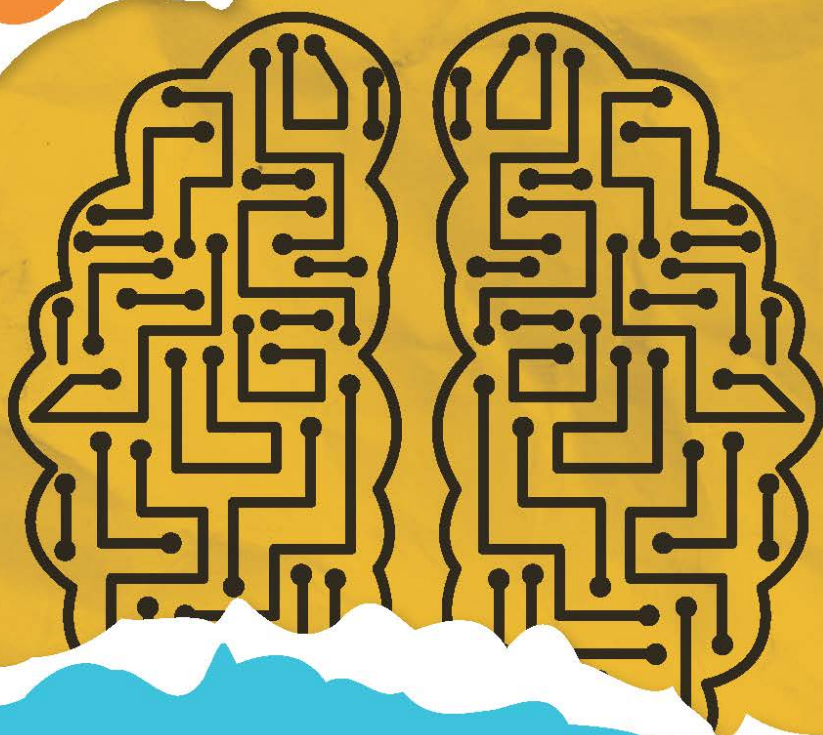


Reimagining South African Higher Education

Towards a Student-Centred
Learning and Teaching Future



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CHAPTER 9

TOWARDS IMPROVING THE POSTGRADUATE RESEARCHER EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

While poor postgraduate throughput, slow completion, and supervision capacity are areas of concern in South Africa, the nature and quality of the postgraduate researcher experience also deserve attention. Challenges in the postgraduate research environment impact negatively on both the success and well-being of postgraduate researchers. The radical changes to educational provision brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic contribute to the already dispiriting experiences of the many postgraduates who are isolated and disconnected from the university. In this chapter, the argument that research degrees should be seen as spaces for teaching and learning, not just research, is taken up, with the aim of improving postgraduate outcomes. Insights from research on postgraduate education are drawn on in order to propose changes to current practice in research degrees that could contribute to the quality of the postgraduate researchers' experience. Proposed changes include: adopting a comprehensive, long-term and systematic approach to researcher education, implementing more structured learning in research degrees, promoting community, and placing writing at the centre of a "curriculum" that is common to all research students.

Keywords: postgraduate researcher education; learning community; postgraduate researcher experience; research proposal; research writing

1. Introduction

While the problems of poor throughput, slow completion, and lack of supervision capacity in South African postgraduate education are widely acknowledged and discussed (CHE, 2022; Cloete et al., 2015), the nature and quality of the postgraduate researcher experience also deserve attention. Given that a third of all supervisor research respondents indicated that they did not give students sufficient attention (Cloete et al., 2016, p. 116), that doctoral provision is unequal across institutions and campuses (CHE, 2022, p. 16), and that there is a lack of support programmes for doctoral students (CHE, 2022, p. 72), it is safe to assume that the quality of the postgraduate students' experience is uneven. The increased reliance on online interaction, given impetus by the COVID-19 pandemic, has resulted in there being fewer opportunities for students to meet on campus to interact with other postgraduates (CHE, 2022, p. 20), and their being cut off and possibly even

alienated from the academy.

