speaking universities: Adjustment factors. *Journal of Research in International Education, 5*(2), 131–154. https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240906065589

Bacha, N. N. (2002). Developing learners' academic writing skills in higher education: A study for educational reform. *Language and Education*, 16(3), 161–177. https://doi.org/10.1080/09500780208666826

Biggs, J. (1996). Enhancing teaching through constructive alignment. *Higher Education, 32*(3), 347–364. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00138871

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2008). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Brutt-Griffler, J., Nurunnabi, M., & Kim, S. (2020). International Saudi Arabia Students' Level of Preparedness: Identifying Factors and Maximizing Study Abroad Experience Using a Mixed-Methods Approach. *Journal of International Students*, *10*(4), 976–1004. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v10i4.839

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE.

Dudley-Evans, T., & St. John, M. J. (1998). *Developments in English for specific purposes: A multi-disciplinary approach*. Cambridge University Press.

Evans, S., & Green, C. (2007). Is EAP necessary? A survey of Hong Kong tertiary students. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 6*(1), 3–17. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2006.11.005

Hyland, K. (2006). *English for academic purposes: An advanced resource book*. Routledge.

Hyland, K. (2012). *Disciplinary identities: Individuality and community in academic discourse*. Cambridge University Press.

Issrani, R., Alduraywish, A., Prabhu, N., Alam, M. K., Basri, R., Aljohani, F. M., Alolait, M. A. A., Alghamdi, A. Y. A., Alfawzan, M. M. N., & Alruwili, A. H. M. (2021). Knowledge and attitude

of Saudi students towards plagiarism-A cross-sectional survey study. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 18*(23), 12303. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182312303

Keck, C. (2006). *The use of paraphrase in summary writing: A comparison of L1 and L2 writers.* Journal of Second Language Writing, 15(4), 261–278. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2006.09.006

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.

Zhang, Y., & Mi, Y. (2010). Another look at the language difficulties of international students. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 14*(4), 371–388. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315309336031

Copyrights