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INTEGRATING SCHOLARLY WRITING DEVELOPMENT INTO POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH PROGRAMMES: AN EXPLORATION OF ENABLERS AND CONSTRAINTS

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ABSTRACT

In many South African universities, full research students receive little support during the research conceptualisation stage of the research journey, other than that provided by their supervisors, who tend to have limited time to engage with their students. Furthermore, during the proposal phase, scant attention is paid to the role of writing in research conceptualisation and scholarly development. In an attempt to address this neglect, the authors of this article worked collaboratively with academic staff from two schools within the Faculty of Commerce, Law, and Management at the University of the Witwatersrand to pilot academic literacies-informed projects aimed at integrating writing in the first year of existing postgraduate research programmes. This article provides insight into factors that constrain and enable such an integration endeavour. Data was collected through focus group discussions with the project teams from the participating schools. Drawing on Margaret Archer's structure, culture, and agency as the analytical framework, five themes emerged from the data: leadership and oversight, supervision and postgraduate pedagogy, supervisor awareness and support, the postgraduate research education curriculum, and student engagement and commitment. The authors discuss these themes in terms of their enabling and constraining dimensions, and conclude with observations that could inform similar initiatives in other postgraduate research programmes.

Keywords: academic literacies, agency, culture, doctoral education, researcher education, research writing, structure

INTRODUCTION

The research conceptualisation stage is an important stage in the researcher's development, and the research proposal that is written in this stage is a key text, as it determines whether students are granted access to pursue their proposed research. In South Africa, many full research students receive little academic support during this early research stage, other than that provided by their supervisors, who have limited time to engage with their students (CHE 2022). Furthermore, in many South African postgraduate research contexts, during the proposal phase, scant attention is paid to the role of writing in the conceptualisation of the research and the scholarly development of the researcher. In an attempt to address this neglect, we proposed integrating writing-focused activities with existing initial-stage research seminars in research degree programmes[1] in the Faculty of Commerce, Law, and Management (CLM) at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). In this article, we report on focus group findings on the first year of the initiative. The purpose of the research was to explore the factors that constrain or enable such integration.

The initiative was spurred by our experience in the Postgraduate Writing Unit (PGWU) with postgraduates who participated in faculty writing retreats, which showed that many students felt lost in the research conceptualisation process, and unsure about how to write the proposal. The initiative was also informed by insights from doctoral education scholarship, which argues that postgraduate students tend not to be research-ready when they register (Johnson, Lee, and Green 2000; Manathunga and Goozée 2007) and that there is a need for institutions to improve doctoral education by making provision for development opportunities and scholarly communities (Badenhorst and Guerin 2016; Brown 2021; McKenna 2017; Samuel and Vithal 2011; Sverdlik et al. 2018; Wilmot and McKenna 2018). Our wish to contribute to creating a more enabling environment for new doctoral students was also informed by global shifts in doctoral education "towards more structured and collaborative approaches" (McKenna and Van Schalkwyk 2023, 12), which in some contexts have seen the introduction of a curricular component, such as coursework, particularly in the first year of study (Cardoso et al. 2022, 898). Knowing that our ideas were in line with global developments gave us the confidence to propose changes to the status quo at Wits and in CLM.

The publication of the Council on Higher Education's (CHE) report on the quality of South African doctoral education (CHE 2022) in the first year of the implementation of the project provided further reasons to pursue the project. The report found that "retention and throughput rates remain a matter of national importance" (CHE 2022, 67), and that despite areas of excellence in some university departments, there is substantial room for improvement. Of particular relevance, writing was highlighted as an area requiring attention (CHE 2022).

After the review, South African higher education institutions (HEIs) are challenged to question whether doctoral programmes are providing candidates with opportunities to engage in the kinds of scholarly debates that promote "intellectual depth" and "high-level critical thinking" (Burton et al. 2022, 4). We posit that the early inclusion of a writing focus and communication activities, such as research presentations, in research programmes, give students more opportunities to interact deeply and critically with knowledge and each other and promote their development as scholars.

