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DESIGNING AGAINST GENERATIVE AI “PARROTING”: A PROCESS PORTFOLIO APPROACH TO MINI PROPOSAL ASSESSMENT

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Abstract:

The rapid growth of generative artificial intelligence (gen-AI) has raised increasing concerns about parroting behaviour in higher education, particularly in research writing. Parroting behaviour occurs when students reproduce fluent AI-generated text while lacking a meaningful understanding of the ideas it expresses. Instead of addressing this issue through AI detection tools or restrictive policies alone, this study explores how assessment design can discourage parroting by requiring students to demonstrate visible evidence of their learning process. An instrumental case study approach was employed to examine the implementation of a scaffolded process portfolio in an undergraduate research methodology course, with a specific focus on the Background of the Study section of a mini research proposal. Seventeen students, organised into five small groups, developed their writing across four staged submissions and one final submission. Data were collected from staged portfolio drafts, lecturer probing during feedback sessions, and written reflections. Three analytic rubrics were used to assess writing, probing, and reflection. The findings showed an overall pattern of improvement across submissions in students' writing, their ability to justify and explain ideas during probing, and the depth of reflection on their writing development. The portfolio made students' reasoning, revision, and conceptual refinement more visible, thereby reducing the usefulness of parroting strategies that depend on producing isolated, surface level text. The study contributes to current discussions on academic integrity in the era of gen-AI by showing how process

portfolio assessment can support both learning and integrity through staged, traceable, and feedback enriched writing development.

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Keyword:

Generative Artificial Intelligence, Higher Education, Parroting Behaviour, Process Portfolio



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Introduction

Research proposal writing is a foundational academic task in higher education, particularly in programmes intended to develop research literacy and inquiry skills. Through this task, students are expected to identify a research problem, situate it within relevant literature, and justify key methodological decisions. However, the central issue is not simply that proposal writing is cognitively demanding for novice researchers, but that it is often assessed in ways that privilege the final product over the learning process through which understanding is developed. As widely argued in assessment literature, students tend to learn in ways that reflect how they expect to be assessed; thus, assessment design plays a critical role in shaping the quality of learning that takes place (Biggs, Tang & Kennedy, 2022; Gibbs & Simpson, 2005). In practice, research proposals are commonly evaluated through a single summative submission, in which students are assessed based on a completed and polished document submitted at the end of the course. Although this approach is administratively efficient and relatively easy to grade (Todd & Hammer, 2021), it primarily emphasises the final written product, focusing on features such as coherence, formatting, and linguistic accuracy. As a result, deeper conceptual engagement with the research process often receives less attention (Lund et al., 2025; Snyder Broussard, 2026). Consequently, while the assessment captures what students submit, it provides only limited insight into how they developed their ideas, made key decisions, or justified their arguments. The emergence of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) has further complicated the assessment of research writing in higher education. Tools such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, and Perplexity can generate linguistically polished, grammatically accurate, and contextually plausible text with very little effort. This allows students to produce assignments that appear academically sound, even when they are not supported by genuine understanding or meaningful intellectual engagement (Lo, 2023; Rudolph et al., 2023; Yeo, 2023).

Against this backdrop, concerns about parroting behaviour have become increasingly prominent. Parroting refers to the reproduction of text or ideas without substantive understanding, intellectual ownership, or the ability to justify what has been written (Yang et al., 2019; Yusof et al., 2025). However, parroting should not be interpreted solely as a matter of academic dishonesty. It may also be a consequence of the assessment environment itself. When assessment tasks reward polished and coherent final products without requiring students to demonstrate how their thinking developed, reproducing existing text becomes a rational and efficient strategy for completing the task (Glatt, 1987; Yusof et al., 2025).

At the same time, conventional detection techniques remain limited in their ability to accurately identify AI-generated content, and excessive reliance on surveillance-oriented responses risks fostering mistrust without addressing the underlying pedagogical problem (Giray et al., 2025; Secreto et al., 2025). For this reason, there is growing recognition that the challenge posed by gen-AI cannot be resolved through policing alone but requires a reconsideration of assessment design itself so that academic integrity is supported through tasks that make learning visible and promote genuine intellectual engagement (Lye et al., 2024; Peters et al., 2025).

