

**Reading the word, writing the person: A close-up analysis of students'
academic writing development at a massified higher education setting
in England.**

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Abstract

Ruth Roberts, Reading the word, writing the person: A close-up analysis of students' academic writing development at a massified higher education setting in England.

Persistent differential outcomes based on characteristics such as class, ethnicity and disability are a regulatory concern for higher education institutions (HEIs) in England. Curriculum development is currently the most popular way for institutions to seek to address this problem. However, adopted interventions often involve popular strategies with little or no consideration for the specific contextual needs of learners or institutions.

In this study, I aim to challenge the prevalence of what are known as 'drag and drop' enhancement interventions by taking an in-depth look at a specific site of academic failure and success, namely, academic writing. I provide a close-up analysis of student academic writing viewed as an important site of interaction between students and institutions.

Academic writing research is a contested space with competing views of students' academic writing development in the literature. I write from the perspective of a subject, rather than language, specialist and seek to straddle conceptual divides by taking a novel approach to the textual analysis of student writing whilst also engaging with student perspectives on academic writing through analysis of in-depth student interviews.

The textual analysis indicates a nuanced interaction between epistemological access and the grammatical and syntactical features of texts in determining academic outcomes. This highlights the need for academics to be aware of potential linguistic bias during marking. However, the prevalence of positive epistemological features in successful texts highlights the importance of student engagement with disciplinary content in academic writing development. This finding is considered in the context of themes from the qualitative data that point to wider contextual and biopsychosocial issues that either help or hinder students' capacities to engage with subject knowledge and thus to produce 'successful' writing.

The narrative representations of student stories highlight the importance of individual factors that are bounded and shaped by students' socio-cultural backgrounds as well as the institutional context. Students' capacities for disciplinary self-authorship are attributed to personal engagement with academic reading and with informal peer support. However, understanding the importance of subject knowledge engagement is a key developmental step that occurs late in the day for some non-traditional learners. Furthermore, meaningful engagement is framed as a costly personal struggle, as students seek to navigate the developmental, familial, financial, and emotional challenges of being at university.

In this study, I contribute to the domains of academic writing research and educational research methods by using novel analytical methods and by

situating the findings within an emancipatory biopsychosocial framework. I seek to raise awareness of the importance of student contextual factors in the learning process and, by doing so, raise ethical questions about the feasibility of narrowing persistent differential outcomes in the current HE policy climate.

Table of Contents

Abstract	i
List of Tables and Figures.....	x
Acknowledgements	xii
Chapter 1: Introduction and Background	19
1.1 The Policy Context and Key Problematic	19
1.2 Nomenclature and Choice of Terminology	25
1.3 Choice of Context: Institutional Factors and Student Demographics	26
1.4 Rationale for a Focus on Contextual Factors.....	30
1.5 Rationale for a Focus on Academic Writing	34
1.5.1 Super Diversity in the Student Body.....	34
1.5.2 Researching Academic Writing	38
1.6 Academic Writing in the Age of AI	41
1.7 Advance Organiser	43
Chapter 2: Academic Writing – Key Concepts and Debates	45
2.1 Approach to literature searching.....	45

2.2 Domains of Literature - Overview	47
2.3 English Language Proficiency and Access to Higher Education	50
2.4 English Language Proficiency and The Policy Environment.....	55
2.5 Supporting Students' Language Needs.....	58
2.6 Academic Literacies	61
2.7 Theoretical Underpinnings of Academic Literacies – Bernstein and Bourdieu	65
2.8 Application of the Academic Literacies approach	71
2.9 Limitations of the Academic Literacies approach.....	72
2.10 Literacies and Inequalities – The Influence of Paulo Freire	75
2.11 Reading as Social Practice.....	82
2.12 Humanised writing and writtenness.....	86
Chapter 3: Methodology, Ethics and Reflexivity	90
3.1 Underpinning Philosophical and Theoretical Perspectives.....	90
3.2 Critiques of the PCA.....	92
3.3 Bio-Psychosocial Approaches and Paulo Freire	98
3.4 Design and Method – Ethics and Issues of Power	102

3.4.1 Recruitment Strategy	104
3.5 Power and Risk to Participants	105
3.5.1 Interviews and Power Relations.....	107
3.6 Participants.....	108
3.7 Participant Led Activities.....	111
3.7.1 Creative Approaches to Qualitative Research.....	112
3.7.2 Photo-elicitation and Emotional Resonance.....	117
3.8 Methodological Reflection - Empathy in Qualitative Research.....	122
3.9 Reflexivity - Researcher Context and Approach to Data.....	132
Chapter 4: Etic Perspective.....	137
4.1 Textual Analysis Method and Rationale	137
4.2 Textual Analysis - Data	144
4.3 Writing Samples - Context	145
4.4 Writing Samples Data Analysis - Coding.....	150
4.5 Code Occurrences	154
4.6 Positive Features.....	159

4.7 Negative Features	164
4.8 Epistemological Access – Academic Conventions	167
4.9 Explicitness as a feature of ‘successful’ academic writing	172
4.10 Etic Perspective: Reflection and Conclusion	179
Chapter 5: Emic Perspective	183
5.1 Epistemological Position and Theoretical Underpinnings	183
5.2 Qualitative Analysis – Process	184
5.3 Thematic Analysis Process	186
5.4 Thematic analysis: Themes and Subthemes	188
5.5 Evocative Narratives: Process	189
Chapter 6: Findings and Discussion: Reading the Word, Writing the Person	192
6.1 Students in Context – Impetus, Struggle and Awareness	192
6.2 Students in the Institutional Context	202
6.3 “A beautiful accident for a student like me”	210
6.4 Reading the Word, Writing the Person	218
6.4.1 From Performativity to Thinking	218

6.4.2 Reading, Reading, Reading!.....	223
6.4.3 Academic Outputs: Self-Authorship and Generic Skills for Coping.....	227
6.5 Summary of findings.....	231
Chapter 7: Reflections, Conclusions, and Future Directions	234
7.1 Critical reflection	234
7.2 Conclusions and future directions.....	237
References.....	244
Appendix A: Evocative Narratives	272
Maria’s journey: I tend to sit away from the windows.....	272
Oshona’s Story: ‘Growth’ embodies that	275
Andrea’s Story: I love writing in pencil because my handwriting is cursive.....	280
Myleene’s Story: It’s almost like tunnel vision.....	284
Hortense’s Journey: Until it’s what I’ve been dreaming of in the evenings	287
Ian’s Story - Exponential difficulty to reward	291
Ayesha’s Story – At What Cost?	295
Fiza’s Epic Story – Living My Prayers.....	299

Part 1: Living My Prayers	299
Part 1a: God knows what would happen if I didn't like it	300
Part 3: More like flow in the way I was thinking.....	303
Part 4: A most beautiful accident	304
Appendix B: Ethical Approval and Participant Facing Documents	307
Appendix C: Interview Schedule.....	317
Appendix D: Researcher Found Images	320
Appendix E: Example of Textual Coding	330
Appendix F: Textual Analysis Codes and Code Groups	331
Appendix G: Thematic Analysis Audit Trail.....	333
Glossary and/or List of abbreviations	345

List of Tables and Figures

Table 1: Participants and degree outcomes	109
Table 2: Example of empathic interview technique	130-132
Table 3: Data sources	138
Table 4: Participant assignment marks	149
Table 5: Normalised code group occurrences	155
Table 6: Absolute frequencies of codes per code group	156
Table 7: Positive codes	160
Table 8: Positive code groups	160
Table 9: Negative code groups	164
Table 10: Coding for epistemic access (Hortense)	168
Table 11: Explicitness and epistemic access scores for all participants	176
Table 12: Comparison of epistemic access scores for Fiza and Andrea	177-178
Figure 1: A unified model of human development	95
Figure 2: Ian's chosen object	113
Figure 3: Andrea's chosen object	114
Figure 4: Myleene's chosen object	114
Figure 5: Fiza's chosen image	114
Figure 6: Maria's chosen image	115
Figure 7: Oshona's chosen image	115
Figure 8: Hortense's chosen image	115
Figure 9: Ayesha's chosen image	116
Figure 10: Proportion of code group occurrences across documents	157

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Author's declaration:

I declare that this thesis is my work and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere. No parts of the thesis have been published elsewhere to date.

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consciousness is generated through the social practice in which we participate.

But it also has an individual dimension.

Paulo Freire (1987, p.32)

Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

1.1 The Policy Context and Key Problematic

The regulator for English higher education (HE), the Office for Students (OfS), requires institutions to document their intended strategies and activities for improving equality of opportunity and outcomes for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Colloquially known as APP (access and participation plan) gaps, persistent differential outcomes are relevant to multiple categories of students including those from marginalised ethnicity backgrounds, disabled students, mature students, white males from disadvantaged backgrounds, and students with vocational qualifications or with the weakest 'A' level results (Office for Students, 2022b, 2024). Stubborn inequalities persist for students from marginalised ethnicity backgrounds, particularly black students, with the award of higher degree classifications (TASO, 2022).

While universities are required to demonstrate a commitment to reaching the OfS access, participation, and progression benchmarks, this must be done in a way that maintains the quality and credibility of degrees so that:

All students, from all backgrounds, can progress into employment, further study, and lead fulfilling lives, in which their qualifications hold their value over time (OfS, 2022b, p.3).

Institutions must evidence a commitment to improving outcomes for all students while maintaining the quality of degrees in a rapidly changing and competitive

financial climate (Carasso & Plume, 2023). Currently, they must do this with limited evidence as to what interventions work best for whom (TASO, 2022) and with reference to reductive statistical measures imposed by the OfS (Hubbard, 2024).

A recent review by the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) into institutional approaches designed to improve the Ethnicity Degree Awarding Gap (EDAG) highlighted the similarity of approaches taken by institutions irrespective of individual institutional context and desired change effect (TASO, 2023). TASO (2023) identified curriculum development as the most prevalent type of planned institutional intervention while activities aimed at developing students were the most prevalent type of change activity identified. It was noted however, that adopted interventions often involve popular strategies with seemingly minimal consideration of the specific contextual needs of learners or institutions (TASO, 2023). Furthermore, the use of what may be termed “drag and drop” interventions (TASO, 2023, p. 7) reflects several limiting factors including institutional understanding of the problem, confidence in tackling ethnically related differential outcomes and the short timescale for addressing the awarding gap imposed by the OfS (TASO, 2023).

Sectoral responses to the persistence of awarding gaps identify the need for institutions to assess what works best and to share information on both positive and negative evaluation outcomes (UniversitiesUK, 2024; TASO,

2023). However, Tight (2023) identifies a positivity bias in the publication of evaluative studies of higher education innovations (mainly in curriculum development or teaching enhancement) and highlights a potential lack of criticality in the identification of ‘evidence-based’ enhancement interventions and their fit for different institutional and disciplinary contexts. Additionally, whole institution approaches may not be relevant where there are discipline-specific differences in differential outcomes (TASO, 2023; Marandure, Hall & Noreen, 2024).

As noted by Wong (2018), success for high-achieving non-traditional students is often more a question of happenstance than design. Austen et al (2022) identify the need for higher education providers to adopt development interventions based on evidence and, at a minimum, a coherent theory of change articulated in institutional access and participation plans. They identify as problematic a lack of consistent definitions in the literature for student outcomes, overreliance on quantitative methodologies, and underdeveloped theories of change in institutional plans.

To achieve meaningful change in APP gaps, institutions need a clear understanding of the factors which underlie statistical differences in student outcomes that are specific to their own students and institutional contexts (TASO, 2023). Furthermore, there is a need for holistic and longitudinal interventions that take into consideration all aspects of the student life cycle,

from access and participation to progression, and which sustain ‘sticky’ practices with evidence of impact over time (Austen et al., 2022).

Despite more than 30 years of widening access to higher education in England, persistent problems of inequalities in both student outcomes and experience persist (and have arguably worsened since the advent of the 2023 cost of living crisis (BBC, 2023)). Ugiagbe-Green and Ernsting (2022) problematise the measures used to define EDAG and posit the issue, in terms of race, as an unsolvable, ‘wicked’ problem. Even in the teaching-intensive, lower-ranking institutions where there are higher than sector average numbers of non-traditional students from minoritised ethnic backgrounds, differential outcomes, particularly EDAG, are persistently problematic (AdvanceHE, 2021). Students in these contexts (such as the one featured in this study) are often subject to multiple intersecting deprivations, including those associated with growing up in deprived neighbourhoods, being part of minoritised ethnic groups, and/or having a disability.

Despite clear evidence of the relationship between structural inequalities and persistent differential outcomes, the increasing neoliberal focus in higher education has led to a shifting of responsibility for outcomes from the state to the individual (Boughey and McKenna, 2021, Burke, 2012) while institutions are increasingly deemed responsible for retention and engagement (Tight, 2020). Simultaneously, discourses of widening participation have led to a problematic identification of groups as ‘advantaged’ or ‘disadvantaged’ (Burke, 2012).

Deficit discourses have stigmatising effects which operate insidiously to shape both student identity and experience and cannot be addressed by 'quick fix' solutions designed to meet or fix institutional metrics (Matthews, Simon & Kelly, 2016). Furthermore, the metrics themselves have limited validity in statistical terms and do not offer a reliable indicator of the value of higher education for students or employers (Hubbard, 2024). Rather, the issue requires "deep-level understandings of the subtle and insidious operations of classed, gendered and racialized inequalities in higher education (and education and learning more generally)" (Burke, 2012, p. 35). Similarly, Hubbard (2024) notes that addressing the gap requires a theoretical model derived from understanding the individualised and intersectional factors that influence student success. This would make it easier to make "testable predictions about underlying causes" (Hubbard, 2024, p.7).

To derive the kind of individualised and intersectional analysis required, I take a close-up view of a specific academic practice that is both characteristic of, and ubiquitous to, higher education. Namely, academic writing. Academic writing is intricately implicated in student academic outcomes since it is a core practice and site of interaction between students and universities.

Murray (2017, p. 28) describes the English language as the "common denominator" of the multiple intersecting pressures and conflicting priorities evident in higher education today. While English literacy, as well as oral and aural competence, are vital for learning in English-speaking contexts, it is

predominantly written English that plays a central role in assessment and, subsequently, in academic outcomes. For this reason, this study focuses on academic writing and its role in student outcomes as a lens through which to examine persistent differential outcomes.

I focus in-depth on the individual and contextual factors that influence students' academic writing development in a high participation (Tight, 2019) HEI in England. The aim is to develop a theoretical understanding of the role of academic writing in academic outcomes and to provide insight into how individual identities and contexts shape individual students' academic writing practices and institutional responses to those practices. The research questions for the study are framed as follows:

1. Which features of academic writing can be discerned as contributing to successful academic outcomes in written assignments?
2. How do students conceptualise their academic writing development?
3. Which individual and / or contextual factors can be discerned as supporting or hindering academic writing development?
4. How can answers to RQs 1 - 3 be understood theoretically to inform practice in relation to addressing persistent differential outcomes in higher education?

1.2 Nomenclature and Choice of Terminology

In terms of nomenclature, the term ‘persistent differential outcomes’ is used in this study due to the problematic nature of other terms used to describe persistent inequalities of outcomes in higher education. As noted by Joseph-Salisbury et al (2020) the term ‘attainment gap’ is problematic as it unfairly designates students as solely responsible for outcomes. The term ‘awarding gap’ is now preferred as it recognises the responsibilities of universities and the wider higher education sector in addressing persistent inequalities, many of which have systemic and institutional causes (Joseph-Salisbury et al, 2020; Ugiagbe-Green & Ernsting, 2022).

The term ‘awarding gap’ has now been widely adopted in UK higher education and is used to denote gaps in outcome and progression that are unexplained when controlling for other background characteristics of students (OfS, 2019). In terms of sectoral reports (UniversitiesUK, 2019; TASO 2022; 2023) and sectoral comment (Khan, 2023), the term ‘awarding gap’ is commonly associated with unexplained differences in outcome based on ethnicity as the ethnicity-degree-awarding gap is markedly persistent despite improvements in outcomes for all groups of students over time (OfS, 2022a).

However, as King (2023) notes, the term ‘awarding gap’ is also problematic in that it potentially prompts excessive focus on assessment and awarding at the expense of other gaps that arise during the student lifecycle. Additionally, Hubbard (2024) identifies multiple problems with the calculation of

awarding gaps at the institutional level as the measure only captures students who graduate and is currently calculated in ways that are “both theoretically and technically reductive” (p. 17). Furthermore, as currently calculated, the ‘awarding gap’ does not give sufficient granularity nor consider intersectional and contextual factors that influence student success (Hubbard, 2024).

Given the critiques of existing terminology, I prefer the term ‘persistent differential outcomes’ as it denotes the persistence of unequal outcomes for disadvantaged or marginalised groups in higher education, is less associated with a single category (e.g. ethnicity degree awarding) and is neutral in terms of the location of responsibility for outcomes. Finally, while focusing on outcomes, the term ‘persistent differential outcomes’ does not imply a reductive view of the educational process as focussed solely on outcomes relating to assessment or awards but denotes a potentially more open interpretation of the term ‘outcomes’ as pertaining to student learning, attainment, awards, progression, experience, and personal development. As Hubbard (2014, p. 14) notes: “A number to summarise educational equity is of most value to the regulator for assessing fairness at scale and is arguably of least use to the student.”

1.3 Choice of Context: Institutional Factors and Student Demographics

The context for the study is a large, urban, post-1992 university currently in the fourth quartile of the Guardian 2024 university rankings (The Guardian, 2024). According to The Complete University Guide (2024) the institution’s rankings have slipped approximately 10 points since 2022 with relatively low

rankings for research intensity, research quality, academic services spending, facilities spending and graduate prospects.

Recent institutional marketing materials are aimed at improving student confidence in the institution as an enabler of access to high-level careers. I have therefore named the institution ‘Urbanity’ both in terms of its urban identity and of its aspirational focus which is underpinned by a focus on technological innovation, enterprise, and commercial partnerships. In terms of aspiration and increased local presence, the institution has undergone substantial infrastructure development since the 2010s with the relocation of several departments from areas outside the city to a modern city centre campus.

The choice of institutional context, while expedient in terms of access to participants, is also interesting in terms of the student experience afforded by an urban university where most students are non-resident and where there are higher than sector averages for numbers of students from minority ethnic backgrounds and low-income neighbourhoods. As a teaching-intensive setting with higher than sector average numbers of non-traditional students, Urbanity is a useful setting in which to explore how persistent differential outcomes are maintained in massified (or “high participation”, see Tight, 2019) higher education. It affords the potential to understand first-hand the types of challenges faced by both students and staff in such settings. It also provides opportunities to consider how context influences learning and how institutional context and student contexts intersect in this part of the sector.

In terms of student profile, the institution is highly diverse, with a population of approximately 30,000 students, predominantly from the UK (HESA, 2024a). Most students are registered full-time (HESA, 2024a) and commute from the surrounding areas. Female students significantly outnumber males (HESA, 2024b), and over 60% of students are from minority ethnic backgrounds. In line with the aspirational focus on employment and enterprise, many academic staff come from and retain links with industry or the professions (The Complete University Guide, 2024).

As course lead for a large BSc social sciences programme serving approximately 350 undergraduate students at Urbanity, this project is a response to my experience of navigating the multiple competing pressures present in this institutional context. A brief description of the programme context is given below (data obtained from institutional records with permission from the university data controller):

In 2020-21, the average entry tariff for the cohort from which participants for this study were recruited was 116 UCAS points, with 60% of students having completed vocational or other non-A-level qualifications at Level 3. Almost 60% of students were classed as commuting from the local region, 58% were classified as being first-in-family (FIF), and 45% were from low-earning or no-earning households. 92% of entrants were female.

In 2020-21, the programme was not open to international students. However, the student cohort was richly diverse, with 69% of entrants in 20-21

identifying as coming from minoritised ethnic backgrounds, many of whom were first or second-generation naturalised migrants to the UK. While all students were domiciled in the UK, many students on the programme spoke English as a second, third or even fourth language. Furthermore, of the students who identified as white, a number were first-generation naturalised migrants from Eastern Europe who also spoke English as a second language.

25% of students on the programme were recorded as having a declared disability. Declared disabilities predominantly related to specific learning difficulties (SpLD), neurodiversity, or mental health problems. Many students declared multiple diagnoses, often relating to mental health problems alongside either neurodiversity and/or SpLD. The programme statistics contrast starkly with the HESA (2024a) reported statistics for UK-domiciled students in England for 2020-21 of whom, 70% were white; 57% were female; 15% declared a disability; 50% had parents who had attended university and only 19% of whom came from the most deprived postcode areas. Programme demographics for the study population continue to be representative of the programme for subsequent years.

Institutional concerns conveyed to academic staff by senior management at Urbanity include improving National Student Survey (NSS) and Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) scores in addition to meeting the Office for Students B3 metrics. Concerns about the B3 metrics include improving continuation rates and EDAG.

In 2020-21, only 59% of students passed the first year at the first attempt. While this cohort was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, first-time pass rates for non-COVID-affected cohorts have only increased to 64%. Following the resit period, on average, only 83% of students progress to the next stage, and there is an average permanent withdrawal rate of 8%, which represents a large annual financial loss for the institution.

There are also large degree awarding gaps on the programme of 40% for black students and 38% for all ethnicities compared with outcomes for white students. For example, in 2024, 76.5% of white students gained a first-class or upper second-class compared with 33% of Asian students and 36% of black students. There is also a 10% awarding gap based on the index of deprivation.

Intersecting factors of class, race, and gender influence access to higher education (Burke 2012; Shiner & Noden, 2015), student experiences of higher education (Boughey & McKenna, 2021; Donnelly & Abbas, 2018), and academic outcomes (Hubbard, 2024). Therefore, the role of individual student contextual factors in understanding persistent differential outcomes is an important area of focus for this study.

1.4 Rationale for a Focus on Contextual Factors

As noted above, the professional concern that precipitated this study was the ongoing requirement, as course lead, to account for academic outcomes including continuation rates, attainment gaps and graduate outcomes

on the BSc programme. Aspirational institutions such as Urbanity embody the accountability and performativity-driven characteristics of the neo-liberal turn in higher education (Ball, 2012). Furthermore, there is a strong sense of disempowerment for academics (Kenny, 2018) who are strongly aware of the multiple factors implicated in student outcomes that are beyond the control of individual practitioners and course teams.

Macfarlane (2013) notes that teaching-led institutions with large widening participation profiles are more likely to respond to the pressures of new managerialism. At Urbanity, course leads must identify realistic and achievable programme enhancement goals to demonstrate improved outcomes and satisfy institutional and OfS benchmarks. However, in line with an increasingly managerialist approach, enhancement initiatives are often imposed from above with course leads tasked with integrating initiatives into diverse curricula. This can be seen as ‘drag and drop’ (TASO, 2023, p. 7) enhancement in action where popular initiatives are selected and imposed with little or no consultation about their suitability for programmes or student cohorts.

The “wicked problems” (Beer & Lawson, 2017) of student attrition, engagement and outcomes are complex and multi-faceted and require a balanced approach that acknowledges all actors in the field. Despite this, there is a predominance of higher education research into academic development and design (Clegg, 2012). While teaching quality, is, in essence, the only variable relating to academic outcomes that is fully within the control of

academic staff, its effectiveness in addressing student outcomes is contingent on interactions with students and for this reason, it seems important to bring student agency, including its possibilities and limitations, to the fore as well. As noted by Tight (2020), contextual factors relating to the broader issues in student lives are under-acknowledged and under-researched in the academic literature.

To improve outcomes, institutional practices must be understood in the context of students' wider lives and identities (Boughey & McKenna, 2021; Tight, 2020). Yet, any view of student outcomes as highly individualised and contextualised (Crenshaw, 1989 cited in Hubbard, 2024) is likely to pose a strong challenge to the capacity of massified institutions to improve social mobility due to the resource implications implied by more individualised approaches to students and their learning.

Writing from the South African context, Shay (2016) citing van Vught (2013) talks about mission overload and the tensions inherent in a system where resources outstrip perceived demands. Additionally, Coleman and Tuck (2021) acknowledge the need for teachers to take more risks in terms of pedagogical approaches but note that academics are only likely to do so if institutional conditions are favourable to radical, pedagogical innovation.

Clegg (2012, p.627) calls on higher education researchers to be “less introspective and more challenging in our research questions in terms of what matters in higher education.” Another aim, therefore, is to question the unequal

shifting of responsibility for academic outcomes to academic staff by exploring (im)possibilities for student agency in this matter; to pose questions about the impact of contextual factors on student learning and to identify what widening participation might look like from an ethical standpoint.

Furthermore, investigating the role of student contextual factors in academic outcomes potentially raises important ethical issues regarding admissions (Roberts, 2023) and the impossibilities of widening participation within an educational environment dominated by neoliberal views of meritocracy and aspiration (Burke, 2012, 2013).

In addition to this, the sector must also contend with regulatory and public perceptions about academic standards and maintaining the credibility of degrees (OfS, 2022b). These perceptions are underpinned by discourses of excellence, quality and standards which emphasise the stratification of the sector (Burke, 2012) and perceptions of lower standards at lower-status institutions (McLean, Abbas & Ashwin, 2013).

Student contexts intersect with institutional ones, and there is evidence that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to apply to lower-status institutions (Shiner & Noden, 2015). This means that students at different institutions face differing challenges (McLean & Abbas, 2009). Therefore, understanding the role of institutional contextual factors in supporting or hindering academic outcomes is also important and acknowledges the overlapping contexts in which higher education takes place.

The rationale for the choice of a contextual analysis may be summarised as follows:

The policy context for higher education has seen an increased emphasis on accountability and performativity. As a result, institutional approaches to addressing persistent differential outcomes often lack contextual relevance at a programmatic and student level. There is a dearth of literature on the role of student context in academic outcomes. Addressing persistent differential outcomes requires further research into the impact of both institutional and student contextual factors since both are relevant to the student experience. This is particularly the case in contexts where most students are studying while living at home and/or are from minoritised ethnic and/or low socio-economic backgrounds.

The ‘recontextualization’ of the learner (cf. Boughey & McKenna’s (2021) “decontextualised learner”) enables a better understanding of how institutional practices intersect with student lives. Therefore, a close-up view of institutional practices in the context of students’ lives helps identify points of mismatch between the perceptions and expectations of both institutions and students (Maton, 2004; Hallet, 2013), leading to the potential identification of relevant enhancement interventions to address persistent inequalities of outcome.

1.5 Rationale for a Focus on Academic Writing

1.5.1 Super Diversity in the Student Body

In terms of university regulations, students do not fail ostensibly because of factors such as class, race, age, gender, or disability. In every cohort, there are students from diverse backgrounds who graduate with higher awards (upper second-class or above) and it can be tempting, therefore, to see such achievements as relating to exceptional individual traits rather than to a complex interplay of factors relating to identity and context (Boughey & McKenna, 2021) as well as individual dispositions (Wong, 2018).

However, a persistently smaller proportion of students from minoritised backgrounds receive first-class degrees (OfS, 2022a) while completion and employment rates for students from economically precarious and significantly disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds continue to fall significantly below those for students from other backgrounds (OfS, 2023).

A minority of students fail to progress because they do not adhere to the rules of the institution e.g. through academic misconduct, disciplinary issues, or failure to pay fees. Increasingly, in the UK, students cite personal and financial reasons as the cause for attrition or for considering dropping out of university (BBC, 2023; HEPI, 2023). Simultaneously, increasing rates of attrition from UK universities are framed politically as relating to decreased confidence in the quality of higher education courses and providers (BBC, 2023). Thus, framing institutions as responsible for the retention and engagement of students.

Academic reasons for lower outcomes include students failing to submit assignments or failing to submit on time. Alternatively, students fail to progress

or graduate with lower degrees because they do not meet the criteria for the award of a qualification as determined by the institution. This includes not reaching the required academic standards and fulfilling assessment criteria as expected by markers of assignments.

In terms of factors that affect outcomes in higher education, the respective expectations of varied stakeholders (students, institutions, parents, employers, and communities) are key. Expectations and orientations towards higher education are highly varied both within and between social groups. For example, Scanlon et al, (2019) note that while working-class families may place a high value on higher education and often have high expectations for their children, the type of familial support available to students varies according to social class and includes parental influences on choice of institution and perceptions about affordability and value for money. Gofen (2009) uses the concept of “family capital” to describe the non-material familial resources and familial support for higher education that influence student performance. She notes that, in the Israeli context at least, the contextual setting of the family, which may be more influenced by class than race, is highly influential in determining student outcomes.

However, while Scanlon et al (2019) identify similarities among UK working-class families in terms of financial concerns they also note “considerable variations in terms of parents’ level of engagement in their children’s education and plans for the future” (p. 16). Furthermore, Hurst (2010)

notes that while working-class students often feel alienated by the values and culture of higher education, there are clear variations between working-class students in terms of orientation to higher education.

Assumptions about students based on background characteristics are increasingly problematised in the literature (Abbas, Ashwin & Mclean, 2013; Burke, 2012; Naylor, Balik & Arkoudis, 2018), pointing to the need for more complex understandings of the relationships between students and universities. However, a more individualised approach to the student - university relationship is potentially problematic in a massified system where universities are financially reliant on attracting high numbers of students. This is especially pertinent when possibilities for in-person interactions appear to have shifted dramatically since the COVID-19 pandemic (Times Higher Education, 2024).

From an institutional perspective, the taken-for-granted and implicit aspects of higher education practice are subject to increasing research scrutiny. Institutional and disciplinary expectations are no longer accepted as value-free and inevitable. Rather, there is increasing awareness of the need to make the values, assumptions, and expectations of the institution familiar to new cohorts of students (Daddow, 2016). This is particularly the case with assumptions about learning and assessment (Haggis, 2006) and academic writing (Lea & Street, 1998; Avenia-Tapper, 2015; Turner, 2018; Lilis, 2019;) in the context of increasing internationalisation and diversification of student cohorts.

Briguglio (2011) argues that universities are yet to grapple with the real meaning of internationalisation for curriculum development and language use noting the need for “extensive dialogue in (and outside) the classroom: between students and between teachers and students” (p. 325) to meet the needs of the internationalised student body. Similarly, Calvo et al (2020) identify the need for universities to attend to the “super-diversity” of the student body and to support inclusivity with more explicit explanations of teaching methods and better guidelines for subject teachers on incorporating inclusive practice in the curriculum. As with the case of Urbanity, this applies to institutions with highly diverse home cohorts as well as those with high numbers of international students.

1.5.2 Researching Academic Writing

In terms of policy contexts, the role of academic writing in academic outcomes was brought to the fore in 2021 by the Office for Students review of assessment practices in English higher education: spelling, punctuation and grammar. The main conclusion of the review states that “most students on most courses should be assessed on their technical proficiency in written English” (OfS, 2021, p.2).

While there is no specific guidance on what “technical proficiency” entails other than reference to “effective communication” for analytic purposes that requires “technically proficient use of sentence and paragraph structure, syntax, and other features of language” (OfS, 2021, p.3), the review seemed to

suggest that spelling, punctuation and grammar should become a universal competence standard of higher education programmes in England, a position roundly criticised by disability and inclusivity practitioners (NADP, 2023).

While the OfS review and subsequent regulatory directive was to some extent dismissed as a reactionary Conservative policy designed to appease concerns of the right-wing press around quality in higher education (WonkHE, 2021), it remains in force and would seem to have important implications for practice. This is particularly relevant to high participation contexts where large numbers of students have declared disabilities or do not speak English as a first language.

The role of academic writing in academic success or failure is complex and contested. Academic writing is a ubiquitous and taken-for-granted practice that involves actors from varying contexts (Turner, 2018). Understanding the situatedness of practices from multiple perspectives helps identify how practices are bound up with and perpetuate underlying social structures (Guillén-Galve & Bocanegra-Valle, 2021).

Ávila Reyes (2021, p. 126) emphasises the importance of understanding students' perspectives of academic writing, noting that underrepresented students often carry "structural expectations of failure" relating to implicit assumptions by both students and staff about the illegitimacy of familial and vernacular languages in academia. As noted by Turner (2018), the labour of academic writing is often unseen and ignored unless the writing is deemed

problematic by readers. Hence, the inclusion of student voices in research into academic writing is both desirable and necessary.

As a potential cornerstone of academic outcomes, therefore, academic writing is laden with often unspoken expectations and assumptions on the part of both academics and students (Ávila Reyes, 2021). Furthermore, there is evidence that marking 'non-standard' writing can affect the mood of markers (Turner, 2018), while assessing language competence is a politically and personally sensitive issue in terms of who is allowed to access professional contexts (San Miguel & Rogan, 2015).

Therefore, both emic (student) and etic (researcher, professional or outsider) perspectives are needed to understand how intersecting practices combine to maintain academic writing as a potential source of academic failure or success. Taking inspiration from textographic approaches (Paltridge, 2008; Guillén-Galve & Bocanegra-Valle, 2021), I aim to identify how institutional and student expectations and practices inhibit or support academic success.

To do this, I provide a close-up analysis of academic writing comprising of a textual analysis of student writing and a combined narrative and thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with students. The interviews aimed to explore how students conceptualise academic writing in the context of their learning journeys at university, thus aiming to uncover the contextual factors that help or hinder engagement with learning and academic writing development. Simultaneously, the textual analysis affords reflection on how the textual

features of students' writing relate to academic outcomes and marker expectations. Salient findings from both the textual and qualitative analyses are then discussed as key findings of the study as a whole.

A theoretical framework drawing on Freire, as well as a biopsychosocial model of learner development, is used to interrogate and explain the findings with creative and emancipatory intent (Trowler, 2012). While the explanatory theoretical framework was applied to the findings post hoc, previous interactions with the theoretical literature are likely to have influenced the interpretation of data. Methodologically, the primary influences on the study design and execution came from the humanistic and phenomenological philosophical underpinnings of the Person-Centred and Experiential approach to counselling and psychotherapy (discussed in detail in Chapter 3). The aim of providing an underpinning explanatory framework is to enhance the relevance of the findings and to suggest theory-based implications for practice. The theoretical influences enhance understanding of the role of individual and contextual issues in the 'wicked' issue of persistent differential outcomes viewed through the lens of academic writing.

1.6 Academic Writing in the Age of AI

While it is beyond the scope of this study to investigate the role of AI generated text in student academic writing, it is important to note the impact of such a major disruptor in the field of study.

Since the beginning of this project, the release of OpenAI's natural language processing model, Chat GPT 4 in March 2023, has precipitated many discussions about academic writing, especially regarding the threat of AI to academic integrity and meaningful student engagement. Crompton and Burke (2023) note a rapid rise in educational research into the role of AI in higher education since 2021, with much of this research focussed on AI use in language learning, including writing.

The examples of academic writing studied in this project were produced in December 2021 before large language models (LLM) were widely available to the public. Despite a notable increase in the number of assignments sent for investigation for academic misconduct at Urbanity since the introduction of Chat GPT 4, the assumption in this study is that most students continue to write their own academic work.

Where the use of Chat GPT or similar is discernible in students' work, this is usually through a combination of irregularities in the writing including content 'hallucinations' (Stokel-Walker, 2024), fictitious references, journalistic prose and LLM conversational phrases such as "Certainly, I can give you a summary of...". These problematic aspects of AI-generated text were not discernible in any of the texts studied in this project. However, given the ubiquity of general editing tools in word processing software, the main influence of AI on the writing samples in this project may have been on general copyediting and presentational factors. Nevertheless, as will be seen from the

textual analysis, students do not necessarily use such tools to their full advantage.

The focus for this project is on how academic writing can be a lens through which to better understand persistent differential outcomes. Therefore, were students to discuss their use of AI in interviews, or if AI usage was detected in texts, this would provide further insight into students' relationship with writing and would be an interesting area of investigation. However, given the timing of this project, AI does not feature in the student interviews and is not discernible in the sampled texts. Any future development of the work begun here would need to consider the influence of AI, as its use would likely feature to some degree in future writing samples and interviews.

1.7 Advance Organiser

The remaining chapters focus in depth on student academic writing and student experiences of writing. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature on academic writing and academic writing development and is organised according to key theoretical domains in the field. Chapter 3 provides a description of the philosophical, methodological and ethical considerations for the project, while Chapter 4 presents the process and findings of the textual analysis of student writing samples, focussing on RQ1: "Which features of academic writing can be discerned as contributing to successful academic outcomes in written assignments?"

Chapter 5 explains the qualitative analytical process and findings. This is followed by a discussion of the qualitative findings in relation to the literature and contributing theoretical framework in Chapter 6, focusing on RQs 2, 3 and 4. In conclusion, Chapter 7 attempts to pull together the findings of both analyses to draw conclusions and identify future research directions.

For ease of reference, the research questions are stated again below:

- 1 Which features of academic writing can be discerned as contributing to successful academic outcomes in written assignments?
- 2 How do students conceptualise their academic writing development?
- 3 Which individual and / or contextual factors can be discerned as supporting or hindering academic writing development?
- 4 How can answers to RQs 1 - 3 be understood theoretically to inform practice in relation to addressing persistent differential outcomes in higher education?

[Appendix A](#) contains the evocative narratives produced as part of the qualitative analysis of interviews. These can be read independently as research artefacts that illustrate the complex and hopeful stories shared by participants during this study.

Chapter 2: Academic Writing – Key Concepts and Debates

In the following narrative review of literature, my aim is to identify the multiple theoretical and conceptual viewpoints prevalent in the field; to consider points of synthesis and opportunities for constructive debate. My position as a subject, rather than English language specialist, is both liberating and constraining, inasmuch as I am not allied to any camp, but despite extensive reading, there may be limitations to my understanding and interpretation of conceptual divisions that might otherwise be refuted by academic writing or English language practitioners.

2.1 Approach to literature searching

In 2022, before beginning work on the large thesis, I wrote a narrative literature review entitled: “Supporting English language proficiency and academic literacy – What are the recommendations from the academic literature for teachers in Higher Education?” This review, completed as an early assignment for the PhD programme, aimed to inform practice in the light of challenges I experienced in marking students’ writing. The resulting short paper identified key guidance discerned from the literature for academics aiming to support students’ language and literacy development as part of disciplinary teaching.

To undertake this review, I conducted a systematised search using the Advanced Search setting of Lancaster University’s OneSearch library tool to identify English language, peer-reviewed articles, published between 2011 and

2022. Initially, search terms and synonyms relating to English language proficiency (ELP), academic literacy / literacies (AL) and student writing were used, followed by the addition of keywords relating to student ethnicity and widening participation. These keywords were added following abstract scanning of initial yields, which suggested that a focus on ethnicity and widening participation in addition to ELP and AL would yield further relevant search results. A subject filter of 'Higher Education' was also applied to expedite the search process.

Exclusion criteria for the original review were pre-2011, non-English language, non-peer reviewed, and not about Higher Education. Theoretical as well as empirical studies were included to enable understanding of key concepts and debates in an unfamiliar field of study. Further to title and abstract scanning, 23 articles were retained from an initial yield of 138. The initial yield of 23 articles was read in depth, and notes compiled into an annotated bibliography.

The initial yield of 23 articles identified key influences and themes in the literature. Namely, the main discursive approaches taken to define students' language and literacy development (English Language Proficiency (ELP), English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and Academic Literacies (AL)) as well as key policy concerns regarding the role of written English in academic outcomes. Therefore, these themes formed the basis for the wider review of literature undertaken during the large thesis. Further literature was found by reference

mining the original 23 articles, as well as ad hoc and iterative searching on themes arising from the literature undertaken throughout the study. To situate this study in the policy domain, I also searched the grey literature, including government reports from the Office for Students, Department for Education, TASO (Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education), the Higher Education Academy and Universities UK.

