

doi: 10.24834/educare.2021.1.5

## Supporting and Encouraging Writing: An interview with dr. Alison Farrell (Maynooth University) and dr. Katrin Girgensohn (European University Viadrina)

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**Dr. Alison Farrell** joined Maynooth University, Ireland, in 2001 as Teaching Development Officer in the Centre for Teaching and Learning. She is the founding chair of the Educational Developers in Ireland Network (EDIN) and of the Irish Network for the Enhancement of Writing (INEW). She was Management Committee Chair of the European COST Action WeReLaTe, which explored frontier taxonomies and institutional synergies across writing, research, learning and teaching. In January 2019, she took up a position with Ireland's National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education as Senior Lead for Sectoral Engagement. Her research interests include academic writing, collaboration, professional development, and policy and power in higher education.

**Dr. Katrin Girgensohn** is Professor for Writing Studies at the Berlin SRH University of Applied Sciences and also Research Staff at the Center for Teaching and Learning at European-University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder), Germany, which she directed for several years. She has served as

board member of the European Association for Teaching Academic Writing (EATAW) and on the board and as chair of the European Writing Centers Association (EWCA). She is a founding member of the German Association for Writing Pedagogy and Writing Research (gefsus). Currently, she is Management Committee Vice Chair of the European COST Action WeReLaTe. Her research interests include writing studies, collaborative learning, peer learning and institutional work in higher education.

Interview conducted by **Dr. Jolanta Šinkūnienė**, Vilnius University, Lithuania. Dr. Jolanta Šinkūnienė is a linguist and Associate Professor at Vilnius University, Lithuania, as well as a member of the Committee of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Research Council of Lithuania. Jolanta also led a Special Interest Group for early career investigators in COST Action “European Network for Research Evaluation in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (ENRESSH)”. Her research interests focus on disciplinary cultures, academic rhetoric, research publication practices, evaluation of research, career development in academia and academic identity aspects.

**Jolanta:** COST Action 15221 (*Advancing effective institutional models towards cohesive teaching, learning, research and writing development*) strives to create synergy among supports for four crucial components of academic career – teaching, learning, research and writing. This is, no doubt, a very timely initiative, which is highly relevant to many higher education institutions on various levels. How did you come up with this idea, and why did you choose the COST framework as the instrument to implement this project?

**Alison:** The idea for the project started with a conversation. I found, as did other colleagues from Ireland, that we were working with colleagues who came from a range of different backgrounds: some with expertise in teaching and learning, some who came from the disciplines of Writing Studies and Rhetoric and Composition, all of whom were engaged in research and many of whom had similar concerns. When we met, we were talking about the same things – about supporting our students, about pedagogy, about being teachers, and about being researchers and writers. But we found that we didn’t always have a shared language, and as a result we didn’t immediately see the connections between the areas. For example, in Writing Studies and Rhetoric and Composition, a great deal of work happens under the heading of “Writing Across the Curriculum” or WAC; if you’re not familiar with WAC, you don’t know that it is about pedagogy, amongst other things: it addresses how writing can be used to help students to learn and to think. If you’re not coming

from a Writing Studies background, WAC is, initially, uninterpretable for you, even though you might be doing similar working in teaching and learning/educational development.

We wondered if there could be ways of more formally connecting our work. We considered that this might be most likely to happen if we could identify the commonalities and the crosscutting elements of our work. We thought that looking at centralised supports might offer some approaches and ways of working that could help us and other colleagues to capitalise on the synergies that we believed existed across writing and research, learning and teaching.

In terms of choosing a COST Action as a way to address this challenge, we believed that an approach which grew from a variety of individual experiences, communities and contexts might help us to address the question. We realised, as noted in our Action description, that professional development and centralised supports frequently occur in a reactive as opposed to strategic and planned manner. We believed that a research informed approach might provide for better understanding of this space. We also believed that a COST Action might provide the basis for further work in this area and much more comprehensive consideration of the challenge; completing the Action would give us some idea about whether there was a potential to explore the challenge to a greater extent through a bigger research project. In addition, we wanted to experience a COST Action, to make connections with colleagues in other settings, to build relationships with colleagues across Europe and beyond and to learn more about European research initiatives. Finally, we believed that the variety and range across the partner countries would give us unique and rich data and would uncover a broad range of models. We needed to understand what currently exists and to discover if there were models of good practice, which might be adaptable or, indeed, adoptable in other settings. From our conversations, we had a reasonable sense of what we believed existed, but we needed to hear from colleagues in different settings to better understand the challenge. We hoped that our examination of the topic could make a useful contribution to various fields and from multiple perspectives.