Addressing this problem requires a shift from surveillance-oriented responses towards integrity-supportive assessment design. Guided by Vygotsky's socio-constructivist theory, which conceptualises learning as a socially mediated and scaffolded process of meaning-making (Vygotsky, 1978), this paper argues that process portfolio assessment offers a more suitable approach for mini research proposal development because it makes learning processes visible through staged submissions, iterative refinement, and documented conceptual progression (Fathi & Rahimi, 2024; Rabbi et al., 2025). In doing so, it reduces the usefulness of parroting strategies that depend on producing disconnected, surface-level text while supporting deeper engagement with the logic of research writing.

Literature Review

In higher education, research writing is more than the presentation of information. It is a learning process through which students identify research problems, synthesise literature, justify methodological and conceptual decisions, and construct coherent lines of inquiry. This review explores that process through the interconnected perspectives of sociocultural constructivist theory, dialogic formative feedback, and process portfolios, with particular attention to the growing challenge of parroting in the era of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI).

The Socio Constructivist Perspective and The Scaffolding of Research Literacy

Inquiry-based learning is grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory, which views learning as a socially mediated process. From this perspective, students do not develop understanding independently; rather, knowledge is constructed through interaction, guidance, and participation with others. For novice researchers, research writing tasks often fall within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the space between what learners can accomplish on their own and what they can achieve with appropriate support.

This perspective highlights the importance of scaffolding in research writing. Scaffolding refers to structured support that helps students internalise the logic of inquiry and gradually take ownership of increasingly complex research decisions. In the context of background of the

study writing, scaffolding enables students to narrow the issues, identify a meaningful research gap, and connect literature to the development of a problem statement (Beck et al., 2020; Santosa et al., 2025). When assessment focuses only on the final proposal, these supports are often withdrawn too early or remain undocumented, leaving students to manage conceptual difficulty on their own. As a result, students may resort to reproducing text that appears academically appropriate without undergoing the intellectual work necessary for genuine understanding.

Scaffolding in assessment is enacted through both staged tasks and iterative feedback. Dialogic formative feedback frames feedback as an ongoing exchange that supports clarification and refinement (Beck et al., 2020; Thamrin et al., 2024), in contrast to the one-way corrective comments more commonly associated with summative evaluation. It creates opportunities for students to explain their reasoning, question assumptions, and refine their intellectual choices in response to others. In collaborative learning environments, these interactions extend beyond the instructor to include peers, creating a richer feedback ecosystem in which understanding is co-constructed (Thamrin et al., 2024). Such an approach is particularly valuable in research proposal writing, where students must justify decisions about source selection, gap identification, and problem formulation. When students know that they will be expected to justify these decisions as part of the assessment process, their orientation to learning is more likely to shift from surface reproduction towards deeper synthesis and conceptual engagement.

Process Portfolios And The Visibility Of Learning

Portfolio assessment assumes that learners actively construct knowledge through social interaction and reflection (Speakman, 2000). In this sense, portfolios foster the social construction of knowledge by enabling collaborative writing and peer revision while promoting students' ownership for their work. By documenting and supporting students' self-identification as writers, portfolios guide learning and enhance rhetorical awareness (Speakman, 2000). The depth of learning demonstrated through portfolio suggests that substantial educational benefits can emerge when students are given better agency in creating and assessing their own work.

Contemporary research demonstrates that process portfolio assessment supports learning by making processes visible and scaffolded, aligning with authentic assessment principles (Allman et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2017; Vyorkina, 2003). In other word, this assessment fosters higher-order thinking skills by promoting analytical, synthetic, and evaluative thinking through recursive drafting and feedback (Bataineh et al., 2016; Rabbi et al., 2025). Furthermore, collaborative inquiry supported by process portfolios offers a more integrity supportive alternative (Fathi & Rahimi, 2024). When students work in groups and show how their ideas develop across stages, they must make their thinking visible. They need to justify their sources, agree on the research focus, and explain how each part of the proposal connects. This means understanding must be explained, not just presented in polished words. As a result, parroting becomes less useful because the assessment values visible idea development, not just fluent text.

Research Objective

The main research objective of this study is to examine how a scaffolded process portfolio reduces the practicality of parroting in students' research writing by requiring visible evidence of writing development, reasoning, and reflection across successive submissions.

Research Questions

How does students' writing develop across the stages of the process portfolio?

How do lecturer probing and written reflection reveal students' reasoning, revision, and ownership of ideas across the portfolio stages?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative instrumental case study design (Stake, 1995) to examine how a process portfolio supported the development of students' writing and revealed evidence of authentic engagement or parroting across stages.

Process Portfolio Assessment Design

The portfolio was designed as a developmental assessment, requiring groups to construct "background of the study". Submissions were made incrementally across the semester, with formative feedback provided after each submission. This staged approach aligns with scaffolding principles, breaking down the complex task of proposal writing into manageable components while providing support calibrated to students' developing capabilities (Santosa et al., 2025).