Restricting the timescale for the original review to 2011 onwards meant that while the literature was up to date, some foundational works were not included, other than those most often cited by the post-2011 literature e.g. Lea and Street (1998). This also meant that some theoretical influences, such as that of Paulo Freire on the AL field, were less apparent to me as a subject specialist than they would have been to a critical linguist or English language specialist. However, these limitations also reflect how certain concepts, such as academic literacies, have been adopted in the wider educational literature since most papers were sourced from the higher education literature as opposed to the field of linguistics.

2.2 Domains of Literature - Overview

There are several domains of literature pertaining to academic writing in higher education. The current field can be divided roughly as relating to English language proficiency (ELP), English for Academic Purposes (EAP), and Academic Literacies (AL) (Murray, 2012). For clarity, it should be noted that definitions of the key research domains concerned with academic writing (ELP,

EAP and AL) are taken from Murray (2012, 2017) and may be understood in more generalised terms than those provided by authors writing in the respective specialist fields. This is particularly relevant to the use of the singular and plural forms of the term ‘academic literacy’ and ‘academic literacies’. Due to the ubiquity and fluidity of how the term ‘academic literacies’ is used in higher education (Lillis & Scott, 2007), care needs to be taken in understanding the theoretical and ideological differences and resonances between the different research domains concerned with academic writing (Lillis & Tuck, forthcoming 2025). It should be noted also that the resonances between domains are perhaps less obvious to a non-English language specialist particularly where one field is aiming to restore the balance of inquiry from one perspective to another e.g. from “text as linguistic object” to “the practices in which texts are embedded” (Lillis & Scott, 2007, p. 21).

The literature on student academic writing crosses many subject boundaries, particularly those of education, sociology, and sociolinguistics. As such, the literature is concerned with understanding a complex set of overlapping factors relating to the intersection of students’ linguistic practices with institutional and disciplinary ones. Therefore, a simplistic typology of the literature is likely to be reductive and is only applied lightly to structure the review.

I reference literature from across the international English-speaking HE sector due to similar concerns about English standards across English-

speaking / medium institutions (Murray, 2017). Furthermore, while there are clear historical and political differences across regimes, research from South Africa and Australia is particularly relevant to the context of this study due to the large numbers of non-traditional students entering higher education in those countries in recent years. There are also global synergies in terms of marketisation, massification and the proliferation of audit cultures in universities (Shore, 2008) which mean that institutions across the globe face similar challenges and tensions regarding upholding the value of degrees, demonstrating worth to the public purse, and remaining attractive to large numbers of students (Murray, 2017).

In addition to recent literature on academic writing, there are several theorists whose work is both contested and highly influential in the field. Chief among these are Basil Bernstein, Pierre Bourdieu, and Paulo Freire. I touch upon the work of all three in this review, but it should be noted that their legacies and bodies of work are too vast to do them justice in a review of this kind. Also included are Turner (2018) who offers a historical analysis of academic writing that captures the complicated relationship between linguistic accuracy, intellectual labour, and academic credibility, and Badley (2009, 2011, 2017) who considers writing from the perspective of academics but has interesting things to say about writing as a dynamic and creative process that is constitutive of knowledge making. Finally, some literature on academic reading is included where the authors make clear links to academic writing and academic outcomes.

2.3 English Language Proficiency and Access to Higher Education

It is generally acknowledged that “a certain level of English language proficiency is necessary to study successfully at an English medium university” (Briguglio, 2011, p. 319) and there are ostensible standards of language proficiency that students must meet to enter English medium HEIs. Entry standards are required due to the assumption that higher education is both ‘higher’ in terms of time (i.e. education that follows compulsory, secondary education) and academic level (e.g. it involves the acquisition of specialised knowledge and development of skills relating to the critical evaluation of arguments and the capacity for decision-making in complex contexts (OfS, 2022)). Although, it should be noted that the notion of levels as pertaining to standards in Higher Education is somewhat contested (Tight, 2023).

The required English language proficiency level at entry for home students at English universities is commonly set at Grade 4 (standard pass) for GCSE English Language. The government subject content and assessment objectives for GCSE English Language state that:

GCSE specifications in English language should ensure students can read fluently and write effectively. They should be able to demonstrate a confident control of Standard English, and they should be able to write grammatically correct sentences, deploy figurative language and analyse texts.

GCSE specifications in English language should enable students to:

- read a wide range of texts, fluently and with good understanding
- read critically, and use knowledge gained from wide reading to inform and improve their own writing
- write effectively and coherently using Standard English appropriately
- use grammar correctly, punctuate and spell accurately
- acquire and apply a wide vocabulary, alongside a knowledge and understanding of grammatical terminology, and linguistic conventions for reading, writing and spoken language.

(Department for Education, 2013)

Similarly, for international students, an IELTS (International English Language Testing System) score of 7 - 8 is described as the “most widely accepted level for admission to universities in English-speaking countries” (IELTS, 2024, n.p.). The overall band scores for 7 – 8 IELTS are described as follows:

IELTS Band Score: 7 Skill Level: Good

- The test taker has operational command of the language, though with occasional inaccuracies, inappropriate usage and misunderstandings in some situations.
- They generally handle complex language well and understand detailed reasoning.

IELTS Band Score: 8 Skill Level: Very good

-
- The test taker has fully operational command of the language with only occasional unsystematic inaccuracies and inappropriate usage.
 - They may misunderstand some things in unfamiliar situations. They handle complex and detailed argumentation well.

(IELTS, 2024a)

For an in-depth examination of the fitness for purpose and comparability of the varying international testing regimes for ELP, see Murray (2017).

Despite the existence of explicit language criteria for university admissions, there is an extensive body of literature from across the international English-speaking HE sector about students' English language proficiency and their preparedness for higher-level study (e.g. Briguglio, 2011; Dunworth et al, 2014; Matthews, Simon & Kelly, 2016; Murray, 2012, 2013; Sultan, 2013; Trenkic & Warmington, 2017; Warnby, 2024). While many concerns are related to the growth of international students in the global higher education market (e.g. Briguglio, 2011; Murray, 2017), there are increasing concerns about the needs of students from English-speaking backgrounds (ESB) who “exhibit dialectal features not congruous with the standards and expectations of higher education – or, indeed, professional contexts” (Murray, 2013, p. 237).

Similar concerns about English language standards are cited by employers (Murray, 2012, 2017; Sultan, 2013) and employability was cited as an underpinning motivation for the 2021 OfS review of assessment practices for

spelling, punctuation, and grammar. In it, the OfS cite concerns from the Confederation of British Industry and the OECD about the weak literacy skills of young people and graduates in England (Office for Students, 2021). However, the notion of ELP is contested, and what is meant precisely by English language proficiency is unclear if some students who meet university admissions criteria for proficiency are still perceived as falling below expected standards both upon entry and at graduation (Murray, 2017).

Murray (2013, p. 303) defines proficiency as:

general communicative competence in language that enables its users to express and understand meaning accurately, fluently and appropriately according to context, and which comprises a set of generic skills and abilities.

Proficiency is also associated with accurate grammar, vocabulary development, reading and writing skills, and the capacity to understand inference and the pragmatics of communication (Murray, 2012, 2013). General proficiency thus comprises a set of “generic skills and abilities [that] represent an investment in language that can be ‘cashed in’ in any potential context of use” (Murray, 2012, p.236).

However, given the global nature of English usage, indicators of proficiency, particularly notions around standard usage of English, are increasingly viewed as context-dependent, ideological constructs (Briguglio,

2011; Turner, 2018). Also, there is little clarity about how proficiency testing standards relate to academic outcomes, given the many confounding variables implicated in academic performance (Murray, 2017). There is general agreement, however, that students require ‘a level’ of ELP to be able to engage with and succeed at university but that academic usage of English differs considerably from ELP and takes longer to develop than everyday fluency (Cummins, 2000 cited in Murray, 2017, p. 83).

There is some evidence that vocabulary knowledge is an important predictor of academic performance (Trenkic & Warmington, 2017), particularly for reading comprehension. Indeed, Milton & Treffers-Daller (2013, p. 168) note: “Student achievement may, potentially, be explained as much by vocabulary size as by academic ability.” They also note “that many university students must be at or below the cusp of the kind of vocabulary size which is required for the easy comprehension of university level texts” (p.168).

Conversely, there is less evidence for the importance of what may be termed “surface level” features of texts (Lea & Street, 1998) (e.g. spelling, punctuation, and grammar) for academic success. Studies of HE marking practices show that markers generally rank ‘surface’ features of texts as less important than features associated with academic engagement with disciplinary knowledge (Lea & Street, 1998; Bloxham et al., 2016). However, Turner (2018, p. 183-4) disputes this view, noting that:

the subordinate positioning of grammatical accuracy risks underestimating not only its textual role as an integral part of writtenness, but also the social and cultural importance of its role as an index of academic credibility and hence, its importance for academic readers.

Turner's view acknowledges the ideological positioning of writing deemed 'unproblematic' by academic readers, noting that this indicates a "linguistic conflation ideology" (p.9) by which "grammatical accuracy metadiscursively indexes academic credibility" (p. 185). However, she also notes the importance of textual coherence and cohesion, arguing that "strong epistemological claims cannot be made without adequate rhetorical and linguistic instantiation" (p. 189).

What is meant by "adequate rhetorical and linguistic instantiation" is determined by a reader's willingness to interpret a writer's meaning. Thus, the question of what constitutes adequate proficiency for academic contexts would still seem to be undecided, and there is the implicit notion that everyone knows what it is, but nobody can (or is willing) to define it.

2.4 English Language Proficiency and The Policy Environment

It is questionable whether responsibility for ELP lies solely with universities or also with pre-university qualifying examination regimes (NADP, 2021) and the metrics-driven approach to primary and secondary education in

England. Literacy was purportedly a key driver of UK educational policy under the last Conservative government, whereby a pass in Maths and English at GCSE became a condition of funding for further education between the ages of 16 – 18 (Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2024). However, the overly results-driven environment of A-levels whereby schools and FE colleges focus on memorisation and reproduction of knowledge at the expense of student-initiated original writing would appear to be a contributing factor in students' declining academic writing skills (Sultan, 2013). Likewise, despite the much-vaunted emphasis on phonics and spelling, punctuation and grammar at primary school level, concerns about children's English language development persist throughout the English education system (Ofsted, 2024).

Given the global higher education market for students, institutions are unlikely to increase language admission requirements without a wholesale agreement to this across the sector as this would likely impact student recruitment negatively on both home and international fronts (Murray, 2017). Indeed, given the pressure to attract students in a highly competitive market, lower-ranking institutions frequently decrease Level 3 tariff requirements during the summer Clearing period to compensate for shortfalls in student recruitment. For example, in an exceptional move during the 2024 recruitment cycle, a sharp decrease in international student numbers prompted Urbanity to waive its Level 2 (GCSE) entry requirements for home students for English and Maths. Thus, in certain parts of the sector, the market, rather than the academic community or government policy, is the main arbiter of entry standards.

To remain solvent, universities such as Urbanity frequently admit students whose previous qualifications are below standard tariff requirements. Furthermore, as noted above, there is a tacit understanding that standard language prerequisites do not necessarily equip students for the proficiency requirements of academic contexts. However, universities must find ways to manage students' language needs while simultaneously maintaining academic standards and the reputation of degrees (Office for Students, 2022b). Furthermore, they must do this predominantly within the standard 3-year timeframe for full-time study in the UK.

Despite the vagaries of the pre-entry examination system, and because of the complex financial and regulatory imperatives that have driven increased participation in higher education in the last 30 years, universities are now faced with a complex set of issues relating to equality of access, participation, student experience and student outcomes. This means that English medium institutions must provide opportunities and support for all students to succeed regardless of linguistic background and level of English proficiency on entry. As noted previously, they are also required to assess students' proficiency in spelling, punctuation, and grammar on most programmes of study (Office for Students, 2021).

The requirement to ensure student success raises further ethical issues in terms of how support is structured and funded (Matthews, Simon & Kelly, 2016). There is an ethical imperative associated with the tacit assumptions

involved in granting admission to students to programmes of study (Murray, 2013) since all students are admitted on the assumption that they have the prerequisite skills to succeed. There is particular concern regarding the stigmatisation of certain groups viewed as requiring additional language support such as students with disabilities (Matthews, Simon & Kelly, 2016); from non-English-speaking backgrounds (Briguglio, 2011; Murray, 2013; Trenkic & Warmington, 2017) or English speakers from non-traditional backgrounds (Murray, 2012, 2013; Murray & Klinger, 2012).

However, with a regulatory focus on degree awarding gaps in England, there is an increased awareness of the need to provide proactive support for students most at risk of attrition or of graduating with lower degrees. These are also the student groups most at risk of stigmatisation from targeted interventions (Matthews, Simon & Kelly, 2016). Meanwhile, whole-institution approaches, while reducing risks of stigma and shame, risk widening gaps between groups since already advantaged students can be further advantaged by additional support. Likewise, international students and those with English as an additional language are further disadvantaged by the fact that native speakers also improve their language skills at university (Trenkic & Warmington, 2017). This leads to the question of how best to support students' language needs.

2.5 Supporting Students' Language Needs

In Australia, post-enrolment testing is increasingly used to identify students at risk of attrition (Matthews, Simon & Kelly, 2016), and it can be argued that the compassionate use of post-enrolment testing is both ethically and pedagogically sound (Murray, 2012). However, the issue of post-enrolment testing is complex and not formally practised in England. Albeit academic staff who become aware of students' language needs, are implicitly expected to police writing standards by signposting students to additional support where they deem this necessary. Yet, academic staff do not necessarily possess the requisite skills and training to recognise or deal with language problems effectively (Murray, 2012; Murray, 2013; Murray & Klinger, 2012; Wingate, 2016) and increasingly, in the globalised HE context, academics may not have English as a first language themselves (Murray, 2017).

Furthermore, what constitutes 'good' writing is determined by more than the linguistic features of texts (Lea & Street, 1998; Richards & Pilcher, 2016) and varies according to disciplinary expectations and conventions (Boughey & McKenna, 2021; Lea & Street, 1998). Determining 'good' writing also varies according to academics' levels of professional knowledge and experience (Murray & Sharpling, 2019) and their willingness to openly discuss or document language issues in students' work for fear of appearing biased or racist (Briguglio, 2011; San Miguel & Rogan, 2015).

Additionally, there are sensitive boundaries to negotiate regarding the respective roles of academics and central services staff in supporting student

literacy (Hallett, 2013). Wingate and Tribble (2012) note tensions between different ways of conceptualising students' language needs at university and a lack of clear models of language instruction. There is a need for collaborative work between language specialists and academics (Bergman, 2016; Calvo et al., 2020; Wingate, 2016), and several authors note the need for institutional approaches to language pedagogy (Dunworth et al., 2014; Murray 2017; Wingate, 2016). What is not contested is the complex and sensitive nature of addressing students' language needs at university in a way that acknowledges rather than stigmatizes difference.

Wallbank (2021) notes that in massified settings, targeted approaches to support minoritised ethnic, widening participation and commuter students can be depersonalising and pathologizing of difference. Furthermore, students tend to underuse centralised support services compared with informal and personalised support networks (Picton & Kahu, 2021). For example, students identified as needing help with literacy can be reluctant to seek support and instead prefer individualised in-text feedback on work (Matthews, Simon & Kelly, 2016). With these tensions in mind, Murray (2017) advocates for a decentralised model of language development that addresses students' language needs on several levels, including additional support for those with general proficiency needs, together with curriculum-based academic literacies and professional communication skills support for all. Such provision requires a coordinated, institutional approach backed by committed leadership willing to resource such interventions.

2.6 Academic Literacies

The insistence on 'Standard English' in the GCSE assessment objectives cited above points to the ideological and contextual nature of language policies that inform pedagogies (Coleman & Tuck, 2021; Freire & Macedo, 1987). This point is fundamental to an Academic Literacies (AL) approach to academic writing that views all students as requiring induction to the linguistic conventions and forms of knowledge associated with specific disciplinary domains (Calvo et al., 2020; Murray, 2012).

AL is focused on students' academic identity development within specific disciplinary regimes rather than a generic approach to literacy for academic purposes (Murray, 2012). However, AL and ELP are intertwined concepts as there is recognition that the generic skills associated with English language proficiency are a prerequisite to developing academic literacy (Murray, 2012) and the communication skills required in the workplace (Murray, 2013).

The provision of support for language needs associated with specific disciplinary domains is generally viewed as less stigmatising than the provision of support for English language proficiency, particularly when students requiring support are already from English speaking backgrounds (Murray, 2012) or who use English as an additional language (Glew et al., 2019). Concerns with deficit discourses have precipitated a shift towards addressing the language needs of all students (Dunworth et al., 2014) with a focus on the contextualised nature of language and its role in the construction of identity (Boughey & McKenna, 2021;

Donovan & Erskine-Shaw, 2018; Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis, 2019; Wallbank, 2021). Academic literacy development is viewed as an emotional as well as intellectual process (Dononvan & Erskine-Shaw, 2018) that “brings the concept of identity into play” (Boughey & McKenna, 2021, p. 64).

While it is acknowledged that a certain level of English proficiency is required for AL development there is also a critical and ideological focus on how disciplinary practices implicitly exclude students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Baker et al., 2019) and on how the disciplines impose dominant discourses on students from marginalised discursive backgrounds (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). Thus, academic literacy development requires sensitivity to issues of identity and marginalisation in the pedagogic process (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). In their seminal paper, Lea and Street (1998, p. 159) note:

It [Academic Literacies] views student writing and learning as issues at the level of epistemology and identities rather than skill or socialisation [...] From the student point of view a dominant feature of academic literacy practices is the requirement to switch practices between one setting and another, to deploy a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriate to each setting, and to handle the social meanings and identities that each evokes. This emphasis on identities and social meanings draws attention to deep affective and ideological conflicts in such switching and use of the linguistic repertoire.

The AL approach views literacy as a social practice whereby literacy is socially constructed and therefore, open to challenge (Hallet, 2013). Literacy, from an AL point of view, is viewed as specific to particular social contexts and is subsequently integral to meaning making and belonging within those contexts (Daddow, 2016). Therefore, induction into the norms of disciplinary contexts from an AL point of view requires explicit articulation of the implicit assumptions underlying both staff and student literacy practices (Lea & Street, 1998) which includes a valuing of diverse literacy practices (Daddow, 2016) and a recognition of the normative role of existing literacy practices in the academy (Lillis, 2019).

There is debate regarding the extent to which students from marginalised discursive backgrounds should be required to transform their linguistic practices to meet the requirements of academic contexts (Daddow, 2016). However, there is also the acknowledgement that certain literacies and language varieties confer more social and educational advantages over others (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015). Moreover, the notion that students enter university to gain access to professional knowledge domains means that they will need to negotiate multiple literacy contexts both at university and beyond (Daddow, 2016; Murray, 2017). However, as noted by Lea and Street (1998) above, developing the capacity to switch from one context to another requires a shift in identity which is particularly impactful for students from marginalised and lower-class backgrounds (Boughey & McKenna, 2021).

Boughey and McKenna (2021) make a clear case for the acknowledgement of student contextual factors in academic outcomes noting the predominant role of class in conferring linguistic advantage (or disadvantage) in academic contexts. Taking a systemic functional view of language (after Halliday) in which language is viewed as a system of choices relating to meaning in context, they note:

Obtaining access to a discipline entails being introduced to the epistemic position of that discipline and thereby to the language practices by which its truth claims are deemed credible. Language is thus understood to be central to taking on the meaning-making processes in specific disciplinary contexts. (Boughey & McKenna, 2021, p.60)

Thus, academic reading and writing do not simply require the acquisition and application of neutral sets of skills but involve shifts in values and challenges to identity:

At a personal level, the need to shift and develop can leave students questioning who they are, all they have ever known and the entire world around them. (Boughey & McKenna, 2021, pp. 64-65)

In and of itself, learning to view the world through multiple lenses is not a bad thing. However, the challenge lies in developing practices that avoid the dichotomous valuing of one set of literacies over another while enabling all

students to learn the literacies that give access to the protected status and earnings potential of the professions (Daddow, 2016).

2.7 Theoretical Underpinnings of Academic Literacies – Bernstein and Bourdieu

When considering the role of language in the maintenance of persistent differential outcomes in education, AL scholars frequently cite one or other of two influential theorists, namely, Pierre Bourdieu or Basil Bernstein. Both Bernstein and Bourdieu developed theoretical frameworks that shift the focus from viewing educational success as solely related to individual agency to understanding the interplay of subjectivity, structural factors, and social interactions in maintaining differential outcomes in education (see, among others, Avenia-Tapper, 2015; Boughey & McKenna, 2021; Burke, 2012; Donnelly, 2018; Donnelly & Abbas, 2018; Wong, 2018). Collins (2000, p.70) states the similarity as a:

shared concern with socially structured mechanisms or schema,
constitutive of individual and collective subjectivities, but not part of
conscious identities

which he describes as “a classic problem of structuration theory” (p.70).

Both Bourdieu and Bernstein were concerned with the reproduction of hierarchies, power, and control in society. Both sought to understand the mechanisms by which power is reproduced through language and discourse

and both offer frameworks which enable questions to be asked about how institutions operate in ways that reproduce rather than address social inequalities. Collins (2000, p. 66) notes:

For each, language is conceptualized as a complex symbolic means through which knowledge is transmitted and transmuted, identities are constructed and expressed, and class legacies organized and imposed.

Both are concerned with the “relation between institutional expectations and students’ discursive resources” (Collins, 2000, p. 67) and theoretical differences between them can be viewed more in terms of breadth of focus rather than theoretical aims (Collins, 2000).

Donnelly (2018, p. 317) notes that Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’ (defined as “the totality of dispositions, tastes, styles and behaviours which predispose individuals and groups to think and act in particular ways”) is useful for understanding that “educational institutions are not based on the culture of all students but embody the cultural capital of dominant groups in society”. Whereas Bernstein “offers a more precise conceptualisation of the relationship between home and educational institution by foregrounding the elements and properties of institutions themselves” (p.319).

Bourdieu, therefore, provides an explanatory framework for the maintenance of power relations in society and is relevant to understanding educational exclusion and the symbolic violence perpetrated by institutions that

require students to adopt new cultural identities to succeed (Burke, 2012; Boughey & McKenna, 2021). Whereas Bernstein's linguistic focus is specifically interested in how groups maintain social hierarchies and how group identity is maintained through access to speech forms that shape consciousness and meaning making (Ivinson, 2011, 2018).

Collins (2000, p. 70) notes the similarities between Bernstein's code thesis and Bourdieu's habitus concept as follows:

the thesis of code orientations shares with the habitus concept an emphasis on a socially constituted, contextually-sensitive tendency or disposition to act and to judge, dispositions which are generative but not fixed, closed, or totalizing in their outcomes.

Therefore, both theories allow for a relational view of subjectivity which is bounded by, but not limited to, social context. For example, Orr (2010) and Shay (2005) both use Bourdieu to identify the complex interplay of subjectivity and social practice that influence academics' assessment of students' work and that require both students and academics to develop a "feel for the game" (Bourdieu cited in Shay, 2005, p. 667).

Developing a "feel for the game" refers to the way in which students and staff are inducted into the practices of institutions and disciplines, and this includes developing an understanding of the tacit assumptions and ways of working that are hard to articulate in language (Orr, 2010). As noted in the

section above, students, particularly those from non-traditional backgrounds, often experience a gap between the linguistic context of home and that of the university (Boughey, 2014). It is now accepted knowledge that some groups have privileged access to the tacit rules of education by virtue of access to forms of social, economic, and cultural capital or code orientations whereby the rules of the game and legitimized ways of communicating are more familiar and therefore more easily accessed.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, developing a feel for the game is not solely linguistic but requires a switch from one “habitus” to another (in terms of language, dispositions and behaviours) and has implications for identity and access to meaning making, which is predicated, on access to what Bourdieu calls “cultural capital” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977 cited in Collins, 2000, p. 68). From a Bernsteinian perspective, the switch concerns “code orientation” and the adoption of legitimized forms of communication (Bernstein, 2003).

For example, Avenia-Tapper (2015) uses Bourdieu’s notion of habitus rather than code orientation to explain relational class-based differences in explicitness of speech utterances and subject positions in educational relationships. Whereas, Donnelly (2018), Hasan (2002), Hoadley and Muller (2010) and Ivinson (2018) use Bernstein’s notion of code to understand how code orientations relate to consciousness and how education can be made less alienating to young people.

While Bernstein's theory of code orientation has been subject to accusations of deficit framing due to the unfortunate implication of hierarchical sounding terminology (restricted / elaborated code), Iverson (2018, p. 552) argues that rather than identifying deficits, code theory enables understanding of the 'different logics' and social organisations of groups. Furthermore, she argues that understanding 'restricted' codes as predicated on implicit knowledge opens the possibility for researchers to focus on difference rather than deficit, which enables discussion of how education can be made accessible to diverse communities. Something which may be achieved through application of Bernstein's analysis of pedagogic practice (Ellery, 2017). The renewed focus on Bernstein's analysis of pedagogic practice has reinstated Bernstein to some degree in the literature, with a focus on "how institutions may be (mis)aligned with the understandings and expectations held by different groups and individuals" (Donnelly, 2018, p. 330).

From the point of view of this study, the theoretical concepts of both Bernstein and Bourdieu have influenced thinking to some degree. Bernstein's linguistic focus provided the initial impetus for the study as I was concerned to know how linguistic practices of both students and staff influence academic outcomes. I was also concerned to know whether, and to what degree, the specificities of language, form and structure are constitutive of content and ideas.

Where language proficiency is deemed problematic, an awareness of potentially discriminatory practice based on a “smooth read ideology” (Turner, 2018) sometimes requires markers to “read between the lines” to discern meaning and engagement with knowledge (Roberts, n.d., manuscript in preparation). However, if forms of communication are constitutive of consciousness, as multiple authors agree, then the requirement is for students to not only write differently but to think differently too. Thus, students have a responsibility to develop forms of writing that evidence this shift in thinking processes while staff have a responsibility to recognise the stages and processes of writing and thinking development in action.

Likewise, Bourdieu’s notion of capital appears to speak to questions about “class differences in cultural practice” (Collins, 2000, p.70). This is particularly relevant at the case institutions in terms of which students seem most comfortable in the classroom and thus take up most of the discursive space in the room. It also speaks to the role of dispositions in academic success. For example, drawing on Bourdieu’s notion of capital, there is great concern at Urbanity about an increasing disconnect between students and staff. This disconnect has to do with the expectations and dispositions required for meaningful engagement on the one hand and effective teaching on the other. Furthermore, there is a strong desire among students for explicit guidance about assignments which can be at odds with lecturers’ capacity to put into words the types of qualities that can only be discerned and appreciated when a

marker is both subjectively and objectively engaged with a text (Shay, 2005; Orr, 2010).

2.8 Application of the Academic Literacies approach

Gimenez and Thomas (2015) offer an example framework for the pedagogical implementation of academic literacies in widening participation contexts. However, there remains the need to expand research into the application of academic literacies approaches, especially in terms of the scale of studies and in ensuring that the detailed analysis of texts remains an object of study alongside the ethnographic methods prevalent in the approach (Lillis & Scott, 2007).

Early academic literacies research that explicitly explores student experiences alongside textual analyses includes Ivanič (1998) and Lillis (2001). These offer detailed ethnographic accounts of writing, focusing on academic writing practices (both students and staff) and the challenges experienced in developing an authorial identity in academic writing.

Ivanič's (1998) case study of Rachel Dean identifies the varied discourses ('discoursal selves' p. 169) that non-traditional students bring into academia and the challenge of integrating these with the discursive practices expected in the disciplinary context. This research also includes a linguistic analysis of student writing extracts, thus shedding light on how discoursal shifts are identifiable in written texts.

Combining linguistic analysis with ethnographic interviews allows Ivanič to explore the differing expectations about academic writing held by both students and staff. It also enables the researcher to map students' writing practices against their ethnographic accounts, thus giving context and insight into students' writing processes. Furthermore, the interviews with both students and staff highlight the consequences for students when, despite their best efforts, their writing practices do not meet staff expectations. Of particular note for this study is Rachel's admission regarding her use of sources as a means of managing academic expectations rather than as transformative engagement with knowledge.

2.9 Limitations of the Academic Literacies approach

While the AL approach can be seen to have sound theoretical underpinnings, there are some notable limitations to the approach which are mainly explained by its ideological positioning and lack of pedagogical application (Wingate & Tribble, 2012). Calvo et al (2020) are critical of the lack of explicit explanation of teaching methods and the theoretical framework needed to support an AL pedagogical approach. They also note that the integration of AL into disciplinary teaching has been slow.

Boughey (2014) also raises concerns that while the term 'academic literacy' has become ubiquitous in higher education, language and literacy development in universities has largely remained skills-based. As such, literacy

development practices often run counter to the original theoretical ideas of AL which position context and affect as fundamental to literacy development.

My critique of the literature relates to a desire for greater pragmatism and ethical mindfulness in understanding the role of context, language, and literacy in student outcomes. A pragmatic approach recognises the inherent complexity of educational issues, steers away from dichotomous thinking and takes a more pluralistic approach to educational research (Badley, 2003).

An ethically mindful approach to student outcomes would take a principled and relational approach to assessing student needs and resources early in the contracting process between student and institution (Roberts, 2021). It would proactively seek to reduce the risk of academic failure by addressing the current affect laden and pressurised approach to student recruitment (Roberts, 2023) and by identifying structural issues in addition to cultural factors that impact epistemic access.

Tight (2023) notes a positivity bias in higher education research where there is a predominance of localised studies and a lack of reporting of null findings. This kind of bias fits well with the “engineering model of research” noted by Hammersley (cited in Badley, 2003, p. 304) that seeks to find ready, evidence-based solutions to problems, and which is at the heart of the ‘drag and drop’ enhancement culture currently prevalent in universities in England.

Such an approach to research and enhancement fits well with the neoliberal propensity for metric-based evaluation and disregards the importance of situated practices based on common sense as well as local and tacit knowledge (Hammersley cited by Badley, 2003, p. 304). It also diminishes the importance of practical solutions such as inclusive timetabling practices, reducing the cost of transportation to and from campus and increasing flexibility in programme structures and delivery.

A more pragmatic view is needed that considers the situatedness of educational practices in the wider world and that moves away from seeing 'failure' as predominantly located either within the individual student or with the institution and teachers. Badley (2003, p. 296) identifies a pragmatic approach to educational research as one that offers "more or less useful descriptions to meet our particular needs and purposes". Despite a large body of literature on academic writing and literacy in HE, the issues of epistemic injustice and unequal outcomes persist. It seems, we are yet to find an approach that simultaneously addresses the needs of both students and institutions alike.

Furthermore, the AL canon has a discernible tenor that exclusively ascribes culpability for unequal outcomes to elitist assessment practices and exclusionary curricula (e.g. Haggis, 2006). This is not to say that practice and curricula should not be made more inclusive nor continually reviewed. However, the dominant focus on curriculum development encourages an introspective view that fails to acknowledge wider factors that affect student experience and

that limit the capacity of institutions to effect meaningful change with and for students.

It also fails to consider the role of student agency, and as noted by Boughey and McKenna (2021), there is a danger of theoretical misappropriation that reinforces rather than challenges dominant thinking. This also begs the question as to whether the induction of students into disciplinary discourses should not only afford access to elite professions but also foster both individual and institutional awareness in such a way as to give rise to meaningful individual and social change.

2.10 Literacies and Inequalities – The Influence of Paulo Freire

The above critique implies the need for more overt awareness of the political role of education in society and of the impact of political cultures on education practice. As noted in a talk by Henry Giroux in 2015:

the disconnect is what's troubling, this inability to understand the context in which people define themselves and the problems that in fact inform their lives, as if that isn't a pedagogical issue, as if that isn't a political issue, as if the educative nature of politics doesn't matter. (MacPherson Institute, 2015)

As will be seen in the student narratives in Chapter 6, students describe a growth process whereby developing self-awareness and self-authorship occur in tandem with increasing access to disciplinary identity and community.

Through the process of learning and writing at university, students become more aware of factors that impede this process and of the need for perseverance in the face of financial hardships and / or emotional distress. As students become more literate in the disciplinary discourse, they become more aware of their own experiences in relation to the discipline. As noted by Freire:

Education is an act of knowledge (knowledge here is not to be restricted to a specific object only) on the part of the very subject who knows.
(Freire and Macedo, 1987, p. 35)

While the project does not contain voices of students who left or failed the programme, the descriptions of personal struggles give an indication of factors that contribute to negative outcomes, many of which arise from personal experiences of oppression, and which are ingrained in the student's self-concept and identity as learner. The work of Paulo Freire is deeply influential in the reading of student experiences in this study.

While Freire is most strongly associated with critical pedagogy and the critique of power structures in society, there is nevertheless a pragmatic flavour to his ideas. For example, in an interview from 1996, Freire notes:

I defend the duty of the teachers to teach the cultivated pattern, and I defend the rights of the kids or of the adults to learn the dominant pattern. But it is necessary in being a democratic and tolerant teacher, it is necessary to explain, to make clear to the kids or the adults that their

way of speaking is as beautiful as our way of speaking. Second, that they have the right to speak like this. Third, nevertheless, they need to learn the so-called dominant syntax for different reasons. That is, the more the oppressed, the poor people, get the command on the dominant syntax, the more they can articulate their voices and their speech in the struggle against injustice. (Literacy.org, 2009)

Similarly, in 'Literacy, reading the word and the world' (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p.89) he writes:

The successful usage of the students' cultural universe requires respect and legitimation of students' discourses, that is their own linguistic codes, which are different but never inferior[...] the legitimation of black English as an educational tool does not, however, preclude the need to acquire proficiency in the linguistic code of the dominant group.

Central to Freire's emancipatory philosophy is the notion of 'conscientização' (the building of awareness and conscience) (Freire, 2004, p. 66). For Freire, literacy is the means to transform oppression through a form of self-decolonization whereby students become aware of their own context, their relationship with the world, and their own internalised oppression (Cammarota in Sampson, 2012).

Thus, literacy is about developing the capacity to read and to question one's own experience in addition to developing the linguistic capacity to voice

one's ideas in a way that will effect change in the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Freire, 2004). Giroux (1992, p.3) refers to this understanding of literacy as "a cultural politics" noting that "literacy cannot be viewed as merely an epistemological or procedural issue but must be defined primarily in political and ethical terms."

In Freire's view, reading is inseparable from writing (Freire, 2004). Reading does not begin with the words on the page but with knowledge of the world and the development of the capacity to read text in relation to one's own context (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Being able to connect one's own experiences to disciplinary content enables students to engage meaningfully and to become active subjects in the process of learning. Nevertheless, Freire does not advocate disposing of canonical literature entirely, rather, he notes:

we all have – teachers and students [an obligation] - to read the classic literature in a given field seriously in order to make the texts our own and to create the intellectual discipline without which our practice as teachers and students is not viable (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 23).

In Freire's view, pedagogy not only has to be meaningful to be transformative but must also be rigorous, structured, purposeful, and directive (Roberts, 2000). A critical and dialogic approach to teaching is one that continually challenges and questions the universality and neutrality of texts, and in which teachers continually question their own positionality and orientations to knowledge (Verma, 2022). In critical pedagogy, the epistemological necessity is

“to relate new ideas we encounter to something within the realm of our existing knowledge or previous knowledge” (Roberts, 2000, p.71).

Drawing in particular on ideas of positionality and dialogue, Freire’s approach can be seen as fundamental to the transformative intent of Academic Literacies research. Freire’s influence can be seen implicitly in Lea and Street’s challenge to the ‘autonomous model of literacy’ and their advocacy of negotiation between student and staff expectations of writing. The emphasis on dialogic approaches is noted explicitly in Lillis (2001), while Lillis and Scott (2007) identify critical pedagogy as one of many theoretical approaches underpinning academic literacies research.

An example of this can be seen in Gimenez and Thomas (2015), who draw on Freire’s notion of ‘praxis’ (as the interrelation of theory and practice) in the creation of their ‘usable pedagogy’ framework, using an academic literacies informed approach to writing development in a widening participation setting. The academic literacies literature also focuses on the costs to student identity, and the struggles students encounter in engaging with the dominant discourses of the academy (Ivanič ,1998; Lillis, 2001). However, the focus on struggle and loss of identity in the AL literature can come at the cost of acknowledging the benefits of engaging with prevailing discourses in addition to students’ own, as was explicitly acknowledged by Freire in the quotation on pages 82-83 above.

Freire acknowledges study as a form of work that demands individual and collective effort (Roberts, 2000). Transformative learning cannot be

achieved through memorization or banking approaches to teaching (Giroux, 1992; Roberts, 2000). Rather, it is achieved through the development of individual and collective agency brought about by a reflexive process of critique and practice (Roberts, 2003). Thus, the process of change through education is difficult but possible (Freire, 2004). Pedagogy is ultimately a hopeful project albeit this hope exists under the 'dark cloud' of neoliberalism (Freire, 2004).

As a way of avoiding concerns about 'dumbing down' in massified higher education settings (Tight, 2019), critical pedagogy invites us to question the current dominant outcome focussed approach to quality assurance. It permits academics to include students in critical conversation about the educational system in which they find themselves and to develop collaborative ways of working based on Freire's 'ontological call' to work with humility, empathy, love, hope and dialogue (Freire, 2017, p.33 cited in Suzina and Tufte, 2020).

For example, at a recent lecture on the influence of organisational context on professional practice, I spoke candidly about the university's new individual performance review goals for lecturers that now require lecturers to meet benchmarks for attendance rates at classes and minimum pass rates for modules. I invited the students to imagine how such contextual factors might influence my practice as a teacher. This intervention had several effects: it used a real-life scenario involving everyone in the room to illustrate an academic point about professional practice and organisational culture; it enabled students to view me as a person, who like them, is subject to power relations and who is

working within systemic and structural limitations; and it enabled students to reflect on their power in the student – tutor relationship. Finally, it invited students to reflect on who owns and is responsible for their academic success.

Inviting discussion about agency and responsibility in this way prompted strong reactions from the students in the room and (coincidentally, or not) attendance at the following week's lecture was the highest all semester. Helping students to "read the world and their lives in a critical and historically relational way" (Giroux in Freire & Macedo, 1987, p.8) invites students to take ownership of their part in the learning process. It can only be done through humanizing praxis characterised by dialogue and relationship (Roberts, 2003).

Boughey and McKenna (2021, p. 56) note that current explanations of student success lack acknowledgement of how students develop and activate their own agency "with and against the structures and cultures of society." For Freire, human agency:

makes sense and flourishes only when subjectivity is understood in its dialectical, contradictory, dynamic relationship with objectivity, from which it derives (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 39).

While lack of engagement on the part of marginalised students can be seen as an act of defiance and ownership of identity, it nevertheless maintains students in the marginalised position (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Refusal to engage means

students “remain distant from the practice of reading” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p.85) and remain excluded from the elites.

In Freire’s terms, therefore, the means to agency, is literacy. Literacy involves first developing a critical understanding of one’s own world before proceeding to “critical mastery of the standard dialect” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p.89). Resistance from learners is overcome by dialogue, structure, direction, and academic rigour (Roberts, 2000) and teachers must ‘read’ the world of students better to connect disciplinary knowledge with students’ lived experience (Freire, 2004). In so far as reading the world is constitutive of consciousness and self-authority, Freire (2004, p. 72) notes, “It is not possible to dichotomize reading and writing”.

