



SNAP TO READ

## NAVIGATING ACADEMIC WRITING CHALLENGES IN ISLAMIC HIGHER EDUCATION

**Dewi Khawa, Zulfi Zumala Dwi Andriani**

*English education, Faculty of Education and Teacher Training, KH.*

*Mukhtar Syafaat University, Indonesia*

*hawaabdulloh@iaida.ac.id; zumalazumala@iaida.ac.id*

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### **Abstract:**

*This study delves into the challenges faced by English Language Education program students in Islamic higher education institutions, focusing on IAIDA and UNUJA. Employing a qualitative case study methodology, the research investigates the factors influencing academic writing skills among final-semester students. Findings reveal intricate challenges, including time management issues due to boarding school commitments, limited technology access, and difficulties in understanding research methodology. Challenges in finding and managing references, alongside the impact of supervisors and external factors, such as financial pressures, are identified. Distinct institutional variations between IAIDA and UNUJA underscore the need for targeted interventions to enhance academic writing skills. The results call for strategic initiatives and curriculum enhancements to address the specific needs of students in Islamic higher education, ultimately facilitating their success in academic writing.*

**Keywords:** *Academic writing skills, Academic writing challenges, Islamic higher education, Santri, pesantren*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Academic writing skills are pivotal in higher education, demanding a profound understanding of formatting, writing styles, and the ability to construct compelling arguments with in-depth analysis (Ramsden, 1991; Gibbs & Coffey, 2004). This significance extends to students enrolled in the English Language Education program at Islamic higher education institutions, facing various challenges in developing effective academic writing skills.

One significant challenge for these students is a deep understanding of the format and structure of academic writing. The process of crafting scholarly work involves organizing information, utilizing references, and incorporating accurate citations (Cunningham, 1998; Richards & Renandya, 2002; Brown & Abeywickrama, 2004). External factors such as limited access to adequate resources, including reference books, scholarly journals, and relevant electronic materials, act as hindrances in cultivating high-quality academic writing (Nasution et al., 2021). Furthermore, the demanding responsibilities of teaching, research, and service imposed on lecturers, coupled with inadequate rewards, may diminish their enthusiasm for providing writing instructions (Rose & McClafferty, 2001).

Internal factors, such as motivation and self-confidence, also play a crucial role in academic writing skills (Ishiyama & Hopkins, 2003; Born & Brock, 2022). Lack of motivation can impede students from developing proficient writing skills, and a shortage of self-confidence, especially when feeling insufficient knowledge or skills, further poses a constraint. The societal context in Indonesia, as identified by Santoso (2011), reflects a lack of productivity in producing scholarly work due to a scarcity of motivation, fear of failure, reluctance to appreciate ideas, and the shackles of work routines.

In our investigation into the challenges faced by English Language Education program students in Islamic higher education on the importance of academic writing skills, we recognize the uniqueness of students in institutions under the umbrella of pesantren, where 75% are santri (students of Islamic boarding schools) and 25% are from nearby rural areas. Pesantren,

serving as centers for Islamic education, provide formal education, including Madrasah, Vocational High School, institutes, and health clinics, further emphasizing the development of English language proficiency (Umar, 2022). This distinctive context implies that students in this environment may encounter unique challenges in academic writing, necessitating a profound understanding of academic writing conventions within their disciplines.

Despite previous research on factors influencing academic writing skills, studies specific to English Language Education program students in Islamic higher education institutions remain limited. Existing research tends to focus on specific aspects such as technology use, video-based lesson evaluations, self-analysis, peer feedback, journal writing, student feedback, and self-assessment in writing or teaching methods (Richards & Renandya, 2002; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Arian, 2006; Richards, 2017). Consequently, a comprehensive and in-depth investigation is warranted to broaden our understanding of the challenges faced by students and the factors influencing their academic writing skills.

This study narrows its focus on the English Language Education program at Universitas Nurul Jadid Probolinggo (UNUJA) and IAI Darussalam Blokagung Banyuwangi (IAIDA). The curriculum of this program introduces the writing course in the early semesters, with a dedicated thesis course in the eighth semester. In this context, we center our research on the challenges faced by final-semester students in writing their theses. These students compile scientific descriptions, presenting their research findings in the form of a thesis or final project report, and upload them on the university's platform (Kemenag RI, 2021).

