

An updated account of master's level business school writing: revisiting the genre family framework

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An updated account of master's level business school writing: Revisiting the genre family framework

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Existing studies of student written genres across business school disciplines were undertaken more than a decade ago. This study has produced an updated overview of master's level written coursework assignments from core modules across eleven business school degree programmes. Nesi and Gardner's (2012) genre family framework was applied in analysing task briefs and related documentation to identify social purposes and genres. Results suggest that in the decade since the British academic written English (BAWE) corpus texts were collected, there has been a considerable increase in the proportion of genres with the 'preparing for professional practice' social purpose (Nesi & Garner, 2012, p. 36), alongside a considerable drop in proportions of 'demonstrating powers of informed and independent reasoning' (Nesi & Garner, 2012, p. 36) genres, which had previously dominated. We argue for the usefulness of further applications of the approach taken in this study across different disciplines and institutional contexts to regularly update knowledge and inform EAP practice.

Keywords: genre analysis, disciplinary student genres, academic business writing

Introduction

Taught master's programmes across the sub-disciplines of business and management are one of the most popular destinations for international students (e.g., Austrade, 2021; HESA, n.d.). This creates a potentially large disciplinary cohort within the EAP provisions whose purpose is to equip students with the language and literacy skills needed to successfully realize the academic tasks they will meet in their degree studies.

In preparing students for their target degree programmes, it is widely argued that a genre approach to academic writing, centring on explication of salient assignment types within target disciplines, can be very effective (Flowerdew, 2020; Tribble, 2017; Wingate, 2012). For such an approach to be most valuable, it is essential to have contemporary knowledge of the key written genres students need to write within and across disciplines. This knowledge is particularly important for areas in which a considerable proportion of international students are studying, such as the discipline of business at taught postgraduate level. However, there is currently a research gap in terms of a comprehensive contemporary survey of the types of writing required in business, with earlier taxonomies of writing in this discipline having been produced a considerable time ago (Canseco & Byrd, 1989; Zhu, 2004). Further available data sets on this cohort's writing such as the British academic written English (BAWE) corpus (Nesi, 2008) were also collected more than a decade prior to our study.

Our study seeks to bridge the gap in contemporary knowledge of the range and frequency of different student written coursework genres across the sub-genres of master's business degree programmes. In line with Gardner and Nesi (2013), coursework texts are defined in this study as the written assignments submitted as components of non-examination-condition assessment work on degree programme modules. We use Nesi and Gardner's (2012) genre family framework to analyse written coursework assignment documentation for core modules across degree programmes in one U.K. university business school.

Literature review and research questions

Genre and student disciplinary writing

The genre approach to writing research and pedagogy emerged in the 1980s and represented a shift away from the process focus on the internal workings of the individual writer's mind (Arndt, 1991, drawing on Flower and Hayes, 1977, as cited in Tribble 2017), towards an emphasis on texts and how they are shaped by their specific cultural and social contexts (Johns, 2002). The three major research traditions (Hyon, 1996; Johns, 2008) within which genre-focused work takes place are North American new rhetoric (NR) studies, systemic functional linguistics (SFL), and English for specific purposes (ESP). SFL and ESP, which share the goal of developing better writing pedagogy, are particularly useful for the purposes of this study's focus on research-informed disciplinary writing pedagogy.

Building on Halliday's work (1978), SFL possesses the most fully theorized linguistic framework for genre. The ESP approach, in contrast, is an applied one, with the practical goal of specific-purpose language instruction at its heart, and draws from both SFL and NR for its theoretical underpinnings

(Bawarshi and Reiff, 2011). Within SFL, the concept of genre was developed by Martin (1984) who situated it at the contextual level of 'culture', above Halliday's framework for register (at the contextual level of 'situation'), and defined genre as 'a staged, goal-oriented, purposeful activity' (Martin, 1997; 2009, p. 10). SFL-informed genre research into academic writing tends to take text as its starting point to investigate social purpose as evidenced by generic stages in the text, before investigating via register analysis how purposes are realized linguistically. ESP genre analysis often starts with context, which in ESP is the target 'discourse community's' (Swales, 1990, p. 9) understanding of a genre and its 'communicative purpose' (Swales, 1990, p. 58), before moving to analysis of the schematic structure of texts, for example the 'Moves' and 'Steps' of Swales's (1990, p. 80) well-known CARS (creating a research space) model. In comparison to SFL, ESP genre research tends to take a less theorized, more top-down approach to selecting lexicogrammatical foci. Examples of SFL-informed research into academic writing include Woodward-Kron (2009) and Donahue (2012), and examples of ESP work include Samraj (2008) and Basturkmen (2012).

Shared elements of SFL and ESP genre approaches, particularly their emphasis on text in context (Wingate, 2012) and functionally motivated lexicogrammatical foci, mean they can be usefully combined for both research and teaching purposes. Nesi and Gardner's research (2012) involving the BAWE corpus, discussed in more detail below, was informed by both approaches. Tribble and Wingate's 'genre informed' (2013, p. 308) model for writing instruction used an ESP 'moves'-style approach in the development of materials, combined with the SFL genre teaching and learning cycle (Rothery, 1996) for lesson design. Genre approaches are widely viewed as being highly effective for teaching university-level writing because of their focus on the explication of authentic target texts in a context which facilitates development of students' understanding of and competence in using disciplinary conventions and discourses (Flowerdew, 2020; Tribble, 2017; Wingate, 2012).