2.11 Reading as Social Practice

Academic reading is identified as a key area of student resistance and difficulty. For example, Wollscheid, Lodding and Aamodt (2021) identify increasing “non-compliant” reading behaviour among students. While Seaboyer and Barnett (2019), identify the transition from print-reading to screen-reading as a potential reason for the increasing prevalence of surface reading for information gathering, over the more contemplative and thought-provoking process of deep reading of complex texts. However, they also note that difficulties with getting students to pursue slow, deep reading of texts is a likely long-standing issue in HE.

Mason and Warmington (2024) report that students approach reading grudgingly, as something that is imposed on them unwillingly. Similarly, Gorzycki et al (2020) reveal an “academic reading paradox” whereby students recognise the value of academic reading but do not engage with it. This is in part due to viewing reading requirements as onerous or irrelevant to academic outcomes. Students may perceive reading as irrelevant when academic goals can be achieved with minimal reading (Gorzycki et al, 2020) and they may avoid deep reading of academic texts when they are unable to establish links between texts and their personal and academic knowledge (MacMillan, 2014).

For worthwhile reading to occur, students need to connect with academic texts in ways that are meaningful to them, and where the advantages of engaging with reading are clear. To this end, students need to understand reading as a social practice by which they are inducted into the knowledge world of the discipline (Afdal, Spernes & Hoff-Jensen 2023; Baker et al, 2019). However, Baker et al (2019) note that the focus of AL research is on writing rather than reading and, as such, reading is a largely invisible social practice in the academy. Induction to the disciplines must therefore also include induction to academic reading and acknowledgement of the central role of epistemic access to academic writing development (Baker et al., 2019).

Language proficiency is also implicated in readiness for reading at higher education level. For example, Warnby (2024) notes positive correlations between academic reading, vocabulary knowledge and grades, while Yafele

(2021) notes how multilingual readers who are second language English (SLE) can experience difficulties comprehending English texts. However, Milton and Treffers-Daller (2013) note that monolingualism is not necessarily an advantage in terms of vocabulary size with many students (monolinguals included), arriving at university with insufficient vocabularies to manage academic reading which is often characterised by high densities of infrequent words. Soares et al (2023) also note that reading ability rather than reading anxiety is positively correlated with academic achievement.

In addition to their level of reading development, a student's prior educational and cultural experiences, may mean they approach reading in ways which are inefficient or unproductive for the types of learning required by universities (Baker et al, 2019; Bertram, 2004 cited in Boughey & McKenna, 2021, p.57). Bharuthram (2012) and Sohail (2015) both advocate for teaching reading strategies across the curriculum. However, Sohail (2015) notes that despite proficient reading ability, some students do not employ effective reading strategies and factors such as age, gender, hours of study and academic level affect which strategies students use. Therefore, students may need to develop new rhetorical strategies in addition to meeting the linguistic challenges of academic reading.

Freire emphasises the contextualised nature of reading:

Reading does not consist merely of decoding the written word or language; rather, it is preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the

world. Language and reality are dynamically interconnected. The understanding attained by critical reading of a text implies perceiving the relationship between text and context. (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p.20).

As universities navigate the increasingly multilingual context of their students, enabling students to perceive the relationship between text and context may require creative and flexible solutions. For example, in the South African context, Yafele (2021) challenges the ubiquity of monolingual, English-medium higher education advocating instead for a translanguaging and pluralistic approach that validates students' own languages and cultural repertoires in the early stages of their academic careers.

Afdal, Spernes and Hoff-Jensen (2023) identify the barriers to taking an AL based approach to reading in that facilitating meaningful dialogue about texts can be challenging. This challenge is understandable if dialogic approaches expose students' struggles with comprehending texts. This suggests the need for a more developmental view of reading that takes into consideration the individual factors that may affect reading engagement (Sohail, 2015). MacMillan (2014) on the other hand, showed that students do make personal and academic connections with texts, but more ways are needed to encourage students to deepen engagement with texts.

Academic reading, in so much as it provides access to disciplinary vocabulary, concepts and genres can be seen as an "act of domestication" (Baker et al, 2019, p. 143) to the disciplines. Reading is also constitutive of

writing (Baker et al, 2019) in so much as it allows writers to understand how academic texts are constructed and exposes readers to new ideas and concepts (Badley, 2009). Reading is therefore one part of the academic process that begins with the ‘deconstruction’ of knowledge through reading and the subsequent re-construction and production of knowledge through writing (Badley, 2009).

In so far as reading provides not only the source material for writing but also induction into academic writing genres, it also maintains and helps re-produce the dominant discursive regimes of the disciplines. It behoves us to question therefore, how and to what extent, the norms of academic writing are ripe for challenge?

2.12 Humanised writing and writtenness

Badley (2017) is critical of academics who produce de-humanized, disembodied texts noting “academic writing often becomes an abusive instrument designed to ensure the hegemony of an intellectual elite” (p. 182). Instead, he calls for “post-academic writing [that] is both personal conversation *and* communal discourse” (Badley, 2017, p. 182). This can be achieved through a more playful approach to writing (Badley, 2011), that personalises texts while also making them more engaging and easier to understand. Albeit, challenging the norms of academic writing in this way risks rejection by editors, reviewers, and examiners alike (Badley, 2011; Trowler, 2015).

Turner (2018) identifies three textual ideologies in academia that privilege writing styles relating to neutrality (expository ideology), clarity (smooth read ideology) and linguistic accuracy (linguistic conflation ideology). The latter, particularly disadvantages students from “lingua cultural backgrounds” (p.24) as it pertains to a deficit view of writing in which intellectual reasoning is conflated with ‘acceptable’ language use. However, in line with Lea and Street (1998), Murray and Sharpling (2019) note that markers were less concerned with accuracy, range of vocabulary, and grammar and syntax than with students’ understanding and engagement with subject-specific content. Nevertheless, where demonstrating an adequate grasp of subject-specific content relates to using discipline-specific vocabulary and writing genres, the value of linguistic accuracy in conferring academic advantage risks being conflated with subject-content knowledge.

Turner coins the term “writtenness” to convey “the received pronunciation” (Turner 2018, p.7) of academic writing and notes how the laborious process of academic writing is relatively undervalued and unacknowledged in academia. Attention is only paid to writing when it is deemed to fall below expected standards of “writtenness”. Contrary to the AL view of grammar as “surface level features” (p.182), Turner notes that grammar is an integral part of writtenness that “metadiscursively indexes academic credibility” (p. 185). She, therefore, calls for a more explicit and consistent articulation of how “writtenness” is assessed. In addition, a more flexible

understanding of evolving language use is required on the part of academics.

She notes:

While students should develop their control over the organization of text and nuance in the meaning of lexical and grammatical forms and syntax so as to maximize intelligibility for their readers, readers for their part need to develop a willingness to move away from the smooth read expectation, and be prepared to put more effort into interpretation.' (p. 260)

In line with Turner's ethical stance, multiple authors call for a more pragmatic, humanising, and dialogic approach to literacy development (Badley, 2009; Bloxham & West, 2007; Briguglio, 2011; Daddow, 2016; Turner, 2018; Wallbank, 2021; Yafele, 2021). These calls echo the concerns of Bernstein (2000 cited in Ivinson, 2011, p. 43) and Freire (cited in Roberts, 2000) about increasingly dehumanising and mechanistic approaches to education policy as well as Boughey and McKenna's (2021) concerns about the decontextualization of students in higher education. In terms of this study, the textual analysis aims to advance understanding of the role of different features of texts in conferring academic advantage while the qualitative analysis aims to understand the human and contextual factors that influence academic writing development.

Key points arising from the literature review include the need for institutions to consider the role of wider contextual factors and issues of identity on the capacity of students to transition smoothly between the language of

home and of the academy. Additionally, universities should consider the role of epistemic access in writing development and find ways of nurturing students' engagement with knowledge in tandem with developing students' language proficiency where required.

Finally, the higher education sector should reflect on the role of linguistic biases and ideologies in the marking of academic writing that disadvantage some students over others. Questions remain as to whether the sector is motivated to develop forms of academic writing that are more generally accessible, and whether student engagement with knowledge can be foregrounded or to some extent revived, as the core activity of a rigorous, dialogic, and inclusive pedagogy.

Chapter 3: Methodology, Ethics and Reflexivity

3.1 Underpinning Philosophical and Theoretical Perspectives

The theoretical and philosophical influences underpinning this study are derived from the multiple theoretical perspectives that have influenced my dual professional identities as a counsellor/psychotherapist and higher education practitioner. Tight (2019) notes how higher education research is a dispersed field with theoretical and methodological influences often imported by researchers from disparate disciplines. This study is a good example of such research as the methodological approach to the qualitative data was strongly influenced by my professional counselling orientation as a Person-Centred Experiential practitioner. This meant that two of the key philosophical and theoretical influences on the study were humanistic psychology and phenomenology.

Wilkins (2003) questions the extent to which the Person-Centred Approach (PCA) was influenced by, or itself influenced, the development of humanistic psychology. Nevertheless, the following tenets, of humanistic psychology as described by Bugental (1964) cited in McLeod (2019, p. 151) were influential in my approach to this study:

1. Human beings, as human, supersede the sum of their parts. They cannot be reduced to components.
2. Human beings have their existence in a uniquely human context, as well as in a cosmic ecology.

-
3. Human beings are aware and aware of being aware (i.e. they are conscious).
 4. Human consciousness always includes an awareness of oneself in the context of other people.
 5. Human beings have some choice and, with that, responsibility.
 6. Human beings are intentional, aim at goals, are aware that they cause future events, and seek meaning, value, and creativity.

In keeping with the underpinning Humanistic philosophy, the qualitative approach was also influenced by Eugene Gendlin's (1992, 1999, 2004) phenomenologically informed philosophy of experiencing and meaning creation and Carl Rogers's (1957, 1959) related understanding of empathy, meaning creation and the symbolisation of experience to awareness. While the inclusion of Gendlin's philosophy technically means that the methodological approach was Person-Centred Experiential, the acronym PCA (Person-Centred Approach) is used here as an umbrella term and for ease of reference.

A phenomenological and relational approach was taken towards research participants and their experiencing and in line with tenet 1 above, the embodied experiences of both researcher and participants played an important role in the co-creation of meaning during interviews. Likewise, the interpretation of data was strongly influenced by a holistic understanding of the person whose experience cannot be satisfactorily reduced to constituent parts. Hence, the creation of narrative soliloquies that aim to encapsulate the individual 'wholes' of participants' experiences.

Finally, from a Humanistic perspective, the interpretation of both the qualitative and textual data was strongly influenced by the notions of awareness, choice, and intentionality as set out in principles 3-6 above. Thus, as a researcher, I acknowledge my active participation in the creation of meaning in this study. This means that the findings are interpretive and tentative. Other researchers may have arrived at different conclusions.

The aim was to depict the data in ways that are credible and that offer opportunities for well-reasoned answers to the research questions. These answers will, nonetheless, have been influenced by my own co-experience with the participants in the setting, and also by my own educational beliefs and previous experiences of higher education research, teaching, and learning. I was aiming for a kind of “rigorous intersubjectivity” (Badley, 2009) that, as far as possible, systematically interrogates the emergent meanings arising from the specific interactions generated by the project.

3.2 Critiques of the PCA

Critiques of the PCA focus on what is seen as an overly American, culture-bound understanding of the individual which emphasises individual responsibility over communal forms of social organisation and decision-making (Wilkins, 2003). Several Person-Centred theorists (Bozarth, 1985; Mearns & Thorne, 2000; Wilkins, 2003) refute such criticisms as partial and outdated. Nevertheless, the approach continues to be criticised regarding a lack of culturally appropriate understandings of power and the need for increased

reflexivity on the part of its mainly white, middle-class proponents in the UK (Haugh, 2016).

Counterarguments to the main critique of culture-boundedness include Rogers' fluid conceptions of the notion of 'self' (Wilkins, 2003) and the characteristic eschewing of power in Person-Centred therapy (PCT) stemming from its adherence to phenomenology and the primacy of subjective experience over expert knowledge (Mearns & Thorne, 2000). Writing in 1985, Bozarth attributed paradigmatic status to the PCA seeing the relational qualities espoused by the approach as akin to a spiritual practice underpinned by a belief in the interconnectedness of persons and the potential for unity arising from mutual surrender in relationship.

Since the 2000s, increased awareness of diversity, equity, and inclusion in both the PCA and the counselling professions more broadly has necessitated a more nuanced understanding of the limitations of individual agency in decision-making that considers the operations of power in society, including an awareness of the power and privilege vested in professional roles (Proctor, 2014). Furthermore, there is increasing recognition of the structural advantages of race and class that contribute to individual professional success and status. White counsellors and educators alike need to consider the effects of their white advantage on the increasingly diverse communities they work with (Haugh, 2016, Bates & Ng, 2021). This awareness means reconsidering discourses of "hard work" and considering the impact of our whiteness on

students and clients of colour (Haugh, 2016, Bates & Ng, 2021). Therefore, a critical awareness of role power and my status as a middle-aged, white female academic and counsellor informed my ethical thinking during this project. This awareness particularly informed the design and conduct of interviews with students from predominantly minority ethnic backgrounds.

While the PCA primarily influenced methodological choices and my understanding of relational processes in the qualitative interviews, the explanatory framework draws on additional theoretical influences that recognise positionality and the role of context more overtly than the PCA. This is not to say that the PCA does not have emancipatory intent. However, the PCA is predicated first and foremost on change at an individual rather than societal level. Despite the lasting influence of the PCA as an educational paradigm (Motschnig-Pitrik & Rohlílová, 2013) and its origins as a radical and liberatory approach to persons, the PCA is seen by some as having been co-opted as the compassionate sounding mouthpiece of neoliberal practice in health and education (Bazzano, 2016). For these reasons, I draw on two other therapeutic models of human development to provide an explanatory framework for the data.

Firstly, the “unified model of human development” from Haigh and Benefield (2019) is based on the idea that complex human problems require a holistic understanding of human development and the factors that affect life outcomes across the life course. Haigh and Benefield (2019, p. 125) note:

A simplistic, single problem approach is insufficient, solutions therefore require a more whole-person and whole-life framework. Fragmentation of understanding comes about when politicians, professionals or the public try to make complex problems manageable by simple means, even costly ones, in order to be seen to have “done something about it.”

Stemming from research into the treatment of complex mental health disorders, the Haigh and Benefield model of human development draws on multiple research areas to map the role of physical, psychological, and sociocultural factors on life outcomes (as represented by the diagrammatic model provided by the authors):

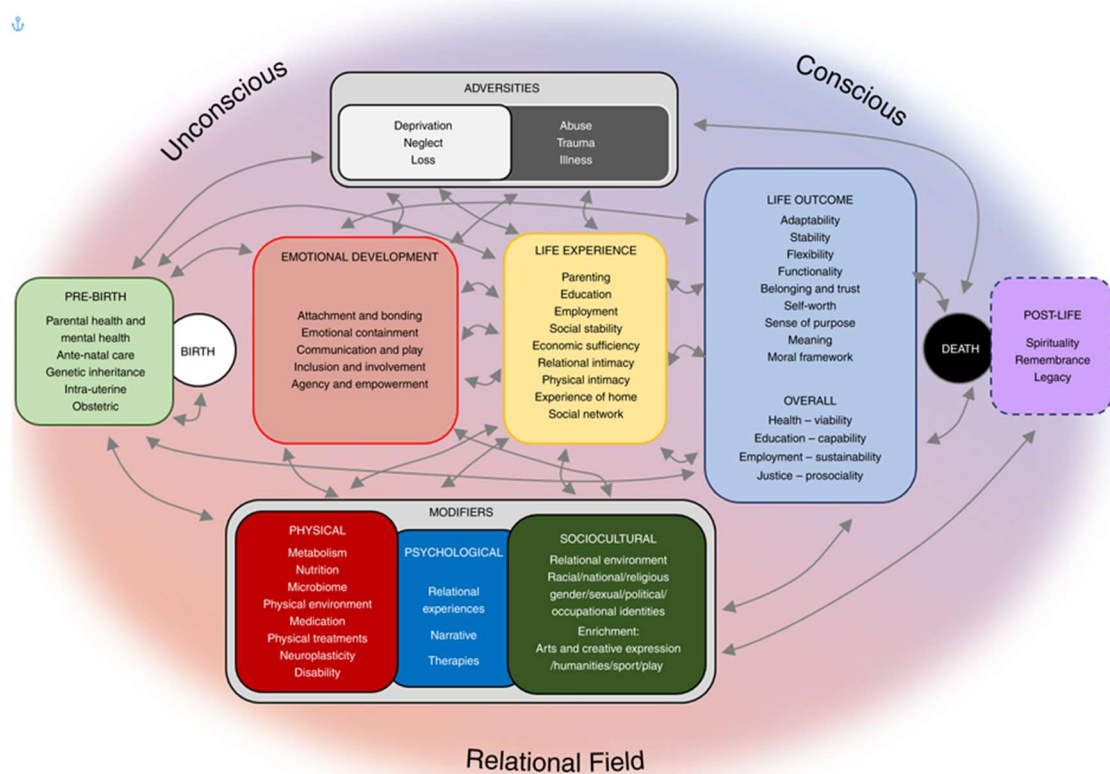


Figure 1: A unified model of human development (Haigh & Benefield, 2019). Used with permission of Emerald Publishing Limited, from: Towards a unified model of

Initially designed to understand and help address complex problems of social exclusion in criminal justice and mental health contexts, it is equally applicable to areas of social policy activity, including education, where there are greater risks of exclusion and persistently unequal outcomes for some participant groups over others.

It also acknowledges that human relationships are underpinned by the operations of power in society that contribute to individual experiences of powerlessness and that these include experiences of adversity (e.g. poverty), threat, social exclusion, and trauma (e.g. racism, othering, and discrediting) (Haig & Benefield, 2019). The unified model of human development would appear to have good explanatory power for understanding persistent differential outcomes in high-participation higher education contexts. This may be particularly true in contexts where there are large numbers of students from low-income backgrounds many of whom may have experienced racial and/or generational trauma and who present at university with unrecognised or unmet psychological, emotional, financial, and learning needs.

As noted, this study is underpinned by an awareness of the importance of context and the interconnectedness of human experience (Humanistic principles 2 and 4 above). In keeping with the Haigh and Benefield model

above, research in the multidisciplinary field of Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB) has also highlighted the importance of relational factors in human flourishing.

IPNB focuses on the neuro-biological, familial, psychological, and sociocultural modifiers of emotional experience that impact life outcomes. Similarly, to the Haigh and Benefield (2019) model, IPNB is based on the view that our experience and sense of self in the world are fundamentally shaped by the quality of relational experiences throughout the life course (Siegel, 2001; Schore 2001). While, both IPNB and the unified model of human development originate from the fields of mental health, I aim to demonstrate how a holistic and relational view applies to contemporary high-participation higher education contexts. Additionally, from a methodological point of view, the use of a theoretical stance that focuses on the relevance of the interpersonal to the intrapersonal legitimizes the use of personal narratives from which to develop a critique of current HE policy and practices.

IPNB is strongly informed by advances in neuroscience which consider the role of the environment in brain development and in the development of mind. Advances in understanding the role of affect regulation and right brain development in early childhood highlight the importance of nurture and empathic attunement in human development and in the maintenance of mental wellbeing and functioning both in childhood and later life (Schore, 2021).

These concepts align with Haigh and Benefield's model which views life outcomes in the context of the quality of relational activity throughout a person's life. Furthermore, the concept of the "amygdala hijack" (Hassed & Chambers, 2014; O'Mahony, 2021) informs understanding of behaviours associated with both interpersonal relationships and learning and provides a neuroscience informed view of why a student's past and current context matters in education. In short, the "amygdala hijack" relates to the disruption of brain functioning caused by reactivity to stress, which is impacted by prior stress or trauma experiences and which in turn impacts learning through impairment of working memory and executive functioning (Hassed & Chambers, 2014; O'Mahony, 2021).

Additionally, the IPNB concept of integration, defined by Siegel (2012, p.9 as a "process of linking differentiated parts into a functional whole" is used to understand the process of learning and writing as described by participants. Applied to educational contexts, integration is defined as the "integration of new information via the senses, meaning-making processes, idea generation, and action"; it involves the "full engagement of the whole learner along with all those fostering the intended learning and development" (Bresciani Ludvik, 2016, p.3).

3.3 Bio-Psychosocial Approaches and Paulo Freire

Writing from a psychodynamic perspective, Harris (2021, p. 163) identifies the benefits of combining a psychosocial approach to persons with critical pedagogy, noting that this "is consistent with a democratic, dialogical

and Freirean [...] view of relationship where students are *influencing* as well as *influenceable* subjects.” Similarly, I would contend that a biopsychosocial view of persons based on the PCA and informed by recent research in IPNB are equally compatible with a Freirean perspective that posits dialogue, love, empathy and hope as key components of pedagogical relationships (Suzina & Tuft, 2020). Siegel (2001) identifies the core components of interpersonal relationships likely to foster emotional well-being and psychological resilience as: collaboration, reflective dialogue; repair; coherent narratives and emotional communication.

Additionally, Freire’s view of consciousness by which individuals come to know themselves dynamically through interaction with a constantly changing world (Roberts, 2003) parallels Rogers’ (2002) view of persons as being in a continual process of becoming. Similarly, in IPNB-informed models, the emergent properties of relationships and what Siegel (2019, p.232) calls “generative social fields” are central to understanding human growth and flourishing. While Gendlin’s experiential view of persons also draws on the emergent properties of bodily experience, awareness, and language and the “interaffecting” system of organism and environment (Purton, 2004).

Language also plays a key part in how each theory understands human experience. From a PCA perspective, the accurate symbolisation of experience to awareness (i.e. putting experience into words) is a key therapeutic process by which human beings come to understand their relationship with themselves

and the world (Rogers, 2002). Gendlin (2004, p.129) notes the “inherent interrelations of language, situations, and the human body.” In Freire’s view, language is always ideological and “plays an active role in constructing experience and in organizing and legitimating the social practices available to various groups in society” (Giroux in Freire & Macedo, 1987, p.5). Language in Freire’s view, is both a tool of oppression and the means to liberation. In both psychological and political senses, the capacity to use language with awareness and accuracy is freeing of externally and internally imposed oppressions.

Another similarity can be seen in the notion of consciousness and intentionality. Roberts, (2003, p. 174) notes: “For Freire, the essence of human consciousness is intentionality toward the world.” The Freirean process of ‘conscientização’ is one in which individuals are aided to awareness through dialogue and by critically understanding the own relationship with the world. This has resonances with a socially and politically aware approach to psychotherapy that simultaneously engenders self-responsibility while acknowledging the role of oppressive social conditions (e.g. power, poverty, racism) in hindering optimal functioning. This echoes liberatory Freire’s (2004, p. 66) view of literacy education that:

can only make sense on a human level if it comes also with a sort of historical-political-social psychoanalysis, from which a gradual purging of undue guilt results. That amounts to an “expulsion” of the oppressor from

“within” the oppressed, as the invading shadow that the former is. Once that shadow is expelled by the oppressed, it must be replaced with self-autonomy and self-responsibility.

The difference, from a Freirean perspective is the foregrounding of the political over the personal as he goes on to note:

It must be underscored, however, that the effort toward conscientização [...] while ethically and politically relevant, is not the end-all, and it must not relegate teaching the reading and writing of the word to a secondary plane.

To summarise, the theories drawn on in this thesis do not form an unproblematic model but rather contribute to a personal theoretical integration that shapes how I understand the data. To this extent, they are applied pragmatically. Rather than an eclectic set of beliefs, they inform the following key ideas underpinning this study, that:

- ultimately, the role of education is to bring about social transformation and a more just and ethically aware society,
- experiences of oppression and personal degradations such as poverty or trauma can impact the capacity of individuals to feel safe and to flourish in learning environments such as universities,
- caring and congruent forms of relating have transformative, educative, and therapeutic potential,
- self-awareness through reflexivity and engagement with knowledge is vital in developing a critical understanding of the world and one's role in it,

-
- our use of language shapes and is shaped by our experience of the world,
 - awareness of the role of language in experiencing is fundamental to providing individuals with the capacity to think for themselves.

3.4 Design and Method – Ethics and Issues of Power

As a registered and accredited member of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), I am bound by the BACP Ethical Guidelines for Research in the Counselling Professions (2019) and as a member of the Faculty Research Ethics Committee at my home institution, my understanding of research ethics is also informed by the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics (2021). These frameworks were foundational in identifying the ethical considerations of the study, particularly in terms of maximising participant autonomy while minimising participant vulnerability to harm.

Ethical approval for the project was granted by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Management School Research Ethics Committee (FASS-LUMS REC) at Lancaster University (see [Appendix B](#)). My supervisor approved subsequent minor amendments to the design, in line with the requirements of the faculty ethics committee.

Of particular concern in this project was the potential vulnerability of the participants created by the design and context of the research (BACP, 2019, 6.2). This was due to my dual identity as course lead, tutor and researcher.

Particular attention was paid to understanding the pitfalls of using students as participants in a faculty research project, and I drew on examples of managing faculty-student research relationships from the educational research literature for guidance as well (see 3.5 below). It was vitally important to consider the potential for coercion in the recruitment process as well as the potential for undermining participant autonomy in the interviews. Careful consideration was given to both the frequency and intensity of my recruitment efforts as well as the design of the interviews.

Other ethical considerations involved considering risks to confidentiality for participants, especially given the small number of participants involved. A further consideration related to reputational risk for the case institution. Therefore, every effort was made to minimise the risk of identifying individuals (e.g. use of pseudonyms and redaction of identifying information from transcripts; minimal and purposeful use of data only). I also attempted to preserve the anonymity of the institution whilst seeking to provide faithful and relevant descriptions of both individual and institutional contexts. Managing Faculty – Student Research Relationships

Several authors raise concerns about the use of students as participants in faculty research projects (e.g. Leentjens & Levenson, 2013; Comer, 2009; Ferguson, Yong & Myrick, 2004). Many of the concerns relate to the fields of nursing or psychology. In psychology, it is common for academic staff to use convenience sampling to recruit students as research participants and to

incentivise research participation through research credit schemes or, in the US, for course credits.

Working in a psychology department, I was mindful that students on the BSc programme might have been reluctant to participate in this study. In particular, data collection was planned towards the end of their time at the university when they were completing their undergraduate dissertations and when incentivisation through the research participation scheme was no longer relevant to them. I was also aware of the risk that students might have reached a point of research fatigue due to frequent calls for participation in staff research. Finally, I was acutely aware of my position as both Course Leader and researcher and had to be mindful of my needs as a researcher while avoiding any sense of coercion or compliance on the part of students.

3.4.1 Recruitment Strategy

Khatamian Far (2018) notes that researchers need to consider students' motivations for participating in tutors' research and that a balance between passive and active recruitment strategies is needed to ensure participation but to avoid any sense of coercion. As a recruitment strategy, I advertised the study on the course Moodle page (passive strategy) and subsequently at the end of a lecture run by a colleague (active strategy).

Students who were my dissertation supervisees at Level 6 were excluded from the study as one concern was that students who knew me well

were more likely to participate due to a personal loyalty or duty. This meant that despite the possible presence of personal loyalties, there was no direct pedagogical relationship between the participants and me as I was not due to mark any of their work during or after their participation in the study.

3.5 Power and Risk to Participants

Ferguson, Yonge and Myrick (2004) note that certain methods can seem too risky for participants, particularly where they involve self-disclosure in a hierarchical relationship, especially when it is not possible for interviews to be anonymous due to the dual tutor/researcher relationship. However, in terms of the type of data required, a qualitative approach that engaged with students' personal stories was needed in addition to seeking permission to analyse samples of academic writing.

There was a slight risk that students might have felt too embarrassed to talk about personal circumstances that had impacted their ability to study. Additionally, the topics of academic writing and academic outcomes might have been distressing to some; for these reasons, students were advised not to participate if the study topic was likely to cause distress. Links to relevant support services were also provided on the Participant Information Sheet and Debrief Sheet ([Appendix B](#)).

Ferguson, Yonge and Myrick (2004) recommend minimising the burden on participants and placing student participants at arm's length from the tutor-

researcher for obtaining consent. For this reason, the study was advertised formally through Moodle announcements, emails and at the end of a lecture. One participant (Oshona) volunteered through snowball sampling via the first participant, Maria. Ian made a reciprocal arrangement with me by which I agreed to be interviewed for his undergraduate dissertation after he participated in this study.

Ferguson, Yonge and Myrick (2004) also note that consent should come prior to using student products (e.g. assignments and journals) for research. However, the knowledge that a piece of text is being used for research can compromise the quality of data, giving a contrived or inaccurate representation of things. In terms of analysing students' academic writing, the aim was to understand the role of everyday academic practices in academic outcomes. Therefore, naturally occurring data was most relevant to this part of the study. I also opted to sample students' Level 5 assignments to minimise pressure on the participants who were completing their high-stakes Level 6 assessments at the time of the study.

This strategy yielded useful data for the study. Students were relatively distanced from the sampled texts, having produced these in 2021. (Only Fiza noted some embarrassment about volunteering her assignment script.) The sampled assignment marks contributed to the participants' final degree outcomes and provided access to a ubiquitous academic writing genre, namely, a compare and contrast essay.

3.5.1 Interviews and Power Relations

Karnielli-Miller et al. (2009) note that power relations in qualitative research should be seen as a continuum across the research process with a seesawing of power differentials according to the stages and tasks of the research. At the data collection stage, researchers may use various methods to increase rapport and to heighten empathy but as noted above, these may lead to increased vulnerability and exposure of participants.

Kvale (2006) notes that describing interviews as egalitarian dialogues misrepresents the asymmetries involved and that underlying attempts at authentic relating potentially involves the misuse of empathy and quasi-therapeutic approaches to elicit more information than participants are comfortable sharing. As a trained counsellor this was something I needed to bear in mind, ensuring that the pace and experiential focus of interviews was appropriate to each participant. However, viewing the interview process as purely asymmetrical denies the agency and autonomy of students who, as participants, also have the power to limit their level of participation and commitment to the process.

Despite all participants disclosing personal information about their lives and educational experiences, no participants became distressed during the interviews. Rather, at times, the impact of hearing participants' personal stories was deeply moving for me as the listener. In particular, the interviews caused me to reflect on students' previous engagement behaviours (e.g. lateness to

class) and to see these in the light of the stories shared in the interviews. Furthermore, I was particularly struck by the participants' sense of personal responsibility and sincerity in the interviews. While I recognise my position as course lead may have limited participants' willingness to critique the institution and the programme, the tenor of the interviews was collaborative and friendly which led to detailed disclosures on the part of some participants.

3.6 Participants

The original aim of this study was to collect multiple forms of data from a range of participants to construct composite case vignettes illustrating variations in approaches to academic writing and associated academic outcomes. Given the number of foci, a sample of 20-30 was originally intended to maximize the potential for variation and to allow for the creation of composite vignettes. However, recruitment proved difficult, with few students responding to the initial recruitment requests. Possible reasons for this include:

- Poor timing - I had underestimated the additional stress third-year students would experience during their final semester, and many were not receptive to any additional demands from staff.
- Insiderliness of the research and my dual relationship with participants impacting trust in the research process.
- The range of data required – as noted, one participant said she was initially anxious about participating because of the embarrassment she felt about me revisiting her written work.
- Research fatigue – as noted above, psychology students are often asked to participate in staff research projects and can experience participation

fatigue, especially where there is no clear incentive to participate (e.g. research credits).

Eight participants were recruited in total. A table of participants, including the mark for their sampled assignment and final degree outcome, is included below:

Pseudonym	Assignment mark	Overall degree outcome
Maria	45%	2,2
Oshona	47%	3rd
Andrea	48%	2,1
Ian	62%	1st
Myleene	65%	2,1
Hortense	65%	2,1
Ayesha	75%	1st
Fiza	75%	2,1

Table 1. Participants and Degree Outcomes

Given the difficulties with recruitment, the original aim of conducting a phenomenographic study was revised in favour of a more phenomenological, interpretive approach to the interviews. Cohen Miller, Schnackenberg and Demers (2020) recommend reframing “failure” in qualitative research as an opportunity to consider alternative data collection methods while maintaining the goals of the project. The aim, therefore, was to make a virtue out of the small sample and to focus on drawing out detailed and rich interview data with each participant. As Frechett et al (2020, p.6) note: “A small purposive sample with rich and diverse lived experiences of the phenomenon is most coherent with phenomenological studies’ main objective of uncovering the multiple layers

of hiddenness of a phenomenon within its context.” The small sample was also conducive to the timescale for the project so that an in-depth analysis of individual stories could be done while also generating salient themes from across the dataset.

The following demographic information was obtained from the interviews rather than being formally collected via a demographic questionnaire. The sample profile is not dissimilar to the general cohort for the programme being predominantly female and with 6 out of 8 participants belonging to minority ethnic groups (general cohort at entry was 97% female and 68% UK BAME). Ian was the only white British male in the sample. However, Ian was also a non-traditional student, having accessed HE as a mature student. All participants were registered as home students and received tuition and maintenance loans from Student Finance England.

Hortense, Andrea, Maria, and Fiza were naturalised migrants with English as an additional language. Hortense and Andrea had previously accessed higher education in their home countries and had migrated to the UK as adults. Ian, Hortense, and Andrea were all mature students between the ages of 30 and 60. Maria’s family moved from Asia to the UK when she was 7 years old and similarly, Fiza had moved from India to the UK age 9. Maria, Oshona, Myleene, Ayesha and Fiza were all from minority ethnic backgrounds and had received all or part of their schooling in the UK. There were no white British females in the sample. The inclusion of a white British female student

would have mirrored the variation in the general cohort better. However, no students from this group volunteered to take part.

In line with the original project plan, an interview schedule was drafted providing prompt questions in three key areas (see [Appendix C](#)):

1. Participants' general experience of university
2. Participants' experiences of academic writing
3. Participants' experiences of supporting and hindering factors

Participants were advised that the interview was intended to be conversational and lightly structured. A photo / object-elicitation task was used to provide a sense of participant agency at the beginning of the interviews. The framing of this task also enabled me to follow up with questions about academic writing and supporting and hindering factors to ensure relevant areas were covered. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes in length.

3.7 Participant Led Activities

One mechanism for increasing participant autonomy in managing the pace and direction of interviews is to provide opportunities for participant-led activities using art or expressive media. Simons (2014, p. 461) suggests using photographs or images as a way of connecting with participants, noting that interviews in case study research should “gain in-depth data, document multiple perspectives and experiences and explore contested issues”. Additionally, approaches that use intuitive, interpretive, and holistic approaches to data analysis can help convey the complexity and overlapping of issues involved.

Farenga (2020) identifies an emancipatory role for participatory pedagogy combined with artful forms of inquiry in higher education research, noting that visual methods are “conducive to research challenging inequalities in society by conveying concepts and experiences normally difficult to express verbally” (p. 87) and that “artful inquiry is compatible with studies seeking to address inequalities of experience of oppressed participants” (p. 89).

Farenga (2020) also highlights the danger of research into inequalities that focuses on what students lack in the HE context rather than understanding inequalities from the students’ perspectives. This was particularly pertinent to the qualitative part of the study, where the aim was to understand participants’ experiences from their frame of reference rather than from my academic position. The aim of providing both etic and emic perspectives was to provide a detailed and balanced account and to challenge the academic position through engaging with student narratives. The need to privilege student voices in the representation of interview data was also a reason for the analytical method chosen.

3.7.1 Creative Approaches to Qualitative Research

Butler-Kisber (2017) describes creative approaches to qualitative research as a means of discussing difficult or challenging experiences or of coming to new meanings about experiences. Furthermore, experiential ways of working invite participants to be active in the research process and can reduce power imbalances by encouraging participant agency. Therefore, participants

were invited to bring an object or image with them to the interview which represented their personal journey at university.

Where participants were unable to find a relevant object or picture, I provided a selection of pictures at the beginning of the interview (presented on an electronic tablet) for students to choose from (see [Appendix D](#)). Participants were advised that they could take their time to view the images and were then asked to choose one image that seemed to resonate most with them. Participants were also advised that the interview could proceed without an image or object if they preferred.

As noted, asking students to choose an object or picture for reflection was intended to provide a sense of agency and ownership at the beginning of the interviews. The main aim was to democratise the previously hierarchical relationship between the participants and me in a way that would facilitate trust and collaboration in the interviews (Roger & Blomgren, 2019).

Four participants chose their own objects/images as follows (Creative Commons images of objects agreed as representative by participants sourced from [Google Images](#), 'CC0 Public Domain' unless otherwise noted):

Figure has been removed due to copyright restrictions.
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Figure 2: Ian's chosen object – black laptop on desk.

Figure has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 3: Andrea's chosen object – black Pentel propelling pencil.



Figure 4: Myleene's chosen object – silver personal organiser.
Note. Participant's own image.



Figure 5: Fiza's chosen image – picture of personal journal taken in a university café.

Note. Booklet, pencil and coffee – stock photo by Veresovich, Royalty-free licence. Getty Images

The remaining participants were unsure about the elicitation task and opted to choose pictures from the selection provided, as follows:



Figure 6: Maria's chosen image.

Note. Bodleian Education Library, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, [CC BY-ND](#)

Figure has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 7: Oshona's chosen image – stylised image of head in profile with tree growing from it.



Figure 8: Hortense's chosen image

Note. Library Entrepreneur Startup [photograph] by Mohamed Mahmoud Hassan, ([Library, Entrepreneur, Startup, Free Stock Photo - Public Domain Pictures](#)), CC0 Public Domain.

Figure has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 9: Ayesha' chosen image – person hiking up a rocky mountain path

The researcher-found images ([Appendix D](#)) were sourced from Google Images, where I collated a series of Creative Commons images into a single file for use by participants. Images were presented on individual pages of a single Word document held on an electronic tablet. (The majority of the images were “CC0 by Public Domain” and do not require attribution. Where attribution was required and available, this has been noted.)

To source a wide variety of images, I searched for stock photos of students, student groups and academic institutions with modern libraries such as that at Urbanity. I then chose images that were suggestive of common metaphors about university life, such as those depicting journeys, physical and mental challenges or personal growth and community. Finally, I chose a series of abstract images that could be used as flexible canvases for different meanings. The aim was to provide a broad range of images that would avoid directing participants towards a particular experience or meaning associated with being at university.

3.7.2 Photo-elicitation and Emotional Resonance

While the researcher-found images included subjects from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, the participants seemed to choose images based solely on their metaphoric potential. Depictions of ethnicity and race were not factors considered by participants. Rather the emotional resonance with the participant's experience was the most important reason for choosing an image or object:

I can see. I can really touch myself [in this photo] (Hortense)

I think I resonate with that picture the most. It's just me going on a journey. I don't really want to pick one of the ones with all the books or anything. I feel like I didn't really spend much time in the library. I think I preferred like working at home. (Yeah.) And then the abstract art ones, I didn't really resonate with either (Ayesha)

The elicitation task proved more influential in the interview process than previously expected. The objects and images chosen by the participants facilitated in-depth conversations much earlier in the process than anticipated and in such a way that the activity became much more than just an ice breaker. As noted by Harper (2002, p. 13), "the photo elicitation interview seems like not simply an interview process that elicits more information, but rather one that evokes a different kind of information." The images and objects evoked

memories and visceral sensations associated with being at university as well as the wider context of students' lives.

