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Cover Page Footnote

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**From Unfinished Sentences to Unfinished Degrees: A Reflection on Students' Struggles
with Academic Writing in the context of Retention in Higher Institutes of Educatio**

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Abstract

This article explores the experiences and beliefs of students whose struggles with academic writing had led to contemplation of withdrawal from the university. It proposes that the absence of writing as a separate factor in existing retention models obscures the importance of writing issues to students' persistence with their chosen course of study. Through a qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with undergraduate students, the article suggests that students' struggles with writing may be distinct from their overall difficulties with the workload. Four beliefs about academic writing are identified as potentially contributing to the students' malintegrative experience within the institution. Seeing academic writing as a site of belonging and exclusion can help better understand students' experiences and facilitate future retention efforts through future comprehensive interventions to help develop students develop as academic writers.

Keywords academic writing; retention; struggles with writing; student writing; student retention; student attrition; contemplation of withdrawal; Tinto; linguistic habitus

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It's buckling me. It's crucifying me. Do you know like where you can't eat, you can't sleep, you can't concentrate, you just ... It's all down to the pressure of writing ... and like, what, why does it stress you out so much do you think?... I just ... I can be a good nurse without having to put it on paper. Do you know what I mean?

This comment by a nursing student at an Irish university is a testament to the immense struggles that some students experience in academia. Writing is a source of stress that, as this student also indicated, leads to thoughts of withdrawal from his course. As manager of a university writing centre, I hear many such stories, and I believe they should be taken seriously. Not only is it possible that students' well-being is compromised by their writing struggles, there is also a risk that they may cause them to leave the university before the end of their chosen course of study, as contemplation of withdrawal and student attrition are correlated (Webb & Cotton, 2018; Xuereb, 2015; Sanders, Daly & Fitzgerald, 2016; Willcoxson, Cotter & Joy, 2011). However, problems with writing are not captured as a factor in the existing retention model (Tinto 1987); consequently, existing stories of struggles with writing are not at the centre of the current retention efforts.

A possible reason for the neglect of writing in the retention models might be the asynchronous development of the fields of retention studies and writing studies. At the time of the first publication of Tinto's model (1975), the complexity of writing as both a cognitive process and a social act was not yet fully understood, as it is with most works on writing research dating after the 1980s (Deane et al., 2008). This article, therefore, addresses the gap in our understanding of writing as a withdrawal-risk factor by offering a reflection on five in-

depth interviews with students whose writing problems made them consider leaving the university. The aims are (1) to understand the nature of students' difficulties with writing as distinct from overall difficulties with their coursework; (2) to understand their beliefs about writing; and (3) and to reflect on the students' difficulties and beliefs in the context of Tinto's model of retention.

Methodology

The five 40–60 minute interviews cited in this article were obtained in summer 2021 and summer 2022. All five students interviewed had previously indicated that they had significant struggles with academic writing to the extent of making them consider leaving the university (see Table 1). All the students had taken part in a pilot intervention designed to address writing issues; the stated purpose of the interviews was to gather feedback on the intervention as well as to understand students' writing problems at a deeper level. The intervention is not part of this discussion as, whatever its merits, it did not seem to eliminate the interviewees' problems with writing. More importantly, the fact that interviews were framed as a feedback-gathering exercise as well as an opportunity to provide information for a research project might have made students more comfortable to speak openly about their writing issues. The interviewer was not acting in the position of teacher or assessor. In fact, the roles were reversed, with the students assessing the benefits of the intervention in the light of their specific needs and the perceived needs of their peers. The interviews took place online and were recorded and transcribed. In accordance with the protocol approved by the University of Galway Ethics Board, participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, that their participation is voluntary, that they were free to withdraw from the study at any point, and that their responses would be anonymised before being published or shared with other researchers.

The transcripts of the interviews were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) principles of thematic analysis. Codes were generated by studying each transcript and assigning labels to various units of meaning. Themes were developed upon reflecting on the patterns of similarity and connections between the various codes. I was interested in themes relating to student experiences, as well as students' assumptions about academic writing. My positionality as a teacher of writing has especially influenced the development of these themes in the latter group. While the interrelationship between my positionality and my observations is inevitable (Scott 2005), its implications have become part of the research area of the study. As I read the transcripts, I found myself often mentally disagreeing with the students at the points where their words hinted at assumptions about writing that ran counter to my assumptions. The perceived clash between my attitudes and those of the students is interesting in so far as it might represent a potential clash between the populations we represent, namely teachers of writing and, possibly, other academics and struggling students (and possibly other students too).