By gaining a deeper understanding of the factors influencing academic writing skills, this research aims to identify strategic steps to enhance teaching and learning approaches in the English Language Education program. Additionally, we anticipate that this study will contribute to academic literature on the learning of academic writing and serve as a reference for the development of more effective curricula to meet students'

needs in Islamic higher education.

## **METHOD**

This qualitative study, guided by Creswell's (2012) approach, adopts a multi-faceted methodology to comprehensively explore the challenges and perspectives of English Language Education program students in developing academic writing skills.

The intentional selection of 60 final-semester English Language Education program students from two Islamic higher education institutions, namely Institut Agama Islam Darussalam Blokagung Banyuwangi (IAIDA) and Universitas Nurul Jadid Probolinggo (UNUJA), forms the study's participant pool (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Criteria for selection encompass a diverse representation, including academic performance, gender, background (santri or non-santri), and graduation timeliness. Ten participants, who recently completed their theses in 2019 and 2018, were further chosen for in-depth interviews.

Primary data collection hinges on in-depth interviews and participatory observation, following Heriyanto's (2018) methodological insights. In-depth interviews, conducted face-to-face and online, allow for a nuanced exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives on the importance of writing skills within the English Language Education program. Participatory observation, as advocated by (Yin, 2018), enables the direct observation of students' interactions and activities related to academic writing.

Secondary data, sourced from documents such as thesis, curriculum materials, and teaching resources, supplements the primary data, providing additional context and background information (Yin, 2018).

The study's procedural framework unfolds in multiple stages. It commences with a thorough literature review to identify challenges faced by English Language Education program students. Data collection involves in-depth interviews with students, academic program heads, and instructors from both institutions, aligning with Creswell's (2012) recommendation.

Thematic analysis, rooted in the qualitative paradigm, is employed to identify patterns and themes within the data.

Thematic analysis constitutes a vital component of this research methodology (Heriyanto, 2018). Following the transcription of interview data, an iterative process of data familiarization, initial coding, theme development, review, and finalization is undertaken. Thematic patterns and relationships within the data are critically analyzed, offering a deeper understanding of the challenges and perspectives faced by English Language Education program students.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Interviews with students, lecturers, and program heads from the English Language Teaching program at IAIDA and UNUJA revealed internal and external factors influencing students' writing abilities. Ten representatives from the graduating classes of 2021 and 2022, freshly completing their theses, highlighted factors impacting their academic writing.

### **Environment and Activities in Islamic Boarding Schools**

The unique context of being a santri entails engaging in various activities within the boarding school, including dormitory management, religious studies (diniyah), and roles in the school's organizations. These activities, while contributing to the students' social experiences and leadership skills, present a considerable challenge in time management, especially concerning academic responsibilities. As mentioned in the literature (Akhtar, 2020; Born & Brock, 2022), the division of time and attention between boarding school commitments and university assignments requires careful prioritization and effective time management skills.

The impact of boarding school activities is evident in the division of students' focus and energy between academic tasks and boarding school responsibilities. While these activities enrich their overall experiences, they also demand a significant time commitment, posing a challenge for students in maintaining a balance. The literature (Nasution et al., 2021; Ramzan et

al., 2023) supports the notion that external factors, such as time constraints and commitments, can influence students' academic performance.

Moreover, the limited access to facilities like the internet and a comprehensive library within the boarding school environment significantly affects students' ability to gather necessary information for academic writing. This limitation aligns with previous research (Nasution et al., 2021; Sari, 2023), emphasizing the importance of adequate resources, including books and electronic materials, in developing academic writing skills. The routine religious activities further compound the challenge, as they require time and attention, impacting the students' ability to concentrate on academic writing that demands in-depth understanding and careful analysis.