**Jolanta:** Indeed, one of the goals of the Action is to identify the existing successful models of support, which have resulted in productivity and effectiveness on individual and institutional levels. What methods and data are used in the Action to elicit support patterns and structures and to evaluate their effectiveness?

**Katrin:** As a very first step, we tried to develop a common understanding of key terms that we used and needed for our research efforts. After this, besides many other efforts, a very popular tool within our action was the so-called Short Term Scientific Missions (STSMs). STSMs allow researchers to visit other institutions across Europe and conduct smaller research missions. STSMs resulted in case studies of institutional support structures, based on different methods like interviews, group discussions, document analyses and so forth. Personally, I am engaged in a combination of STSMs across Ireland, Sweden and Germany that build the Writing Centre Exchange Project (WCEP). We used a model of institutional work of writing centre directors that I had developed based on research in US writing centres. We used the model to identify how writing centre professionals conduct institutional work for fostering success, productivity and effectiveness on individual and institutional levels. The STSMs allowed very intensive data collection – for example, interviews with stakeholders on different institutional levels and group discussions – that allowed us to present and discuss the very first findings. This research made me even more aware of the influence of the local and national contexts for support structures in higher education. There will never be an easy one-size-fits-all-solution.

Other data collection methods were surveys and activities during our Action's MC (Management Committee) meetings, including short writing exercises. Data collected through those methods were often analyzed by individuals during STSMs, e.g. Meyhoefer (2018), Carmody (2019), Fogarty (2019) and Melonashi (2020). They used the time abroad to dig systematically into the data.

For identifying desirable models, we had a step-by-step approach to our way of data collection. We hoped to learn from colleagues whom we identified as being outstanding in all four areas: writing, research, teaching and learning. We wanted to find out what they identify as being important for their success. In an MC Meeting, we agreed on the criteria on how to identify those outstanding colleagues that we call “stellar colleagues”. We agreed to the criteria, but to measure those criteria we decided also to trust our professional judgments.

We had a training school, where early career researchers developed different data gathering tools that we might use to collect data. In a MC meeting, we decided to start with focus group discussions. Then, all MC members asked a stellar colleague from their country if they would participate in focus group discussions. Luckily, many stellar colleagues agreed to take the time for this kind of research.

Getting ethical approval took some time; because of the European dimension of our project, we had to get approval from each institution where the focus groups hosts were located, although we had them online.

The focus group interviews took place in internationally and interdisciplinarily mixed groups. Drawing from the interview data, we then built a survey that we sent out to more stellar colleagues across our MC members' home countries. This time, we took a quantitative approach. 252 colleagues, from across 31 countries answered the questionnaire. The questionnaire considered the four areas of writing, research, learning and teaching and used 16 Likert scale questions and four open text questions. The quantitative results of the questionnaire (minus the open text questions) were analysed by a member of the MC Erika Melonashi (2020). The findings from stellar colleagues that we refer to in this interview are based on her excellent analysis of the data. From my point of view, this data collection about what stellar colleagues think is important to support teaching, learning, research and writing is very impressive.

**Jolanta:** The geographic scope of the informant data is indeed impressive with a range of countries worldwide representing various institutions, cultural backgrounds and disciplines. Would you say that this diversity is reflected in writing support practices shared by Action participants?

**Alison:** What we have learnt about writing and support for writing is fascinating. As you note, we have colleagues participating from several countries. One of the things that we knew from the beginning was that all of us – staff, teachers and researchers in higher education – have to write. Writing is central to our own learning, vital to our teaching and utterly necessary for our research. Writing is not just a tool but a methodology, a process without which we would struggle hugely. Given the strategic and everyday centrality that writing has, it was remarkable that, across our respondent countries, writing support is amongst the support that is least provided.