Disciplinary genres of student coursework writing at undergraduate and postgraduate taught level have historically received less research attention than their postgraduate and professional academic research counterparts. However, this imbalance has begun to be redressed. Early studies of student university writing drew on institutional documentation about task expectations (Braine, 1989; Hale et al., 1996; Moore & Morton, 1999; 2005). Using such types of data, Carter (2007), for example, produced a comprehensive genre taxonomy of undergraduate student written assignments in the disciplines at one U.S. institution, classifying texts as belonging to four 'metagenres' of 'problem solving, empirical enquiry, research from sources, and performance' (p. 387).

Nesi and Gardner's (Gardner & Nesi, 2013; Nesi & Gardner, 2012) analysis of U.K. student assignments across disciplines in the BAWE corpus is the

most comprehensive study of undergraduate and taught postgraduate texts to date and has greatly enhanced understanding of the needs of novice academic writers. Drawing on both SFL and ESP genre approaches, Nesi and Gardner (2012, pp. 26–27) classify student texts across the disciplines into thirteen genre family groups under five social purposes: explanation and exercise, with the social purpose of *demonstrating knowledge and understanding*; critique and essay, with the social purpose of *developing powers of independent reasoning*; literature survey, methodology recount, and research report, with the social purpose of *building research skills*; case study, design specification, problem question, and proposal, with the social purpose of *preparing for professional practice*; and, narrative recount and empathy writing, with the social purpose of *writing for oneself and others*. They reveal similarities and differences between disciplines both in terms of what genres are favoured and the range of genres used; for example, in sociology and history the majority of assignments are from ‘the Essay genre family’, in contrast to engineering in which a wider range of assignment types are found from across all families in the framework (Nesi & Gardner, 2012, p. 29). A major strength of Nesi and Gardner’s university genre framework is that it is based on iterative analysis of a large body of authentic student texts across disciplines and levels drawn from four U.K. higher education (HE) institutions (Nesi, 2008).

The framework has been widely utilized for the development of materials for disciplinary writing development (Crosthwaite et al, 2021; Hyon, 2016; Lughmani et al. 2016; Wingate & Drummond, 2019) and as a basis for further exploration of particular student genres within the framework, for example, the case study (Parkinson et al., 2022; Pessoa et al., 2023) and the laboratory report (Mancho-Bares et al., 2022; Parkinson, 2017). However, to our knowledge, beyond Evans’s (2019) application of the framework in a Vietnamese English as a medium of instruction (EMI) context and Ketteringham’s (2022) application at undergraduate level in the discipline of engineering, few studies to date have applied Nesi and Gardner’s framework as a whole within further institutional or disciplinary contexts.

Student genres of business writing

Two studies – Canseco and Byrd (1989) and Zhu (2004) – have undertaken a systematic classification of the range, frequency, and characteristics of writing assignments specific to business related programmes. Both studies were conducted at single North American institutions primarily to inform EAP/ESL (English as a second language) writing instruction.

Canseco and Byrd (1989) identify seven categories of writing task via their analysis of fifty-five course syllabi spanning forty-eight graduate business courses. Their study does not employ predetermined categories of genres as they derive their classification from course documentation wording. The

selection of data is broad as it encompasses any written text attached to a course including exams. Hence, exams are identified as the most frequent written task followed by projects and assignments. In the absence of any descriptions of the final genres arrived at, it is difficult to draw comparisons with other studies. Even in this early investigation, though, the researchers note challenges for ESL business students in interpreting the variety of different terms used to name writing 'products' (p. 313). They argue that 'personal essays' are limited as models for academic writing for graduate business students.

Zhu's (2004) systematic analysis is richer in terms of data and scope. Classifications of writing genres at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels of study emerge from repeated examination of student writing, interviews with faculty, and course documentation covering seventy-six courses. As in Canseco and Byrd's study (1989), no predetermined categories of writing genres are imposed, yet the lucid descriptions here allow for synthesis with other similar studies. The 'case analysis' emerges as the most frequent writing task for both levels of studies.

While these studies have contributed to developing understanding of genres of student writing on business-related degree programmes, Zhu's data is now quite dated having focused on courses from 1998 to 2000. More recent data on business genres can to some extent be extrapolated from later large-scale surveys (Cooper & Bikowski, 2007; Graves et al., 2010; Nesi & Gardner, 2012). In relation to the focus of the present study, of the fifty BAWE corpus texts at level 4 (taught postgraduate) in the discipline of business, 60% have the social purpose of developing powers of informed reasoning, with twenty-five texts in this category from the 'essay' genre and five from the 'critique' genre, while 16% have the social purpose of preparing for professional practice, with seven out of eight of these texts from the 'case study' genre (Nesi et al., 2008). However, BAWE texts, too, collected in 2005 and 2006, are now more than fifteen years old. Therefore, a systematic contemporary survey of key academic business writing assignments in the HE context is very much needed.