The testimonial from NI regarding the challenges in thesis writing due to a tight schedule underscores the practical implications of these issues. While not solely influenced by boarding school factors, personal time management difficulties, as discussed in the literature (Krause, 2001; Born & Brock, 2022), contribute to the complexity of the thesis writing process. In conclusion, these findings emphasize the need for targeted support, both in terms of time management skills and resource accessibility, to address the academic writing challenges faced by English Language Teaching students with backgrounds in Islamic boarding schools.

### **Lack of Experience in the Technology**

Despite the internet's widespread impact, SF noted constraints in internet access due to boarding school regulations and WiFi "blank spot" areas, as highlighted by A'yuni & Muhammad (2023). This limitation serves as a barrier to utilizing technology for academic writing, aligning with (Nasution et al., 2021) observations.

Some students also struggle with using laptops, typing processes, and understanding necessary writing tools like Microsoft Word or research applications. This challenge is fundamental as academic work is no longer handwritten but digital. ZR mentioned difficulty using a laptop for academic writing, leading to additional time needed to complete the thesis.

HS's advocacy for freedom of access aligns with the idea that unrestricted technology access can enhance writing quality, as discussed by Akhtar et al. (2019) and Hana & Suwarti, (2020).

Students' unfamiliarity with gadgets is rooted in their infrequent use of electronic devices due to their hectic schedules, predominantly as Islamic boarding school students. Coupled with laptop and internet usage restrictions, students become less accustomed to electronic tools. This aligns with Nasution et al.'s (2021) assertion that adequate access to resources, such as reference books, scholarly journals, and electronic materials, is crucial for developing academic writing skills. Boarding schools should allocate sufficient time for literacy learning (A'yuni & Muhammad, 2023).

In response to these changes, educational institutions must develop learning strategies accommodating evolving technology needs to facilitate students' adoption of digital tools for academic purposes. (Hana & Suwarti, 2020) emphasized the importance of English language educators enhancing digital literacy to prevent artificial intelligence from replacing them in the future.

### **Challenges in Understanding the Research Methodology**

Students often face challenges in understanding the research methodology that forms the basis of their thesis writing process. They struggle to formulate a robust research proposal, utilize relevant references, and apply academic writing techniques up to the expected standards. These constraints hinder students' efforts to produce quality academic work aligned with curriculum requirements and academic expectations. The struggle with organizing thesis chapters aligns with the observations of Born & Brock (2022) and Krause (2001), who emphasized the importance of well-structured academic writing.

Understanding and organizing the structure of thesis chapters, especially in the methodology, research findings, and conclusion sections, pose difficulties for students. Planning and crafting a suitable research methodology design aligned with their research goals prove challenging.

Additionally, summarizing research results in a clear and comprehensive manner presents its own set of challenges. Summarizing the entire research in a concise yet informative conclusion chapter often becomes a hurdle for students, affecting the smooth progress of thesis writing and slowing down their academic writing skills development. Students express the need for guidance and comprehensive guidebooks in structuring their theses.

Some students feel that the quality of learning in certain courses at IAIDA falls short in supporting them in producing quality academic work. They perceive that teaching approaches used by some lecturers are too fast-paced and do not consider the diverse abilities and understandings of students. This impacts the quality of their learning and hindering their academic writing skills (McLeod, 1987; Nasution et al., 2021). The program head mentions that there is a research methodology course in the curriculum covering various research types in 3 credit hours, along with writing courses like basic writing, academic writing, scientific writing, critical thinking, and reading, designed to equip students with the skills needed for thesis writing. However, some students find these courses insufficient in providing a comprehensive understanding of research methods, content, and the overall research process. As a result, students' academic writing abilities, which should be supported by a strong understanding of the material, are affected. The program head acknowledges the need for continuous evaluation of the course and is in the process of adding more research methodology courses. The acknowledgment by IAIDA's program head of the need for continuous evaluation and additional research methodology courses reflects an effort to address these shortcomings (Imran & Almusharraf, 2023).

