

1 **The use of 'writing retreats' in supporting Geography and Environmental Science**
2 **undergraduate independent research projects**

3 **By**

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5 **1 Introduction**

6 *“Dissertations have had a long history in geographical higher education, being widely*
7 *regarded as the pinnacle of an individual's undergraduate studies and the prime source of*
8 *autonomous learning”*

9 Boud, 1981, cited in Gold et al., (1991, Chapter 8)

10

11 It has been recognised that there is a need for graduates in the twenty-first century to have the
12 aptitude to be critical thinkers and make balanced judgements about the information that they
13 find and use (Harvey, Moon, Geall, & Bower, 1997; Stefani, Clarke, & Littlejohn, 2000; Hager
14 & Holland, 2006; Solem, Cheung, & Schlemper, 2008; Spronken-Smith, 2013; Spronken-
15 Smith, McLean, Smith, Bond, Jenkins, Marshall, & Frielick, 2016). The undergraduate
16 dissertation¹, also known as a capstone project, is an independent research project that is
17 undertaken at the end of the degree programme that enables students to demonstrate their
18 ability to apply, analyse, synthesis and evaluate their knowledge i.e. *'students as producers of*
19 *knowledge'* (Boud, 1981; Healey, Lannin, Stibbe, & Derounian, 2013), promoting lifelong
20 learning through the construction of a range of graduate attributes (Whalley, Saunders, Lewis,
21 Buenemann, & Sutton, 2011; Blanford, Kennelly, King, Miller, & Bracken, 2020; Thomas,
22 Wong, & Li, 2014; Mossa, 2014; Hovorka & Wolf, 2019). Graduate attributes have been

¹ The term dissertation is used throughout this paper, however, it is recognised by the author that there are a range of different terms used to describe the major independent research projects/reports undertaken by undergraduate students, such as capstone projects, honours projects and final-year projects.

23 defined as “the qualities, skills and understandings a university community agrees its students
24 would desirably develop during their time at the institution and, consequently, shape the
25 contribution they are able to make to their profession and as a citizen” (Bowden et al. 2000,
26 cited in Bridgstock, 2009, pp. 32) i.e. graduates are seen as 'global citizens'.

27

28 Degree programmes in the U.K. are subject to 'benchmarking standards'. These standards are
29 set out by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). Within the QAA
30 standards the dissertation is often seen as a hallmark of undergraduate degree programmes. For
31 Geography degree programmes, the QAA (2019, p.10) notes:

32 *“Within most Honours degree courses in Geography, it is anticipated that some form of*
33 *independent research work is a required element. Students experience the entire research*
34 *process, from framing enquiry to communicating findings. Independent research is often*
35 *communicated in the form of a dissertation in the later stages of the course.”*

36

37 Whilst the emphasis here is on the Geography dissertation, undergraduate independent research
38 projects are seen as an important part of many degree programmes across many countries, as
39 Scott (2002, pp.13 – cited in (Walkington, Griffin, Keys-Mathews, Metoyer, Miller, Baker &
40 France, 2011, pp. 316)) notes, “in a 'knowledge society' all students – certainly all graduates –
41 have to be researchers.” Dissertation practices however differ (in terms of length, timing and
42 the number of module credits) from discipline to discipline, institution to institution and
43 country to country (Hill, Kneale, Nicholson, Waddington, & Ray, 2011). For example, in the
44 US, The Boyer Commission, founded in 1995, produced a blueprint document for US higher
45 education institutions on the structure of undergraduate programmes in research led-institutions
46 and recommended that all undergraduate degree programmes should culminate in a capstone
47 project (Boyer Commission, 1998). In Europe, similar studies have also documented the
48 strengths of students being engaged in research (Committee on Higher Education, 1963; Elsen,
49 Visser-Wijnveen, van der Rijst, & van Driel, 2009; Healey, 2005a, 2005b; Healey & Jenkins,

50 2006, 2009; Jenkins, Healey, & Zetter, 2007), with the integration of teaching and research –
51 interconnected through the 'teaching research nexus' – seen as fundamental to current higher
52 education programmes and represented as 'research-based curricula' (Hattie & Marsh, 1996;
53 Healey & Jenkins, 2009b; Speake, 2015). Both at the national and international level,
54 independent research projects are seen as a critical component of many undergraduate (and
55 postgraduate) degree programmes and can represent a significant component of the final degree
56 assessment (Hill, Kneale, Nicholson, Waddington, & Ray, 2011). Furthermore, dissertations
57 are seen as a successful tool that can be used to promote the connection between teaching and
58 research, empowering the learner (i.e. the student) and 'talent spotting' (i.e. identification of
59 potential postgraduate research students thus increasing the retention of students in research)
60 (Marshall, 2009; Brew & Mantai, 2017). In addition, the discussion in the literature of the use
61 of dissertations as a means for 'talent spotting' so-called 'strong' students for postgraduate
62 degree programmes has also considered the process of dissertations in terms of encouraging
63 more students in general, not just those that are considered to be 'strong' students, to consider
64 continuing in research, as the dissertation experience can increase the links between staff
65 research, staff teaching and student learning and enhance the students' engagement in the
66 research culture of the institution (Haigh, Cotton, & Hall, 2015).