Beyond studies surveying the range and frequency of genres across the discipline of business, there have also been a number of studies of single genres of student business writing. The written 'case analysis' has received particular attention, leading to a better understanding of the textual organization and linguistic features of this dominant genre within the discipline (Bangeni, 2013; Forman & Rymer, 1999; Nathan, 2013), and of the demands that case-based writing places on student writers in terms of negotiating role relationships and accommodating the needs of multiple audiences (Bangeni, 2013; Freedman et al., 1994; Hollis-Turner & Scholtz, 2010; Miller & Pessoa, 2016; Zhu, 2004). To exemplify the challenge entailed, Miller and Pessoa (2016) identified five roles (student, consumer, consultant,

manager, and researcher) and a total of eleven different functions required of undergraduate case analysis assignments, which students had to ‘negotiate, juggle, and perform’ (2016, p. 55) to effectively fulfil the task. Further to this, Pessoa et al. (2020) map business and information systems case analysis genre assignments across four courses at one EMI institution on a pedagogical to professional trajectory in terms of how far they prepare students for post-study workplace contexts.

Previous research has shown two further challenges which may impede students’ successful realization of business genres. The first is the impact of students’ prior genre knowledge. Bangeni (2013) found that students who applied their knowledge of writing argumentative essays at undergraduate level to writing case analyses on a postgraduate marketing degree struggled with the following aspects: different notions of audience, the application of concepts, theory, and principles, the mismatch between the requirements for contextualization, and where to position the ‘claim’. This finding underlines the importance of students being aware of genre and genre differences when approaching their university writing. A second related challenge that students may face is misleading genre labelling in assignment briefs. Issues around assignment type labelling and its implications for students are common across the HE sector and have been much discussed (Graves et al., 2010; Johns, 2008; Zhu, 2004). Johns (2008), for example, argues that the low prestige nature of student university writing means it is often at risk of somewhat careless naming with, for example, a range of genres inaccurately labelled as ‘essays’. Therefore, an important strand of a survey of student genres in any context or discipline should be to investigate how far institutional assignment labelling converges or diverges with the genre category labels drawn from the analytical framework applied.

Research questions

This study aims to address the research gaps outlined in the literature review, applying Nesi and Gardner’s genre family framework in a contemporary U.K. HE setting. We seek to update knowledge about the range and frequency of written coursework genre types within the disciplinary context of postgraduate taught degree programmes in a business school. We also explore the extent to which institutional labelling of the target written coursework assignments reflects our social purpose and genre categorizations using the Nesi and Gardner (2012) framework. In our application of Nesi and Gardner’s framework, we allow for the possibility of assignments spanning more than one social purpose or genre category and explore genre-related features beyond core social purpose and genre categories, those of audience(s) and whether an assignment is an individual or group task. Our research questions are as follows:

1. Which genres from Nesi and Gardner's (2012) framework occur and in what proportions within taught postgraduate business writing data in this study?
2. How far does the distribution of Nesi and Gardner's (2012) social purposes and genres in the taught postgraduate business data from this study, collected in 2017–2018, align with or differ from the distribution in equivalent texts collected for the BAWE corpus across 2005 and 2006?
3. How far do departmental assignment labels accurately reflect the genre categorizations for the data within our study?

The context

The pedagogical setting for this study was a business school situated within a large university in the southeast of the United Kingdom. The business school enrolls approximately 7,000 students, offering programmes at both undergraduate and postgraduate level as well as doctoral degrees, and post-experience executive study. More than twenty-two postgraduate degrees are taught across the subjects of accounting, business management, real estate, digital business, and finance. The rationale for selection of this research setting was twofold. Firstly, it is a large and consistently highly ranked U.K. business school, so it can be argued that the types of assignments students complete on degree programmes here are likely to be representative of student writing in business more generally within the U.K. cultural context. Secondly, as practitioner-researchers, the setting was informative in terms of specific-purposes EAP practice for this discipline and level of study. Discipline-specific writing courses are offered to international undergraduate and postgraduate students entering the business school who have English as an additional language. Following a diagnostic language test on entry, postgraduate students are enrolled on courses specific to their subject area. The courses aim to develop the knowledge and skills needed for the common types of coursework assignments occurring across the modules students take in the business school.

Method

Data collection

To allow for ease of replication of analysis across other courses/programmes, we exercise greater precision than previous studies (Canseco & Byrd, 1989; Graves et al., 2010; Zhu, 2004) regarding sources of data. We included only assessed coursework writing tasks, that is, those submitted as components of non-examination-condition assessment work, from core modules across

the eleven taught postgraduate degree programmes offered in the target business school, across the sub-disciplinary areas of accounting, marketing, business, management, and entrepreneurship. Focusing solely on core modules assignments also ensures the analysis produces as accurate a sense as possible of the types of student writing most valued within and across the target degree programmes.

We identified all modules core to at least one of the eleven target programmes and asked the business school for access to the virtual learning environment (VLE) pages for these. As our focus was written coursework assignments, we eliminated modules containing only exam-condition writing and modules for which 100% of assessment was a final research project or dissertation. The latter is in line with the design decision in compiling the BAWE corpus to exclude master's dissertations because of their greater length and multiple draftings (Alsop & Nesi, 2009) and allows for a comparison between our results and BAWE data for PGT – postgraduate 'taught' (as opposed to 'research') - degree programme business writing. For the remaining assignments, we then collected assignment briefs and all related institutional artefacts (for example, extra instructions and lecture slides relating to assignments).