Table 1

Student participant profiles

	Entry Route (Mature or Post Leaving Certificate)	Year of Study	Gender	Discipline	Other Issues
Jacinta	Mature	2nd year	Female	Childhood Studies	Dyslexia
Lisa	Post Leaving Cert Entry	2nd year	Female	English and Geography	
Kieran	Mature	2nd year	Male	Nursing	Dyslexia

Pilar	Mature	2nd year	Female	Childhood Studies	Non-native speaker of English
Carol	Mature	2nd year	Female	Science and Technology	part-time student

Students' Experiences of Writing Struggles

1. Writing is a Barrier to Studying.

The description of writing as ‘crucifying’ quoted in the introduction above belongs to Kieran, who also explained that he often contemplated leaving the university over the course of his studies. For Kieran, ‘trying to write to get good results ... [is] crippling’; his ability ‘to be a good nurse without having to put it on paper’ and ‘do it on the floor’ [of the hospital] contrasts with a sense of helplessness in the face of writing. Kieran’s comments are echoed by Pilar who explained that she considered leaving the university several times over the course of the year before completing her diploma: ‘And it was difficult to the extent that ... when you have to write you, like, sometimes feel: oh I don't want to continue.’ Jacinta also spoke of her ambivalence about returning to the university after the summer, linking it specifically to her anxiety over the referencing rules and her fear of the plagiarism detection software: ‘the writing and the referencing and paraphrasing, it freaks me. And because I know everything is going to go to Turnitin [plagiarism-detection software] next time. I have already been distressed before I even press the Turnitin button. You know, it is hard.’ Lisa and, to a lesser degree, Carol also pointed to difficulties with writing as a key issue affecting their commitment to staying with their chosen course of study, Lisa singling out her struggles with English.

2. Frustration with the Institution over the Lack of Clarity about Academic Writing

All students have experienced a degree of frustration with the way writing was integrated into their course. Kieran and Jacinta felt they lacked adequate procedures and explanations about the process of academic writing. Lisa spoke about what she perceived as an unfairly arbitrary approach to the assessment of writing. Kieran said that he understood the need for academic writing to be part of the curriculum, saying that ‘you have to have the skills, you have to have the academic knowledge’. He attributed his difficulties with being constantly unsure whether he was ‘answering the questions correctly ... make the point exactly. What the lecturers are asking what's in the brief’. Kieran’s single positive experience with writing occurred during placement, where he learnt to write patient care reports by copying the wording and the structure of past reports. Kieran contrasted that experience with writing essays: ‘that’s the writing I can do. I can do every day sort of writing ... I can write a letter, no problem; I can write a formal letter [...] but the essay, the essays I struggle with’. In the absence of clear templates, instructions, and language to emulate, Kieran said he felt overwhelmed.

Jacinta felt that the opportunities she was given to learn writing were limited and possibly mistimed. She remembers a single mandatory workshop on academic writing, which at the time seemed irrelevant to her and her classmates. As she put it: ‘what the feck is he on about; we’re not learning to write’. Now she regrets it and believes ‘bigger emphasis needs to be made on academic writing’. Her frustration also revolves around teachers’ exclusive reliance of handouts in lieu of detailed explanations. Apparently, she asked one of her teachers for help with understanding references and was sent a handout. Jacinta then explained that she struggled to understand handouts, and was especially annoyed when, in response, she was sent a handout again.

Lisa criticized what she perceived as unfair assessment of writing in English. In her view, if she gets good marks in Geography, she should get good marks in English,

precisely because she writes ‘in the same style of writing, my writing is the same kind of way and my grades are anywhere between 50 to 70 percent; it just depends on the lecturer.’ Lisa’s frustration was aggravated by the fact that she used a method suggested by one of the lecturers and visited the writing centre, actions which in her view should have guaranteed a good result.

3. Frustration and Confusion over the Requirement to Use Sources.

The students’ comments on the uses of sources were all marked by a sense of confusion. Jacinta, for example, simply said: ‘it freaks me’. She then mentioned her learning process, whereby she abandoned the earlier way of dealing with sources by ‘trying to cod the system where I was trying to change a word here and there, which wasn't working’. Instead she learned to ‘really paraphrase [her]self’. Still, she linked her worries about the next year with the greater use of Turnitin for assessment. This is echoed by Lisa who worries while waiting for the automated ‘plagiarism count’ after submission; ‘when you're like, you're either like: oh, okay, it'll be fine. Or you're like: oh Jesus what do I do?’