As Katrin has already mentioned, in our research, we gathered data from the members of our Action and from identified stellar colleagues. Many of our Action members, and certainly our identified stellar colleagues, had significant experience in terms of writing and research, teaching and learning. What we discovered from our work with these colleagues was the nature and breadth of support provision, and what colleagues might consider desirable in terms of support. Our early survey research, conducted with MC members, suggested that support for writing was available in only 14% of the respondents' institutions, 57% of respondents to that survey said that there was

no centralised support for writing, while 29% said that they were ‘unsure – that it was difficult to describe the situation’. In a subsequent survey with stellar colleagues, when they were asked about the sort of support that they considered desirable, they highlighted, first and foremost, access to relevant literature; they also noted mentoring, dedicated long blocks of time for writing and editor corrections/services as being very important.

While we found a great deal of diversity in terms of writing support practices, we also discovered a great deal of similarity in terms of what colleagues would consider desirable. Hence, while across our Action, we discovered that our contexts are very different indeed, nonetheless, what we require as academics, teachers and researchers is remarkably consistent, regardless of the particularities of our settings. To return to your question, specifically, yes – we did see a great deal of diversity with regard support for writing. Equally, we saw diversity across support for all of the areas.

**Jolanta:** You have mentioned a predominant lack of centralised support for writing – an important result that should perhaps alert many higher education institutions to take action. What could be the reasons behind neglecting the skill which is crucial for one’s work in academia? What could the consequences of insufficient centralised support for writing be?

**Alison:** My experience is that in the past, writing was more often “caught than taught” in higher education. When one speaks to expert colleagues about how they learned to write within the academy, they will often say that it was through trial and error and through support from peers and mentors – often a research or doctoral supervisor – who helped them to become the writer that they are. They also recognise that there is a good deal of deliberate practice required. I don’t think that in the past, there was an intentional neglect of writing support. Rather, I think it reflects some of the observations that prompted the Action, i.e. that centralised supports and professional development evolve and/or can be reactive, rather than proactive.

In terms of the consequences of a lack of centralised support for writing, I think, on a positive note, that what can happen is that other support emerges. Some of our data suggested that while there was no centralised support, there was a good deal of mentoring by experienced academics of early career researchers, including mentoring in writing. This is certainly to be encouraged as early career researchers will learn about more than writing when they work with experienced colleagues. The downside of these more organic interventions is that the support might be haphazard and inconsistent, rather than in line with a clear developmental trajectory.

Thankfully, there appears to be a shift happening, and while in the past centralised supports might not have existed, what we hear from early career researchers in some jurisdictions now is that they are much more likely to have had organised writing support in the form of modules/courses on academic writing, workshops in academic writing, writing groups, writing retreats etc. This is very encouraging.

**Jolanta:** What are the other key results concerning writing support and encouragement patterns derived so far in the Action? Are they what you have expected?

**Alison:** What the data suggest is that expert colleagues enjoy writing for the most part and that they are intrinsically motivated to write. The barriers which exist in terms of writing are largely to do with the lack of time, generally or as a result of other workload. Colleagues' motivation to write is associated with passion for the discipline, career advancement, a wish to be recognised in the field and a desire to share one's work. In terms of support for writing that colleagues consider valuable, access to research/literature in the field comes out on top.

**Jolanta:** While the key results seem to be what you may have expected, are there any writing support practices that strike you as very innovative? Are modern technologies playing an important role in the process of teaching writing and learning how to write?

**Alison:** One might expect that technology would be playing an important role in the process of teaching writing and learning to write, and in some very obvious ways it is, but in other respects technology really didn't feature to any great extent in the results of our Action. Where we see technology having an effect is in the way we capture our writing; many of us write on our laptops: we write digitally. In answering your questions, here, I'm using a "dictate" function on my laptop, which allows me to speak my answers and to see them appearing almost word perfect on my screen. When I'll finish the piece, I'll email it to you or we might work on it collaboratively through a shared document. In this way, technology facilitates our writing, and it certainly helps us to share it. But in terms of other ways that technology is influencing how we write, I'm not sure that there is a significant effect. In addition, one of the things that emerged from our findings was that academics are less interested in learning more about writing in different media – including social media – than they are interested in learning to write for conventional, traditional academic outlets, e.g. book chapters and journal articles.