Within the period available, we were able to access and analyse thirty distinct assignments from twenty-two modules. There were potentially nine further assignments relevant to our study that were not included due to lack of information on the VLE or the need for more information from faculty which was not obtainable within our time frame. However, the data we have, providing information on just over three quarters of core module assignment types, affords a reasonably accurate picture of the range of genres which master's students in the target disciplines face.

Data analysis

We adopt Nesi and Gardner's (2012) framework of 'social purposes' and 'genre families' to categorize task types in the target discipline at master's level rather than approach the labelling of written assignments inductively as in Canseco and Byrd (1989) and Zhu (2004). This framework, already briefly outlined above, is based on analysis of the BAWE corpus holdings (Nesi, 2008) of 2,858 student texts across four levels and thirty-three disciplines. A summary of the framework is presented in Table 1.

Following earlier studies (Canseco & Byrd, 1989; Graves et al., 2010; Zhu, 2004:), we analyse wording of the assignment briefs themselves as well as instructions in related course documentation. The present survey extends the criteria for analysis established by Zhu (2004) to capture data on whether assignments involved individual, pair, or group work. To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the roles students adopt in academic business writing, we also identify the audience, single or multiple, described

Table 1 Student writing in higher education: a social function & genre analysis

| Social function | Genre families | Educational purpose; generic structure; genre network | Examples |
|--|----------------------|---|---|
| 1. DEMONSTRATING KNOWLEDGE & UNDERSTANDING | EXPLANATION | To demonstrate/develop understanding of the object of study and the ability to describe and/or account for its significance; Includes descriptive account and explanation; May correspond to a published explanation or part of a Critique or Research Report | Business explanation; instrument description; methodology explanation; organism/disease account; site/environment report etc. |
| 2. DEVELOPING POWERS OF INFORMED INDEPENDENT REASONING | EXERCISE | To provide practice in key skills (e.g., the ability to interrogate a database, perform complex calculations, or explain technical terms or procedures), and to consolidate knowledge of key concepts; Data analysis or a series of responses to questions; May correspond to part of a methodology recount or research report | Calculations; data analysis; mixed (e.g., calculations & short answers); short answers; statistics exercise |
| | CRITIQUE | To demonstrate/develop understanding of the object of study and the ability to evaluate and/or assess the significance of the object of study; Includes descriptive account with optional explanation, and evaluation with optional tests; may correspond to part of a research report, professional design specification or to an expert evaluation such as a book review | academic paper review; approach evaluation; business/organization evaluation; financial report evaluation; interpretation of results; legislation evaluation; policy evaluation |
| | ESSAY | To demonstrate/develop ability to construct a coherent argument and employ critical thinking skills; Introduction, series of arguments, conclusion; May correspond to a published academic/specialist paper | challenge; commentary; consequential; discussion; exposition; factorial |
| 3. BUILDING RESEARCH SKILLS | LITERATURE SURVEY | To demonstrate/develop familiarity with literature relevant to the focus of study; Includes summary of literature relevant to the focus of study and varying degrees of critical evaluation; May correspond to a published review article or anthology, or to part of a research report | analytical bibliography; annotated bibliography; anthology; literature review; literature overview; research methods review; review article |
| | METHODOLOGY RECOUNT | To demonstrate/develop familiarity with disciplinary procedures, methods, and conventions for recording experimental findings; Describes procedures undertaken by writer and may include introduction, methods, results, and discussion sections; May correspond to part of a research report or published research article | Computer analysis report; data analysis report; experimental report; field report; forensic report; lab report; materials selection report; programme development report |
| | RESEARCH REPORT | To demonstrate/develop the ability to undertake a complete piece of research including research design, and an appreciation of its significance in the field; includes student's research aim/purposes, investigation, links, and relevance to other research in the field; May correspond to a published experimental research article or topic-based research paper | Research article; student research project; topic-based dissertation |
| 4. PREPARING FOR PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE | CASE STUDY | To demonstrate/develop understanding of professional practice through analysis of a single exemplar; Description of a particular case, often multifaceted, with recommendations or suggestions for future actions | business start-up; company report; organizational analysis; patient analysis; single issue |
| | DESIGN SPECIFICATION | To demonstrate/develop the ability to design a product or procedure that could be manufactured or implemented; Typically includes: purpose, design development, and testing of design; May correspond to a professional design specification, or to part of a proposal or research report | application design; database design; game design; label design; product design; system design etc. |
| | PROBLEM QUESTION | To provide practice in applying specific methods in response to professional problems; Problem (may be stated in assignment), application of relevant arguments or presentation of possible solution(s) in response to scenario; Problems or situations resemble or are based on real legal, engineering, accounting, or other professional cases | business scenario; law problem question; logistics simulation |
| | PROPOSAL | To demonstrate/develop the ability to make a case for future action; Includes purpose, detailed plan, persuasive argumentation; May correspond to professional or academic proposals | book proposal; building proposal; business plan; legislation reform; marketing plan etc. |
| 5. WRITING FOR ONESELF AND OTHERS | NARRATIVE RECOUNT | To demonstrate/develop awareness of motives and/or behaviour in individuals (including self) or organizations; Fictional or factual recount of events, with optional comments; May correspond to published literature or part of a research report | accident report; account of literature/web search; biography; character outline; plot synopsis; reflective recount; urban ethnography etc. |
| | EMPATHY WRITING | To demonstrate/develop understanding and appreciation of the relevance of academic ideas by translating them into a non-academic register, to communicate to a non-specialist readership; may be formatted as a letter, newspaper article, or similar non-academic text; May correspond to private genres as in personal letters or to publicly available genres such as information leaflets | expert advice to industry; expert advice to a lay person; information leaflet; job application; letter to a friend; news report |