67

68 U.K. undergraduate dissertations are typically between 8,000 – 12,000 words in length and are
69 often the first time students undertake a fully independent project, from designing,
70 implementing and producing a piece of research, that enables students to explore their own
71 subject-specific interests and consolidate their own academic disciplinary identities (Harrison
72 & Whalley, 2008; Hill, Kneale, Nicholson, Waddington, & Ray, 2011). The design and
73 production of the dissertation is a time-consuming process. In the U.K. undergraduate
74 dissertations are typically undertaken across the second and third years of study (Gatrell, 1991);

75 the summer of the second year enables data collection to be undertaken and initial analysis of
76 findings. Each institution has its own specific guidelines and regulations about the completion
77 and final submission of the dissertation, most permit a minimum of 12 months to complete the
78 dissertation and hand-in, some a maximum of up to 18 months (Parsons & Knight, 2015). The
79 central position long held by the dissertation in many institutions' undergraduate degree
80 programmes and the time afforded to it reflects the importance it is seen to have as a tool for
81 student learning, assessment and lifelong learning (Harrison & Whalley, 2008). One of the
82 major challenges in the undergraduate dissertation is the balance in the provision of sufficient
83 and continuous support to students for the design, implementation and production of their
84 independent projects due to the autonomous element of the dissertation i.e. the dissertation
85 being an example of '*student-centred learning*'. For the student, despite a lengthy period of
86 supervision (~ 12 – 18 months) and the requirement of twenty-first century graduates to be
87 independent and confident self-directed learners, students can still struggle to feel confident
88 and motivated in the final editing, formatting, and write-up stages of their undergraduate
89 dissertation. Despite the pedagogical importance of the dissertation and the implication of them
90 for the undergraduate student experience, much of the literature on dissertations focuses on:
91 the design and implementation of (subject-specific) dissertations (e.g. Parsons & Knight, 2015;
92 Peters, 2017), the teaching and learning strategies used in dissertation modules (e.g. Todd,
93 Smith, & Bannister, 2006; Harrison & Whalley, 2008), the assessment criteria and marking
94 standards of dissertations i.e. quality assurance (e.g. Webster, Pepper, & Jenkins, 2000; Pepper,
95 Webster, & Jenkins, 2001; Pathirage, Haigh, Amaratunga, & Baldry, 2007; Nicholson,
96 Harrison, & Whalley, 2010), the structure, style and format of dissertations (e.g. traditional
97 dissertations *vs.* forward-facing dissertations, such as the use of portfolios and undertaking
98 work-based projects) (e.g. Harrison & Whalley, 2008; Hill, Kneale, Nicholson, Waddington,
99 & Ray, 2011; Healey, Lannin, Stibbe, & Derounian, 2013), and the students' development of

100 subject-specific skills, personal attributes and transferable skills. However, the question
101 remains as to how best to support and motivate undergraduate students in the final stages of
102 the dissertation write-up process.

103

104 The research undertaken in this paper is focused on addressing the gap in the literature on the
105 facilitation of students' confidence and motivation in the final stages of the dissertation write-
106 up process. This paper investigates and assesses the use of writing retreats within the final
107 stages of the undergraduate dissertation process, it describes the format and the structure of the
108 retreat and presents the methodological approach taken, before presenting its main findings and
109 recommendations. More specifically, the objectives of this paper are:

110 (i) to assess if the use of writing retreats for undergraduate students can facilitate a safe
111 and supportive environment through the construction of protected time and space that
112 is intended to afford dedication to the final editing, formatting, and write-up stages of
113 the dissertation; and,

114 (ii) to examine if the introduction of writing retreats can foster attitudinal changes such as
115 increased confidence, enhanced motivation and a more pleasurable final write-up stage
116 for undergraduate dissertation students through the potential removal of feelings of
117 isolation through the construction of communities of practice.

118

119 **2 The use of writing retreats**

120 *Academic Writing Retreats*

121 Fundamental to all academic careers is communication, in particular *written communication*,
122 this comes in a number of different formats, from the initial doctoral thesis through to the
123 construction of conference papers, journal papers and books (Cameron, Nairn, & Higgins,

124 2009). However, one major challenge facing many academic scholars is finding the time and
125 space to write. Murray (2015, pp. 57) defines a writing retreat as being “an obvious way to
126 make time and space for writing. It provides dedicated writing time”. Furthermore, retreats are
127 designed to create more than just protected time and space to write (i.e. uninterrupted time),
128 they are also designed to create an atmosphere of trust and empowerment (Grant & Knowles,
129 2000), increased motivation (Moore, 2003; Petrova & Coughlin, 2012), build a community of
130 support (Murray, 2014) and have the potential for transformational learning – e.g. the process
131 of deep, constructive and meaningful learning that can change an individuals’ beliefs, attitudes
132 and feelings – for all those that attend. Since the use of writing retreats for academic and
133 research staff and postgraduate research students have been documented in detail in the
134 literature (see for example, Wittman, Velde, Carawan, Pokorny, & Knight, 2008; Aitchison &
135 Guerin, 2014; Kornhaber, Cross, Betihavas, & Bridgman, 2016; Tremblay-Wragg, Mathieu
136 Chartier, Labonté-Lemoyne, Déri, & Gadbois, 2020) and as it is not the purpose of this paper
137 to repeat these listings, the range of common benefits for those that attend the retreats in the
138 Higher Education sector are discussed in brief. The literature suggests that the main focus of
139 an academic writing retreat is '*writing*', however, the so-called academic writing retreat model
140 (including structured, semi-structured and unstructured retreats) has also proven to be
141 successful for a myriad of organisational (e.g. allocation of resources and follow-up support),
142 personal (e.g. increased motivation, confidence, engagement and pleasure in writing and
143 reduced writing-related anxiety) and professional (e.g. increased writing skills, teamwork and
144 the development of a community of writers) outcomes (Kornhaber, Cross, Betihavas, &
145 Bridgman, 2016). Furthermore, Grant and Knowles (2000) have stated that instead of the
146 practice of academic writing being seen as an autonomous and isolated act that is undertaken
147 at home or in an office, it should be reframed to be seen as more of a community-based,
148 collaborative and social experience. The formation of a community “creates a social space in

149 which participants can discover and further a learning partnership related to a common domain”
150 (Wenger, Trayner, & de Laat, 2011, pp.10), therefore becoming a resource for those that attend
151 the retreats in the future in the form of a shared practice i.e. a process for collaborative and
152 cooperative learning.

