

## ***Examining Students' Preferences for Academic Writing Support in a Third Level Institute in Ireland.***

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### **Abstract.**

Academic writing support has become an integral part of the learning process at third level. At Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands (TUS: Midlands), the Academic Writing Centre (AWC) offers individual and group support to all 5,000 learners attending the institute. Historically, all support was provided face-to-face, but due to Covid-19 it moved online in March 2020 and since then the service has been available through a combination of remote and face-to-face delivery. Learners attending the AWC during three academic years were asked to outline their preferences on the provision of support: face-to-face, online or a combination of both. The findings highlight that in the 2019 – 2020 academic year the majority of students expressed a preference for face-to-face contact with writing tutors, while in the 2020 – 2021 academic year there was increased preference for working remotely or a combination of face-to-face and remote delivery. Then, in the 2021 – 2022 academic year, there was a shift back to a preference for face-to-face delivery. Learners were also asked to identify specific areas where they needed academic writing support. The results show that in each academic year the area where students required most support was writing structure. Grammar and punctuation, referencing and paraphrasing, language and writing literature reviews were also among the main areas where academic writing support was requested by learners.

**Keywords:** Academic writing; Covid-19; Face-to-face; Learners' preferences; Remote learning.

## 1. Academic Writing Support at Third Level.

For many learners, academic writing is overwhelming initially and blank screens and empty pages can be difficult to address. Additionally, many students struggle with academic “*discourse*” (Lea & Street, 2006, p.229). However, with the right supports in place, encouragement and a willingness to overcome the issues, academic writing can become a positive component of the overall learning process.

One of the aims of academic writing is to be able to “*share your ideas in the clearest, most effective form*” (Foss, 2015, p. 333) and for many students at third level that is a considerable challenge. This is one of the ways where academic writing support is a helpful, and in many instances, an invaluable support. Academic writing support is provided in a number of ways: in writing, orally and through face-to-face and online meetings, the latter which has become more common since the onset of Covid-19. Tackling issues with academic writing is also done in a number of ways. For example, the provision of additional online resources works well for some educators and learners, while for others, going through a draft assignment face-to-face is more effective.

Some educators favour the provision of writing support through large chunks of text, while for others, examining a passage of writing on a word-for-word basis works more effectively. It depends on the individual learner and also the nature of the piece of writing. For example, a longer dissertation lends itself better to feedback by section, while a shorter piece of reflective writing may be tackled more effectively on a sentence by sentence basis, or through section by section.

Jusslin and Widlund (2021) argue that the provision of academic writing support increases students’ confidence in their writing and helps to motivate them. While students receive feedback from lecturers on their assessments, most focus on the subject and not on the writing element and learners do not know what they need to focus on, from a writing perspective. Constructive feedback from academic writing staff, specifically in relation to the academic writing, can make a significant difference.

Gopee and Deane (2013) contend that tailored individual writing support has a positive impact on learners and plays a role in ensuring lasting changes to their writing and adopting new techniques that will work on a long-term basis. I support this argument as each learner has different requirements and has different strengths and weaknesses in relation to their academic

writing. Jusslin and Widlund (2021) argue that support in thesis writing, through the provision of workshops, is important for students as dissertations are a vital component of most academic programmes at third level. Additionally, in my view, a two-way system of communication is essential as students need to engage and ask questions during the workshops which will benefit their academic writing skills in the long-term. One method of encouraging students to engage during workshops is to request attendees to submit questions in advance of the tutorial or to bring questions to the tutorial (Eriksson, Carlsson & Börjeson, 2021).

### **1.1 Growing need for Academic Writing Supports.**

In many of the world's higher education level institutes, academic writing centres were regarded as supplementary to essential support for students (Collett & Dison, 2019) and historically were regarded as "*asides*" to the core functions of third level institutions (Kadenge, Dison, Kimani & Namakula, 2019, p.169). However, this has changed as their role has become essential and many of them are now integrated into the various departments and subjects at third level.