in the task. The possibility of a single assignment pertaining to more than one genre family and/or evidencing more than one social purpose is also documented, which has not been acknowledged in the prior studies reviewed here. Finally, we also noted how closely ‘nomenclature used within university departments for assignments’ (Nesi & Gardner, 2012, p. 5) aligned with genre classifications.

As stated above, documentation for thirty assignment briefs were analysed in the study. Firstly, ten briefs were analysed independently by both authors to identify the elements evidencing particular social purposes and genre families. The authors then met to discuss and agree which classification(s) best identified each assignment task. This was a careful and detail-focused process, which helped clarify and standardize the raters’ approach for applying Nesi and Gardner’s (2012) framework to analysis of the remaining assignments. The two raters then independently analysed these final twenty briefs before comparing results. Inter-rater reliability at this stage proved to be 100%.

Results

In this section we report on the prevalence of the five social functions across the thirty coursework assignments analysed and the proportion of genres represented. The study finds that ‘preparing for professional practice’ was the most represented of social functions, with the case study the most common genre in terms of frequency and range across all eleven degree programmes. We compare our findings with equivalent BAWE data, and this reveals a noticeable shift in frequency of social function between BAWE data and our own towards more ‘preparing for professional practice’-focused coursework assignments, particularly the case study genre.

We address the frequency of assignments covering more than one genre and examine which genres co-exist in one single assignment. Data on the ratio of individual to group assignments is further analysed, finding that those which prepare students for professional practice are typically set up as collaborative tasks. The study further helps to distinguish categories of audience, with an emerging prevalence of an audience beyond the assessing academic. The final part of this section is concerned with how genres are named to students on assignment briefs, and the accuracy of this labelling against the genre family framework.

Social function and genre family distributions

Proportions of social function and genre family across the thirty coursework assignment briefs are shown in Table 2. Three of Nesi and Gardner’s (2012) five social functions were represented in the assignments analysed. The largest grouping was ‘preparing for professional practice’, which constituted just

under 60% of all assignments. 'Developing powers of informed independent reasoning' made up just over 20% of assignments, and 'Writing for oneself and others' constituted exactly 20% of assignments analysed, all instances being narrative recounts involving individual or group reflection. No instances of 'demonstrating knowledge and understanding' were identified (although, as will be discussed below, there was one assignment in which an 'explanation' genre was the secondary genre, but with a smaller assessment weighting), nor were there any instances of 'building research skills' which is likely to be explained by our exclusion, in line with the BAWE analysis, of final project or dissertation modules.

Of the genres represented, case studies were the largest group, making up one third of all assignments. There were similar numbers of proposals, narrative recounts, and essays, accounting for 21.66%, 20% and 16.66% of assignment briefs respectively. Here are examples of assignment instruction wording for each of these genres from our data:

Case Study assignment brief extract: Write a 2,500 word report analysing the corporate governance frameworks and disclosures of a company chosen from the FTSE 100 listing of the of the London Stock Exchange (do not choose a financial sector/banking company).

Proposal assignment brief extract: Building on the research and work you have completed as a consultancy team, you should now focus the group business report on the development of a strategic marketing plan for your chosen company in the country or region you have you have analysed as a team.; Your intended audience for the business report is the senior management team of your chosen company.

Narrative recount assignment brief extract: This individual reflective report does not require further research, but reflection on the market research conducted, the group process, the group decision making and group presentation as well as your own personal role, and how you would change that process if you were to conduct it again (action points for the future).

Essay assignment brief extract: 'Modern work practices make employee motivation difficult.' Do you agree with this statement? Explain your answer with reference to relevant literature and examples.

In one instance, two genres had equal weighting within an assignment, so we categorized 0.5 as critique and 0.5 proposal. Critiques and design specifications were rarer, with 1.5 and 1 respectively occurring within our data. Below are examples of assignment instruction wording for these two genres from our data:

Critique assignment brief extract: You are required to work in pairs to write a report with the following title: An evaluation of the financial

management of Wm Morrisons Supermarket plc. since 2012/13 based on an analysis of its cash flow statements.

Design specification brief extract: You have been asked to help solve the company's information technology and accounting information systems problems and design a new system for the revenue transaction cycle.

The frequent use of 'report' in the labelling of assignments across a range of genre categories is noticeable. Institutional labelling will be further discussed below.