153

154 The implementation of academic writing retreats has been revealed to be a useful and helpful
155 strategy in order to manage productive writing time as well as to increase confidence in the
156 process of writing itself (i.e. through identification as a 'writer') and collegiality; all retreats
157 regardless of their structure (e.g. structured, semi-structured and unstructured retreats), include
158 three fundamental inter-connected features: a shared writing space, a shared writing time and
159 peer discussion. Despite the benefits of writing retreats, they are typically only offered to
160 academic and research staff (Moore, 2003; Cameron, Nairn, & Higgins, 2009; Kornhaber,
161 Cross, Betihavas, & Bridgman, 2016) and postgraduate research students (Ciampa, & Wolfe,
162 2019), but to date NOT undergraduate students, however, communication remains a core
163 undergraduate transferable research skill and forms part of many of the desired graduate
164 attributes. Furthermore, recent studies of using writing retreats for academic and research staff
165 and postgraduate research students have demonstrated the many positive benefits of running
166 such retreats, therefore, providing a solid basis in order to investigate the use and success of
167 writing retreats for undergraduate students.

168

169 *Undergraduate Student Writing Retreats*

170 Many undergraduate students face dissertation writing feeling unprepared (Todd, Bannister, &
171 Clegg, 2004), after all it has been stated that students are not explicitly trained to be professional
172 writers (Delyser, 2003), therefore the transition from student to independent researcher/scholar

173 can be a challenging process for some students. Furthermore, many students feel isolated while
174 writing their dissertation, this is often also combined with a lack of confidence in the writing
175 and editing process and feeling unsupported, despite the structured lengthy supervision support
176 students receive (~ 12 – 18 months). The self-directed independent learning element of the
177 dissertation project can lead to a difference in expectations between the student and supervisor,
178 this can have an impact on the students' satisfaction of the supervisory role and ultimately their
179 own work (Del Río, Díaz-Vázquez, & Maside Sanfiz, 2018); as Brew & Mantai (2017, pp.
180 554) commented “the relationship between supervisor and student are essential factors in a
181 positive research experience.” Writing retreats help address some of the challenges presented
182 within the undergraduate writing process, as Delyser (2003, pp. 170) states:

183 *“We treat writing as if it were an innate talent, something we are simply able to do well – or*
184 *not. Luckily that is not the case, for writing like carpentry, gymnastics and drawing, is only*
185 *partially talent-determined. Like the other three, writing is also a skill and a craft. It can be*
186 *learned and practiced, honed and sharpened, practiced some more and perhaps even nearly*
187 *perfected.”*

188
189
190 Retreats can act as scaffolding and help offset the feeling of isolation in the final write-up stage
191 of the dissertation. Students attending a retreat have a shared common goal, in this example to
192 complete their dissertation, this can create a collaborative, collegial and supportive community
193 in which students become aware that the challenges and struggles of the final write-up stage of
194 the dissertation are also shared by their peers' (Moore, 2003). This has the potential to increase
195 confidence and motivation, reducing the feeling of isolation and the perception of being 'cast
196 adrift' (Shadforth & Harvey, 2004). Although writing retreats are not a new concept, as
197 aforementioned there have been numerous studies on the use and structure of retreats for
198 academic and research staff and postgraduate research students generating a vast literature
199 enabling the benefits and challenges of such retreats to be explored and brought into focus,

200 however, there appears to have been little investigation or empirical research on the potential
201 benefits and the use of writing retreats for undergraduate students.

202

203 **3 Institutional Setting**

204 The University of Liverpool (U.K.), where the research took place, is a large teaching and
205 research-based institution. The Geography (BA and BSc) and Environmental Science (BSc)
206 degree programme intakes are typically around 300 and 35 students per year and are accredited
207 by the *Royal Geographical Society* and *Institution of Environmental Sciences* respectively,
208 both of which have clear expectations that programmes should clearly contain 'individual
209 research projects' as part of the programme structure (RGS, 2017, p.9). The dissertation projects
210 are undertaken by students in their final years of study and address many of the specific
211 graduate attributes identified within The University of Liverpool's Institutional Education
212 Strategy 2026 and Curriculum 2021 Framework (University of Liverpool, 2016a, 2016b), in
213 particular, the Liverpool Hallmarks focused on 'research-connected teaching' and 'active
214 learning' and the Liverpool Graduate (subject-specific) attributes focused on 'confidence' and
215 'digital fluency'.

216

217 In the Department of Geography and Planning, School of Environmental Sciences, at The
218 University of Liverpool, the deadline for Geography undergraduate dissertation submission is
219 in the third week of the second semester in the third year. In 2018/19, The University of
220 Liverpool made an institutional decision to make an alteration to the main 'exam' period,
221 shifting from a designated two-week period to a three-week period. This institutional shift in
222 the 'exam' assessment period resulted in the submission deadlines of both continuous, and other
223 forms of assessment, not being permitted in this time period, for strong pedagogical reasons,
224 therefore the deadline for Geography undergraduate dissertation submission moved from the

225 thirteenth week of the first semester (~ early January) in the third year to, the third week of the
226 second semester in the third year (~ early February). This change to the deadline for Geography
227 undergraduate dissertation submission has resulted in a 'gap' between the end of the 18 month
228 dissertation supervision period at the end of the first semester in the third year and the final
229 submission hand-in deadline (~eight weeks) where students do not receive supervision. In order
230 to address this 'gap' a dissertation writing retreat has been designed and established in the third
231 year undergraduate students timetable during this 'gap' period. Those students that had chosen
232 to undertake module ENVS321 (Geography Dissertation) – a compulsory module for
233 Geography (BA and BSc) and Environmental Science (BSc) students and an optional module
234 for Geography and Planning (BA) and Combined Honours (BA and BSc) students – were
235 informed of this new and novel dissertation writing retreat in early November so that they could
236 build it into their dissertation write-up plan, though it was explicitly explained to the students
237 that the retreat was not an opportunity to receive additional supervisory support, rather a chance
238 to 'polish' their dissertation drafts through structured dedicated writing time in a safe and
239 supportive environment, facilitated by members of staff, and address formatting and technical
240 questions.

