

Term papers: A chance or challenge for university students?

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Manuscript received March 13, 2024, revised August 21, 2024, accepted August 24, 2024, and published online November 7, 2024.

Recommended APA Citation

Sarair, S., Trisnawati, I. K., & Nurfaizah, N. (2024). Term papers: A chance or challenge for university students? *Englisia: Journal of Language, Education, and Humanities*, 12(1), 85-96. <https://doi.org/10.22373/ej.v12i1.22840>

ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate how university students perceive term papers as part of their course assignments. The study used qualitative research method to collect data. The data was collected through a semi-structured interview. A total of 20 students majoring in English Education participated in the study and were selected using a convenience sampling technique. The data were then analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that students perceived term papers as an opportunity to develop their knowledge, motivation and confidence. On the other hand, some also perceived that term papers were challenging due to several factors such as lack of learning resources, lack of cooperation, lack of ability to explain difficult topics and lack of academic writing and critical thinking skills. This study suggests that lecturers should encourage student collaboration, offer personalized support and provide explicit guidance on academic writing in order to make term paper assignments easier and more beneficial for all students in higher education.

Keywords: *Course assignments; Student perceptions; Term papers*

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1. Introduction

Academic writing is a key component of higher education learning (Hyland, 2013; Oshima & Hague, 2007). As an essential element of the tertiary learning experience, it requires students to engage in the production of written texts across a variety of subjects (Rafik-Galea et al., 2012). Students at universities are frequently required to submit written assignments that adhere to specified rules and come in various formats, such as summaries, essays, term papers, and research reports (Gloria & Mbato, 2023; Irawati, 2017; Shields, 2010). Term papers are commonly used to evaluate a student's understanding of academic writing principles (Graves et al., 2010).

A term paper, in the context of this study, refers to as a research-based academic paper completed by university students and submitted at the end of a semester (Parker, 2023; Rafik-Galea et al., 2012). A term paper serves as a tool to demonstrate the knowledge of a subject matter, the capacity to conduct research, and the ability to convey complex ideas (Parker, 2023). Writing an academic assignment, such as a term paper, requires throughout planning, research, and execution (Parker, 2023; Tamene, 2020). As such, many university students find writing these papers a complex process because academic writing needs careful consideration and reflection, which involves understanding of specific writing conventions (Gloria & Mbato, 2023; Netta et al., 2024; Rafik-Galea et al., 2012). Moreover, unlike other types of writing, academic writing requires students to pay attention to the structure, purpose, objectivity, evidence, citation, and language of their writing (Tamene, 2020).

When writing term papers, students often encounter difficulties, especially when attempting to clearly express their thoughts and follow a logical writing process for their papers (Farsia & Sarair, 2023; Helmanda et al., 2022; Muniruzzaman & Afrin, 2024; Pitrianti, 2023). Widodo et al. (2020) also found that students' ability to produce academic papers was still extremely low, their use of plagiarism was high, and their paper-writing methodology did not follow the specified rules. Many students who have trouble with academic writing rules resort to plagiarism as a shortcut, which often originates from a lack of understanding about the need of proper reference and the inability to apply these rules properly (Rafik-Galea et al., 2012). Students who are unfamiliar with academic language might also find it challenging to paraphrase and introduce quotes (Ananda et al., 2021; Budjalemba & Listyani, 2020; Helmanda et al., 2022; Sundari & Febriyanti, 2022). Thus, it is significant that university students understand what a term paper is, along with its format and elements, in order to produce a quality academic writing.

In light of the above discussion, this study seeks to address the issue on students' perceptions of term papers as their course assignment. The significance of this study lies in the need to understand the students' voices on term papers so that lecturers can provide assistance to help improve their students' learning process in higher education. In addition, by identifying the challenges that the students encounter when completing term papers, lecturers can work towards minimizing these challenges and creating a more

inclusive and supportive learning environment. This present study aims to identify the students' views on writing term papers in English and the challenges they have faced whilst completing their term papers.

2. Literature review

An assignment refers to a task or responsibility assigned to someone (Hornby, 1995). In universities, lecturers often assign writing assignments for undergraduate students in the form of an essay, a summary, a term paper, and a research report (Sardiko, 2004; Irawati, 2017). These assignments enable students to gain significant writing experience, as they are an essential tool to hone students' writing skills and expand their scientific knowledge (Havel, 1995). An assignment as a component of assessment measures, and the ways by which it is completed, develops into matters of significance in the lives of students as they progress throughout a course, as well as for instructors and administrators who have a concern for the achievement of its objectives (Bhatt, 2014; Ulum, 2020). When completing an assignment, students must carefully identify research terms, incorporate concepts into a logical essay, and synthesize material from multiple sources in order to produce a well-structured piece of writing (Havel, 1995).

