

Understanding student preferences for one-to-one writing appointments post-pandemic

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Abstract

The academic writing scheme at the university is a near-peer service, which provides students with the opportunity to book one-to-one appointments with an academic writing tutor. When launched in 2019, all appointments took place in-person in the university library. When Covid-19 hit in March 2020, the service moved online, with appointments taking place over Microsoft Teams. However, with this, we noticed a drop-in appointment bookings. Currently, there is a paucity of information regarding one-to-one writing appointments during the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly for student preferences of online or face-to-face appointments. Within this study, an online survey was conducted, and the 701 responses analysed to investigate students' preferences in relation to the delivery of one-to-one writing appointments post-pandemic. The results indicated a preference for in-person appointments to be available, with 55.8% of the respondents choosing this. The main factor was the preference for communicating in-person as it allows for more questions and a natural conversation. However, there is clearly still an appetite for appointments to be delivered online, with postgraduate students in particular expressing an interest in this format. Students indicated that the accessibility of appointments for students who are not on campus regularly was the biggest factor for choosing online as their preference. It can be concluded that a hybrid model, where students can choose between the two appointment types is most appropriate, which along with increased targeted promotion to specific faculties and year groups, should increase the usage of the service.

Keywords: pandemic; Covid-19; academic writing; near-peer; academic skills; one-to-one support.

Introduction

Since the emergence of Covid-19, there have been several studies which focus on teaching students online in groups, and how these sessions have had to adapt to remain active and engaging. This has involved re-thinking the concept of 'remote' and changing the perspective from an 'unemotional experience' to more of a social event (Vallis, 2021, p.2), and 'humanising' the online learning experience (Kotula and Beaumont, 2021, p.2). Many of these studies also consider how some of these concepts may continue to be relevant and useful for staff to consider in a post-Covid-19 world.

Prior to the pandemic, student preferences for learning face-to-face and online had been investigated. Tratnik, Urh and Jereb (2019) reported that students were less satisfied with online learning, stating that drivers of satisfaction included course delivery/quality, expectations, motivation and student interactions. Similar studies reported increases in anxiety and helplessness in online learning compared to face-to-face learning (Butz, Stupnisky and Pekrun, 2015), and that 60.4% of students surveyed felt they learnt more face-to-face than online (Alsaaty et al., 2016). Conversely, Stern (2004) identified benefits to online learning, particularly for shy students, and Tagoe (2012) found that students preferred a mixture of face-to-face and online learning.

However, literature on student preferences and perspectives post-pandemic, particularly in a one-to-one setting, is currently quite limited. There are several pieces which discuss the issues students have faced through being forced to learn online, with Raaper and Brown (2020) theorising the negative impacts of the pandemic on mental wellbeing and study motivation and Lederer (2020) stating that students have been less likely to feel a sense of belonging to their institution when learning remotely, which may suggest that students would appreciate in-person appointments becoming available once more. There are also several articles which discuss the issues new students may face in transitioning to university. Pownall, Harris and Blundell-Birtill (2021, p.6) state that students may struggle to 'reacclimatise' to academic life due to the gaps in their education and lack of formal assessment. It has been suggested that those from disadvantaged backgrounds will be hit the hardest and will 'suffer from prolonged absence from more traditional support' (Universities UK, 2020, p.4).

Academic skills providers and learning developers will have a key role to play in helping students overcome their worries around studying at this higher level and allowing them to feel more confident in their abilities and overcome any imposter syndrome they may be experiencing (Raaper and Brown, 2020). Previous studies have shown that peer to peer and near-peer schemes can aid transition and allow students to feel more integrated and supported (Yomtov et al., 2017), and Pownall, Harris and Blundell-Birtill state that these schemes can allow students to inquire about the norms of learning at university level 'without judgement' (2021, p.14).

As restrictions are easing, and students return to campus, the one-to-one academic writing service needs to adapt in a way in which the maximum number of students feel comfortable in engaging with it, whether that be in-person, online, or more of a hybrid offer. To achieve this, it is essential to gather as many perspectives from as wide a range of students as possible.

The academic writing scheme was launched in the university in 2019, although it had previously existed on a much smaller scale within a single faculty. It is a near-peer service, and all the academic writing tutors are currently studying for their PhDs at the university. They offer support to students with planning assignments, being critical, structuring their writing, understanding tutor feedback and referencing. Any student, regardless of their subject or level of study, can book an appointment using the online booking system, which runs through LibCal. Although there are not tutors representing every school at the university, it is made clear that any tutor can provide helpful advice on planning assignments, being critical, structuring writing, understanding feedback and referencing.