241

242 **4 Research methods**

243 The optional dissertation writing retreat for third year Geography (BA and BSc) and
244 Environmental Science (BSc) undergraduate students was held on-campus at The University
245 of Liverpool in the Department of Geography and Planning building. All students registered
246 on the dissertation module (n=292) were invited to attend the retreat. In total ~100 students
247 (>30% of the 2019/20 module cohort) attended the retreat across the two days; more students
248 attended on day two (~60% of the retreat participants), however no formal list or register was
249 taken as the retreat had intentionally been designed to be both open and informal in structure

250 to encourage student participation (Massingham & Herrington, 2006). Some students attended
251 on either day one or two, however a large group of students attended on both days.

252

253 The writing retreat was structured with the following ethos in mind and influenced by the
254 Communities of Practice (CoP) learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and
255 Containment Theory (Murray, 2014): to create a safe atmosphere for productive writing; to
256 help create an environment of peer support and build a community of support (i.e. foster
257 collegial relationships) both during the retreat and beyond to increase individual confidence
258 and motivation; to explore behavioural and attitudinal changes that result in transformational
259 learning; and, to produce a more positive and enjoyable experience of the final write-up stage
260 of the dissertation. The introductory session at the beginning of each day encouraged students
261 to actively engage and contribute to the retreat on an individual- and peer-level. Following this,
262 the remaining parts of the two days were structured around discrete periods of set activities
263 including question sessions where students could discuss dissertation formatting and technical
264 issues with members of staff and also interact, share ideas and have discussions with their peers
265 attending the retreat. There were so-called 'silent' focused writing time – this took up a large
266 proportion of each day – and scheduled breaks for refreshments and a chance for a change of
267 scene. The retreat adopted a 'typing pool' model (Murray & Newton, 2009) e.g. all students
268 wrote together in the same room for the duration of the retreat (co-located writing) and the
269 retreat included a series of fixed time-periods for writing and question sessions, as
270 aforementioned. Furthermore, the retreat included the use of 'expert facilitators' present for the
271 duration of the retreat in the form of a range of academic members of staff from each of the
272 different broad research areas (e.g. Environmental Change; Planning, Environmental
273 Assessment and Management; Geographic Data Science; and, Power, Space and Cultural
274 Change) representing a range of career stages in the Department of Geography and Planning.

275

276 The use of the writing retreat in supporting Geography (BA and BSc) and Environmental
277 Science (BSc) undergraduate independent research projects has been assessed using
278 questionnaires, completed by the third year undergraduate students after the attendance of the
279 retreat. Students attending the dissertation writing retreat were provided with a paper copy of
280 the questionnaire on their arrival, or as soon as possible thereafter, by the author or by
281 colleagues in attendance of the retreat, and asked to return their completed questionnaires into
282 a post-box based in the room at any stage during the day; this enabled students to be free to
283 choose where and when they filled-in their questionnaire. The self-completion questionnaire,
284 reproduced as Table 1, contained a range of 'open' and 'closed' questions. The use of 'open'
285 question enables the respondent (i.e. in this example the student) to control the length of their
286 answer and the type of information that is included, the question tends to be short and the
287 answers tend to be longer (Denscombe, 2014). In contrast, the use of 'closed' structured
288 questions enables the researcher to collect standardised data from a range of identical questions
289 in order to compare participant responses (Denscombe, 2014). The success of research
290 questionnaires depends on three inter-connected factors:

- 291 1) the response rate
292 (i.e. *how many are returned to the researcher*);
- 293 2) the completion rate
294 (i.e. *how many are returned fully completed to the researcher*); and,
- 295 3) the reliability of responses
296 (i.e. *how many of those returned to the researcher are truthful and accurate*
297 *responses*).

300 **[insert Table 1 near here]**

301 In recent times there has been much discussion around the increasing non-response rates of
302 student questionnaires and surveys in the Higher Education sector. There are a number of
303 factors that may have an impact on response rates of student questionnaires, such as: the length
304 of the questionnaire, the timing of the questionnaire, the mode of the questionnaire (e.g. paper-
305 based or digital), engagement of students and the treatment of responses (e.g. confidentiality)
306 (Coates, 2006; Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014; Dommeyer, Baum, Hanna, & Chapman,
307 2004; Nair, Adams, & Mertova, 2008; Porter, Whitcomb, & Weitzer, 2004). Furthermore,
308 another factor that has an impact on student response rates in the Higher Education sector is
309 so-called 'questionnaire fatigue', the over-surveying of students (Sharp & Frankel, 1983; Porter,
310 Whitcomb, & Weitzer, 2004); this issue has been raised by undergraduate Geography (BA and
311 BSc) and Environmental Science (BSc) students at The University of Liverpool during the
312 internal Staff-Student Liaison Committees (SSLC), held twice each semester. In order to
313 reduce the potential issue of 'questionnaire fatigue' and increase the response rate, the design
314 of the self-completion questionnaire remained simple in order to make the answering of the
315 questions as straightforward and easy as possible, whilst maintaining a high-level of detail
316 collected (Denscombe, 2014). The self-completion questionnaire included seven questions in
317 total; three 'open' questions (including a free comments section) to collect students' opinions
318 on the concept of the dissertation writing retreat, the individual preparation undertaken before
319 attending the retreat and how they felt the dissertation writing retreat's could be amended for
320 subsequent years i.e. forward facing feedback; and, four 'closed' questions based on a five-point
321 Likert scale, that attempted to collect information on the success of the dissertation writing
322 retreat in fostering a more positive writing experience. Before completing the questionnaire,
323 all participants received an information sheet that contained details on the research being
324 undertaken (i.e. the purpose of the questionnaire), how the information would be used,
325 reassurance that that information that they provided would remain anonymous and that all

326 responses were voluntary (i.e. they were under no obligation to answer the questions). The
327 research undertaken in this paper received ethical approval from The University of Liverpool.