For example, in Andrea's case, the propelling pencil she brought to the interview represented a link between her life before coming to the UK as well as her struggles at university in the UK. The pencil reminded her of the values that had enabled her to persist at university while also providing a reminder of overcoming past struggles with the faith and support of friends and acquaintances from the past. The object provided rapid access to multiple layers of meaning and enabled her to situate recent experiences in the wider context and history of her life.

Similarly, for other participants, the image or object provided access to multiple experiences and embodied sensations. For example, Hortense and Maria's chosen images of students reading alone identified the frequent challenge of disruption to studies and the importance of quiet spaces on campus. Thus, the image represented both the challenge and the solution. However, it also represented an aspect of the person's self-concept and character as *"someone who just likes studying, and then I like having that quiet time on my own while studying"* (Hortense) or, from Maria's point of view: *"I'm not the type of person who holds focus."* (Maria). Both participants had quite different conceptualisations of their need for a quiet space despite the use of similar images to access these experiences.

Matteucci (2013) citing Barthes (1964), notes the polysemic nature of images and their capacity to produce “syneasthetic experiences” or the “stimulation of one sense may activate other senses which may then become dominant in recollecting events” (Matteucci, 2013, p. 194-5). For all participants, the elicitation task stimulated recollections of previous educational experiences in addition to experiences at university. They also stimulated rapid connection with the deeply personal aspects of university experience as can be seen in Oshoma’s third comment in her interview below:

Genuinely, very proud of myself to even get to the third year. Like the fact that I even stayed, like, those moments where I wanted to drop out, those moments where I nearly gave up because of things like the academic writing and because of things like the fact that I have dyslexia and I have always felt like I always struggled to know my thoughts and write them properly and articulate them the way I want to articulate myself, I would find that was something I struggled with (yeah) so the fact that I even still stuck it out and tried my hardest. And I failed stuff and I'm still re-doing stuff I did in second year, but I'm still trying and I'm still here. (Yeah) I'm proud of myself for that.

Roger and Blomgren (2019) note the difference between the meaning of elicitation in drawing ‘out’ and drawing ‘forth’ of something latent. They note:

Through the process of elicitation within participatory visual methods, unpredictable ideas, connections, and insights can be triggered,

sparked, or rekindled. Indeed, the old definition of elicitation suggests that we do not always know what path our elicitation processes will take. This “drawing forth” speaks to the unpredictability of the results of elicitation in research and perhaps even more for the results related to visual methodologies. (Roger & Blomgren, 2019, p.2)

Harper (2002) also notes that using images connects the experience of the researcher with the researched through a shared “anchor”. The discussion of the image (or also in this project, object) provides a shared basis for understanding as both parties are engaged with the visual object in a process of meaning creation and both may already share common meanings it. Bates et al. (2017) also note that photo-elicitation provides “student-centric conceptualisations” enabling the development of new perspectives and conceptualisations of topics previously defined by others (e.g. the concept of student satisfaction as defined by the National Student Survey).

A core aspect of visual methods has to do with the de-centering influence of the image that speaks to metaphoric, bodily, and emotional understandings of the social world (Harper, 2002; Opiniano, 2021). Other visual and material methods operate in similar ways. For example, the introduction of a material object into the interview space affords the possibility of accessing qualitatively rich material through immediacy and present-focused reflections (Willig, 2016).

Opiniano (2021) notes that objects can help facilitate difficult conversations about sensitive topics while Richards & Pilcher (2020) used an object elicitation task draw-out discipline specific academic language and identities. Thus, objects, as both visual and material artefacts, facilitate access to knowledge that may be hard to reach by conventional methods.

Willig (2016) points to the importance of researchers staying with participants' meanings associated with objects rather than trying to discern meaning from the object itself. The importance of staying with individual participants' experiences is underlined by the possibility of object-led assumptions influencing and limiting the direction of questioning. In this way, the use of empathic responding (see 3.8 below) provides a useful complement to visual methods by ensuring that the enquiry is attuned to the participant's process and meanings rather than the interviewer's assumptions and object-led interpretations.

Furthermore, from a relational perspective, the use of visual or material methods provides the opportunity for interview conversations to involve parallel rather than direct engagement. Gaze can be directed towards the image or object, and this can serve to reduce the intensity of the one-to-one interaction. Additionally, focusing on an external object allows participants to experience a sense of distance from personal experiences that may be too difficult or intense to access in a conventional interview. Participants can imbue images and objects with characteristics or features which link to personal characteristics,

but which may be difficult to wholly own and explore from a personal perspective. Carefully listening to the meanings of the image or object for the participant can enable the interviewer to make connections at later stages of the interview, e.g. toward the end of Ayesha's interview, I commented:

R: but that that that internal pressure. (Yeah, definitely) that, it just reminds me of the picture, you know, the person walking on the path (Yeah) And being determined to get (yes) to the end and so that's you, that bit of you that says "Come on I've gotta get going. I've gotta get through it." That's been really important.

P: Yeah definitely. I think having just to put my head down and do it at the last minute and be like "I have to get through this. There is no other choice other than getting a good grade." (Laughs)

3.8 Methodological Reflection - Empathy in Qualitative Research

Interviewing participants for this study presented two specific challenges relating to the dual relationship between myself and the participants and my habituation to counselling ways of working in interview-type situations. As a trained counsellor of 20 years' experience, my default approach to working one-to-one is to use an active form of enquiry that is firmly rooted in the PCA 'core conditions' of empathy, unconditional positive regard (UPR) and congruence (Rogers, 1957 /2007).

These conditions are labelled 'core' as they relate to the practitioner's way of being with clients and, as such, are largely regarded as fundamental to establishing trusting and facilitative relationships. Moreover, embodying a non-judgemental, empathic, and authentic way of being on the part of the counsellor helps reduce power differentials in the relationship and avoids the exchange becoming that of expert practitioner and patient (Rogers, 2002). Some characteristics of the person-centred therapeutic interview may, therefore, be of use in qualitative research, especially where there is a clear hierarchy between researcher and participant and where the focus of the work is on eliciting detailed descriptions of a person's experience.

However, from a research point of view there are potential pitfalls to this way of being with participants. Not only do the boundaries between therapy and research need careful and clear delineation but the provision of facilitative relational conditions such as the core conditions requires an active and participatory stance on the part of the researcher. Furthermore, the researcher needs to be careful not to misuse therapeutic methods to elicit surreptitiously more information than participants are willing to share (Kvale, 2006).

Rogers (1957 / 1992, p. 244) is clear that "attitudes cannot be directly perceived". Therefore, the provision of empathic understanding, UPR and congruence require that the listener/interviewer responds to the speech content and manner of speaking of the participant with the intent of clarifying meanings and deepening experiencing (Rogers, 2002). This is particularly the case with

conveying empathic understanding (Rogers, 2002). In this sense, using empathy in research refers not simply to the capacity to sense what is going on for your participants during data analysis but to using active listening and responding during interviews to elicit personally held meanings and enable deeper exploration of experiences.

Such active responding on the part of the researcher has a potential directive influence in the interview. This brings into question issues about the co-creation, trustworthiness, and quality of data. However, in this methodological reflection, I hope to demonstrate the value of using active enquiry and empathic responding in qualitative interviews and its potential for building rapport and clarifying meanings.

As noted, empathy is widely acknowledged to be an important relational quality that underpins productive interpersonal encounters (Baughan & Merry, 2001). The presence of empathy in interpersonal encounters is believed to facilitate accurate understanding on the part of the listener and enhance the experience of the speaker in respect to feeling understood, accepted, and valued in the relationship (Mearns & Thorne, 2013).

There is a range of nuanced definitions of empathy (Kocyba, Muszel & Trogisch 2022). For a detailed overview of different definitions and a detailed etymology of the term concerning research, see Gair (2012). A common definition of empathy, and one which shall be used here, relates to the capacity of a listener to imaginatively enter, experience and communicate their

understanding of the experiential process or 'world' of another back to the speaker (Rogers, 1957 / 1992).

There are contradictory views of the necessity and usefulness of empathy in research settings (Gair, 2012). The arguments for and against empathy in qualitative research relate to the perceptions of its function in facilitating or hindering accurate understanding on the part of the researcher (see Gair, 2012 for an overview). Arguments against cite the need to acknowledge difference rather than shared experiences in the research encounter (Lather, 2009 and Watson & Shields, 1996 cited in Gair, 2012, p.137). Likewise, concerns about the use of empathy relate to the danger of researchers projecting predispositions in the name of empathy on the experience of participants (Hollan, 2008, cited in Kocyba, Muszel & Trogisch, 2022, p. 20).

However, other viewpoints acknowledge the usefulness of empathy in facilitating an imaginative leap into the world of the other, leading to more nuanced and sensitive interpretations of data (Gair, 2012) or to the formulation of hypotheses (Kubik, 1984 cited in Kocyba, Muszel & Trogisch, 2022). It can also facilitate trust, leading to more meaningful interactions (Watts, 2008 cited in Gair, 2012), particularly if empathy is experienced by both parties to the interaction (Kocyba, Muszel & Trogisch, 2022).

Working empathically as a researcher requires a commitment to phenomenological understanding and a recognition of the positionality of the

other. Empathy is not present if the listener is lost or subsumed in the process of the speaker (Rogers, 1957 / 1997). Fostering empathic understanding can foster openness and, according to Kocyba, Muszel & Trogisch (2022 p. 21), is an ethical requirement enhancing researchers' capacity to stay with hard-to-hear stories or with participants whose views are deemed challenging and culturally undesirable. In their qualitative study on religious family groups, Marks and Dollahite (2018) go so far as to recommend a deep engagement and openness to learning from other groups culminating in an experience of "deep respect" and "holy envy". They note that some learning can only be learned relationally, where there is a shared experience on the part of participants and researchers.

In the Person-Centred Approach, accurate and non-judgemental empathic responding is believed to facilitate the process of change by enabling a mutual and close-up view of the client's process. In hearing their experiences reflected by the listener, the client is invited to come closer to their experiencing. According to Rogers' (1959, 2002) theory of therapeutic personality change, this process enables previously denied or distorted self-experiences to be symbolized to awareness more accurately. In other words, the client is prompted to speak more directly and openly about their experiences in response to the counsellor's attempts to convey understanding. In this sense, empathic responding (even if inaccurate) encourages clients to choose words that accurately reflect the whole "felt sense" (Gendlin, 2004) of

their experience. Accurate symbolisation of experience then allows for new meanings and experiences to be brought forth (Gendlin, 2004).

The non-judgemental aspect of the PCA encourages this process even if the experience confounds expectations or beliefs about self. Thus, the client's experiencing becomes more immediately available leading to more openness to contradictory self-material (Rogers, 1959). In this manner, while not seeking to direct the client's process in any way, non-directive therapy facilitates a process of change in the client.

A parallel might be seen here with the difference between reasons and rationalizations for actions given by participants in research interviews. As Scott (2017) notes, in research interviews, participants provide post-hoc rationalizations for their actions. Post-hoc rationalizations are emergent from "the actual reason for the activity" (Scott, 2017, p. 255). In interviews, participants 'redescribe' reasons for actions by rationalizing them according to "wider, social, political, economic and discursive contexts" (Scott, 2017, p.255). While the purpose of interpretive research is to understand the reasons for actions in relation to participants' expectations and practices, an empathic form of enquiry might enable a closer examination of actions in relation to reasons (even where these confound discursive contexts). Since, as Scott (2017, p. 255) notes, "the individual has the potentiality to access them". In this way, empathic enquiry is conducive to emancipatory research approaches.

Additionally, in research, the interaction between researcher and participant can never be fully non-directive. In questioning participants, we are directing attention to certain parts of their experiencing and the potential emotional consequences of this are now acknowledged in ethical approval processes. Empathic inquiry where there is a gentle excavation of participant experience can help crystallize participants' views and facilitate understanding and theorising for the interviewer in the moment (Lillrank, 2012), an opportunity that is otherwise lost at the later stage of data analysis. As noted by Kocyba, Muszel & Trogisch (2022) "the more dialogue, conversation, and explanation there is in the research process, the more likely it is that it will generate a solid and reliable interpretation" (p. 27).

As noted, empathic responding involves a deep commitment to the experiential process of the other and, as such, is often characterised by a close reflection or paraphrasing of the speaker's words (Bozarth, 2001). However, responding can also take idiosyncratic forms based on intuition derived from the counsellor's close engagement and interest in the client's experiences (Bozarth, 2001). Parallels to this process can be drawn with interpretive research approaches in which active listening:

becomes interactive, relational work that theoretically means more than just hearing things correctly. It means reflective work, or trying to understand the responses or an emerging story from the interviewee's

point of view, and to theorize flexibly about what comes next regarding related follow-up questions' (Lillrank, 2012, p. 281).

Responding actively and congruently to participants' statements indicates that I am actively seeking to understand their experience. This is equally the case when my empathic responses are limited or ineffective as participants seemed to respond positively to the intent rather than to the accuracy. Indeed, inaccuracy on the part of the listener can enable a clearer exposition of the participant's experience as they feel impelled to correct the listener's perceptions.

In the next section, I provide an example of empathic responding during an interview and discuss my intentions and the impact of this on the interview process. The main points derived from this analysis are:

- Empathic responding allows increased focus on the experiential process of the participant.
- Empathic responding helps deepen experiential focus even where the responding is inaccurate.
- Empathic responding helps develop potential themes from otherwise oblique references in participants' speech.
- Empathic responding helps link areas of interest e.g. from a general sense of the experience at university to a clearer understanding of factors affecting outcomes.

The following excerpt is from interview 4 with Myleene:

Interview Exchange	Comments
<p>R1: thanks again for agreeing to do the interview, it's more of, really a conversation than an interview, even though I have some questions, but they're really just prompts for me. And as you're aware, I'm kind of mainly looking at three areas of your experience, but it can be really broad ranging actually what we talk about. So, can I, just to get us started, can I ask about the image or the object that you chose?</p>	<p>Typical opening and scene setting</p>
<p>P1: Yeah. So, I just brought my planner because I think, like when I look at it, I instantly just think of uni because I don't really plan anything else out apart from uni. I just very much have to be structured and organized. So, I think that was like a key tool for me to know what I was doing each day, especially with making progress. I think if I didn't know what I was doing each day and I didn't have a clear plan, it definitely threw me off in terms of making like good progress.</p>	<p>Object elicitation - emergence of a theme about planning and goal orientation (making progress)</p>
<p>R2: OK. So, it's something that really sets uni apart from other things, is the fact that you have to plan and it really (Yeah) symbolizes kind of how you are at uni that object, yeah and different to the rest of your life.</p> <p>P2: Exactly, I think I do like plan other areas of my life, but it's more so like making mental notes or I'll quickly type something in my phone. But having like a physical object to plan in, I definitely associated with uni.</p>	<p>In R2, I emphasize the point about university being set apart from everyday life by the need to plan events. However, this is not quite accurate, and the participant clarifies my understanding in P2, noting a nuance that in general she does need to plan but that university requires extensive planning using a physical object (planner).</p>
	<p>Despite the inaccurate empathy, the result is a more detailed response on the part of the participant and a clarification of her experience to both herself and the researcher.</p>
<p>R3: Yeah, and actually writing it down, which is quite unusual these days, you know, in a written</p>	<p>This is researcher opinion, but it links to the participant's own</p>

<p>planner. OK. So thinking about that object, you know, what does that represent for you in terms of being at uni that you know, what does it say about your experience of being at uni that object?</p> <p>P3: I think just like a lot of intention with what I'm doing because I think with other things I can kind of write a plan, but if it doesn't happen, it's kind of not a big deal. But I would hear especially with like motivational videos and stuff, they would always say to write things down, like specifically in writing, because you're more likely to do it that way. So I've always made like a clear intention to write it down and actually tick it off at the end of the day. And so I guess, yeah, just being really intentional about kind of trying to get higher grades and make progress.</p>	<p>differentiation between planning for everyday events and planning for university.</p> <p>Participant's goal orientation explained in more detail and the underlying interest in getting higher grades and making progress.</p>
<p>R: OK. So that's some, that's really interesting that what kind of characterises your time of being at uni is about being intentional, about having a really clear intent, about getting things done, making progress. So I'm wondering, does that, does it have a a feeling sense to it that that kind of need to focus and get things done? What? What do you feel when you think of that?</p> <p>P: Yeah, I definitely think, like when I think of uni, I just think of a very clear path of what I needed to do. Like I always knew that I want to do psychology quite early on in secondary school. So when I think of like, the academic side of my life, I very much see everything, cause like, a structured amount of time to achieve this and then another set of time to achieve that. It's like very goal, almost like tunnel vision, just, I can really see what I'm working towards, but it's a little bit far at the moment, but I know what I need to do to get there if that makes sense.</p> <p>R: Yeah. Yes, it sounds like you had a real sense of progression from quite early on in school, you say a bit of tunnel vision. And would you say, is it you driving that? That vision?</p>	<p>Reflective response leading to a prompt and increased focus on feelings and the experiential quality of an experience.</p> <p>The participant is using the metaphor of a 'clear path' through education characterised by a goal-oriented and time sensitive view.</p> <p>Paraphrase followed by direct reflection of participant's words (tunnel vision) to pick-up on the participant's goal-orientation and to move into questions about what</p>

	<i>has helped participant to stay at university.</i>
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Table 2: Example of an empathic interview technique

3.9 Reflexivity - Researcher Context and Approach to Data

Undertaking this project led me to two strands of self-reflection: firstly, on my longstanding question of what is meant by success in higher education (Roberts, 2021), and secondly, on the underlying motives for this project and my role as an HE practitioner.

Dyson (2020), writing about narrative research approaches, notes that:

reflexivity is a crucial element of reflection. Meta-reflection requires that we return to our assumptions and expectations and question them in the light of experience, engaging in critical reflection. Our critical reflections may lead us to question previously held beliefs and ideas, not least about ourselves and our identity. Such reflection can lead to discomfort (Dyson, 2020, p. 44).

However, Pillow (2003) is critical of self-reflexivity “predicated upon the ability of the researcher to know her / his own subjectivity and to make this subjectivity known to the reader through disclosure” (p. 184). Texts employing this type of reflexivity are, according to Pillow, in danger of collapsing “under the weight of the confessional tale” (p. 182).

Contrary to Pillow's expectations, I did not undertake self-reflection during this project to know the participants better, nor to find personal resonance with their stories. Rather, the motivation for self-reflection was, in part, to correct the inherent power imbalance in the work and to clear an emotional and cognitive space in which to identify the underlying motives for this work (Dyson, 2020).

As a counsellor, it is generally acknowledged that being willing to go to the same personal depths as one's clients is essential to successful therapeutic work. Additionally, undertaking self-reflection is a necessary component of ethical practice by which one seeks to understand the values underpinning ethical decision-making and the emotional responses elicited by client material (Pompeo & Levitt, 2014). Similarly, there can be a withholding of power in research, whereby researchers are unwilling to undertake similar levels of personal exploration as those expected of participants. The self-reflection I undertook during the project was intended to counter this withholding tendency and to prompt honest reflection on the motivations underlying the study.

To undertake the reflexive process, I wrote an extended account of my experiences as a student and as a higher education practitioner which I shared with my supervisor. The main issues arising from my self-reflection had to do with my own experiences of:

- Being schooled through the medium of Welsh before going to an elite English-medium university.

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- Feeling 'other' in the elite university environment and being othered because of my accent and Welsh colloquialisms.
 - Adopting a 'university identity' which countered my 'home identity'.
 - Experiencing allyship from tutors who were primarily interested in ideas rather than forms of expression.
 - My personal journey to understanding the role of academic reading in both knowledge and language acquisition.
 - Understanding the role of language in indexing credibility in academic environments.
 - Feeling frustration at current HE practices which favour outcome over learning as a process.
 - Feeling anger at the apparent lack of ethical thinking underpinning institutional decision making and the cost of this for both students and staff.

Drawing on Dyson (2020), undertaking this study prompted me to reflect on my marking and assessment practices and on my assumptions about academic writing. It highlighted how I had introjected expectations about academic writing from my own undergraduate experiences and how these, and my own conflicts about accepted practices in academia, were operating as barriers to connecting with students. It also highlighted the fallibility of marking and the dehumanising potential of high workloads in massified higher education settings.

The interviews and qualitative analysis provoked sadness in me at the levels of personal difficulty experienced by many of the participants. It prompted me to reflect on the inflexibility of the current 3-year degree system to allow for a more developmental view of learners. Furthermore, the interviews prompted me to consider my responses to issues of student behaviour e.g. non-compliance with

prescribed reading or tardiness to class, which resulted in reflection on, and changes to, practice.

For example, I no longer ask students who are more than 15 minutes late to class to wait until the break to join a lecture. I do not comment on lateness or early leavers although I make it clear to students that lectures always start on time. In seminars, I purposefully talk to as many students as possible in small group discussions prior to using whole-class plenaries. This has the effect of humanising students to each other and to me before engaging in more formal, whole-class approaches.

My increased empathy for students' experiences has not reduced the discomfort (and sometimes annoyance) I feel when students do not appear engaged or when their behaviour appears disrespectful. Rather, it has allowed for an increased awareness of difference and opportunity for reflection rather than reaction. It has highlighted the discomfort that occurs when my values and expectations about learning behaviours conflict with those of students, but it has not eradicated the differences entirely. Furthermore, the study has not changed my expectations about academic standards, but it has alerted me to the potential of linguistic bias to obscure recognition of a person's achievements.

Finally, in terms of my approach to the data, I actively sought to use my identity as a counsellor to improve the data gathering and analysis processes. In so far as my pedagogical aims are also political ones, then this research has

also been a project of in “conscientização”, as noted by Freire (2004, p.72):

“Conscience of the world engenders conscience of the self, and of others in the world, and with the world. It is by acting in the world that we make ourselves.”

Chapter 4: Etic Perspective

4.1 Textual Analysis Method and Rationale

Written assignments are an important site of interaction between students and staff. In some instances, assignments may constitute the mainstay of student–staff interactions, particularly where students are regularly absent from taught sessions or where personal interactions are limited by a massified system. However, most importantly, academic assignments are the point at which students engage with the demands of the institution to achieve the award of a qualification. In this respect, assignments are part of the student–institution transaction.

Failure to complete assignments successfully can have emotional, financial, and academic implications for students and potential financial and reputational implications for institutions. As will be seen in the analysis of interviews, for some students, completing assignments takes a paradoxical precedence over the learning process, particularly in the early stages of their university careers.

The analytical methods used in this study were influenced by textography. Textography is an approach to textual analysis which views texts in the wider context and situatedness of their production (Sizer, 2021). It combines elements of participatory ethnographic research with textual analysis (Paltridge, 2008) to understand why participants produce texts in the ways that they do. It considers how social and cultural context impact how people

produce texts (Guillén-Galve & Bocanegra-Valle, 2021) and in academic contexts, provides the student (emic) perspective on texts that are primarily written for, and usually judged by, others (etic).

Textographic research often focuses on multiple sources of data and acknowledges the impact of the interpretations and situatedness of the researcher on the analysis (Sizer, 2021). In doing so, it balances etic with emic interpretations to produce a holistic understanding of academic writing (Sizer, 2021). In this project, participants were asked to provide or to allow access to the following information:

Data source	Details
Participant writing samples and assignment marks	8 x 1,000-word samples from undergraduate level 5 essays provided by participants. Assignment mark and marker's comments removed.
Semi-structured interviews	8 semi-structured interview transcripts. Duration: 45 - 90 minutes
Participant attendance data	% attendance score for each participant obtained with consent from the student record
Participant degree outcome	Obtained with consent from the student record

Table 3: Data sources

The participant attendance data and degree outcome data were intended to provide additional context to the writing samples by situating the writing in terms of students' engagement with the institution and their final academic outcomes. However, given the number of participants recruited the attendance information as a numerical score proved less useful than the students' accounts of their engagement with the institution. Furthermore, the attendance data held by the institution has since been deemed unreliable due to issues with the electronic attendance system.

Textographic research employs loosely structured interviews with a focus on the experiences of producing texts while also, in many cases, taking a broader interest in participants' life histories and narrative accounts of experiences (Sizer, 2021). The present study differs from classic textography in that I do not focus on a specific piece of text in the interviews. Rather, participants describe their experiences more broadly, identifying their challenges and successes with academic writing in the context of their academic journey. However, the intention is similar in that I recognise the central role of academic writing "as a vehicle of learning and social participation" (Ávila Reyes, 2021, p.127), and as such, experiences of academic writing are key to understanding student outcomes.

In addition, the textographic literature, along with the AL literature, acknowledges the symbiotic nature of academic writing and the acquisition of disciplinary content knowledge (Ávila Reyes, 2021). This study also aims to

consider the point at which students' literacy practices and linguistic repertoire either impede or facilitate the process of disciplinary content acquisition.

Therefore, this analysis also acknowledges the skills-based debate about language proficiency as a prerequisite to academic literacy (Murray, 2012, 2013).

Balancing competing perspectives about academic writing is a difficult task. Particularly where one approach (AL) is viewed as less problematic and stigmatising of difference and diversity than the other (Murray, 2012). My own experiences as a lecturer, in addition to research conducted at an earlier point in the PhD programme, led me to question the AL view that "what makes a piece of student writing 'appropriate' has more to do with issues of epistemology than with the surface features of form to which staff often have recourse when describing their students' writing" (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 162).

Turner (2018, p. 182) notes that "[w]riting pedagogy conventionally places grammatical accuracy in a subordinate position to the ordering of ideas in an overall structure, and it is often referred to as 'surface level' features." Drawing on the concept of 'writtenness' defined as "the received pronunciation of writing" (p. 7), she notes:

the subordinate positioning of grammatical accuracy risks
underestimating not only its textual role as an integral part of
writtenness, but also the social and cultural importance of its role as an

index of academic credibility and hence, its importance for academic readers. (p. 183-4)

Therefore, consideration of grammatical and syntactical features is included in the analysis. Grammatical and syntactical features also relate to the concept of 'explicitness' which refers to the capacity of a message to retain meaning over space and time and relates to Bernstein's theoretical framework whereby the degree of explicitness (or non-context dependent meaning) in a person's speech is considered a feature of linguistic code variation (Avenia-Tapper, 2015, Bernstein, 2003).

Explicitness is related to successful academic outcomes (Avenia-Tapper, 2015) and is characterised by linguistic and grammatical choices which enable speakers (and writers) to convey meaning without the need for a shared context. The degree, or lack, of explicitness in a text can be discerned by the use of deictic words (words that point to the time, place or situation relative to the context of the writer e.g. he, she, it, they, and adverbs of time and place e.g. there, here, now, then) rather than complete noun phrases (Avenia-Tapper, 2015). Explicitness also requires accurate and sometimes complex grammatical and syntactic forms (Aliakbari & Allahmoradi, 2014; Wardhaugh and Fuller, 2015). It enables clarity of argument to be conveyed through the structure of writing.

There are competing arguments about the social mechanisms underlying explicitness in language use (Bernstein, 2003; Aliakbari & Allahmoradi, 2014;

Avenia-Tapper, 2015). However, insofar as explicitness is acknowledged as an important feature of successful academic writing, it is included in this analysis in terms of participants' use of deictic terms when complete noun phrases might convey meaning more clearly. Explicitness is also considered in terms of the prevalence of language features that relate to clarity and non-context-dependent meaning, including punctuation and word order.

Paltridge (2008) identifies the following aspects to consider in the textography of academic writing:

- Context of text; its content, acceptability of certain points of view and claims.
- Intended audience reactions and marking criteria.
- Intended audience, e.g. novices writing for experts.
- Discourse community expectations for the texts; shared understandings between writers and readers; background knowledge assumed by the texts.
- Style of language expected.
- Level of critical analysis required.
- Level of originality expected.

From the point of view of reader expectations, Nesi and Gardener (2006) identify a consistency across disciplines with regard to what constitutes good academic writing with recurring expectations in relation to critical analysis, logical development, clarity of argument, well-structured writing, originality or creativity, succinct expression, and adherence to academic conventions. Therefore, features of writing coherence and structure such as advance

organiser paragraphs, signposting and paragraph order were also considered relevant to include in the analysis. Therefore, the textual analysis considers both the linguistic and grammatical strategies employed by students as well as the capacity of students to convey ideas coherently within the epistemological framework of a discipline-specific task, i.e. an essay comparing different counselling theories. It also considers the extent to which students demonstrated the capacity to balance competing points of view leading to independent evaluation and assessment of theoretical knowledge, i.e. the capacity to demonstrate criticality.

In summary, the textual analysis aims to identify and describe, from an academic staff point of view, the 'successful' and 'unsuccessful' strategies encountered in student academic writing. The following categories were therefore chosen as a basis for the textual analysis (etic perspective):

Linguistic and grammatical strategies:

- Explicitness (deictic terms/noun phrases)
- Grammatical and syntactical features related to clarity and explicitness (e.g., punctuation, word order, sentence structure)

Coherence:

- Signposting and logical structure
- Paragraph order

Epistemological access:

-
- Use of discipline-specific vocabulary (relevance, accuracy)
 - Accuracy of content claims
 - Adherence to academic conventions (referencing, tone, genre, formatting)
 - Evidence of attempts to move beyond novice-level repetition of knowledge.

4.2 Textual Analysis - Data

A 1,000-word writing sample from each participant was uploaded to Atlas.ti for coding. Samples were taken from a 1,500-word essay completed by participants in Semester 1 of the academic year 2021-22 as part of a core, level 5, Counselling Theories and Concepts module, where the essay was weighted at 60% of the overall module mark.

A sample of 1,000 words per participant was considered sufficient to identify successful and unsuccessful elements of student writing, focusing on the categories identified above. For consistency, samples consisted of the first 1,000 words from each assignment. A limit of 1,000 words was applied to expedite the analysis process and to ensure the purposive use of minimal data where possible.

In addition, the need to manage power dynamics between myself and participants meant that the request to use an excerpt of work seemed less threatening to participants than the use of an entire essay. The sensitivity of seeking consent to collect writing samples was borne out when Fiza noted that

she had been reluctant to volunteer for the research because of the request for a writing sample and her embarrassment about the mark received for her essay.

A reasonable period had elapsed between marking the assignments for the module in December 2021 and undertaking the textual analysis in October / November 2023. All summative and in-text marker comments were removed from the samples before uploading to Atlas.ti for coding. Therefore, the textual analysis of writing samples was undertaken with no indication of marks awarded or comments assigned to each piece of writing. Nevertheless, due to the small scale of the project and my familiarity with participants, an impression of participants' attainment was inevitably present for me when analysing the texts. To address this, I used participant numbers rather than pseudonyms in Atlas.ti and this, in addition to the disaggregation of texts from marker comments, served to anonymise the texts further.

4.3 Writing Samples - Context

The assignment chosen for the analysis (a theoretical 'compare and contrast' essay) provides a good example of a typical writing task at undergraduate level. The task required students to draw on two theoretical traditions in counselling (the PCA and one other theoretical approach of their choice) and to briefly identify the ways in which each tradition conceptualises three key areas of therapeutic thought, namely:

-
- human development
 - the development of individual distress
 - the process of therapeutic change.

Students were required to evaluate different theories and to identify their commonalities and differences. The task also involved discerning whether the chosen counselling approaches could be integrated into a coherent integrative counselling model. Thus, the task required higher-order skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation as appropriate to a level 5 assignment.

As far as possible, teaching on the module was aligned with the assignment tasks. Lectures were structured around the conceptual framework and included, for each theoretical approach, a discussion of:

- the underpinning philosophical basis
- the underpinning model of human development and distress
- the key characteristics of counselling practice
- the mechanisms of therapeutic change

Finally, there was also a lecture on different models of counselling integration with a strong steer for students to refer to a particular model of integration in the assignment. Thus, there was an attempt to align the assignment task with the organisation of knowledge in the module. In addition to the lecture materials, students were provided with a 'theories ready reckoner' for quick reference, which was also structured according to the module framework. Detailed assignment guidance was also provided, including discussions of marking criteria and learning outcomes.

In addition to the assignment type, the module assignment was chosen as a data source due to concerns about below benchmark module outcome data regarding first-time pass rates and attainment gaps. The distribution of marks on the module revealed some stark differences in attainment with notable differences by ethnicity, gender, and age. In addition, students who entered HE with a Level 3 Qualification (A level or BTEC) fared, on average, less well than students with other qualifications such as Access to HE or a previous Level 5 or other qualification.

A brief overview of module statistics is included here to provide context for the sample: 66 students attempted the module; 80% passed at the first attempt, and a further 17% passed at the second attempt, giving an overall pass rate of 97%. The mean mark for the module after the second attempt was 53%. As noted, there were considerable differences in mark distribution by gender and ethnicity. Male students (who only comprised 5% of the cohort) outperformed females with an average mark of 64.75% compared with 52.6% for females. Similarly, students categorised as belonging to black and minority ethnic groups scored, on average, 48.51% compared with an average score of 63.38% for white students.

The gaps in mark averages by ethnicity are consistent with the overall attainment gap for degree classifications on the programme with approximately 20% difference between the number of white students obtaining first-class or upper second degrees compared with black students. The difference in higher

classification awards between other minority ethnic and white students currently stands at approximately 30%.

On average, black and minority ethnic female students (who also make up most of the student cohort) scored lowest on the module. However, it should be noted that one of the joint highest scoring students on the module, with an overall mark of 80%, was female and from a mixed ethnic background.

The overall marks on the module ranged from 15% - 80% with a bunching of marks in the 40 - 49% range. This bunching of marks accounts, in part, for the lower average scores for black and minority ethnic students since marks in this range were awarded most frequently and black and minority ethnic students make up most of the cohort. Therefore, it is logical that the most represented group in the population features most in the most frequently awarded category.

Due to the weighting of components, it was possible to pass the module overall with a low pass (42%) in the essay component and a marginal fail (35%) in the case study component. Therefore, while the module exceeded the benchmark for overall passes, it was below benchmark for average marks and ethnicity awarding gaps.

Compared with the general cohort, the research participants fared better on average, with the range of marks for the sample assignments between 45% and 75%, with an average mark of 60.25%. This is unsurprising given that the

study was advertised as investigating academic success and is more likely to have recruited academically successful participants. All participants also passed the essay component at the first attempt. The marks awarded to participants for the essay component of the module are detailed in ascending order below.

Participant	Mark received
Maria	45%
Fiza	47%
Oshona	48%
Myleene	62%
Andrea	65%
Hortense	65%
Ian	75%
Ayesha	75%

Table 4: Participant Assignment Marks

Despite the positive skew, the profile of marks for participants is in keeping with the fact that, on average, males and older students fared better than under-21 females. Andrea, Hortense, and Ian were all mature students, and all scored 65% or above. Andrea and Hortense both had previous degrees gained before migrating to the UK, and Ian was a white, mature, male from the UK. The exception to this was Ayesha, who scored 75%, was under 21 and came from a minority ethnic background. Maria, Fiza, Myleene, and Ayesha had all completed 'A' levels whereas Oshona had completed a BTEC at level 3. As a whole, the sample consisted entirely of work by non-traditional students based on ethnicity, first in family status, age, migration status and socio-economic background.

4.4 Writing Samples Data Analysis - Coding

As noted in section 4.1 above, three main categories with further sub-categories were chosen as a basis for analysing the texts from a marker's (etic) perspective. These were:

Linguistic and grammatical strategies:

- Explicitness (deictic terms/noun phrases)
- Grammatical and syntactical features related to clarity and explicitness (e.g., punctuation, word order, sentence structure)

Coherence:

- Signposting and logical structure
- Paragraph order

Epistemological access:

- Use of discipline-specific vocabulary (relevance, accuracy)
- Accuracy of content claims
- Adherence to academic conventions (referencing, tone, genre, formatting)
- Evidence of attempts to move beyond novice-level repetition of knowledge.

These categories provided a basis for coding.

For consistency across samples, coding in Atlas.ti involved a sentence-by-sentence reading of texts and application of codes to individual sentences.

Multiple codes were applied to single sentences as appropriate. An example

of the most heavily coded excerpt (Participant 6, Hortense) can be seen in [Appendix E](#).

During the coding process, the initial categories were quickly deemed too limited to cover the range of writing characteristics identified in the samples. New codes were created within the broad categories identified above (named code groups in Atlas.ti). After two iterations of coding, the resulting analysis generated 48 codes across 6 code groups. The 48 codes were refined after coding to eliminate overlapping codes e.g., the code group Explicitness was reduced to two main codes of 'Explicitness – deictic words' and 'Explicitness – vague', which was used to identify sentences where the meaning was unclear or lacking specificity not attributable to deixis. The resulting list of codes and code groups can be seen in [Appendix F](#).

The coding process primarily identified problematic features of writing. However, the code groupings for coherence and epistemic access were separated into both positive and negative groups as it was possible to determine positive features (e.g., signposting and structuring or linking elements) that contributed to the coherence and readerliness of the text.

Similarly, in terms of epistemic access, it was possible to determine positive and negative aspects, such as accurate or inaccurate knowledge claims and correct or incorrect referencing. The epistemic access code group could have been further divided into a neutral category containing the codes of 'mostly correct understanding' and 'minor errors of understanding.' However,

these were coded as positive and negative respectively, based on the overall effect of the limited or faulty knowledge claims, i.e., whether the knowledge claims were simplistic but mostly correct, as expected at a novice level, or whether there were specific errors that indicated a below novice or inadequate level of understanding.

It should be noted that coding was carried out as a marker rather than a linguist i.e. I responded to my perception of idiosyncrasies and problematic features of texts as I would as a marker rather than as a trained linguist analysing texts from a more objective point of view.

The focus on problematic features of writing echoes Turner's (2018) claim of an "unbalanced symbolic economy of academic judgement in which 'good' writing is recognized but its achievement not valued, and 'bad' writing is disproportionately emphasized and allotted negative value" (p. 5).

Insofar as the analysis was intended to portray the etic perspective of a marker on the text, a focus on features that positively or negatively influence this evaluation was expected. Nevertheless, the prevalence of negative codes compared with positive ones provides data for reflection about which textual features are visible and noticeable to markers, and which are invisible or taken for granted. However, as I hope to demonstrate below, the prevalence of negative features does not necessarily predict academic outcomes. Rather, the evidence appears to point to a more nuanced situation where the relative

weightings of negative and positive features in the context of the entire text contribute to the marker's evaluation.

Due to the iterative nature of code creation, once coding was complete, the entire dataset was checked and coded for a second time to ensure consistency across samples. This resulted in a more granular analysis of each sample and produced a more complex set of code occurrences than had resulted from the initial stage of coding. Due to the proliferation of codes across the dataset, the subsequent interpretation requires a nuanced awareness of patterns across the dataset rather than a simplistic analysis of individual codes in isolation.

While the sentence-by-sentence approach provided a level of analytical consistency across samples, there were some unforeseen consequences to this, particularly regarding the variation in the number of sentences in each 1,000-word writing sample. For example, Ayesha's writing (sample 7) was characterised by long sentences with multiple subordinate clauses. This meant that Ayesha scored higher on 'Coherence – sentence length' than other participants (a negative score for Coherence). However, Ayesha also scored highest for 'epistemic access positive', meaning that her use of extended sentences was, to some extent, a product of her advanced understanding of complex theoretical concepts. This meant she often linked concepts and ideas through multiple subordinate clauses in a sentence.

