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### Cover Page Footnote

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**Writing Problems and Student Retention: A Quantitate Study into Contemplation of  
Withdrawal among Undergraduate University Students in Ireland**

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### Abstract

This paper examines the results of a quantitative study of the relationship between problems with academic writing and undergraduate student retention. In spite of the evidence that writing problems may affect student attrition, problems with academic writing are not listed as a separate factor in most retention models. Consequently, academic writing is not usually singled out in interventions designed to address student attrition. However, it is possible that the absence of writing issues in retention models is due to the predominant view of writing as a single element within academic studies as opposed to a complex and multi-modal process, involving students' background and skill-acquisition, social context, behaviour and time-management, as well emotional and psychological well-being. In order to test this possibility, a survey was designed and administered to undergraduate students at an Irish university, aiming to capture student writing process awareness and writing issues within social, emotional, behavioural, and artisanal contexts. The results provide a breakdown of the challenges faced by students who see issues with academic writing as a factor in their contemplation of withdrawal, ranging from the need for more support to lack of confidence and writing anxiety. These insights can be used in designing targeted retention interventions that would address students' problems with writing. The answers of the students who contemplated withdrawal were compared to the answers of those who did not contemplate withdrawal and those who did not connect their thoughts on withdrawal to difficulties with writing. The comparison suggests that some writing-related issues, such as the perception of writing as isolating, may also play an indirect role in student attrition. This further underscores the need to study the role of writing issues in student attrition.

*Keywords:* student retention; writing process; writing anxiety; consideration of withdrawal; academic writing in Ireland.

## Introduction

This study explores the relationship between writing problems experienced by undergraduate students and student retention. It proposes that the exclusion of difficulties with academic writing as a separate factor in most student retention models might be due to the view of writing as a single element within academic studies as opposed to a complex process, involving students' background and skill-acquisition, social context, behaviour and time-management, as well emotional and psychological well-being. Drawing on the studies that view contemplation of withdrawal as a strong predictor of student attrition (Webb & Cotton, 2018; Xuereb, 2015; Sanders, Daly & Fitzgerald, 2016; Willcoxson, Cotter & Joy, 2011), this study is based on a survey of undergraduate students in the University of Galway. It provides an insight into the particular challenges faced by students who identify problems with academic writing as a factor in contemplation of withdrawal. Their responses were compared with the responses of students who did not contemplate withdrawal and those who did not link their contemplation of withdrawal to struggles with academic writing. The comparison raises the possibility that some writing issues may affect students indirectly, thus contributing to attrition even among students who do not associate their contemplation of withdrawal with difficulties with academic writing.

### **Background: writing problems and student retention models**

Most students are engaged in writing throughout their undergraduate degree, with writing being used for assessment as well as studying and note-taking (Elturki, 2021). Several studies support the idea that retention can be improved through students receiving support with writing, whether in the form of participation in writing remediation programmes (Attewell, et al., 2006; Bettinger & Long, 2005; Baker & Jolly, 1999), through visiting learning centres (Lau, 2003) and, particularly, writing centres (Babcock & Thonus, 2012) or through

comprehensive interventions linking writing with other areas (Ruecker et al., 2017; Buyseri, et al., 2017). The obverse also seems to be true, with student failure in a writing course being a predictor of early withdrawal from the university (Garrett et al., 2017). Nevertheless, issues with writing are not listed as a separate factor in the early retention models (McNeely, 1939; Summerskill, 1962; Spady, 1971; Astin, 1975). Nor is writing mentioned in Tinto's influential model (first proposed in 1975 and revised by the author in 1993), or in the later studies (Bean 1980, 1983; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Seidman 2012).

Why does writing seem to be absent from most retention models? One answer may be that writing is subsumed in the general idea of the academic studies. With retention models designed to analyse a complex range of factors both within and outside institutional control, it is natural that what might be regarded as a single component of academic studies is not isolated. Thus, when McNeely (1939) identified academic failure, financial difficulties, and “burdensome academic load” (Morrison & Silverman, 2005) as key reasons for students leaving the institution, he did not see the need to look closer to see how writing or another type of academic practice, such as mathematics, might have contributed to the students' workload. Similarly, when Astin (1975) singled out the habit of turning homework in time and doing it every day as one of the key personal factors affecting a student's likelihood of staying in college, he did not feel the need to examine the extent to which this homework included written assignments (see also Morrison and Silverman, 2005).

However, writing is more than a single element of the study process (Lillis, 2002). Students write in exams; they take notes in lectures; they are required to write on campus and off campus. Looming deadlines determine their approach to time-management, potentially interfering with their sleep or determining the nature of their social or familial interactions. Further, writing presents a unique set of psychological and emotional challenges (Brand, 1987; Pajares, 2003; Haas, 2009; Sword, 2017; Huerta et al., 2017). Students may suffer from

writing anxiety, and cope by infinitely procrastinating and delaying writing. Additional difficulties may have to do with students' cultural experiences with writing. Not all forms of writing and linguistic expression are equally accepted in academia at the present time. Even though recent years have seen increasing calls for inclusivity, academic writing still operates as an exclusion mechanism. As Cecile Badenhorst (2011) points out, echoing research by Mary Soliday (2011), "far from being a discrete and separate 'skill', writing is part of a complex network of social practices conducted within different academic discourses".

For most students, therefore, writing affects all the aspects of their university experience. Writing pervades all the four variables for student retention identified by Bean and Metzner (1985), academic, background, psychological and environmental. It is also present in the five areas identified by Tinto (1993) as impacting student retention, expectations, support, feedback, involvement, and learning.

However, its very pervasiveness is what makes writing invisible. Similar to the scholars of retention such as Tinto and Metzner, students do not always highlight writing when describing their difficulties with studying. Thus, a UK report, which involved surveying over 3,000 students in third-level institutions, found "academic studies" to be the "most frequently cited reason for considering withdrawing" (Foster et al., 2011, p.13). Yet it is not clear from the report the extent to which problems with writing contributed to the students' difficulties or dissatisfaction. In fact, the report does not mention writing. The idea that writing is a multi-layered and complex process (Haas, 2009) is not usually taught to students. Consequently, a student who may have experienced writing anxiety due to their inability to separate the drafting and the editing parts of the process may only report anxiety over assignments. A student who did not develop techniques for expressing their thoughts on paper may not necessarily see it as a writing issue; they may report a general inability to

submit course work. As we shall see, the problem whereby writing is not identified as an area of concern for student retention is particularly noticeable in Ireland.

### **Retention and Writing in Ireland**

Student retention and successful student progression are highlighted in *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* and the *System Performance Framework 2014-2016* (Liston et al., 2016). Currently, the overall retention rate for Irish third-level institutions is 76%, a relatively high percentage compared to other countries (Pigott & Frawley, 2019). In the early 2000s, several initiatives took place to study student retention in Ireland and to provide support for projects aimed to improve retention. None of them specifically targeted writing (Van Stolk et al., 2007).

Most quantitative research into retention in Ireland focuses on student characteristics, such as gender or social class, as opposed to conditions within the educational institution (Pigott & Frawley 2019). Relevant to the current study is the positive correlation found between previous educational attainment and, specifically, grades in English and mathematics, and students' graduation rates (Morgan et al., 2000; Blaney & Mulkeen 2008; Mooney et al., 2010; Liston, 2016; Pigott & Frawley, 2019). NVIVO analysis revealed academic issues, and specifically issues with "course" emerged as the main theme with "course-difficulty" as a significant sub-theme, in a qualitative analysis of over 4000 entries of qualitative data generated at 16 educational institutions commissioned by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (NFETL) (Moore-Cherry et al., 2015).

In contrast to other European countries, where financial and social difficulties were found to be the main causes for student withdrawal, student attrition in Ireland appears to be related to issues within the academic domain (Van Stolk et al., 2007). The question is whether some of these reported course difficulties may be related to problems with academic writing. The above-mentioned correlation between retention and students' past performance



in the English exam hints at this possibility. This finding is also the only way to measure the significance of writing for student success using available large-sample quantitative data. Irish institutions do not currently require their students to attend any foundational writing courses of the type common in the US. If writing tends to disappear from surveys and models of student retention in the US, this is even more the case in Ireland. The lack of writing-focused cross-discipline courses and their associated assessment makes writing invisible in Ireland, and problems with writing may remain under-reported as a result.