328

329 The analysis of the questionnaire responses explored the four 'closed' questions through a
330 statistical analysis of the strength of the response, with percentages for each Likert class
331 calculated. Responses to the three 'open' questions were assessed using a thematic analysis of
332 the responses based on broad thematic themes identified from the literature.

333

334 **5 Results and Discussion**

335 In total, 75 completed questionnaires were returned across the two days of the writing retreat
336 (including no duplications), with the break-down of the degree programmes of the attendees
337 including: 41 Geography (BA) students, 24 Geography (BSc) students, 2 Geography and
338 Planning (BA) students, 1 Environmental Science (BSc) student and, 1 Combined Honours
339 (BA or BSc) student. This split of the attendee's degree programme registrations crudely
340 reflects the proportional number of students undertaking each of those specific degree
341 programmes (Geography (BA and BSc), Environmental Science (BSc), Geography and
342 Planning (BA) and Combined Honours (BA and BSc).

343

344 The first four 'closed' questions of the questionnaire based on the five-point Likert scale (5 –
345 strongly agree, 1 – strongly disagree), all indicate that the majority of students (>85%) after
346 attending the retreat felt it had been a beneficial experience (see Figure 1). The first question
347 (Q1) attempted to assess if students found the retreat a positive experience and resulted in 96%
348 stating that they *Strongly Agree* or *Agree* that the retreat had been. In total, 96% of the students
349 responded *Strongly Agree* or *Agree* to question two (Q2) – “The writing retreat helped support
350 my dissertation writing experience”. Question three (Q3) in the questionnaire had a response

351 of *Strongly Agree* or *Agree* from 89% of respondents that the retreat had been helpful in
352 increasing their confidence in the final write-up and editing stages of the dissertation process
353 and, question four (Q4) – “I found the retreat to be a collegial and enjoyable experience” – had
354 a response of *Strongly Agree* or *Agree* from 97% of the participants. The meaning of these
355 responses can be further explored and assessed in detail in terms of the three 'open' questions
356 included on the questionnaire (including a free comments section) that collected information
357 on the students’ opinions on the general concept of holding a writing retreat to support the final
358 write-up and editing stages of the dissertation process, the preparation undertaken before
359 attending the retreat and how the retreat could be improved for subsequent years.

360 **[insert Figure 1 near here]**

361

362 *Protected and dedicated environments for 'goal setting' and 'writing'*

363 The first of the 'open' questions, question five (Q5), “What preparation did you undertake
364 before attending the writing retreat (e.g. full draft completed) and what are you intending to do
365 as a consequence of participating?” gathered some interesting responses. There is much
366 detailed literature on the use and strengths of 'goal setting' in successful completion of academic
367 outputs, be that academic journal papers, undergraduate essays, or undergraduate and
368 postgraduate dissertations (Grant & Knowles, 2000; Zimmerman, 2000; Moore, 2003; Grant,
369 2006; Murray & Newton, 2009; Moore, Murphy, & Murray, 2010; Swaggerty, Atkinson,
370 Faulconer, & Griffith, 2011; Van Dinther, Dochy, & Segers, 2011; Girardeau, Rud, & Trevisan,
371 2014). The setting of goals can range from larger-scale goals, such as completing the project
372 (i.e. the final hand-in date, in this example of the dissertation) or smaller-scale goals, such as
373 individual tasks that lead to the completion of the overall goal. The use of retreats can help in
374 the setting of smaller (more specific)-scale goals thereby having the potential to reduce some

375 of the feelings of anxiety linked to completing larger projects, such as dissertations, leading to
376 increased motivation in the process, as one participant stated: *“I relaxed a lot more over*
377 *Christmas knowing that this was coming up”*. Of those students that attended the dissertation
378 writing retreat, 95% responded to Q5, and the main common theme that emerged in those
379 responses centred around the notion of 'goal setting'. In total, 63% of participants responses
380 included statements indicating that they had prepared full or partial drafts of their dissertation
381 before attending the retreat. For example, participants stated that they had *“full draft[s] almost*
382 *done”*, *“had fully completed drafts”*, *“majority of dissertation ... written”* and had focused on
383 *“specific parts”* of their dissertation before attending. In addition, 19% of students commented
384 that they had been through their dissertation and compiled lists of questions on the format and
385 structure of their dissertation ready to ask the retreat 'expert' facilitators, for example: *“[I] wrote*
386 *down questions”*, *“Had ... questions prepared”*, *“I came with a list of questions”*.

387

388 The preparation undertaken by students before attending the retreat, such as compiling lists,
389 can enable the identification of potential barriers or issues being faced and therefore increase
390 self-awareness and motivation and foster attitudinal and behavioural changes through the
391 realisation of those barriers and issues faced and enabling students to be open to the possibilities
392 for making steps to amend them (Moore, Murphy, & Murray, 2010). In addition to the
393 preparation undertaken by students beforehand, 18% of participants responses included
394 statements indicating that they had attended the retreat for formatting support as comments
395 included: *“the retreat helped me with details and formatting of the dissertation”* and *“after*
396 *[the retreat] I was able to know how to format my work”*. One participant commented on the
397 inter-related 'knock-on' effect of the retreat and in particular the help on the formatting of the
398 dissertation – *“[the retreat was] very useful in making the format look professional and clear*
399 *which builds on confidence in the run up to the deadline”*.

400

401 The notion of 'goal setting', be that before or after a retreat, is a fundamental feature of
402 implementing meaningful and productive writing time and feelings of accomplishment
403 (Rosser, Rugg, & Ross, 2001), hence the importance of the design (e.g. timing, structure and
404 format) of a writing retreat. In one sense the final structure of the dissertation writing retreat is
405 determined by those students that attended the retreat (i.e. it is highly self-directed) in terms of
406 the goals that they set beforehand and their desired outcomes from the retreat (Hamerton &
407 Fraser, 2011). In addition, factors such as the length of time set aside for set 'activities' (e.g.
408 question sessions) and/or 'contained' writing time (e.g. 'silent writing') combined with the
409 physical space used for the retreat all contribute to the overall atmosphere and environment of
410 the retreat. One participant indicated that the use of the Department of Geography and Planning
411 building for the retreat was preferred over other areas for writing, such as the library, as they
412 stated “I used [the retreat] as a comfortable focused environment – better than the library!” and
413 another participant stated that the “GIC [*the room in the Department of Geography and*
414 *Planning building used for the retreat*] was nice and quiet”.