Academic writing support in higher education institutions in Ireland is relatively new and previously was available on an "*ad hoc*" basis (Cleary, Graham, Jeanneau & O'Sullivan, 2009, p. 4.1). Subject-specific lecturing staff, by and large, do not have time to focus on academic writing skills in their teaching, and the support of a specific academic writing centre is key to ensuring students are aware of and avail of writing supports.

*"There is now a growing awareness of the need to adopt a systematic approach to writing support for both undergraduate and postgraduate students"* (Cleary et al., 2009, p. 4.1). Writing centres have been established as "*hubs for nurturing and enhancing students' intellectual and linguistic capacities in order to engage and master disciplinary literacies and genres while contributing to the transformation of educational projects*" (Sefalane-Nkohla & Mtonjeni, 2019, p.1), whilst ensuring this is done in an inclusive environment where constructive feedback is a priority.

The need for academic writing support is intensified due to the substantial changes in higher education as a result of factors including increasing student numbers and wider diversity. This has led to the creation of more support structures for learners (Wilmot, 2018) and the role of formal academic writing support is important, given that writing is integral to learning and assessment across every discipline in third level education (Cleary et al., 2009).

When writing academic assignments, learners are required to show a clear understanding of

the topic and good academic writing techniques are essential. “*Students generally have to write academic assignments to demonstrate knowledge, comprehension and application of concepts that are inherent components of the selected topic area, as well as critical analysis, although various other factors determine their engagement with writing*” (Gopee & Deane, 2013, p. 1626).

Wilmot (2018) argues that one of the areas where support for all learners is key is in academic writing. “*Academic writing, the primary way to reflect disciplinary knowledge, is gaining recognition as an area that all students need support in, regardless of linguistic or educational background*” (Wilmot, 2018, p. 258). Many students struggle with the transition from second-level to third-level education and many of those challenges faced are associated with academic writing where the style and structure is very different from that experienced in second-level (Sefalane-Nkohla & Mtonjeni, 2019), and specific writing supports are essential to help students make a seamless transition.

## **1.2 Academic Writing in TUS: Midlands.**

The Academic Writing Centre (AWC) in TUS: Midlands – formerly Athlone Institute of Technology – was established in November 2015. Prior to its establishment, academic writing support had been available on a small scale, between 4 and 6 hours a week initially, before it became formalised. It remains a part-time service: the Academic Writing Co-ordinator who is also the AWC’s Academic Writing Tutor is employed for 20 hours a week. This is supplemented by an average of four hours per week during term time, provided by the institute’s lecturing staff.

Academic writing support is available for all registered students – both full-time and part-time – at the institute in every subject area, free of charge. Writing support is available on an individual and group basis. While the Academic Writing Tutor collaborates with lecturing staff in delivering presentations to classes throughout the academic year, the onus to request individual or small group academic writing support is on the student.

Writing support is available through presentations on specific topics relevant to academic writing, writing seminars on a range of topics and tailored workshops. Among the topics covered in the presentations and seminars include writing a literature review, critical writing and, reflective writing. The centre also provides practical advice and assistance to students, such as helping them to plan their writing tasks and to employ (or utilise) useful writing techniques. Time management skills, to help students to manage multiple academic demands, are also taught. These skills, once mastered, support students throughout the course of their studies, and

additionally, helps them to develop confidence in their writing in the long term.

On an individual basis, students are invited to contact the AWC to discuss their writing assignments and receive timely feedback and guidance on their writing.

In addition to this, the AWC page on the virtual learning environment Moodle contains a range of academic writing resources. These resources were devised by the AWC staff and include a combination of audio PowerPoints, pdfs, academic writing papers and a range of practical resources which focus on all elements of academic writing. These resources are particularly useful during busy times of the academic year and also during the summer months when the Centre is closed.

Limited resources, coupled with increased student demand during busy times of the year means that students, invariably, have to wait for up to 5 days for an appointment due to the intensity of assignments students are completing.

The AWC responds to the individual needs of all students who access services via an online booking system, through email or by dropping in to the AWC. Accessibility is key and the Student Resource Centre management carefully considered the location of the centre when it first opened. The writing centre is strategically located at the centre of the college's main campus where all students frequent on a daily basis, just off the main canteen and adjacent to the institute library (Athlone Institute of Technology, 2021).