Indeed, writing has not emerged as a strong theme in the studies of student retention in Irish educational institutions (Van Stolk et al., 2007). Consequently, measures taken to improve student retention did not include targeted support with academic writing. Institution-level initiatives included “improved information for prospective students; mentoring initiatives; retention officers”, “Maths/Science/Engineering/IT-specific programs” and a variety of compulsory and optional programmes of various duration offering “advice on study skills, effective reading, critical thinking, exam strategy, time management, stress management, and communication and presentation skills” (Van Stolk et al., 2007). Writing, whether or not it might have been included in some of these interventions, does not appear to have been a significant enough component to be identified among the areas of support.

Writing similarly goes unmentioned in the recommendations of the 2015 NFETL report (Moore-Cherry et al., 2015); this is understandable since the analysis of the students’ responses did not reveal “writing” to be a key theme. However, recommendations 7 and 10 deal with areas closely related to writing, namely assessment and general skills, without, however, acknowledging this connection.

Recommendation 7 suggests that “assessment feedback and academic support structures” should be reviewed with a “particular focus on the first three months of a programme” (Moore-Cherry et al., 2015, p.63). Assessment is writing-based for the majority

of students. Of course, academic writing is not the only potential challenge for students, but the multiplicity of factors is precisely the reason why it is important to examine the extent to which the obligation to write might hinder students' efforts while checking what support structures they can use.

Recommendation 10 calls for more “focus on general learning skills at higher education in the early weeks of first year, as well as building curricula interventions that promote student engagement and student resilience in their higher education studies” (Moore-Cherry et al., 2015, p.64). “General learning skills” is a broad term: different institutions may have different interpretations as to what general learning skills are and to what degree they should include writing. Yet, it is well established that successful writing instruction requires the framework of a focused course, which would enable students to engage in “sustained and guided practice” and to participate in carefully sequenced and selected tasks (Hesse 2017, p.3). Ad-hoc workshops, or additional written assignments, however well designed, do not give students enough scope to develop as academic writers. “Student resilience”, also highlighted in this recommendation, is a similarly broad area rather than a narrow focus for intervention. It is worth noting that if it were the case that writing anxiety or maths anxiety constituted a significant cause for concern, then students would be more likely to benefit from resilience-building courses in these areas rather than general hours allocated to improving their coping skills.

The phrasing of the 2015 NFETL report recommendations follows the pattern seen in retention studies and models: writing disappears between the lines. The absence of general writing courses as well as limited funding provided to writing centres is further indication that, in Ireland, writing is not seen as a major area of concern with regards to student support. This contrasts with the possibility that, as part of the general issues with the course of study, writing plays a more important part in retention in Ireland than it does in other countries.

## Method

### *Contemplation of Withdrawal or Doubting*

A key concept for this study was “doubting”, which refers to thoughts about leaving a course of study at the university. The term “doubters” originating from the work of Sarah E. Mackie (2001) refers to students who doubt their commitment to completing their studies at the university. The concept has been used extensively to gain insight into issues with students’ attention and retention (Martin et al., 2016). Doubting can be used interchangeably with the term “considering withdrawal” (Foster et al., 2011) and “contemplation of withdrawal” (Webb & Cotton, 2018). Another term to describe the phenomenon is “likelihood to leave the university” (Willcoxson et al., 2011). In this paper, the term “contemplation of withdrawal” and “doubting” are used interchangeably to describe the concept, but the shorter phrases “doubters” or “non-doubters” are used to describe students who experience thoughts of leaving the university.

Contemplation of withdrawal or doubting has been found to be closely linked to actual withdrawal (Willcoxson et al., 2011; Foster et al., 2011; Xuereb 2015), in the sense that, as Lalage D. Sanders, Annette P. Daly and Katherine Fitzgerald put it, “Not all students who doubt withdraw, but those who do withdraw first experience doubts” (2016, p.78). Studying doubting allows to explore attrition issues while avoiding the logistical difficulties of surveying past students. Moreover, students who are still in the university or college are actively experiencing the challenges that make them contemplate withdrawal and might be able to identify them better than those who have left their studies and for whom the challenges are in the past (Webb & Cotton 2018). Surveying students rather than university leavers also helps avoid methodological difficulties arising from university leavers’ responses being potentially “influenced by post hoc rationalisation” (Foster et al., 2011).

### *Study Design*

The aim of this study was two-fold: to get an insight into the particular challenges and need for support experienced by doubters with writing problems; and to find out whether some of these problems and the need for support may also be prevalent among those who do not identify writing issues as a factor in contemplation of withdrawal (doubters without writing problems). In the absence of existing instruments, a questionnaire was designed and discussed with other writing professionals outside the University of Galway and with a small focus groups of undergraduate students before being sent to a large cohort of undergraduate students at the University of Galway. The questionnaire had 22 Likert-type questions, and one multiple choice question. Likert-type questions rather than a Likert-scale were used because the intention was to examine specific writing issues rather than study the responses as a composite scale (Boone & Boone 2012).

The first question was used as a way to get participants to confirm that they had read the information sheet, were satisfied with the information provided, agreed to take part in the study, and knew that they had the right to withdraw from the study. Two questions (Q2 and Q3) were used to establish whether students contemplated withdrawal and whether writing issues, including writing anxiety and writing in exams, were a factor: Q2 asked students whether they considered leaving the university before completing their course of studies; Q3 asked students to identify all factors that influenced their contemplation of withdrawal. The choices were:

- None: I have not considered leaving the university
- Finance, family commitments or health
- Other reasons not related to studying (e.g. travel plans, career opportunities, relocation)
- Difficulties with keeping up with the workload

- My expectations of my chosen course have not been met
- Difficulties with academic writing (essays, assignments, lab-reports and so on)  
Difficulties with submitting work on time
- Difficulties with writing in exams
- Stress or anxiety triggered by my workload
- Stress or anxiety triggered by the requirement to submit written work
- Stress or anxiety triggered by exams
- Other

Two other questions were designed to establish the degree to which students find writing assignments and essays difficult (Q5), and whether their studies would benefit from additional support with academic writing (Q23)

Fourteen more questions sought to get a breakdown of the particular difficulties faced by students. The questions were informed by Helen Sword's idea that behavioural, social, artisanal, and emotional habits are the cornerstones of productive writing practice (2017, p.4). Swords' theory, based on her qualitative research into the habits of professional academics, was adapted to examine writing in the context of university studies; thus "social aspects" are ways in which writing relates to students' overall experience of life on campus and the way writing integrates with their other studies; "artisanal aspects" refer to students' view of their ability as writers; "emotional aspects" refer to their enjoyment of writing, anxiety, and motivation. It was decided to limit questions on behavioural aspects to issues of time-management because it was felt that other issues covered by Sword, such as writing rituals and use of space, being possibly unfamiliar, might be better suited for focus groups or structured interviews than a large-scale questionnaire. Table 1 gives a breakdown of the questions according to the four groupings.

**Table 1***Question groupings*

Artisanal Aspects	Social Aspects	Behavioral Aspects/Time-Management	Emotional Aspects
Q8. I find it hard to express my thoughts and ideas in writing.	Q18. I find writing isolating.	Q6. I find writing essays and other academic assignments difficult.	Q4. I enjoy writing essays and other academic assignments.
Q20. I am gradually getting better at academic writing.	Q19. I share my writing assignments with other people besides my teachers.	Q10. I feel that I need more time to write my assignments than my peers.	Q7. Writing makes me anxious.
Q22. I am already a competent writer.	Q16. I would find studying easier overall, if I did not have as much writing to do.	Q9. How much of your overall time do you spend working on your essays and other written assignments (including researching, brainstorming, outlining, and thinking about them)?	Q21. Becoming competent at academic writing is important for my future.
	Q17. Writing helps me to understand and remember course materials.	Q10. I feel that I need more time to write my assignments than my peers.	

Finally, five additional questions sought to get an insight into the students' metacognitive understanding of the writing process and were informed by Sarah Haas' model of the writing process (2009), which divides it into five non-sequential areas: *exploring*, *unloading*, *polishing and publishing*, *structuring* and *incubating*. Questions 11–15 asked students to indicate what percentage of their time is spent on each of these areas.

Most questions had a standard scale of agreement from 1 ('strongly agree') to 5 ('strongly disagree') with an additional option of "not applicable", which was included to ensure that those students who felt that none of the options suited them could proceed with

the survey without giving an incorrect answer. However, questions on writing anxiety and ability to express one's thoughts in writing had a frequency scale, from 1 ('always') to 5 ('never'). Questions on time-management approaches included a percentage scale, from 80%–100% to 0%–20%, and did not include a non-applicable option.