As shown in Figure 1, the process portfolio was designed for the Background of the Study (BoS) component of a mini research proposal and structured across four staged submissions and one final submission. Before the portfolio began, students received pre portfolio instruction covering the task brief, expectations, and the overall feedback process.

Each submission required a developing draft of the BoS. Across stages, students were expected to progressively build the component from topic area, issue or concern, and relevant literature towards a clearer research gap, rationale, and study focus. In addition to the draft itself, the portfolio design included article source evidence with DOI and lecturer probing at each stage. From the second to the fourth submission, students also provided written reflections to explain their revisions and developing ideas. The final submission represented the completed BoS after progressive drafting and refinement across the earlier stages.

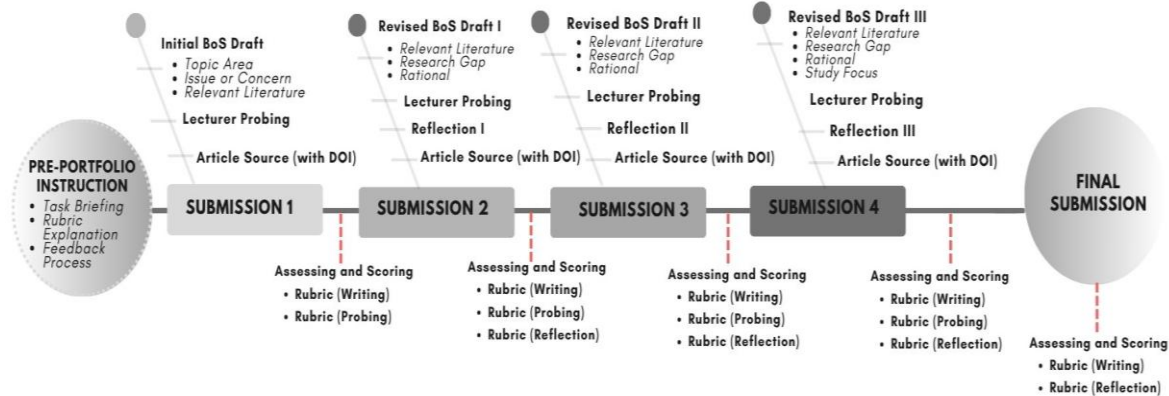


Figure 1: Process Portfolio Design for the Background of the Study Component

Instrument and Data Collection

Three instruments were used in this study, as shown in Table 1. These comprised an analytic writing rubric, an analytic probing rubric, and an analytic reflection rubric. Together, the instruments were used to assess not only the quality of students' written products, but also the reasoning, justification, and developmental processes made visible through the process portfolio.

Table 1: Rubric and Purpose

Rubric	Purpose	Criteria	Source of evidence
Analytic Writing Rubric	To assess the quality and development of students' written submissions for the Background of the Study across the portfolio stages	Clarity of focus, meaningful use of scholarly sources, development and refinement across submissions, and ownership and traceability of ideas	Students' written drafts across Submissions 1 to 5
Analytic Probing Rubric	To assess students' verbal explanations during lecturer probing sessions	Ability to justify ideas, demonstrate conceptual links	Students' responses during lecturer probing sessions
Analytic Reflection Rubric	To assess students' written reflections submitted as part of the portfolio process	Subjective specificity, metacognitive rationale	Students' written reflections across the portfolio stages

Results and Findings

Writing Results Across Submissions

As shown in Figures 2 (2a to 2d), the writing results indicate an overall pattern of improvement across the five submissions for all groups, although the rate and extent of progress varied by criterion and by group. Across the portfolio stages, students' writing generally became more focused, better supported by scholarly sources, more clearly developed through revision, and more traceable in terms of idea ownership. This pattern suggests that the process portfolio supported progressive writing development rather than one time production of a polished final text.

