

# **Academic literacies and the tilts within: the push and pull of student writing**

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### **Abstract**

A theoretical understanding is offered to help explore how students attempt to reconcile divergent narratives around the purposes of Higher Education in relation to their own writing. Drawing from the twin notions of centripetal and centrifugal forces, the paper discusses the ways that students both follow and resist convention in their own writing, and their reasons for doing so. In revealing the intricate oscillation between restrictive and expansive writing approaches, the research suggests that students ‘tilt’ their writing according to a diverse and broad understanding of higher education learning. Derived from semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students at a pre-1992 university, the research challenges the over-emphasis placed on consumeristic agendas of students and provides insights beneficial for practitioners involved in the supporting and assessing of student writing in Higher Education.

**Keywords: academic literacies, student writing, assessment, tilts, tilting point**

### **Introduction**

Academic Literacies (Lea and Street 1998) has had prominence across the globe in articulating the issues that student writers face. It has provided a ‘critical frame’ (Street 2009) to help theorise student writing and the ways in which universities support the development of student writing. Most recently, its twenty year anniversary has instigated a revival in thought about the role of Academic Literacies theory in helping to understand student writing. These new considerations are also made relevant by a wider changing Higher Education landscape that centres upon notions of student satisfaction and consumer compliance. The consumer-led policies that continue to shape Higher Education learning

raise new questions about how students might come to writing and how they might conceive of writing in a high-cost, high-stakes sector (Fernsten and Reda 2011). Although the need to achieve in academic writing is not new (see Baker [2017], Read, Francis and Robson [2001] and Norton et al. [2001]), the attention paid to individualised benefits singularises the reason for attending Higher Education (Henderson 2020; Jones, Vigurs and Harris 2020; Garlick 2014). When the value of a degree is narrowed to its final classification, burden is placed on students in relation to their individual grade attainment. For many students, the weight of this worry is most pronounced when they are *writing for assessment*.

By contrast, Academic Literacies theory was originally devised amid a climate of widening participation. Its aim, from conception, has been to cultivate a climate of access and success for all university participants by shedding light on the labyrinthine nature of writing (Wrigglesworth 2019). It is most well-known for its three models that capture the ways in which writing is supported by the academy and the difficulties for developing proven pedagogical strategies to aid student writers new to the academy (Zahn et al. 2020). The three models consist of the skills model, the socialization model and the academic literacies model. Although each subsumes the others, the academic literacies model that views writing as a social practice involving matters of identity, epistemology and power is the preferred approach (Lea and Street 1998). For example, Lea and Street (1998) explain how students often find themselves party to ‘course switching’. They suggest that students continually have to adapt to different writing rules depending on the module, assessment and individual lecturer teaching them. Therefore, the social practice view foregrounds the importance of the context within which writing takes place, and how that context helps to govern, shape and legitimise certain writing practices (Pahl and Rowsell 2012). In making visible the role that institutions play in the way writing is conceived of, the Academic Literacies model helps to

unclasp the problems relating to practice rather than locating the problem with student writers.

### *Academic Literacies and the tilts within*

Already, Academic Literacies theory is concerned with the ways that power between academic staff and students plays out in writing practices, and how agency in writing is particularly limiting for new student writers. These understandings can be traced back to Bakhtin's (1981) notion of 'voice' and its similarity to the tensions between structure and agency within sociological debate. In Bakhtinian terms, 'voice' is the product of the struggle between the rules that restrain writing against alternative intentions of individual expression. Providing a language for this struggle in order to capture the times when academic writers find ways to express agency *and when they cannot*, can be found in Thesen's articulation of a 'tilting point' (2014). Influenced by African literature and postcolonial theory, Thesen (2014; 2013) outlines how the notion of risk can be understood as 'narratives of loss', referring to what we might sacrificially give up in order to secure something else in return. To help convey this trade-off, the notion of a 'tilting point' pulls into focus the tensions that manifest in the psyche of writers as an interpolation between 'centrifugal forces' and 'centripetal forces' (ibid. 2014: 6). The 'centripetal forces' represent 'pulls towards convention' and refers to what is expected to be written, what is likely to be accepted and to do well, and what chimes with established conventions. By contrast, the 'centrifugal forces' are aspects of voice that appear to be more 'hybrid, experiential' that 'pushes away from the centre' (ibid. 2014: 6), inferring writing in ways that are less established, less expected and more diverse.

A good place to start to think about a 'tilting point' in student writing within Academic Literacies research, is the centripetal forces that shape the ways in which students lose voice

in their writing. In such instances, students sometimes ‘ventriloquate’ (Ivanic 1998) to match their writing as close as possible to their perceived expectations of the academy. Such practices can be problematic. It can lead students to write out their own thinking, ideas and values in ways that limit authentic pursuits in learning (Fulford 2009), and notwithstanding to hinder a sense of belonging within the academy (Hyland 2002). Many students may end up writing in ways that are geared almost exclusively at achieving grades at the expense of developing disciplinary understanding (Norton et al. 2001; Baker 2017).