The questionnaire was administered in the second term of the 2017–18 academic year. The Blackboard Inc. survey tool was used to build the questionnaire and anonymise the data. Email invitations were also generated via Blackboard and sent to over 12,000 undergraduate students. No incentives were offered for the completion of the survey. Students were told that by taking part, they would help the Academic Writing Centre at the University of Galway to conduct research into writing problems and staying at the university. Ethical approval for the project was received from the University of Galway Ethics Board before the process was started. For comparison, the data was processed using SPSS Statistics (Version 26.0).

The fact that the author of the project is the manager of the Academic Writing Centre (AWC) at the University of Galway presented an issue of a potential bias, in the sense that a discovery between retention and writing problems would be advantageous to the AWC. To address the problem, survey invitations were issued to a large number of undergraduate students with or without a connection to the AWC; no implications of the potential findings were mentioned to the participants.

### **Findings**

A total of 238 usable questionnaires was obtained. All were undergraduates at University of Galway: 86 had enrolled in autumn 2016; 87 had enrolled in autumn 2017; and 65 had enrolled in 2018. It was decided not to collect any additional demographic information such as age, sex, gender, sexual orientation, or background. On a practical level, this was to ensure that in the event of small sample being obtained, students could not be identified and did not

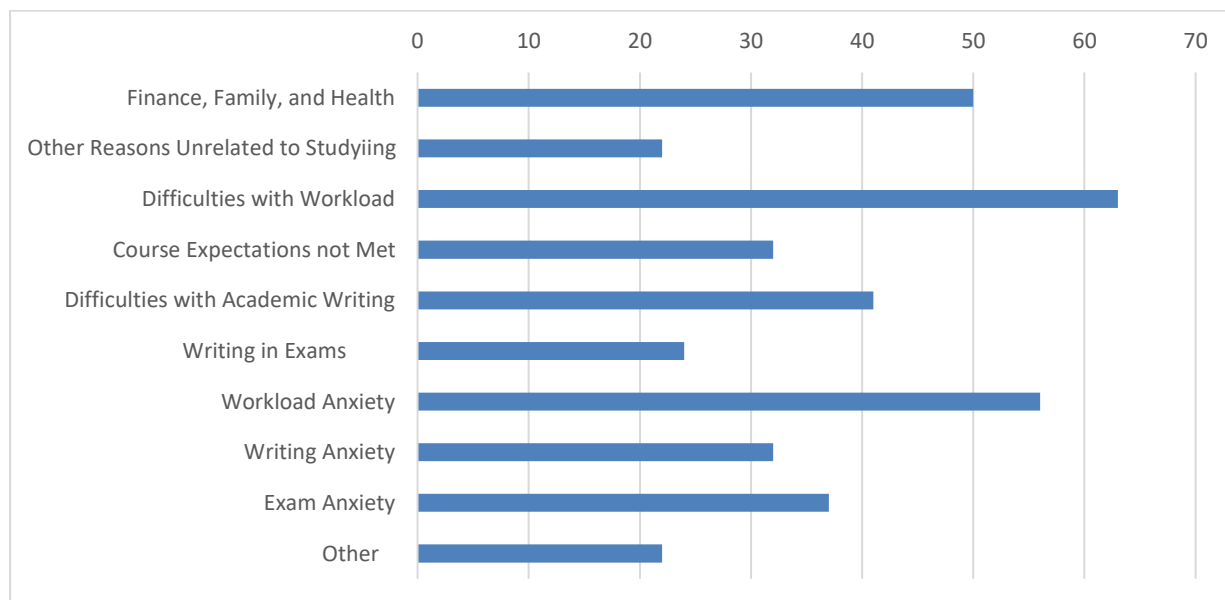
have any reason to fear being identified. In addition, there was a desire to prevent students thinking that their attributes were gathered to examine them as predictors of retention.

### 1. Reasons for contemplation for withdrawal.

The survey responses pointed to “difficulties with workload” as the most prevalent factor in the students’ consideration for withdrawal. This is line with some of the earliest studies on student attrition (McNeely, 1939) and with the documented reasons for attrition in Ireland (Moore-Cherry et al., 2015; Van Stolk et al., 2007). Finance, family and health occupy the second place as a factor. Workload anxiety occupies the third place, and writing difficulties follow after. Figure 1 indicates that the overlapping issues of writing anxiety, writing in exams, and difficulties with writing are important factors and that their interconnections should be considered.

### Figure 1

*Factors of Contemplation of Withdrawal*



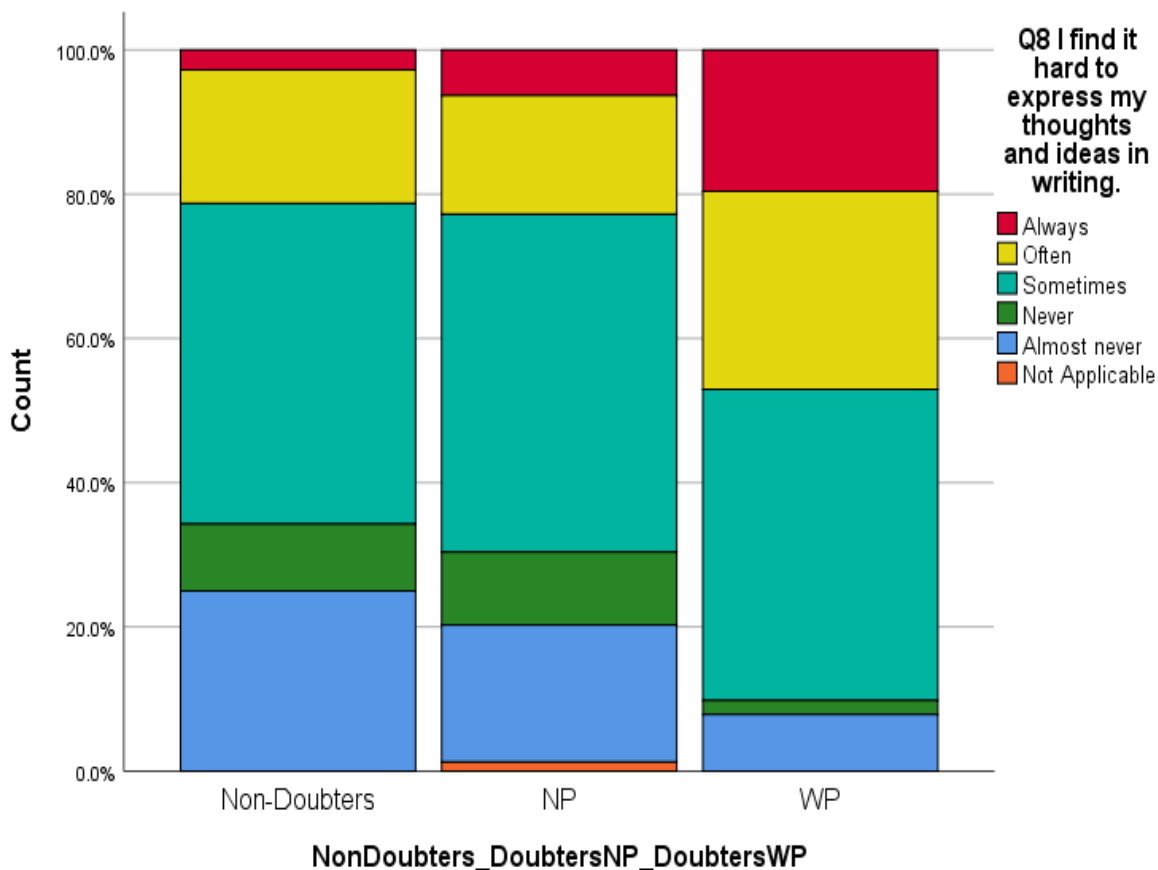


## 2. Comparison of the three groups

Based on their responses to Q3, respondents were divided into three groups: those who did not contemplate withdrawing from the university before completing their course (non-doubters; N=108), those who contemplated withdrawal but did not identify any writing issues as factors (doubters without stated writing problems; N=79), and those who attributed their contemplation of withdrawal wholly or in part to writing problems (doubters with stated problems; N=51). A comparison was made using a series of univariate ANOVA (Analysis of Variance), a common data analysis technique used in educational research. (The results of this comparison may be found in the Appendix.)