Doctoral education scholars acknowledge the complexity of doctoral writing (Paré 2019) and report that even highly proficient writers find writing challenging (Badenhorst and Guerin 2016). Writing[2] is understood here in its broadest sense as the use of language in the representation and communication of knowledge. In South Africa, writing is an aspect of research education that receives little explicit attention in practice. Although there are some notable exceptions, mainly in the field of education (e.g., McKenna 2017; Samuel and Vithal 2011), provision for addressing scholarly development is generally in the form of ad hoc arrangements, such as writing groups (Chihota and Thesen 2013; Wilmot and McKenna 2018), or writing centre consultations (CHE 2022, 47). While such interventions undoubtedly have value, there are strong arguments from academic literacies theorists for the integration of writing development into the curriculum (Boughey and McKenna 2016).

Academic literacies scholarship shows that writing cannot be addressed in isolation from its context (Lillis 2019), and that it is imbricated in identity-formation (Ivanič 1998). Reading and writing instantiate the dominant beliefs, standards, practices, and ways of working with knowledge valued by specific disciplines (Lea and Street 2006). As such, academic knowledge work is context-specific. Consequently, reading, writing, and knowledge construction are value-laden activities that influence postgraduate students' identity development.

In the context of postgraduate research, this view of writing means that interventions aimed at developing scholarly writers ought to encompass the entire process of knowledge construction and representation, rather than focusing narrowly on writing alone. While supervisors are best placed to guide their students in the writing practices of their disciplines, many supervisors do not have the time or the metaknowledge about writing (Paré 2019) to support their students' development as scholarly communicators. For these reasons, the PGWU chose to prioritise the integration of writing within the full research degree programmes[3] offered in the Faculty. As there are no formal courses in these programmes, we were interested in how writing could be integrated into existing activities that brought postgraduates into learning "spaces", such as orientation sessions and seminars. This initiative was conceptualised as projects in two sites in the Faculty.

CONTEXT

Since the nature of the project requires us to be particularly sensitive to context, this section provides more detail about CLM, the faculty in which we work, and the projects themselves. Wits is a large, research-intensive public university, located in Johannesburg, South Africa. The university can be classified as "favourably located and resourced" (Temoso and Myeki 2023, 216), especially when compared to historically disadvantaged HEIs. The Faculty, comprising of six largely independent schools, has the largest postgraduate intake at the University. On average, there are roughly 6000 postgraduate students enrolled in the Faculty annually, of which approximately 500 are full research students.

There are approximately 230 fulltime academic staff members in the Faculty (Wits 2022, 11), who are expected to supervise across the levels of honours, Master's by coursework, Master's by dissertation, and doctoral studies. Given the ratio of postgraduate students to academic staff members, it should come as no surprise that there are supervisory capacity constraints in the Faculty. Additionally, the Faculty has identified postgraduate throughput and retention, along with postgraduate writing, as priorities.

To mitigate some of these challenges, and as part of the Faculty's broader strategy for providing a high-quality postgraduate experience, strategic decisions were made in 2019 to enhance postgraduate writing by establishing the PGWU. Two of the authors are writing specialists appointed in the unit. The PGWU forms part of the Faculty's Teaching and Learning Centre, which is headed by the other author. The unit serves all six schools in the Faculty. Faculty management endorsed the PGWU's strategy to integrate writing activities into the Faculty's research degree programmes, which would require close collaboration with academic staff in specific schools. Subsequently, two schools agreed to work with the PGWU to include research writing activities in the induction programmes for new research students.

In 2021, a project team was set up in each of the schools to plan for the integration of activities that explicitly address research writing. Each team consisted of the two PGWU writing specialists and five staff members from the school. Each school was represented by research supervisors, two of whom are experienced senior academics, and the postgraduate programme administrator. In one of the schools, two project team members supervise research in that school, and work in the school's Writing Centre. Each project team worked independently of the other, with the only common denominator being the staff from the PGWU.

Due to the fact that each school had existing researcher education programmes for new intake research students, the projects aimed to integrate writing in these structures. In one school, the programme consisted of ninety-minute seminars held periodically throughout the

year, while in the other, it consisted of an initial intensive methodology seminar series that ran daily over approximately four weeks. The project teams collaboratively developed more comprehensive year-long programmes that started with welcome and orientation sessions. While academic staff from each school covered topics such as the content and structure of research proposals; how to work with the literature; using the databases; and theoretical frameworks and methodology; the writing specialists facilitated sessions on language, structure and style in the proposal; and organised and facilitated research days on campus, which included optional writing consultations. Online mock proposal defence sessions were introduced, at which students who were due to defend their proposals could present their research to a supportive audience of peers and project members. The aim was to give students practice at presenting their research, as well as to provide developmental feedback. Components of the programmes offered opportunities for peer learning that are not common for students who engage almost exclusively with their supervisors.