However, the ‘tilting point’, by definition, prompts the consideration of other factors that might mediate the way writing is carried out. In doing so, a critical space is created to help consider the diverse ways in which learning is understood by students (Macfarlane 2020), and by extension, the ways in which writing comes into being. More centrifugal forces, for example, might include the times when students find and exert their authorial voice (Ivanic 1998), their perspective, their way of viewing the arguments and debates that they are encountering in their studies. In the tradition of Academic Literacies research, Lillis (2014: 238) offers what centrifugal forces might look like in practice as: ‘how scholars enact agency by using the stuff available to them – genres, languages, registers, accents – to make knowledge’ (ibid. 2014: 238). It is the ‘stuff available to them’ or, to use a term applied to student writers specifically, the ‘personal resources’ (Mitchell and Scott 2015), that provides the wriggle-room for writing in ways much more centrifugally.

Encompassing both centripetal and centrifugal forces, the ‘tilting point’ works by capturing the oscillation between the two. The ‘tilting point’, much like a seesaw, must arrive at an eventual resting point that ultimately reveals a dominant ‘pull’ of one force over the other. The litmus test being: ‘when voices do not carry as hoped, we must ask why’ (Thesen 2014: 6). In other words, when centripetal forces predominate, Thesen urges us to ask:

*Did the meanings that the writer had in mind see the light of day, or were they filtered out during the writing process, either because the writer did not want to risk exposing an unusual style (perhaps more colloquial, or blended) or unusual subject matter (references to experience, to research designs that went wrong)? Or did the writer choose to hold back what might have been said and instead take the path of least resistance? (ibid. 2014: 6).*

The questions raised were coined to help explore and theorise the silences in writing; the ideas and ‘tilts’ that did not make the final cut and that also, and ultimately, made way for what gets written. Yet, the notion that writing takes place in the context of conflicting imperatives can also be applied to the case of undergraduate student writing (Lillis 2014). The ‘tilting point’, pivoting between centrifugal and centripetal forces, captures tensions relevant to undergraduate student writers – whether to write in restrictive ways in order to ‘play safe’ (Read, Francis and Robson 2001) or to write in expansive ways with ‘spontaneity, flow and play’ (Thesen 2013: 116). Thus, Thesen’s theoretical tools can be made available to help understand how students navigate making the grade on the one hand, and attempting to develop disciplinary understanding and identity on the other.

## **Materials and Methods**

This paper draws on data analysis to help theorise how student writing ‘fits’ into today’s logic of Higher Education that proffers disciplinary discovery and advancement while increasingly promoting individualised human capital gains (Hannon, Faas and O’Sullivan 2017). The aim of the research was to understand how student writing is understood, viewed

and experienced by student writers within the varying and sometimes competing narratives of Higher Education, steered by the following questions:

- How do student writers negotiate the longstanding ethos of discovery and knowledge advancement against the newer versions of Higher Education endorsing individual gain?
- How do student writers in terms of the way they view, experience and approach writing reconcile differing and sometimes competing narratives?
- And, how do students negotiate the difficulties in writing *but also* what do they see as the pleasures and privileges, if any, in writing?

As such, the paper helps to shed light on student writing in consumer-led times in ways that helps to provide answers posed by the question: ‘how can theory and practice from Academic Literacies be used to open up debate about writing and language at institutional and policy levels?’ (Lillis et al. 2015: 4). The implications of the research and recommendations for practice are discussed at the end of the paper.

The research used semi-structured interviews with students in order to give a pre-eminence to ‘student voice’, understood in the context of this research as student responses in relation to aspects about their Higher Education experience. Although semi-structured interviews are usually used in research that draws from the theoretical lens of Academic Literacies, they are often additionally accompanied by some sort of elicitation device. Whilst elicitation devices offer a deepening focus to the interview, the scope of the research *in this case* was to tap into the more general feelings around writing – feelings and views that students are left with when they are not writing. To this end, it is suggested that the ‘headlines’ of what students recall and summon up, provide insight into what stood out and seemed to matter the most in relation to student views and accounts of their experiences to do with writing.

Thus, based on 20 semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students, I report on student accounts that capture the conflicting ways in which they viewed writing for assessment, how student writers balanced out the competing narratives of Higher Education, and what this means for understanding writing in current climatic conditions. The explorative small-scale study took place in a pre-1992 university. Interviews were conducted across a three-year period ending in 2018. Although this means that the data was generated some years ago, the position of this paper is that the context of higher education has not changed considerably in this time bar a ramping up of consumeristic trends and the additional exception of COVID. Purposive sampling was used to recruit students and snowballing sampling was used as a supplementary device to help boost uptake. The sample size was determined by ‘theory saturation’ (Mason 1996) in the sense that data analysis was iterative and interviews were ceased when the same sorts of themes emerged again and again. The study was open to all years and disciplines excluding only those studying mathematics due to the very minimal writing requirements of that particular course. The approach taken in this research therefore departs from many of the studies related to student writing where research is connected to one particular cohort or one specific degree programme. Instead, the anticipation was that by casting the net far and wide, student views and accounts would have in common the consumer landscape of Higher Education and not be limited to a year group or route of study. The student profiles who took part in the study are shown below (Table 1), and a full list of vignettes for all 19 participants (1 participant did not consent to full write up), are provided as an appendix:

**[Table 1 near here]**



Interviews typically lasted over an hour. Questions ranged from emotional involvement and using assessment guidance, to engaging in feedback and accessing support. Semi-structured interviews were transcribed and thematic network data analysis (Attride-Stirling 2001) was applied to the data. It was not always possible to entice participants to review transcripts after the interviews had taken place. Therefore, sense-making of the dataset was discussed with a colleague in the form of a ‘critical friend’ (Stenhouse 1975). The thematic network approach began with a coding framework derived from literature and expanded to include new codes emerging from the data (labelled in Table 2 as ‘coded text segments’). Organising themes were then formulated to think about the data more abstractly. At this point, coded text segments were relabelled thematically by identifying how writing was being talked about (such as writing being talked about as something that was enabling, agential, compromising or restrictive). Finally, organising themes were collapsed together to create global themes as way to capture the theoretical significance of the dataset. Here, the organising themes that aligned with when writing was talked about in ways foregrounding a more agentic type of writing were subsumed into the global theme of ‘centrifugal tilts’. Likewise, the organising themes commensurate with when writing was talked about as a type of loss that gave way to write what was expected to be written, were subsumed into the global theme of ‘centripetal tilts’.

**[Table 2 near here]**

The data analysis is discussed in two parts that are, referred to as centripetal and centrifugal tilts respectively, in order to reveal the range and nature of tilts at play. However, it is important to add that the students in the study often accounted for both types of ‘tilts’ when talking about their writing. Therefore, ‘tilts’ refer to intricate processes that co-exist and implicate the

complexities involved in writing from the student writer point of view – and not as mutually exclusive categories that characterise student types and behaviours.

In the steps taken above, it was inevitable that there was a layer of interpretation – both in terms of devising the themes but also in selecting quotes to be used in this paper. This research is therefore unavoidably framed by my own worldview developed out of my professional practice and personal experience. However, almost uniformly, it is acknowledged that qualitative research involves (if not requires) subjectivity at most stages of the research process (Walliman 2018). Thus, in the style of ‘confessional reflexivity’ (Foley 2002), I admit to having preconceptions born from my own encounters and anecdotal evidence at the outset of this research. I suspected that the consumer pressures and uncertain economic climate would overtake students’ imperative to learn for learning’s sake and hinder their use of writing as an explorative learning tool. Critically, I did not anticipate the ways that students might reflect upon this struggle and find ways to resist such narratives. The divergent and competing ways in which students talked about and accounted for their writing is led by the data and contrasts my original viewpoint. To put it another way, it is the data and not my pre-conceptions that have paved the way for using the notion of ‘tilts’ to help articulate these intricate aspects of student writing.

The research abided by BERA ethical guidelines. Measures were taken to minimise potential uneven power dynamics between myself and the students I interviewed. I took the precaution to conduct the fieldwork outside of my normal place of work and students were informed of this during initial contact and again when arranging interview times and at the start of each interview. Interview spaces, having significance to the interviewee in some way or another, additionally contributes to the interview-interviewee relationship. Therefore, deliberate

attention was also paid to the ‘microgeographies’ (Elwood and Martin 2000) involved in the interviewing process. Interviews therefore took place in locations chosen by the students. I met with students in empty classrooms, library spaces, student homes, cafes and the students’ union. The data has been pseudonymised in the presentation of this paper.

### **Findings: The ‘tilting point’ in student writing**

The data analysis reveals varying and competing imperatives that can be understood as centripetal and centrifugal tilts in student writing. These tilts infer a type of tilting point in student writing that involves deliberation over what to write, what not to write, how to write and how not to write. These types of deliberations, described here as the push and pull of centrifugal and centripetal tilts, broadly captures an oscillation between writing for capitulation on the one hand and writing for developing disciplinary identities on the other. The competing tilts suggest that students have a complex relationship with writing in ways that stretch beyond consumeristic tendencies.

#### ***Centrifugal tilts in student writing***

Writing was spoken about as being part of a wider learning experience that enabled students to develop disciplinary meaning and understanding, and helped them to explore, and be playful with, their authorial voice (Ivanic 1998). Students’ articulations included how they saw writing as something that reflected the writer, and as something that they could have a degree of ownership and control over. As Brenda, one student writer, put it: “*it is personal to you...you have developed since that as a person and a student*”. Students spoke about writing in ways that accorded to their own logic, interests and sense of self as a writer which meant they were able to find ways to assert their own, more centrifugal, style and approach to

writing. For example, Amelia explained to me how she preferred to write in simplistic ways in order to ensure her writing was “accessible”:

*Amelia: I try and avoid any...umm...unnecessary words so it comes across as quite simplistic but actually it is quite deliberate. I think in Law essays they want you to, they like you to have lots of, you know, complicated terms in there but I don't enjoy that because I don't think it is very accessible.*