In the first semester of 2019-20, the service was popular, with 626 appointments attended. These appointments all took place in-person, in study rooms in the university library. When Covid-19 arrived in March 2020, the service moved online, and appointments took place over Microsoft Teams. There was a significant drop in appointment bookings, with only 292 appointments being booked in semester one of 2020-21. This contradicted with online webinar bookings for Library study skills sessions, which increased considerably compared to face-to face workshop figures the previous year. In the first semester of 2021-22, appointments have remained online, and although there has been an increase in bookings, with 419 appointments, levels are still lower than they were pre-pandemic.

Although there may be a wide variety of reasons for a lack of engagement in the one-to-one element of the academic skills offer at the university, it is important to ensure students can access support in a way which suits them, and not just assume their preferences (or reasons for these preferences) as life returns to some form of normality.

Methods

In order to gather student perspectives, a survey was created using JISC Online Surveys. Using a survey allowed easy dissemination across the university and provided students with a quick and easy way to state their preferences. The survey was deliberately short to encourage greater participation from a diverse body of students, and so as not to result in self-selection of just a few highly motivated students. The survey consisted of four closed multiple-choice questions asking about the student faculty, level of study, whether they had heard of the academic writing appointment scheme and which format of appointment they would prefer. An open question was also included at the end asking the student to provide reasoning for their choice. This open question was included as a compromise between keeping the survey short, and encouraging participation, and obtaining higher quality responses. A participant information sheet explaining the study was also made available as a link at the start of the survey.

An iPad was purchased as an incentive and every student who completed the survey had the option to add their email address, which entered them into the draw to win this. This contact information was only used for this aspect and was not considered when analysing the data.

The survey was open for six weeks during semester one of the 2021-22 academic year. During this time it was promoted using various methods. These included promotional adverts on screens in the library, leaflets distributed by the student team (three students recruited as part of the study skills programme in the library), graphics on the library social media accounts and an announcement sent to all students via the VLE (Canvas). Funding for the iPad was granted by the ALDinHE Research Fund, and ethical approval was granted by the university's Ethics Committee (ref. 5326).

Results

In total, 701 responses were received (university population 27,900). The students were first asked which faculty they were from. The results showed that the survey had reached students in a reasonably proportionate manner in comparison to the overall university population (Table 1).

Table 1. Percentage of students from the various faculties who completed the survey, compared to the entire university population. Note, 'Other' may refer to students who do not know which faculty they belong.

Faculty	% of respondents	% of university population
Humanities and Social Sciences	37.8%	41.2%
Health and Life Sciences	27.2%	31.8%
Science and Engineering	23.5%	26.9%
Other	11.4%	

The students were also asked to provide their level of study, and again this showed that the survey had reached students across the university (Table 2).

Table 2. Percentage of students from different levels of study who completed the survey, compared to the entire university population.

Level of study	% of respondents	% of university population
One year part time diploma	0.7%	0.26%
Undergraduate Year 1	25.2%	37.86%
Undergraduate Year 2	24.3%	27.96%
Undergraduate Year 3+	21.7%	14.13%
Taught Postgraduate	21.5%	12.70%
Research Postgraduate	6.6%	7.09%

The one year, part time diploma is aimed at students who do not have traditional entry qualifications. Completion of the programme gains entry to degrees within the faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences.

The following question asked if students had heard of the academic writing scheme. Overall, 41.2% of all respondents had, and 58.8% had not. When this question is examined by faculty, it can be seen that the highest levels of awareness of the scheme are

in Humanities and Social Sciences (Table 3). The largest proportion of appointment bookings is also from this faculty. Lowest levels of awareness are in the faculty of Science and Engineering, with only 26.1% of respondents aware of the service.

Table 3. Percentage of students from different faculties who had heard of the academic writing scheme and completed the survey, compared to the entire university population.