Since the new researcher education programmes provided informal learning opportunities for new-intake research students, instead of formal courses, they remained, in effect optional. Consequently, it proved difficult to involve the entire cohort. Since the days intended for scholarly writing community development were on campus (unlike the rest of the programme, which was online), the writing-focused activity had the poorest take-up. In 2022, the first year of project implementation, there were 43 doctoral and four Master's students in the one school, and 19 doctoral and 15 Master's students in the other. Approximately 25 per cent of these students regularly engaged with the writing-focused components of the programmes.

METHODS

The writing integration project was conceptualised as a practical contribution to improving the quality of postgraduate education in CLM. Since only a few South African universities have documented similar research writing development initiatives at research degree level, our initiative was also set up as a research project. Ethics clearance for the project was obtained through the Wits Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical).

The data drawn on for the article was collected by means of focus group discussions with the two project teams. Focus groups were chosen as data collection method based on the generative potential of such engagements, which afford opportunities for participants to interact with one another, engage with observations made by other participants, and modify responses based on what other participants said (Bryman 2012, 503; Smithson 2008, 358). Project members were invited to participate in the focus groups and gave informed consent for the sessions to be recorded. To offset possible bias as a result of the researchers' position within the

projects, none of the focus group contributions made by either of the two researchers directly involved in the projects were included in the analysis. To further strengthen the trustworthiness of the research (Lincoln and Guba 1986), and in order to minimise researcher bias, a draft of the article was shared with all focus group participants for comment (Maxwell 2012).

The third researcher, who was not involved in the projects, was the focus group facilitator. The focus group schedule did not directly address the question of integrating writing with research, but rather, asked questions about research training and support, proposal development initiatives, the collaboration between the schools and the PGWU, and the outcomes of the first year of the projects.

Focus groups were conducted virtually, using Microsoft Teams. We analysed the automatically-generated transcripts independently, initially adopting a deductive approach. Thereafter, we worked collaboratively to look for examples of factors that would constrain or enable the integration of writing development and support into the two postgraduate research programmes. Inductive analysis followed in order to identify sub-themes within the broader categories of constraining and enabling factors. We drew on our own experiences of the projects in our selection and interpretation of the data. Finally, Archer's concepts of structure, culture, and agency (1995; 1996) were used to analyse the extracted data so as to answer the research question: what factors affect the integration of scholarly writing development and support into postgraduate research programmes in research-intensive higher education contexts?

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The analytical framework for this article is informed by Margaret Archer's social realism (see Archer 1995; 1996), which has been used extensively in higher education research (see Williams 2012; Case 2015; Boughey and McKenna 2021). We draw on one tool from Archer's proverbial toolbox, which she refers to as *analytical dualism* (Archer 1995, 165–194).

Analytical dualism refers to the "theoretical separation of the parts and the people" (Boughey and McKenna 2021, 23), which Archer understands as structure, culture, and agency (Archer 1995). This separation enables researchers to view each of these parts autonomously, but also to interrogate their interplay, usually with the aim to better understand the enabling or constraining powers they may have on one another. Furthermore, analytical dualism also allows researchers to observe emergent properties that may arise from the interaction of structure, culture, and agency.

In social realist terms, in the context of higher education, structure encompasses aspects such as "the institution, departments, policy, professional bodies and committees" (Behari-Leak 2017, 489). Culture, in turn, comprises values, ideas, beliefs, and attitudes (Case 2015; Behari-

Leak 2017). Social realism is concerned with how structure and culture manifest either to maintain the status quo, or else to effect changes in social reality. Case describes the third dimension, agency, as "the domain of human action and interaction" (Case 2015, 843), which is either enabled or constrained by structure or culture, or the properties emergent from the interaction of structure and culture (Behari-Leak 2017, 489).

In this article, we use analytical dualism as a framework for analysing the focus group data we collected. The rationale for doing so lies in the synergies that exist between academic literacies theory and social realism. In both instances, there is an acknowledgement that a phenomenon cannot be viewed in isolation from its social context, and that enabling or constraining structure(s) and / or culture(s) hold(s) bearing for the people involved, as well as their ability to enact agency. In adopting structure, culture, and agency as lenses with which to analyse the data, we are afforded the opportunity to consider how factors that enable and constrain the integration of writing development into the two postgraduate research programmes manifest and interconnect.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, we explore factors that enable or constrain the integration of writing in postgraduate research programmes in relation to five themes that emerged. Participants are cited verbatim throughout.