The term paper, as the focus of this study, is the most frequent type of writing assignments in higher education (Graves et al., 2010). A term paper is described as a research-based assignment written by students over the course of a term that contributes significantly to their final grade (Parker, 2023; Rafik-Galea et al., 2012). In general, a term paper is intended to explain a phenomenon, a theory, or an argument in several pages, which is typically submitted at the conclusion of semester (Holloway, 2023; Parker, 2023). A term paper typically provides a broad overview of a topic, drawing on existing information from various sources, rather than conducts original research (Holloway, 2023). A term paper can help a student demonstrate his/her mastery of a subject, capacity for research, and ability to elaborate complex concepts semester (Parker, 2023). A term paper also helps develop a student's writing, analytical, and critical thinking abilities, all of which are beneficial throughout and beyond university (Kolesnikova, 2022).

As a course assignment, a term paper is written following standard academic writing conventions. A term paper typically has specific format that students have to pay attention to when outlining the structure of the term paper (Parker, 2023). A term paper should include cover page, table of contents, introduction, body (i.e., methods, results and discussion), conclusion, and references (Baues, 2023). Term paper writing is a structured process that involves several important steps. Every step of the process, from brainstorming and research to outlining and final polishing, has a substantial contribution to the paper's overall quality (Gorbold, 2022; Harmer, 2007). To achieve a good term paper, students should follow a step-by-step guide to prepare their writing, including selecting a good topic, finding relevant sources, taking notes, building an outline, writing

an initial draft, making revisions to the draft, taking a break in between the writing, and making the final formatting (Blakely, 2016).

3. Method

This study employed a qualitative research method to explore students' opinions towards completing term papers in university courses. Semi-structured interviews, comprising ten open-ended questions, were conducted with twenty participants studying at English Education Department of Universitas Muhammadiyah Aceh. The participants were students who had enrolled in courses that required them to write term papers in English as part of their coursework. The participants were selected using random sampling technique. The interviews were carried out online through WhatsApp, in which each participant was inquired separately. The responses were recorded and then transcribed. The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, based on the following themes: the benefits and challenges in completing term paper assignments.

4. Findings

To address the issue on how university students experienced writing term papers as a course assignment, this study identified some common themes, as explained below.

4.1. Theme 1: Benefits of writing term papers

The interview results found that students had some favorable opinions on the term paper task assigned by lecturers. The students understood that term paper was a requirement that must be fulfilled in their coursework. These opinions are related to how the students view their experience when writing their term papers, which they needed to complete and then submit at the end of the semester.

4.1.1. Increased confidence and motivation

When inquired about their positive thoughts on term paper assignment, some students revealed that this assignment helped enhance their self-esteem and enthusiasm because they were more engaged in producing good term papers. Their interview excerpts are in the following “Students will be even more motivated by assignments because they will feel more confident and enthusiastic to learn the content they wanted to present” (Student NL). “Writing term papers strengthen our confidence when it comes to delivering our findings to audience” (Student YR).

These results indicate that course assignments are viewed as essential resources for improving student personal development. These students argue that term paper assignment help to increase motivation to research the topics they focus on. In addition, they contend that the assignment also improves their self-esteem to present quality written products to their lecturers.

4.1.2. Improved knowledge

Another positive response of term papers is that the term paper assignment helps the students to learn more. Term papers help them widen their comprehension on the subjects they write “Term paper can increase students’ knowledge since they require us to research and acquire new material in order to finish this assignment” (Student NL). “The assignment can also broaden students’ understanding because they make us learn more about a variety of topics” (Student FY).

The results suggest that term papers are useful to assist student learn material in-depth. The students argue that this writing a term paper drives them to explore more information, thereby deepening their understanding of the topic at hand.

4.2. Theme 2: Challenges in completing term papers

In addition to the benefits, the interview results also showed unfavorable views in relation to term paper assignment. The students shared their concerns on the difficulties that they had encountered when completing this assignment.

4.2.1. Lack of facilities

Lack of proper tools is one of the issues students have when finishing this writing assignment. The students found it difficult to complete their assignments successfully because of lack of access to learning resources. “The challenge with completing term paper projects is that some students still do not own personal laptops, making it hard for them to complete [term papers]” (Student DH). “One of the main issues with term paper assignment is having trouble using the [learning] resources, like not owning a laptop” (Student RM).

Term papers inadvertently present several difficulties for students, such as limited access to technology. The students admit that one major problem is that they have no personal laptops, which makes it challenging to obtain information from the internet, thus reducing their writing productivity.