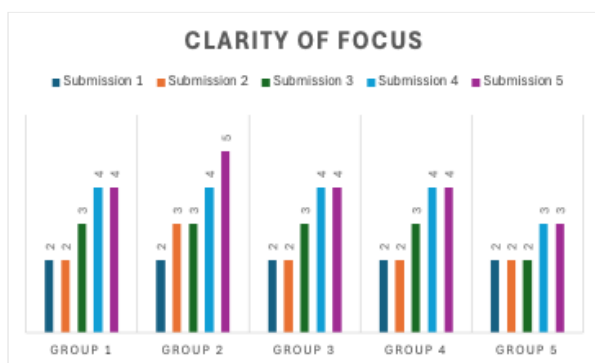


Figure 2a

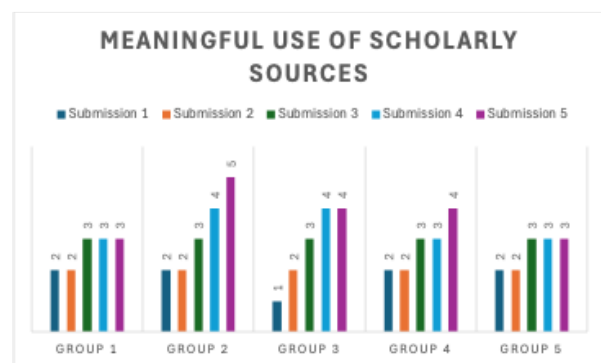


Figure 2b

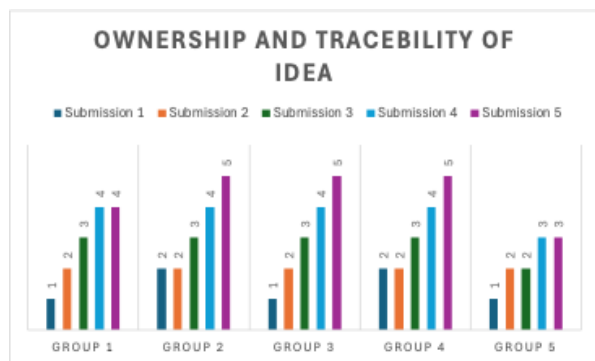


Figure 2c

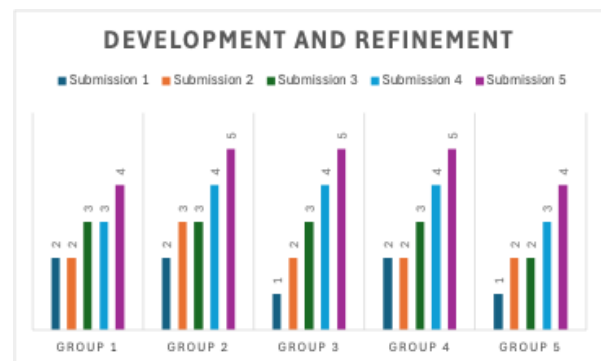


Figure 2d

Figure 2: Writing Scores Across Five Submissions By Group And Criterion

Development of Probing Performance Across Submissions

As shown in Figure 3, the probing results indicate an overall pattern of improvement across the four submissions for all groups, although the rate and extent of progress varied by criterion and by group. Across the portfolio stages, students showed a gradual improvement in their ability to justify their ideas and explain conceptual connections during lecturer probing. However, none of the groups achieved the maximum score of 5, indicating that although their responses became stronger over time, their verbal justifications and conceptual explanations had not yet met the highest level of performance described in the rubric. These findings suggest that the

probing process made students' reasoning more visible and encouraged them to articulate their understanding more clearly across successive submissions. At the same time, the results indicate that there was still room for further conceptual development.

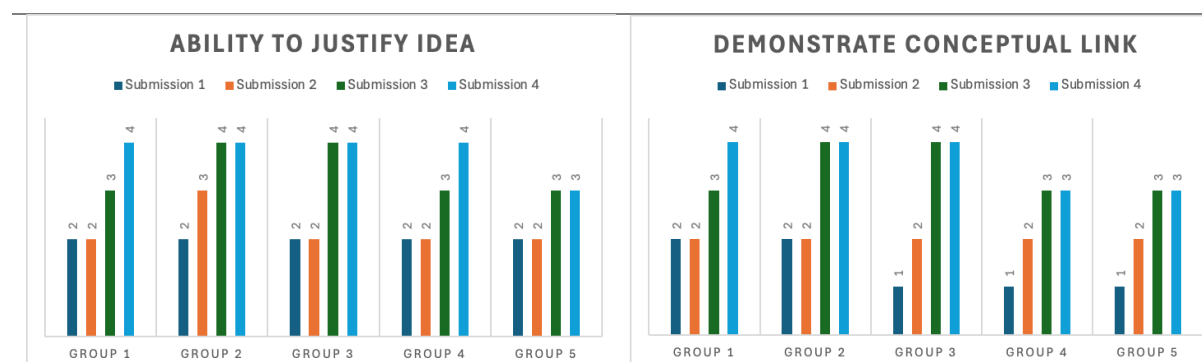


Figure 3: Probing Scores Across Four Submissions By Criterion

Reflection Results Across Submissions

As shown in Figure 4, the reflection results indicate an overall pattern of improvement across Submissions 2 to 5 for all groups, although the rate and extent of progress varied by criterion and by group. As the portfolio progressed, students' reflections became more explicitly connected to earlier drafts, sources, and lecturer feedback, while also providing stronger evidence of how their thinking evolved over time. This pattern suggests that the reflection component supported more visible engagement with the writing process rather than simple description of completed work.