**Figure 2**

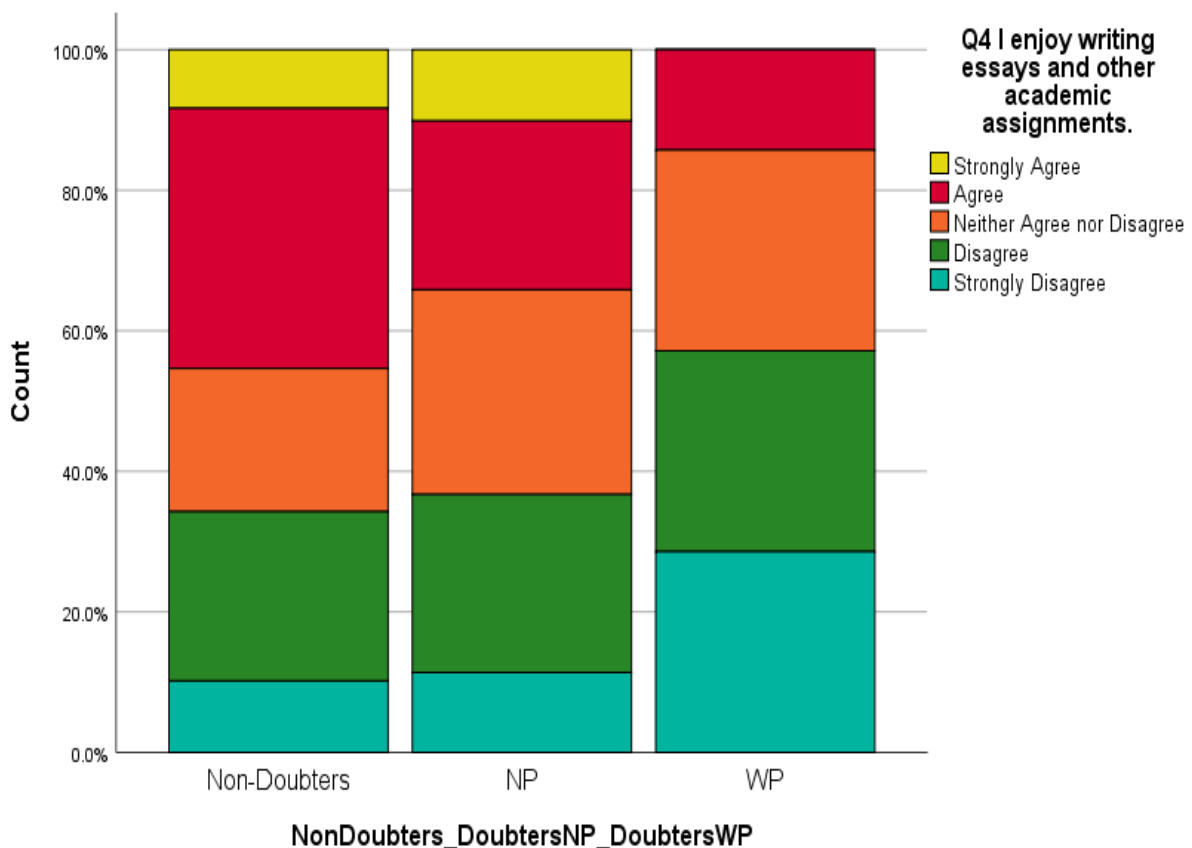
*Enjoyment of Writing (Question 4)*



As expected, the analysis revealed significant differences between doubters and the two other groups, and that doubters with writing problems would show lower degree of agreement with all the statements in relation to issues that impact writing positively and higher degree of agreement with all the statements in relation to issues that impact writing negatively. Figures 2 and 3 represent a typical breakdown of responses by the three groups, with the doubters with writing problems (WP) experiencing less enjoyment of writing and more difficulties with expressing their thoughts than the other two groups.

**Figure 3**

*Difficulty with expressing one's thoughts in writing (Question 8)*



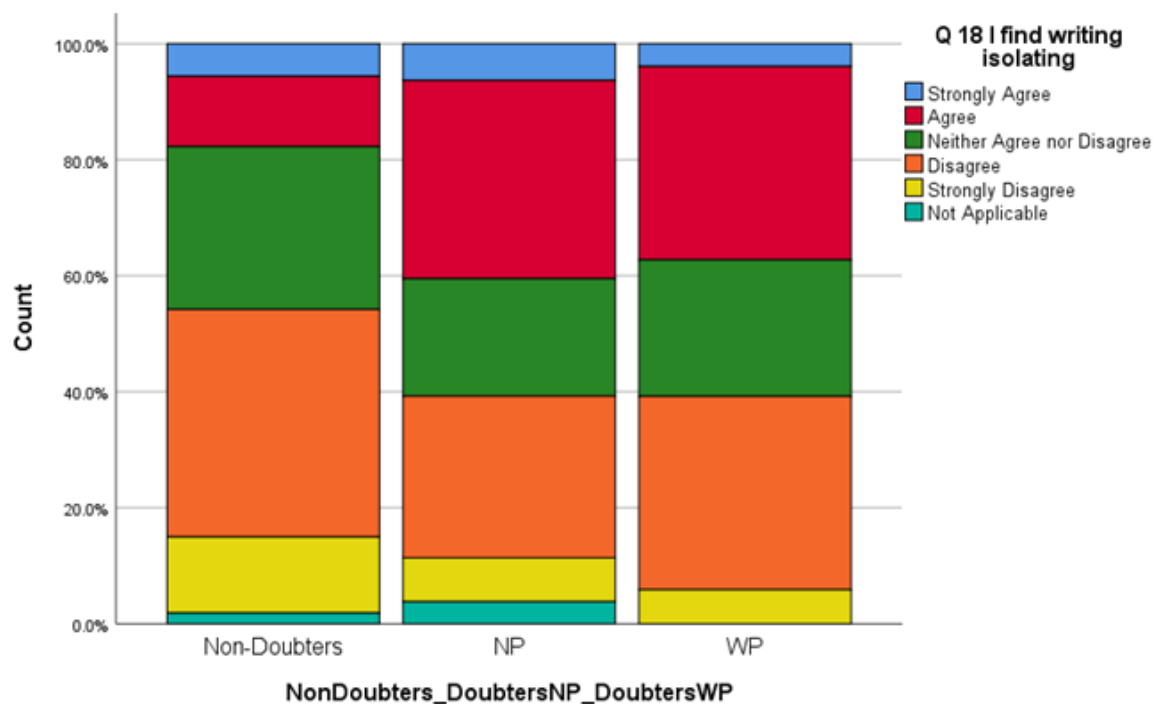
No significant overall differences were found between groups regarding writing time distribution (Q11-15), the contribution of writing to comprehension (Q17), sharing one's

writing (Q19) or the perception that academic writing is an important skill for one's future (Q21).

In the case of two questions, Q9 on time spent on writing assignment and Q20 on perceived improvement in writing, the responses of the second group (doubters without stated writing problems) occupied a middle position, displaying no statistical significant difference, between the other two groups, who differed from each other.

#### Figure 4

*Question 18: "I find writing isolating". Degrees of Agreement across the three groups*



The most intriguing result concerned the responses to "I find writing isolating" (Figure 4; Q18). Students' sense that writing is isolating differed significantly between non-doubters and doubters who did not report writing problems ( $p=0.011$ ). Doubters who reported writing problems did not significantly differ from doubters without writing problems ( $p=.91$ ) or from non-doubters, though the comparison was trending in this analysis ( $p=0.086$ ). This suggests that a negative experience of writing may contribute to considerations of leaving university even among those who do not report directly experiencing writing problems.