Awareness of the importance of wellness and mental health for postgraduate researchers, particularly PhD candidates, has grown significantly in recent years. In a scoping review of studies investigating the influence of the doctoral environment on mental health, Mackie and Bates (2019) analysed 26 articles from studies conducted in North America, Europe, and Australia, noting increasing calls to mitigate risks to postgraduates' mental health. Aside from financial insecurity and career uncertainty, the factors in the doctoral studies environment shown to impact doctoral candidates' mental health were: supervision, lack of transparency in university procedures, and "role conflict" regarding work or family responsibilities (Mackie & Bates, 2019, pp. 566-567).

It is possible that students in South Africa have even more wellness challenges than their counterparts in the developed world. Funding is scarce, resulting in a large proportion of the postgraduate population having to work to pay for their studies or to supplement limited research funding (CHE, 2022, p.68; Cloete et al., 2015). In addition, many students have extensive family responsibilities. Consequently, having six to eight full hours a day for research and writing with a fresh and focused mind is not a reality for a substantial proportion of South African postgraduates.

Fuelled particularly by external government funding, in the form of University Capacity Development Programme (UCDP) grants (CHE, 2022, p. 21), which are dedicated to improving negative educational outcomes, universities are in the process of implementing strategies to address postgraduate researchers' challenges and developmental needs, but much more can be done to develop and support postgraduate researchers.

In South Africa, all levels of university education from Honours up are considered to fall into the category "postgraduate". However, only postgraduate **research** education is addressed in this chapter. While it is acknowledged that some of the concerns expressed here about postgraduate education are as relevant for honours and master's by coursework, these levels are excluded from the discussion. In the rest of this chapter, ideas about how to contribute to more positive student researcher outcomes and experiences are considered. Global trends in researcher development are explored, and promising theoretical strands are brought together in a proposal for more systematic researcher development.

Two distinct strands are identifiable in literature on improving postgraduate education. One strand focuses on supervision, and the other focuses on student researcher development. While it is acknowledged that supervision is an important area, only researcher education is considered in this chapter. Although most of the literature referred to in this chapter is focused on doctoral study contexts, the insights generated are generally relevant to master's by research only contexts too.

2. Global Trends and Themes in Postgraduate Researcher Education

The idea that once students are accepted for postgraduate study they already have the capacity to complete the programme is less prevalent than it was when scholars felt the need to debunk the myth of the “autonomous” scholar (Johnson, et al., 2000; Manathunga & Goozee, 2007). It is now widely recognised that student researchers need to learn during their candidature, and that they benefit greatly from initiatives that are designed to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they require. Two discourses are evident in the researcher development literature. One is a skills-development discourse, arising primarily from concerns about growing the economy, and the production of knowledge workers; the other is educational discourse that is grounded in concerns about the researcher experience and learning. Only the latter will be drawn on in the rest of the chapter.

There is a robust literature, dating back to the end of the previous century, that focuses on researcher education as a specialised form of pedagogy. Green and Lee observed that research tends to take precedence over teaching and learning, to the detriment of research education (Green & Lee, 1995). Boud and Lee (2005, p. 502) highlighted the tensions between research and teaching, and argued for “[s]ystematic attention to the space of research learning as pedagogical space” (Boud & Lee, 2005, p. 504).

Given the competition between higher education institutions and the resultant pressure to increase research publications (Lee & Aitchison, 2009, p. 88), it is likely that there is even more danger of research being privileged over teaching. Consequently, this chapter is aligned with the calls to consider postgraduate studies as a form of education that can benefit from the incorporation of insights from research on teaching and learning (Boud & Lee, 2005, p. 503). Postgraduate education is not generally viewed as a context for teaching and learning, since it falls within the research domain, and (in most cases) is managed and staffed by academics who have no qualifications in education. This means that insufficient attention is paid to how postgraduate research students **learn** to do research, write about it, and interact with communities of scholars. The argument is that pedagogical ideas drawn from teaching and learning research could be incorporated into postgraduate programmes to improve the student experience.