4.5 Code Occurrences

Following coding, code-document analyses of code distributions across samples were carried out in Atlas.ti. These were exported to Excel, where conditional formatting using colour scales was applied to illustrate the relative density of each code across the samples (darker colours indicate a greater density of code/code groups per sample). The application of colour scales was done code by code (line by line) rather than across the entire table. Doing so produced an individual writing profile for each writer according to the prevalent features of their writing. To aid the interpretation of results, data is presented in assignment grade order from lowest to highest. A summary of code occurrences by code group is shown in Table 5 below.

Note: Atlas.ti calculates 'code group' frequencies according to the number of times a 'code group' has been applied to quotations rather than the total frequencies for all codes within a code group per document. This means that two codes belonging to the same code group within a quotation are counted as one occurrence rather than two. Therefore, the total number of 'code group' frequencies may be lower than the number of individual code occurrences for each code group. This normalisation of occurrences is done to aid comparison between documents of unequal size where absolute frequencies may be a misleading measure of comparison (ATLAS.ti, 2023). While the documents in this study were of equal length, as noted above, the documents were coded sentence-by-sentence. This meant that the total

number of sentences per document varied according to sentence length. This resulted in an uneven number of quotations per document. Therefore, normalised code group occurrences are used (Table 5, below) rather than absolute frequencies to give a better measure of comparison between documents:

	Maria 45%	Fiza 47%	Oshona 48%	Myleene 62%	Andrea 65%	Hortense 65%	Ian 75%	Ayesha 75%	Totals
Coherence Negative	15	7	14	9	9	6	7	10	75
Explicitness negative	10	10	6	2	9	13	3	0	53
Grammar and syntax	22	15	13	13	24	24	10	24	147
Epistemic access negative	33	17	27	13	31	38	23	11	193
Epistemic access positive	14	22	16	16	23	30	22	29	172
Coherence positive	1	0	1	8	6	1	5	2	23
Totals	98	71	76	61	102	112	69	76	666

Table 5: Normalised code group occurrences.

Presented as absolute frequencies of codes per code group, the data looks as follows:

	Maria 45%	Fiza 47%	Oshona 48%	Myleene 62%	Andrea 65%	Hortense 65%	Ian 75%	Ayesha 75%	Totals
Coherence Negative	16	7	15	17	15	7	12	12	100
Explicitness negative	11	11	6	2	9	13	3	0	55
Grammar and syntax	25	26	16	15	35	29	10	39	196
Epistemic access negative	47	22	33	16	36	50	25	11	241
Epistemic access positive	15	31	18	24	27	41	33	52	241
Coherence positive	2	0	1	8	5	1	5	2	23
Totals:	116	97	89	82	127	141	88	116	856

Table 6: Absolute frequencies of codes per code group.

When viewed as normalised code group occurrences (Table 5), the most frequently coded group was 'Epistemic Access - Negative' followed by 'Epistemic Access - Positive', 'Grammar and Syntax', 'Coherence Negative', 'Explicitness', and finally 'Coherence - Positive'. As noted above, the relative invisibility of 'good' writing features might explain the low occurrence rate of the 'Coherence – positive' code. This contrasts with the 'Epistemic access – positive' code group which occurs with the same absolute frequency as the 'Epistemic access – negative' code group and with only a marginal difference of 172: 196 when viewed according to the normalised frequencies for code groups.

Epistemic access codes (both positive and negative) account for 55% of all coding across samples (normalised code groups). Insofar as the other code groups relate to linguistic features of writing as opposed to issues related to access to knowledge, the ratio of coding for linguistic features to epistemic access is approximately 45%: 55%. As noted above, most of the coding identified negative features with only 29% of code group occurrences for the 'Epistemic access – positive' and 'Coherence – positive' code groups. Figure 10 below illustrates the proportions for code groups across all documents:

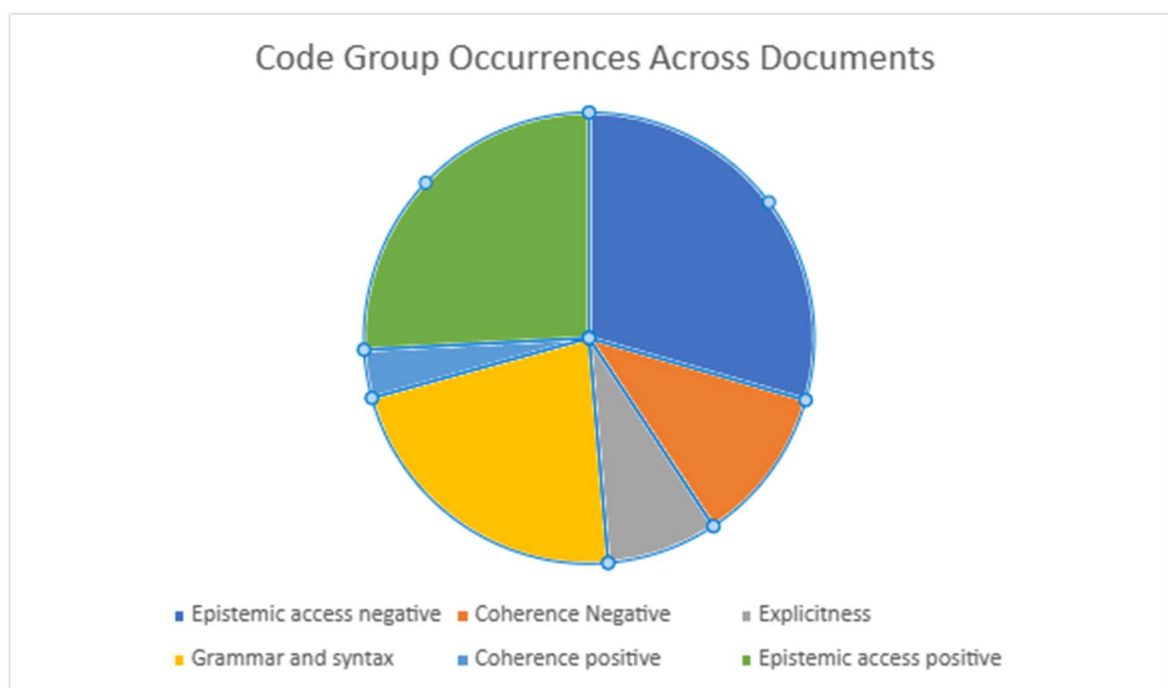


Figure 10: Proportion of code groups across documents.

The prevalence of epistemic access codes may be seen to support the influential claim made by Lea and Street (1998) that “what makes a piece of student writing 'appropriate' has more to do with issues of epistemology than

with the surface features of form to which staff often have recourse when describing their students' writing.” (p. 162)

In their research, Lea and Street (1998) identified a mismatch between student and staff expectations of academic writing based on the language used to describe successful academic writing by academic staff i.e., terms like structure, argument and clarity (Lea and Street, 2000 cited in Nesi and Gardner, 2006, p. 101). Indeed, my assumption before the analysis was that linguistic features and markers of explicitness would be more prominent than appears to be the case from the data. Therefore, given the prominence of ‘Epistemic access’ codes in the analysis, this study would appear to give credence to Lea and Street’s claim that academic success has more to do with the situatedness of epistemological discourses than individual deficits in linguistic skills (Bocanegra-Valle & Guillén-Galve, 2021).

However, the prevalence of a code group is not necessarily the same as its importance in determining outcomes, and potential observational bias towards certain features during coding may limit the interpretation of results. Furthermore, as noted by Turner (2018), marking non-standard writing can affect the mood of markers, and similar inconsistencies in this analysis are possible. However, insofar as this was an analytical rather than evaluative exercise, the process was not as emotionally laden or as time sensitive as marking and the analysis appears to show that different combinations of features contribute to individual outcomes at different points in the marking

range, i.e., it is the writer's overall profile that allows a marker to arrive at a summative judgement.

The variability in individual profiles for each marking band suggests that summative marking, whereby an overall mark is applied to an entire assignment, is a process of discernment and weighing up different writing features to arrive at a mark for the piece. However, there do appear to be some general characteristics of good versus weak academic writing that relate to the relative weightings of positive and negative epistemological and linguistic features in a text. These are explored in the sections below.

4.6 Positive Features

Key positive characteristics can be discerned when codes are sorted according to positive or negative features. For example, in Table 7 below, a greater bunching of positive features (e.g., correct referencing and correct understanding) can be seen at the higher end of the marking scale:

	Maria 45%	Fiza 47%	Oshona 48%	Myleene 62%	Andrea 65%	Hortense 65%	Ian 75%	Ayesha 75%	Totals
Coherence - structure	0	0	1	6	5	1	5	2	20
Coherence - signposting	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	3
Epistemic access - correct referencing	1	11	2	12	5	13	11	26	81
Epistemic access - correct understanding	7	9	11	9	20	23	17	21	117
Epistemic access - criticality	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	3	6
Epistemic access - mainly correct (partial) understanding	7	9	5	3	2	5	4	2	37
Totals:	16	31	19	32	32	42	38	54	264

Table 7: Positive codes

Contrastingly, the lower marked samples have a greater concentration of partial or ‘mainly correct understanding’ demonstrating a more novice level of conceptual understanding for these participants. The relative density of positive codes becomes clearer when viewed as code groups:

	Maria 45%	Fiza 47%	Oshona 48%	Myleene 62%	Andrea 65%	Hortense 65%	Ian 75%	Ayesha 75%	Totals
Coherence positive	1	0	1	8	5	1	5	2	23
Epistemic access positive	14	22	16	16	23	30	22	29	172
Totals	15	22	17	24	28	31	27	31	195

Table 8: Positive Code Groups

While there is no single indicator of writing success, a combination of features appears to contribute to the overarching positive or negative profile of

a writer. For example, while Fiza (47%) is among 3 participants whose writing contains some critical elements, Fiza has no positive codes for coherence, 9 instances of 'mainly correct understanding' and only 9 instances of 'correct understanding'. This indicates that Fiza is at a more novice level of conceptual understanding than the students who scored above her. This can be seen if we contrast Fiza's explanation of Person-Centred theory of personality development with Ayesha's:

Fiza:

The results shown in PCA is that after therapy, the individual will possess actualization which will impact their awareness of feelings and positive cognitions in relation to the individual's life; self-trust would have also been created (Rennie, 1998).

Ayesha:

Contrastingly, growth in P-C counselling is characterised by increased congruence between one's organismic self and self-concept, which allows openness to experience that would have been perceived as threatening to the self-concept previously, and therefore denied to awareness in the past (Rogers, 1957, 1959).

Ayesha demonstrates accurate use of disciplinary vocabulary and correctly identifies the mechanisms of personality development according to Person-Centred (PCA) theory. Fiza, on the other hand, has misunderstood the

definition of 'actualization' in PCA theory and, therefore, uses this term inaccurately. Also, although Fiza has understood that the PCA theory of personality change posits an increase in awareness and acceptance of feelings, she does not demonstrate the more advanced theoretical knowledge about the mechanisms of personality development as demonstrated by Ayesha.

Curiously, Myleene would appear to be an outlier in the higher-scoring group as she has only 9 instances of 'correct understanding,' no instances of 'criticality' and only 3 instances of 'mainly correct understanding'. However, Myleene's position in the middle of the table is understandable as, although her overall score for understanding is relatively low, Myleene also demonstrates good writing skills with the highest score in the group for positive features of coherence. Myleene is also the lowest-scoring student overall for negative features. Compared with her lower-scoring peers, Myleene also has lower instances of 'epistemic access negative' and fewer instances of negative codings for explicitness. Therefore, Myleene's writing is characterised as having a good structure, good adherence to academic conventions and few negative features as can be seen in this paragraph:

A similarity between the PCA and psychodynamic approach is that they both recognise the role external factors play in influencing an individual's behaviour. For instance, the PCA states that an optimal environment is required for the self-actualising tendency to take place therefore, the

environment plays a role in how much an individual can grow regardless of their innate desire to improve (Motschnig & Nykl, 2014). The psychodynamic approach places a much bigger emphasis on the effect these external factors have on an individual's behaviour, as it states that behaviour is a result of past experiences and our environment that are pushed into the unconscious until being brought into awareness using therapeutic methods, whilst looking at the motivational forces that initiate human behaviour (Kets de Vries & Cheak, 2014). This highlights that both approaches maintain that external factors are significant in influencing behaviour.

However, Myleene's subject knowledge is quite broad and lacks some of the detail evidenced by Ayesha and Ian, as can be seen in a similar passage from Ian's work:

PCA is firmly rooted in Humanistic philosophy, believing that, at their core, humans are trustworthy and, given the right conditions, will naturally grow in a positive direction towards autonomy, fulfilment, and self-determination (Rogers, 1959). Rogers called this natural progression the Actualizing Tendency. Whilst acknowledging that his ideas do not fully answer the question of free-will versus determinism, Rogers (1961) errs on the side of freedom, believing that humans are inherently capable of making their own decisions. This fundamentally contradicts the Psychodynamic view, particularly the Freudian view, which ascribes

to the ideas of psychological causality: all behaviours are strictly determined by unconscious instinctual/biological drives, and motivations that are buried within our subconscious (Corey, 2012, p. 59).

What differentiates the highest-scoring assignments from the lower-scoring ones is correct and detailed epistemological understanding coupled with a capacity to express this succinctly and explicitly using discipline-specific vocabulary. By contrast, lower-scoring assignments demonstrate less advanced or greater instances of partial understanding and less precise use of discipline-specific vocabulary.

4.7 Negative Features

When grouped by negative features, the differences between the lowest- (Maria - 45%) and highest-scoring students (Ian and Ayesha – 75%) are more noticeable:

	Maria 45%	Fiza 47%	Oshona 48%	Myleene 62%	Andrea 65%	Hortense 65%	Ian 75%	Ayesha 75%	Totals
Coherence Negative	15	7	13	9	9	6	6	10	75
Epistemic access negative	36	17	27	13	31	38	23	11	196
Explicitness	10	10	6	2	9	13	3	0	53
Grammar and syntax	22	15	13	13	26	24	10	24	147
Totals	83	49	59	37	75	81	42	45	471

Table 9: Negative Code Groups

Again, the patterning is not straightforward, and it is the balance of negative and positive features that seems to contribute to the final overall grade. For example, based on the lack of negative features in Myleene's writing (62%), one might have expected Myleene to have scored higher than Andrea or Hortense who both scored 65%. However, as noted, Myleene's writing also has fewer 'Epistemic access – positive' codes than any of the higher-scoring samples. As can be seen from the excerpt quoted above, Myleene's writing is well-organised but lacks theoretical sophistication. Thus, despite the lack of negative features her mark is at the lower end of the upper second-class band.

Ian and Ayesha, as the two highest-scoring students, have contrasting negative profiles: Ayesha has more issues with grammar and syntax, whereas Ian has more issues with unsubstantiated claims and the occasional sentence that is complex and unclear e.g.

Ian:

Much of this conflict, and the internal values that perpetuate them, are unconscious and this strife between the continually conflicting areas, further reinforced by the defence mechanisms with which the ego responds, is how distress forms.

Ayesha's writing is also characterised by long sentences with multiple sub-clauses. However, Ayesha's uses clear, explicit language so that, while her writing is complex, the meaning is usually clear, e.g.

Ayesha:

This conditional environment causes an incongruence, or discrepancy, between one's self-concept and organismic experiencing, creating feelings of confusion and anxiety (Sanders & Joseph, 2016), facilitating the development of an external organismic valuing system, whereby one evaluates themselves (self-concept) according to others' values, introjecting them as internal conditions of worth, thus influencing one to behave in a way according to these conditions in order to obtain positive regard (Fall et al., 2017; Ismail & Tekke, 2015).

Grammatical idiosyncrasies in Ayesha's writing do not impede comprehension, e.g., a missing determiner and unnecessary comma here:

Both P-C and existential counsellors assume clients have the capacity to reflect upon their experiences, and steer their own therapeutic change due to a gradual increase in awareness (Rogers, 1959; Yalom, 2020).

Most examples of grammatical or syntactical errors in Ayesha's writing are minor and rarely impede comprehension. However, for lower-scoring students, grammatical and syntactical issues intersect with issues of epistemological understanding and this combination of factors seems to contribute to the lower mark e.g.

Andrea:

How individuals process their self-concept is the reflect of the values others put on them or conditions of worth; their judgement of themselves and the world around them or locus of evaluation.

4.8 Epistemological Access – Academic Conventions

The most commonly occurring code from the 'Epistemic Access - Negative' code group was 'Epistemic access - reference missing'. The absolute frequency for this code is 137, and all participants have some unsubstantiated or unreferenced claims in their work. 'Reference missing' is then followed for frequency by 'Epistemic access – correct understanding' from the 'Epistemic Access Positive' group.

The frequency of the code 'Reference missing' with the co-occurrence of 'Epistemic access – correct understanding' suggests that some students demonstrate a broadly correct grasp of disciplinary knowledge but have not yet grasped disciplinary expectations regarding referencing and evidencing of ideas. This co-occurrence is most evident for Hortense, who scored 65% on her assignment.

In line with Hortense's reasonably strong assignment grade, her sample is coded with 23 occurrences of 'Epistemic access – correct understanding' but only 4 co-occurrences of 'Epistemic access – minor errors' and 4 instances of 'Epistemic access – misunderstanding'. She has 4 occurrences of 'Mainly

correct understanding' and 13 instances of 'Correct referencing'. However, Hortense has 32 occurrences of 'Epistemic access – reference missing':

Epistemic access - correct referencing	13
Epistemic access - correct understanding	23
Epistemic access - inaccurate claim	1
Epistemic access - mainly correct understanding	5
Epistemic access - minor errors	4
Epistemic access - misunderstanding	4
Epistemic access - reference missing	32
Epistemic access - referencing error	2
Epistemic access - vocabulary	3

Table 10: Coding for epistemic access (Hortense).

Hortense demonstrates a good grasp of the subject matter; she attempts to provide detailed explanations of key theoretical concepts but often fails to support her claims with references to relevant literature. The lack of referencing in some parts of the assignment may be because Hortense attempts to paraphrase theoretical literature using her own words. As Hortense is writing in her third language, this can mean that the marker has to interpret Hortense's writing to discern her meaning. An example of this can be seen in her description of the Person-Centred theory of distress:

distress occurs as the result of the discrepancy between the internal valuing process and the conditions of worth. The conditional environment denies individuals the awareness of self therefore creating confusion in the process of their self-concept. This jeopardises the self-actualisation tendency. Hence the interpretation and perception of individual experiences based on the internal locus of evaluation become distorted as the person develops a low evaluation or reject their own abilities. The individual's construction of the self-concept is obscured from consciousness.

In this excerpt, Hortense has largely understood that the Person-Centred theory of distress has to do with a discrepancy between a person's self-experiences and their self-concept and that this process is related to living in a conditional environment (Rogers, 1959). She has also understood the mechanism whereby distress develops, i.e., that as a result of developing conditions of worth, a person's internal locus of evaluation is denied in favour of the external valuing of self-experiences (Rogers, 1959). To appreciate Hortense's mainly correct understanding of theory, the marker has to make an allowance for Hortense's writing style and use of language. However, in the final sentence, there is an inappropriate use of vocabulary, which may be due either to Hortense's third language English status or to a lack of theoretical understanding as the term 'consciousness' is unlikely to be used in Person Centred literature. Rather, the term 'awareness' would be used instead.

Similarly, Andrea who also scored 65%, had 20 occurrences of 'correct understanding' co-occurring with 6 'minor errors' and 2 occurrences of 'misunderstanding.' Like Hortense, Andrea also had a relatively high occurrence (22) of 'Epistemic access – reference missing' also suggesting that her writing demonstrated good engagement with the discipline knowledge but poor adherence to referencing conventions.

It is worth noting that both Hortense and Andrea were mature students with English as a second or third language. Both had recently settled in the UK and had previously completed degrees in technical disciplines in their home countries. Therefore, they were both aware of the need to engage with course content but had been accustomed to different academic conventions.

Conversely, a lack of referencing can co-occur alongside frequent errors in understanding and a general lack of specificity or accuracy in arguments. For example, Maria, who scored lowest for the assignment (45%), had the highest number of unsubstantiated claims and the lowest co-occurrence of 'Epistemic access – correct understanding'. Overall, Maria had the highest occurrence of minor errors and misunderstandings with 3 occurrences of 'Epistemic access – misunderstanding' and 7 occurrences of 'Epistemic access – minor errors.'

The co-occurrence of both negative and positive epistemic access codes is exemplified by the following quotation from Maria:

The PCA discusses positive assumptions to being a human being. It see's humans as having an inherent tendency to move in the direction of self-development, personal growth, and optimal functioning in the environment an individual is in.

While this excerpt contains a punctuation error (*It see's*) and unusual word choices in the first sentence, from a marker's perspective, the grammatical issues are less problematic than the grasp of disciplinary knowledge displayed. Some of the ideas expressed are broadly correct but are not substantiated with reference to literature. For example, there is an attempt to use discipline specific vocabulary such as 'inherent tendency'. This refers to wording used by Rogers' (1959) regarding his theoretical concept of the 'actualising tendency'. Therefore, a reference to Rogers (1959) would have been appropriate here.

An indicator of the limits of the writer's understanding can be seen in the use of the term 'optimal functioning'. Rogers (1959) does posit the idea of an inherent growth tendency present in all organisms. However, the theory is predicated on the idea that 'optimal functioning' is only possible under specific conditions not whatever conditions an 'individual is in' as suggested by the writer. This might suggest a lack of engagement with source materials and an attempt to portray a broad understanding of the topic which is consistent with the lack of referencing.

Hortense's example demonstrates that poor referencing conventions can be balanced by good conceptual understanding. However, as in Maria's case, a

combination of poor referencing conventions with inaccurate or imprecise subject knowledge has contributed to the lower mark.

4.9 Explicitness as a feature of ‘successful’ academic writing

Avenia-Tapper (2015, p. 117) notes that “Text and utterance can be located along a continuum reaching from very implicit to very explicit” and that the degree to which someone uses language explicitly involves the deployment of capital whereby taking an “arident” or “discursive” stance to knowledge is normalised. Thus, according to Avenia-Tapper (2015), students who are habituated to a discursive style of language are more likely to use markers of explicitness in their writing (e.g. noun phrases rather than deixis) and the degree to which a writer relies on deixis can be taken as proxy for the degree of explicitness or implicitness in the text (e.g. Aliakbari & Allahmoradi, 2014).

However, in analysing student essays for this project, it became clear that a raw count of deictic terms in a text is not necessarily a straightforward proxy for explicitness, as deictic terms are routinely used to replace noun phrases from previous sentences in the same paragraph, e.g. “I saw my best friend yesterday. She was pleased to see me.” In this case, the pronoun ‘she’ is entirely appropriate and expected; it does not impinge on the explicitness of the text. Therefore, the meaning of a deictic term and the degree to which it can be seen as an indicator of implicitness depends on its position and function in the text.

Furthermore, the degree to which a text is considered implicit or explicit is determined by the level of shared context between reader and writer. For example, a subject novice will require more explicitness in a text than a subject expert, who may be able to 'fill in the blanks' where there are minor omissions or implicit meanings. It is difficult, therefore, to determine explicitness as an objective linguistic category since the flexibility of the reader to discern meanings will impact the interpretation of the text.

It should be noted, therefore, that a degree of discernment was employed in determining the relative explicitness or otherwise of texts for this study, and the impact of different writing features on the overall meaning of the text was considered as well as the effect of a particular features on the mood of the reader (Turner, 2018). For example, consideration was given as to whether the use of a deictic term impaired or delayed comprehension for the reader. Occurrences of implicitness, or a lack of explicitness, were coded for when the structure of a sentence required the reader to 'work' for the meaning or where deictic terms were used without a clear referent in the preceding sentence.

Similarly, a lack of explicitness was coded for where sentences contained little or no explanatory content i.e. sentences that made a general point without explicit connection to the subject under discussion. As such, these can be seen as filler sentences with little meaning or relevance to the assignment task, and their intent is not immediately clear to the reader. An example of this can be seen in the following opening sentence from Hortense:

Human development has been a focus of theories and concepts as it involves topics that encompass physical, emotional, and social wellbeing.

The following examples consider the use of deictic terms, e.g. Fiza's second sentence contains four deictic pronouns:

PCA, which was developed by Rogers (1959), has rich philosophical roots of which humanism plays a poignant role; it believes in a holistic view of the individual and assumes that humans are positive. It views them as having an innate tendency to grow and achieve full potential and functionality of their bodies and mind, this is also known as the actualising tendency.

The first 'it' of the second sentence refers to the Person-Centred Approach (PCA) introduced in the first sentence; 'them' and 'their' refer to the 'humans' also appearing in the first sentence. The final 'this' refers to the idea of human potential explored in the first part of the second sentence. The use of the first three deictic pronouns is relatively unproblematic, but the final pronoun, 'this', requires a reader with shared specialist knowledge to determine Fiza's meaning, especially as there is no citation in the second sentence to support the link to theory. A more explicit way to phrase this might have been to use a new sentence that explains the connection to theory, e.g. *The innate tendency of all organisms to move towards growth is described by Rogers (1959) as the 'Actualising Tendency'.*

Similarly, in the following excerpts from Maria and Hortense, the use of pronouns requires the reader to discern the intended meaning. Both instances involve the improper use of a subject pronoun that personifies the abstract concept or theoretical approach under discussion:

Maria:

Both approaches explain and discuss what it means to be human with rich detail and sufficient evidence, their view of human nature allows for the counsellor to understand the client they may be working with, and which treatment is best to support them.

Hortense:

This essay will describe a model of human development and psychological distress based on the PCA, the existential approach, and their therapeutic interventions.

Another example from Maria is where the contextual referent for a deictic pronoun is unclear:

In counselling therapists directly encourage clients to accept negative cognitions, then challenge irrational or intrusive thoughts they're struggling with.

On first reading, it is not entirely clear who is struggling with intrusive thoughts. However, the meaning becomes clearer upon reading the next sentence:

*The counsellor works to teach emotional management skills,
encouraging realistic and healthy ways of coping (Albert Ellis., 1955).*

This sentence also includes a referencing convention error.

Maria, Hortense, Andrea, and Fiza scored highest for negative features of explicitness:

	Maria 45%	Fiza 47%	Oshona 48%	Myleene 62%	Andrea 65%	Hortense 65%	Ian 75%	Ayesha 75%	Totals
Explicitness	10	10	6	2	9	13	3	0	53
Epistemic access positive	14	22	16	16	23	30	22	29	172
Epistemic access negative	36	17	27	13	31	38	23	11	196

Table 11: Explicitness and epistemic access scores for all participants.

The confusion with pronoun attribution for Maria, Fiza, Andrea, and Hortense is unsurprising since all three were from non-English speaking backgrounds. In the case of Andrea and Hortense, English was a third language as both were bilingual in other languages before moving to the UK as adults. Maria moved to the UK as a child and learned English from seven. Fiza, who also scored relatively high for negative features of explicitness, moved from India to the UK as a child.

By contrast, Ayesha, who scored lowest for negative indicators of explicitness, completed A-level English before attending university and displayed the most advanced use of language in terms of sentence structure. In contrast, Hortense's style of writing becomes more understandable with the

knowledge that she was primarily translating directly from French into English at this stage in her academic journey.

Maria, Fiza, Andrea, and Hortense all have similarly high negative scores for explicitness. However, Andrea and Hortense scored in the 2,1 band, while Maria and Fiza both scored in the third-class mark band. Comparing Andrea and Fiza's scores for epistemic access and explicitness, one might expect them to have similar academic outcomes (see Table 11 above). However, a closer look at the epistemic access categories for both participants shows that while Fiza scores higher than Andrea for many of the epistemic access negative categories (lower scores), Andrea has many more instances of demonstrably correct understanding of the subject matter (see Table 12 below).

	Fiza 47%	Andrea 65%
○ Epistemic access - academic conventions	0	1
○ Epistemic access - correct referencing	11	5
○ Epistemic access - correct understanding	9	20
○ Epistemic access - criticality	2	0
○ Epistemic access - inaccurate claim	0	0
○ Epistemic access - mainly correct understanding	9	2
○ Epistemic access - minor errors	5	6

○ Epistemic access - misunderstanding	1	0
○ Epistemic access - out-of-date reference	2	0
○ Epistemic access - potential plagiarism	0	0
○ Epistemic access - reference missing	10	22
○ Epistemic access - referencing error	2	3
○ Epistemic access - use of acronym	1	0
○ Epistemic access - vocabulary	1	4

Table 12: Comparison of epistemic access scores for Fiza and Andrea.

Therefore, once again, the mark appears to be influenced more by the epistemic content of the work than the form of the writing. However, where there are comparatively few problematic features for explicitness (e.g. Ian), the clarity of the writing would appear to outweigh some of the benefits of epistemic access positive features, as Ian scored lower than Hortense for epistemic access positive codes but gained a higher mark overall. Part of Ian's high score of 75% may, therefore, be attributable to writing features over epistemic ones. However, when compared with Hortense, Ian has fewer epistemic negative features. Therefore, it is the relative weightings of epistemic access negative and epistemic access positive codes alongside unproblematic linguistic features that seem to tip the balance in Ian's favour.

4.10 Etic Perspective: Reflection and Conclusion

The main finding from the textual analysis concerns the role of correct subject knowledge understanding, adherence to academic conventions, and engagement with literature in successful academic outcomes. In attempting to separate categories of epistemological access from linguistic and grammatical ones, the aim has been to discern whether accurate epistemological claims can be made without recourse to “adequate rhetorical and linguistic instantiation” (Turner, 2018, p. 189). The evidence from this analysis appears to suggest that epistemological claims are weakened or not perceived as critical where access to specific rhetorical and linguistic structures is limited. Contrastingly, in some instances, marks can be bolstered when language is ‘unproblematic’ and access to knowledge is accurate but limited.

In attempting to reconstruct the marker’s perspective, the analytic process drew attention to marker preferences and attitudes as well as to privileged forms of writing and their relation to academic outcomes. On re-visiting the analysis of explicitness in particular, the idiosyncrasies of personal judgment regarding writing conventions became increasingly evident since the perception of implicitness or explicitness is determined by the positionality of the reader in relation to the text.

In so much as this analysis attempted to provide an overview of textual features that contribute to academic outcomes, it can also be seen as a reconstruction of marker preferences concerning academic writing both in terms

of which writing features are most noticeable to me as a marker and which are associated with the award of higher marks.

Turner (2018, p.9) describes the privileging of particular forms of writing as part of the “smooth read ideology” that characterises the “metatextual value system” of “writtenness” in higher education. This can be seen in instances where ‘unproblematic’ writing appears to convey an advantage on writers who are otherwise on a par with non-standard writers in terms of epistemological access (e.g. Myleene and Ian). This analysis would therefore appear to give some credence to Turner’s view that “grammatical accuracy metadiscursively indexes academic credibility” (2018, p. 185).

The privileging of reader expectations in marking leads to a perception that some students lack criticality because they may be “deploying different rules of rhetorical organization or relating to different perceptions of what’s required” (Turner, 2018, p. 232). This may have been the case with Andrea and Hortense and their inclusion in the upper second-class band rather than the first-class band as they scored higher than Ian for ‘correct understanding’, but their writing was not perceived as critical.

Drawing on themes from the literature review, the privileging of ‘reputable’ academic sources in marking highlights the need for greater recognition of students’ readiness for higher-level study as well as formal dialogue regarding the relevance of reading and its role in academic success.

This would also entail enabling students to engage with reading in personally meaningful ways (MacMillan, 2015).

In line with the humanising view of literacy development advocated in Chapter 2, this analysis highlights the potential limitation of extended, high-stakes academic writing as a traditional means of assessment in massified higher education settings. Particularly where possibilities for dialogue around written feedback are precluded by the tempo and content-heavy curricula of modular degrees (McArthur, 2018).

There is also room to explore the role of emotion in marking and the potential to misperceive linguistic accuracy for criticality and academic rigour. Drawing on Freire's ontological call (Suzina & Tufte, 2020. P. 414) there is a need for empathy in marking which recognises that "different points of departure that make it harder for some to reaching their goals." Recognising this strengthens a case for increased ipsative assessment (Hughes, 2011; McArthur, 2018), particularly where admissions policies mean that institutions knowingly admit students without the standard academic prerequisites.

The question remains as to what extent epistemological resources are constitutive of the organization and structure of writing and vice versa. As will be seen later in the analysis of interviews, epistemological understanding provides access to the privileged rhetorical and linguistic structures of the academic disciplines, and much like learning a foreign language, immersion in the epistemological landscape facilitates access to the related linguistic

structures. This, in turn, highlights the importance of contextual factors that support rather than hinder students' capacity to engage with learning. It also highlights the importance of academic rigour and the need for critical engagement with the disciplinary canon.

Chapter 5: Emic Perspective

5.1 Epistemological Position and Theoretical Underpinnings

To complement the textual analysis, the qualitative analysis aims to situate academic writing in the wider context of students' lives and to elucidate the personal meanings attributed by students to their experiences of academic writing at university. From this, the aim is to shed light on contextual factors relating to academic writing that contribute to the maintenance of persistent differential outcomes.

The combination of thematic and narrative approaches is in keeping with the explanatory theoretical approach described in Chapter 3. This approach takes an emancipatory, contextually situated, and developmental view of persons that acknowledges the centrality of environmental and social factors, most notably the quality of human relationships, on the developing mind and maintains that these consequently shape the development of consciousness, individual experiencing, and functioning in the world (Siegel, 2001; Haig and Benefield, 2020). It also recognises the role of power in influencing social relationships and the unavoidable intertwining of the personal with political and social structures.

In terms of how humans come to know their experiencing, it gives primacy to bodily experiencing in interaction with the environment (Gendlin, 1992) and acknowledges the vital role of language in bringing experiencing to awareness. Insofar as language use has important social determinants, this

study both recognises the importance of linguistic practices in shaping experiences and the uniquely individual role of inner experiencing, which is accessible only to the individual, but which can only be fully brought forth linguistically through interaction with another (Gendlin, 1999).

The analysis and incorporated discussion are also underpinned by a critical, emancipatory view of literacy as “fundamental to aggressively constructing one’s voice as part of a wider project of possibility and empowerment” (Giroux in Freire and Macedo, 1987, p.5). The discussion draws on Freire’s emancipatory view of literacy to understand and construct student accounts as counter-narratives to institutional and regulatory definitions of successful academic outcomes. Additionally, the analysis demonstrates the uniquely personal yet socially situated process of engagement with reading and writing that, when experienced as an integration of learning and self, brings about a changed awareness of self in the world (Freire in Freire & Macedo, 1987).

5.2 Qualitative Analysis – Process

The qualitative analysis is intended to help answer the following research questions: RQ2. How do students conceptualise their academic writing development? RQ3. Which individual and/or contextual factors can be discerned as supporting or hindering academic writing development? RQ4. How can answers to RQs 1 - 3 be understood theoretically to inform practice in relation to addressing persistent differential outcomes in higher education?

As noted earlier, the interviews drew on a loose question schedule focusing on three main areas:

- Participants' general experience of university
- Participants' experiences of academic writing
- Participants' experiences of supporting and hindering factors

Data excerpts are taken from evocative narratives (Faulkner and Squillante, 2020) created from the transcripts. The narratives (available in full in [Appendix A](#)) were created to draw out individual participant voices as they recount their experiences of higher education and academic writing.

Narratives were developed following a process of close reading and coding of individual transcripts in Atlas.ti. Alongside the production of individual narratives which delve deeply into individual stories, a thematic analysis was also undertaken to provide an overview of salient themes across the entire dataset.

The relational nature of the interviews, particularly the use of empathy, helped provide a structure to the narrative outputs. As discussed in the method chapter, the use of object and image elicitation together with empathic responding enabled participants to 'carry forward' (Gendlin, 2004) their own experiences so that underlying meanings and personal realisations became available to awareness during the interview encounter itself. In this way, the interviews added a collaborative element to the analytic process in that underlying meanings and realisations were arrived at during the interviews

rather than solely through later interpretations of the data. Thus, the nature of the interview conversations shaped the data and consequently the outputs of the analysis. This is shown by the parallel structure of interviews and narratives in which participants move from reflection on experience to reflexive engagement with their ongoing experience of personal change. The parallel structure is further emphasised in that narratives maintain the chronology of the interviews rather than the chronology of the person. (A detailed description of the narrative creative process is provided in section 5.4.)

5.3 Thematic Analysis Process

Post-interview, the analytic process began with transcription, proofreading, re-reading and initial inductive coding in Atlas.ti. While the initial intent was not to produce a thematic analysis, coding the data increased familiarity and helped provide a sense of order to what were, at times, dense transcripts containing substantial amounts of text. Coding also helped identify the most salient themes for each person and, subsequently, across the entire dataset.

Braun and Clarke (2021) recognise inductive coding to mean coding that is grounded in the data rather than in a theoretical vacuum. Researcher motivations, prior reading, and personal experience necessitate a reflexive approach to the data that acknowledges the researcher's impact on the data and subsequent representations of it in the analysis. As noted previously, my input into the interviews meant that data were produced collaboratively and in a

relational context. Additionally, my position as both course leader and researcher may have impacted this process. However, as noted, the elicitation task, together with the cultivation of a free-flowing conversational style of interview, were intended to reduce the impact of my status in the dyad.

Initial coding generated many codes reflecting the diversity and detail of the individual experiences shared by participants. As coding progressed, a large bank of codes became available for use with subsequent transcripts, while more codes were generated iteratively with the coding of each transcript.

Once coding was complete, the entire bank of codes was reviewed to consolidate any overlapping or duplicated codes. This process resulted in a final set of 265 individual codes. Codes were then grouped thematically to produce 15 sub-themes, which were subsequently organised into 4 overarching themes and 9 sub-themes. The internal coherence of sub-themes was checked to ensure that codes were categorised accurately. An audit trail of the coding and theme generation process can be found in [Appendix G](#).

Following clustering of codes into themes and sub-themes. Word clouds for sub-themes were generated to depict the prevalence of individual codes across the dataset. In thematic analysis, however, the prevalence of a code does not necessarily denote salience to the research questions (Byrne, 2022). Therefore, following another period of reflection on the data, subthemes were further refined and simplified. The final organisation of themes and subthemes depicts those that were both prevalent and salient to the research questions.

5.4 Thematic analysis: Themes and Subthemes

Four overarching themes and 3 subthemes were generated as follows:

1. Students in Context: Impetus, Struggle and Awareness
2. Students in the Institutional Context
3. Individual Factors and Dispositions - A beautiful accident for a student like me
4. Reading the Word, Writing the Person
 - a. From performativity to thinking.
 - b. Reading, reading, reading!
 - c. Self-authorship and generic skills for coping

The placement of themes in Figure 11 below aims to depict the role of context before, during and after participants' time at university. Themes relating to individual factors and students' academic writing and personal development (3 and 4) are depicted as a central process flanked by the two contextual themes (1 and 2).

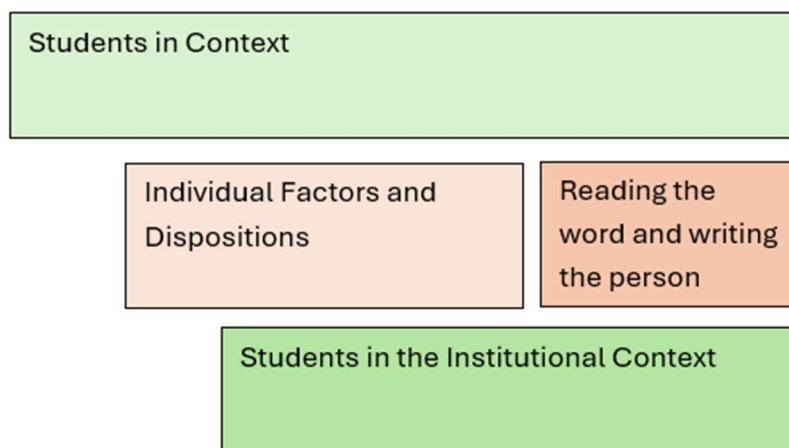


Figure 11: Overarching themes.