415

416 A small number of students commented on the additional factors that had helped to create a
417 safe and productive writing environment, such as the availability of refreshments (e.g. tea,
418 coffee, soft-drinks and biscuits). This was not one of the questions on the self-completion
419 questionnaire, however, four of the 75 respondents (5%) mentioned refreshments being an
420 appreciated factor of the retreat, for example one participant commented that they “loved the
421 snacks” and another stated that the “tea/coffee/biscuits [had been] a good idea”. The use of
422 structured, or 'contained' time periods for focusing on the editing, structuring, and writing of
423 the dissertation in the retreat alongside the use of regular scheduled breaks can lead to increased
424 feelings of confidence in the students’ own competencies and foster a more positive attitude to

425 the final write-up stage, as reflected in the responses to Q's 1 and 2, through more productive
426 behaviour i.e. having planned opportunities for breaks after 'contained' time periods of writing
427 can increase motivation to write in those more 'structured' writing times (Silvia, 2007; Petrova
428 & Coughlin, 2012; Kern, Hawkins, Al-Hindi, & Moss, 2014; Murray, 2015; Kempenaar &
429 Murray, 2016). In addition, the planned breaks can also lead to greater feelings of collegiality,
430 as reflected in the response to Q4, through increased social interaction, collegiate connection
431 and support also being a feature commented upon in the other two 'open' questions.

432

433 *Communities of practice*

434 The second and third of the 'open' questions –question six (Q6), “This is the first year we have
435 tried running a dissertation writing retreat, would you suggest any changes for next year?”, and
436 question seven (Q7), “Any further comments?” – had response rates of 73% and 20%,
437 respectively. In response to Q6, 31% of participants of the retreat stated that they had no
438 suggestions for improvements, and many commented on the success of the retreat:

439 (Q6) – “This is the first year we have tried running a dissertation writing retreat, would you
440 suggest any changes for next year?”

441

442 *“No, [it] was a good experience with lecturers around to help.”*

443

444 *“No, I think this is really helpful. I am really glad it has been introduced.”*

445

446 *“No, [it] was a great relaxed atmosphere where the balance between help and independent
447 work was right.”*

448

449 *“No, everything worked well, staff were attentive and helpful...”*

450

451 *“It has been so helpful...”*

452

453 The comments on the atmosphere created and the design of the retreat (balance between the
454 question sessions and the 'silent writing' sessions) from the quotations above correspond to the

455 responses seen in Q's 1, 2, 4 and 5. It has been stated that the skilled facilitation of the structured
456 sessions ensures a smooth running of the retreat and enables sufficient support for participants
457 (Hamerton & Fraser, 2011) and as demonstrated in the quotations for Q6, having access to
458 'expert' facilitators – in the form of a range of academic members of staff – is one of the main
459 strengths of the retreat held. However, some participants (16% of those that responded to Q6)
460 did comment it would be beneficial to have more academic or postgraduate research students
461 present for the duration of the retreat to increase contact time in the question sessions.

462

463 In considering the atmosphere created in the retreat one participant stated in their response to
464 Q5 that the “... *retreat [had] allowed me to see how other people are getting on and pushing*
465 *me to do more*”. Retreats can create a sense of community between those that attend (Casey,
466 Barron, & Gordon, 2013; Murray, 2014; Kent, Berry, Budds, Skipper, & Williams, 2017). This
467 is because the members of the retreat are joined together by a shared-goal, in this example to
468 complete their dissertation, and through the retreat the participants follow the same approach
469 in doing so. This sense of community, built from the promotion of peer interactions and from
470 the knowledge and understanding that others are experiencing similar challenges, can lead to
471 increased confidence and motivation and help break the feeling of isolation in the final write-
472 up stages of the dissertation through the creation of communities of practice (i.e. community
473 of writers), and as reflected in the responses to Q's 1 to 4. In addition, this can increase student
474 satisfaction in the dissertation process.

475

476 The remaining responses to Q6 centred around the structure, scheduling and timetabling of the
477 dissertation writing retreat. It has been aforementioned that the design of the retreat is important
478 to its success and having a firm structure can contribute to ensuring a productive and support
479 environment is established. Students attending the dissertation writing retreat had been

480 informed prior to the retreat the start and end times but, the decision had been made not to
481 include the complete structure beforehand; however one participant commented that it would
482 be beneficial to communicate the full-structure of the retreat beforehand in particular “*when*
483 *staff are around*”. This decision not to release the full-structure beforehand had been made to
484 encourage students to attend the retreat for the range of sessions rather than for the just the
485 staff-led question sessions for logistical reasons, thereby increasing the feasibility of running
486 the retreat for a large cohort (~300 students). In addition, another participant suggested having
487 some more additional focused activities throughout the retreat rather than just question and
488 'silent writing' sessions, such as having “*different seating [areas] with presentations [for]*
489 *quantitative and qualitative [students by staff members]*”. The structure of the retreat across
490 the two days was the same, however, based on initial feedback from students at the end of day
491 one that it would be helpful to see copies of past dissertations again (these are available
492 throughout the semester for students to view, and it should be noted that for reasons of data
493 protection no comments or marks are included on the copies), a minor amendment was made
494 ahead of day two; this included setting up a 'reading desk' for students to view copies of a range
495 of past dissertations – an example of action on reflection. Furthermore, one participant
496 commented at the end of the retreat that “*it was useful to see past dissertations*”.

