

Lessons Learned from
universities who are widening
participation:

Supporting an unbounded
approach to the reading
practices of First Year
Undergraduate students at UCL

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What is a Widening-Participation (WP) University?

- A definition of a WP university is where a student may fall into a WP target postcode, have experience of being in care or have been to a school with a low attainment level (UCAS, 2021).
- An example is the University of Suffolk (UoS) that has a unique demographic, compared to other universities in the East of England, where 66.8% (2017/2018) of the student population is made up of mature students and 11% come from BAME (University of Suffolk, 2020).
- UCL East is part of UCL's development for being an open and accessible WP campus, as plans were approved to help close the deprivation gap with the rest of London with the London Legacy Development Corporation (LLDC).

What do we mean by academic reading skills?

Reading in an academic context is different from everyday reading. Academic reading requires a more active, probing and **recursive** strategy than does recreational reading.

- Reading strategically is integral to the process of understanding your topic, finding research materials, and developing your ideas.
- Academic reading involves layers of:
 - asking questions
 - reflecting on relationships among parts of the text
 - interpreting meaning
 - making connections with other readings
 - refining your topic and purpose

Source:

York University (n.d) *Academic Reading*. Available at: <https://spark.library.yorku.ca/effective-reading-strategies-academic-reading/>

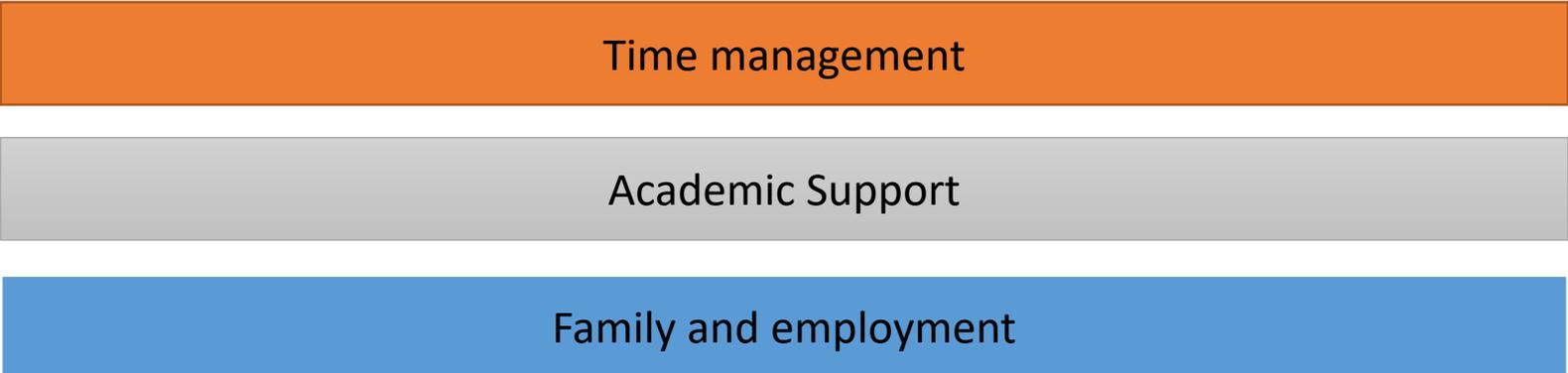


Research Background (1)

- Primary research was carried out using interviews, questionnaires with first year undergraduates and academic staff relating to attitudes and support with academic reading within a WP university in East Anglia around 'high reading' areas such as Law, Psychology, English and History.
- Undertaken as to fulfill the requirements of a Master's, which has broader implications for practice, which will be discussed today. I was a Librarian, within the organisation and anecdotally noticed issues with information literacy, with my conversations and observations with students and lecturers
- Research questions were around, **what are undergraduate students' views on academic readings? How are undergraduate students currently engaging with academic readings? How can undergraduate students' engagement with academic reading be improved?**
- A high proportion of participants reported they had a learning or physical disability or an additional need

Research Background (2)

- WP students have other commitments rather than being "traditional" full-time students, such as undertaking paid employment and family / child commitments that impacts on their ability to engage with academic reading
- Thematic Analysis was used to interpret the data: 3 major themes emerged:



Time management

Academic Support

Family and employment

Theme: Time management

Students who declared they had a disability often struggled with time management and needed more time to complete their readings and other academic tasks

Some students were unaware of the support available to them, such as extended library loans and assistive technology, if they had a disability

Time management was helped as mostly students could locate their readings on the Virtual Learning Environment, which the tutor had added for them

Most students attempted any 'essential' readings but few did any recommended

Theme: Academic support

Lecturer support was seen as important in selecting the correct readings for students to engage with

An integral first year Academic Skills module in some undergraduate courses was seen as highly beneficial to teach key skills

Support from the library, in terms of workshops were highly valued, but also the 1:1 support from specifically Academic Skills Advisers and Librarians was highly regarded

Peer support between some students was evident to help with motivation and skills development e.g note taking

Theme: Family and employment

Many students work part-time to support themselves and their families, which reduced the time they could commit to their studies and specifically academic reading

Research suggested that if reading were deemed as 'critical' students would find the time to do with it, even with conflicts in their personal lives, showing their motivation and achieving the goal (e.g passing the assignment)

UCL East & Widening Participation

- UCL Access and Participation Plan
- UCL East Equity & Inclusion Strategy
- UCL East offers a foundation programme, so students can access courses through non-traditional means, with plans for more!
- The strategic vision is half of UCL East's UK students will be from target access backgrounds

Academic Communications Centre

They are doing a fantastic job supporting students!