5.5 Evocative Narratives: Process

Narratives were constructed alongside the thematic analysis and were not dependent on the final thematic representation of the data. In this way, the evocative narratives and thematic analysis offer complementary ways of viewing the data and comprise a close-up and detailed analysis of the transcripts. The narratives depict individual processes, while the thematic analysis provides an overview of salient themes across the dataset.

Mazzoli Smith (2020) makes the case for narrative approaches in HE research, arguing for more ways of researching student experience that draw out alternative discourses of widening participation to the dominant ideas of marginalization and disadvantage. The main analytic role in creating the narratives involved discerning the most salient and evocative aspects of each person's account and distilling these into a soliloquy of found phrases. The thematic analysis aided this process as it provided opportunities for close engagement with the data. The large number of individual codes generated by the thematic analysis underscored the unique range and variations of individual experiences within the small cohort of participants.

Evocative and salient phrases from each transcript were arranged in chronological order of the interview and then edited and combined to create a series of narrative 'verses' to convey the person's story as succinctly as possible. Faulkner and Squillante (2020, p. 1028) note:

a narrative is a shapely thing: organised, polished, curated, its events arranged so that they will reach us, move us. Change us. Simply put, narrative is story.

Drawing on the Focusing technique of Eugene Gendlin (1981) a 'handle' phrase was found and used as the title to evoke the sense of the whole of the person's experience. For example, Maria's statement: 'I tend to sit away from windows' was prompted by the image elicitation task and evocatively summed up two aspects of Maria's experience: 1) that on an everyday basis, she was easily distracted and found it hard to focus on her studies, often because of feelings of overwhelm and 2) that her early experiences of migration, poverty and bereavement meant she was acutely aware of the world outside of education and had gradually come to view her time in education as an important but challenging necessity. Her use of the phrase 'I tend to sit away from windows' evoked both her ongoing commitment to and struggle with education.

Sometimes, the handle phrase was not re-iterated in the narrative soliloquy (e.g. Andrea). At other times, the handle phrase was reiterated to emphasise the overall feel of the person's story. For example, in Oshona's story, the handle phrase 'Growth embodies that' is used to emphasise verses that deal with Oshona's experience of personal growth and omitted for verses where individual experiences and outside influences challenged this movement towards growth.

The aim was to distil interview data in such a way as to avoid repetitive or boring accounts of the data while creating a faithful and compelling representation of the person's experience (Faulkner and Squillante, 2020). The poetic elements of the narrative such as repetitions of 'handle' phrases were intended to help readers engage with the 'felt sense' (Gendlin, 1981) of the whole of the person's experience. For example, despite Oshona's many difficulties, her interview was characterised by an overwhelming sense of positivity and gratitude and therefore it was fitting to include the handle phrase multiple times in the narrative account. Myleene's interview, on the other hand, was more emotionally muted, and the experiential sense of the interview paralleled her narrow focus on academic achievement during her time at university. Therefore, Myleene's narrative is less ebullient in tone.

Given the importance of the elicitation task on the trajectory of the interviews, the narratives are presented in [Appendix A](#), with an accompanying picture of each participant's chosen image or object. These also help illustrate the experiential sense of the narratives.

Chapter 6: Findings and Discussion: Reading the Word, Writing the Person

This chapter explores the themes and sub-themes identified in the qualitative analysis, drawing on excerpts from the evocative narratives to illustrate these. The findings are integrated with the discussion which is informed by the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 3 and the literature considered in Chapters 1 and 2. I begin by considering the contextual factors participants perceived as hindering or helpful to their university journeys. This is followed by a consideration of individual factors and participants' descriptions of their academic writing development. These sections relate to research questions 2 and 3, beginning with RQ 3: Which individual and/or contextual factors can be discerned as supporting or hindering academic writing development?

6.1 Students in Context – Impetus, Struggle and Awareness

Insofar as persistence is a prerequisite of academic success, the contextual factors identified here relate to academic writing development both tangentially and directly. The narratives demonstrate that student academic writing development does not occur in a vacuum, and viewing learners as decontextualised, as noted by Boughey and McKenna (2021, p.54), constitutes a “significant blind spot to the bigger social structures within which students and the university exist.” This is particularly the case when students continue to live at home and/or must navigate significant cultural shifts between home and university.

The influence of parental culture, values, and orientations to education were key to participants' decisions to engage with and persist in higher education. For example, Fiza, Maria, Myleene and Oshona were acutely aware of parental expectations and perceptions regarding the need to continue in education, e.g.:

My Dad has always, always, always told me that education is the best thing that you can do for your life. It's placed on a pedestal. There's a lot of pressure that comes with that. (Oshona)

Even as a mature student, Ian tentatively acknowledged his mother's influence:

it wasn't something I was forced into in any way except for the fact that my mom has been on about it for years.... It wasn't a forceful thing; it was just a maternal nudging. (Ian)

For both Fiza and Myleene, the introjection of parental values towards education appeared to align with their own interests in learning. They recognised their educational engagement as separate from, yet connected to, parental values. However, for Ayesha and Fiza, familial recognition and praise were also conditional upon achieving educational success:

It's something I've always been praised for. When I would get good grades that would be the only time when my parents would be like "Oh. Well done. You're the most academic one in the family." (Ayesha)

While Fiza's love of learning chimed with her parents' insistence that she stay in formal education, the alternative was nevertheless unthinkable to her:

My academic achievement is equal to their happiness. I think it kind of helped that I liked it. God knows what would happen if I didn't. (Fiza)

The participants' awareness of parental influence is in keeping Scanlon et al's (2019) analysis of the high value often placed on higher education for children from working-class families, while parental engagement with the educational processes of university can vary widely. Gofen's (2009) notion of family capital is useful here in thinking about the varying levels of familial support and non-material resources available to students. For example, Fiza's home and university identities contrasted starkly according to the differing relational qualities she experienced in each context:

It's like I'm two different people. (Fiza)

Oshona, Fiza and Ayesha's experiences echo Avenia-Tapper's (2015) notion of difference in class orientations to childrearing, particularly in terms of opportunities for negotiation in working-class families and emotional support for children who struggle in education. For example, when Oshona experienced academic difficulties, emotional support from home was limited. For Oshona, her parents' cultural and educational values were at odds; they simultaneously placed a high value on continuing in education while formal help-seeking to improve educational prospects was culturally unacceptable:

Growing up African, there's no such thing as you have a learning disability. Absolutely not! Don't help me. Just struggle. You just have to continue struggling. Forget the help. (Oshona)

Oshona's experience of help-seeking is notable given the increased number of students from black backgrounds entering university since 2006 (Race Equality Unit, 2023). Institutional support based on a medicalised, diagnostic paradigm is culturally specific and value laden. As noted by Matthews, Simon, and Kelly (2016, p. 452), there is a need for research that interrogates "the role of diagnostic processes as a way of managing resources, value and class privilege within the context of neoliberal education systems." Not only do diagnostic systems of support risk marginalising and stigmatising students within the institution, but students can be doubly othered as university systems intersect with cultural values at home.

Where parental influence was less apparent (e.g. for Andrea as a mature student in her 50s), the motivation to persist was influenced by an enduring self-concept shaped by the participant's socio-economic history:

I was an orphan very young and since then my life has been very challenging. What I found comfort in, was that I do not quit whatever I start. My whole life had been 'No, I'm not a quitter' and with this degree, it was no different. (Andrea)

Similarly, difficult experiences relating to students' familial socio-economic status were both hindering and supportive of engagement with HE. For example, Maria's experience of migration to the UK as a young child meant that education did not feel like a priority despite her parents' focus on it:

I knew poverty existed; I knew losing a loved one exists. I knew all of that existed, so I didn't care about education. (Maria)

Whereas for Fiza, the ability to continue in education for as long as possible underpinned the purpose of migration to the UK:

My dad brought me here for a better living and my siblings were born here. School is free and I'm really lucky, in the sense that it's free here. (Fiza)

Familial, cultural, and socio-economic factors often provided the impetus for pursuing higher education and helped maintain persistence but were also a source of conflicting priorities and values that students had to navigate to succeed.

From an IPNB perspective, implicit experiences of hardship or early trauma can affect a person's capacity to regulate their emotions (Schoore, 2001; Siegel, 2001). Learning requires access to the executive functions and capacity for present-moment awareness located in the prefrontal cortex of the human brain (O'Mahony, 2021). However, advances in neuroscience have shown that at times of increased stress or fear, the prefrontal cortex can be inhibited by the

reactivity of other, more primitive areas of the brain (O'Mahony, 2021). A process known as the "amygdala hijack" disrupts a person's capacity for information processing, emotion regulation and awareness.

Maria's experience of being overwhelmed by the alien university environment may be understood in the light of her early experiences of migration and loss. It is possible that Maria's early experiences of poverty and death, described in her narrative, contributed to a lack of feelings of safety at university since prolonged exposure to stress and fear, especially in childhood, can have insidious effects on memory processing (Siegel, 2006; O'Mahony, 2021) as well as on a person's capacity to adapt and to be open to new experiences (Siegel and Drulis, 2023). Therefore, Maria needed to feel safe in the bewildering university environment before she could engage with learning effectively.

For Maria, finding a supportive peer network increased feelings of safety, but she also highlights the prevalence of similar experiences amongst her peers. This begs the question as to what extent universities are cognisant of developmental and affective factors that impact academic outcomes, particularly among students under 25 who are still undergoing the neurological changes associated with adolescence and maturation (O'Mahony, 2021).

As noted in chapter 1, section 3, 45% of students on the programme came from a low-earning or no-earning household, while 25% of students, like Oshona, declared a disability predominantly relating to SpLD or mental health

difficulties. These figures compare starkly with averages for the sector of 19% and 15%, respectively (HESA, 2024a). Additionally, 69% of students on the programme came from minoritised ethnic backgrounds, many of whom were first-generation migrants to the UK.

The students who participated in the research were typical of those on the programme; it is possible to surmise that many students at Urbanity have experienced (and continue to experience) financial hardship and/or have been subjected to traumatic experiences relating to migration and racism.

Recognising the impact of racism, hardship, and trauma on individuals' capacities to learn can be achieved by focusing on relationally informed curriculum design and systems. Haigh and Benefield (2019, p.124) note that in light of increased awareness of the impact of external factors on human development, the "quality of relational activity should be central to effective organisational and human outcomes".

Additionally, previous relational experiences shape our capacity to engage relationally in later life (Siegel, 2012). Hierarchical or evaluative relationships can invoke challenging emotions depending on the person's response to autonomic arousal occasioned by the perception (real or otherwise) of threat (Siegel, 2012). Therefore, Ayesha's procrastination and feelings of burnout can be understood in light of the perceived consequences of not being seen as the 'academic one' in her family:

I guess that umm well, fear of humiliation as well. That's what kept me going. (Ayesha)

Similarly, experiences of conditional regard in nurturing relationships can lead to the formation of a rigid self-concept (Rogers, 1957, 1959), meaning that deviation from expected self-experiences can seem threatening or impossible:

it's like a self-fulfilling prophecy, I felt like I kind of had to live up to that. (Ayesha)

my circumstances don't allow me to act upon that new developed thought because at the end of the day, I still want to, like, please my parents. (Fiza)

Parallels' can be drawn here with Freire's notion of the internalisation of colonial discourses whereby change is accompanied by undue feelings of guilt (Freire, 2004; Cammarota, 2012). Self-autonomy and self-responsibility can be inherently risky for students from minority ethnic backgrounds who must balance familial expectations about continuing in education with cultural norms that may run counter to university practices and expectations:

my mom wasn't in the country for most of it as well, so I was kind of taking care of everyone in the house. It was just a lot on me to manage. It was just too much. (Fiza)

Students described a process of attaining self-autonomy and self-responsibility (Freire, 2004) through “expulsion” such as through Oshona’s defiance of her parents’ rejection of a dyslexia screening or Fiza’s adoption of a new way of being at university. For Andrea, it was about fighting a self-imposed stigma about her age and fighting with herself to change:

We’ve had the opportunity to change, and it has been very difficult because of that. (Andrea)

For Oshona, Hortense, Fiza, and Ayesha, remaining at university meant balancing multiple priorities. This entailed managing heavy workloads or caring responsibilities, notably, the students took ownership of this process, not blaming anyone else or ‘the system’ for their difficulties:

But I guess that’s part of the reality of becoming an adult, I guess.
(Oshona)

And then, you know, your children, your husband, your house... It’s not easy, to be honest. It’s a kind of struggle, you have to be very strong. (Hortense)

From a psychological perspective, Maria experienced a cognitive dissonance between reconciling the educational priorities of her parents and the institution with her own life experience. Marx, Gates and Bresciani Ludvik (2016) note that the levels of self-authorship and criticality expected in tertiary education require students to develop the ability to reconcile internal and

external viewpoints and to develop a sense of identity in the higher education context. For Maria, finding a course “*for people like me*” was revelatory but still entailed a long process of acculturation and becoming conscious of the potential role of education in her life:

I didn't really understand what education was for, I kind of gained consciousness very late, that's when I started caring.

Writing was a pivotal part of the process of belonging and self-authorship where participants gradually came to acknowledge the validity of their experiencing and contributions:

I always like essays; they help me learn how to articulate, to like, sound British, like I belong here. (Maria)

These essays should be in my own words, my own... my own voice? As if I'm thinking. (Maria)

The examination of student contextual factors points to the complexity of understanding student engagement in highly diverse and massified settings. Participants' socio-economic and socio-cultural contexts meant they were faced with multiple intersecting challenges, including clashing cultural norms and expectations, fear of humiliation, emotional overwhelm, financial hardship and guilt. These factors were present in addition to any linguistic challenges experienced by the participants. Socioeconomic, cultural, and familial factors often provided the impetus for attending university (Scanlon et al. 2019; Keane,

2012) but could also influence students' capacity for academic engagement and progress.

Persistence, therefore, requires individual motivation and determination. This echoes the findings of Wong (2018, p. 7), who notes the importance of determination and "educational dispositions that support academic excellence" among academically successful non-traditional students. In comparison with Wong's study, however, what is notable in this study is that such dispositions were required of students to attain even lower degree outcomes (Maria and Oshona). The development of an educational disposition was, therefore, a pre-requisite of persistence in and of itself rather than solely for academic high performance among nontraditional students. As noted by Maria:

What really has kept me persevering was my own willingness to actually want to be here.

6.2 Students in the Institutional Context

In terms of hindering institutional factors, participants were generally less forthcoming with criticisms of the institution. This may have been a consequence of my dual role as course leader and researcher. However, where criticisms were raised, participants noted a lack of pedagogical coherence and structure in some modules leading to feelings of confusion and lack of clarity about academic expectations. Understanding the curriculum structure was also important in enabling students to contextualise assessment tasks.

These factors are in keeping with findings from the literature that emphasise the need to make unfamiliar assumptions, values, and expectations explicit to students (Daddow, 2016; Murray, 2012). Furthermore, providing a coherent and accessible overview of the curriculum serves to demystify hidden factors that contribute to differential academic outcomes (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). It also underpins the need for inclusive curriculum design that enables students to connect with the curriculum in ways that are meaningful to them (Daddow, 2016; Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Andrea raised the issue of overcrowding and oversubscribed support services as a source of stress and frustration. Furthermore, as a naturalised migrant with English as a third language, Andrea's linguistic needs were akin to those of an international student, she notes:

I used to take courses and I think I took them all about academic writing. They were very supportive. Also, they are not many and there are many people, and they are very busy.

Briguglio (2011) notes that support issues need to be at the centre of internationalisation initiatives, yet the additional language needs of naturalised migrants are not acknowledged since these students do not attract additional funding in the English system.

As noted in Chapter 1, institutions such as Urbanity attract high levels of diverse students from non-English speaking backgrounds and while the

institution has managed to maintain its student numbers, this is in the context of the decreasing value of student fees and increasing staff costs and inflation. Indeed, Burke (2012) notes that according to the Universities and Colleges Union (UCU), the funding framework since 2010 leaves the least prestigious universities most financially at risk. It is unsurprising therefore that Andrea exhausted the opportunities for formal support at the university noting that:

You have to provide for yourself, you know, search for solutions of your problem and not just wait for support to come by their self, falling from the sky. (Andrea)

Andrea's point highlights the important interplay of individual and contextual factors. Since, if institutional resources are insufficient, success primarily becomes a matter of relying on personal resources such as attitudes to failure and capacity for perseverance (or grit).

In addition to a reliance on personal resources, peers were an important source of support and encouragement for Ayesha, Oshona, Maria and Fiza. Finding a sense of solidarity in peer relationships was key to managing challenges:

I made like two really good friends, and they were kind of a support network for me. It made all the difference, just because I knew that I wasn't alone. (Ayesha)

Connecting with peers was also instrumental in participants' engagement with, and socialisation to, disciplinary knowledge:

I knew that I wasn't alone, or I knew that I had someone to ask questions to or like check my understanding with. (Ayesha)

Donovan and Erskine-Shaw (2018) note that institutions could do more to meet the diverse needs of the student population. Enabling students to cultivate a sense of belonging to the university through acknowledging the emotional toll of learning is reinforcing of a shared academic identity and contrasts with the stigmatising effects of singling students out for additional support (Donovan & Erskine-Shaw, 2018).

Institutional structures and pedagogic methods that reinforce and facilitate interpersonal connections are important in nurturing students' sense of belonging, validation, and self-efficacy (Austen et al, 2022). Wong (2018) also notes the facilitative influence of generic study groups in the experience of high-attaining non-traditional students. This is clearly articulated by Fiza who notes:

... at university, when you have friends and tutors and you tell them, like, an achievement and they're really happy for you and they're encouraging you. It's kind of like validation. (Fiza)

For Fiza, the newness of university relationships was liberating and encouraged experimentation with new ways of being:

being with people who are like minded, it really helped. Having a clean slate, completely, leaving the person that I was behind and just truly trying to embrace whatever I wanted to do. (Fiza)

For Hortense, cultural differences and difficulties with sensory stimulation meant learning to navigate social expectations of peers while simultaneously recognising and appreciating the value of the youthful university environment. And for Ian, capitalizing on the social connections offered by tutors and peers led to better self-understanding:

have conversations with people that might lead you to a deeper understanding of what your motivations are and how you might sort of capitalize on them. (Ian)

For Ayesha, the importance of place was evident in her proactive choice of an institution with high rates of minority ethnic students. Whereas, for Hortense, Maria, and Fiza, the university learning environment and resources were key to allowing differentiation between study and home identities, enabling one to “put your head down and focus” (Maria). Likewise, for Ian, the structure of the university day was important in managing his persistent insomnia:

It's been quite a solid constant. You've got a routine, there are things you have to do, but for the most part, it's quite positive. (Ian)

Bates, Kay & McCann (2019, p. 299) note the importance of people and place in shaping positive university experiences. It was important for students to

experience the physical and relational environment as supportive of their needs. This is particularly important where the home environment does not allow for individual study space or where cultural practices and caring responsibilities limit opportunities for socialising outside of the home.

From an IPNB perspective, social environments offering nurturing, collaborative and supportive relationships can foster belonging, trust, and a willingness to engage and to experiment (Siegel, 2019). A positive feedback loop can be discerned between disciplinary learning in the context of supportive social interactions leading to constructive personal change. This also underpins Haigh and Benefield's (2019, p.130) view that improving the quality of relational activity in organisations is central to providing contextually sensitive support and avoids simplistic solutions to policy problems that "fragment our understanding of the person as a whole unique individual." The findings also support research demonstrating the importance of a sense of belonging for students from widening participation backgrounds, particularly those who are first-in-family to attend university (Nolan & Ruairc, 2022; Naylor, Baik & Arkoudis, 2018).

In terms of institutional context, the humanistic underpinnings of the programme of study could also be seen as influential in students' developing self-awareness and self-authorship. Students developed the capacity to seek out and foster supportive interpersonal relationships in tandem with disciplinary learning that emphasised reflection and self-development:

I'm more in touch with who I am as a person. I think having a stronger idea of like who I am, what I value, what I want out of life. Now if I feel the need to reflect on something, I'll go and write it down because I know that is gonna be part of my career development. (Ayesha)

The experience of constructive personal development in the light of disciplinary engagement supports Ashwin's (2024) claim that disciplinary engagement is transformative of how students interact with the world.

Undertaking a programme of study which focuses on critical self-reflection (psychology and counselling) offered students the opportunity to reflect in action, by noticing incremental changes in how they related with others. For example, Andrea noticed that she became less demanding and judgemental of other people while for Maria, Hortense, Oshona, and Ayesha, congruent and meaningful friendships occurred in the latter half of their university journeys. For Fiza, there was a fortuitous synergy between the subject of study and changes in her interpersonal relationships. Participants experienced a shift in their interpersonal relating, and their expectations of the world and other people:

Because I have been given so much knowledge and that's helped me see things in a different way; see people's behaviour; see the society and understand this in a better way because before you just would be your own. (Hortense)

These findings are in-keeping with Freire's view of dialogue as a means of re-creating oneself and the social world (Roberts, 2003). In connecting with peers and staff and in reflecting on these connections in the light of their learning, students were placing their own lives under the microscope. For Andrea, this meant recognising her own oppressive, perfectionist tendencies and loosening these within herself and with other people. For other participants, dialogues and reflection on the course provided opportunities to connect experientially with the discipline and to see it in the context of their own lives. This process enabled students to envisage themselves in terms of education and the discipline:

I feel like I'm doing the thing that I'm supposed to be doing. Like I'm on the right path. I do feel like a sort of sense of belonging as to education as a whole. (Ian)

This part of the analysis highlights the multiple factors that contribute to academic persistence and a sense of belonging in education. Institutional factors such as the physical environment, academic support, curriculum structure and content are identified as important supporting factors. However, these institutional factors operate in tandem with individual reflective dispositions and supportive peer relationships that engender opportunities for transformational educational experiences. The prevalence of the first-person pronoun 'I' is notable in students' accounts of helpful and hindering institutional factors. Although one would expect subjective experience to be predominant in

qualitative accounts, participants demonstrated a strong sense of ownership of their educational experiences, nevertheless. What can be discerned from the narratives is a strong sense of personal development that occurs both despite of, and because of, contextual factors. It is these individual factors that are the focus of the next section of the analysis.

6.3 “A beautiful accident for a student like me”

Multiple individual factors were discerned as helpful or hindering to student persistence and academic writing development. These were initially grouped into two sub-themes: “A student like me”, which relates to learner self-concept and orientation to learning and “A beautiful accident”, which relates to participants’ emotional and transformative experiences of learning. Upon writing the findings and discussion, these were merged to create the overarching theme: “A beautiful accident for a student like me”, since this theme underscores the importance of individual student self-concept, which is then challenged by the transformative potential of increasing self-awareness brought about through subject knowledge engagement.

Student narratives contained many “I am” statements, which were either supportive or undermining of a positive learner identity e.g.:

I’m not the kind of person who holds focus (Maria)

I’m someone who just likes studying (Hortense)

Higher-scoring students (Ian, Ayesh, and Hortense) identified a relatively stable and positive sense of learner identity. For example, Ian, Hortense, and Ayesha had positive conceptions of their capabilities as writers:

To be honest, I'm always good at writing, I kind of learn quickly to adapt to any style of writing. (Hortense)

Both Ian and Ayesha entered university with a strong sense of themselves as learners and writers. They reported incremental changes in their writing development rather than wholesale changes in learner self-concept:

I would always say that I had a good standard of academic writing. I did English A level, so I've always been developing. (Ayesha)

While Ayesha and Ian reported little change in their approach to academic writing, they both reported personal growth from overcoming emotional difficulties related to academic work:

The work is the same, it's you that changes around it. (Ian)

Myleene and Andrea also appeared to have relatively stable learner self-concepts, although Myleene acknowledged that she adopted new ways of being at university:

I don't really plan anything else out apart from uni. (Myleene).

Myleene's planned approach was linked to her strong sense of direction and determination to succeed.

Similarly, Andrea drew on established attitudes to learning, including a commitment to excellence and achievement:

I haven't failed really any assignment but when a low grade came, it kicked me hard in my proudness because I'm the person who likes excellent things. So, it's just my thing to be good, very good. (Andrea)

When participants reported difficulties with their studies, they often took a problem-solving and outcome-focused approach, indicating a degree of self-efficacy and a capacity for critical thinking and metacognition:

I just very much have to be structured and organized... really intentional about trying to get higher grades and make progress. (Myleene)

Several authors identify the role of self-efficacy in academic success (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001; Millward, Wardman and Rubie-Davies, 2016). This is in keeping with the sense of personal competence reported by Ian, Ayesha, and Hortense and the problem-solving approaches of Myleene, Andrea, and Fiza.

Other students (Maria, Oshona and Fiza) noted changes in self-efficacy over time, culminating in a sense of pride in their achievements. Maria entered university with a low sense of self-efficacy, which increased gradually as she

began to trust in her ability to study. On the other hand, Oshona and Fiza both experienced the shock of unexpected academic failure. For Oshona, this led her to label herself negatively.

I was always thinking of myself to be like an average student, but then I came in and I failed so many modules. I don't know, I thought I would do better. So, I kind of took it quite negatively. I'm not that intelligent anyway. (Oshona)

Even for academically confident students like Hortense, seeing evidence of academic improvement engendered shifts in learner identity:

Sometimes, I'm like, "Where did I find these words to write? It's my writing!" I will be shocked about how, you know, there's like someone very knowledgeable. (Hortense)

Avila Reyes (2021) notes that underrepresented students often enter university "carrying structural expectations of failure" (p. 126), necessitating greater attention to the meanings associated with academic success or failure. A process-led approach that normalises experiences of failure and struggle (French, 2016) would support students such as Oshona, whose early failure was interpreted in terms of personal attributes, and which had serious deleterious effects on her mood and learner self-concept thereon.

For Freire (2004, p. 83), making mistakes should be seen as "a moment in the process of discovery". However, anecdotal evidence from Urbanity shows

that many students do not engage with formative learning opportunities and only submit work for high-stakes end-of-semester assignments. Systemic issues relating to high student numbers and heavy staff workloads mean that students often feel discouraged from submitting formative assignments due to the lack of opportunities for individualised feedback as well as a general emphasis by both students and the institution on summative outcomes. This means that there are few opportunities to experience failure as part of a process, and students like Oshona, Maria and Fiza are left to grapple with failure on their own. Luckily for Oshona, individual factors relating to motivation and a willingness to seek help meant that her early failures did not result in attrition.

I knew I could, as much as I wanted to drop out, I knew that with help, I could do that, I just had to keep going. (Oshona)

All participants described the need for grit and determination at some point in their university journeys, and this echoes the findings of other studies on the individual characteristics of successful students (e.g. Millward, Wardman and Rubie-Davies, 2016; Wong, 2018). For example, Andrea reported considerable challenges with academic writing that were detrimental to her confidence. This is in line with Murray (2013), who notes demotivation and low self-efficacy among the impacts of weak language skills. Nevertheless, Andrea also demonstrated considerable grit and determination in focusing on her goals

despite her setbacks with language. What helped was an awareness of incremental progress and a willingness to develop language skills over time:

What I have been doing is, I have sustained the progress between years to years. That's the thing that you won't have to do fast track - the academic writing. It had to be you know, one step at a time. (Andrea)

However, in the context of a high-stakes assessment culture, a willingness to stay with difficulty can seem like a risky choice, but as French (2016) notes, struggle and uncertainty are part of the process towards developing academic writing confidence. Similarly, Freire (2004, p.100) identifies the need for educators to acknowledge difficulty as a necessary part of learning and, in doing so, to engender education as a “permanent process of hope-filled search.”

Several participants were initially concerned with success in instrumental terms in line with familial expectations for career outcomes, but the individual processes depicted by the narratives demonstrate an increasing awareness of personal transformation through engagement with subject knowledge. This was particularly marked for Andrea, who moved from perfectionism to viewing success in different terms:

I'm able to say “Well, that feeling is in there. We need to embrace ourselves.” I never thought I would be able to think in that way. That's it, that's success. (Andrea)

Engagement with subject knowledge was also key in helping students overcome difficulties. For example, Oshona connects her academic improvement to meaningful engagement with the subject and having something worthwhile to say:

I think it's also because I also enjoy this a lot more. Like, this is something I actually want to do in life. (Oshona)

These points echo Ashwin's (2024) recent research on the transformational value of students' engagement with subject knowledge. Fiza's story is a case in point, illustrating the various stages of her academic trajectory from a purely outcome-driven approach to one of holistic engagement with knowledge that encompassed spiritual revitalisation and renewed relationships with family:

Once I came into university, and with the counselling modules as well, that really made me form a connection with God. I just automatically wanted to put my hands up and thank God because I am living my prayers. And once I fixed my relationship with God, it helped me fix the relationship I had with his creation. So, like my parents, now the relationship is much better. (Fiza)

Fiza's experience was both joyful and hopeful. She engaged with the subject matter on her own terms and made connections between the discipline

and her life experiences. Fiza exemplified Freire's notion of education as "a permanent process of hope-filled search" (Freire, 2004, p.100). She notes:

This was probably the most beautiful accident that has taken part in my life. ... the most rewarding three years, the most, like, happiest that I've been, like the self-development and I've seen myself grow. This entire experience, it's gonna contribute to so much more that's gonna happen in my life later on. (Fiza)

Boughey and McKenna (2021) note that a decontextualised view of learners means that failures and successes are primarily understood as a matter of personal responsibility. There is evidence at Urbanity that a mass system of higher education encourages reliance on individual responsibility, given the lack of capacity for a more personalised approach to learning and the pressure on staff to provide sufficient and equitable pastoral and academic services.

All participants engaged in discourses of self-responsibility and appeared to have introjected values about self-responsibility either during or before their degrees. This could be seen as in keeping with Freire's view that the "oppressed can be so dominated that they take the oppressor's view of the world" (Roberts, 2003, p. 179). However, each person also described a process of growing self-awareness and self-confidence brought about through reflection on, and engagement with, subject knowledge. This further enhanced self-responsibility, making success more likely. As Freire (2004, p. 66) notes, "Once

that shadow is expelled by the oppressed, it must be replaced with self-autonomy and self-responsibility.”

6.4 Reading the Word, Writing the Person

This section considers the final overarching theme focusing on salient aspects of the academic process identified by students as key to academic writing development and the resulting academic outputs. This section seeks to answer research question 2: How do students conceptualise their academic writing development?

While interviews were conversational and closely followed the participant’s track, several prompt questions were prepared to maintain the focus on academic writing, these can be found in [Appendix C: Interview Schedule](#) and focussed on students’ experiences of the writing process including awareness of any changes in their writing since arriving at university and what advice they would give their first-year selves about writing.

6.4.1 From Performativity to Thinking

While Ian and Ayesha had relatively fixed views of what constitutes good academic writing and had sometimes resisted criticism from tutors, all participants were aware of changes in how they thought about academic writing. The most dramatic changes were evident among the lower-scoring participants who struggled with academic writing early in their university careers.

Engagement with disciplinary knowledge was key to writing development. Participants described academic literacy development as a process whereby subject knowledge and writing skills grow together. This developmental process can be seen in the change from viewing academic writing as a performative activity to more of a thinking process:

I think before I would just think things, say things are like 'Oh this this comes from the academic zone' but no, I think I'm actually able to make more of a clearer point nowadays. Like, this is what I'm actually trying to say to people. I need to actually be staying stuff, not just make it look nice. (Oshona)

Before, it just felt like words on the page. I do need to be more creative with my writing now, I need to have my own ideas, to make my writing my own. (Maria)

Changes in the conceptualisation of the purpose of writing paralleled positive personal growth, self-awareness and self-responsibility:

there's so much learning all the time - academically, mentally, physically, like training yourself up. (Oshona)

By the end of their degrees, participants described increasingly fluid conceptualisations of writing as a form of authentic expression and meaning creation. The notion of writing as an ongoing and sometimes difficult “journey”

was evident in the narratives, and participants described periods of uncertainty, challenge, disappointment, or shame as part of this process.

Participants' accounts give credence to the view of academic writing development as agentic and meaning-focused rather than as passive socialisation (Coleman and Tuck, 2021). They accentuate the emotional investment students make in their academic work (Donovan and Erskine-Shaw, 2018) and the time needed for investment in the learning process (McArthur, 2018). They also give support to the AL view of student writing as having more to do with epistemological access and identity than skill or socialisation (Lea & Street, 1998) and demonstrate that students can be at vastly different starting points in this process when they enter university.

In terms of socialisation to academic expectations, there was evidence that students' early expectations of academic writing had to do with understanding the need to adopt academic conventions without necessarily understanding their purpose or value to the writing process:

I did not kind of understand that, like how am I writing my own piece of work if I'm referencing everything?

So that's another reason why, like, I would do all-nighters, 'cause I was thinking of ways to change my work to fit that because I needed the references. (Fiza)

There was also the early perception that academic writing was an unknown quantity, something to be produced rather than a form of authentic expression:

At the start, I just wanted it to be like, not very unique at all, just very academic sounding, but I think it read back very boring. (Myleene)

Even though Myleene wanted to be more expressive in her writing, at Level 6, she still had doubts about what constituted a 'good' piece of writing:

I'm hoping anyway that it reads back more unique, and it doesn't sound as robotic when I write.

I still have doubts, like every time I submit something, I still kind of never know what grade I'm gonna get. (Myleene)

Myleene's experience echoes Turner's (2018) view of the lack of consistency and "general fuzziness" of assessment practices around writtenness. It also echoes the findings of the textual analysis, which showed that Myleene's unproblematic writing enabled her to access scores in the upper second-class range. At other times, a more precise analysis of the accuracy and sophistication of the knowledge accessed by Myleene might have led to a lower mark. Hence giving rise to unpredictable marking standards and a climate of uncertainty (Turner, 2018) despite Myleene's belief that she was working consistently to similar standards.

Ian and Ayesha, who were accomplished writers before coming to university, acknowledged some resistance to change but were also able to reflect on the pros and cons of their writing styles:

I think, in the way that I write, I don't think has changed that much, and I'm not necessarily sure whether that's a good thing. (Ian)

For Ian, adhering to academic conventions meant engaging in a pragmatic dialogue with himself about the purposes of writing:

In terms of writing, I would tell myself that it's a better idea to try and stick with academic standards. This isn't the point where you need to change the world with your essays. (Ian)

For Ayesha, developing fluency in the genre of critical reflection associated with counselling assignments developed in tandem with the personal development acquired during the course:

In terms of reflective writing, it definitely has improved. I find it easier now as well, just 'cause I'm more in touch with who I am as a person. (Ayesha)

For all participants, their perceptions of the purpose and nature of academic writing changed through the course of the degree. This supports the notion of writing development as a “multi-layered, developmental process” (French, 2016, p. 414). The analysis also supports the idea that focusing on thinking and

subject matter engagement rather than the acquisition of decontextualised academic skills is crucial to academic writing development (Hallett, 2013).

6.4.2 Reading, Reading, Reading!

For the lowest-scoring participants (Maria, Oshona and Fiza), a developmental shift in writing occurred with the realisation that writing is successful when integrated with the work of studying and thinking, not when produced as something separate or tangential to it. Oshona, Maria, Fiza and Myleene all described periods of confusion and difficulty before attaining a realisation of what university-level work entails:

There was a lot of confusion. I'd write the essay completely, but the reading used to take part at the end; like that was the last thing I'd do.
(Fiza)

A significant change for these students was in their understanding of the academic process and in connecting academic reading with writing development:

Obviously, I do the reading first now. Doing it first and having a bank of references ready for me to use. Letting the reading guide my writing style now, which has helped massively because I was able to make links to like, my own voice. (Fiza)

A key finding of this study, therefore, relates to participants' agreement about the importance of reading in academic writing development. When asked what advice participants would give their first-year selves about writing, Fiza, Ayesha, Ian, Hortense, and Andrea all focused on the necessity of reading in writing development. For Hortense and Andrea, who struggled with writing in a foreign language, reading was a key activity that simultaneously informed both language and knowledge development:

When I read, I don't translate to understand the topic, I read it, I look at the grammar, I look at the vocabulary and everything. That's how I have to read it twice. And when I write, I have feedback. So, writing and reading together, my writing style has changed a lot. (Hortense)

Wong's (2018) study of successful nontraditional students found that high-achieving students were passionate readers, and that regular reading of any kind was seen to benefit students, especially in discursive subjects like the social sciences. Hortense exemplified the high-achieving non-traditional student described by Wong (2018) with her love of reading and disposition towards academic excellence:

I love reading, this is maybe why I find writing easy because of this.
(Hortense).

As noted in the literature review, reading is a largely invisible social practice in universities (Baker et al., 2019), and student engagement with

reading is viewed as increasingly problematic (MacMillan, 2014; Gorzycki, et al., 2020). For the students in this study, the relevance of reading was either inculcated before they arrived at university (Ian, Ayesha, Hortense and Andrea) or discovered through a process of trial and error, leading to the personal realisation that reading supports writing.

This suggests that simply providing resource lists and encouraging students to read is not sufficient to inculcate reading as a core academic activity. Rather, students need to understand the relevance of reading (Mason and Warmington, 2024) and its constitutive role in writing (Baker et al., 2019). This includes addressing student beliefs about what constitutes appropriate engagement with knowledge at university. For example, Gorzycki et al. (2020, p.507) suggest infusing “assignments with reading instructions that target[s] the improvement of critical thinking and academic reading skills” so that reading becomes an unavoidable and relevant part of assessment.

A lack of understanding about the role of reading was exemplified by Fiza’s early attempts to fit references to her writing retrospectively. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the practice of writing first and referencing second is relatively widespread amongst students at Urbanity. Fortuitously, Fiza eventually developed an understanding of reading as ‘deconstruction’ (Badley, 2009), viewing it as an opportunity to re-examine ideas and to make connections between different concepts and materials. Furthermore, reading

used to inform writing helps with the development of authorial voice and more efficient ways of working, as noted by Fiza:

Obviously, I do the reading first now. Doing it first and having a bank of references ready for me to use. Letting the reading guide my writing style now, which has helped massively because I was able to make links to like, my own voice. Whereas before, I was forcing someone else's voice into mine. Whereas now doing the reading is what challenged my voice and made me come to a different opinion. Before, I was trying to force someone else's voice into mine whereas now there was just more like flow in the way that I was thinking, and I wasn't restricting my way to one style of thinking. And I stopped doing all-nighters. I stopped that once I started reading. Yeah, the reading is what structured my work, I actually have the content now.

Furthermore, in addition to this developmental view of reading, there is a need to acknowledge the role of specific learning disabilities on reading ability and confidence:

Reading what's expected is not something that really clicks. (Oshona)

Finding ways of supporting reading in addition to writing is therefore necessary for institutions such as Urbanity where there are large numbers of students with declared disabilities including specific learning difficulties such as

dyslexia and ADHD as well as large numbers of students who may have done little scholarly reading before attending university.

Sohail (2015) suggests that teachers need to know how to teach reading strategies, taking into consideration the role of factors such as age, gender, hours of study and academic level on reading development. Mason and Warmington (2024) suggest five ways to improve reading scholarship among students, including focusing on the 'absolute basics' of a subject area for first-year students, providing clear rationales for assigned readings and advising students about effective reading strategies. Such approaches require reading development to be embedded in disciplinary teaching and suggest the need to elevate reading alongside writing instruction in assignment guidance.