In the next three sections, postgraduate well-being is considered, and scholarship with a broadly sociocultural theoretical framing is used to consider the role of community, and of writing in research education.

3. The Role of Emotion and Well-Being in Postgraduate Education

The affective turn in education has resulted in a growing recognition of the role of emotion in learning. The long-standing image of the rational detached scholar is slowly being eroded as it is acknowledged that postgraduate researchers are “emotionally engaged and socially embedded” (Badenhorst & Guerin, 2016, p. 14). Indeed, the idea that affect may be just as important as cognition is gaining

traction. High expectations in the postgraduate environment can lead to self-sabotaging behaviours, such as overcommitment, perfectionism, procrastination, and lack of organisation or effort (Kearns et al., 2008, p. 80). Also, it has been recognised that the strong emotions experienced by students who are personally involved in the organisations or issues that they are researching can impact negatively on the research (Herman, 2008, p. 100).

Generally, a more holistic student-centred view of research students is taking hold around the concept of well-being (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018). It is increasingly acknowledged that postgraduates are complex beings whose personal relationships, commitments, and motivations affect their ability to do research, and that attention to their well-being can have positive effects. Well-being is being explicitly linked to postgraduate success (Sverdlík et al., 2018).

Some of the most powerful emotions generated in research are centred on writing (Cotterall, 2013, p. 183) and receiving feedback on writing (Carter et al., 2020, pp. 24-26). Writing scholars have shown that academic writing is bound up with a sense of self (Ivanič, 1998) and even desire (Lillis, 2001). In an account of multiple writing workshops with different postgraduate groups, Wellington reported that the students discussed their feelings about research writing “with enthusiasm, reflexivity and care” (2010, p. 146). While they experienced both positive and negative emotions regarding their research writing, words frequently used were: “stress, fear, isolation and anxiety” (2010, p. 146).

In order to write with an authoritative voice, doctoral-level students need to develop confidence (Clarence, 2020, p. 51). Doctoral candidates, particularly those not writing in their primary language, have very little time to develop a suitably authoritative scholarly voice, and having to pass themselves off as confident results in their feeling anxious and “fraudulent” (Casanave, 2019, p.58). It is not surprising therefore, that imposter syndrome is recognised as a common feature of the postgraduate experience (Addison et al., 2022; Casanave, 2019; Cisco, 2020). Consequently, calls are increasing for academics to be more aware of the importance of the affective domain in postgraduate research.

4. The Role of Community in Postgraduate Research

One strategy for improving postgraduate outcomes that features extensively in postgraduate education literature is the harnessing and development of community. Social learning theory is drawn on to support arguments for a greater focus on community. The concept of the “zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky, 1978) is used to explain how new research students can learn from their more experienced peers and those who are at later stages of research candidature.

Drawing on social learning theory, scholars of postgraduate education point out that research learning is “distributed” (Boud & Lee, 2005, p. 503), meaning that students learn not only from their supervisors, but also from other academics and peers in their scholarly communities (Parker, 2009, p. 44). Boud and Lee

are critical of the entrenched institutional practice of “individualising” research students rather than seeing them as part of a community (2005, p. 512). They point out that peer learning occurs in research communities both informally and in “structured pedagogical events” (Boud & Lee, 2005, p. 513). Students learn in situations “where they can be supported by peers and those already in the ‘zone’ in moving from novice to expert, or newcomer to core member.” (Kiley, 2009, p. 302). Participants in supportive communities, such as a doctoral programme, in which they can talk about their work and take intellectual risks, are enabled to cross the conceptual thresholds that are part of doctoral learning (McKenna, 2017, pp. 463-464).

Student communities are also seen as a way to counter the isolation that research students experience. Johnston eloquently highlighted the problem of isolation and loneliness that research degree students experience, particularly those in the humanities and social sciences, and part-time students, because, unlike those who do coursework as part of their degree, they do not have structured opportunities to meet with each other (Johnston, 1995, pp. 280-281). She noted that such students had little sense of belonging to an academic community, arguing persuasively for course coordinators to establish processes to induct students into the academic community. As the role that departments play in the socialisation of postgraduates is one of the most significant factors that impact their well-being (Sverdlik et al., 2018, 372-375), it is not surprising that scholars argue that conscious efforts – whether by departments or institutions – should be made to induct postgraduates into communities (Brown, 2021; Buissink-Smith et al., 2013; Wisker et al., 2007).