Prior to Covid-19, drop-ins were commonplace on a daily basis but this lessened even after the return to campus in 2020, as most students preferred to book in advance or set up online meetings.

Many students find the gap between second and third level education is hugely challenging, and central to this is the expectation in relation to academic writing. As Carlse (2019, p. 183) has noted, "*At many universities, writing centres have been tasked with providing support to assist in bridging this gap between academic expectations and the capabilities of student writers when they enter tertiary education.*" In line with this, the aim of the centre at TUS is to provide academic writing support on both an individual and group basis (Connolly, 2019). There is a strong emphasis in the writing centre on inclusivity and academic writing support is tailored to the needs of the individual student or groups of students. This is essential, as each learner's requirements varies.

Collaboration is key and many students are referred to the centre by their lecturers; lecturers

working across all departments of the institute can book the academic writing tutor to deliver a seminar for their students. This is tailored to the specific requirements of the lecturers and their class. Lecturers generally encourage their students to attend these classes and engage with the Academic Writing Tutor and then students have the option of requesting individual follow-up sessions with the tutor.

Working in partnership with lecturers across all subject areas is an important consideration in the process to avoid conflicting feedback from writing instructors and lecturers or supervisors. This is particularly important as generic advice provided by writing instructors may differ from discipline-specific advice offered by lecturers or supervisors who are knowledgeable in specific subject areas (Ma, 2019).

Other than the sessions requested by lecturers, it is important to state that attendance at any of the writing centre seminars or presentations is optional. It is up to each individual student to avail of academic writing support if they wish. Each student is entitled to a maximum of three academic writing centre sessions in each semester of each academic year.

### **1.3 Remote Learning.**

Boltz, Yadav, Dillman and Robertso (2021) argue that while there has been much focus on digital teaching in recent years. In practice there has, in fact, been little emphasis on preparing lecturers to teach online and on preparing students to learn online in an industry which traditionally has been dominated by face-to-face delivery. While there had been much debate on digital delivery, it was not until the global pandemic that it was put into practice on a widespread scale. In reality, for many advocates of digital teaching, Covid-19 achieved what many had struggled to achieve over many years prior.

In Spring 2020, there was an “*unplanned and sudden*” shift from classroom teaching and learning to online (Khlaif, Zuheir & Kouraichi, 2021, p. 7034) due to the outbreak of Covid-19 which prompted “*drastic educational changes*” (Tzaflikou, Perifanou & Anastasios, 2020, p. 7281). It was described as “*emergency remote teaching*” (Boltz et al., 2021, p. 1378). The overnight change had a huge impact on every aspect of society, not least learning, where the unprecedented changes were enforced.

Third level institutes put in place emergency plans to replace face- to- face learning with online learning and there was a huge focus on ensuring the transition was smooth: in some institutes new digital platforms were set up while in others, existing digital platforms were developed

(Tzaflkou et al., 2021).

The sudden move to online learning was a significant change for everyone involved in teaching and learning. Rather than put everything on hold, third level institutes decided to move to various online platforms and continue with the teaching. All communication with students was done through various online platforms and email and phone. In many realms, technological tools were used for the first time by many lecturers and students (Khlaif et al., 2020). What initially was an emergency situation has now become a valuable component of the learning process as online learning and engagement is now more readily available and easily accessible. It has become a key part of learning and will continue, at least in the short-term (Katz, Jordan & Ognyanova, 2021; Marcus-Quinn, 2020).

Marcus-Quinn (2020, p. 252) contends that “*we are in a golden age of online resources*”. The digital technology is available to ensure its success (Hunter, 2015). And while technology presents challenges for learners, overall there is a great resilience and adaptability, in the long term remote learning is workable if teaching staff commit to “*online community building, become adept in teaching in an online environment, schedule respite from technology, and promote self-care to cultivate resilience*” (Wallace, Kaulback & Baker, 2020, p.617).

