



## **The Essay Route Map: helping students to navigate their academic writing**

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### ***Presentation abstract***

The Essay Route Map is an institution-wide initiative designed to help improve students' essay writing skills. The interactive online course guides students through the process of writing an essay and brings together the wealth of resources and tools available at the University of Lancashire. Students can feel overwhelmed due to the volume of information available and do not always know what is expected of them in HE, particularly as many of our students come from non-traditional backgrounds. Students enter university with preconceived ideas about what to expect based on previous schemas, such as school, college or the workplace, and often these do not align with expectations at HE level, leading to low attainment. As McEwan (2017, p.511) highlights, the 'transition into higher education...and the early experiences of higher education (HE) during the transition period could impact on the academic outcomes of students well into their program of studies'. This has implications for student attainment and retention.

The Essay Route Map therefore sought to provide scaffolding to help students with the transition to HE by supporting their development of key academic skills. The course can be embedded on a VLE or completed independently via the Learning Development Team resources webpage. This paper outlined the pedagogical rationale for the Essay Route Map and the pilot of the project with two apprenticeship cohorts. It covered the benefits of

embedding the course on the VLE as part of a blended learning approach as well as the inclusivity aspects accounted for throughout the project.

**Keywords:** essay writing skills; higher education transition; blended learning; academic support; inclusivity.

## ***Community response***

During the presentation, the speaker introduced the Essay Route Map, an institution-wide, interactive online course designed to enhance students' essay writing skills and support their transition into higher education (HE). A central theme was addressing the challenges students face when entering HE, especially those from non-traditional backgrounds who often bring preconceived ideas from previous educational or workplace experiences that may not align with HE expectations. The resource aimed to provide clear scaffolding to ease this transition, helping students develop critical academic skills, such as critical thinking, planning, academic reading, writing, grammar and learning from feedback.

Another key theme was inclusivity – the course was intentionally designed to be accessible and adaptable, recognising the diverse needs of students. The flexibility of the Essay Route Map allowed students the autonomy to navigate through the material either sequentially or selectively, based on their individual needs and readiness. This blended learning approach, with the course embedded in the virtual learning environment (VLE) or accessible independently, supported varied learning preferences and contexts.

The interactive components – including practical tasks, knowledge checks, and a final quiz awarding certificates – encouraged active engagement and reinforced learning. The presentation highlighted the benefits of embedding such a resource within the VLE to promote sustained student interaction and retention.

During the Q&A and discussion, attendees expressed enthusiasm for the resource's flexible structure, recognising its potential to empower students through autonomy while providing vital academic support. One participant shared that this model inspired their institution's plans to redevelop online resources with a similar learner-centred approach. This exchange underscored the broader relevance and applicability of the Essay Route

Map's design principles, especially in supporting student success and inclusivity across diverse higher education contexts.

### **Next steps and additional questions**

How do you see this resource intersecting with the current prevalence of generative AI use in students? Do you see your Essay Route Map as going some way towards supporting students to not make the quick and easy switch to AI?

### ***Authors' reflection***

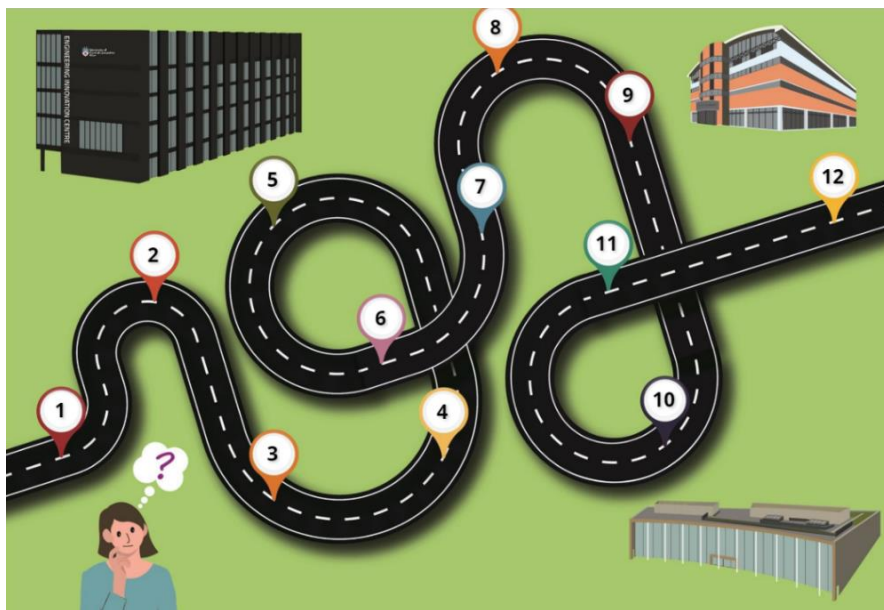
Academic writing can be a challenging aspect of study for many students, as it requires both low order skills, such as spelling, grammar and punctuation, and high order skills such as critical thinking, organising text, synthesising and choosing a formal register (Hughes and Schwab, 2010). Students can often feel overwhelmed due to the volume of information available to them and sometimes do not know what is expected of them in HE. Navigating websites such as our Student Hub can also be problematic for some students. This is particularly pertinent at the University of Lancashire as many students come from non-traditional backgrounds. The Essay Route Map guides students through the process of writing an essay and brings together the wealth of resources and tools available to them to assist with the development of academic writing skills.