In the interviews, plagiarism appears as a vaguely understood spontaneously occurring phenomenon. Jacinta’s word ‘freaks’, meaning (following the Merriam-Webster definition) ‘to astonish or distress’ reveals her sense of incomprehension of the idea of appropriate use of sources. Even after learning to paraphrase instead of ‘coddling the system’ by changing a few words of her source, she is terrified of what the automatic counter will reveal about her writing. While Lisa and Jacinta appropriate other people’s words, adopting the tactic of slightly changing them so as not to get caught, Pilar wishes to remove herself from the conversation entirely:

And most of the things that the teachers are looking for, they are already written.

And they want to us, to paraphrase that. But ... I just sometimes have nothing to say

because the journal [articles] are being so descriptive that she [the teacher] needs to read what they said.

Pilar's confusion as to why the lecturer would want her to paraphrase the information in the journal articles shows her bafflement at the role she is meant to fill as an essay writer. She wonders if she is a mere conveyor of the information, and if so, then why her imperfect services are enlisted, when the teacher could easily access the original.

None of the students approached their need to use sources as taking part in a scholarly discussion. On the contrary, the need to use sources undermined Jacinta's and Carol's sense that their ideas and knowledge were valued. Jacinta, who is a childcare professional, did not understand why in spite of her experience, 'you're still expected to be able to find something that's someone that has wrote about it [sic] to put it into an assignment'. Similarly, Carol voiced her uncertainty about the process: 'I don't know. You know the way every time you as a person will have your own ideas and your thoughts on a particular subject. Now I know some of the lecturers would say that you need to have a backup for that. [...] And ... you know. Will there always be a backup? You know. It's your thoughts.'

Student Conceptions about Academic Writing

One way to understand the causes of the students' suffering is to examine their beliefs about academic writing. Student conceptions of academic writing have been studied from various perspectives (Mateos and Solé, 2012), with one significant strand of research into undergraduate students' conceptions concerning the difference between the 'deep' and the 'surface' approach to writing. This binary informs a series of articles by Lavelle and several co-authors (1993, 2001) who used psychometric methods to identify five factors in student attitudes. Factors associated with deep learning are 'Elaborative', whereby students see

writing as a personally meaningful activity, and ‘Reflective Revision’, whereby students are committed to the process of revision to help generate meaning. The latter was shown to be predictive of higher grades. By contrast, factors associated with ‘surface’ approaches and lower grades are ‘Low Self Efficacy’, which concerns the writer’s lack of enjoyment of writing as well fear and low confidence in their abilities; ‘Spontaneous Impulsive’, which refers primarily to the belief that writing does not require revision, and finally ‘Procedural’, which refers to overreliance on perceived rules and teacher expectations.

One Does not Become a Good Writer

The students’ lack of confidence in their writing aligns with what Lavelle calls Low Efficiency factor. The students’ comments encompass a degree of fatalism. Jacinta said ‘my writing is always going to be an issue for me’, and Carol was frustrated with the irredeemable lack of ‘flow’ in her work. Both students blamed specific personal factors. Jacinta referred to her dyslexia, while Carol explained that her long absence from academia means that she can do reports better than essays:

Essay writing, it's a, you know, it would have been a long, long time since I was writing essays, so I still think that the grades reflect that , and no matter what training I would do it's still a bit, you know, they're still lower than they would be with the report writing.

Moreover, the students’ understanding of what constitutes good writing does not appear to include the idea of development. Jacinta described a good writer as someone who has ‘a way with words, being able to put words together right’, unlike her who only has ‘‘basic English’. Similarly, for Kieran, a good writer is someone who has ‘good intellectual ... English or someone that just has a free-flowing concept of a use of English language’. The students’

notion of a good writer has more to do with an inherent talent than a more advanced stage in the shared practice.

Lisa is more confident about her writing than Kieran and Jacinta. However her insistence that the same approach to writing should yield the same results, and insistence that the teachers must be wrong in their judgment of her work suggests that she too does not think of continual development as part of the writer's craft, but rather sees it as a fixed skill with a specific toolkit. When asked what makes a good academic writer, she said that 'following PEAR method [...] and [...] being able to use like references and citations properly makes a good writer'.¹ The hope of becoming a better writer is not present in any of the interviews. While Kieran, Jacinta, Carol and Pilar blame internal factors (dyslexia, time away from academia, and second language issues) Lisa blames external factors such as the allegedly unjust forms of assessment within the discipline. None of them see a way past these factors.