Table 2 Social purpose and genre classification for thirty master's business school assignments

| Social function | % | Genre family | % (no.) |
|--|---------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Demonstrating knowledge and understanding | / | Explanation | / |
| | | Exercise | / |
| 2. Developing powers of informed independent reasoning | 21.66% | Critique | 5.00% (1.5) |
| | | Essay | 16.66% (5) |
| 3. Building research skills | / | Literature survey | / |
| | | Methodology recount | / |
| | | Research report | / |
| 4. Preparing for professional practice | 58.33% | Case study | 33.33% (10) |
| | | Design specification | 3.33% (1) |
| | | Problem question | / |
| | | Proposal | 21.66% (6.5) |
| 5. Writing for oneself and others | 20.00% | Narrative recount | 20.00% (6) |
| | | Empathy writing | / |

Table 3 shows a comparison of social function and genre family proportions within our study and within a comparable set of texts from the BAWE corpus, all Level 4 (master's level) BAWE texts grouped under the disciplinary category of 'business'. There are large differences between the two sets of data, the most dramatic being the two social functions, *developing powers of informed independent reasoning* and *preparing for professional practice*. For these categories proportions are almost precisely reversed in BAWE, where there is a much higher proportion of *developing powers of informed independent reasoning* texts (60%), with the essay genre family accounting for exactly 50% of all master's level texts, and a much lower proportion of *preparing for professional practice* (20%), with fewer instances of case study and no proposals to be found.

Table 3 Comparison with BAWE data for level 4 business (50 texts)

| Social function | % | BAWE % | Genre family | % (No.) | BAWE % (no.) |
|--|---------------|---------------|----------------------|----------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Demonstrating knowledge and understanding | / | 20.00% | Explanation | / | 4.00% (2) |
| | | | Exercise | / | 16.00% (8) |
| 2. Developing powers of informed independent reasoning | 21.66% | 60.00% | Critique | 5.00% (1.5*) | 10.00% (5) |
| | | | Essay | 16.66% (5) | 50.00% (25) |
| 3. Building research skills | / | 4.00% | Literature survey | / | / |
| | | | Methodology recount | / | 2.00% (1) |
| | | | Research report | / | 2.00% (2) |
| 4. Preparing for professional practice | 58.33% | 16.00% | Case study | 33.33% (10) | 14.00% (7) |
| | | | Design specification | 3.33% (1) | / |
| | | | Problem question | / | 2.00% (1) |
| | | | Proposal | 21.66% (6.5*) | / |
| 5. Writing for oneself and others | 20.00% | 0.00% | Narrative recount | 20.00% (6) | 0.00% (1) |
| | | | Empathy writing | / | / |

Table 4 shows the distribution of these assignment types across the eleven target degree programmes. Each tick stands for one core module assignment in a genre to illustrate the number of times assignments in each occur within a programme.

Table 4 Genre family distribution across target degree programmes

| Degree Programme | Critique | Essay | Case study | Design spec. | Proposal | Narrative recount |
|---|----------|-------|------------|--------------|----------|-------------------|
| MSc in Accounting and Financial Management | ✓ | | ✓✓ | | ✓ | |
| MSc Accounting and International Management | | ✓ | ✓ | | | |

| Degree Programme | Critique | Essay | Case study | Design spec. | Proposal | Narrative recount |
|--|----------|-------|------------|--------------|----------|-------------------|
| MSc Accounting and Finance | | | ✓ | | | |
| MSc Marketing (Int. Marketing) | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓✓ | ✓ |
| MSc Marketing (Digital Marketing) | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| MSc in International Business | | | ✓✓✓✓ | | ✓ | |
| MSc in International Business and Finance | | | ✓✓✓ | | ✓ | |
| MSc in International Human Resource Management | | ✓✓ | ✓✓✓ | | | ✓✓ |
| MSc Entrepreneurship (Creative) | | ✓✓ | ✓✓ | | ✓✓ | ✓✓ |
| MSc Entrepreneurship (Leadership) | | ✓ | ✓✓ | | ✓✓ | ✓✓ |
| MSc Entrepreneurship (Finance) | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓✓ | ✓✓ |

The distribution of assignment genres illustrated in Table 4 shows that two genres belonging to the social function category of *preparing for professional practice* are used very widely: case studies occur across all programmes and proposals occur across most. In comparison to other degree programmes, there is a smaller number and narrower range of written assignments required on the three accounting-focused programmes, understandable considering that this discipline is relatively numeric in nature. No assignments in the narrative recount genre are required on core modules in accounting-focused programmes. The narrative recount and essay genres are used for assessment in approximately half of the programmes, and critiques and design specifications in three of and one of the eleven programmes respectively.

Dual-genre assignments

We found only four assignments containing more than one genre. One assignment involved equally weighted critique genre and proposal genre

components: students were asked to critique 'the cost-plus approach' to pricing decisions before writing a report including recommendations for an imaginary company. A second contained a 1,500-word critique of a study on transfer pricing and cost avoidance followed by a 1,000-word case study applying the findings to a real-world Microsoft case reported in *The Economist*. A third assignment involved the narrative recount genre with students asked to reflect on their 'consultancy readiness' but involved an initial 'explanation' of process consultancy theory with a 20% weighting. The final dual-genre assignment involved a case study of human resource management, and a small weighting given for a narrative recount with students asked to use 200–500 words of the 3,000-word assignment to reflect on their personal learning from the module. However, in most cases, twenty-six out of thirty students were required to understand and navigate only one set of genre expectations per coursework assignment.