Student writing was therefore not approached straightforwardly as a matter of assimilating convention in order to maximise individualistic potential, but also harnessed to oppose the expected ways of doing things. Student writing involved: ‘the possibility of students bringing alternative discourses to the academy which might eventually have an effect on its conventions’ (Ivanic 1998: 86) and subsequently, an aspect of higher education learning that was not limited to a passive and consumeristic pursuit. Knowing how writing was expected to be done, but then choosing to write in a different way, was therefore one way that the tilting point tended to pivot in relation to student writing. For instance, Veronica explained to me the differences between the two subjects she studied that denoted an ability to ‘course switch’ (Lea and Street 1998). She explained how: “*with Law, it's not such a problem because you're not expected to have too much of an opinion. But with Politics they like to know where your thinking is and how you have analysed the work*”. Yet as part of Veronica’s understanding, there was also an awareness of knowing what not to do, but at times involved still being inclined to cross the line:

*Veronica: I've gone off on a tangent with my reading because I've got myself involved and found another link or another article and then, it'll turn out that I'm off on a tangent. But I'll put it in because I think it's really interesting.*

Thus, students talked about how they used writing for their own reasons and gains. They found writing to be interesting and pleasurable in its own right, and were not always driven by what might please the person marking their work. Writing was therefore used to achieve tacit benefits that lay beyond a more consumeristic version of learning. Centrifugal tilts, as a result, found expression in the ways that students talked about drawing enjoyment and pleasure from writing. For instance, Simon talked about writing being: *"really, really fun"* and how you can *"do different things with an interesting, quirky bit of knowledge"*. Similarly, Jimmy talked about feeling a sense of satisfaction from being able to be "authoritative" in his writing and to have "the final say":

*Jimmy: your opinion is being expressed in a very concrete manner and that's what people are going to read. So I sometimes feel quite authoritative when I'm writing a piece because that's the final say, that's what they're going to read, my perception on the topic*

In this scenario, writing allowed Jimmy to play out a role in which he started to see himself as someone with expertise; a voice with authority and a platform with which to have his "say". Writing was therefore at times a tool for students to use to help them make sense of the world and in particular, their own place within it. For Marley, this meant that writing – and its subsequent feedback– allowed her to challenge personal pre-held conceptions as well as the biases of others:

*Marley: I was writing about a South African community, so there I did think I had an authority because it was a, it's coming from a country where I've lived in for 18 years and I do have experience. Whereas someone from the UK, even someone who is writing academically, unless you've been out there and lived it and experienced it yourself, I don't think you have an authority. So there, maybe, that is, that kind of links to what I was saying about people who have written for ages in that field; they know it and they've lived it, so they would have a bias. And then my bias is coming from how I feel the same about that particular topic that I was writing about.*

The bias that is written into all writing (Bakhtin 1981), implicit in Marley's observations, reveals how through endeavours as writers, students are able to question how the authorial voice comes into being in the first place – a question that reveals students' critical engagement with the nature of knowledge. Marley saw herself as being “*quite set in my own way of writing*” and “*quite opinionated*”, but writing offered her a way to challenge – that she was prepared to do at a cost to her grades - notions of authority around who can say what.

Centrifugal tilts in student writing had sway when students developed and exerted their voice, their perspective, their way of viewing the arguments and debates that they encountered in their studies. These inclinations reveal a preparedness to stretch if not break writing rules when other less consumer-led perceived benefits are seen to be gained. Thus, the student agendas were not limited to consumeristic ways of approaching higher education learning and student writing tended to involve more than achieving grades. Students found ways to resist ‘pulls towards convention’ (Thesen 2014) by integrating aspects of themselves – such as style or creativity – into their writing and could identify times when they had augmented

wording, style and articulation in a way that reflected how they identified with the discipline they were studying.

### ***Centripetal tilts in student writing***

There were also centripetal tilts in the way students accounted for their writing experiences.

Centripetal tilts restricted what was written for reasons to do with the way assessments and assessment-grading were perceived, including the individual preferences of the lecturer.

Student writers sometimes harboured these types of concerns, that writing in ways that deviated from assessment criteria or guidance would cost marks. Jade, for example, felt that assessment stipulations restricted what you might discuss in an essay and identified a struggle between what she might like to do, and what she must do. Just as some students who were faced with this conundrum chose to include secondary sources that may seem risky (as we have seen with Veronica), others will decide to play safe (as with Jade, below):

*Jade: you were so worried about if you didn't stick to what they say, then you weren't going to get that mark. What about if you went off and looked at other areas, other research, what if you decided, actually I would like to look at how this is researched in a different culture, in France for example, or look at how it is in Germany and compare it - but it doesn't say to do that, so if you do that are they going to mark you down?*

In some cases, centripetal tilts were so overt that the *only* option students felt was to 'play safe' (Read, Francis and Robson 2001) in their writing. Melanie suggested how assessment guidance can over-stipulate what should be written in ways that determine almost entirely what gets written (Fulford 2009):

*Melanie: we did have one where it was loads of guidance with it, basically telling us what she wanted... and you just felt like you were kind of writing an essay that she was going to write but, you know, in that sense it was writing something for them so it was a bit pointless to get that essay done. And it also raised anxieties, people said, "oh, no it can't be this, it can't be this simple to do this, you have to do something else", but no, I said, I think she just wants these points and that is it.*

These reflections infer how centripetal tilts can dominate writing instruction to unhelpful levels from the student point of view. The precision of the instructions not only stripped writing of its purpose by "*writing an essay that she was going to write*" but also caused additional anxiety. The specific instructions created a narrower vision of what could be written that, by definition, made it easier to fall short of.