Contrastingly, students from UNUJA have a different perspective. They feel that the courses they take adequately guide them in academic writing skills. The program head mentions a curriculum with five research methodology courses starting from the third semester: introduction to research, qualitative research, quantitative research, critical action research (CAR), and research in English language teaching (ELT). Additionally,



there are four levels of writing courses: Basic Writing, Intermediate Writing, Advanced Writing, and Writing for Academic Purpose. Each course focuses on different aspects of writing skills, from sentence construction to academic writing and research, specifically preparing students for thesis writing. Some students believe that the materials and teaching approaches applied by lecturers have supported them well in understanding the academic writing process. UNUJA's curriculum with multiple research methodology courses and writing levels exemplifies a more comprehensive approach emphasizing the importance of varied writing courses (A'yuni & Muhammad, 2023). However, the program head at UNUJA also acknowledges that some students still struggle with idea development, choosing appropriate words, and experience confusion in writing due to overreliance on automatic translation or lack of confidence in English resonate with the broader issue of students struggling with language proficiency and creative aspects of writing (Akhtar et al., 2019; Sari, 2023).

These differing views highlight variations in teaching approaches among institutions, where students' experiences and perceptions of academic curricula can significantly differ from one institution to another. Some students also criticize the teaching model of certain lecturers who rely heavily on lecture methods. DL mentions feeling bored when there's too much focus on lecturers explaining theories. The delivery of material solely through lecture methods is deemed ineffective given the changing behaviors and needs increasingly connected to technology in the current younger generation (Umar, 2022). Teaching methods are expected to be more varied, utilizing technology and not limited to a teacher-centered approach. The call for more interactive and technology-enhanced teaching echoes the evolving demands of the current generation (Hana & Suwarti, 2020).

### **Difficulty in Finding and Managing References**

Students face challenges in finding suitable and relevant references for their research topics. One major factor contributing to this limitation is a reluctance to search for high-quality references that align with their research

needs. Additionally, the restriction in accessing reputable journals by both campuses poses a serious obstacle to obtaining reliable information sources. The further constraint of limited and inefficient internet access on campus exacerbates the situation. This infrastructure limitation restricts students in conducting research and accessing crucial information sources to support their academic activities. Consequently, the quality and diversity of references accessed by students are hindered, impacting the depth of research and the limited coverage of relevant information for their academic development.

For some students, proper and efficient reference management is a significant challenge in their academic writing process. They often struggle to compile a structured reference list that adheres to academic writing rules, including citation arrangement, bibliography writing, and ensuring the relevance of used references to the researched topic. Efficient reference management proves to be a substantial hurdle, with students struggling to compile structured reference lists adhering to academic writing standards (Akhtar et al., 2019; Nasution et al., 2021). HL emphasizes the importance of reference-seeking skills, especially from scholarly journals, considering the use of appropriate and quality references as a crucial aspect of good academic writing. Reference-seeking skills aligns with previous studies highlighting the pivotal role of appropriate references in academic writing (Hana & Suwanti, 2020; Born & Brock, 2022).

A lack of habit in utilizing the internet as the primary source for reference searching poses a challenge for some students. They are not fully proficient in using the internet as an adequate reference search tool to support their research or academic work. Moreover, skills in operating reference management software like Zotero and Mendeley are still relatively low among students. These limitations hinder the efficiency and effectiveness of reference management, from searching to compiling reference lists in academic work. The limited proficiency in utilizing the internet and reference management software, as noted by some students, reflects a broader challenge in adapting to digital tools crucial for academic research (Imran & Almusharraf, 2023).

In academic writing, having good references supports the arguments presented, crucial for strengthening the validity and accuracy of information in academic work. At UNUJA, HM mentions a limitation in the program's emphasis on students' ability to seek quality references. IZ also states difficulty in finding and managing references, particularly from scholarly journals. Going deeper, DL adds that he only knows references from senior theses and books in the campus library without utilizing articles. Some students are not aware of journals and platforms that could assist them in writing their theses. This can be problematic if students are not equipped with good reference-seeking skills, especially from trustworthy journals. This raises concerns about students' awareness of diverse and trustworthy information sources (Sari, 2023).