Faculty	% who had heard of the academic writing scheme	% who had not heard of the academic writing scheme
Humanities and Social Sciences	53.2%	46.8%
Health and Life Sciences	38.2%	61.8%
Science and Engineering	26.1%	73.9%

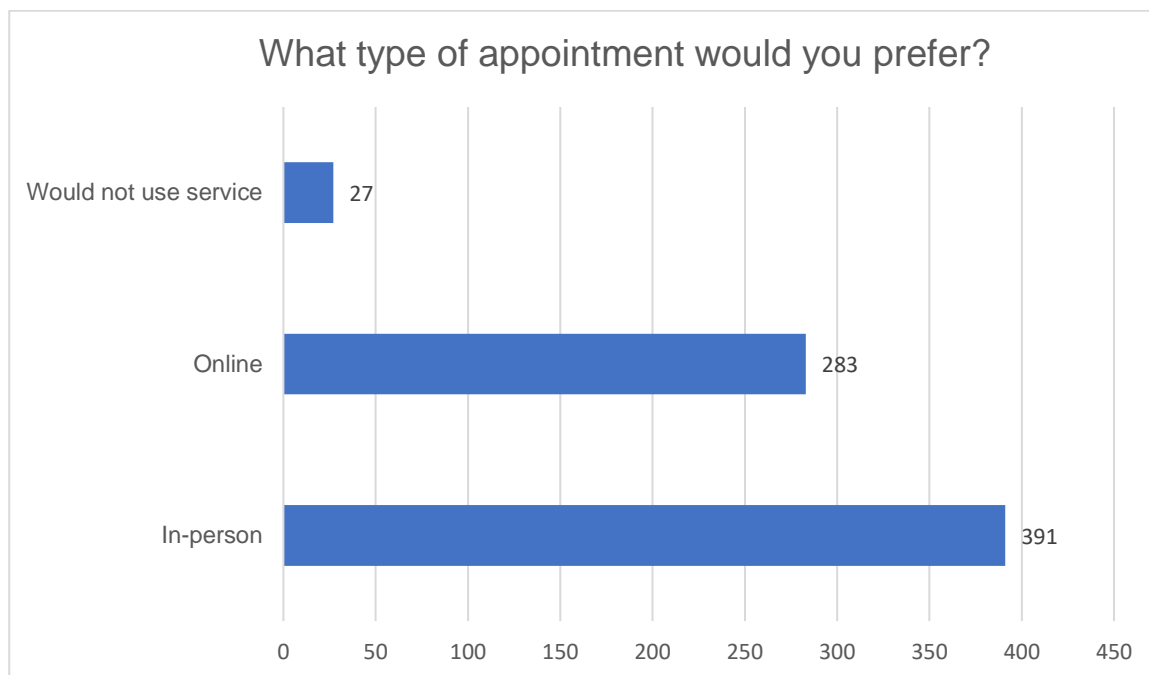
When this question is examined by level of study it can be seen overall that students in higher levels of study seem to have more awareness of the scheme than those in the earlier stages of their studies (Table 4).

Table 4. Percentage of students from different levels of study who had heard of the academic writing scheme and completed the survey, compared to the entire university population.

Level of study	% who had heard of the academic writing scheme	% who had not heard of the academic writing scheme
One year part time diploma	60%	40%
Undergraduate Year 1	23.2%	76.8%
Undergraduate Year 2	33.8%	61.2%
Undergraduate Year 3+	51.3%	48.7%
Taught Postgraduate	51%	49%
Research Postgraduate	52.2%	47.8%

The next question asked: if students were to use the service, which type of appointment they would prefer? The results indicated a preference for in-person appointments (55.8%), whilst the online option was preferred by 40.4% of students. Only 3.9% stated that they would not use the service (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Number of students who preferred in-person or online one-to-one writing appointments.



When examining these results by faculty, it can be seen that all faculties reflected the same trend of interest in both appointment styles, with a slight preference for in-person appointments (Table 5).

Table 5. Percentage of students from different faculties who preferred in-person or online appointments.

Faculty	% who would prefer an in-person appointment	% who would prefer an online appointment	% who would not use the service
Humanities and Social Sciences	58.1%	41.1%	0.8%
Health and Life Sciences	55%	38.7%	6.3%
Science and Engineering	52.7%	42.4%	4.8%

When examining the results by level of study it can be seen that postgraduate students have a preference for online appointments, whereas undergraduate students prefer in-person options (Table 6).

Table 6. Percentage of students from different levels of study who preferred in-person or online appointments.

Level of study	% who would prefer an in-person appointment	% who would prefer an online appointment	% who would not use the service
One year part time diploma	80%	0%	20%
Undergraduate Year 1	62.1%	35%	2.8%
Undergraduate Year 2	67.6%	29.4%	2.9%
Undergraduate Year 3+	51.3%	43.4%	5.3%
Taught Postgraduate	45.7%	51%	3.3%
Research Postgraduate	32.6%	60.9%	6.5%

The final question asked the students to provide reasoning for their choice. Below are the responses from the 391 students who stated they would prefer an in-person appointment, grouped into nine categories (Table 7). It should be noted that some students provided more than one reason in their response. The highest number of comments were around the concept that in-person appointments allow for better and easier communication, with students feeling like they can ask questions and partake in more of a natural conversation.