Leadership and oversight

The first theme identified is that of leadership and oversight, which can be viewed as either enabling or constraining, depending on the context within which the integration efforts occur.

In School Y,[4] a perceived lack of leadership and oversight from school managing structures emerges as a constraint. One participant emphasised the need for more regular engagement with these structures in order to foster a stronger relationship between school management and the project.

> "... the only thing that is kind of missing [to ensure better alignment with the processes and practices in the school], is outside of the control of all of us [the project team]. And that is the uptake at senior school level and integration and communication." (FGPY1).[5]

This frustration with the perceived lack of commitment to the project from management structures may be partially influenced by school culture, but may also speak to the competing strategic objectives that exist within this school.

We identified a strong conviction that the responsibility to drive uptake of the project

within the school ought to be that of top management. Consequently, a perceived lack of structural support for the project from school management appears to hamper the integration efforts and – by extension – project group member agency.

However, leadership and oversight can serve an enabling function, as it did in the other school. In the School X Focus Group, mention was made of the way in which one of the focus group participants championed the establishment of a postgraduate researcher community in the school. It is into this structure that the writing activities were later integrated as part of the School X project. In our view, this participant exemplifies the potentially enabling powers of appropriate leadership and agency within the project team. This view is corroborated by another participant, who observed:

> "I think there is awareness of this programme, because ... [FGPX1 and FGPX2] have worked very closely with the [School X] Postgraduate Studies Committee, making sure they are aware of the programme and everything we are doing, and they have communicated with supervisors as well." (FGPX4).

The cited response above illustrates the importance of strong agential drivers in the project team itself for achieving the integration objectives of the project. Once permission for the project was granted in School X, management was not involved at all, in contrast to School Y, where management was involved periodically. On reflection, we understand that school management is not necessary for driving such projects, where there is strong agency in the project team. The agency in School X may derive from the strong culture of academic autonomy in that particular school.

Supervision and postgraduate pedagogy

Although none of the focus group questions explicitly addressed supervision, in both focus groups, the discussions settled on supervision several times. A participant from Focus Group Y, an experienced supervisor, expressed the view that supervisors are not trained as teachers, and are therefore not aware of the pedagogical dimensions of supervision: "... we do not have to have a teaching qualification to teach at the university. So, the pedagogical stuff is often absorbed by osmosis or ... not, as the case may be." (FGPY1).

At a later point in the discussion, the same participant commented that the academic staff in the school seem to be resistant to learning more about supervision: "... supervision skills are taken for granted – it can be done better and in very many cases the difficulty is that supervisors think they do not need training." (FGPY1).

It was suggested that if there were greater clarity about how to supervise, there might be

fewer major revisions required after examination. Here we note how the introduction of a structural measure (i.e., opportunities to learn more about supervision) may have the potential to shift what appears to be a culture of resistance to changing supervisory practice. Such a shift would benefit the writing integration efforts at the core of the project.

Adding to the discussion, another participant agreed that supervisors do not take up opportunities to learn: *"*... because we do not think we need them, we do not take them up ..." (FGPY4).

While School X Focus Group participants were unanimous in seeing the writing integration project as supplementary to supervision, there was acknowledgement that there was: "... place for another level of assistance to the students, a more general level as opposed to just, you know, just you and your supervisor ..." (FGPX2).

It was suggested that the project could contribute to improved: "... consistency across the school ..." (FGPX2). Another participant pointed out that: "... supervisors are so immersed in their field that they almost don't know what the students don't know ..." (FGPX4) and argued that disciplinary outsiders are able to make the academic culture "visible" to students and to have: "... the kinds of explicit disciplinary conversations that are needed to help ... induct them into ways of thinking and being in the PhD programme". (FGPX4).

The School X Focus Group exhibited a sophisticated understanding of postgraduate learning and teaching, and the respective roles of both supervisors and writing specialists. This understanding could be attributed to two factors: at least one member of the School X project team has a background in education, and there is interest in postgraduate pedagogy in the school, as evidenced by the following statement:

> "There is a parallel trajectory that is beginning to happen in the school and maybe should happen more in the school, around the kind of pedagogy of supervision ... in schools like ours, the history has been of supervision, something you do on your own with your student. And you do not really talk that much with your colleagues unless they're your close colleagues. And you may or may not discuss a problem you have with supervising. And I think the school is ... trying to build a more collective sense that we are all supervisors, and we can learn from each other." (FGPX1).