4.2.2. Lack of cooperation

Apart from individual assignments, lecturers often assign term papers for students to work in groups. Therefore, active participation from group members is necessary to complete the assignments. Several students commented that some ignored working together to write the papers, as expressed in the following “Term paper assignments become difficult to finish when group members do not want to participate, rely too much on one another, and do not work hard enough” (Student MP). “Problems occur in a group when individuals are unwilling to contribute; some may not be interested in the task at hand and may just be interested in the outcome” (Student KU).

Completing paper assignments might be difficult when there are issues with group dynamics. Students feel doing the task is challenging when people in a group do not put in enough effort and do not actively participate. Writing term papers is a complex activity,

and thus, group members should share the burden in completing the work at hand to produce a good result.

4.2.3. Difficulty in explaining topics

Another challenge that the students encounter when completing term paper is the struggle to identify pertinent information and construct a compelling explanation. The interview excerpts are as follows “We are having trouble coming up with ideas for a term paper assignment” (Student CI). “My challenge when doing a term paper assignment is figuring out how to describe the subject because we have to communicate the information using our own interpretations and understandings of the given issue” (Student EL). “If students are not familiar with the topic of the term paper assignment, they will struggle to come up with ideas” (Student FY).

This finding indicates that presenting ideas in-depth significantly hinders the students’ writing process. The students find it difficult to interpret and explain the topics in a way that reflects their own understanding.

4.2.4. Lack of academic writing skill

For students whose English is not their first language, writing skills may provide challenges, as is the case of the students in this study. These students first write their papers in Indonesian, after which they translate their writing into English using Google Translate. This can be seen from the following excerpts “Since I have trouble understanding formal English vocabulary compared to daily language, I now rely on Google Translate” (Student CS). “I don’t know how to write [academically], that is why I took from Google sources” (Student CI).

Academic writing is undoubtedly a challenging task for students whose first language is not English. The students frequently write in their first language, Indonesian, which they subsequently translate into English using Google Translate. The writing process is further complicated by the possibility that they will copy and paste directly from the original sources in the internet.

4.2.5. Lack of critical thinking skill

The interview results revealed that some students seemed to have low critical thinking skills. Instead of elaborating on the given topics, the students tended to copy and paste existing information, without the need to provide their own understanding on the information obtained. The following are the interview excerpts “The majority of them [students] use the ideas of others without expanding upon them” (Student NL). “According to me, if students simply copy and paste other people’s ideas into their term papers, they won’t be able to think creatively” (Student FY). “In my opinion, it’s hard for them [students] to come up with original ideas these days because so many students still copy and paste” (Student IC).

Their opinions suggest that some students feel that lack of analytical thinking skills present among them as some rely on others' ideas instead of generating their own. These revelations shed light on the potential problems of originality, creativity, and linguistic proficiency that students may experience when completing term paper projects. In general, term paper assignment promotes learning, motivation and confidence among the students. However, problems exist when the students have no necessary tools to complete assignments, become less involved in group tasks, feel difficult to articulate the subject matter, have low writing and critical thinking skills.

5. Discussion

This study explored the difficulties that the students encountered in completing term papers and their attitudes towards the assignment as a chance to learn or a challenging task. One positive impact of term papers is that some students viewed the assignment essential to their academic growth. The assignment helped improve their knowledge, providing them the opportunity to learn in-depth about the topics at hand. Researching more about the topics in term papers contributed to the students' broader comprehension, which greatly enhanced their overall educational experience. This finding corroborates that in the study by Erdil (2019), which found that the term paper assignment was valued highly in terms of contributing to students' learning in the context of their courses. Dynan and Cate (2009) assert that writing encourages students to become active learners, as they read relevant resources on the subjects at hand and make connections whilst completing their writing assignments; thus, advancing their knowledge development.

Another benefit of term papers is helping the students enhance their self-esteem and drive. This finding is similar to that in Erdil's (2019) research that the term paper assignment had a moderate effect on students' motivation to learn. Being confident and motivated is necessary since the students need to be self-assured to carry out their academic tasks and to succeed in their studies; thus, a positive learning attitude is highly significant to achieve better learning outcomes (Yusni et al., 2021).