At other times, centripetal tilts claimed sway in student writing following the testing out of more centrifugal approaches by student writers. When Sookie recalled starting university, she spoke about having a love for writing and how "*in the beginning, I really enjoyed it*". She discussed how this changed by saying:

*Sookie: "in the beginning it was a bit more my opinion but then I realised that wasn't really working and then I think towards the third year it was ,yes, more sculpting it more around what they wanted to hear and less about what I really thought".*

Sookie gradually found that writing for assessment often required the need to 'ventriloquate' (Ivanic 1998), and that over time, these centripetal tilts became increasingly dominant in her writing.



Writing in ways that were more centrifugal, although alluring to students, were therefore seen as the reserve for certain circumstances. Gayle spoke about how she looked forward to doing a dissertation because: *“I would really much like to write something completely what I want to write, not what was said to me”*. For Erin, this meant avoiding texts that were tricky to reference because: *“it sometimes puts you off wanting to use journals because you don’t have to reference it”*. Robbie felt insecure about his grade profile and therefore felt unable to write in ways that might be seen as ‘risky’. He recognised the potential for centrifugal tilts in his writing but saw it as a set of freedoms that existed only for already high-achieving students.

*Robbie: If I was consistently getting firsts really, or high 2:1s, then I would be willing to explore something, be a bit more creative in my writing. But for someone who’s getting lower band marks, that could take away from it. So it’s not a risk that someone like me could take.*

These responses reveal that while inclinations to write in more centrifugal ways were often a part of students’ academic literacies, the tilting point for student writing was still, in the end, often swayed by the centripetal pull. Thus, for student writers teetering at the tilting point, bending centripetally in order to ‘play safe’, although a go-to strategy, was not something that was undertaken unreflectively.

## **Discussion**

Higher Education students are often characterised as consumers seeking value-for-money, inducing a fear amongst academic staff that the more traditional values of liberal education are being eroding away. However, the adequacy of this view is being more frequently

questioned (Jones, Vigurs and Harris 2020; Raaper 2018). The data analysis discussed in this paper helps to contribute to this developing counterview by problematising the student-as-consumer mantra. By using student writing as a lens to help explore student experiences and views of Higher Education, a picture has emerged of a much more contested understanding of what higher education learning means for today's students. Rather than seeing writing as a gateway to individualised human capital, students sought out possibilities for expression and experimental writing endeavours, alongside an impetus to test traditional and established ways of writing, or to redirect writing in ways that served their own learning interests.

On the other hand, students did express a need to balance these ways of writing with an attention paid to the assessment stipulations within which they had to work. There was a range of viewpoints expressed about how the role of assessment guidance and criteria played into their writing, including welcomed ways. But students also offered reflections about the possible restrictive nature that such expectations (expressed in guidance and via individual lecturer expectations) had brought into their writing. Therefore, while student use of assessment-guidance documents is unsurprising (that is why they are produced and made available to students), what is of note is the extent to which assessment and assessment *inter alia* were perceived by students to restrict writing, and by extension, learning. In the most extreme of examples was the deliberate adoption of 'ventriloquation' that, at times, students felt compelled to do although it jarred with what they wanted to write about. The significance of which is how learning and teaching practices, even when developed to support student writers, can foreground in students' minds the primacy of assessment regulations. For many students, the need to balance the requirement to follow guidelines in order to 'play safe' versus using writing as a way to develop voice and ways of knowing was a characteristic of writing in a consumer-led higher education system.

I have described this balancing act as a tilting point, drawing on Thesen's notion of competing centrifugal and centripetal forces. In doing so, I suggest that student writing entails moments of oscillation between different meanings that contest with each other before settling upon one or the other tilt. The pivoting resembles Bakhtin's notion of 'voice' and the way that language is always a tussle between what one wants to say, and what has been said before. The centrifugal tilts tended to be generated from the 'personal resources' (Mitchell and Scott 2015) and 'stuff available to them' (Lillis 2014), such as finding expression in authority, personal experience, expanding the topic, or articulating oneself in a way that feels 'right'. The centrifugal tilts that students discussed were described as adding value to their writing - although at times such action might require a preparedness to compromise on grades along the way. Student acceptance to let their more centrifugal tilts take dominance in their writing helps to reveal the ways in which student understanding of higher education learning is not framed by consumeristic agendas alone. Students reported clearly the times when they wanted to use writing in particular ways in order to shape their learning. They shared examples and instances of when writing was more playful, experimental and identity-forming. Students sought and developed ways to deposit aspects of themselves into their work, to use writing as a tool to learn in a way that they wanted to and to experiment with their own writing identity. In this sense, student writers discussed writing in ways that resisted consumer logic.