With increasing institutional focus on outcome statistics, this study highlights the importance of understanding students' relationship with learning. It highlights the need to provide conditions that encourage and support students' meaningful engagement with learning rather than outcome-focused curriculum and assessment reform. The paradoxical necessity of an outcome-focused approach is that maintaining quality comes about through a focus on process and relationships rather than on outcomes.

6.4.3 Academic Outputs: Self-Authorship and Generic Skills for Coping

Alongside the recognition of reading as a core activity to support writing, students also acknowledged the level of work required to produce well-

informed, authentic, and meaningful writing. Reading, as Maria suggests, implies *putting your head down and focusing* since reading is a time-consuming and challenging activity. All participants referred to the hard work of study and the challenges experienced in meeting the time demands of their course. Oshona's story is not untypical of students at Urbanity, many of whom work part-time jobs, including night shifts, to support themselves at university. It is unsurprising that under such conditions, the academic demands of a degree programme can seem arbitrary and unreasonable:

I was doing night shifts. That took a toll on me emotionally.

And I just have to pick it all up and go back to everything else, you have to go back to work, and you have to go back to being able to juggle all the academic pressures. All of these assignments! Thousands, thousands, and thousands of words (Oshona)

Students' economic contexts often necessitated the development of various practical coping skills as well as managing the emotional toll of their financial situation and the strain of balancing competing demands. For example, for Hortense, finding a space for focussed study supported personal wellbeing in addition to academic success:

So, the environment is the resource here, that we can have a quiet space and sit down. This is one thing that's helped me a lot because my house is not as quiet ... I have to close the door before I study, so I

prefer just come to uni, and not just for the learning but for myself. (Hortense)

As noted above, for Maria, Oshona, Fiza, Ian and Ayesha, finding like-minded peers was important in developing a sense of belonging and in fostering engagement with learning materials. However, creating meaningful relationships also requires emotional resources and time. As Oshona noted:

All of these hours at the same time. I was exhausted, I was really tired. And then also to try to maintain a social life as well. You're trying to maintain all this stuff.

This brings us back to the relevance of context since the material conditions of a student's life not only require sufficient support to be in place to enable self-focussed engagement with the work of studying (a notional 200 hours per 20 credit module at undergraduate level) but also sufficient emotional resources and time to benefit from relational interactions with peers and staff. As noted in section 6.1.1 above, a person's environment, including material conditions such as poverty, can have discernible impacts on their emotional and psychological capacity for learning as well as their capacity to form trusting and productive relationships (Haigh and Benefield, 2019; Siegel, 2001). Furthermore, Marx, Gates and Bresciani Ludvik (2016, p. 99) note that self-authorship involves the "ability to internally define ones' own beliefs, identities, and relationships" (p. 99). From this perspective, the capacity to form healthy relationships occurs in tandem with the development of self and is reliant on the

provision of appropriate relational and material conditions for self-authorship and flourishing to occur (Haigh and Benefield, 2019; Marx, Gates and Bresciani Ludvik, 2016; Siegel, 2001).

Donovan and Erskine-Shaw (2018) note that institutions could do more to meet the diverse needs of students, including acknowledging the emotional toll of learning. Rather than viewing nontraditional students as incapable of coping with conventional higher education, there is a need to recognise the considerable coping resources already employed by students and to design higher education provision that is more cognisant of the everyday constraints many students face (Haggis, 2006). This includes finding ways to foster institutional belonging (Bates and McCann, 2019; Burke, 2012; Donovan and Erskine-Shaw, 2008; Wong, 2018) and to facilitate engagement on practical and logistical levels that are the necessary precursors to emotional and academic engagement. This is particularly important where there are high numbers of first-in-family students who have been shown to have a lower sense of belonging on average (Naylor, Baik and Arkoudis, 2018) and who may, as this study attests, be facing everyday structural barriers that impact their capacity to engage with learning.

From a Freirean point of view, educators need to provide the “appropriate conditions for allowing others to liberate themselves” (Roberts, 2000, p.61). To properly understand persistent differential outcomes, institutions need to understand and acknowledge the contextual factors that

influence students' success and that are likely to be "highly individualised and intersectional" (Hubbard, 2024, p. 5 citing Crenshaw, 1989). This may include the need to revise the shape of the academic year and the expectations of full-time undergraduate study in its current form.

Given the current funding crisis in UK HE, and current institutional reliance on outcomes as markers of quality, there appears to be little appetite or resource for the personalised, relational, and humanising approaches advocated by the theoretical influences on this study. This brings us back to the original problematic outlined in Chapter 1, Section 1.1 and the continuing failure of "drag and drop" curriculum design initiatives designed to improve attainment gaps. As Haigh and Benefield (2019, p. 129) note, simple or single solutions simply fail to work with the "messiness" of a whole-person / whole-life framework".

6.5 Summary of findings

The narratives show the journey through higher education as part of an ongoing multi-layered experience where students are required to navigate multiple practical, academic and emotional challenges while also engaging with learning and the concomitant identity shifts associated with this process (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). The idea of higher education as a discreet or cloistered experience separate to the students' external context is missing from the student stories presented here. The students understood that successful

learning is learning that is integrated into a person's sense of self and that results in new ways of thinking about the self and the world.

Individual conceptualisations of learner identity shifted from confused, disengaged, fretful or frustrated to more reflexive positions in which learning is integrated as part of the individual's process of self-authorship. This is particularly noted in the realisations around academic writing as performance (*coming from the academic zone* – Oshona) and academic writing as thinking, voice or authorship.

Similarly, Maria's '*gaining consciousness very late*' and Andrea's realisation that '*we need to embrace ourselves*' indicate a shift from the notion of student as object, defined by outcomes, to student as subject, defined by engagement with process. Even for the more instrumentally oriented participants such as Mylene, the process of being at university and engaging with academic work resulted in an awareness that study is essentially a personal project with social implications.

Each participant emphasised the work of study and the grit required to purposefully direct one's attention to study in the face of distractions, practical setbacks, and emotional difficulties. The challenge of engaging with studying when external and internal conditions impinge on the process is key to each narrative. The study re-contextualises the student experience, showing that such a self-focused process of change requires practical, emotional and

relational resources, the provision of which (as illustrated by Wong, 2018) appears to be more a question of happenstance than design.

The role of epistemic access in academic writing development is consistent across data sets and is central to the changed identity processes described by the participants. This study supports the idea that alongside context, student agency is key to academic writing development, as noted by Fiza:

I don't think people understand that [reading] really affects your writing at university because it's all about reading at the end of the day ... Keeping up to date with what's new and stuff. So, you have to realise that and act upon it, which is up to the individual.

However, key to this process is the understanding that access to knowledge provides students with the opportunity to reflect on their relationship with the world and with other people and this, in turn, has implications for how they think about themselves:

I have been given so much knowledge and that's helped me see things in a different way; see people's behaviour; see the society and understand this in a better way because before you just would be your own. (Hortense)

Chapter 7: Reflections, Conclusions, and Future Directions

7.1 Critical reflection

Ivanič's (1998) concept of discursual identity refers to how a writer's identity is constructed through their choice of words, tone, genre, and rhetorical stance in a given context. This identity is also shaped by the discourses available to the writer and the awareness of potential power dynamics at play in the production and reception of a piece of text. This is no less true of a PhD thesis than for any other piece of academic work, especially as PhD students might be writing with a particular academic audience or examiner(s) in mind. Additionally, in a field as dispersed as higher education research (Tight, 2019), researchers may draw on multiple discursive repertoires, depending on their disciplinary origins and theoretical approach to the subject of study.

In a similar vein, Lillis and Scott (2007, p. 14) argue that teacher-researchers need to consider which "key tropes" are being used in researching academic writing, as the use of tropes can reveal which theoretical approaches are being drawn upon as well as indicating the researcher's "normative interest." At times, the use of "key tropes" may mirror the process described by students in Ivanič (1998) in terms of trying on new discourses for size or of using language to seek legitimacy and belonging. At other times, the adoption of tropes may occur outside the writer's critical awareness due to the implicit adoption of the discursive norms of a particular environment. For example, the repeated use of the term "risk of attrition" in Chapters 1 and 2 of this study

reflects the implicit adoption by me of institutional policy discourses in my role as a course leader. The term “attrition” reflects institutional and regulatory concerns about continuation rates as a performance indicator of individual programmes of study. Additionally, the term “attrition” has a more neutral flavour than the term “failure” or “drop-out”, both of which would seem to apportion responsibility to students for leaving a course of study. “Attrition” is also a more formal use of language and reflects the language used in academic papers on the subject e.g. Beer and Lawson (2017) and Naylor, Baik and Arkoudis (2018). Therefore, its use may be viewed both as an implicit adoption of institutional concerns and an attempt to use a formal “academic” voice in my writing.

Other discursive choices in this study may be viewed as implicit adoption of other writers’ material. For example, the use of the word “grit” to describe student engagement in Chapter 6 echoes Wong’s use of the word in his 2018 article on the academic success of nontraditional students. However, the use of the word “grit” can also be seen as being derived from the experiential counselling discourse of Focusing (Gendlin, 1981), since the word “grit” was derived from the experiential sense of the image chosen by Ayesha of a person walking steadfastly along a gravelly mountain path. Furthermore, finding words that convey meaning in accurate and evocative ways is a personal interest and something that I attribute to the poetic influence of the Anglo-Welsh literature (e.g. Dylan Thomas) I encountered as a child. The plosive quality of “grit”, which can be said through gritted teeth, seemed to evoke the participants’

passion and perseverance as well as the harshness of their experiences better than its synonyms.

As discussed in Chapter 3, I needed to review and adapt the design primarily due to difficulties with recruitment. However, the process of analysis and interpretation of results was also an iterative one, which involved wrestling with the multiple theoretical influences I have encountered during a varied career in higher education. While I have sought to avoid theoretical eclecticism, the dispersed nature of the theoretical framework used in this study is a potential limitation, as it may appear to draw selectively from multiple sources. A similar criticism of eclecticism could also be applied when the object of study lies outside of the researcher's main disciplinary field. My engagement with the academic literature on writing, therefore, may be viewed as an incomplete process of understanding and enculturation to the academic writing literature. As noted previously, a linguist or writing specialist would have approached the literature with a clearer understanding of the historical influences as well as the synergies and distinctions between different theoretical approaches, and this would likely have included an awareness of seminal papers not included in my original literature search.

However, insofar as this study casts a light on the challenges faced by academics working with students' writing development, it also casts a light on how key messages from the different theoretical traditions on writing are interpreted by those outside the academic writing fields. Furthermore, it

highlights the need for in-depth conversations between academic writing and subject specialists to ensure that embedded writing pedagogy is adequately informed by writing research.

When writing up the textual analysis, I became aware that rather than indicating a value-free framework by which academic writing could be measured, the analytical framework used primarily cast a light on marking preferences and marker evaluations of work as they related to students' use of language. This awareness was evidenced by a change of emphasis in presenting the results at conferences. For example, for a presentation at the Assessment in Higher Education Conference (2024), I used the title: *Reflections on marking arising from a textual analysis of student essays: The role of writing in academic outcomes*. In this way, the framework used to analyse the textual data may be viewed as a heuristic to make visible reader positionalities, rather than fixed categories to label the text. As such, it may prove helpful in initiating reflections on staff expectations of academic writing and in facilitating conversations about staff expectations with students.

7.2 Conclusions and future directions

In this study, I sought to understand persistent differential outcomes in higher education through a focus on academic writing viewed as a social practice and an important site of interaction between students and institutions. The findings highlight the complex interaction of factors that contribute to students' academic writing development. The textual analysis noted that

students can be more-or-less skilled in academic writing, but that engagement with disciplinary knowledge is a key determining factor in the academic evaluation of writing. This finding supports earlier research in the AL field (e.g. Lea & Street, 1998).

The finding that epistemological claims can be perceived as lacking in criticality where access to specific rhetorical and linguistic structures is limited supports the notion that markers are susceptible to linguistic bias. This is particularly pertinent with the perception of explicitness or context independence of the writing on the part of the reader. This questions the value previously ascribed to context-independent writing as a measure of academic success, especially in the context of differing academic expectations regarding assessment genre, writing style and register.

The qualitative analysis supports the findings of the textual analysis in that it shows that writing skill development occurs in tandem with disciplinary engagement and reading. In this respect, students' perceptions of academic writing coincide with the marker's perspective that immersion in the epistemological landscape of the subject area facilitates access to the related linguistic structures of the disciplinary discourse and it is in this way that students are both inducted into disciplinary discourses while developing new resources for thinking and meaning creation. Thus, students did not report a loss of identity but rather became aware of new identity possibilities, which may be perceived as both liberating and challenging, depending on the context.

The qualitative data, viewed through the integrated theoretical lenses of the study, highlighted how individual and institutional contextual factors hinder or support students' capacities to engage with disciplinary material and thus to develop their academic writing. Individual contextual factors relate to familial influence and values about education together with the psychological, emotional, and relational impacts of prior experiences on students' emotional well-being and self-concept as learners. Individual contextual factors also relate to dispositions and the availability of emotional and material resources to enable students to engage at length in self-focused activities such as reading or pursuing supportive peer relationships. The importance of institutional belonging and supportive peer relationships for academic outcomes is also supported by previous literature.

The qualitative analysis highlights the importance of individual disposition associated with self-determination and grit as well as the capacity to recover from failure. However, the discussion highlighted the structural and resource limitations in massified higher education settings, which necessitate a reliance on individual dispositions and which, in turn, obscure the importance of contextual factors in determining outcomes. It also raises the question as to the minimum necessary material conditions required for studying full-time in higher education and to the wider structural changes that may be required to provide equitable access to knowledge for students from all backgrounds.

The study highlights the problematic disregard of curriculum enhancement initiatives for individual and contextual factors that influence academic writing development and, consequently, academic outcomes. As such, it calls for a more nuanced dialogue about the material and structural issues underlying persistent differential outcomes between groups in contrast to the dominant enhancement approach of context-agnostic curriculum design. It also calls into question the ethical responsibility of institutions where changes to admissions policies are not accompanied by changes to resourcing or academic structures in line with students' increased academic, material, and emotional needs.

I have attempted to evidence arguments systematically using the detailed accounts provided by students and the analysis of academic writing samples viewed through a subject practitioner's lens. The small sample enabled detailed engagement with the data and the development of rich descriptions and interpretations informed by the theoretical influences outlined in Chapter 3. As noted in the methodology section, other researchers may have reached different conclusions. Further textual analysis using the model employed in this study and in collaboration with other subject specialists may provide additional credibility to the work.

The methodological approach to interviews and qualitative data acknowledges the role of the researcher in the creation of data and views the interviews as co-created accounts providing rich snapshots of life in a massified

higher education setting in England. The novel approaches to both the textual and qualitative data sets were intended to be both thorough and respectful of client material. The use of empathy in qualitative interviewing provided a novel approach to managing power relations in the interviews. It enabled participants to explore their experiences in depth, increasing participant self-understanding in addition to producing data for research. An extension of this approach would be to explore participant experiences of this form of interviewing through debriefing with another researcher.

In terms of theoretical approaches, the application of a biopsychosocial model such as Haigh and Benefield's (2019) unified model of human development or Siegel's (2001) interpersonal neurobiology as an explanatory framework for higher education research is relatively new and worthy of further discussion and application. This study shows the importance of supportive relationships for enhancing learning experiences, but also underscores the value of learning for enhancing relationships brought about through an individual process of academic engagement and reflection. This is an important consideration where there is a predominance of metric-driven approaches to quality and increasing instrumentalization of learning at the policy level. As noted by Hortense:

we don't live like in an analysis, we live with other people.

Since the start of this study, the general availability of generative AI has changed the academic writing landscape significantly. Many AI tools are

specifically marketed to students and purport to improve written communication while minimizing the effort required to understand and synthesize academic knowledge. Since one of the main findings of this study relates to the role of disciplinary engagement in meaningful and transformative educational experiences, the advent of tools that circumvent or minimize individual engagement with subject content raises alarm. A future research direction, therefore, would be to explore student perceptions of AI tools and their impact on student engagement with knowledge.

As noted, exploring the role of context in student academic writing development highlights the need for the sector to understand the minimal material and linguistic resources necessary for all students who wish to persist in academia to achieve satisfactory outcomes. It also requires institutions to consider the impact of adverse life experiences on the learning process and the emotional toll of learning, where there are simultaneously high familial expectations and personal or systemic expectations of failure.

An honest exploration of the minimal conditions necessary for effective study, based on a transformative view of education, may result in the need for structural changes to the standard format for full-time study as well as the provision of additional bridging resources to allow students to both survive and thrive at university. Only then can there be a clear starting point from which to consider persistent differential outcomes for **higher** degree outcomes. This study only interviewed students who completed their degrees. Further research

into the causes of attrition in widening participation settings would be helpful to explore the role of contextual factors in student outcomes further.

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Appendix A: Evocative Narratives

Maria's journey: I tend to sit away from the windows.



Figure A1: Maria's chosen image

Note. Bodleian Education Library, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, [CC BY-ND](#)

I tend to sit away from the windows, I'm not the kind of person who holds focus, I have such a big imagination and there are things outside that education will not teach you.

I knew poverty existed; I knew losing a loved one exists. I knew all of that existed, so I didn't care about education.

But you need to put your head down and focus, be part of an institute for a couple of years or your work will not be on the point.

I realize I'm not focused because I feel so overwhelmed. I got support from peers, they were in the same boat as me, a lot of the time.

People would try to explain, and I never understood, maybe my way of thinking isn't correct so when I get a good grade using methods that work for me, it's really validating.

I'm not really sure how I persevered, I think it's just because my parents really scared me, I would say, ...to continue education.

I tend to sit away from the windows, because alongside fear, I want to be able to sustain myself and my family.

I didn't really understand what education was for, I kind of gained consciousness very late, that's when I started caring.

When she told me that these types of courses existed for people like me, I thought that's amazing!

I knew no one, so far away from home and no friends here, didn't really understand the way university works.

It was really hard for me to make a start. I've always thought essays were not creative because I expected them to be so, umm...educational.

I expected it to be so difficult. I expected it to be at a much higher level. But, umm, writing really is a journey and it still is.

Before, it just felt like words on the page. I do need to be more creative with my writing now, I need to have my own ideas, to make my writing my own.

I always like essays; they help me learn how to articulate, to like, sound British, like I belong here.

These essays should be in my own words, my own... my own voice? As if I'm thinking.

Writing is not scary, Writing is fun. I'm not sure what made me think that writing was not fun.

The way I've experienced education is actually very unconventional. A lot of people can breeze by a lot easier but I made sure that I passed, that I got my work done.

What really has kept me persevering was my own willingness to actually want to be here; I do really feel like this has been such a journey.

I tend to sit away from the windows.

Oshona's Story: 'Growth' embodies that

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due to copyright
restrictions.

Figure A2: Oshona's chosen image. Stylised image of head in profile with tree growing from it.

Being my own individual person, coming to grow and educate myself, I've never felt so proud.

'Growth' embodies that.

Those moments where I wanted to drop out, where I nearly gave up, the fact that I even still stuck it out and tried my hardest,

'Growth' embodies that.

I can't just be depressed all the time. I need to be here, I'm gonna be here; I'm gonna try and better myself. Become somebody.

'Growth' embodies that.

My Dad has always, always, always told me that education is the best thing that you can do for your life. It's placed on a pedestal. There's a lot of pressure that comes with that.

I feel like every day, I'm having realizations. I'm more aware of the fact that I have a brain. Like, I actually have thoughts. But to write them down, it's a whole other story.

Growing up African, there's no such thing as you have a learning disability. Absolutely not! Don't help me. Just struggle. You just have to continue struggling. Forget the help.

I don't need to struggle with this. If there's help out there, I should get the help.

I was crying when I was getting diagnosed because I felt so stupid.

No, I'm not stupid. I just struggled with something, that's all.

'Growth' embodies that.

I was always thinking of myself to be like an average student, but then I came in and I failed so many modules. I don't know, I thought I would do better. So, I kind of took it quite negatively. I'm not that intelligent anyway.

I just don't quite understand what exactly they're looking for. Reading what's expected is not something that really clicks.

I actually genuinely really, really enjoyed sitting down and getting to practice the skills, instead of writing up about it.

'Growth' embodies that.

But I think I'm able to make more, like clearer points. I think before I would just think things, say things are like 'Ohh this this comes from the academic zone' but no, I think I'm actually able to make more of a clearer point nowadays. Like, this is what I'm actually trying to say to people. I need to actually be staying stuff, not just make it look nice.

Actually, that's how I've changed here.

'Growth' embodies that.

I think it's also because I also enjoy this a lot more. Like, this is something I actually want to do in life.

'Growth' embodies that.

I was really struggling a lot mentally while at university. I guess the whole revelations and developments... Luckily, it was a thing I realized, "I just need to get some help."

'Growth' embodies that.

I knew I could, as much as I wanted to drop out, I knew that with help, I could do that, I just had to keep going.

'Growth' embodies that.

The people I've met have made me understand the person I want to strive to be, the sort of person I gravitate more towards.

'Growth' embodies that.

We all plan to encourage each other, to get through it. We can all do it together and we've made it this far. Let's keep going. It makes it easier because everything is better shared.

'Growth' embodies that.

The whole idea of being like an independent adult, the struggle with money, like having to work. Like, I have to work two jobs and also do this at the same time, right?

I'm trying to work. I'm trying to survive by doing all these shifts. There was a lot of pressure to take care of people, they would like kind of bully me, I was doing night shifts. That took a toll on me emotionally.

And I just have to pick it all up and go back to everything else, you have to go back to work, and you have to go back to being able to juggle all the academic pressures. All of these assignments! Thousands, thousands, and thousands of words,

All of these hours at the same time. I was exhausted, I was really tired. And then also to try to maintain a social life as well. You're trying to maintain all this stuff. But I guess that's part of the reality of becoming an adult, I guess.

Maybe, if there's a possibility for you to do it part-time. A lot more people that I have met would have been able to continue with it. If it was like a bit of a slower pace.

'Growth' embodies that.

But just the whole concept of moving away from home. Like having this whole place, something that you have to commit to. You have to be consistent with one thing in your life.

'Growth' embodies that.

I don't know, I think it's great. Like, there's so much learning all the time - academically, mentally, physically, like training yourself up.

'Growth' embodies that.

Andrea's Story: I love writing in pencil because my handwriting is cursive.

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due to copyright
restrictions.

Figure A3: Andrea's chosen object – Pentel propelling pencil

I love writing in pencil because my handwriting is cursive. A friend of mine gave me a pencil and because in my country, everybody migrate, there are many things related to that, you know, cursive writing and pencils.

It's like giving me some reassurance and a bit of confidence because, obviously, English is not my first language. I have a lot of problem moments with language and understanding academic writing, especially academic writing.

It has been quite a journey with the language, and you never feel confident enough.

When you learn a language, you learn the Quotidien, the everyday, you know - speaking, talking and communicating but with academic writing, you need to think, always in another way, and especially using the grammar, the proper words, all that thing, it impacts.

And I feel very frustrated for the fact that it's not that I don't know the topic, it's just I don't know how to.. sometimes, I just don't find the words I need.

When you grow up and you end up with two, three languages but I started learning English very late. That has been very difficult for me. You have no idea how many times I've said "That's it, it's done. I can't continue it!"

I was an orphan very young and since then my life has been very challenging. What I found comfort in was that I do not quit whatever I start. My whole life had been 'No, I'm not a quitter' and with this degree, it was no different.

I haven't failed really any assignment but when a low grade came, it kicked me hard in my proudness because I'm the person who likes excellent things. So, it's just my thing to be good, very good.

I got the ability, I need to understand my limitation, language is one of my limitations. It's a degree in a different language. I got a lot of knowledge; it's very difficult when you know something and you want to progress.

What I have been doing is, I have sustained the progress between years to years. That's the thing that you won't have to do fast track - the academic writing. It had to be you know, one step at a time.

Because I got so my confidence is so low sometimes with the language, I need support and reassurance. I used to take courses and I think I took them all

about academic writing. They were very supportive.. Also, they are not many and there are many people and they are very busy.

You have to provide for yourself, you know, search for solutions of your problem and not just wait for support to come by their self, falling from the sky. No, you need to look for it, you have to make it happen. And it's very difficult.

At the beginning, it was very difficult for me thinking about support because of my age. I feel that stigma on me, like I probably fear being judged. There are not too many mature students in the university. It's quite difficult...to fit in.

I sometimes say that this is my last opportunity to get my degree and feel I can do something and that's the reason I say, I'm being so tired. We've had the opportunity to change and it has been very difficult because of that.

I think now, I don't want to be perfect. I want to have a good grade that will give me the opportunity to keep building on the skills because I really want to help people, you know. So I learned to argue less and to hear more.

I see things very differently. I was very rigid. I was very tough. I think success is being happy with what you achieve. Feel you fulfil that meaning and also think that it's yours, you didn't copy.

I fought for it. I'm still fighting for it, and I think that could sound very proud but at the same time, I'm very proud of myself that I could do it.

It's really, yeah, it's success, it's happiness. And something that I think I see in this degree is to be happy, you have to have small things. Maybe that happiness, it's just the small things.

It's learning to appreciate even the air that you breathe when you're doing breathing exercises.

I'm able to say "Well, that feeling is in there. We need to embrace ourselves." I never thought I would be able to think in that way. That's it, that's success.

Myleene's Story: It's almost like tunnel vision

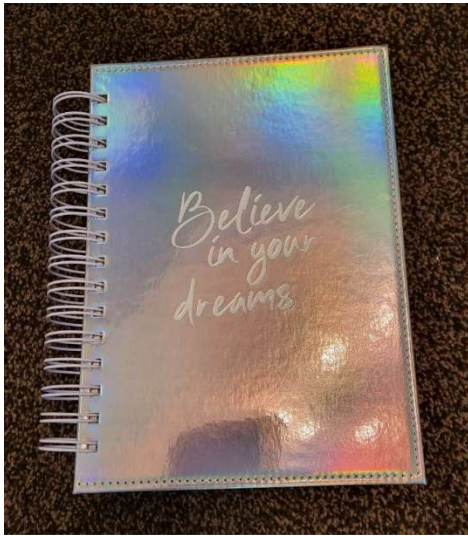


Figure A4: Myleene's chosen object.

Note. Participants' own image.

I don't really plan anything else out apart from uni. I just very much have to be structured and organized... really intentional about trying to get higher grades and make progress.

It's almost like tunnel vision, I can really see what I'm working towards, it's a little bit far at the moment, but I know what I need to do to get there.

My parents definitely drove me to make sure I get a career rather than just a job, but I definitely wanted to do it as well.

The minute I know I only have a set amount of time to do something, it puts on a lot of pressure.

In first year, it's such a big jump because you've got so much independence and you're very much responsible for the grades you get. Independence and the time constraints were the biggest challenges, hence the planner

If you want good grades, you really do have to put in the work yourself. The minute I did take it into my hands, the more it was showing in my work.

Doing wider reading and really just putting a plan together, that worked for me. Seeing good progress and stuff definitely is rewarding.

At the start I was very lost like in first year, I think even a bit of second year.

It was very independent like, subjective, you're free to choose what style you write in. I didn't really know where to go because I kind of like to be told that there's one right way to do things.

At the start, I just wanted it to be like, not very unique at all, just very academic sounding, but I think it read back very boring.

I'm hoping anyway that it reads back more unique, and it doesn't sound as robotic when I write.

I still have doubts, like every time I submit something, I still kind of never know what grade I'm gonna get.

Before, I'd end up kind of just writing random things and not answering the question. Now, it's definitely more clear how to hit each mark. Especially with

wider reading and to know what the lecturers are looking for because they're not really hiding anything from us.

The wider reading as well, it really helps to set your work apart. In general, wider reading is something that would work for everyone to understand the topic more.

Looking back on progress (helps) realizing it's not as bad as you think at the time and sticking with it was a big factor for me to keep going.

Once a certain amount of time had passed that just helped me to, you know, say "Keep going. You're already half the way there."

Having all your eggs in one basket definitely forces you to keep on with something and I didn't wanna drop out and just be in the abyss of not knowing what I'm doing and yeah, the enjoyment definitely helped with the process.

I'll be taking away the fact that I can motivate myself. You can be the motivating fact to yourself. It's made me realize that again, I'm just responsible for my own grades.

I'll definitely bring forwards the organizational skills and just the confidence I've gained in myself. I just feel very different. I think I pushed myself to heights I didn't think I would.

Hortense's Journey: Until it's what I've been dreaming of in the evenings



Figure A5: Hortense's chosen image

Note. Library Entrepreneur Startup [photograph] by Mohamed Mahmoud Hassan, (<https://www.publicdomainpictures.net/en/view-image.php?image=256311&picture=library-entrepreneur-startup>), CC0 Public Domain.

I'm someone who just likes studying; I like having that quiet time on my own to go back into myself and think about what I have learned. These past weeks, I started letting people know about that because they found me antisocial. I need that space. I need that time out just for myself and that's how I learn. I feel like respecting my needs because that's how I find my strength.

From my background, there's always a kind of a duty of respect but here, it's not the same.

I mean, this is a public place! Even if you don't come here to study, other people around you study, so you have to take that into consideration. It's still a bit of shock for me when I see people's behaviour, you know? But yeah, England is England. I just have to accept it.

The first thing I've found rewarding is being with young people. It's something that has helped me feel young again, and also that I feel happier. They are full of energy. You see them doing some silly things, but somehow, they contaminate you.

The thing is, as you're growing old, your capabilities are not the same, memory is not as sharp. And then you know, your children, your husband, your house... It's not easy, to be honest. It's a kind of struggle; you have to be very strong.

I had a call from my son's school. That just affected me so much. Then I had a call this morning asking me to come to work tomorrow. Yes, I need the money but for me, this time is priority studying.

To be honest, I'm always good at writing, I kind of learn quickly to adapt to any style of writing. And when it comes to essays, I don't know, it's just, I have something, I have inspiration when everything just flows.

But because it's my second language the way you write it doesn't reflect exactly your thoughts; your lack of words and vocabulary and everything is like you can't remember the word you were right about to say.

Sometimes, I have inspiration. Sometimes, I'm like, "Where did I find these words to write? It's my writing!" I will be shocked about how, you know, there's like someone very knowledgeable.

I can be working on one thing for a long time but that means I have the inspiration for that subject so I will be working on it until it's what I've been dreaming of in the evenings.

When I read, I don't translate to understand the topic, I read it, I look at the grammar, I look at the vocabulary and everything. That's how I have to read it twice. And when I write, I have feedback. So, writing and reading together, my writing style has changed a lot.

I love reading, this is maybe why I find writing easy because of this.

I don't know, I just love reading. I just love reading. I take my time to read and then to understand the concepts, the information. I think it's just reading, reading, reading and reading.

I've learned so much, and not just for the sake of learning, but for myself.

Like even now, when I think about, I'm gonna finish here soon, I feel sad. Because I have been given so much knowledge and that's helped me see things in a different way; see people's behaviour; see the society and understand this in a better way because before you just would be your own.

So that's all about living, because we don't live like in an analysis, we live with other people.

Being in harmony, you know, your social surrounding and everything, to be able to understand them. These kinds of things are fundamental to have that inner peace, in yourself. Solving all that has contributed to my own well-being, I just love it.

So, the environment is the resource here, that we can have a quiet space and sit down. This is one thing that's helped me a lot because my house is not as quiet ... I have to close the door before I study, so I prefer just come to uni, and not just for the learning but for myself.

Ian's Story - Exponential difficulty to reward

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due to copyright
restrictions.

Figure A6: Ian's chosen object – black laptop on desk

It just symbolizes hard work. It's quite metaphorical of university and, sort of, the ups and downs of it. The work is the same, it's you that changes around it.

My sort of like emotional reaction to it, that's what changes. And it sort of exacerbates the feelings that you're having. It's like a little golem sitting there in the corner of the room.

University for me has just been about the work, predominantly. I need to, you know, make something of myself at this point, this is quite important.

It's been quite a solid constant. You've got a routine, there are things you have to do, but for the most part, it's quite positive.

I've got really bad insomnia but, you know, you have to sort of drag yourself kicking and screaming to a bus stop. And then just sitting on the bus, just all the way here, it's horrible. I just want to turn around, but it always ends up being the better decision.

Getting yourself up is really empowering. It is very motivating for me. It's exponential difficulty to reward.

Not being a philosopher, I think was actually the thing that I might have struggled with the most ...to the point where it's almost detrimental because I want to know everything about everything.

It's letting go of the fact that I don't need as much knowledge as I think that I do to be able to understand the things that we're talking about.

I've never once struggled to meet the word count. I just wanna say everything about everything. I want to know everything about all the stuff and things, and then I just confuse myself by the end of it.

I ended up using ridiculous sentences and to me, I was like, "that sounds really good here". But now I look back and I'm just like, "yeah, that's that was a totally pointless thing to say". Look, it's a cool sentence but, you know, it's not helped me.

I wanna be right more than I want to answer the question. I wanna, like, know all of the points, know for a fact that I am right about this. But obviously, there's a lot of things you can't write about, it's just an argument, and it's all to do with, like, how you weigh the values.

But if there is an opportunity for me to be right about something, I do like that. I value intelligence really highly. I mean, yeah, 100% there's an ego in there one way or another wanting to be smarter than everyone.

I think, in the way that I write, I don't think has changed that much, and I'm not necessarily sure whether that's a good thing, because apparently sometimes, I have a penchant for being super flowery. Saying unnecessarily descriptive things. I can kind of see it and I try to avoid it, but there's always a bit of a humour to my writing.

In terms of writing, I would tell myself that it's a better idea to try and stick with academic standards. This isn't the point where you need to change the world with your essays.

There is a two-pronged approach, like, I want to do the academic thing and I'm gonna get decent marks and there's part of me that's "I'm gonna change the world!" Superman sort of thing. And not that I'd necessarily like to get rid of either of those, I like the interplay between them, I think it's been quite helpful and quite important.

I guess if I was gonna sort of advise anyone who wanted the experience, I would tell them you have to take whatever motivation you can get, I guess that's it, because it's hard, it's hard work and there will times when you are lacking motivation. So, wherever you can find it. And have conversations with people that might lead you to a deeper understanding of what your motivations

are and how you might sort of capitalize on them. Do that and don't be embarrassed or ashamed of them.

I feel like I'm doing the thing that I'm supposed to be doing. Like I'm on the right path. I do feel like a sort of sense of belonging as to education as a whole or some sort of like.

And it's nice to be surrounded by people who, or at least the most part, are like minded. They're all attempting to learn in order to educate themselves. You know there's at least one thing that you have in common with everyone here.

Ayesha's Story – At What Cost?

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restrictions.

Figure A7: Ayesha's chosen image – person hiking up a rocky mountain path

University has kind of broadened my horizons, it's kind of like an ongoing journey.

My life could go in any direction now and it's kind of very open and I'm not being forced along a certain pathway. It's not like they're lonely in that picture, there's some sort of achievement, I guess. It's like I know what I'm doing there, and I know that I have choices as well.

I suffer a lot from like procrastination. I would often leave my assignments to the last minute and then basically, I'd sacrifice my mental health because of it. I always told myself, I need to start earlier every time and then I would end up pulling all-nighters and things like that. I think it's just sometimes, everything can like seem overwhelming. And then, you kind of put it off... I know that I wasn't alone in it. I know that other people felt the same. I didn't overcome it. I got the grades, but at what cost?

You stay awake for so much time that you kind of get to like a delirium. It's just the fact that I kept putting my body through that. And it led to a lot of

disappointment in myself because I knew that I could do a lot better. I think maybe the fact that I started working during my second year as well. So, maybe it was just overwhelm.

I made like two really good friends, and they were kind of a support network for me. It made all the difference, just because I knew that I wasn't alone, or I knew that I had someone to ask questions to or like check my understanding with. Yeah, I would say friendship. It definitely gave me a sense of belonging at university.

I would always say that I had a good standard of academic writing. I did English A level so I've always been developing. There was one instance where a member of staff kept prodding me to use scientific language, but to me, it was my writing style. There was a bit of resistance there because I kind of felt a bit offended. Overall, I wouldn't say that I had a problem with academic writing, I don't think.

I always feel like quite a good reader. I enjoy reading and I think that's what's helped me develop it over the years. Even reading journal articles for my assessments; it really contributes to how you write the final essay up. I've always practised a lot, like obviously doing A level English, it was constantly just writing, writing, writing. And I kind of had an idea of what referencing was so I was in quite a good position when it came to academic writing.

In terms of reflective writing, it definitely has improved. I find it easier now as well, just 'cause I'm more in touch with who I am as a person. I think having a stronger idea of like who I am, what I value, what I want out of life. Now if I feel the need to reflect on something, I'll go and write it down because I know that is gonna be part of my career development so it's something that I want to continue practising.

But I would say, just read and read again. It's just like reading and practice. Even just reading articles out of interest as well. The past couple of months have just been reading, reading, reading. But I think practice as well is really important. Being able to look back on your work and see. Just simple things like going through feedback or getting other people to look at your work and see how you can improve or just comparing it to other students, it's really helpful. Even being given like an example paragraph or something. It, kind of, doesn't leave you in the dark.

I know that I have a tendency to have a fear of failure so that kept me going and it is what gave fuel to those all-nighters. Having to put my head down and be like "I have to get through this. There is no other choice other than getting a good grade." But I'm not as excited to see the grades anymore. I know how much I put myself through to achieve that, which I guess takes away from the sweetness of it.

It's always been in my mind like, I have to do well from the start. To make sure that I get something good in the future. I have that choice because I've

achieved those grades. It's something I've always been praised for. When I would get good grades that would be the only time when my parents would be like "Oh. Well done. You're the most academic one in the family." I think it's like a self-fulfilling prophecy, I felt like I kind of had to live up to that. So, I guess that umm well, fear of humiliation as well. That's what kept me going.

Fiza's Epic Story – Living My Prayers



Figure 5: Fiza's chosen image – picture of personal journal taken in a university café.

Note. Booklet, pencil and coffee – stock photo by Veresovich, Royalty-free licence. Getty Images

Part 1: Living My Prayers

That was probably the happiest I've been that entire year. They said they'll discharge me, that was like a big relief for me. It was kind of a difficult year, 'cause my mom wasn't in the country for most of it as well, so I was kind of taking care of everyone in the house. It was just a lot on me to manage. It was just too much.

With university, I wanted to just prove to my parents that I had made the right decision with my degree. University is like my escape, my safe place, you know? At university, I can truly do things I like. I don't have to think about asking permission and education has always been a big love of my life.

There's always been the pressure of education, to do well, because my dad never went to school, my mum didn't go to school - both of them didn't. So, they've always fostered within me, ever since I was a child "Oh, you need to do

well. This is for yourself. Don't be like us. You don't wanna struggle like us. So, you do well." But I don't mind that pressure because I actually like learning.

I mean, I still get scared. Like, oh my God, I'm still scared to tell them because what if they don't think it's good enough? I've never told them a grade; I'm always scared to share happy news with them.

It's like I'm two different people. At home, I'm completely like, just don't share anything with anyone, just do as I'm told. Whereas at university, when you have friends and tutors and you tell them, like, an achievement and they're really happy for you and they're encouraging you. It's kind of like validation.