Table 7. Responses from students who stated they would prefer an in-person appointment, grouped into nine categories based on qualitative data from an open question. Note, some students gave more than one reason for their choice.

Reason for preferring in-person appointments	Number of mentions	Example responses	% of respondents who chose in-person who mentioned this
Better communication	165	<p>'In an online appointment its harder to read body language and facial expressions, which I believe are extremely important in any discussion'</p> <p>'In person allows me to feel more comfortable asking questions and it just makes things a lot more interactive'</p> <p>'Information can be misinterpreted over a video call, and important tips and advice may be missed. I also feel that a face-to-face conversation would flow more naturally between two people'</p>	42.19%
General preference for in-person	47	<p>'I prefer in person teaching as a rule'</p> <p>'Face-to-face meetings work better for me'</p> <p>'More beneficial to see someone in person'</p>	12.02%
More of a personal experience	41	<p>'I feel like I would feel less judged and be able to take the advice better as it would feel more personal'</p> <p>'I want the personal connection'</p> <p>'I think it would be more useful and productive to meet in person, and easier to build a personal rapport with the tutor'</p>	10.49%

Reason for preferring in-person appointments	Number of mentions	Example responses	% of respondents who chose in-person who mentioned this
Easier to focus	40	<p>‘I find it difficult to concentrate sometimes when I am online but if someone is telling me something in person I feel like I might listen better’</p> <p>‘I believe that place and relationship are crucial for learning. Over time my ability to focus and sustain concentration at home has decreased. I find that actively attending an appointment in a different setting helps me to enter a "work" frame of mind and get more from my studies.’</p> <p>‘I prefer face-to-face interaction and often find it difficult to concentrate whilst on a zoom/Microsoft teams call due to the amount of distractions around.’</p>	10.23%
Easier to share resources and collaborate	34	<p>‘In-person appointments facilitate better communication and resources for discussions, such as papers and books, can be readily available as a hard copy.’</p> <p>‘As I have dyspraxia I find it better to have a printed version of things to work on as I sometimes find it hard to follow things on a screen’</p> <p>‘Easier to bounce ideas, and to make references to materials by just showing it to the tutor (compared to having to go through sharing of screen etc over Teams or Zoom)’</p>	8.69%

Reason for preferring in-person appointments	Number of mentions	Example responses	% of respondents who chose in-person who mentioned this
Technology issues	29	<p>'I always experience technical issues over Teams during lectures and meetings'</p> <p>'My internet connection is so poor at my shared house that Teams would not work'</p> <p>'Having an in-person appointment would mean that there is less worrying about connection issues and delays'</p>	7.42%
Feel more comfortable and less anxious	16	<p>'I feel more comfortable meeting people in real life. I tend to be much more shy online so don't think I would get as much out of it'</p> <p>'I struggle with interactions over video call, creates more anxiety and stress compared to in person meetings'</p> <p>'I find it less intimidating to actually be sat with someone compared to online'</p>	4.09%
Wanting a return to normality	10	<p>'Having a face-to-face meeting would be like getting back to normal campus life'</p> <p>'I like working in the library in general. The atmosphere is better than in my accommodation. I prefer in person because I spend enough time on my computer in normal uni hours - it is good to have some normality.'</p> <p>'I am tired of online study in the post-pandemic world'</p>	2.56%

Reason for preferring in-person appointments	Number of mentions	Example responses	% of respondents who chose in-person who mentioned this
Other – comments about how they would use their service or suggestions for a hybrid model	15	‘I struggle with refining points and critically thinking about my writing’ ‘Communicate online in advance, then meet offline to resolve writing issues’	3.84%

Below are the responses from the 283 students who stated they would prefer an online appointment, grouped into six categories (Table 8). It should be noted here that some students provided more than one reason in their response. The highest number of comments was around the accessibility of online appointments, allowing students who are not studying or living on campus to access the service.

Table 8. Responses from students who stated they would prefer an online appointment, grouped into six categories based on qualitative data from an open question. Note, some students gave more than one reason for their choice.