By contrast, the notion of 'centripetal tilts' captures the times when writing was shaped more specifically by 'pulls to the centre'. In the context of student writing, centripetal tilts were constituted by assessment stipulations and individual preferences of lecturers. There was a need to adhere to what was wanted that, at the same time, entailed a giving up on what

students felt they might want to achieve in their writing. Students discussed examples of times when this meant not including what they otherwise wanted to write about, when their voice was shaped to mirror the sort of views that were expected by the academy and not feeling able to write in more expansive ways as a result. All of these views have in common a sense of loss, compromise and necessity in relation to the pulls towards the centre that shaped their writing, but in ways that suggest that centripetal tilts are not easy to bend to.

Students referred to both tilts when they talked about their writing endeavours, suggesting an oscillation between writing for grades on the one hand, and writing to make meaning on the other. The tilting point therefore captures the complex relationship that students have with writing that, despite happening within a consumer-led higher education system, stretches beyond grade accumulation. The mingling of tilts implicates the way that students are not for one way or the other. The tilting point instead reveals how students find themselves having to navigate wanting both to achieve and to learn; to impress others but to at once express themselves; and to have a voice but for it to not be the wrong voice. These points of oscillation help to shed light on what writing is like from the student point of view. It helps to widen the conversation from a skill-led narrative (the skills model) and an assessment discourse (somewhat as part of the academic socialisation model) towards issues to do with epistemology and identity (the academic literacies model).

Understanding how the tilts shape writing can be used to inform how writing might be discussed, taught and supported in the academy. Thus, as well as providing a language for the conflicting space that students write within, the tilts provide a catalyst to start reflecting on, not only the ways that learning and teaching practices may play in constructing them, but also what this feels like for student writers. That students give way to the more centripetal tilts in

their writing which leaves them feeling diminished as writers is both a concern and an opportunity. On the one hand, in the starkest of instances centripetal tilts can make writing lose meaning and become a type of lip service to the academy. On the other hand, there is an opportunity to cease the ways that student writers have other centrifugally-aligned ambitions for their writing; this is something that practitioners can engage with and do something about.

For practitioners, a number of aspects relating to this research may therefore be useful in informing practice. In the academy's urge to 'satisfy' students, there lies an under-discussed danger relating to the overprovision of writing guidance – that brings few gains even from the student point of view. This raises questions around how and in what way writing can be *usefully* supported. In other words, what level of writing guidance is helpful and what might lead to the active curtailing of writing – particularly in a climate when so much hinges on grades. Practitioners may therefore look for ways to rearticulate assessment briefings and corollary documentation. The aim would be that as opposed to students feeling limited by assessment criteria, more emphasis is placed on the possibilities and myriad of ways that an assessment could be interpreted. It is possible also for students to play some part in determining assessment criteria (see Buckler, King-Hill and Dart [2015]) and thus, extend their involvement in what gets written. In cases where there *must* be stipulation about how the assessment is done and what it should include, practitioners might find ways to encourage their students to consider how the nature of the assessment task reflects the needs and conventions of the discipline they are studying (see Middleton *et al* [2020]). This could be done by helping students to explore assessment criteria either through dialogue with lecturers (see Bloxham and West [2007]) or via student-led discussion (see Tapp [2015]).

Practitioners can also draw from the way that students want to develop voice and find ways to develop more agential practices as writers. It is therefore also poignant to invest in assessment strategies that encourage students to fulfil more centrifugal inclinations in the way they write. For example, practitioners involved in devising assessments may want to consider assessment tasks that are project-led to allow students to feel ownership over their work. Attention may also be paid to developing ways to be more inclusive of the rich array of student experiences that now often characterises the student body (see Snowball and McKenna [2017]). Assembling these ideas, some suggestions and recommendations for practice include:

At assessment level:

- Within assessment guidance, use phrases such as ‘*the sorts of things you could do...*’ or ‘*you might want to...*’
- Within assessment guidance differentiate between absolutes (what students must do) and what is discretionary (what students have choice over)
- Discuss discipline-based conventions so that when stipulations are required, it is understood why

At course level:

- Provide more guidance at Level 4 and decreasing amounts at Levels 5 and 6, discussing the rationale for this with students
- Build in opportunities for choice over title/topic/research activities to help students carve out ways to develop their disciplinary interests and identities
- Develop assessment that requires empathy writing (see Strauss [2017]) so that students can access opportunities to develop their authorial voice in their writing
- Discuss why there might be prevailing views and a degree of consensus over certain issues but how, and in what way, these may be challenged

Additionally, it is also important to challenge the student-as-consumer view when we can. Not only is it inaccurate to take a single aspect of studenthood and portray it as the key characteristic, but it also has the potential to create a rift between student and lecturer. Colleagues can be mindful of this during meetings, training days, course validation events and indeed, in classrooms.