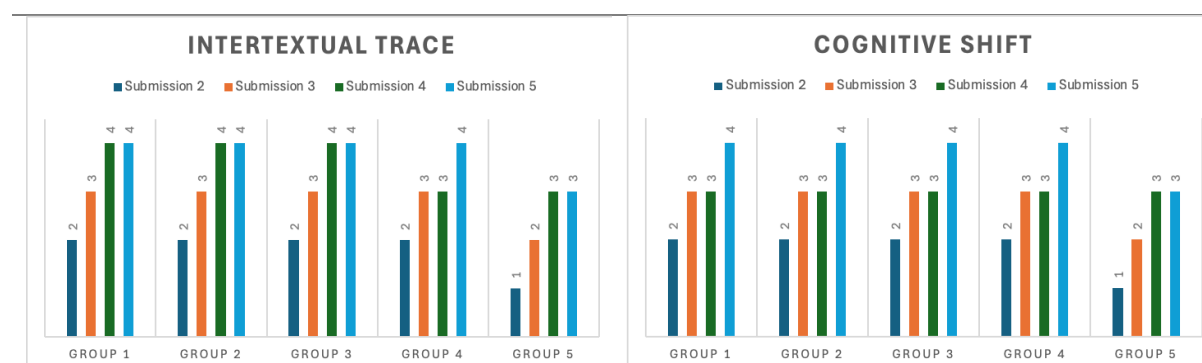


Figure 4: Reflection Scores Across Submissions By Criterion

Discussion

The findings indicate that the process portfolio functioned as an integrity supportive assessment design by making students' learning processes more visible across staged submissions. Rather than rewarding a single polished product, the portfolio required students to demonstrate how their ideas developed (Bataineh et al., 2016; Rabbi et al., 2025), through source selection, revision, reflection, and lecturer probing. Across the writing, probing, and reflection results, students showed gradual improvement in focus, source use, development and refinement, justification of ideas, conceptual linkage, intertextual trace, and cognitive shift. Overall, these

patterns suggest that the portfolio captured not only the quality of the final text, but also the developmental pathway through which that text was constructed (Allman et al., 2021; Bataineh et al., 2016; Rabbi et al., 2025).

This finding is especially relevant to the issue of parroting behaviour. Rather than discouraging parroting through explicit rules or prohibitions, the portfolio appeared to make this strategy increasingly difficult to sustain. Because students were expected to demonstrate how their writing developed over time, simply relying on generic or AI-generated text was no longer sufficient (Gabay et al., 2025; Osamor, 2023). Each submission had to build on the previous one by refining ideas, justifying decisions, and maintaining consistency across drafts. Informal feedback from students reinforced this pattern. Several students indicated that copying text without understanding was ineffective because they still had to explain their reasoning, revise their ideas, and show how each submission connected to the next. As a result, parroting became a less practical strategy, as producing convincing academic text was no longer enough without clear evidence of conceptual development throughout the writing process.

The findings can also be understood from a social constructivist perspective, where learning is viewed as a process shaped by guidance, interaction, and shared meaning-making. The staged portfolio gave students repeated opportunities to revisit, refine, and strengthen their ideas over time, while lecturer probing and reflective writing encouraged them to articulate the reasoning behind their decisions. In this context, scaffolding extended beyond the sequencing of portfolio tasks. It was reinforced through ongoing feedback, questioning, and revision across successive submissions (Santosa et al., 2025). These features created opportunities for students to engage more deeply with the research writing process, supporting earlier work that highlights the value of structured guidance in promoting meaningful learning (Beck et al., 2020; Thamrin et al., 2024). Lecturer probing and reflective writing were particularly valuable because they revealed aspects of students' understanding that were not always evident in the written drafts themselves. The findings are consistent with recent discussions on assessment design in the era of generative AI, which argue that authentic, process-based assessment can reduce the practicality of parroting by shifting the focus from polished final products to visible evidence of learning (Osamor, 2023; Lye et al., 2024; Peters et al., 2025). Peters et al. (2025), for example, proposed the Academic Integrity and Creativity in the Age of Artificial Intelligence (AICAI) model, which advocates authentic assessment that encourages both creativity and academic integrity by requiring students to demonstrate genuine intellectual ownership. The scaffolded process portfolio reflected this principle by treating the learning process itself as part of what was assessed, rather than evaluating only the completed written product.