As the need to write about research is common to all research students, no matter their discipline or methodology, writing is the focus of many of the postgraduate communities that have been documented in the literature. The insight that scholarly writing is inherently social (Murray, 2015) has bolstered the impetus for postgraduate students to come together to write and talk about their writing. The most common and well-documented provision for such group activity comes in the form of writing retreats (Davis et al., 2016; Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2020) and writing groups (Aitchison, 2009; Kumar & Aitchison, 2018). Such groups are valuable spaces for student researchers to “rehearse” their emerging scholarly identities (Chihota & Thesen, 2013, p. 131). Some of the benefits of participating in social writing initiatives are: “increased motivation, confidence, engagement and pleasure in writing”, as well as less writing anxiety (Kornhaber et al., 2016, 15), increased commitment to degree completion (Maher et al., 2013), personal transformation (Wilmot & McKenna, 2018), and agency (Oluwole et al., 2018).

5. The Role of Writing in Research Education

Writing plays a central role from the very beginning of the research process – and it encompasses all the ways in which researchers use language, images, tables, and graphs for conceptualising, operationalising, and representing research. In their body of scholarship, Pat Thomson and Barbara Kamler draw convincingly

on their supervision experience, as well as scholarship on identities and academic literacies, to argue that “research and scholarly identities are co-constructed in and as writing” (Thomson & Kamler, 2010, p. 149). Their work has had a profound effect on subsequent scholarship on postgraduate writing, and on practice, shifting it from “handy hints” technical approaches to show how research writing is a practice that is profoundly shaped by the disciplinary context and which, in turn, shapes the researcher (Kamler & Thomson, 2006).

Not only in research education, but at all levels in higher education, language and writing have been side-lined. Turner powerfully argues that in higher education “the role of language, and the concomitant performances of languaging [...] are underestimated, undervalued and marginalised” (Turner, 2011, p. 4). She points out that language is always seen as secondary to content, and observes that language is noticed only when it is perceived as faulty (Turner, 2011, pp. 4-6). This dominant view of writing in higher education has given rise to the widespread perception that when students have difficulty with writing, they are deficient and that the solution to writing problems is to offer remedial support. Consequently, literacies provision has tended to be offered in decontextualised spaces that are separated from the mainstream curriculum (Boughey & McKenna, 2016; Jacobs, 2007).

Academic literacies scholarship developed in opposition to the prevailing forms of literacies provision referred to in the previous paragraph, the key foundational principles being that writing is a social practice impacted by power relations, that writing is inextricable from knowledge construction, and that writing is a key site for scholarly identity development. It follows that writing development is best situated within the specific institutional, disciplinary, and social contexts of the students, and should be focused on the texts that students are required to read and write for their studies (Lea, 2004; Lea & Street, 1988). Another insight is that writing development is slow, incremental, and ongoing: “student writers must constantly develop, particularly when they enter a new learning context, such as postgraduate study” (Fergie et al., 2011, p. 236). These insights have been influential beyond a writing or language-specific focus, and have informed undergraduate teaching in all subjects. It is now widely understood that development and support initiatives aimed at improving learning are more effective if they are fully integrated into the formal curriculum (Boughey & McKenna, 2016). Although academic literacies scholarship speaks more directly to undergraduate teaching, the principles apply to the teaching of writing in the research education context and have been taken up extensively in writing development initiatives in postgraduate contexts (e.g., Wilmot & McKenna, 2018).