In drawing some of these points to a close, it is also necessary to acknowledge the limitations of this research - not only to make clear where some hesitation may be prudent but also to pinpoint what subsequent research could follow. Although the paper seeks to present data analysis originating from an exploratory small-scale piece of research, it is also worth noting that the data represented stems from a relatively broad sampling criteria and a singular method for data collection. Therefore, there is scope to develop a more specific understanding of the way 'tilts' feature in the writing of particular groups, levels or courses of study. There is also room to involve more ethnographical methods to help explore the way tilts vary across different modules, stages of study and assessment types for individual student writers. I would therefore suggest these areas as potential avenues for future research in helping to understand more the way writing 'tilts' may be linked to particular modes of study, assignments or even cohorts. Finally, the small-scale nature of the research is limited in terms of its generalisability that means that tilts and tilting points discussed are, so far, particular to the students who took part in the study. However, the value of this paper resides within its *capacity* for generalisation (Wolcott 1994) with situations that share a 'context similarity' (Larsson 2009). The paper therefore contends that these multi-faceted ways of negotiating writing are potentially relevant to students beyond the ones who took part in the

study and in this sense, worthy of consideration for practitioners involved in planning and developing writing for assessment tasks.

## **Conclusion**

Higher Education policy continues to be increasingly consumeristic informing the tone and practices that frame the student experience. The fee-paying status of students positions them further into the role of consumer and the university into service provider, raising concerns that the more liberal and progressive notions of Higher Education based on disciplinary allegiances, discovery and knowledge advancement are being squeezed out of the frame.

But using student writing as a lens to explore these ideas presents a different version of what Higher Education is like for today's students in ways that offers an alternative and more complex narrative. Students are not only interested in obtaining marks that are in the higher grade boundaries, but are also interested in learning the discipline, growing as an individual, and using writing as a tool to develop disciplinary identities. However, this does not mean that students aren't prepared to adhere to writing rules when they feel they need to – something that perhaps needs the most thought about in the design and articulation of assessments and assessment guidance.

At a theoretical level, Academic Literacies accompanied by Thesen's 'tilting' point, helps to capture these issues as moments of oscillation between centripetal and centrifugal tilts for undergraduate student writers. The diverse accounts from the student point of view reveals how, even in a consumer-led climate, student understanding of higher education learning remains diverse and is shaped in multifaceted ways. Grades are not the only game in town. It is hoped that these insights could prove useful in supporting student writing and developing



assessment practices, as well as highlighting how student approaches to Higher Education learning remains diverse and extends beyond consumeristic agendas.

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**Table 1**

	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Year of study at time of interview</b>	<b>Discipline(s) studied</b>
1	Amelia	1 <sup>st</sup> Year	Law
2	Belinda	2 <sup>nd</sup> Year	Psychology and Criminology
3	Brenda	1 <sup>st</sup> Year	Adult Nursing
4	Erin	3 <sup>rd</sup> Year	Social Work
5	Gayle	2 <sup>nd</sup> Year	Physics and Business Management
6	Helen	2 <sup>nd</sup> Year	Chemistry
7	Ivy	Graduate	Psychology and Media Communication
8	Jade	Graduate	Education and History
9	Jimmy	1 <sup>st</sup> Year	Medicine
10	Joss	4 <sup>th</sup> year	Medicine
11	Letitia	Graduate	Faculty of Health
12	Lydia	3 <sup>rd</sup> Year	Biochemistry and Biology
13	Marley	2 <sup>nd</sup> Year	Criminology and Psychology
14	Melanie	Graduate	Social Work
15	Norma	2 <sup>nd</sup> Year	Psychology
16	Robbie	1 <sup>st</sup> Year	Law
17	Simon	1 <sup>st</sup> Year	History and International Relations
18	Sookie	Graduate	Education and History
19	Veronica	3 <sup>rd</sup> Year	Law and Politics
20	Warren	2 <sup>nd</sup> Year	Education

**Table 2**

<b>Coded text segments</b>	<b>Organising Themes</b>	<b>Global Theme</b>
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Researching, transferable skills, emerging professional identities, creativity, contribution, writing style	Enabling Empowering Purposeful Agential	Centrifugal tilts
Having to write what is expected of you, There is one notional 'right' answer Feels like jumping through hoops	Compromising Meaningless Restrictive	Centripetal tilts

**Word count: 6997 (excluding List of References and Tables)**

### Appendices:

Participant Vignettes	
Amelia	Amelia was a 1 <sup>st</sup> year student studying Law. Amelia wasn't afraid to ask for help if she did not understand something or if she was unsure of what she was being asked to do. Amelia wanted at least a 2:1 grade, and found that many of her cohort in Law wanted either a 2:1 or First. She found that grades were often very important to her fellow classmates because of the restrictions of what some might experience if they didn't achieve a high enough grade.
Belinda	Belinda was a 2 <sup>nd</sup> year student studying Psychology and Criminology. Her subjects required her to write a lot as part of her course. She saw herself as quite academic. She enjoys researching for an essay but always wants to research more than there is time for. Achieved firsts in her first year but grades had dipped in year two. Generally confident about ability to write but admitted to worrying a lot about her writing.
Brenda	Brenda was a first year student studying Adult Nursing. She has to partake in academic writing for the theoretical modules relating to nursing but elsewhere her degree has a more vocational element and involves practical activities. Brenda talked about given herself enough time, starting early, writing a plan or checklist and ticking off what she had done on her list. The practical steps she put in place for herself posed a sort of feel of 'progress' which she found reassuring.
Erin	Erin was a final year student studying Social Work. She had a negative account of her writing experiences stemming from a series of failed essays in her second year. Her experiences left her with some anxiety around her writing making assessments and waiting for grades to be revealed, particularly stressful times.
Gayle	Gayle was a second year student studying Physics and Business Management. She felt that she had to do a lot of writing for her course but that the type of writing was different for each subject. Overall, Gayle found that it was important to be evaluative and therefore made a very conscious effort to make all of her writing