Individual vs group assignments

A total of 40% of assignment briefs analysed were collaborative tasks, i.e., paired or group. The proportions for each genre are shown in Table 5. The greater proportion of assignments in *preparing for professional practice* genres are paired or group tasks, reflecting the teamwork that would be typically required in real-world business workplaces. By contrast, most assignments with *developing powers of informed independent reasoning* and *writing for oneself and others* social functions were individual assignments. This is to be expected as the essay genre is a traditionally individual academic assignment, and reflective writing usually involves a personal account. Only one of the six narrative recount genre assignments was a group task, requiring students to write an account collectively of 'the group processes', 'the contribution of each team member' and '[a] summary of your collective learning about the process of working in a team'.

Table 5 Proportion of individual vs group assignments

| Social Function | Genre family | Total | Individual | Paired/ group |
|--|--------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Demonstrating knowledge & understanding | Explanation | / | / | / |
| | Exercise | / | / | / |
| 2. Developing powers of informed independent reasoning | Critique | 5.00% (1.5) | / | 5.00% (1.5) |
| | Essay | 16.66% (5) | 16.66% (5) | / |

| Social Function | Genre family | Total | Individual | Paired/ group |
|--|----------------------|---------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| 3. Building research skills | Literature survey | / | / | / |
| | Methodology recount | / | / | / |
| | Research report | / | / | / |
| 4. Preparing for professional practice | Case study | 33.33% (10) | 20.00% (6) | 13.33% (4) |
| | Design specification | 3.33% (1) | / | 3.33% (1) |
| | Problem question | / | / | / |
| | Proposal | 21.66% (6.5) | 6.66% (2) | 15.00% (4.5) |
| 5. Writing for oneself and others | Narrative recount | 20.00% (6) | 16.66% (5) | 3.33% (1) |
| | Empathy writing | / | / | / |
| Total | | | 59.98% | 39.99% |

Audiences

Of the thirty assignments, eight had an audience beyond the default academic audience, all belonging to genres from the *preparing for professional practice* social function category. Five assignments had an imaginary professional entity as audience, with instructions such as ‘your report is to be presented to the board of directors’ and ‘the intended audience for the business report is the senior management team of your chosen company’. Three assignments had real-world audiences, two of which were host organizations for field-work assignments in an entrepreneurship module, and one in the proposal genre (labelled a ‘business plan’) to a real-world company in an online task involving collaboration with students internationally.

Departmental vs genre family framework (Nesi & Gardner, 2012) nomenclature

Table 6 shows how far departmental nomenclature used for assignments aligns with genre category. We found a mixed picture. Assignment labels which are potentially problematic have been rendered in bold font in the table. Essays, proposals, and narrative recounts are, in most cases, given labels clearly reflecting the genre required. However, critiques and case studies have more varied labelling, with the terms ‘essay’, ‘report’ and ‘assignment’ used somewhat interchangeably, possibly risking obscuring rather than clarifying the social function and expectations. To illustrate, below are two further extracts from assignment briefs showing the business

school labelling (in bold) of assignments in the case study genre, which in the first example aligns with, and in the second example differs from, the genre family framework category label:

Example 1: you are asked to create a team **case study analysis** and proposal of 5,000 words and a visual tapestry for your host business

Example 2: The **essay** will illustrate the international business activity of a country, with respect to: 1) activity of exporters 2) activity of MNEs 3) participation in global value chains

Table 6 Departmental vs 'genre' labelling

| Genre labelling | Departmental nomenclature |
|------------------------|---|
| Critique | ' report '; ' essay/report ' |
| Essay | 'essay' x 5 |
| Case study | ' report ' x 3; ' critical summary '; 'case study analysis' x 2; ' individual essay '; ' individual coursework '; ' team assignment '; ' written assignment ' |
| Design specification | 'system designs report' |
| Proposal | 'group business report – strategic marketing plan'; ' report '; 'business plan'; 'client report – analysis & proposal'; ' individual management report '; 'consultancy report' |
| Narrative recount | 'group log', 'individual reflective report', 'reflective report & self-assessment', ' individual written submission ', 'individual reflection', 'report- consultancy readiness' |

Discussion

Our analysis revealed a high proportion of genres, just under 60% of the total, with the social purpose of *preparing for professional practice*, most frequently the case study genre, and second most frequently the proposal genre. This finding lends further weight to arguments from previous studies (Bangeni, 2013; Miller & Pessoa, 2016; Nathan, 2013; Pessoa et al., 2020) about the salience of the case genre in business disciplines and thus the importance for students of knowing how to effectively meet its expectations. Results show that the high proportion of professionally oriented assignment types in our data links strongly to findings of an imagined or authentic real-world audience, and to the high number – 40% – of assignments involving group work. As mentioned above in the results, this is to be expected in preparing students for the collaborative nature of workplace business roles.