University has, and the course as well, it's really got me spiritually connected. Once I came into university, and with the counselling modules as well, that really made me form a connection with God. I just automatically wanted to put my hands up and thank God because I am living my prayers. And once I fixed my relationship with God, it helped me fix the relationship I had with his creation. So, like my parents, now the relationship is much better.

Part 1a: God knows what would happen if I didn't like it

Education is so emphasised in my household 'cause back home, you have to pay to go to school. My dad brought me here for a better living and my siblings were born here. School is free and I'm really lucky, in the sense that it's free here.

I do actually like learning. I do a lot of it myself as well, like at home, I used to go to tuition just for fun, like maths and stuff. It was always an advantage for me because it was making my parents happy too. My academic achievement is equal to their happiness. I think it kind of helped that I liked it. God knows what would happen if I didn't like it.

When I didn't get the A level grades and I didn't get obviously into university, it was very disappointing. I was like, "OK, that's it. Life is completely over. It's done!" And we were considering all options and in Clearing, we started calling out to universities. And my dad was like, "OK, I just want my daughter to do a degree because it would be the first in my family to get a degree." Something sciencey was what they were hoping for.

And people back home told my dad, "Why does she need to? Don't you see her cousins? They're all staying at home after getting their degree and they are married, blah, blah." But my dad always wanted me to get a degree, so he was like, "OK, just do whatever you want."

Part 2: Confusion

When we were introduced to like referencing and all of that, it was quite new. I was like, "Hang on a minute...even though I feel like I'm saying, it's actually not me saying it. Someone else has said it, I have to reference it." So, like first year, I'd write my piece of work up first and then find the references. That's what I would do.

I didn't know how to literature search. I didn't know what resources to use. There was a lot of confusion, I'd write the essay completely, but the reading used to take part at the end, like that was the last thing I'd do. Sometimes, assignments were kind of like vague, like there wasn't really a question, there was just a title.

Once I came to university, I was like, I need to put my old self away, because at school I was very shy, I didn't take part in the lessons, with second guessing, doubting myself and I had a weird relationship with teachers, I was really scared of them, I was just not confident. And in first year, my main goal was like, "I wanna become more confident asking questions." So, I would put my hand up and set myself goals this week, even ask one question in the seminar, any seminar.

I knew I didn't just want a pass. I was like, I need to get like 70s and 80s. Like, I'm looking at that part of the marks scheme only. So, I made sure, like, first year, all the assignments, I'm looking at the first, 80%, 85%. I'm trying to meet everything that they're saying. I was doing all-nighters during first year; all the way through the night and I had two to three friends and we would all be like messaging each other saying. "How far are you? How many words left?"

It was really bad, but I just knew that I had to because I'm not one of those people who can just write what I'm gonna submit. I edit then, colour code it, then edit it, then colour code that again and come back to it later and edit it to make it better.

That's when I realised that the wider reading was important as well, but I didn't really understand how to search for the sources and what words I should like enter into the library but also like, combining voices, I did not kind of understand that, like how am I writing my own piece of work if I'm referencing everything?

So that's another reason why, like, I would do all-nighters, 'cause I was thinking of ways to change my work to fit that because I needed the references. I would have saved myself so much time if I did the reading first. It's really weird because I made that mistake throughout first year, but I still didn't learn from that. I don't know why.

Part 3: More like flow in the way I was thinking.

Obviously, I do the reading first now. Doing it first and having a bank of references ready for me to use. Letting the reading guide my writing style now, which has helped massively because I was able to make links to like, my own voice. Whereas before, I was forcing someone else's voice into mine. Whereas now doing the reading is what challenged my voice and made me come to a different opinion. Before, I was trying to force someone else's voice into mine whereas now there was just more like flow in the way that I was thinking, and I wasn't restricting my way to one style of thinking. And I stopped doing all-nighters. I stopped that once I started reading. Yeah, the reading is what structured my work, I actually have the content now.

Part 4: A most beautiful accident

I've always been that person who does, like I start something, I have to finish it, even if I don't like it. I don't want to be that drop out person because I don't know what my parents will think of that. But obviously my mindset towards that has changed and maybe when I have children, I'd tell them for sure, "If it isn't right for you, then drop out." But my circumstances don't allow me to act upon that new developed thought because at the end of the day, I still want to like please my parents.

This was probably the most beautiful accident that has taken part in my life. So, me not expecting to be here and then it being such a beautiful experience, like, I'm forever grateful for these three years, probably the best three years of my life, even though there have been ups and downs, but it's the most rewarding three years, the most, like, happiest that I've been, like the self-development and I've seen myself grow. This entire experience, it's gonna contribute to so much more that's gonna happen in my life later on.

I think I've grown up in an environment where everyone's quite closed minded or judgmental and I've desperately wanted to get out of that culture. But being with people who are like minded, it really helped. Having a clean slate, completely, leaving the person that I was behind and just truly trying to embrace whatever I wanted to do. Be more expressive, be more outspoken.

When I do look on my old pieces of work and I compare it to now, I can see the difference. In the language as well, because obviously if you're not a reader, you don't pick up the vocabulary. And so, when you do look at those pieces of work, it's very like basic it's not creative, it's like you're just reading a newspaper. Now I actually want to reread my work and it's not that I'm doing it because I wanna get a good grade. It's there for also like self-satisfaction as well.

That's the main shift that I realised in my academic writing. Especially, literature searching and reading, you just pick it up along the way. It's not something that you just you're taught and then you're doing it. It comes from a personal thing as well that guides the reading, like if you're interested then you automatically start to read. And that's when I realised, there's so much reading to actually do. Now, I evaluate everything, like putting on a scale and letting the reading do my work for me instead of me trying to force references in.

The reading informs everything, everything. You need a basis, like content there for you to have something to write about. Whereas I was doing the opposite before. And I interpreted the mark schemes on my own terms later which really shifted the perspective of writing for me generally. It was now, like, my own pieces of work that I was writing and not because the tutor told me to.

All of the reading helped with the time management which made home life much easier as well. I had much more like time for other things that I wanted to do, like coffees and family. And like I said, spiritual connection as well.

I wasn't a reader 'til university. Now I read books for pleasure but that's the latest stage. I don't think people understand that really affects your writing at university because it's all about reading at the end of the day at university. Keeping up to date with what's new and stuff. So, you have to realise that and act upon it which is up to the individual.

Appendix B: Ethical Approval and Participant Facing Documents



23rd February 2023

Dear Ruth

Thank you for submitting your ethics application and additional information for **A case study approach to understanding academic persistence and achievement at a UK university**. The information you provided has been reviewed and I can confirm that approval has been granted for this project.

As Principal Investigator your responsibilities include:

- ensuring that (where applicable) all the necessary legal and regulatory requirements in order to conduct the research are met, and the necessary licenses and approvals have been obtained;
- reporting any ethics-related issues that occur during the course of the research or arising from the research (e.g. unforeseen ethical issues, complaints about the conduct of the research, adverse reactions such as extreme distress) to the Research Ethics Officer (Dr Richard Budd or Dr Jonathan Vincent).
- submitting details of proposed substantive amendments to the protocol to **Dr Jan McArthur** for approval.

Please do not hesitate to contact your supervisor if you require further information about this.

Yours sincerely

Kathryn Doherty

Programme Co-ordinator

PhD in Higher Education: Research, Evaluation and Enhancement

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Professor Paul Ashwin, BA, MSc, PhD
Professors
Carolyn Jackson, BSc, PhD
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Participant information sheet

A case study approach to understanding academic persistence and achievement at a UK university.

For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights please visit our webpage: www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection

My name is Ruth Roberts, and I am a PhD student at Lancaster University. I would like to invite you to take part in a research study about academic outcomes on the BSc Psychology and Counselling programme at BCU.

Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the study about?

The aim of the study is to understand how student-related factors such as a person's social context relate to academic outcomes and course completion at university. I am particularly interested in understanding student experiences of academic writing; their sense of belonging at university and the sources of support available to students outside of university.

Why have I been invited?

I have approached you because you are a final year student on the BSc Psychology and Counselling programme. The BSc Psychology and Counselling programme is particularly relevant to this research as large numbers of students on the programme are from non-traditional backgrounds. This means that students on this programme may be the first in their family to attend university or, they may be mature students or, from backgrounds that are typically under-represented in Higher Education.

Understanding some of the challenges that students face in addition to factors that enable students to succeed on the programme may help improve programme design and student support in the future. I would be very grateful if you would agree to take part in this study.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?

If you decided to take part, you will be asked to:

1. Provide consent for me to access and download your PSY5068 Counselling Theories essay from Level 5. A 1000 word writing sample will be extracted from your essay and used to identify common patterns of how students use written English in academic assignments (linguistic analysis of grammar, structure, and vocabulary use).

2. Take part in a face-to-face interview (lasting approximately 50 – 60 minutes).

To prepare for the interview, you will be asked to bring along a picture or small, personal object that represents your experience on the course. (If you are unable to find a personal object or picture, I will provide some pictures for you to choose from.)

The questions in the interview will focus on your experiences of being at university including your experiences of undertaking academic writing, your sense of belonging at university, and the sources of support available to you outside of university. Interviews will be arranged at a mutually convenient time and will take place on campus at BCU. If you are unable to travel to campus, we can arrange a time to meet online using MS Teams.

3. Provide consent for me to access your degree assessment results and attendance data. This data, along with the writing sample and interview data will be downloaded into anonymised, numbered case files and used to construct composite case study vignettes of different student profiles on the programme. The interview data

and writing samples will also be stored as amalgamated copora of data for thematic analysis.

What are the possible benefits from taking part?

If you take part in this study, your insights will contribute to our understanding of factors that contribute to student success at university. This may help us to improve programme design and student support going forwards. The findings of the project may also contribute to wider recommendations for improving student support in higher education in general. You may find that reflecting on your experience at university helps you identify personal factors and attributes that have contributed to your persistence and successful completion of the programme.

Do I have to take part?

No. It's completely up to you to decide whether or not you take part. Your participation is voluntary. If you decide not to take part in this study, this will not affect your studies and the way you are assessed on your course.

What if I change my mind?

If you change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time during your participation in this study. If you want to withdraw, please let me know, and I will extract any data you contributed to the study and destroy them. However, it is difficult and often impossible to take out data from one specific participant when this has already been anonymised or pooled together with other people's data. Therefore, please let me know about any intention to withdraw no later than **4 weeks** after taking part in the study. If you wish to withdraw, you can contact me using my Lancaster email address: r.roberts14@lancaster.ac.uk . You do not need to give a reason for withdrawing from the study.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

It is unlikely that there will be any major disadvantages to taking part. The study will take approximately one hour of your time. You may find reflecting on your time at university brings up some difficult emotions. Should this be the case, I will direct you to relevant sources of support (detailed below).

Will my data be identifiable?

After the interview, the data will be available to me, as the main researcher and to my research supervisor, Dr Jan McArthur. The interviews will be transcribed solely by me in preparation for analysis. During the transcription, I will keep all personal information about you (e.g. your name and other information about you that can identify you) confidential, that is, I will not share it with others. I will remove any personal information from the written record of your contribution. All reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project.

The different items of data will be stored in the following ways:

- Anonymised, electronic case file for each participant (interview data, written data, attendance data, attainment data).
- Amalgamated corpus of data stored electronically for thematic analysis (interview data, written data).

How will we use the information you have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research study?

I will use the information you have shared with me only in the following ways:

I will use it for research purposes only. This will include my PhD thesis and research publications, for example journal articles. I may also present the results of my study at academic conferences and Higher Education practitioner conferences. The results of

the study may be used to inform institutional policymakers and to recommend changes to programme design and / or student support.

When writing up the findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with me. I will only use anonymised quotes (e.g. from my interview with you), so that although I will use your exact words, all reasonable steps will be taken to protect your anonymity in any publications.

I will also present composite case vignettes to highlight key themes and examples from the data. Participants may recognise aspects of their own stories in these composites. However, every effort will be made to protect participants' identities and specific identifying features will be removed.

How my data will be stored

During the project, your data will be stored in encrypted files (that is no-one other than me, the researcher will be able to access them) and on password-protected computers. I will keep data that can identify you separately from non-personal information (e.g. your views on a specific topic).

At the end of the project, data will be deposited in Lancaster University's institutional data repository and made freely available with an appropriate data license. Lancaster University uses Pure as the data repository which will hold, manage, preserve and provide access to datasets produced by Lancaster University research.

For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights please visit our webpage:

www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection

What if I have a question or concern?

If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact me on: r.roberts14@lancaster.ac.uk or you can contact my research supervisor, Dr Jan McArthur (j.mcarthur@lancaster.ac.uk) Senior Lecturer, Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University.

If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you can also contact: Professor Paul Ashwin – Head of Department; Tel: +44 (0)1524 594443; Email: P.Ashwin@Lancaster.ac.uk; Room: County South, D32, Lancaster University, Lancaster, LA1 4YD, UK.

Sources of support

As noted, there is a small chance that the interview topics may cause some minor distress or upset to you. Should this happen, you are advised to contact the following organisations for help and advice:

- Student Support and Wellbeing, Birmingham City University:
<https://www.bcu.ac.uk/student-info/student-support>
- Student Space from Student Minds:
<https://studentspace.org.uk/support-services>
- MIND: <https://www.mind.org.uk/>

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you for considering your participation in this project.

Consent form

A case study approach to understanding academic persistence and achievement at a UK university

Researcher: Ruth Roberts

Email: R.Roberts14@lancaster.ac.uk

Please tick each box in the table below

Statement	Tick box
I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	..
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during my participation in this study and within 4 weeks after I took part in the study, without giving any reason. If I withdraw within 4 weeks of taking part in the study, my data will be removed.	..
I give permission for my assignment for module PSY5068 Counselling Theories to be downloaded and a 1000 word sample of this essay to be stored securely for linguistic analysis.	..
I give permission for my attendance and assessment outcome data to be downloaded and stored anonymously. I understand that this data may be used in the creation of composite case vignettes.	..
I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications, or presentations by the researcher(s), but my personal information will not be included, and all reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project.	..

I understand that anonymised data may be made available to other researchers / academic journals via a research repository.	
I understand that my name will not appear in any reports, articles or presentation without my consent.	..
I understand that any interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed, and that data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure.	..
I understand that data will be kept according to University guidelines for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the study.	..
I agree to take part in the above study.	..

Participant's details

Participant's Name _____

Participant's Signature _____

Date _____

Appendix C: Interview Schedule

Thank you for agreeing to take part in my research. Before we begin, I just want to check that you are clear about the project and are happy to proceed with the interview.

Do you have any questions about the project?

Ok, so I'm going to press record on the Teams meeting now. This will just record the audio in the room (if f2f). Or – this will record both the audio and video (if remote).

After I've finished all the interviews, I will then transcribe them and delete the recordings. Does that all sound OK to you? If you would like me to send you a copy of the transcript, feel free to let me know.

As you're aware, I'm interested in finding out about your experiences at university now that you are nearing the end of your time on the BSc programme.

Image / Object Elicitation

I was wondering if you had been able to find an object or image that represents for you, your time at university? If 'no': I have a series of pictures on this tablet here, would you like to go through them and choose an image that you feel best represents your experience of being at university?

1. Looking at your object / image, could you tell me why you've chosen it?
 - What does represent for you about your time at university?
 - Are there any specific instances or experiences that this picture / object brings to mind for you?
 - Can you say a bit about the felt sense of the picture / object? What feelings do you notice when you look at the picture / object?
2. Thinking about your time at university, which aspects of being at university have been most challenging to you?

3. Which aspects of being at university have you found most rewarding?

Writing

I'm interested in your experiences of academic writing.

1. Can you tell me a bit about your experiences of academic writing at university? E.g. for writing essays and for your dissertation

Prompts:

- When you first arrived at university, did you feel prepared for the kind of writing you had to do for your assignments?
 - If so, what helped you feel prepared?
 - If not, what was challenging for you?
2. Do you think your writing has changed since coming to university? If so, how has it changed?
3. If you could start the course again, what advice would you give yourself about academic writing?

Belonging and perseverance

You might be aware that quite a few people who started this course with you in the first year have not continued to the end of the course. What do you think has helped you stay the course?

Prompts:

- I'm wondering about your support outside of university. What has that been like for you?
- I'm also wondering about whether you've had a feeling of belonging at university?
- What factors would you say, helped you feel like you belong at university?

or

-
- What could have helped you to feel more like you belong at university?

Ending

Thank you, that's all the questions I have. Is there anything more you would like to add about anything we've talked about?

Thank you very much for taking part in this research. (Provide de-brief form – hard copy or email).

Appendix D: Researcher Found Images

All images retrieved from [Google Images](#).

Figure has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure D1 Person hiking up a rocky mountain path



Figure D2 *Note*. Man standing on a rock [photograph] by Andrei Tanase, n.d. Pexels (<https://www.pexels.com/photo/man-standing-on-a-rock-1271619/>). CC0



Figure D3 Forest trail

Note. CC0 Public Domain



Figure D4 Highline Trail

Note. Highline Trail [Photograph]([Highline Trail \(4169004303\).jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#)). CC BY 2.0.



Figure D5 Bamboo forest

Note. Bamboo forest by HeyitsWilliam [photograph], flickr, 2012.
(<https://www.flickr.com/photos/heyitschili/6898665654/in/photostream/>)CC BY-ND 2.0



Figure D6 A group of students

Note. Google Images, CC0 Public Domain

Figure has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure D7 – Person on mountain path with clouds

Figure has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure D8 – Woman with long hair between library stacks



Figure D9 – Rock climber on wall

Note. Rock climber on wall [photograph] by Leon Brooks, (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rock_climber_on_the_wall.jpg#filelinks) CC0 by Public Domain.



Figure D10

Note. Bodleian Education Library, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, [CC BY-ND](#)



Figure D11

Note. Google Images, CC0 by Public Domain



Figure D12. People inside a library

Note. People inside a library [Photograph], by Tetiana Shevereva, 2019, Pexels. <https://www.pexels.com/search/stadtbibliothek%20stuttgart/> CC0 by Public Domain



Figure D13.

Note. Library Entrepreneur Startup [photograph] by Mohamed Mahmoud Hassan, ([Library, Entrepreneur, Startup, Free Stock Photo - Public Domain Pictures](#)), CC0 Public Domain.

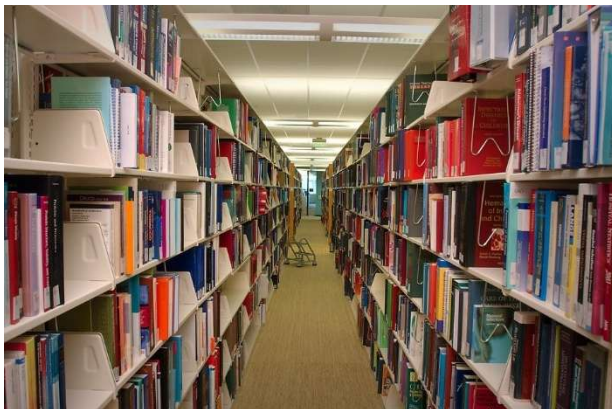


Figure D14.

Note. Google Images, CC0 Public Domain

Figure has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure D15 – Person working amid computer wires



Figure D16

Note. Finding Balance [photograph] by woodleywonderworks, 2013, Flickr (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/wwworks/>) CC By 2.0



Figure D17

Note. Eye, Chakra, by Geralt Aura royalty-free stock [illustration].(<https://pixabay.com/illustrations/eye-chakra-aura-esoteric-meditate-3922211/>) 2019. Pixabay.

Figure has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure D18 – Stylised image of head in profile with tree growing from it.



Figure D19

Note. Google Images, CC0 Public Domain



Figure D20. Multicoloured Abstract Painting

Note. Multicoloured Abstract Painting [photograph] by Steve Johnson, 2018, Pexels (<https://www.pexels.com/photo/multicolored-abstract-painting-1313413/>). CC0



Figure D21. Abstract Painting

Note. Abstract Painting [photograph] by Steven Johnsons, 2019. Pexels.
(<https://www.pexels.com/photo/abstract-painting-1882359/>) CC0

Figure has been
removed due to
copyright restrictions.

Figure D22. Abstract image of coloured bubbles



Figure D23, Red, Green, Yellow and Blue Abstract Painting

Note. Red, Green, Yellow and Blue Abstract Painting [photograph] by Steven Johnsons, 2018. Pexels. (<https://www.pexels.com/photo/red-green-yellow-and-blue-abstract-painting-1283208/>) CC0



Figure D24.

Note. Google Images, CC0 – In the Public Domain



Figure D25. Abstract oil painting

Note. CCO Public Domain



Figure D26

Note. Google Images. CC0 Public Domain



Figure D27

Note. 'After-Munchs' by Fons Heijnsbroek, 2015, Flickr
(<https://www.flickr.com/photos/abstract-art-fons/10020071944/in/pool-artistway/>) CC By 2.0.

Appendix E: Example of Textual Coding

In this assignment I will be assessing both the person-centred approach and cognitive behavioural therapy, I will be describing the difference between both the approaches whilst considering underpinning philosophies, theories of human development, suffering and therapeutic change.

A person-centred approach is where the patient's thoughts and needs are placed at the centre of the service and treated as a human first. The focus is on the individual and what they can accomplish, rather than their illness or impairment (Cooper, 2010). Carl Rogers is the founder of this approach and expanded on the view of Maslow and added; for a person to grow, they need to be in an environment that is congruence, accepting, and empathic. Carl Rogers adopted his views on human suffering and process of therapeutic change from the teachings of humanistic psychology; this could be seen in his interpretation of self-actualisation. Self-actualization is stated as "full realisation of one's capability, full progress of one's abilities, and full appreciation for life." (Ayesh, 2020). In relation to Carl Rogers and his theory on the person-centred approach he furthered this concept by adding that for a person to achieve self-actualisation it's essential for them to be in a state of congruence. Congruence is defined to be a situation in which one's ideal self and actual experience are identical or almost same (Rogers, 1957), Rogers sees congruence to be a significant attribute specifically for a therapist as it enables effective counselling. Congruence in a therapist encourages therapeutic change as it promotes the therapist to be genuine and authentic with the client which then promotes the client to speak freely and to truly be present in their sessions.

Dr Aaron T first developed the practice of cognitive behavioural therapy, CBT was founded on the concept that our thought patterns affected our emotional states. The goal of therapy was to "correct" these behaviours, allowing clients to "think and act more realistically" (Reporter, 2018). The approach focuses on creating a safe space for clients to grow and develop the skill set to allow them to be their own therapist, become their ideal self. The ideal self is defined to be the person you strive to be, it consists of our desires and ambition within life, for it to be a state of ideal self it would require it being dynamic meaning it is forever changing (Reporter, 2018). In connection to the CBT approach Dr Aaron T expressed that essential our thought process is what affects the way we behave (Integrating Cognitive Behavioural and Humanistic Approaches, 2000), he adopted his views on human suffering and process of therapeutic change from the teachings of behavioural approach. This is where Cognitive behavioural therapy differs from Person centred approach as PCA is a humanistic approach whereas CBT is a behavioural approach.

The philosophy behind each approach plays a major role in therapy as each approach has key goals that they try to attain. For a person-centred approach some underpinning philosophy would be autonomy through respectful communication, addressing psychological, spiritual, cultural, social needs, enhancing and client's empowerment (Giusti, 2020). The benefit of having these philosophies is that they are a foundation on which people can build principles and guidelines that help the quality of professional knowledge and establish the integrity of the client-practitioner relationship. The main underpinning philosophies of CBT is that people are aware and able to rationalise their own thoughts and behaviours. PCA and CBT are similar in the manner as they collectively argue that we as people are responsible for our actions and that only our self and change our pattern of behaviour (McLeod, 2019). Some outlined key concepts inaugurated by Beck (1976) are core beliefs, Negative automatic thoughts and cognitive distortions. Becks (1976) has defined core beliefs to be people's fundamental convictions about themselves, others, and the world. Core beliefs are developed early in life and might pertain to cognitive content (Fenn & Byrne, 2013). This would link with automatic negative thoughts as if your core beliefs are steam from a negative perspective it is inevitable that you will have automatic negative thoughts. Negative and random

2:1 In t...	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Coherence - sentence lengthCoherence - signpostingGrammar - punctuation		
2:2...	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Coherence - incomplete sentenceEpistemic access - reference missingEpistemic access - vocabularyGrammar - pronoun		
2:6...	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Epistemic access - mainly correct understandingEpistemic access - referencing error		
2:8...	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Epistemic access - minor errorsExplicitness - no explanation		
2:10 Co...	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Epistemic access - correct understandingEpistemic access - reference missingGrammar - word choice		
2:12...	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Epistemic access - mainly correct understandingEpistemic access - reference missingGrammar - punctuationGrammar - tense		
2:16 In con...	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Coherence - sentence lengthEpistemic access - academic conventionsEpistemic access - referencing errorGrammar - punctuation		
2:18...	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Epistemic access - reference missingGrammar - pronoun		
2:20 Th...	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Coherence - filler sentenceEpistemic access - reference missingEpistemic access - reference missing		
2:22...	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Coherence - typoEpistemic access - correct understandingGrammar - punctuation		
2:23 PC...	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Coherence - typoEpistemic access - correct understandingCoherence - sentence length		
2:25...			
2:3...		<ul style="list-style-type: none">Epistemic access - academic conventionsEpistemic access - minor errorsEpistemic access - reference missingEpistemic access - vocabularyGrammar - punctuationGrammar - tense	
2:4...			<ul style="list-style-type: none">Epistemic access - referenc...Grammar - tense
2:5 Carl...			<ul style="list-style-type: none">Epistemic access - mainly c...Epistemic access - referenc...
2:7 In f...			
2:9...		<ul style="list-style-type: none">Epistemic access - reference missingExplicitness - no explanation	
2:14...		<ul style="list-style-type: none">Epistemic access - referencing errorExplicitness - no explanationCoherence - new paragraph neededEpistemic access - reference missingExplicitness - deictic words	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Epistemic access - misund...
2:17 Th...		<ul style="list-style-type: none">Epistemic access - reference missing	
2:19 Fo...		<ul style="list-style-type: none">Epistemic access - mainly correct understanding	
2:24...		<ul style="list-style-type: none">Coherence - new paragraph neededGrammar - punctuationEpistemic access - correct understandingEpistemic access - potential plagiarism	

Appendix F: Textual Analysis Codes and Code Groups

Code Groups	Code	
Coherence Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Coherence - signposting ○ Coherence - structure 	
Coherence Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Coherence - filler sentence ○ Coherence - incomplete sentence ○ Coherence - lack of flow ○ Coherence - new paragraph needed ○ Coherence - paragraph order ○ Coherence - sentence length ○ Coherence - typo 	
Epistemic access positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Epistemic access - correct referencing ○ Epistemic access - correct understanding ○ Epistemic access – criticality ○ Epistemic access - mainly correct understanding 	
Epistemic access negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Epistemic access - inaccurate claim ○ Epistemic access - minor errors ○ Epistemic access - misunderstanding ○ Epistemic access - out-of-date reference ○ Epistemic access - potential plagiarism ○ Epistemic access - reference missing ○ Epistemic access - referencing error ○ Epistemic access - use of acronym ○ Epistemic access - vocabulary 	
Explicitness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Explicitness - deictic words ○ Explicitness - no explanation ○ Explicitness - no linking ○ Explicitness - non-specific vocab ○ Explicitness - unclear attribution ○ Explicitness - vague 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Explicitness – deictic words ● Explicitness - Vague
Grammar and syntax	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Grammar - adverb ○ Grammar - definite article ○ Grammar - elision ○ Grammar - missing determiner ○ Grammar - missing or incorrect preposition ○ Grammar - passive voice ○ Grammar - plural ○ Grammar - preposition ○ Grammar - pronoun ○ Grammar - punctuation ○ Grammar - run on ○ Grammar - tense 	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">o Grammar - verbo Grammar - word choiceo Syntax - incomplete sentenceo Syntax - sentence structureo Syntax - word order	
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Appendix G: Thematic Analysis Audit Trail

Sample Coding

P: I think ...this one does.

R: That one does? The girl in the library here with a pile of books.

P: Because I feel like this is the kind of environment I need to be in (right) to get work done or to produce a significant amount of work, I need to be on my own. I need to be surrounded by all of my material, my resources. I need to have this type of environment with the books to encourage my learning to, whenever my mind wanders. I don't like to be seated next to windows. (OK) so downstairs, you know, we have a really big window area (Yeah) I tend to sit away from the windows. (OK) Because I always people watch or stare outside the window. So I really have to be next to books or next to like a few tables where my mind wander.

R: Yeah. So you like to be almost, like, encapsulated? Yeah, in in the library. At the heart of the library. And surrounded by books that.

P: Yeah, like, just really concentrating, all my attention completely on my books. On my page.

R: Yeah. Yeah. So I'm wondering what that. What's that? You know, in terms of your time at university, what has that meant to you having that space? How's that been important for you at university?

P: It's really been important because I'm not the type of person who holds focus. (right) So, In education, really, I've had such a big like imagination, so I will always have to recenter my focus. I always have to bring myself back. (OK) A lot of the times. I don't get a lot of work done, right? So I have to be in that type of environment which is like 4 walls and a desk and books (Yeah) with the door shut. Because, I think it was in our reading week. I went into the library 9 to 5 and I sat with like talking people (right) So, like a busier environment. (Yeah) And I didn't get anything done. (OK) I got very little work done. (Yeah) I'm a person who cannot focus.

R: OK, so there's distractions (mm). And you were saying in education in general, has that been your experience then?

P: Yeah. Yeah, because although my background is very, very much "You should go to university. You get the highest degree of education you can achieve and then go out into the world." I wasn't, I was never really focused on education. (Right).

R: So, prior to coming to university. (Yeah) And then there's that maybe some expectation that you would get to uni (Yeah) but your own experience, umm, not that focused on it.

P: Not that focused on it because I was always aware there's problem, there's bigger problems outside of education that or there's things outside that education will not teach you. I was more focused on those experiences but obviously. Umm. Coming from a background where education is really important (yeah) I soon realized, oh, I have to put my head down and to really have a high paying job or to be comfortable in the future, you have to get degree (OK) or you have to get some sort of higher education. You need to put your head down and focus. (Yeah) and be part of an institute for a couple of years.

R: OK, so. So, the temptation to think there's more to life than this and actually you physically do it by, like the girl in the picture (Yeah), there in the library getting your head down and focusing. (Yeah. Yeah.) I'm wondering for you, what's that? What does that feel like? That sitting with your head down? Or if you were looking at the picture, do you get a sense of feeling sense about what that's like that experience?

1:75...
1:1...
Managing workload
Importance of learning environment
Needs as a learner

1:10 B...
Needs as a learner
Not getting work done

1:2...
What it takes to learn - concentration

1... 1:5...
1:77...
1:6 I went...
Self concept as learner
Not getting work done
What it takes to learn - concentration
Busy environment
Collusion with peers - work avoidance

1:7 be...
1:8...
Clash with parental values and expectations
Relationship with education - changed perspective

1:11...
Influence of earlier life experiences
Relationship with education - wider perspective
Self in the world

1:76 I don't like...
Distractions

1:4 I...
Self concept as learner

1:9 I'm...
Self concept as learner

1:12 Com...
Family expectation
Putting my head down
Self discipline

Codes and Code Groups

Code Group	Code
Belonging and Community	Being in the same boat Belonging - role of disciplinary identity Belonging -shared values Belonging and personal development Collusion with peers - work avoidance Engagement needs community Importance of belonging and fitting in Importance of community at uni Loss of academic environment Mature student - lack of belonging Mature student - stigma Positive relationship with peers Valuing different perspectives
Academic literacy development	Academic challenge Academic conventions Academic expectations Academic literacy Assessment literacy Discipline conventions Integration of knowledge Making connections in learning Marking criteria Role of academic literacy in reducing stress Role of feedback Unclear expectations Use of exemplars Writing at university unclear expectations Writing standards at uni - expectations
Generic skills development	Independent learning Managing workload Organisational skills Planning Pleasure and mastery Prioritisation Study habits Time management

Support and support needs	<p>Academic support</p> <p>Academic support - limited resources</p> <p>Decision to seek help</p> <p>Engagement takes help</p> <p>Financial support from uni</p> <p>Importance of feeling supported by the uni</p> <p>Relationship with tutors</p> <p>Second language english</p> <p>Support from family</p> <p>Support from peers</p> <p>Support from tutors</p> <p>Support from uni -inclusion</p> <p>Time pressure</p> <p>Transition - challenges</p> <p>Writing Challenges: Writing challenges - ESL</p> <p>Writing Challenges: Writing challenges - perfectionism</p> <p>Writing Challenges: Writing challenges - SPLD</p>
Prior Educational Experiences	<p>A levels</p> <p>Clearing and access</p> <p>Educational history - emotions</p> <p>Educational history - Language</p> <p>Multi-lingual history</p> <p>Previous educational experience</p> <p>Previous experience of uni</p>
Academic writing - constituent parts, incremental progress, and voice	<p>Writing as journey</p> <p>Writing as journey: Writing and academic freedom</p> <p>Writing as journey: Writing and career development</p> <p>Writing as journey: Writing and changed expectations</p> <p>Writing as journey: writing and confidence</p> <p>Writing as journey: Writing and creativity of ideas</p> <p>Writing as journey: Writing and focus</p> <p>Writing as journey: Writing and fun</p> <p>Writing as journey: writing and lack of confidence</p> <p>Writing as journey: Writing and personal development</p> <p>Writing as journey: Writing as a journey</p> <p>Writing as journey: Writing as a means to belonging -cultural identity</p> <p>Writing as journey: Writing as a means to language development</p> <p>Writing as journey: Writing as personal practice</p> <p>Writing as journey: Writing as self-development</p> <p>Writing Challenges</p>

	<p>Writing Challenges: Dyslexia</p> <p>Writing Challenges: Readiness for academic writing</p> <p>Writing Challenges: Writing - content and structure</p> <p>Writing Challenges: Writing - grammar</p> <p>Writing Challenges: Writing - old habits</p> <p>Writing Challenges: writing as labour</p> <p>Writing Challenges: Writing challenges - Articulating thinking</p> <p>Writing Challenges: Writing challenges - ESL</p> <p>Writing Challenges: Writing challenges - perfectionism</p> <p>Writing Challenges: Writing challenges - SPLD</p> <p>Writing development</p> <p>Writing development: Academic writing - Incremental progress</p> <p>Writing development: reflective writing</p> <p>Writing development: Successful writing takes time</p> <p>Writing development: Writing - role of feedback</p> <p>Writing development: writing - vocabulary</p> <p>Writing development: Writing and own voice</p> <p>Writing development: Writing easy</p> <p>Writing development: Writing improvement</p> <p>Writing development: Writing practice</p> <p>Writing development: Writing process</p> <p>Writing standards and conventions</p> <p>Writing standards and conventions: Academic writing - proofreading</p> <p>Writing standards and conventions: Academic writing - referencing</p> <p>Writing standards and conventions: Academic writing - using AI tools</p> <p>Writing standards and conventions: Writing - role of language</p> <p>Writing standards and conventions: Writing genres</p> <p>Writing standards and conventions: Writing standards at uni</p> <p>Writing standards and conventions: Writing style</p>
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University environment - helpful and hindering factors	Benefits of online learning Busy environment Challenges of university social context Collusion with peers - work avoidance Competing demands - academic Importance of learning environment Structure of academic year - challenges Transition - no preconceptions Uni as different space University as escape University provides freedom
Socio-cultural factors - legacy and challenges	Acculturation Clash with parental values and expectations Conditional acceptance Cultural differences Cultural values External demands family Family background Family expectation Family needs Family values Fear of failure Fear of humiliation Importance of family HE experience Parental educational history Parental expectations
Socio-economic factors - legacy and challenges	Challenge of full-time study Competing demands - work and family Financial worries immigration Influence of earlier life experiences Socio-economic background

Personal orientation to learning	Attendance and commitment Immersion in task Ownership of learning Putting my head down Relationship with education - ambivalence Relationship with education - caring Relationship with education - changed perspective Relationship with education - differences Relationship with education - difficulties Relationship with education - family Relationship with education - passion for learning Relationship with education - personal relevance Relationship with education - wider perspective Valuing learning Vocational vs academic
Outcomes and orientation to outcomes	Awareness of attrition Career focus Good outcome in the end Impact of failure Impact of personal change on others Importance of planning Learning journey Ongoing journey Perfectionism - loosening Reward of perseverance Role of grades Success brings opportunities and choice Validation through success Visualising success
Disciplinary influence and shortcomings	Engagement with the course Fit with discipline Importance of module coherence Positive influence of discipline

Individual factors, self-concept, personality and personal responsibility	Achievement in face of difficulty Ambition Aspiration Consciousness Determination Distractions Embarrassment Endeavour Engagement and enjoyment Engagement being proactive Engagement take perserverence Engagement takes courage Engagement takes development Faith and spirituality Hard work Help seeking challenges Hope Incremental gains Intention Intrinsic motivation Learner identity Lifestyle Love of learning Love of reading Mature student mature student learning challenges Needs as a learner Not getting work done Perfectionism persistence Personal challenge Personal change Personal disappointment Personal goal Personal growth Personal growth - independence Personal journey Personal meaning Personal motivation Personal needs Personal preference Personal project personal responsibility Personal satisfaction Personal standards Personal wellbeing
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	Personality and belonging Personality and learning personality and self-concept Physical health Pragmatism Self-concept Self-concept as learner Self-discipline Self in the world Self-awareness Self-belief Self-concept Self-concept - people like me Self-criticism Self-reliance Tunnel vision What it takes to learn - concentration
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Emotional experience of learning	Anxiety Confusion Cost of perserverence Distractions Embarrassment Emotional experience of learning - confidence emotional experience of learning - imposter syndrome Emotional experience of uni Emotional impact Emotional impact - gratitude emotional impact - pride Emotional maturity Frustration Happiness Inner critic Mental health Object evokes feelings Overwhelmed Pressure Pride Procrastination Relationship with education - fear Stress Stress and writing Ups and downs worry
Reading, reading, reading	Love of reading Reading and assignments Reading and comprehension Reading and critical thinking Reading and intrinsic motivation Reading and motivation for learning Reading and time Reading and vocabulary development Reading challenges Reading development Reading helps grammar Role of reading

Development of themes and subthemes from code groups:

Code Group	Subtheme	Theme
Support and support needs	A student like me	Individual Factors and Dispositions
Personal orientation to learning		
Outcomes and orientation to outcomes		
Individual factors, self-concept, personality and personal responsibility	A beautiful accident	
Emotional experience of learning		
University environment - helpful and hindering factors	Institutional Resources	Students in the Institutional Context
Disciplinary influence and shortcomings		
Belonging and Community	Peers and Interpersonal resources	
Academic literacy development	From performativity to thinking	Reading the word and writing the person
Academic writing - constituent parts, incremental progress and voice		
Academic writing - constituent parts, incremental progress and voice		
Generic skills development	Generic skills for coping	
Reading, reading, reading	Reading, reading, reading!	
Prior Educational Experiences		Students in Context – Impetus, Struggle and Awareness
Socio-cultural factors - legacy and challenges		
Socio-economic factors - legacy and challenges		

Glossary and/or List of abbreviations

AL – Academic Literacies

APP – Access and participation plan

EDAG -Ethnicity Degree Awarding Gap

ELP – English Language Proficiency

ESB – English Speaking Background

FIF – First in family

HE – Higher Education

HEI – Higher Education Institution

IPNB – Interpersonal Neurobiology

OfS – Office for Students

Ofsted – Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills

PCA – Person Centred Approach