An important point to note is that writing about research is difficult – even for experienced scholars. Producing an extended piece of writing such as the thesis is an immense undertaking. In the editorial for a journal edition devoted to postgraduate writing, Paré comments that “the dissertation is a profound rhetorical, linguistic, intellectual, emotional, and psychological challenge” (Paré,

2019, p. 81). In response to the understanding that research writing is challenging for everyone, the last twenty years have seen the introduction of writing support for postgraduate students in the form of writing consultations and writing groups, but only recently have scholars shown awareness that such initiatives are best embedded within “larger instructional efforts” or linked to “classroom or laboratory activity” (Paré, 2019, p. 83). In South Africa, such writing support is increasingly being implemented in universities, but embedding it within formal postgraduate education provision presents challenges because the research domain, generally, is kept separate from the teaching and learning domain.

6. A Proposal for Improving the Postgraduate Researcher Experience

Against this backdrop, I offer a proposal for improving the postgraduate researcher experience, guided by the questions that follow. What could make starting a postgraduate research degree less daunting? What could be done to increase the chances of success for new master’s and doctoral students? What would make the postgraduate research experience more satisfying and enjoyable? And – importantly – what kind of development opportunities should be prioritised in a funding-scarce environment? My background as an academic development practitioner working in the postgraduate-studies context has shaped my approach to these questions. University staff who work between academic and professional roles can be conceptualised as working in a “third space” that straddles both academic and professional roles (Guerin, 2021; Whitchurch, 2008). My ideas about how postgraduate education could be configured differently draw on my third-space experience at two large urban South African universities, in a centralised postgraduate school and in a large faculty, where I have engaged with both the concerns of postgraduates and the imperatives of university management.

In this section I draw on the scholarship referred to in the previous sections to propose some changes aimed at improving the postgraduate researcher experience, and consider some of the challenges to implementation. The approach proposed is centred around three broad strategies: integrating development and support initiatives into postgraduate education programmes, promoting collaboration and community, and placing writing at the centre of an informal “curriculum” that is common to all research students.

6.1. Formal integration of development initiatives

Although it is widely acknowledged in South African universities that even doctoral researchers have a lot to learn in order to complete their studies successfully, and that development initiatives are necessary (CHE, 2022, p.37), such provision tends to be ad hoc and extra-curricular. The perception that only underprepared students need such support is still widespread. Generally, opportunities to learn are in the form of decontextualised “support” that is provided by external departments, junior academics, or third-space professionals who have little or no interaction with postgraduates’ academic departments, or their supervisors, with a consequent

disconnect between research and learning. Not-for-credit courses or workshops tend to focus on research design and methodology. Supervisors are often ignorant of the content of such initiatives and may be unaware of what their students make of them and whether the learning is integrated into the development of their students' own research designs.

A first step towards improving the outcomes of research programmes would be for universities to acknowledge that teaching and learning is as important as research, and that such programmes require as much pedagogical oversight as undergraduate or taught postgraduate programmes. Despite the critique of the traditional "master-apprentice" approach to supervision (Parker, 2009; Sverdlik et al., 2018), a common practice, especially in the humanities and social sciences, is student-supervisor dyads working in isolation from the department and the wider research community. Consequently, students are set up to learn only from their supervisors. Although there are exceptions (see McKenna (2017) and Samuel & Vithal (2011)), full research programmes generally do not have a formal curriculum with courses or taught components; there is no common curriculum and no structure to the learning experience.

There are good reasons why the introduction of a formal structured curriculum would benefit students. The lack of structure in research degrees results in there being few times, aside from meetings with supervisors, dedicated to focusing on studies. Particularly for part-time students with very limited time for their studies (CHE, 2022, p. 38), this places a huge responsibility on them to make the time to focus on their research. Such students do not have the luxury of time on campus with the possibility of serendipitous encounters with academics or peers to inspire and motivate their learning (CHE, 2022, p. 38). The likelihood of such students becoming disengaged from their studies is high. More frequent opportunities for postgraduates to engage with the research community and each other would help to make research activities a more real part of their lived experience.