We see here at least two orientations to supervision emerging from the data, a "supervision as pedagogy" approach, which is not the dominant orientation to supervision in the schools, and an approach that may be characterised as "supervision as research". Our observation is that these orientations, which may relate to culture, have a strong enabling or constraining influence on the integration of writing in the research programmes of these schools. In instances where a "supervision-as-pedagogy" approach dominates, writing integration efforts may be more easily achieved at the levels of structure and culture.

Supervisor awareness and support of the project

Poor supervisor engagement and participation in the project emerged as one of the factors that constrained the integration of writing into research programmes in both schools. Participants in both focus groups pointed to the important role supervisors play in the research process.

One participant identified supervisors as agents who are key to the success of the integration project:

> "... the buy in is quite lacking, so we do not have engagement from the supervisor. So, I think for me the key to – you know this whole process succeeding is for us to get buy in, from our colleagues or supervisors so that they are aware, and they can also see and appreciate the value of the writing aspect and they do not see it as just an add on or something that is imposed on them." (FGPY3).

While another participant supports the project, the importance of supervisor involvement and balancing additional support with that offered by the supervisor was emphasised:

> "... one thing that is really important about this kind of provision is that it is seen as ... supportive of the relationship between the supervisor and the supervisee ... otherwise you can run into trouble ... for any kind of additional provision, it is really important that it is done with the supervisor ...." (FGPX4).

In both focus groups, supervisor awareness of the project was identified as an issue, which we view as constraining the integration objectives of the project. In School Y, the project was introduced to the supervisors by the Academic Director at the start of the year. Thereafter, there was no engagement between the supervisors and the project team. In School X, although members of the project team had shared information about the project with the School's Postgraduate Studies Committee, it appeared that it had not reached all the supervisors. One participant felt that more could have been done to connect with supervisors: "... not all supervisors knew exactly what was happening. ... if this has to continue [the writing integration project], we need to have a direct line of communication with supervisors ..." (FGPX5).

The discussion in both project teams turned to the need to engage the supervisors and convince them of the value of actively participating in the project:

> "... how do we then convince our colleagues, you know, supervisors about the worth of this project because as it stands, not many are buying into it. And I think it is a missed opportunity from the student side, but also the supervisor because if a student attend[s] these, then it could save ... great amounts of time of editing or frustrations." (FGPY3).
>
> "... when other supervisors have joined in, the students have appreciated that massively and I think that is maybe something we should try and cultivate more – so get more supervisors to the research

> celebration day, get more of them coming to the mock proposal defences ... I think that would be a really good way of building community that includes the supervisors more explicitly ....” (FGPX4).

Although supervisors in both schools ought to have been aware of the projects, they did not engage with the project teams, despite invitations to become involved in the revised programmes for new-intake PhD students. Very few chose to participate in the mock panel defence sessions of their supervisees. While the lack of supervisor involvement could be attributed to structural elements such as workload, culture may present an even greater constraint. The dominant “supervision-as-research” orientation could explain the lack of interest and support for the project.

The postgraduate research education curriculum

Connected to the themes discussed in the previous sections, is a less explicit theme: “the postgraduate research education curriculum”.[6] Paradoxically, this theme was present in its absence in the focus group discussions, as curriculum was never explicitly referred to. Since, in both schools, students are generally allocated one supervisor, the master-apprentice model of supervision dominates (McKenna and Van Schalkwyk 2023). Several comments suggest that a factor constraining learning in the research programmes – and by extension the integration of writing – is that there is not a robust structure, such as a formal curriculum, supporting research learning and supervision, whether in the proposal development stage, or across the years of doctoral study.

In the School Y Focus Group, it was acknowledged that more attention needs to be given to the doctoral programme. One participant suggested that a learning needs analysis be done with students, while another participant agreed, noting the importance of knowing: “... what the base is and what sort of support they need coming into the programme” (FGPY3).

In discussion regarding the reasons for students not meeting deadlines, a participant contrasted the doctoral degree with coursework degrees:

> “But with full 100% research, there’s no exam date and it feels like you’ve got this long time because you’ve got four years, so you don’t take regular leave days so that you can meet certain milestones and before you know it, you have four years and you haven’t moved – so time management, project planning.” (FGPY4).

Another participant added: “... it is about project planning, but it’s also about commitment and focus and critical thinking, which we don’t teach ...” (FGPY1).