Our results show that between 2005 and 2006, when BAWE texts were collected, and 2017–2018, when the data was collected in this study, there

was a large shift in the proportional distribution of genres in the target discipline towards professionally oriented assignment types. Between these two data sets and time periods, there was an almost symmetrical reversal of proportions of developing powers of informed and independent reasoning genres, primarily the essay, and proportions of preparing for professional practice genres. Some of this difference may be accounted for in part by the differences in data collection processes. The BAWE project depended on student donations across four U.K. HE institutions of assessed coursework texts, so it was not possible to control how evenly distributed the resulting assignments were across modules and degree programmes. We collected a representative snapshot of genre distributions in one academic year in core module assignments across degrees in the target level and discipline and were thus able to avoid unevenness, overlaps, or gaps in the genres represented. However, the striking size of the reversal in proportion of social purposes across decades points to a concrete trend towards more real-world relevance being designed into business assessment at master's level. This aligns with a move within this period towards more authentic assessment, i.e., tasks which replicate what students will complete in 'industry' in the U.K. and Australian HE sectors (Groves, 2012; Kinash et al., 2018). Indeed, at the institution where this study took place, which is likely reflective of many, this trend is a core strand of ensuring employability in the curriculum.

Pertinent to the prevalence of the case study genre within our data, and in line with previously expressed concerns about imprecise institutional labelling (Graves et al., 2010; Johns, 2008;), the current study also throws up potentially confusing inaccuracies, particularly in the target business school's labelling of the case study and the less frequent critique genre. The fact that labelling issues relate to the important case analysis suggests the risk Bangeni (2013) outlines of students misapplying 'essayist' genre knowledge in their disciplinary coursework may be very valid. However, whilst greater consistency in assignment naming is the ideal, potentially problematic labelling is often somewhat mitigated by accompanying instructions explaining purpose and expectations. Indeed, this helped us to be able to categorize target assignments according to the genre family framework accurately and with relative ease. Suggestions from the literature (Bangeni, 2013; Shi & Dong, 2015) include pursuing a consistent categorization of task names, agreed departmentally or emerging from predetermined ones, and raising students' awareness of the characteristics of different assignment genres so that they can more quickly and effectively marshal relevant genre knowledge and experience to tackle written tasks. A role for EAP course designers is thus to equip students with analytical tools to look beyond the assignment names and effectively use other instructional and linguistic cues to build a well-rounded picture of social function and related expectations.

Conclusion

Although writing assignments can provide important insights into the goals and values of a discipline, few researchers have focused on studying them in business schools. This study updates knowledge of student written genres at taught postgraduate level, for which previous research evidence is now dated by more than a decade. The data selected for analysis has afforded a balanced representation of written coursework assignments from a recent academic year in core modules in master's degrees across sub-disciplines within a business school. It thereby facilitates insights into the proportional frequency of different student genres. This has revealed a noticeable shift towards greater use of professionally oriented writing tasks across the decade since the BAWE texts were collected. Our findings are likely to reflect broader trends within postgraduate business writing beyond the specific context within which our data was collected.

In terms of theoretical implications, our application of Nesi and Gardner's (2012) genre family framework to the categorization of core coursework written assignment genres in our target business school programmes has clearly demonstrated its continued efficacy. In all cases, the assignment data fit logically and clearly within one, and very occasionally two, social purposes and genres from the framework, which points to the value in future research of the framework being applied across further institutional and disciplinary settings. This regular updating of knowledge is essential to maintaining the relevance of the content of EAP provisions in a climate of ongoing change in university assessment policies and practices (e.g., in the U.K.; Elkington, 2020), which will have ongoing impact on the nature and distribution of student genres across disciplines and levels of study. The advent since late 2022 of openly available large language models (LLMs) such as Chat GPT is having an impact on assignment design in the HE sector (Tayan et al., 2024) and, in light of this, it would also be useful in the near future to revisit the set of programmes from the current study and re-apply the genre family framework in order to investigate the impact that institutional consideration of LLMs has had on coursework genres between data collection points.

In terms of methodological implications, we applied a principled pre-existing framework, developed from grounded analysis of a large corpus of authentic student texts (Nesi & Gardner, 2012) to the genre analysis of institutional assignment documentation, in a context where collecting a representative sample of student texts in the target areas was not an immediate practical possibility. We would argue that our study demonstrates the effectiveness of such an approach. Whilst analysis of a large corpus of student texts might be argued to be desirable, the approach used within our study is one that is less time-intensive and therefore

more accessible for typical teaching-intensive EAP practitioner-researchers, such as ourselves, wishing to yield results relatively quickly to inform updates to the content of EAP provisions. Our choice to focus only on written coursework assignments from core programme modules provides a replicable model for any future researchers who wished to achieve the highest comparative affordances possible between their findings and our own.

In terms of practical applications, findings from our study informed a major revision to the discipline-specific writing course for postgraduates studying business management and accounting. The provision's focus subsequently shifted from 'mapping' (Sloan and Porter, 2010) a previously core module across all degree programmes, to a broader 'genre' approach (Gardner & Nesi, 2013; Nesi & Gardner, 2012; Swales, 1990) with attention given proportionally to prevalent genres. It also highlighted areas to develop for pre-sessional academic English provision. Later revision of this curriculum incorporated writing instruction on a variety of assessed writing genres including a case study analysis for students progressing to business and finance degrees.

In terms of limitations, in an educational environment that is continually changing, our study has produced a snapshot of one disciplinary area at one point in time. As discussed above, in terms of future research, contrastive investigations of the same disciplinary area across different institutions, of different disciplinary areas, and investigations of the distributions of disciplinary assignment types across different time periods would be valuable for the purposes of building a wider, regularly updated understanding of the nature and distribution of genres of student university writing.

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