Undergraduate

Support includes:

- Credit-bearing modules: Academic Writing in English and English Language Skills for Academic Purposes
- Academic communication workshops
- One-to-one tutorials
- Online resources
- Writing retreats

Postgraduate Taught

Support includes:

- Credit-bearing modules: Academic Writing in English and English Language Skills for Academic Purposes
- Courses and workshops in academic writing, presentations and dissertation writing
- One-to-one tutorials
- Online resources
- Writing retreats

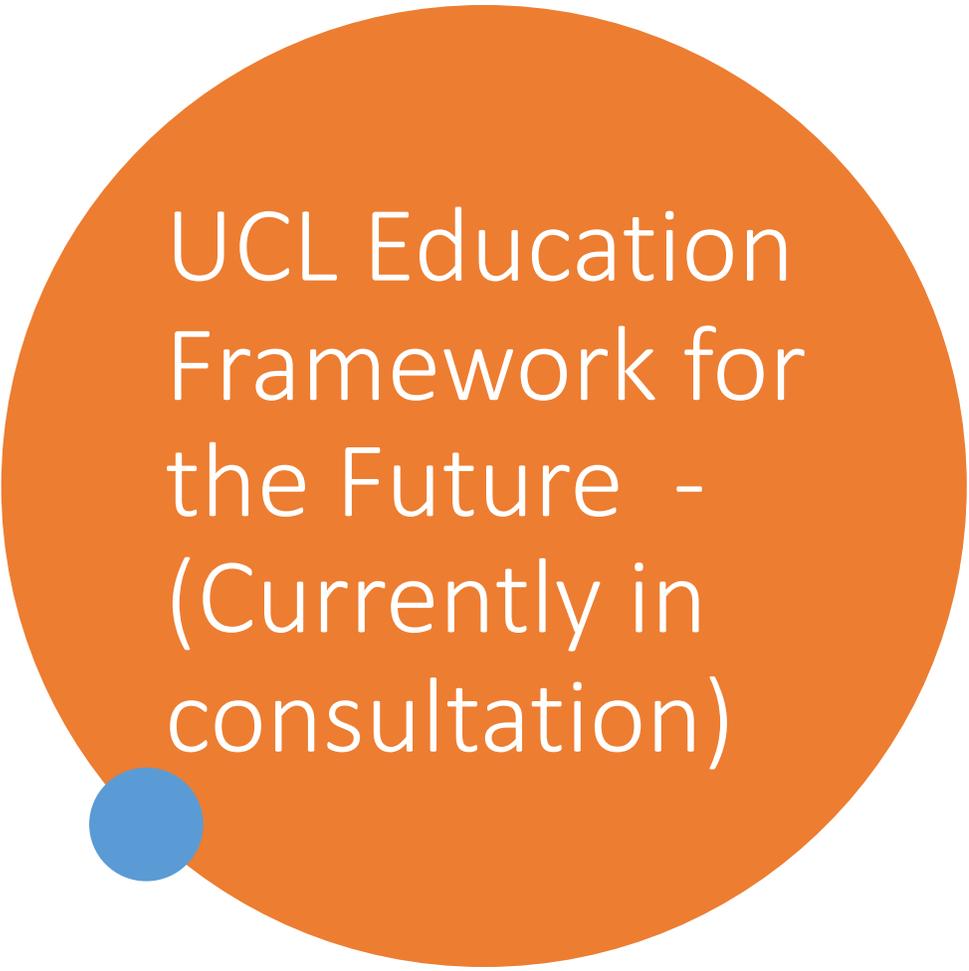
Postgraduate Research

Support includes:

- Writing your PhD Thesis
- Pronunciation and Academic Discussions
- Academic Presentations and Pronunciation
- Preparing for your Viva
- Online resources
- Writing retreats

Source: UCL (2023) *UCL Academic Communication Centre*. Available at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/languages-international-education/ucl-academic-communication-centr>

In addition, what are we doing at UCL around supporting reading? Do we assume that all our students read and have the skills how to read efficiently on entry to university?



UCL Education
Framework for
the Future -
(Currently in
consultation)



Acknowledges that skills are important and to establish an Institute of Higher Education, Development and Support (HEDS) to bring up academic work together e.g information literacy skills / reading

Potential Implications for institutional practice

- Research suggests that Academic skills and reading need to be integral to course design and programmes, and not a 'bolt on' or used purely during induction sessions (e.g Baik & Grieg, 2009)
- Development of peer-support to increase engagement and skills (e.g Chester, et al, 2018) in reading.
- Can we consider our curriculum design to incorporate reading skills, in preparation for PMAP?
- An assessed academic module can build upon skills (to include reading) in lieu of an access to HE programme, which previously supported skills development
- WP students appreciate 1:1 bespoke support with specialist advisers to help develop academic skills e.g critical writing, note taking, academic reading skills
- Disabled students still need more support with assistive technology and resources
- Are we still focused about the functions of accessibility (e.g use of screen readers, font size) rather than the information literacy aspects of reading?
- Clear module guides with signposted and easily accessible essential readings and is this clear on the VLE?





References

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Questions?

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