Slightly different from the situation at UNUJA, some IAIDA students claim not to encounter many problems in finding references, even though IAIDA does not subscribe to quality journals. HS, for example, mentions no difficulty in accessing references due to using Google Scholar, and if a reference is locked, they use SCI-HUB. Students are introduced to several journal platforms such as Taylor & Francis, JSTOR, Garuda, Emerald, and Google Scholar from the first semester. They are also equipped with how to use the SCI-HUB platform to unlock articles with a DOI by the first-semester lecturers.

Regarding plagiarism checks, IAIDA uses X-Plagiarism as one tool to assess the originality of students' work. Meanwhile, at UNUJA, Turnitin is used for similar purposes. Both tools play a crucial role in ensuring that academic work submitted by students has a high level of authenticity and prevents plagiarism in academic writing or assignments. With the use of these software, both institutions can ensure academic integrity in their learning environments. This highlights institutional efforts to ensure academic integrity (Imran & Almusharraf, 2023).

The program head at UNUJA identifies challenges related to plagiarism, which may be caused by two main factors. First, time pressure

often becomes a dominant factor driving students to seek instant solutions to complete academic tasks. Second, inadequate preparation in academic writing skills, a potential cause of plagiarism, is due to a lack of knowledge about proper citation and writing in one's own style. This lack of knowledge can force students to resort to plagiarism as a solution to difficulties faced in completing the thesis. Emphasizing the importance of addressing these root causes to foster a culture of originality and proper citation practices (McLeod, 1987; Nasution et al., 2021).

### **Incompatibility or Limitations with Supervisors**

The challenge of motivation and response to supervisor feedback in thesis writing is a common struggle for IAIDA and UNUJA students, impacting the revision process and overall progress. The time and energy expended on revisions, coupled with potential mismatches between supervisor guidance and students' capabilities, pose significant hurdles (Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Arikan, 2006). HL's experience highlights the potential misalignment between supervisor guidance and student needs, contributing to difficulties in meeting expectations (Arikan, 2006).

Supervision dynamics play a pivotal role, with some students facing incompatibility issues in style and approach with their supervisors. This resonates with the findings of (Arikan, 2006) and (Kumaravadivelu, 2003), emphasizing the influential role of social support, both from supervisors and peers, in shaping students' perspectives on their academic writing abilities.

The significance of the supervisor's presence in the academic writing process is evident in students' testimonials. HS and ZR acknowledge the critical role of their supervisors, emphasizing the impact on the quality of their writing. IZ highlights the supportive role of the supervisor in providing guidance, particularly regarding research ideas, contributing significantly to overcoming challenges and enhancing academic work quality.

(McInnis, 2001)Efforts by the heads of the English Language Departments at IAIDA and UNUJA to foster better communication between teachers and students indicate institutional initiatives to address these

challenges. The shift towards teachers actively seeking students for guidance and counseling reflects a departure from traditional dynamics, signifying a commitment to improving the student-supervisor relationship (McInnis, 2001). The use of digital platforms like WhatsApp for progress evaluation further underscores the evolving strategies employed by educational institutions to enhance supervisor-student interactions (Farrell & Johnson, 2010).

### **External Factors**

Motivation and self-confidence, as highlighted by Born & Brock (2022), are pivotal in shaping students' ability to engage in academic writing. External factors, including tuition fees, family conditions, and economic pressures, can significantly impact students' focus and enthusiasm for completing academic tasks. IAIDA students, for instance, express the dilemma of balancing work priorities to pay tuition fees while grappling with the challenges of writing a thesis.

Some IAIDA students say that the tuition fees they have to pay force them to prioritize work to continue their studies rather than writing a thesis but are unable to continue their studies. Z tells his experience of borrowing money online to pay for tuition fees and other expenses. In addition, an unstable economic situation makes him feel stressed and makes it difficult to focus on completing the thesis because of concerns about personal finances and the tuition fees he has to bear on his own, making him more focused on work. The economic strain, highlighted by Z's experience of borrowing money online for tuition and other expenses, adds a layer of stress that hinders thesis completion. The financial burden intensifies focus on employment, diverting attention from academic writing. This resonates with the findings of Born & Brock (2022), emphasizing the complex interplay of external factors in influencing academic writing engagement.