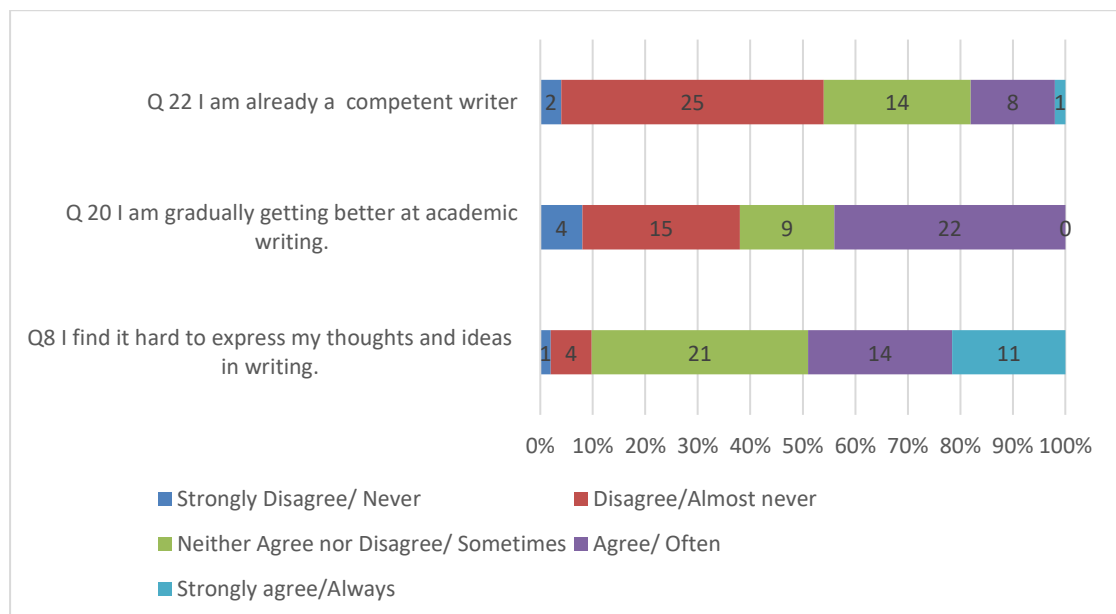
### 3. Doubters with stated writing problems

An overwhelming majority (82%) of doubters with stated writing problems expressed agreement or strong agreement with the statement that they find writing essays difficult, while 76% confirmed that they would find it easier to study if they received more support with writing. Using an adapted version of Sword's 2017 model, the rest of their answers are presented here in four clusters referring to artisanal, social, emotional, and behavioural aspects of writing practice.

The first cornerstone of Sword's model, the artisanal aspect, refers to writers' attitude to their craft, including their approach to the process of the mastery of writing, their work process and their ability to address the various challenges therein, and the qualities they seek in their written text (Sword 2017). Students were asked about their existing writing competence, their estimation of their gradual improvement as writers, and difficulties with expressing their thoughts.

#### Figure 5

*Students' Attitudes to Writing as a Craft (the Artisanal Aspect)*



As can be seen in Figure 5, nearly half of the students (49%) stated that they always or often found it difficult to express their ideas in writing, and over 50% expressed disagreement or strong disagreement with the statement that they are competent writers. This means that, for some students, assignments remain difficult in spite of their belief that they are competent writers. Teachers of writing should not find it surprising; to become a good writer means to acknowledge the difficulty of the process (Elbow, 1998, p.18; Sword, 2017, p. 79). However, the question is whether the difference in numbers is due to the students' understanding of the inherent difficulty of the writing process or their definition of writing competence. Students may, for instance, view writing competence solely in terms of their knowledge of the rules of grammar; they may not be aware of the wider ranges of writing competence, which include the understanding of the whole writing process and an ability to deal with difficulties in a constructive way.

Of more concern is the fact that just over 40% of students in this group thought they were getting better at writing. Motivation has been found to be correlated with perceptions of existing ability as well as expectancy of success (Sanders et al., 2016; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). If these students feel that they are not progressing in the subject in which their perceived existing ability is low, their motivation to persevere with the subject might be severely affected.

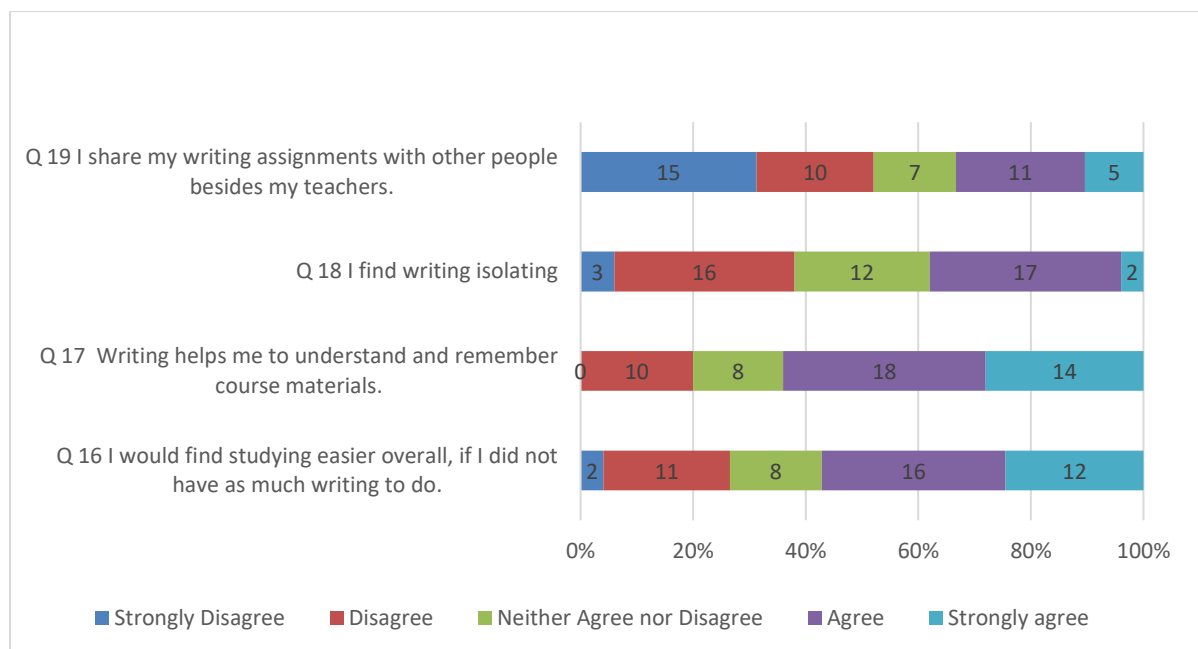
The second cornerstone of Sword's model is the social aspect. Other people influence the act of writing, not only as readers or mentors, but also as the writer's community (Sword, 2017, p.106). Indeed, writing is not an isolated act but a social practice (Aitchison & Lee 2006) determined by the context of a social situation. Students were asked how writing affects their social life through the question concerning whether they find writing isolating and whether they share writing with other people apart from their teachers. Questions asking

whether writing assists or hinders their studies were intended to offer an insight into how writing fits in with their overall experience of studying

As Figure 6 illustrates, students in this group do not tend to share their work with other students (with 52% expressing disagreement or strong disagreement) and find writing isolating (with 58% expressing agreement or strong agreement).

## Figure 6

### *Writing in the Context of Students' Studies and Social Interactions (The Social Aspect)*

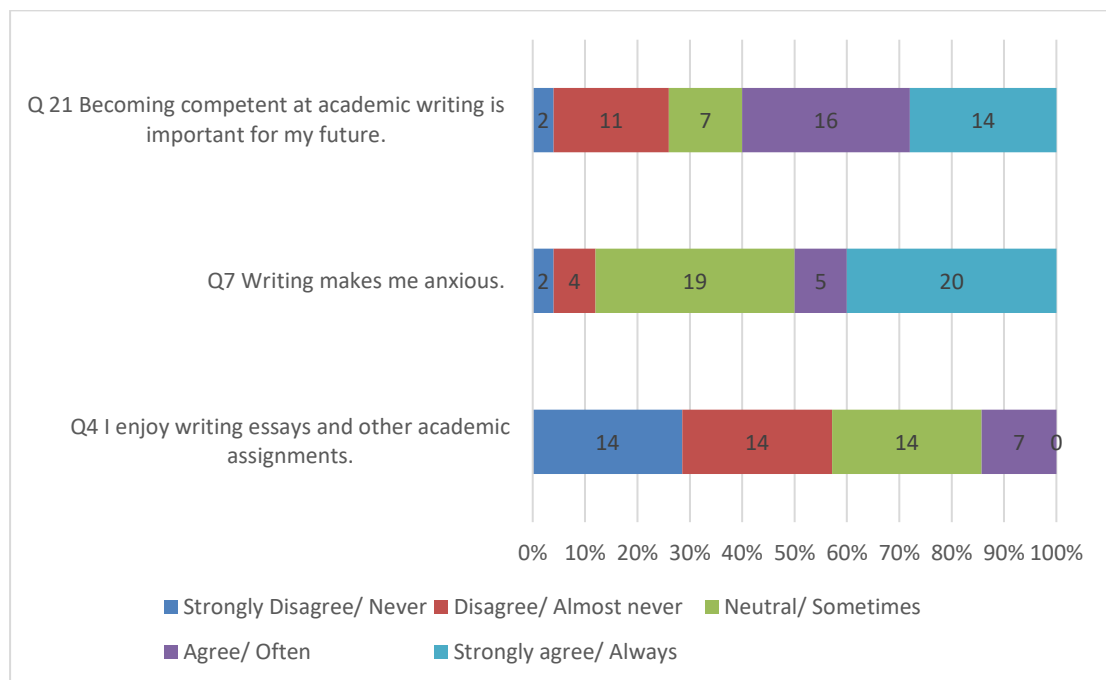


The majority of the students in this group believe that writing helps them to understand and remember course material (with 64% expressing agreement or strong agreement). Yet nearly half of the group also believe that studying would be easier without the writing requirement (with 48% expressing agreement or strong agreement). In other words, for many doubters with writing problems, writing is both a hindrance to learning and something they believe is essential to their learning process. This double-edged difficulty is compounded by the fact that the majority of students in this group also believe that their writing skills are not improving.