	evaluative. Gayle was pretty confident about writing so long as she had enough time to dedicate to writing.
Helen	Helen was a 2 <sup>nd</sup> year student studying Chemistry. She had a relaxed approach to writing. She felt her time management could be better, and that the more research you had done, the better placed you were for writing. She said she wasn't likely to use support systems for writing issues unless she had a specific issue she wanted addressing.
Ivy	Ivy studied Psychology and Media Communications and recalled differences in the way she was expected to write for her two disciplines. Ivy enjoyed the challenge of writing. She felt that with enough organisation and planning, she could take to writing fairly straightforwardly. She reflected on a couple of areas – her ability to write concisely, and her ability to not overwrite.
Jade	Jade studied History and Business Management before transferring to a History and Education course. Jade had mixed feelings about writing. Jade enjoyed writing creatively and found that academic writing was sometimes a little stifling. She liked writing tasks with more creative qualities. Other writing she found tedious at times.
Jimmy	Jimmy was a first year medicine student. Jimmy had to produce a lot of different types of writing including turning scientific papers into layman speak. Jimmy enjoyed writing in the various styles that he was expected to write in. He found it a creative process, and personally rewarding and strived to do a good job. He felt that writing allowed him to develop a more professional and authoritative voice, and even experimented with style and humour.
Joss	Joss was a final year medicine student. Joss felt that writing could be stressful at times, but that ultimately, it was a positive endeavour and led to certain privileges. In particular, Joss talked about opportunities to write papers with her supervisors that would potentially lead to publications. Joss saw the real-life applicability of writing as something that was a motivating and rewarding factor in writing. Joss did say that writing could be stressful and at times she would be overcome with emotion and cry when she received her grades.
Letitia	Letitia wished not to be identified at course level, but was happy to be referred to as a student from the Faculty of Health. Letitia enjoyed reading and research but sometimes found the writing quite onerous. A contributing factor to this was time management, as Letitia explained that her time was split between placement activity, research and writing – so sometimes writing assessments was a bit of a stretch. She also mentioned that some guidance was unclear or vague for particular writing tasks which had contributed to feelings of uncertainty.
Lydia	Lydia was a third year Biochemistry and Biology student. She expressed a passion for her subjects and found, as a result of her disciplinary interests, that she enjoyed writing and found it a rewarding process. Lydia did express some concerns about



	her English skills. She enjoyed writing that offered a choice and that she would be able to research.
Marley	Marley was a second year student studying Psychology and Criminology. Her schooling was in South Africa, at a prestigious school in Cape Town where writing was taken very seriously. Many of her assignments required written work which Marley felt was a fair way of assessing engagement and understanding. Marley was achieving 2:1 and First marks. Marley had a positive relationship with writing. She had received feedback suggesting that she needed to be less biased.
Melanie	Melanie studied Social Work. Melanie recalled how particular times in writing were quite stressful. She had supported a fellow student through a difficult time in their studies and found the experience stressful in ways that impacted on the way she experienced waiting for marks in her own future assignment work.
Norma	Norma was a Psychology 2 <sup>nd</sup> year student. She had started University with ambitions to become a child psychologist although had since become sure of what she wanted to do. Norma talked about ‘stressing’ quite a bit when writing. She talked about writing as quite important on her course, with assessments very essay-based. Norma felt used to writing in different ways for different genres and felt comfortable with the variation that this offered her.
Robbie	Robbie was a first year Law student. Robbie was slightly negative about his writing experiences. He felt that he was still learning the ropes and that he had made some mistakes in year 1 that he intended not to repeat in year 2. He found that overall writing was a pressurised process and mainly because of the perceived need to achieve highly within the discipline of Law if to go into practice after graduation.
Simon	Simon studied History and International Relations. Simon told me he enjoyed writing and that he took it seriously with designs on perhaps achieving a first degree overall. Simon talked about how he was willing to stretch for a first to aid his employability in the future. He felt that he was generally well supported and that feedback he had received was useful in helping him further his writing skills. Simon felt as if there was a creative aspect to writing which he enjoyed tapping into, whilst being aware of the main aim to keep to the task.
Sookie	Sookie studied Education and History. Sookie expressed how much she had loved writing prior to university and how she enjoyed writing poetry. Sookie talked about enjoying doing the research for an essay and writing in a way that conveyed her views on a particular topic. However, Sookie found that over time she gave herself less scope for saying what she wanted to say and placed more emphasis on writing what she thought was wanted to be heard. Sookie found that writing contained some pressures – especially pressures to achieve particular grades.
Veronica	Veronica studied Law and Politics. Veronica enjoyed writing and had a positive relationship with writing. She saw a distinct difference between writing for Law and writing for Politics. Veronica enjoyed doing research in preparation for

	writing. She saw that this ensured a broad knowledge base that was useful for the future.
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