497

498 In addition to the structuring comments and in considering the scheduling and timetabling of
499 the retreat, 18% of the responses to Q6 suggested running additional retreats earlier in the
500 semester and/or later in the semester, closer to the submission deadline, with a handful of
501 responses (<5%) commenting on not holding them in the designated three week assessment
502 period, and perhaps splitting them across a number of days rather than two consecutive days.
503 Much of the literature on the design and planning of writing retreats considers the optimum
504 duration of a retreat to be from two to five days (Kornhaber, Cross, Betihavas, & Bridgman,

505 2016). If the retreat is shorter than two days or longer than five the benefits of such retreats for
506 the participant can be impacted and the feasibility of the retreat can be affected through not just
507 the availability of 'expert' facilitators (i.e. restricted by timetabling and scheduling of other
508 research, teaching and administrative duties), but also their willingness to attend for a pro-
509 longed period of time (i.e. multiple days). It is intended in subsequent years that the dissertation
510 writing retreat would not be held in the designated three week assessment period. Instead the
511 retreat would be held after the exam period at the beginning of the second semester. The
512 timetabling of the first retreat had been constrained by existing timetable activities; in the future
513 timetabling of the retreat is planned to take place alongside the central institutional timetabling
514 for the third year modules of the Geography (BA and BSc), Environmental Science (BSc),
515 Geography and Planning (BA) and Combined Honours (BA and BSc) degree programmes.

516

517 The final 'open' question on the questionnaire, Q7, as aforementioned, had a response rate of
518 20%. Most of these response (>87%) commented on the success of the retreat being included
519 into the dissertation module, for example: *“Good idea”*, *“Very useful”*, *“Thank you for the*
520 *staff for taking the time out of [their] day to help us”* and *“Many thanks to all staff who gave*
521 *up their time. It was brilliant and highly informative”*. The remaining >10% of participant
522 responses for Q7 centred back around the potential modifications that could be made for future
523 years, in particular one student suggested the inclusion of *“a suggestion box with questions*
524 *answered in a group email/session after”*. The idea of a 'follow-up' session be that face-to-face
525 or online is a useful consideration as this can help sustain the collegiate connection formed in
526 the retreat and continue to foster increased confidence and motivation in the final write-up
527 stages of the dissertation and enable students' time to reflect on their experience (Petrova &
528 Coughlin, 2012).

529

531 The results and findings of the questionnaires, completed by the third year undergraduate
532 students after the attendance of the dissertation writing retreat that have been presented here
533 have shown that participants found the retreat to be a productive experience, that enabled the
534 construction of protected time and space for the final editing, formatting, and write-up stages
535 of the dissertation in a trusted, safe and collegial environment that increased confidence,
536 enhanced motivation through increased peer interaction and made it a more pleasurable final
537 write-up stage of the dissertation. The creation of a friendly and relaxed atmosphere was
538 appreciated by the students, at what can be a stressful time of the academic year – an element
539 reflected in both formal and informal feedback from those that attended the retreat.
540 Furthermore, a number of students identified that the retreat helped them focus their '*writing*'
541 (e.g. preparation undertaken before attending the retreat) and enhanced their confidence and
542 motivation in the final editing, formatting, and write-up stages of the dissertation. Despite the
543 dissertation module handbook and documentation including detailed information on these
544 elements, students seemed to appreciate the one-to-one reassurance of the formatting and
545 structuring criteria i.e. increasing assessment literacy (Greenbank & Penketh, 2009). The
546 students that attended the retreat also benefitted from having increased contact-time in the
547 newly established 'gap' period where students do not normally receive supervision. In addition,
548 in our role as lecturers or so-called 'teachers', it is often one of our main desires to create an
549 inspiring environment for students in order to encourage deep 'meaningful' active learning to
550 take place and help in building a community of learners that 'buzz' (Maguire & Edmondson,
551 2001), a feature that is both important for academic members of staff and students. There are
552 also clear benefits to the academic members of staff holding these retreats not just the students,
553 as the retreats offer an efficient and focused mechanism for addressing student concerns in
554 relation to the dissertation and also act as a referral point for student questions that arise during

555 the scheduled three week break and assessment period. Despite the numerous benefits of
556 holding writing retreats that have been identified, there are some challenges and retreats do not
557 remove all problems faced by third year undergraduate students completing their dissertation.
558 In fact, a two-day retreat is a short-time to enable students to complete their final editing and
559 writing, therefore it is important that the retreats help to develop techniques that can be used
560 post-retreat to implement a structure to support students.

561

562 Recommendations for further research of the use of writing retreats in supporting Geography
563 (BA and BSc) and Environmental Science (BSc) undergraduate students in the final write-up
564 stages of the dissertation process include the continued assessment and reflection of the
565 teaching and learning strategies used in undergraduate dissertation modules and the role that
566 dissertation writing retreats can have in this as a permanent embedded part of the module
567 structure. It should be noted here that due to the success of the retreat, it has been decided that
568 in the Department of Geography and Planning, School of Environmental Sciences, Geography
569 dissertation module (ENVS321) at The University of Liverpool, the retreat is going to be
570 recognised as a permanent addition to the module structure and teaching and learning strategies
571 used (it should be noted that due to the global COVID-19 pandemic it has not been possible to
572 hold these in 2021). In addition, the relationship between success factors (such as the final
573 dissertation mark attained) and the student attendance of the dissertation writing retreat could
574 be an interesting consideration, however, this could impact on those students that choose to
575 attend the retreat if a formal list of participants is taken to capture attendance records, as
576 attendance of the retreat may appear as mandatory rather than optional. Furthermore,
577 monitoring the sessions that are better attended (e.g. question sessions or 'silent writing'
578 sessions), might offer insights into the needs of the students that can then be embedded as part
579 of the students' own self-reflection.