Related to the theme of the research curriculum, is “scholarly community”, as it is through

social engagement about teaching and learning that the curriculum is enacted. A School Y participant related how in the past there had been seminars where doctoral students presented their work to their peers and supervisors:

> "... everyone present – presenting in – participating and commenting and growing each other and – and collaborating, which was great – meant to be like that ... [the PhD director] found himself the only person, the only academic in the room and really putting his entire soul out to the students and which you know, really became quite onerous for him." (FGPY1).

These seminars no longer take place, because supervisors are either unwilling or unable to participate.

In School X, in contrast, scholarly community development had been and continues to be a driving factor. In the School X Focus Group, a senior academic related:

> "... part of my sort of impetus in getting involved in this – I think initially only in welcome events – was to build community and then also it sort of morphed into providing some support and then with when [the project] came along ... that was an opportunity to formalise what we had started doing." (FGPX1).

The members of both project teams acknowledged that more structured and formalised doctoral programmes could contribute to ensuring that students finish their proposals within the stipulated timeframes, and are well prepared for writing the thesis in the next research stage. One participant from Focus Group Y suggested including assessment:

> "... so that there's more structure in that way, then we know what students are coming out with. So, as it is now, they come and attend, but in actual fact we don't know whether they have gained the information or that they are able to apply it. So, I think for me if you know they can review the coursework especially for the PhD." (FGPY3).

The fact that there are no repercussions for non-attendance of the programme was seen as a constraint:

> "... they [students] can choose whether they want to [attend] or not [which means] we're missing out on an opportunity of knowing whether they have actually gained or learned anything during the coursework. So, I'm a firm believer that if the coursework could be ... assessed and ... more rigorous ..., then they will take it [the programme] seriously." (FGPY3).

Another participant agreed that creating a more formal curriculum as a steppingstone into doctoral studies was a good suggestion, citing processes in another school in the Faculty as a possible model:

> "I think you're onto something really big there, cause [another school in the Faculty] has coursework. [...] They [students] must do the course and they must pass it. They must submit a proposal [...] and those that get through are then admitted to the PhD programme." (FGPY1).

In the School X Focus Group, there was extended conversation about how the current programme could be improved through student research presentations that facilitate peer learning, and more explicit teaching of opaque discourse conventions. Rather than a deficit approach to writing (Boughey and McKenna 2016), in the project team, there was the understanding that writing is part of scholarly development: "... everyone needs help with writing ... I need help with writing, and I'm not a research student, so it's kind of a no brainer. However good you are with writing, you can always write better ..." (FGPX1).

The regular seminars were seen as spaces for community development and as providing structure and direction for the students: "... just being part of the Thursday community helps you to think about your writing ..." (FGPX1). There was also recognition that writing is integral to scholarly development: "... a lot of my so-called writing consultations are actually getting them to think themselves into the identity of a PhD student and what that means ..." (FGPX4).

On reflection, we conclude that the dominant culture of master-apprentice supervision in both the schools, and the lack of a pedagogy-oriented community among the supervisors, made it difficult for the project teams to engage with the schools about the research curriculum and the changes that the project teams introduced. However, in the project teams, the presence of individuals who had an interest in postgraduate education made it possible to have conversations that enhanced the process for planning for writing integration.

Student engagement and commitment

The final theme in our discussion is student engagement and commitment, which we found to have constraining properties in relation to writing integration. The School X Focus Group observed that few students participated in the writing days, which was seen as a constraining factor. One participant noted that they felt: "... the writing days should have been valuable, but they weren't because there was a poor take up often." (FGPX1). Another participant agreed that there was less interest in this specific intervention. "I don't know how we can improve on that. Maybe we can market ourselves better." (FGPX5). Yet another participant indicated that it is important to explain the value of writing activities to students:

> "... make it clear that the writing days aren't about teaching you to write, [or that you are seen as] a weak writer, or because you need help with your writing necessarily. But just ... recognising that

> it's really difficult to make progress in the PhD, that it's difficult to find ... dedicated time to write. And it's a good way of increasing productivity." (FGPX4).

The writing days in School Y were better attended. For the School Y Focus Group, a constraining factor was students' perceived lack of commitment to their studies. One participant indicated that: "They [students] could always have other things going on at work ... but I think it is also maybe deeper in terms of commitment and urgency ... in terms of getting it done." (FGPY4). Another participant elaborated that students are not aware of the amount of time they need to complete the PhD degree.