Even where excellent initiatives designed to support students, such as writing groups or retreats, have been implemented, they are not necessarily part of a coordinated set of activities that are understood and appreciated by everyone who has a stake in postgraduate outcomes. Since such activities are not compulsory and are not seen as part of the formal programme, students may not appreciate their value and may not see the benefit in engaging with them. It could also be the case that staff who are in contact with the students know little about such support initiatives and, consequently, some students are not aware of available support. Even when students are aware of ad hoc support, the students who most need it are not necessarily the ones who take advantage of it.

For the reasons discussed above, and since strong arguments have been made that academic support that is integrated into a programme is more effective than stand-alone decontextualised support, it is worth considering how to move away from the provision of ad hoc support in order to direct resources to the creation of

learning opportunities that are integrated into the framework of a more structured curriculum. Such an approach could involve a formal course at entry level, such as a proposal development course, but need not involve formal courses at all. Instead, it could involve consideration of the learning that needs to take place in the postgraduate programme in order for all students to have an equal chance of being successful, and the implementation of activities that promote such learning.

Ad hoc support tends to be uneven, for example, focused on only one of the stages of research, with the result that students who are supported for a limited period of time may feel abandoned when that support is not sustained. Ideally, a comprehensive long-term approach to implementing learning opportunities should be taken, allowing for layers of differentiated support that extend across the years of study. The advantage of considering the student learning experience across the whole of the research programme is that it is possible to create continuity between the stages of learning. For example, an intensive focus on the conceptualisation of research in the proposal phase could be followed by ongoing writing groups or one mandatory writing retreat per semester, with a final retreat focused on writing for publication. Regular colloquia where students present their research would also provide development opportunities. Such provision could be flexible enough to allow for student agency and the self-directed learning expected from independent researchers (CHE, 2022, p. 87), but still ensure that students are exposed to people, ideas, and resources that they would not necessarily find if it were left to chance.

A major challenge to the integration of learning opportunities into currently unstructured postgraduate programmes is that it requires a coordinated approach, involving all role players in postgraduate education. Faculty and departmental leaders, postgraduate programme coordinators and administrators, supervisors, teaching and learning/support staff, and the students themselves all contribute to the postgraduate research “ecosystem” (Boud & Lee, 2005; Tobbell & O’Donnell, 2013). Since the structures and systems that affect postgraduate researchers are interdependent, synergy between them is essential if change is to take place. However, persuading different sectors within the university to collaborate is difficult, especially if such collaboration is perceived as an infringement on much-prized academic freedom, or interference in the “sacred” space of supervision. Implementing more formal learning programmes will take not only strong leadership and a change of mind-set but also willingness on the part of everyone to engage in time-consuming discussions about what changes to make and how to effect them.

6.2. Prioritise community

Given the numerous references to student isolation in the literature on postgraduate education, there can be no doubt that it is worth considering how to counter the seemingly inevitable experience of loneliness. The creation of learning communities is one obvious strategy and, as Section 4 highlighted, there are emotional, social, and educational benefits for students who belong to scholarly communities.

While research shows that postgraduates are resourceful in mobilising the support of others (Elliot, et al., 2016; Hopwood, 2010;), there is much that can be done to give students opportunities to meet and interact. Departments that intentionally bring research students together have better retention rates than those that do not (Sverdlik et al., 2018). Arguably, a degree of top-down organisation is needed if the aim is to grow a community from the bottom up. Unless departments are very large, it may be more efficient for a top-down organisation to be done at faculty level.

A crucial time to bring both master's and doctoral students together is at the start of their postgraduate programmes. While it is ideal to have welcome and orientation sessions on campus where students can meet each other in the flesh and socialise before and after the formal proceedings, this is not always possible. Rather than simply sending information to students to access online in their own time, bringing students into the same room, whether it is online or on campus, gives students the opportunity to see and interact with each other and staff members other than their supervisors.