Avoidance of Editing

The interviewees' responses indicate the notion of revision as central to the writing process. Jacinta primarily relies on Grammarly for editing. When asked whether she spends any time working on the structure of her sentences she said no. When she was asked whether she sometimes tries out different arrangements of words to express her ideas better, her response was markedly emotional:

Interviewer: Interesting. So you know how, for example, I could write something like 'I like oranges' and then reread it and I go mmm actually, I'll say it 'oranges, this is what I like'. Do you ever do that that kind of shuffling?

¹ The 'PEAR' method' refers to a popular way of teaching students to structure paragraphs to include the main point, evidence, analysis, and a response. See, for example, <https://misstomelty.wordpress.com/2014/09/18/p-e-a-r/>; <https://www.mytutor.co.uk/answers/58805/GCSE/English-Literature/How-do-I-write-a-paragraph-for-an-essay/>

Jacinta: (with a note of irritation) No. Rarely. No, I rarely do it.

Interviewer: Does it annoy you?

Jacinta: yea...[...] no, I'm ... I don't want, I don't want to do it I definitely don't think it will work

While Jacinta's dyslexia and the concurrent accumulation of negative experiences with writing and reading likely have a role in this response, Lisa's account of her writing habits and her tendency to deliberately finish her assignments the night before the deadline also revolves around the fear of editing. Lisa said she had tried an ostensibly more organised approach, writing 500 words a day, and found it emotionally difficult: 'the worst thing about that is you go over and over and over your words and you over-analyse them and like you penalise yourself a bit more'. Lisa's view of the editing process as 'penalis[ing] yourself' parallels Kieran's description of writing as painful. For both of them, the sense that ideas cannot be readily translated into words is a cause of anxiety; Kieran explained that he did not feel anxious about deadlines but the sheer necessity of fulfilling what appear to be multiple and obscure requirements through a single act of writing: '[what] I find it overwhelming [...] it's trying to get the references right and trying to just deliver the contents that they are looking for to try and get a good result.' In other words, Kieran was at a loss when contending with the unexpected complexity of the writing problems arising from the 'attempt to map language onto [the writer's] thoughts and feelings as well as the expectations of the reader' (Deane et al. 2008). Lisa's decision to avoid the editing process whereby her linguistic choices would be subjected to scrutiny and 'over-analyz[ing]' is a strategy to avoid a painful experience like Kieran's. Writing was 'way more time-consuming, ... emotionally as well ... I think I'm too much of a perfectionist, but I don't know exactly what I'm perfecting.'

Lavelle's (1993) 'Reflective-Revisionist factor' refers to 'a sophisticated

understanding of the revision process as a remaking and clarification of thinking'. Based on their responses, such an understanding is not available to the interviewees. On the contrary, the idea of deep revision leads to anxiety. In response, Lisa has adopted a stance associated with Lavelle's Spontaneous Impulsive factor, whereby writing is 'one-step procedure', a defensive reaction to the fear of the 'idea of composition as a process' (Lavelle and Zuercher, 2001). Jacinta, however, having deeper issues with writing, retreated into fatalism in relation to her writing on reliance on technological aids, such as Grammarly.

Writing Well Means Following Specific Procedures

As we have seen Lisa, believed that teachers judged her assignments unfairly, citing the procedures that she had adhered to when writing the assignment:

It was like, I [...] went over this assignment with [...] the Academic Writing Centre.

So that was a bit frustrating And I followed the PEAR method of writing And [...] he was like: oh I can see you're following PEAR, and I was like , yes. So yeah.

For Lisa, the PEAR method is not one of the many approaches to paragraph structure but a set of discipline-sanctioned procedures whose use should automatically ensure the high standard of the finished product. Likewise, going over the assignment with a writing centre tutor is not seen as part of ongoing practice and development as a writer, but as a guaranteed stamp of success. In other words, Lisa believes that there is a specific method for one certain method of writing essays, which once followed, should yield uniformly good results.

Similarly, Kieran, as we have seen, attributed some of his writing issues to the absence of clear guidelines. He said he was 'blessed' to have access to patient reports on placement, and he 'actually started to copy lines that caught [his] attention:

I actually copied them, brought them home, put them on the laptop. Just the sentences, no, not the patient information [...] So when I was doing my notes [...]

on [...] patients, I would be assigned for the day. And then I'd look back and I go, oh, I'm going to use that line in there. And then I take another line [...] then another line and then I compile all that [...] and then my preceptors were very impressed with it.

Kieran regrets that this way of writing is not taught at the University.