Boltz et al. (2021, p. 1378) argues that there is no “*one-size-fits-all definition*” for remote teaching, as a variety of methods and approaches have been utilised. Indeed, from my experience in the AWC in TUS: Midlands it is clear that remote delivery has a place. It is particularly evident among those studying in the Department of Lifelong Learning where programmes are part-time and mainly in the evenings and scheduling of classes online from home, outside of their working hours, has received positive feedback. I believe that post-Covid-19, delivery options – remote and face-to-face delivery – need to be monitored and the method of delivery should be tailored to lecturers’ and students’ requirements. This may change from semester to semester and from one academic year to the next and some subject areas work more effectively online than others. Flexibility is particularly important as all supports provided by the AWC are optional.

## **2. Methodology.**

The aim of this research was to establish students’ preferences on the method of delivery of academic writing support: face-to-face, online, or a combination of the two. Learners were also asked to identify specific areas where they required academic writing support i.e. writing

structure; grammar and punctuation; language; referencing and paraphrasing; literature review or support with writing reflective essays.

The research was particularly important, given that the AWC is quite a new structure in place in the institute. A student-centred approach is important and feedback from learners is a key consideration in planning ahead. This included their views on the method of delivery: online, face-to-face or a combination of both. It was also aimed at establishing what specific academic writing support students required, so that planning for future writing supports could be done efficiently.

A questionnaire is one of the most widely used data collection methods in which each participant is asked the same set of questions (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). *“This allows for consistency and precision in terms of the wording of the questions and makes the processing of the answers easier”* (Denscombe, 2007, p.153).

It is essential that the specific data required is gathered to ensure the research question and objectives are met (Saunders et al., 2012). In this research, careful consideration was given to the questionnaire design. Participants' time is limited so it was decided to send out the short, focused questionnaires within two weeks of each learner receiving academic writing support, followed by two reminders in the following fortnight; it was important to circulate the questionnaires in a timely manner, while it was fresh in their minds. In one question, participants were asked to identify their preferences on the method of delivery of academic writing support: specifically face-to-face, online, or a combination of face-to-face and online. In another question, participants were asked to identify specific areas where they required academic writing support and were given the option of selecting as many categories as they wished. These included writing structure; grammar and punctuation; language; referencing and paraphrasing; literature review and writing reflective essays.

All students who engaged with the AWC over the course of three academic years: 2019-2020, 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 were invited to complete a questionnaire on SurveyMonkey (Momentive Inc.). Students were informed about the survey – which was optional – when they attended with the Academic Writing Centre and the link to the survey was circulated via email afterwards.



### 3. Findings.

Over the course of three academic years – 2019 – 2020, 2020 – 2021 and 2021 – 2022 – 186 students completed the questionnaire. 52 responses were received in the 2019 – 2020 academic year and 80 responses were received in the 2020 – 2021 academic year, while 54 responses were received in the 2021 – 2022 academic year. The response rate was low – approximately three per cent overall, over the three years – which I believe was due to the fact it was optional and students were primarily focused on completing their writing assignments, many of which were due for submission soon after their appointments with the AWC.

In the 2019 – 2020 academic year, feedback was provided by the following:

- 43 students who had sought and received individual academic writing support from a member of staff working in the AWC
- Nine students who attended a class or workshop organised by the Centre

In the 2020 – 2021 academic year, feedback was provided by the following:

- 26 students who had sought and received individual academic writing support from a member of staff working in the AWC
- 45 students who attended a class or workshop organised by the Centre
- Nine students availed of both individual appointments and a class or workshop organised by the Centre

In the 2021 – 2022 academic year, feedback was provided by the following:

- 44 students who had sought and received individual academic writing support from a member of staff working in the AWC
- 10 students who attended a workshop organised by the Centre.

#### 3.1 Specific writing support.

Participants were asked to state the specific academic writing support they received from staff assigned to the Academic Writing Centre. The categories were: grammar and punctuation; language; structure; referencing and paraphrasing; literature review; reflective writing; other and learners could include as many categories as was relevant. The results showed that in each academic year there was a higher number of queries related to writing structure than for any

other category. Grammar and punctuation was a common category in both academic years, while in the 2020 – 2021 academic year there were substantial amounts of queries on referencing and paraphrasing; language; reflective writing and writing literature reviews. Literature reviews and writing structure were the most common areas where writing support was sought in the 2021 – 2022 academic year (See Table 1 below).