Although it is relatively standard to have orientation or welcome sessions, subsequent formal activities that bring students together are less common. Ideally, especially in the research conceptualisation stage, it would benefit students to meet regularly in sessions that focus on problem and purpose formulation, literature review, and research design and methodology. Research seminars at which students do oral presentations of their draft proposals for feedback from their peers are another way of promoting a sense of community from the beginning. Bringing cohorts together periodically once students' proposals have been accepted would also strengthen community. The focus of sessions could be to mark milestones, such as the end of each year of candidature, or to share observations that supervisors are making that are relevant to most of the students. Opportunities for smaller groups within a cohort to meet, such as organised writing retreats or writing group sessions are also valuable ways of keeping students connected to their research and each other.

While the research on postgraduate wellness referred to in this chapter was mostly conducted in the developed world, there is no reason to assume that postgraduates in Africa are any less vulnerable than their global counterparts. Scholarly communities provide a space for participants to share their study-related difficulties and setbacks with peers who understand and can give encouragement. They are also spaces for sharing progress and celebrating small steps towards thesis completion. Barring serious mental health issues, this engagement can mean that group members are less likely to need help from professional counsellors or psychologists. Consequently, scholarly communities can contribute to the building of resilience and mitigate against some of the risk factors that can impact negatively on postgraduate well-being.

If cohorts are brought together for interaction in such a way that a sense of community develops, favourable conditions are created for the formation of

smaller peer-initiated communities and friendships and study partnerships. Within broader groupings, there is space for students to exercise their agency to form relationships with others who share similar research interests or contexts that make regular engagement desirable or practical. As smaller groups develop naturally and become self-sustaining, the number of formal structured meetings in a programme could be gradually reduced.

When new-intake students are brought together, they need to be welcomed into an already established scholarly community. This requires a team approach. Ideally, the students' supervisors, as well as the other role-players in postgraduate education, such as research methodologists, research writing specialists, librarians, and administrators, should be introduced to the group at the start. At least a small group of supervisors should be involved in subsequent activities. Research students who are further along in the process could also contribute substantially to such events. While postgraduates learn about the discipline and the methodology primarily from their supervisors, events that provide opportunities for students to learn from other academics and supervisors are valuable. Experienced supervisors and NRF-rated researchers could be involved in sessions where students discuss their conceptual frameworks and research design before they are finalised. A more collaborative environment can develop out of the sharing of knowledge at such events, where students and less experienced supervisors can benefit from the expertise and experience of research leaders.

However, there are challenges to a more community-centric and collaborative approach to postgraduate education. A practical problem is the way the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted universities. Post-COVID, the number of on-campus activities, and campus visits, have decreased as institutions have made more provision for online interaction (CHE, 2022, p.20). Relationships form more easily in face-to-face interaction and a sense of belonging is strengthened by "physical presence" (Pilbeam et al. 2013, p. 1484). While it may be possible to use digital technologies to bring students into the same conceptual space and to keep them connected, it requires determination and creativity to make such interaction as effective as face-to-face meetings. In this regard, a blended, rather than online-only approach is advisable.

Research culture tends to be competitive, and the culture of the individual prevails (Boud & Lee, 2005, p. 512). Given the current nature of research degree study, and the competitive and individualistic nature of academia, bringing cohorts of postgraduates together with academic and professional staff is a difficult undertaking. This approach goes counter to the prevailing culture in a stressed and unequal higher education environment (CHE 2022, p. 13). Asking academics to make time available for collaborative activities is difficult. Even postgraduates with responsibilities competing for their time may need to be convinced of the value of time-consuming group activities. As much as we know that postgraduates enjoy interacting with each other, it may still be difficult to convince part-time students

to commit the time required. Of course, supervisors can play an important role by supporting such initiatives and explaining the underlying reasoning and the benefits of participation. Since the call for more collaboration and sharing has much in common with the spirit of ubuntu, which values “human connections and interdependency” (Oviawe, 2016, p. 3), ways to draw on the philosophy of ubuntu in the postgraduate environment could be explored, as suggested by Samuels and Vithal (2011).