While the results revealed that the students reacted favorably to the assignment given by their lecturers, they also struggled in writing term papers. The study highlights a number of difficulties that the students faced when completing term paper projects, including problems with learning resources, group dynamics, topic complexity, writing abilities, and critical thinking. One obstacle that hinders the students to efficiently finish their tasks is the lack of appropriate instruments, such as laptops. In addition, the students also believed that a lack of access to the information online is the factor that made it difficult for them to complete their assignments, underscoring the need for proper resources and assistance. Supporting facilities, such as laptops, indicate the importance of the use of technology in today's education. Technology offers academic resources, tutoring, and study materials available around-the-clock, and consequently, learning is

convenient and flexible, and students can access knowledge from anywhere in the world (Laya, 2023; Malakar & Begum, 2024; Yusny et al., 2021).

Cooperation is also crucial in completing term papers, particularly those assigned to group work. Some students mentioned occasions in which group members failed to contribute or showed little enthusiasm for the task. A study by Fitria et al. (2023) also discovered that students struggled to finish the writing project due to irresponsible group members. Lack of cooperation among the students caused a delay in the completion of the assignment. When group members do not contribute fairly, or actively participate, the efficiency of the writing tasks will be hampered. Burdett (2003) also found that unequal participation could result in conflict among group members, wherein some students felt unfair for the those who were able to profit from the compensating work of others for their 'free riding' and inactivity. This lack of cooperation amongst group members not only detracts from the quality of the work, but also from the entire educational experience, emphasizing the significance of shared responsibility and active engagement in any group assignment. Group work should be perceived as an event in which members offer differing degrees of drive, dedication, effort, and participation to the completion of the assigned tasks (Burdett, 2003).

The difficulty in elaborating the topics of the papers is another challenge for the students. The students admitted to have problems in explaining the concepts in their writing. The students had an even greater hurdle when they had to rely on their interpretations and comprehension of the material, especially when the topics were foreign to them. Pitrianti's (2023) study also found that the students who did not understand the concept and system of scientific work encountered difficulties in composing their paper, particularly when organizing ideas and writing them. This emphasizes how instructors shall provide students with more precise direction and assistance so they may successfully navigate and interact with difficult material.

Another crucial area of concern is the writing skills; particularly for students whose English is not their first language. The students in this study often utilized Google Translate to translate texts from their Indonesian into English, which might cause confusion and errors as well as complicate their writing. Paraphrasing and introducing quotes can be challenging for students who are not accustomed with academic language (Budjalemba & Listyani, 2020; Helmanda et al., 2022; Sundari, & Febriyanti, 2022). Pradana et al. (2020) mention that the students should put a lot of work and attention into learning how to evaluate, synthesize, and respond to specific information. Students also need to focus on brainstorming, structuring phrases and paragraphs, and correctly using terminology and grammar (Fidian, 2020). Therefore, in order to produce high-quality academic writing, university students need to understand what a term paper is, as well as its structure and features.

Critical thinking is another challenging aspect among the students when writing term papers. The study found that instead of coming up with their own unique ideas, the students frequently relied on pre-existing concepts from other sources. Their inability to

think creatively and generate original work was due to their dependence on copying and pasting others' ideas. Thomas (2011) states that one essential skill that students must acquire in higher education learning is critical thinking. (Rahmat, 2020) also affirms that critical thinking and writing skills are highly related. Effective writing involves careful preparation, which entails gathering information and evaluating it critically to ascertain its relevance and significance for the writers' purposes. Writers can make the necessary revisions and generate a better, more polished piece by critically evaluating their own writing (Rahmat, 2020).

The findings of this study generally suggest that term papers require a complex writing process, posing both a chance and a challenge for university students, particularly those with lower English proficiency levels. Therefore, this writing assignment makes the case that students attending universities should possess essential abilities to success in both educational and practical contexts. The findings highlight the necessity of writing assignments that encourage both lower thinking skills, such as remembering ideas, understanding information, and applying knowledge, and higher thinking skills, including analyzing information, evaluating ideas, and creating new concepts. In other words, the assignments promote autonomous learning and creativity while also supporting students' academic language and critical thinking development. Further, this study recommends that lecturers provide tailored support, clear guidelines on scientific writing, and encourage collaboration among students in order to make term paper assignments be more inclusive to benefit all students in higher education.

6. Conclusion

This study aims to explore students' views on term papers as a course assignment at university. The results show that term papers offer students the opportunity to improve their knowledge and to increase their confidence and motivation. However, students face more challenges in completing the assignment, such as limited access to technology, problems with group dynamics, difficult topics, and problems with critical thinking and writing skills. It is therefore important that students are provided with appropriate support to help them overcome these challenges and become more efficient in completing their writing assignments. Student engagement and performance will also be improved by encouraging active participation in group projects and by creating assignments that stimulate creativity and critical thinking. Helping students with their academic writing and making appropriate use of translation tools can also help them meet these challenges. By putting these suggestions into practice, students' learning outcomes and university experience can be greatly enhanced.

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