The third cornerstone of Sword's model concerns emotions. While it has long been known that emotions affect student writing (Brand, 1987), more recent work by Haas (2009) and Sword (2017) include emotions in their models of the writing process. Thus Haas gives the concept of "feelings" a prominent place in her writing model, while Sword advises writers to see their work in a positive light, to avoid negatively couched writing tips, and to develop techniques to make writing an enjoyable activity. Students were asked to assess their enjoyment of writing, whether writing makes them anxious, and whether they considered becoming competent writers to be important for their future. In this way, the survey hoped to capture the effects of writing on their emotions, their psychological well-being as well as their motivation to write.

### Figure 7

#### *Writing and Motivation, Psychological Well-being and Emotions*



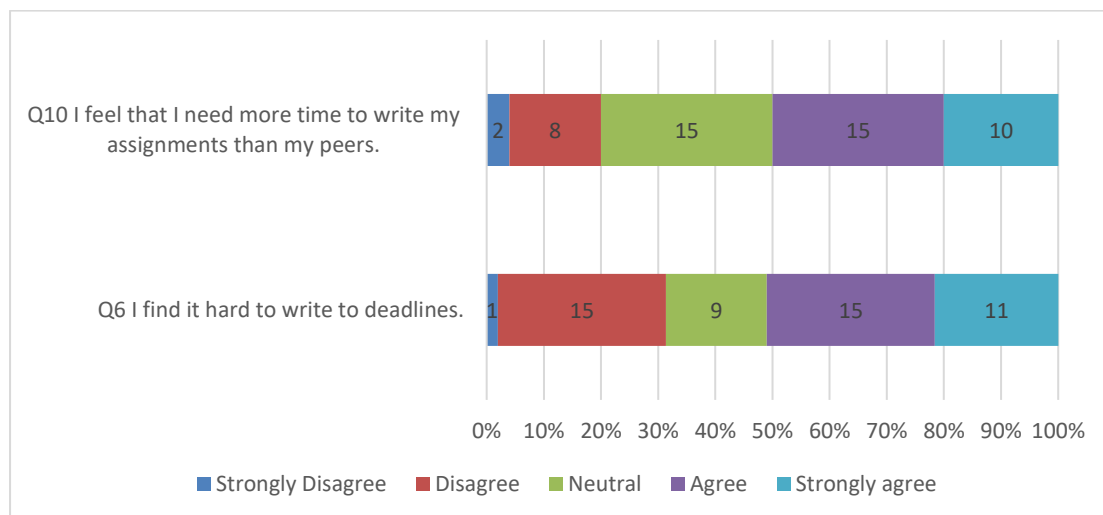
As can be seen in Figure 7, the majority of students from group 3 (doubters with stated writing problems) consider writing to be important to their future (with 60% expressing

agreement or strong agreement) and do not enjoy academic writing (with 57% expressing disagreement or strong disagreement). Fifty per cent of respondents experience writing anxiety “always” or “often”, with an additional 38% having this experience some of the time. The idea that academic writing is important for one’s future may be a strong motivating factor. However, when a supposedly important skill brings no enjoyment and causes anxiety, the belief in its importance might contribute to the negative experience and act as a demotivator.

The fourth area of Sword’s writing base concerns behaviour, including time-management, use of space and writing rituals. Sword explains that, contrary to the belief fostered by several self-help books on writing, there is no single formula for correct writing behaviour. This is also the view implicit in Haas’s model of the writing process, which is determined by personal strategies.

## Figure 8

### Writing and Time (Behavioural Aspect)



Students were asked whether they find it hard to write to deadlines, whether they need more time to write their assignments than their peers do, and how much of their overall time they



spend working on their essays and other written assignments (including researching, brainstorming, outlining, and thinking about them). As can be seen from Figure 8, the majority of doubters reported having difficulty with deadlines (with 51% expressing agreement or strong agreement) and felt they needed more time to write assignments than their peers (with 60% expressing agreement or strong agreement). Additionally, 36% of the respondents in this group stated that they spend between 40% to 60% of their time writing essays, and 32% of the respondents stated that figure to be in the region of 60%–80%.

Students were also asked what percentage of their time they dedicate to each of the five areas of Haas's model of the writing process. As no significant differences between the groups were found in the students' answers to these questions, these results will be examined in the next section.

#### **4. The students' understanding of their writing process: all respondents**

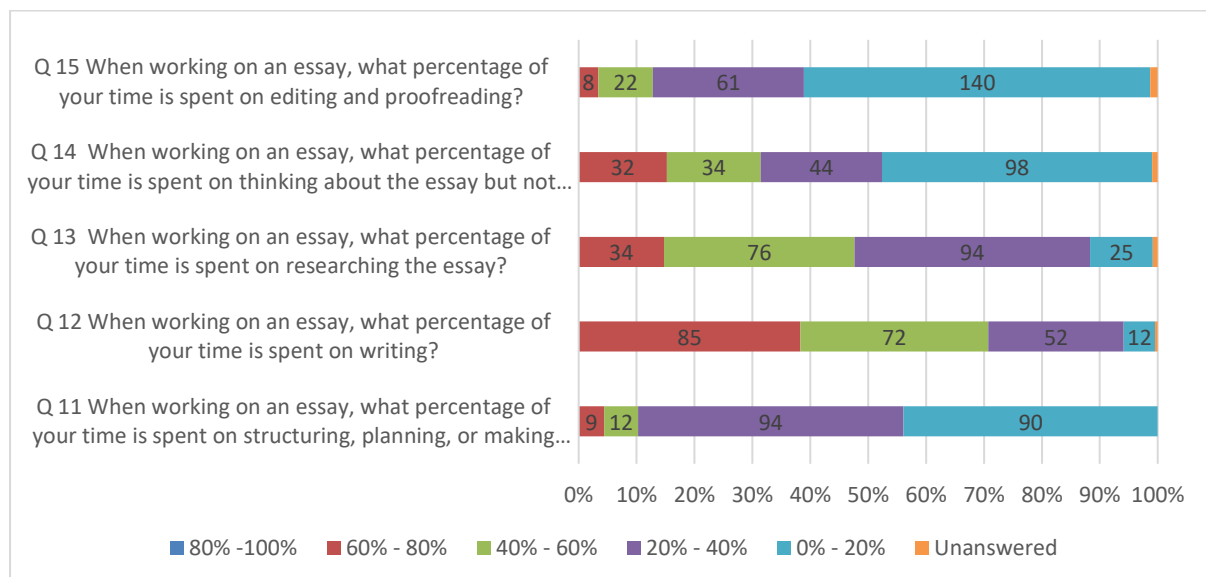
Haas's model of the writing process, arising from the author's qualitative research into writing groups and designed through a collaboration with her students, presents the process as a circle composed of five equal parts: researching (or "exploring" as the author titles it), structuring, drafting ("unloading"), editing ("polishing and publishing"), and "incubating", which combines the active and the passive thinking about the writing project away from "books, notebooks or computer" (2009, p.27).

While, the areas take roughly similar amount of time, the movement between these five areas is determined by the writer's personal preferences. Successful completion of the writing project depends on the writer finding the balance between these areas. While the model is not widely known outside writing centre studies, in my experience it is helpful and empowering tool for students wishing to deepen their understanding of their writing process.