Internal challenges, particularly laziness, emerge as common hurdles to productivity in the thesis writing process. Respondents acknowledge the need for self-awareness and motivation to overcome moments of decreased

motivation or laziness. Laziness is recognized as a significant impediment, with strategies such as seeking company with diligent friends, participating in guidance sessions, and maintaining a proactive approach to counteract these tendencies (Born & Brock, 2022).

In addressing internal challenges, students from IAIDA and UNUJA adopt various motivational strategies. Parental encouragement serves as a primary motivator. Effective time management is identified as a key element in the writing process, contributing to increased motivation. Drawing inspiration from fellow students' study patterns, seeking support through discussions with seniors, and emphasizing social support from friends emerge as crucial components in boosting enthusiasm for academic writing (Born & Brock, 2022).

### **Personal Experience and Educational Background**

The diverse educational backgrounds among students in the English Language Education program at IAIDA and UNUJA present a significant challenge in academic writing proficiency (Soleha & Surur, 2020). Some students feel left behind compared to other classmates. Some students say that they initially had no intention of studying in the English Language Department because of their inability. However, in reality, they have become students in the English Language Department and are required to adhere to the regulations set by the department.

English language proficiency among students in the English Language Education Program at IAIDA and UNUJA is highly diverse. Some students did not have a foundation in the English language when entering the department, while others already had a background in English before. The Head of the English Language Department at IAIDA states that students from the language dormitory in pesantren or those taking English courses in the village have better English language skills. Similarly, the Head of the English Language Department at UNUJA states that students who take language courses at pesantren have better language skills than those who do not. The diversity in language proficiency levels poses a challenge for English

language students, especially for those without a background in English. While some students express initial reluctance due to perceived language limitations, others seize early opportunities to develop their writing skills (Soleha & Surur, 2020).

On the other hand, some students say that they have the opportunity to develop their writing and English language skills since the first semester. All participants agree that they are given assignments to write academic papers by teachers from the beginning of college. These assignments take the form of papers or journal reviews given by lecturers from the first semester. In addition to assignments from teachers, some students also actively write personally. Like HS, who at the beginning of college wrote articles for Radar Banyuwangi Jawa Pos and worked as a freelance journalist at times.

Although not all English language students say that background is a challenge in writing academic papers, most students state that it is. The Heads of the English Language Department at IAIDA and UNUJA say that the quantity of students with a quality English language background on campus is minimal. This challenge causes students to fail to graduate on time, the quality of student writing is not good, and a lack of confidence. To overcome this problem, both institutions have created different strategies. At UNUJA, students are required to participate in outcome-based community service aimed at producing research articles and community service articles. At IAIDA, students are involved in research and community service conducted by lecturers and heads of departments, such as TBIG goes to school; research grants; and TBIG Ramadan safari. These programs are continuously evaluated and monitored to be able to be an alternative to raise the level of English language proficiency for students.

These strategies aim to bridge the gap in language proficiency and foster academic writing proficiency among students, aligning with the institutions' commitment to continuous improvement and student support. Ongoing evaluation ensures the effectiveness of these programs in elevating students' English language skills and academic writing abilities. Through

targeted interventions and collaborative efforts, IAIDA and UNUJA strive to empower students with the necessary tools for success in academic writing and beyond (Soleha & Surur, 2020).

## **CONCLUSION**

Proficiency in academic writing holds immense importance in higher education, particularly for students enrolled in the English Education Program at Islamic universities, primarily stemming from santri backgrounds. The challenges identified in this study encompass various facets, including the intricate demands of academic writing, limited access to technology, and the impactful division of time and attention between academic tasks and pesantren commitments. Despite the assistance of technologies like artificial intelligence in addressing grammatical aspects, the primary obstacle remains the students' insufficient understanding of academic writing structures and vital research methodologies. Moreover, external factors such as tuition fees, economic pressures, and motivational constraints further impede their progress in academic writing. Therefore, fostering comprehensive academic writing skills is not only an academic requirement for these students but also reflects their dedication to studies and signifies a crucial endeavor in preparing for their future careers.

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