In terms of innovative approaches, something which isn't particularly innovative but which I really enjoy seeing and participating in, is collaborative writing. Technology certainly helps us to do this to a much greater extent, and I like how democratic it is to work on a shared document, where the edits happen in real time. I also like how academic writing and research can reach wider audiences now, and technology has allowed for this. Finally, I think the Open Access movement is incredibly powerful. Open access research and open educational resources are essential if all colleagues are to be able to engage in research – the Open Access movement is essential for the democratization of research.

**Katrin:** Another of the notable trends now is that many of the European writing centres work with peer tutoring. Peer writing tutors are students that get special training classes, in which they get knowledge about writing processes, about methods to support writing processes and, most importantly, they learn to talk about writing processes. They train in conversation techniques to foster meaningful discussions on texts and writing, but without appropriation of authorship. These kinds of conversations are often called “non-directive”. Peer writing tutors offer one-to-one conversations on students' texts, either as additional service or integrated in classes, as so-called writing fellows. This is a really responsible position; therefore, writing tutors discuss their tutoring experiences in teams and get mentoring from academic staff.

This approach to writing support is not new, but I think it is still innovative in European Higher Education. For example, at the European University Viadrina, peer tutoring was first implemented in the writing centre and then started to influence other areas of the university that also started to work with well-trained and mentored peer tutors. Peer tutoring can support writing, but also learning in general and teaching. And students' research, of course. And peer tutoring can take place online as well; it does not have to be analog.

**Jolanta:** These are indeed great examples of how institutions could contribute to writing support and how individuals could collaborate in making the writing experience easier and also more enjoyable. Are there any other strategies that institutions could implement to support teaching of writing in general and teacher competency in particular?

**Alison:** I think support for writing requires a cultural and community commitment – one might talk of the institution as a literacy community or a writing community. Greater awareness, more



discussion and more deliberate sharing about the writing process and writing practice would be very useful. While becoming a writer is an individual process, deliberate writing guidance can be very beneficial. Certainly, we all need to work out our own approaches, but there is a wealth of research that institutions, departments and individuals we can tap into that could make writing more comprehensible and, ideally, more enjoyable. Some research work that is happening around threshold concepts in writing studies is helping to demystify writing and helping us to map ways through the complexity of writing; Adler-Kassner and Wardle's work in this space is very useful. There is also very interesting work on writing transfer happening.

**Katrin:** I agree that making writing an explicit topic and writing competence an explicit goal in higher education institutions would be important. In the Action, we found that institutions need to provide a framework to protect time and space in flexible ways for academics (including students) to develop in each of the four areas: teaching, learning, research and writing. But I think that writing has a special position because it is so much needed across all those areas. I can't help but think about our model of centralised support as a physical, central, very visible and highly prestigious space at campus. Implementing this kind of space that allows for interaction and contemplation would be a great starting strategy for institutions: it would show their commitment. And then, of course, fill the space with dedicated support staff and allow teachers, students and researchers enough time to make use of it.

**Jolanta:** You describe it so vividly, I can already visualise this space shared by enthusiastic colleagues eager to discuss and improve their writing as well as share their experiences. And, indeed, this does not include only researchers and teachers, but students as well. How can, for example, teachers contribute to the development of student writing in the most effective way?

**Alison:** In terms of how we as teachers can help students, I think one of the simplest ways to do this is by sharing our own writing processes. We have things that we know work for us; we could share these with our students. We also know what doesn't work; we could share that as well. We could empathise with our students by telling (admitting!) how we feel about writing: how often we find writing difficult, how we frequently don't know where we are with our own writing, how we need and employ good strategies to get the work done (drafting, revising, sharing our writing, use of deadlines, etc.), how we also avoid writing. All of this would be really useful for our students, and wouldn't cost anything. We could all do this without the need for any additional resources.

**Katrin:** I agree that we should share our own success strategies and also failures in writing with students. However, we must make sure that they understand this as our individual ways. What works for me may certainly not work for everyone. So, this kind of sharing always needs the invitation to share and value other experiences, too. An easy way to show that we are all different types of writers is to give students two different writing assignments. One that includes freewriting and one that includes planning. You will always have students that prefer one over the other.