Haas’s specific terms, such as incubating or unloading were not used in the questionnaire, as it was felt that the students might not understand them. Instead, questions were phrased to make them easy to understand. For example, to check the percentage of time allocated to “incubating”, students were asked, “when working on an essay, what percentage of your time is spent on thinking about the essay but not doing any specific activity?”, with the possible answers being 0%–20% of my time, 20%–40% of my time, 40%–60% of my time, 60%–80% of my time, and 80%–100% of my time.

### Figure 9

#### *Students’ Perception of the Time Spent on Each Area of the Writing Process*

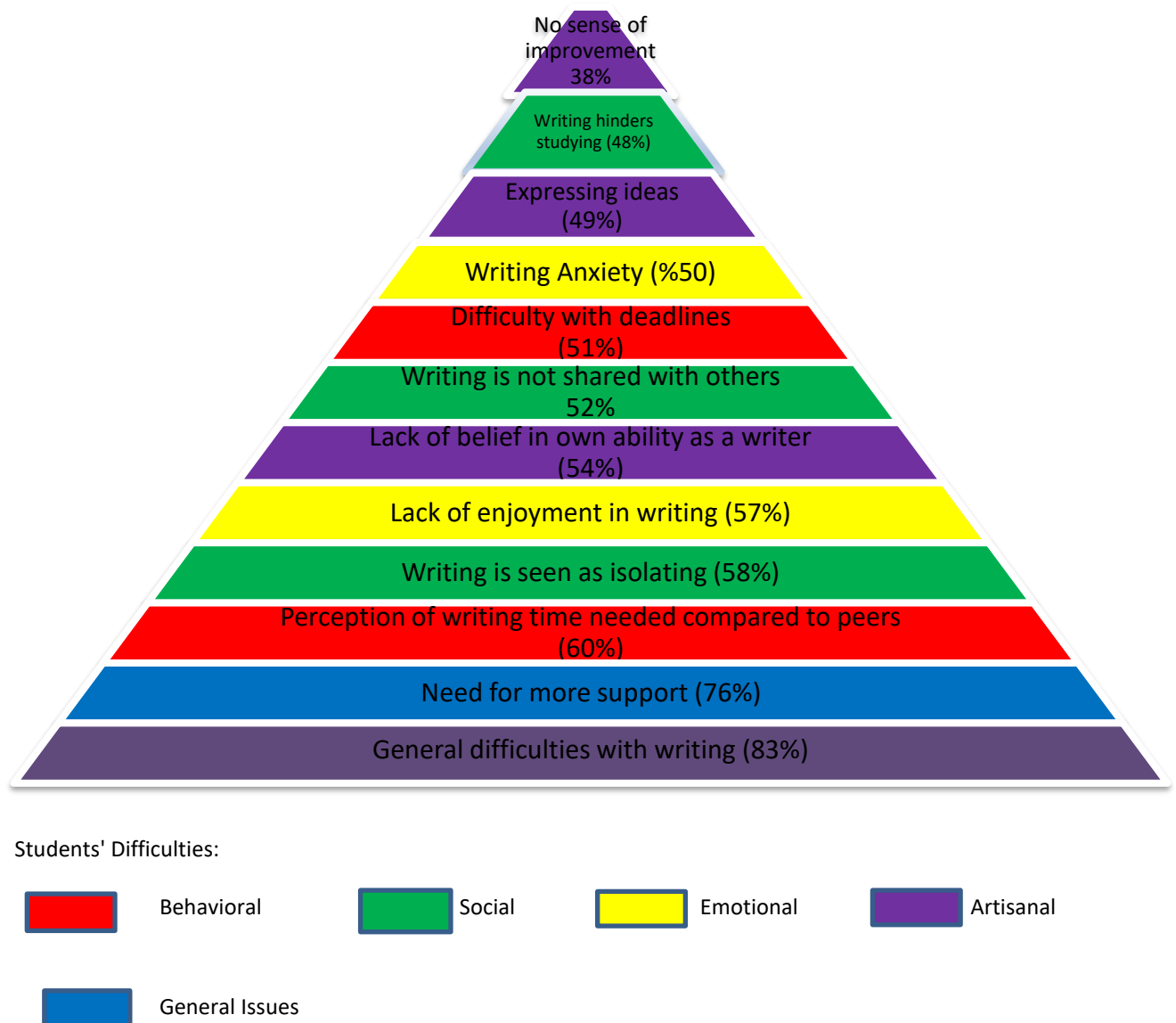


Most respondents did not pay full heed to the fact that the available answers were percentages. Many gave mathematically impossible answers, stating that they spend 60%–80% of their time on two or more activities (thus making the total percentage of time spent doing various activities more than 100%). While it was therefore impossible to use the responses to understand the percentage breakdown of the students’ writing process, the answers still offer an insight into students’ perception of managing their writing workload. It

was decided to treat the responses as indications of the students' general impression of the significance of particular activities to their overall writing process, not as correct percentage estimates of the time allocated to each activity. Figure 9 shows that, in all three groups, the majority gives most of their time to the physical writing of the essay (we added a note to this question to include writing the essay on a computer, writing by hand, dictating to a scribe and using speech-to-text software). Researching the essay is the second priority. Structuring, thinking about the essay, and editing are the least important, with the majority of the students choosing 0%–20% as the time dedicated to editing.

### **Discussion**

A comparison of the overall scores of the students from group 3 (doubters with stated writing problems) shows that perceived general difficulties with writing emerge as the overriding concern closely followed by the perceived need for more support within the university. As can be seen in Figure 10, all four areas of Sword's basis of successful writing practice are a source of concern. Nor are the issues separate. It is reasonable to expect that if a person finds that they need more time to write than their peers, they might find writing less enjoyable and isolating, and that the sense of isolation will be increased if writing is not shared with others. It is possible that difficulties with expressing one's ideas or a sense that writing hinders studying will contribute to writing anxiety. Students whose writing problems have contributed to their consideration of withdrawal have expressed a need for more support with writing. However, the nature of this additional support should take into account the complex nature of the students' writing problems. Interventions that take care of artisanal issues only, without taking into consideration students' emotions around writing, the way writing relates to their life as students, and issues of time-management (as well as possible other areas of behaviour unexplored by this study) run the risk of serving the needs of only a small proportion of students and thus not addressing the issue of retention.

**Figure 10***Doubters with Stated Writing Problems: Breakdown of Issue by Prevalence*

Students' approach to the writing process is an issue that unites the three groups. Students do not dedicate much of their time to editing, structuring, or thinking about the essay. Experienced writers know that editing takes at least as much time as drafting; for many

writers, moreover, being able to see drafting and editing as distinct processes reduces anxiety and makes writing more enjoyable (Elbow 1981). Finally, most academic writing instructors would agree that structuring is an important aspect of the writing process (Zemach & Rumisek, 2003; Canter & Fairbairn, 2006; Wallbank, 2018).

However, the key issue that the responses hint at (especially if we remember that many gave answers that, as we have seen, are mathematically impossible) is the respondents' poor metacognitive awareness of the writing process. To be aware of the writing process, its constituent parts, and the individual challenges offered by each part means to be in control of one's writing (Haas, 2009; O'Neil 2006). For some, this lack of control will lead to anxiety or poor performance, some might consider leaving the university because of this, and some may be able to compensate for this writing issue in other areas of their studies. However, for all students, navigating the writing process without sufficient understanding of its particularities involves a degree of risk, whether in terms of performance, overall satisfaction with their studies, or retention

The experience of writing as an isolating activity is of particular concern, as it affects not only doubters with stated writing problems but also those who did not list writing problems as a factor for their contemplation of withdrawal. Sword explains that successful writers share their work and discuss it with others (2017, p.106). Yet, the responses suggest that sharing writing does not seem to be part of the student culture. Possibly, students associate sharing writing with cheating or do not value peer-review as a tool for improvement. Thus, students spend a significant portion of their time on a task that they believe should be done in isolation, away from their peers, and without a sense of shared mistakes or achievements. Given that "lower perceptions of social connectedness" have been found to be a predictor for student attrition (Styron Jr, 2010, p.9), it is possible that isolation is a hidden writing problem that affects students' consideration for withdrawal indirectly.