Lisa's and Kieran's statements reveal what Helen Lavelle calls the Procedural factor, which is a 'method-driven strategy based on strict adherence to the rules and a minimal amount of involvement' (Lavelle and Zuercher, 2001). Procedural approach to writing is sometimes associated with the desire to 'please the teacher' rather than using writing as vehicle for expressing ideas (Lavelle and Zuercher, 2001). The idea that pleasing the teacher is a separate function rather than a consequence of the overall quality of the text is particularly notable in the interviewees' shared ideas about expanding their word count through adding unnecessary words and details. Kieran refers to his dyslexia as preventing him from expanding on his ideas which he calls waffle:

I don't waffle [...] when people say expand on your sentences or can you give me more information [...] No. [...] I just cut to the point straight away [...] that's where I struggle. I struggle to make up waffle'.

Kieran's dismissing detailed writing as waffle is similar to Jacinta's response:

You know, the way some people will write a sentence and in it sounds so much better than I... I'll try and have it as simple as I can. But it's not right [...] I feel I'm not able to bluff it up enough. You know the way. For me it's too basic what I do. I might know what I want to write, but I'm not able to make it sound better for the one.

Here, the answers of students with dyslexia parallel those of student without. For Lisa adding extra words is a necessary part of the writing process, however 'awful' it might sound:

This is awful to say when you're just trying to fill an assignment, with waffle to build up the word count. Sometimes the wackier it sounds, the more unique it sounds and that can help.

Kieran and Jacinta bemoan their inability to 'waffle', while Lisa considers it her skill. Their three answers reveal a shared idea that 'waffle' or 'bluffing up' is necessary and will be favoured by their teachers.

Writing Should Not Be Shared with Peers.

All students resisted the idea of sharing their writing with their peers. When Kieran was asked whether he would ever share his work with his classmates, his response was: 'Jesus my work... are you mad?' He mentioned, moreover, that his class have a WhatsApp group, where they would ask each other for advice about course material. However, when he was asked about looking at each other's assignments his tone became guarded:

No. No, no, no, That's all. No, we wouldn't do it, and we wouldn't actually be honing in on some of their screens or copying and pasting or [inaudible] No, That's one thing. That's one rule that we said that we don't do, we don't we don't break the college rules and we have respect for each other's work.

The same guarded notes were heard in the interview with Pilar. When asked whether she would share 'writing with maybe your friends or .. somebody who could like help to you and you could help them'. She said: 'No. I know before and oh. Yeah. No, no.' When the interviewer tried to cast the idea of sharing work in a positive light saying that 'sometimes it's good to share' she said: 'Yea. OK', in spite of giving elaborate answers until that point.

There is a contrast between Pilar's dismissal of the idea of sharing her work with other students and her sense of isolation during the writing process. When describing her occasional thoughts about leaving the university, Pilar spoke about her fear of longer

assignments (2000 or 3000 words as opposed to the 500 words, which is the length she had gotten used to) and she related this challenge to the way her writing is usually divorced from speech:

And that was quite challenging because that means I have to think a lot where I'm going write about it. I also discover something. I don't talk to nobody about [...] my ... what I'm reading, I don't talk to nobody. And when I spoke with [a person at her place of work] ... two weeks ago, I was able to put my thoughts in my words. And then I think, God, I should have write this in my essay. So yeah, I don't talk to nobody about what I'm doing. Nobody. And I do write my journals. But again, it is a lot of thinking and thoughts. I don't really speak. I just write and I found that I need to speak. What I'm writing and what I'm thinking. ... I am very verbal, I mean.

For Pilar, this experience of sharing her ideas contrasts with the habitual unproductive silence in which her writing is done. Yet she sees this positive experience as an exceptional occurrence outside her normal writing process. Her classmates are not regarded as a community of writers, and the silence contributes to the difficulties that make her think about leaving her degree. Similarly, Jacinta and Carol mentioned class WhatsApp groups and explained that while these are useful, they do not enable an approach to writing as a social activity.

Students' Conceptions and Retention Issues

Students' beliefs about academic writing offer clues as to the connection between writing issues and student perseverance within the institution. Starting with Tinto's (1987) influential model, many retention scholars link students' ability to persist with their course of study with their ability to fit in. As Tinto puts it 'individual departure from institutions can be viewed as arising out of a longitudinal process of interactions between an individual with given

attributes, skills, and dispositions ... and other members of the academic and social systems of the institution.' (Tinto, 1987, p. 113). According to Tinto, 'malintegrative experiences' undermine the student's ability to persist, regardless whether they occur in the social or the academic sphere (Tinto, 1987, p.115). Later scholars have expanded on the idea of integration as key for retention, drawing on Bourdieu's concept of habitus to underscore that a mismatch between the students' abilities or 'social and cultural practices' and those of the institution is thus largely accountable for involuntary departure (Thomas, 2002).