The project was borne from a collaboration between the Learning Development Team based in the Centre for Collaborative Learning (CCL) and several services. The Learning Development Team was established in 2021 to provide an extended, dedicated central team working closely with schools. Through collaboration meetings, learning developers, school academic skills leads, subject librarians and educational developers worked together to consider school provision and work to address academic skills development. One of the central aims of the Learning Development Team is to support staff in embedding academic skills in the curriculum and addressing students' specific academic skills development needs. This starts with an initial dialogue about specific student cohort requirements and how bespoke workshops or interventions could be co-constructed to address student needs. From initial discussions with the Academic Skills Lead for the School of Psychology and Humanities and subsequent surveys given to three schools, we

identified a need to support students with essay writing. Ethical approval was granted permitting use of the data from this project for research purposes.

A RISE package was the chosen platform for the Essay Route Map, due to its ease of creating an asynchronous, interactive educational content. Other delegates who attended shared that they had also found the RISE platform functionality relatively easy to use. Content can be easily copied and pasted into the RISE course. Much of the content for the course was drawn from the resources produced and published by the Learning Development Team on academic skills development available for all students. Additionally, the content for the course drew on the library resources and digital skills tools available to students. The course includes interactive activities, videos, knowledge checks and practical tasks to guide students through the process of writing an essay stage by stage. At the end of the course, students can take a test to consolidate knowledge and receive a certificate of completion. The Essay Route Map can be embedded within a module on Blackboard, where students can be tracked, complemented with study skills sessions delivered by either the module tutor or learning development lecturers/subject librarians, or can be completed by students independently via the Learning Development Team's resources pages. The project found that embedding the course on a VLE is more beneficial for student engagement.

Although the course is presented in a linear format, we recognised that essay writing can be a recursive process and that not all students produce essays in the same way. For this reason, a road map was developed where students can choose which section of the course they would like to access (see Figure 1). The course contains different strategies that students can experiment with, and it asks them to reflect on the tools/strategies they found most useful. The aim is that completing the course becomes an explorative journey of self-discovery.

**Figure 1. Navigation tool on the Essay Route Map.**

Essays are still the main mode of assessment in many disciplines, despite the rise of AI. Given current iterations of generative AI, there may be some changes required to assessments to negate abuse of these systems (Yeadon et al., 2023), which pose some challenges to the value of the essay. However, we would argue that the essay is still a valuable means of helping students develop proficient literacy skills. The skills required for essay writing are multifaceted and include planning and organisation skills; acquisition of research skills; learning to write coherently, succinctly and grammatically; understanding how to construct arguments and synthesise literature (Wingate, 2012); and developing critical thinking skills (Haggis, 2006; Nesi and Gardner, 2006). The essay allows students to develop an array of transferable skills.

According to McEwan (2017, p.514) 'essays are an area of assessment where student expectations and interpretation of the rules and criteria often do not match those of the teacher'. His study found that most aspects of essay writing were in alignment, apart from some nuanced areas such as constructing an argument and critical engagement (McEwan, 2017). Although, overall, students tended to know what their lecturers expected, the essays students produced were often not in alignment, a scenario undoubtedly familiar to many who teach or support learning. If students appear to understand *what* is expected of them, then perhaps they do not fully understand *how* to do what is expected of them. Indeed, as Haggis (2006, p.524) claims 'these underlying principles are usually only implicit in course outlines, assessment instructions...and are therefore difficult for those

unfamiliar with the discourse to see and understand'. It is then the difference between knowing *what to do* and knowing *how to do it*. This tacit knowledge, also referred to as the hidden curriculum, can remain a mystery and can disadvantage students. For example, how do they write academically, write grammatically correct sentences, construct a coherent paragraph, structure an argument, engage critically, synthesise sources, and so forth. To further compound this, in some disciplines, academics may have tacit knowledge of essay writing skills but may not have the explicit specialist knowledge required to teach academic writing (Elton, 2010). In addition to this, courses often do not have the time to focus on academic skills development as pressure to cover subject content often takes precedence.

When students lack understanding of what is expected of them or feel overwhelmed with a task as they do not have a process to follow, this may make the student more likely to use AI tools unethically to produce content. Hence, the Essay Route Map provides a scaffolding for students, focussing on *how* to write an essay and the steps in the essay writing process, which are often missed by students. Focusing on the essay writing journey as a tool for self-discovery rather than the end product (Abegglen et al. (2024) may help to address challenges with AI. Demystifying the essay writing process and providing a framework for students to follow may make them less likely to use AI tools inappropriately. Our plans are to continue to improve the course by adding more videos and AI tools which can be ethically used to help them with the essay writing process. The Essay Route map links with our Academic Integrity Essentials course, which covers AI usage and is mandatory for all students.

The course was piloted with two first-year Chartered Management Degree Apprentice (CMDA) student cohorts, who completed the Essay Route Map as part of their Academic and Work-based Skills module. The course was embedded on Blackboard, where students could be tracked, and was complemented with academic skills and librarian workshops throughout the module. Students were asked to reflect on the skills/knowledge gained from the course as part of a reflective essay, which ensured completion of the course. The pilot provided valuable insights to the development team around its use and the skills gained and utilised, not just on their course but also in their place of work. Feedback was very positive, with students commenting that they found the interactive elements in particular

very useful and that the course equipped them with the requisite skills for their degrees and beyond.

We both thoroughly enjoyed presenting our work and have been thrilled by the response to the project. We have been contacted by delegates who wish to design similar resources, and we are more than happy to share our experience and help those who wish to do so. One delegate asked if the resource could be developed for other aspects of academic skills development or for specific courses. This is a question we have been asked at our institution. The RISE platform is intuitive and easy to use, and the course could easily be adapted for specific programmes/modules or other aspects of academic study such as report writing and dissertations. The course can be copied on the RISE platform and edited to align better with specific course requirements if required. The more bespoke the Essay Route map is to specific programmes, the more likely it is that students will find the content relevant and engage with it. The Essay Route Map is a prime example of what can be achieved when services and academics come together and work collaboratively.

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The authors did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content of the article and have complied with the JLDHE's principles of AI use.

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