**Alison:** Katrin's right that writing is both an individual and a social act. Associated with that social element is one of the other things that we can do to help writers: to provide really useful and considered feedback; we might do this as teachers, but, as Katrin mentioned already, there is huge potential in peer feedback. Doing this well is time-consuming, but if we see our responses to students' (and each other's) writing more like a dialogue between the reader and the writer, then I think this could provide for a very positive learning experience for our students.

**Katrin:** Agreed. I emphasise the value of text feedback and put much effort and time into training peer feedback in class. For sure, it is time consuming, not only the peer feedback itself but also its scaffolding, coming to the stage where it becomes meaningful. Learning how to give and take feedback is nearly as ambitious as learning writing. But it pays off. And it is a competence that students can build on in their professional lives after university. So, with regard to institutional strategies, I would like to add that growing a feedback culture is necessary.

**Jolanta:** Alison mentioned sharing our own writing processes with students, the things that work well for us. What are your personal strategies to develop your own writing competencies? To develop competencies of your students? Have these strategies changed over time?

**Alison:** My top personal strategy is to have a deadline. I cannot get anything written without a deadline. My second-best strategy is to promise the piece of writing to someone else – like with this piece – I promised you, Jolanta and Katrin that I would get something to you. My third strategy is to write with other people (again as evidenced in this piece). I like to write with others, and it is hugely motivational for me. Other things I do are so basic that they hardly merit mentioning: I sit down and I write, even when I don't want to; I \*start\* writing as once I start, I usually continue, and I quite like it, but the starting is hard, so I just make myself start; I write fast and try not to edit too much at the beginning; and I follow that with editing and revising until the deadline: I tweak up until the last minute.

**Katrin:** I can agree with everything you said, Alison. Collaboration is so important for my writing. I deliberately arrange feedback for my writing, and I also enjoy giving feedback on texts for colleagues and for students. I learn so much from it. And I enjoy writing collaboratively, although collaborative writing processes often include frustrating phases of disputing what and how to express, or style or even working style, like project management. But from my experiences, those writing processes often lead to the best texts. I also discovered that collaborative writing in the sense of having a room full of writers – writing side by side, every writer on their own texts – is very productive for me. Like during the “Long Night against Procrastination” that our peer writing tutors started in 2008, an event now celebrated at many institutions worldwide, usually at the first Thursday in March. My personal favorite writing support is the national novel writing month (NANOWRIMO), which connects hundred of thousands of writers worldwide in November.

With regard to teaching writing, I find it most important to foster autonomy. Every writer has to detect the best ways to be productive, and also they have to develop their style. This needs time – writers need time to develop – as we know, for example, from Ronald Kellogg’s research about development in writing. Besides time, writing teachers are, in my perspective, responsible for creating an environment of trust and respect. We know that even the most experienced, published writers can feel the imposter syndrome. That is why I strongly believe that writing competences cannot develop when students fear critique, feel disrespected or are afraid to ask questions until they really understand the task. What I also found out is that writing tasks have to be meaningful for students. Some of my classes include autonomous writing groups, where students create their own tasks. This works very well: they learn to take responsibility for their own learning processes with regard to writing. My learning goals for students’ writing are that they learn to reflect about their own processes as writers and their own texts, and from this become able to practice writing as a lifelong learning experience. I hope that after my classes they realise that writing is hard work, indeed, but hard work that they can handle, and that writing is also a joy and even a personal development tool.

**Jolanta:** Thank you very much for the interview.

**Alison:** Thank you, Jolanta, it was a pleasure.

More information on COST Action 15221 (*Advancing effective institutional models towards cohesive teaching, learning, research and writing development*) can be found on <http://www.werelate.eu> and on <https://www.cost.eu/actions/CA15221/#tabs|Name:overview>

The link to the Final Action Dissemination: <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/centre-teaching-and-learning/ctl-projects/current-ctl-projects/cost-action-15221-we-relate>

**Acknowledgement:** This publication is based upon work from COST Action 15221, supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology)

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