This mismatch can be observed between students' conceptions of writing and those of composition scholars, and, possibly, academics in general. Revision is seen at the heart of academic writing by most composition scholars, starting with Peter Elbow, for whom the first draft is a free-flowing creation of raw material from which one can craft an essay, to, more recently, Helen Sword who has used the metaphor of fitness to describe the necessary process of making prose more concise (Sword, 2016). The idea that one's writing ability is not fixed but develops over time is central to the discipline of composition, and includes students with dyslexia (Wallbank, 2022). However, students are not aware of the mismatch between their ideas and those of their teachers. Their 'malintegrative experience' occurs without them fully being aware of its causes.

While we looked at students' struggles with sources as an explicit aspect of their experience rather than an expression of an attitude, here too a mismatch is observed. For academics, it is not enough to write logically or coherently, or even present good evidence, but that one 'must also find a way of entering a conversation with others' views – with something "they say"' (Graff et al., 2014, p. 4). Writing in academia is often seen as a vibrant conversation expanding over several decades; the conversation is led by scholars via their publications, but students take part in through their assignments (in their view), which is also resonant of the approach by Janet Giltrow (2002). However, as we have seen, the

interviewees did not see the requirement to use secondary sources as an invitation to take part in a scholarly conversation. Rather, published sources were seen to be preferred by the teachers to their ideas; teachers were therefore perceived as being uninterested in the student's professional opinions or original thoughts. The very act of extending an invitation becomes, for the students an act of exclusion.

The students' belief that their writing should not be shared with their peers might point to another malintegrative experience. Writing groups and retreats have been shown to benefit postgraduates (Quynn and Steward, 2021), as well as undergraduates (Bharuthram & McKenna, 2013; Nicol et al., 2014; Davenport, 2022). Yet the idea of sharing their work with peers is outside the students' imaginations. Instead of being a shared activity assisting a student's ability to integrate within the student body, writing becomes an isolating experience.

Further Reflections and Recommendations

While this study focused on students' beliefs, it by no means lays the blame for their struggles on the students themselves. Behind students' experiences are their beliefs, and behind their beliefs are environmental and institutional conditions. Possible contributory factors to the formation of students' beliefs might be the lack of sufficient engagement with writing as an academic subject. Recently, there have been calls for deepening our thinking about academic writing, whose paradoxical and complex nature is belied by its seeming familiarity. Indeed, it is this familiarity that has likely occluded the role that writing plays in retention, reducing a complex system of communication underpinning the very foundations of academic discourse with its attendant mechanism for inclusion and exclusion to a mere skill that indirectly affects student success. Over two decades ago, Theresa Lillis (2002) noted that surface approaches to writing, including viewing writing as an easily acquired

student skill rather than a shared scholarly practice of depth and complexity, were paramount. Given the dearth of writing programmes across Ireland and the UK, it is possible that the situation has not changed.

Beyond including in-depth writing interventions and courses in various retention interventions, institutions could also incentivise academics to design their assignments with the view of correcting students' conceptions about writing. Such incentivisation, in turn, should be marked by a reflexive rather than a procedural approach and may take the form of encouragement for cross-disciplinary collaboration, and especially collaboration with composition and writing pedagogy scholars by all members of the institution. Further initiatives should focus on introducing students to the benefits of peer-learning as applied to academic writing. One solution could be fostering cross-disciplinary writing groups, where students can learn from each other without compromising their academic integrity

The recent advent of ChatGPT and other forms of generative AI gives a new urgency to the situation. One is more likely to outsource writing to an AI tool if one believes that it is impossible to improve one's writing ability and that revision is too stress-inducing to practise. The procedural approach, where writing is seen as a function of specific instructions is in fact close to how AI writes. (As per this July 2025 ChatGPT-generated answer to the question as to the way that it writes: 'I write academic papers by quickly assembling information based on patterns in existing texts, without true understanding or original insight.'). Procedural approach is therefore particularly well aligned with the use of AI. Though the effect of the use of AI for the students on their subsequent studies and career is outside the scope of this paper, it is likely to be particularly detrimental given that writing is a problem-solving activity assisting cognition development and better familiarisation and processing of information.

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