Reason for preferring online appointments	Number of mentions	Example responses	% of respondents who chose in-person who mentioned this
More accessible – especially for those who commute/are not on campus regularly	113	‘I am a distance learner so would not be able to attend face-to-face’ ‘No time wasted on travel – much better to use travel time to actually do some writing!’ ‘I prefer the flexibility of online meetings as I am a commuter student’	39.93%

Reason for preferring online appointments	Number of mentions	Example responses	% of respondents who chose in-person who mentioned this
More convenient – can fit around schedule	78	<p>‘This would allow the service to fit around lecture times and busy schedules’</p> <p>‘I work full time and am a part time student – Teams meetings are more convenient’</p> <p>‘Easier to slot an online appointment into my timetable’</p>	27.6%
Concerns about Covid-19	43	<p>‘Online meetings eliminate the risk of spreading the virus’</p> <p>‘With the situation at the moment and the number of cases of Covid-19 rising in the UK it would make more sense having online sessions where we can’</p>	15.19%
Technology enhances the appointment	29	<p>‘It is much simpler to work together on a piece of writing online rather than work on the same computer or using highlighters’</p> <p>‘Sharing a screen in an online meeting is a lot more interactive’</p> <p>‘It’s easier to take notes or even record (with permission) and refer back to what’s been discussed when done online’</p>	10.25%
More confident with communicating online	29	<p>‘Since I am a non-native English speaker, I find online meetings helpful in relieving my nervousness’</p> <p>‘My anxiety is worse in person’</p> <p>‘Less intimidating’</p>	10.25%
Other – e.g. comments about what they would use the service for	3	<p>‘Useful for referencing and planning work’</p>	1.06%

27 students said they would not use the service. Their comments can be split into four categories. The most common was students not feeling like they needed the service as their course did not require much writing, they already felt confident, or they were happy using other resources to improve their skills (Table 9).

Table 9. Responses from students who stated they would not want to use the writing service, grouped into four categories based on qualitative data from an open question. Note, some students gave more than one reason for their choice.

Reason for not wanting to use the service	Number of mentions	Example responses	% of respondents who mentioned this
Don't feel like they need it	15	'There isn't much academic writing in my course' 'Online resources seem to be enough'	55.56%
Access issues	5	'I am a remote student' 'Lack of time'	18.52%
Don't know what it is	4	'Unsure what this entails' 'I don't have knowledge about it'	14.81%
Other	3		11.11%

Discussion

Awareness of one-to-one writing support

There was greater awareness of the academic writing scheme from students in the faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences than from the other two faculties. Since the scheme existed in this faculty prior to adoption by the library, and their assignments are largely focused around academic writing, this result was not unexpected. Postgraduate students showed the most awareness for the academic writing scheme, whilst first years showed the least. Presumably this relates to the number of years spent at the university, although many postgraduates will not have attended the same university for their undergraduate degree.

Interestingly, only a small percentage (3.9%) of students stated that they would not use the academic writing service, with some stating they didn't know what the service was, suggesting that a lack of awareness of the scheme is currently one of the main reasons for current usage levels, and that the majority of students appreciate this type of support. This is supported by Gopee and Deane (2013) who reported that Academic Writing Support Centres, offering one-to-one support, and informal peer learning, were enablers to academic writing skills. Furthermore, research has also suggested that peer writing support can build relationships, provide emotional support and improve writing abilities, as well as providing the writing tutors with valuable teaching experience (Capous-Desyllas et al, 2021). Therefore, any universities not currently offering this type of one-to-one support should consider ways to integrate it. Furthermore, universities currently offering one-to-one writing support can use these results to strengthen the case to support these writing schemes.

Preference for delivery of one-to-one writing support

Overall, students in this study slightly preferred in-person appointments to online appointments. When this was examined by faculty there were no observable patterns, however when results were explored by level of study, some differences were noted. Undergraduates showed a preference for in-person appointments, whilst postgraduates, particularly research postgraduates preferred online appointments. Students enrolled on the one-year part-time diploma, aimed at students without traditional qualifications for university entry, were the only group to exclusively prefer in-person appointments, although it should be noted that only five students were part of this group.

The recent Covid-19 pandemic led to an increase in online learning and research has shown that students have felt more isolated as a result (Hill and Fitzgerald, 2020; Raaper and Brown, 2020). Even before the pandemic, students have reported that learning in-person maintains a better connection to others and their campus (Jaggars, 2014). Therefore, it was not surprising that some of the reasons given for preferring in-person appointments related to this and 'wanting to get back to normal'. However, this was not the most common reason for students preferring in-person appointments. The most common reasons for students preferring in-person appointments related to better communication, having a general preference, providing a more personal experience and being able to focus better. Improved focus when learning in-person or a lack of focus when learning

online has been reported in several other studies (Hill and Fitzgerald, 2020; Ramachandran and Rodriguez, 2020), and should not be overlooked in higher education.