6.3. Writing as the common core

Just some of the signs that writing at postgraduate level in South Africa is a source of concern that merits more pedagogical attention include: the uneven quality of written expression in the theses and dissertations publicly available via university online portals, the growing problem of “outsourcing” external editors who may overstep the mark and address higher-level issues such as structure and argument, and the increase in cases of plagiarism. While some students may have genuine difficulty with achieving the high level of literacy required for representing their research, in many cases these problems are the result of insufficient attention being paid to the writing by both students and supervisors, or writing being left until very late in the process when there is insufficient time to revise and craft the language for clear and convincing expression of ideas.

Deficit discourse about writing is as present in postgraduate education as it is in undergraduate education. Postgraduate writing support at many universities tends to be in the form of voluntary writing centre consultations, a model that has been described as “clinical intervention at the point of crisis” (Aitchison & Lee, 2006, p. 266). While there is value in such provision, especially since writing is not necessarily the focus of interaction with supervisors (Fergie et al. 2011), ideally, the writing development should be fully integrated into research education (Paré, 2019).

Since research writing is a crucial site for the development of scholarly practices, community, and identity, it is worth considering how to infuse writing development systematically into the overall course of study for particular cohorts from the very beginning. This proactive approach depends on an understanding of language as the principal resource for conceptualising and representing knowledge, and of writing as being integral, not just to the representation of the research, but to the thinking and activities that are part of the processes of research. Even when students within the same field have vastly different research topics, and use different methodologies, what they share is having to write a proposal, followed by a thesis or dissertation, or a set of articles for journal publication. Thus, writing is the common thread that connects all postgraduates. Writing can be used as the rallying point for the cohort community and as the structuring principle of any research programme.

Even students who have produced good research and achieved top results in the master's degree are likely to find writing a thesis challenging at certain points of the process. In the South African context, where most students, whether local

or international, use the lingua-franca of research, English, as an additional language, writing presents another layer of difficulty to negotiate. Consequently, it is important to make research writing a focus of formal learning in postgraduate programmes, with occasions for all research students to engage in the practices and processes of writing, and to reflect on and discuss writing. When the challenges and joys of research writing are “surfaced” and students learn that their struggles are not the result of their inadequacy but, rather, are an inevitable part of the challenging process of making knowledge, a culture of writing is likely to develop, so that writing is no longer a private and lonely activity. When writing is no longer pathologised, more students may begin to see writing support, such as consultations and writing groups, as a normal part of the research process. For these reasons, an early writing intervention, such as a series of workshops or seminars that guide proposal writing and prepare research students for writing the thesis is recommended.

Ironically, if writing comes to be acknowledged as an important focus in researcher education, and research students come to expect opportunities to learn how to become better writers, a different challenge will emerge: sourcing the expertise to teach research writing. Even supervisors who are experts in their field and have mastered the conventions for representing knowledge in their fields may not be good at teaching others how to write, since “senior scholars can employ the specialised rhetoric of their fields without being able to speak about it” (Paré, 2019, p. 82). The fact that it is difficult for supervisors to articulate the tacit knowledge that they have developed over many years of apprenticeship in a disciplinary community is a strong argument for the involvement of writing specialists who can work in collaboration with disciplinary experts to find ways to make implicit conventions explicit.

7. Conclusion

No matter what measures are taken to improve research education, not every student who registers for a research degree will complete it. However, if even a few of the insights that research on postgraduate education has generated are carefully considered, adjusted for context, and implemented, the postgraduate researcher experience will be improved and the chances of more positive and equitable outcomes for postgraduates will be increased.

In this chapter it has been proposed that postgraduate researchers would benefit from the implementation of more structure in the postgraduate research curriculum, the creation of scholarly communities in which a spirit of collaboration prevails, and the systematic embedding of writing development activities in postgraduate education programmes. While such changes would make demands on academic departments and supervisors, it should be clear that having students who are less stressed and isolated, and less dependent on their supervisors for learning and support, would make the challenging role of supervisors less burdensome. Should supervisors be willing to participate in the learning communities envisaged, the

isolation that they too may experience could be diminished and they could enjoy opportunities to learn and share their expertise and experience. Despite the post-COVID period bringing stress and disruption to the lives of academic staff, surely the value of contributing to positive changes in the postgraduate environment will be worth the investment in time and energy?

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