A similar perspective is reflected in Stack's (2023) concept of contextual constraints, where assessment tasks are intentionally designed to require responses to evolving, interconnected, and context-specific demands that cannot easily be addressed through generic AI-generated text. Although AI can produce plausible responses to individual prompts, maintaining conceptual consistency across multiple linked submissions, while incorporating personalised feedback and earlier revisions, is considerably more challenging. The portfolio in this study introduced these contextual demands by requiring students to maintain coherence across drafts, reflections, lecturer probing, and source-based justifications, making parroting a less practical strategy.

The findings should not be taken to mean that the process portfolio completely eliminates parroting. Instead, its strength lies in reducing the opportunities for surface-level reproduction to succeed. The relatively weaker performance in the early stages, particularly in demonstrating ownership and traceability of ideas, together with the fact that probing scores never reached the highest level, indicates that students continued to need structured support to explain, justify, and defend their thinking. This highlights an important implication for assessment design. Supporting academic integrity is not achieved through a single assessment strategy or technical solution. Rather, it requires an ongoing pedagogical approach that combines scaffolding, constructive feedback, and repeated opportunities for students to revise and strengthen their work.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings has several implications for assessment practice in higher education. One key implication is that academic integrity in the era of gen-AI should not be addressed solely through detection technologies (Giray et al., 2025; Secreto et al., 2025). Equal attention should be given to the way assessment is designed. When assessment focuses mainly on a final polished product, students may be rewarded for fluency without demonstrating understanding. A process portfolio offers a different approach by making learning visible through drafting, revision, reflection, and explanation. As students are required to show how their ideas develop over time, meaningful engagement becomes a necessary part of the assessment process, while superficial reproduction becomes less practical. This highlights the importance of designing research writing tasks that allow students to demonstrate ownership of their ideas throughout the writing process rather than only in the final submission.

Second, the study highlights the pedagogical value of integrating staged writing, lecturer probing, and reflective tasks into research proposal assessment. These elements do more than support grading. They act as scaffolds that help students refine their thinking, justify their choices, and make conceptual links more explicit. This is especially important for novice researchers, who often need structured opportunities to move from broad interest to clearer research focus. The findings therefore suggest that process-based assessment can serve both developmental and integrity related purposes.

The study also points to several practical recommendations. Research proposal assessment could be redesigned so that key sections are developed across multiple stages rather than submitted as a single completed product. Reflection, together with oral or written justification, can be incorporated throughout the process to encourage students to explain how and why their ideas evolve. Assessment rubrics should recognise not only the quality of the final written product but also evidence of revision, traceability of ideas, and intellectual ownership. At the institutional level, professional development initiatives could help lecturers design assessment practices that are better suited to the challenges created by gen-AI, particularly by promoting process-based approaches that support both learning and academic integrity.

This study also opens several directions for future research. Similar work could be undertaken across different disciplines, with larger samples, or by examining individual rather than group-based portfolios. Future studies might also compare scaffolded process portfolios with traditional single-submission assessments to explore differences in learning quality, ownership of ideas, and susceptibility to parroting. Such work would provide a deeper understanding of

how assessment design can better respond to the evolving challenges of research writing in the age of gen-AI.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that a scaffolded process portfolio can function as an integrity-supportive approach to assessing research writing by making students' learning processes visible across successive submissions. By combining staged writing tasks, lecturer probing, and reflective activities, the portfolio captured not only the quality of the final written product but also how students developed, justified, and refined their ideas throughout the writing process. As students were required to provide visible evidence of progression and maintain conceptual consistency across submissions, parroting became a less practical strategy because they had to explain, revise, and connect their ideas over time.

Finally, this study reinforces the importance of moving beyond surveillance-oriented responses towards assessment designs that promote genuine intellectual engagement. Rather than treating academic integrity only as a problem of detection, the study highlights how assessment itself can be redesigned to support ownership of ideas and deeper learning. Process portfolios therefore offer a meaningful alternative for research proposal writing by aligning assessment with the developmental nature of learning and by reducing the usefulness of superficial, disconnected text.

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