Activities involving communication with others, have been identified as key predictors in student retention at university, which may be particularly challenging for online learning (Rienties and Toeteneel, 2016). Issues around technology and feeling anxious about online appointments were also mentioned by students preferring in-person appointments. Having a quiet place to learn and a reliable internet connection have been described previously as important features which students may not have access to when learning online (Ramachandran and Rodriguez, 2020). Undergraduates may also find themselves on campus more for lecturers meaning that in order for them to have an online appointment, they must have suitable equipment and a quiet/private space in which to have the writing appointment. Therefore, it should not be assumed that in today's world of advanced technology, that all students will have the same access to suitable working environments and equipment, or that students will be able to focus to the same extent when learning online versus in-person.

Of those students who preferred online appointments, the main reasons given were online appointments being more accessible off campus – particularly relevant for distance learners, convenience to fit in with schedule, concerns about Covid-19, and conversely to those preferring in-person appointments, these students felt that technology enhanced the appointment e.g., screen sharing, and that they felt more confident online. Remote learning has the potential to give students equality, for example by making learning more accessible to disabled learners, single parents, students with jobs and removes location as an obstacle to opportunities and learning (Oswal and Meloncon, 2014; Gilbert, 2015). A study of 47 community college students from Virginia also reported that convenience, flexibility and efficiency were the main reasons that students preferred online learning (Jaggars, 2014). The same study found that only five of the 47 students would be prepared to do all their learning online, with some of these five students reporting a better learning experience online. In the present study, several comments were made referring to an improved learning experience in-person, for example:

In person provides a more interactive environment to discuss, develop and learn. [It is easier to understand and respond as well as gather information when in a face-

to-face environment because the person is present to help with any difficulties immediately.

When responses from those who preferred online learning were searched for the word 'learn', the only matches were for phrases such as 'distance learning'. Work by others has also shown that 42% of students feel they learn less when learning online (Public Agenda, 2013). There is also some evidence to suggest that younger students, black students and males may have bigger performance gaps when it comes to learning online (Xu and Jaggars, 2014). Conversely, a meta-analysis discovered a moderate improvement in performance of e-learners (Means et al, 2013). Overall, this suggests an important role for online writing appointments, particularly for students with other responsibilities or demanding schedules. However, it also highlights the need to not rely on online appointments only, since they may not enhance learning for all students.

Taken together these results suggest the need to offer in-person and online support for students, both during periods of uncertainty, such as pandemics, but also in times of 'normality'. This is supported by Eringfeld (2021) who encourages the use of hybrid learning and reported that although students would not favour an entirely online learning environment, they would not necessarily want to go back to pre-pandemic ways which were less accessible and meant less freedom. In addition, Eringfeld (2021) argues that a more flexible approach may improve equality and diversity in universities, and this flexibility also has the potential to encourage more distance learners (Kanwar and Carr, 2020).

Considerations about this study

Overall, this study benefited from a relatively high response rate for studies of this nature, and although as a percentage of the university population, response numbers may seem low, the data indicate a fairly even split of different year groups and faculties. School and subject level was not taken into account, so it is unknown as to whether some subjects were over- or under-represented. In addition, students were not asked to indicate their ethnicity, gender or other attributes, so it is unclear if certain groups would benefit more from in-person or online appointments with writing tutors.

Conclusions

The survey responses clearly show a demand for both online and in-person academic writing appointments. There is little difference in demand for the different options between the different faculties, but demand for online seems to be more prevalent amongst postgraduate students.

It can also be seen that there is a low awareness of the service, so targeted promotion will be useful, especially within the faculties of Health and Life Sciences and Science and Engineering, and amongst first- and second-year undergraduate students.

As this survey was conducted whilst Covid-19 is still prevalent, it would be interesting to see changes in responses once Covid-19 is no longer considered a risk. Future work may also focus on the preference of in-person or online appointments by other student factors, such as gender, ethnicity and social economic status in an attempt to improve equality and diversity. Other one-to-one support services can be found in universities, such as support with maths and statistics, and it would be beneficial to know whether the results in the present study would translate to other areas.

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