## Conclusion

The results of a survey of 238 students at the University of Galway suggest that writing issues may play an important part in student contemplation of withdrawal, and by implication of student attrition. A comparison was made between those who did not contemplate withdrawing from their course of study (non-doubters), those who contemplated withdrawing but did not identify writing issues as a factor (doubters with no stated writing problems), and those who identified writing issues among the factors that caused them to contemplate withdrawing from their course of study (doubters with stated writing problems). It was found that doubters with writing problems experience a range of artisanal, emotional, social, and behavioural writing issues. Doubters with no stated writing problems also perceive writing as isolating, with no significant difference found between their responses and those of the doubters with stated writing problems. There is, therefore, a possibility that isolation associated with writing might impact students' contemplation of withdrawal even in the absence of other writing problems. An examination of students' answers to the questions on their management of the entire writing process, an area where no significant differences were found between the three groups, suggested that students may have poor metacognitive awareness of the writing process.

A majority of surveyed students indicated that they would benefit from additional support with writing; this case was particularly prominent in the case of doubters with writing issues. The question is what form this support should take. The doubters' responses suggest that these students could benefit from support that would address their emotional, social, artisanal, and behavioural issues with writing. This point echoes what we know from research into retention and student success, namely, that a holistic approach, targeting students' emotions, motivation, and social interactions is required in addition to supporting their

academic or artisanal skills (Xuereb, 2015; Robbins et al., 2009). This does not mean, however, that issues concerning the emotional or social aspects of writing can be successfully improved through a generic, non-writing-specific intervention. Writing anxiety is not the same as general anxiety, and insufficient awareness of the writing process is not the same as general issues with time management. Writing problems and general emotional psychological and social issues may overlap and influence each other, but one cluster is not simply a component of the other.

The kind of support that can be provided depends on the institutional resources and traditions, some of which may be country specific. In Ireland, foundational writing or “writing across the disciplines” courses of the kind common in the US third-level institutions are not usually available to students. While most writing teachers would agree on the benefits of such courses and there is evidence that they aid in student retention, they are expensive and require a remapping of existing credit allocation structures and timetables. Their implementation is not easily achieved. Therefore, sustainable and inexpensive interventions need to be designed, tested, and implemented. Changing students’ approach to writing as an isolating activity, improving students’ understanding of the writing process, targeting writing anxiety, and improving students’ ability to express their ideas will be the key priorities of these interventions.

The study also has implications for international audiences, and these relate to the need to include writing issues as a separate component in retention models. We know that academic writing is not taught often enough to enable all students to understand all its unique linguistic features and codes (Badenhorst, 2011; Soliday, 2011). If we continue to overlook writing in retention modelling, the resulting injustice to students who struggle with writing may be perpetuated on additional levels. Writing is an aspect of studying, but it is not synonymous with it. Nor is it synonymous with the vague term “workload.” Nor is it an

invisible activity without impact on the students' emotional well-being, social interactions, and the time that is available to them (Rose, 2012). Nor is it an easily taught skill that can be quickly passed on by any professional academic. It is a complex practice whose unique challenges and components are central to most students' third-level experience. This experience can be improved, and the chances of students' unplanned withdrawal can be reduced, if we refocus the lens through which we see writing.



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## Appendix

### Comparison between the three groups using ANOVA

Mean, standard deviation (in parenthesis) and number of responding participants (N) for each group. Omnibus inferential statistics (univariate ANOVA) are given in the second column.

For each question (row) means marked with the same superscript letter do not differ significantly based on Tukey's HSD.

Question	Omnibus ANOVA	Non-Doubters	Doubters Non-writing Problems	Doubters Writing Problems
Q4 enjoy writing	$F_{(2,233)}=8.71$ $p<0.001$	2.91 <sup>a</sup> (1.16) N=108	3.04 <sup>a</sup> (1.17) N=79	3.71 <sup>b</sup> (1.04) N=49
Q5 writing is difficult	$F_{(2,234)}=12.75$ $p<0.001$	2.74 <sup>a</sup> (1.04) N=108	2.59 <sup>a</sup> (0.99) N=79	1.92 <sup>b</sup> (0.72) N=50
Q6 hard to write to deadlines.	$F_{(2,226)}=7.24$ $p=0.001$	3.39 <sup>a</sup> (1.11) N=103	3.13 <sup>a</sup> (1.17) N=75	2.65 <sup>b</sup> (1.16) N=51
Q7 Writing makes me anxious.	$F_{(2,234)}=14.11$ $p<0.001$	3.27 <sup>a</sup> (1.04) N=107	3.13 <sup>a</sup> (1.2) N=79	2.27 <sup>b</sup> (1.19) N=51
Q8 hard to express thoughts in writing	$F_{(2,234)}=10.75$ $p<0.001$	3.19 <sup>a</sup> (0.94) N=108	3.1 <sup>a</sup> (1.01) N=78	2.45 <sup>b</sup> (0.97) N=51
Q9 time spent working on written assignments	$F_{(2,223)}=3.33$ $p=0.038$	2.5 <sup>a</sup> (1.12) N=108	2.61 <sup>ab</sup> (0.99) N=72	2.98 <sup>b</sup> (1) N=46
Q10 need more time to write than peers	$F_{(2,228)}=7.02$ $p=0.001$	3.22 <sup>a</sup> (1.06) N=106	3.22 <sup>a</sup> (1.11) N=74	2.57 <sup>b</sup> (1.12) N=51
Q11 percentage of time planning	$F_{(2,235)}=2.59$ $p=0.077$	29.07 <sup>a</sup> (17.59) N=108	24.43 <sup>a</sup> (16) N=79	30.78 <sup>a</sup> (17.87), N=51
Q12 percentage of time actually writing	$F_{(2,233)}=0.77$ $p=0.462$	53.7 <sup>a</sup> (20.85) N=108	51.27 <sup>a</sup> (20.34) N=79	55.71 <sup>a</sup> (18.26) N=49
Q13 percentage of time researching	$F_{(2,233)}=0.24$ $p=0.785$	42.45 <sup>a</sup> (18.61) N=106	40.63 <sup>a</sup> (20.46) N=79	42.55 <sup>a</sup> (18.74) N=51
Q14 percentage of time thinking	$F_{(2,231)}=2.9$ $p=0.057$	33.58 <sup>a</sup> (26.87) N=106	35.57 <sup>ab</sup> (26.97) N=79	45.1 <sup>b</sup> (32.28) N=49
Q15 percentage of time editing	$F_{(2,232)}=0.92$ $p=0.4$	23.14 <sup>a</sup> (19.77) N=105	20.13 <sup>a</sup> (14.63) N=79	24.12 <sup>a</sup> (20.12) N=51
Q16 studying easier, if not as much writing	$F_{(2,221)}=3.62$ $p=0.029$	2.98 <sup>a</sup> (1.09) N=102	3.03 <sup>a</sup> (1.09) N=72	2.52 <sup>b</sup> (1.22) N=50
Q17 Writing helps to understand / remember	$F_{(2,232)}=1.24$ $p=0.292$	2.01 <sup>a</sup> (0.82) N=107	2.13 <sup>a</sup> (0.98), N=77	2.25 <sup>a</sup> (1.09) N=51
Q18 writing is isolating	$F_{(2,229)}=4.86$ $p=0.009$	3.43 <sup>a</sup> (1.06) N=105	2.96 <sup>b</sup> (1.11), N=76	3.04 <sup>ab</sup> (1.04) N=51

Q19 share writing assignments	$F_{(2,221)}=0.43$ $p=0.653$	3.34 <sup>a</sup> (1.25) N=106	3.52 <sup>a</sup> (1.33) N=69	3.37 <sup>a</sup> (1.41) N=49
Q20 getting better at academic writing	$F_{(2,225)}=5.06$ $p=0.007$	2.49 <sup>a</sup> (0.94) N=105	2.69 <sup>ab</sup> (0.9), N=72	3 <sup>b</sup> (1.04) N=51
Q21 competence at writing is important for my future.	$F_{(2,231)}=2.56$ $p=0.079$	2.08 <sup>ab</sup> (1.07) N=106	1.96 <sup>a</sup> (0.94) N=77	2.39 <sup>b</sup> (1.23) N=51
Q22 I am already a competent writer	$F_{(2,232)}=4.44$ $p=0.013$	2.84 <sup>a</sup> (1.14) N=107	2.94 <sup>a</sup> (1.07) N=77	3.37 <sup>b</sup> (0.87) N=51
Q23 easier to study, if more writing support	$F_{(2,226)}=5$ $p=0.008$	2.44 <sup>a</sup> (1.11) N=104	2.54 <sup>a</sup> (1.14) N=74	1.96 <sup>b</sup> (0.82) N=51