**Table 1: Type of academic writing support requested by students attending TUS: Midlands.**

Type of academic writing support	Academic Year 2019 – 2020	Academic Year 2020 – 2021	Academic Year 2021 – 2022
Grammar and punctuation	14 (27%) 2 <sup>nd</sup> most popular	28 (13%) 3 <sup>rd</sup> most popular	32 (17.5%) 4 <sup>th</sup> most popular
Language	3 (6%) 5 <sup>th</sup> most popular	28 (13%) 3 <sup>rd</sup> most popular	12 (6.5%) 6 <sup>th</sup> most popular
Structure	19 (36.5%) most popular	63 (28%) Most popular	38 (21%) 2 <sup>nd</sup> most popular
Referencing and Paraphrasing	6 (11.5%) 4 <sup>th</sup> most popular	42 (19%) 2 <sup>nd</sup> most popular	34 (18.5%) 3 <sup>rd</sup> most popular
Literature Review	7 (13%) 3 <sup>rd</sup> most popular	22 (10%) 5 <sup>th</sup> most popular	40 (22%) Most popular
Reflective Writing	0	26 (12%) 4 <sup>th</sup> most popular	21 (11.5%) 5 <sup>th</sup> most popular
Other (writing personal statements/blogs)	3 (6%) 5 <sup>th</sup> most popular	8 (4%) 6 <sup>th</sup> most popular	5 (3%) 7 <sup>th</sup> most popular

### 3.2 Preferences: face-to-face or online academic writing support.

Participants were asked how they preferred to communicate with staff assigned to the AWC i.e. how they wished to work with the Academic Writing Tutor or lecturers assigned to the Centre. The categories were: email; face-to-face; online i.e. Microsoft Teams or Zoom; a combination of email and Microsoft Teams or Zoom; a combination of face-to-face and Microsoft Teams/Zoom. It is important to note that most of the academic writing support provided in the 2019 – 2020 academic year was face-to-face, until March 2020 when teaching went online due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic (Khlaif et al., 2021; Tzafilkou et al., 2020). Most of the

academic writing support, in line with Government guidelines due to the pandemic, was provided online throughout the 2020 – 2021 academic year.

The results showed that in the 2019 – 2020 academic year almost 70% of students expressed a preference to meet lecturers and the academic writing tutor face-to-face. A total of 15% of students expressed a preference for academic writing support through a combination of face-to-face and Microsoft Teams or Zoom, while 11.5% of students expressed a preference for academic writing support through email only. None of the participants expressed a preference for writing support through a combination of email and Teams/Zoom, while almost 4% of students stated that they preferred to receive writing support through Teams/Zoom only. It is worth noting that the survey was circulated to all students in April 2020, after all learning and teaching had moved online.

The results from the 2020 – 2021 academic year showed that fewer participants expressed a preference for face-to-face academic writing support: just 7.5% of students wished to communicate solely through face-to-face. A total of 20% of students expressed a preference for a combination of face-to-face and Zoom/Teams. In total, 31% of students expressed a preference for a combination of email and Zoom/Teams; almost 19% of students preferred academic writing support through email only; 17.5% of students stated that their preference was Teams/Zoom only.

The results from the 2021 – 2022 academic year showed that more students were interested in face-to-face communication with the Academic Writing Centre. 29% of students expressed a preference for face-to-face meetings only, while 36% of students stated that their preference was a combination of face-to-face, Zoom/Teams and email. Just 7% of students were interested in communication through Zoom/Teams only; 14% stated that their preference was email, while another 14% of students stated that email and Zoom/Teams was their preferred method of communication with the centre. While the preference for face-to-face communication was not to the extent that it had been prior to Covid-19, it was clear that the pattern was reverting in that direction; this is in line with more on site delivery, as opposed to online delivery of lectures.