580

581 It is important to also consider that the retreat received little criticism from those that attended
582 and although the self-completion questionnaire contained a range of 'open' and 'closed'
583 questions that created a richness of data, the research could benefit from additional data from
584 focus groups of students that have the chance to reflect upon their own experience of attending
585 the retreat, therefore increasing the use of the 'student voice' (Slinger-Friedman & Patterson,
586 2012); though responses from the 2019/20 student module evaluation survey (EVASYS) for
587 ENVS321 completed after the final 'hand-in' deadline of the dissertation, and therefore after a
588 period of reflection, had an additional 17 comments specifically mentioning the use and success
589 of the retreats, for example: “[the] *dissertation retreat was really good - I would suggest having*
590 *maybe two retreats, one during exams and one after exams, a little more time before the*
591 *deadline*”, “*The refining workshop was incredible - a massive thank you... calming input and*
592 *support*” and “[the] *dissertation writing retreat was great and it was good to be able to speak*
593 *to a variety of academics*”. These comments reiterate the responses collected from the
594 questionnaires, though have a greater degree of reflection in them.

595

596 **6 Conclusion**

597 In this paper it has been demonstrated from the insights gained from both holding the
598 dissertation writing retreat and the responses from the questionnaires the central role that the
599 use of writing retreats have in:

- 600 • creating a safe and supportive collegial environment, for what is often a rather isolating
601 and autonomous process;
- 602 • facilitating student editing, formatting and writing through formal and informal
603 feedback mechanisms; and,

604 • fostering increased confidence and enhanced motivation, leading to potential
605 behavioural and attitudinal changes that produce a more positive and enjoyable
606 experience of the final write-up stage of the dissertation for third year undergraduate
607 students.

608 Although the dissertation process described within this paper relates to Geography (BA and
609 BSc) and Environmental Science (BSc) dissertations at The University of Liverpool, many
610 degree programmes offer capstone projects that may benefit from the use of dissertation writing
611 retreats, with the potential to be adopted across both the social and physical sciences, offering
612 a valuable tool in dissertation support across a range of disciplines. The use of writing retreats
613 are a feasible intervention tool for other disciplines (and the wider University as a whole) to
614 consider using in order to facilitate attitudinal changes, such as enhanced motivation, increased
615 confidence and a more positive outlook on the writing process of final-year undergraduate
616 students in the completion of their independent research projects.

617

618 **Declaration of interest**

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869

870 **Table 1:** Questionnaire completed by third year undergraduate students after the attendance
871 of the dissertation 'writing retreat'.

872 _____
873 Degree Prog.: BA Geog. BSc Geog. BA G&P BSc E.S. Other

874
875 *Please circle to indicate score (Strongly Disagree 1 - Strongly Agree 5)*

876
877 1. Attending the writing retreat has been a positive experience.

878
879 1 2 3 4 5

880
881 2. The writing retreat helped support my dissertation writing experience.

882
883 1 2 3 4 5

884
885 3. The writing retreat has helped develop greater confidence in my dissertation writing and
886 development.

887
888 1 2 3 4 5

889
890 4. I found the writing retreat to be a collegial and enjoyable experience.

891
892 1 2 3 4 5

893
894 5. What preparation did you undertake before attending the writing retreat (e.g. full draft completed)
895 and what are you intending to do as a consequence of participating?

896
897
898

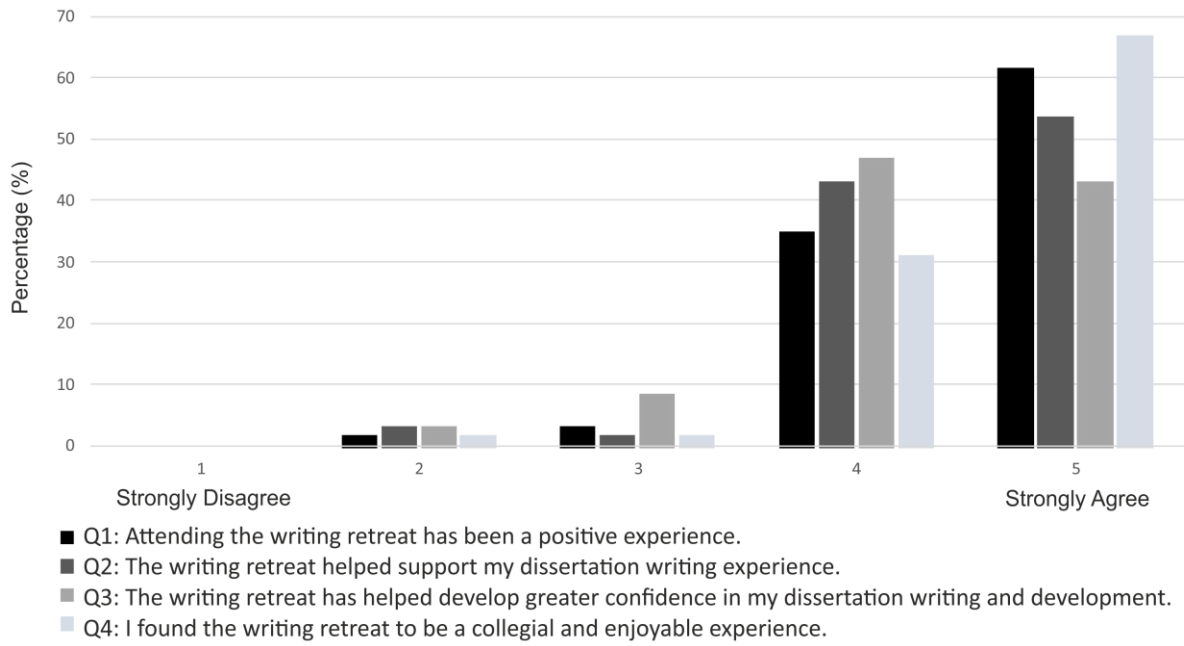
899
900 6. This is the first year we have tried running a dissertation writing retreat, would you suggest any
901 changes for next year?

902
903
904

905
906 7. Any further comments?

907
908
909

910 _____
911



912

913 **Figure 1:** The student questionnaire responses to the 'closed' research questions one to four
 914 (Q1-4) for the undergraduate dissertation writing retreat.

915