## **4. Discussion.**

Covid-19 has had considerable impact on attitudes to remote learning. Of particular interest in this research was the fact that in the first year of Covid-19 – 2019-2020 – students still expressed a preference for face-to-face learning. As Covid-19 lingered on in the 2020 – 2021 academic

year, students' attitudes changed and many expressed a preference for online learning or a combination of online and face-to-face academic writing support. And while more students expressed a preference for face-to-face learning in the 2021 – 2022 academic year, there was still much interest in online communication with the AWC.

Given that learning and teaching were delivered, globally, in different ways in the years chosen for this research, it was of particular interest that there was a preference for support through online platforms in the second year (2020 – 2021 academic year) compared with the first year (2019 – 2020 academic year). However, the scale of the difference is notable, particularly the reluctance to opt for online support prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The findings suggest the lack of availability of online options prior to March 2020. During most of the first semester of the 2020 – 2021 academic year, students were given the option of online academic writing support or socially distanced face-to-face academic writing support. The vast majority of students opted for online support, through Teams, Zoom and email. When students were asked what platform they wished to use, in both the '*face-to-face*' and '*combination of face-to-face and online*', the following was stated: '*if safe, given the current circumstances*'. Yet, most still opted for communication other than through face-to-face.

Collett and Dison (2019), in their research in South Africa, found that a combination of face-to-face and online interaction between writing instructors and learners was the ideal support. I concur with this; while this research found that while the majority of students preferred online support solely in the 2020 – 2021 academic year this was understandable due to the Covid-19 restrictions. However, I believe that, going forward, consideration should be given to face-to-face support, complemented by online options. Just 20% of students opted for this combination in the 2020 – 2021 academic year, but further research in this area, in future academic years, would be of interest to establish if preferences have changed given that classes for all programmes are now provided face-to-face on campus. While the online writing support was forced to move online, due to the pandemic, it is poised to become a permanent part of the university's supports for students as flexible learning has become the norm. It also enables learners studying in the Department Lifelong Learning to avail of increased flexibility which is crucial in allowing many of them – who are in full-time employment – to continue with their studies.

While the physical space remains a cornerstone of the writing support process, it is important that the centre is not just confined to this and a dual approach – where learners are afforded

the choice of face-to-face or online, with emphasis on a combination of both is adopted, "*within the context of a digital age*" (Collett & Dison 2019, p. 95).

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations.

Academic writing centres have an integral role to play in supporting students to succeed with their writing and to develop their writing techniques (Gopee & Deane, 2013). "*The department teaches students techniques that they may not have learned in their previous education, and thereby writing tutors enable students to become more autonomous and confident writers*" (Gopee & Deane, 2013, p. 1629).

On average each year, almost 2,000 students engage with the AWC in TUS: Midlands, through classes and individual appointments. The findings from the survey carried out with TUS: Midlands' student cohort suggest that a variety of delivery options is necessary to meet student needs. Consequently, the adoption of a flexible approach, in my view, would be advantageous to ensure that all learners are facilitated where possible. The provision of choice for all learners is essential, particularly for academic writing support which is optional and not mandatory.

The feedback shows that student attitudes to their preferred method of communication changed considerably during the course of the pandemic. The learning environment changed considerably towards the end of the 2019 – 2020 academic year when teaching moved from the classroom to an online environment and then began to shift back to the original pattern of mainly classroom learning in the 2021 – 2022 academic year. It will be interesting to establish what preferences are expressed in forthcoming academic years, given that there has been a focus on more on campus delivery and less online learning and teaching and closely monitoring this – and adapting where possible – on a continuous basis would be most prudent.

Operating the physical writing centre as a drop-in hub is recommended; in this space students can discuss, informally, their writing with their peers and also writing instructors. In the 2018 – 2019 academic year a writing group was set up on a pilot basis by the Academic Writing Centre Co-Ordinator where students met informally with other students from different academic programmes to discuss their writing. The feedback was positive and, with further resources and space afforded, this group could be re-established and developed further.

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