> "... students have no idea what they're letting themselves in for and what they've signed up for ... cause it is about 5000 hours [needed to complete the PhD] ... and they haven't thought really deeply about where those hours are going to come from in the context of everything else they're doing." (FGPY1).

The lack of engagement from students emerged as constraining the integration projects in both schools. This could be viewed as an example of pre-existing culture (i.e., poor student engagement) affecting the structures that are intended to benefit postgraduates. Candidates' low take-up of aspects of the programmes may signal to supervisors that embedding writing development in research degrees is not a worthwhile way to support students. This reinforces the dominant culture at the University, which holds that research students need to work in isolation.

A further layer worth considering is that many students in both schools hold fulltime jobs. Thus, the cultures and structures of their work environments are also likely to affect their take-up of the programmes. These students are also, in general, more established in their careers, returning to higher education after some time spent in the world of work, where they are required to draft business reports or legal documents. Thus, their agency as accomplished writers in their work environments may lead students to believe that they do not need writing development and support when (re)entering academia. Such students may not realise that research writing is a different genre with different requirements and conventions.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the challenges experienced in the first year of project implementation, the writing integration projects were deemed worth continuing with in 2023. An indication of the success of the projects is that the researcher education programmes that have been collaboratively developed over the two years will be offered to the new-intake 2024 cohorts, and the project teams are working actively to obtain formal recognition for these programmes through official

structures, such as the schools' postgraduate studies committees. This move represents a significant step towards embedding more comprehensive researcher education programmes in the schools. There are now signs that what was seen as optional support may form part of formal teaching and learning activities for research postgraduates, which would represent a major shift in culture in the two schools.

While there were fewer writing-focused activities than initially anticipated, we were successful in the overall goal of integrating writing activities in the schools' programmes. The revised programmes function as enabling structures for the development of research writing. However, since only a small proportion of the student body participated regularly in the writing-focused activities, the impact of these activities was limited by the dominant research culture, which promotes writing in isolation. We have identified this as a constraint. Our experience in the PGWU has shown that writing tends to be side-lined, and is noticed only when it is perceived as faulty. The success of projects such as the one described herein is highly dependent on the dominant view of writing in higher education, where "language, and the concomitant performances of languaging [...] are underestimated, undervalued and marginalised" (Turner 2011, 4). Both supervisors and students may have a narrow view of writing as the reflection of ideas, rather than as a site for the construction of knowledge and negotiation of scholarly identity. This view, an aspect of culture, makes it difficult to engage with supervisors (and schools) about writing-related activities that are conceptualised as being for all students, and not merely those who are identified as in need of writing development. It also affects student participation in writing-related activities, since those who see themselves as competent writers may not understand how they could benefit as scholars from specialised attention to writing. We envisage that, through more effective communication with students and supervisors about the centrality of writing in research, this culture will shift slowly, and participation may improve in the future.

Although what initially drove the project was the aim to have writing activities included in the research degree programmes, the projects developed in such a way that they led to other positive outcomes. A significant outcome was the extension of the existing seminar series programmes to include additional activities offered regularly throughout the academic year, resulting in the creation of a more structured, if informal, curriculum component for the first year of the research degree programmes. Other positive outcomes included the increase in opportunities for students to interact and feel part of a scholarly community. There were benefits for the PGWU as well as the schools. The meetings of the project teams encouraged the academics to critically consider their researcher education programmes, and have led to greater understanding of the roles that both supervisors and writing specialists can play in supporting

student researchers. While these unintended outcomes are not all directly related to writing, per se, they contribute to fostering an enabling research environment that encourages scholarly engagement, which includes writing.

We acknowledge that the research is limited, in the sense that it draws on only two focus group sessions, as well as our reflection on our experience over two years. However, the projects are ongoing, and additional insights are anticipated in the next stage of the research from future focus group sessions and interviews with the 2022 new-intake cohort and their supervisors. For others exploring the integration of writing and research, the following may be useful to consider. In contexts where there are staff members within schools or departments, "insiders", who have both an interest in writing and the time for including it in their researcher development activities, writing may be integrated more naturally. However, since in most research contexts this is not the case, it may be necessary to draw on "outsider" writing specialists.

Our experience has confirmed that such collaborations entail ongoing negotiation, which in our case took place in regular meetings of the project teams. Regular engagement demands additional time that, ideally, should be acknowledged as part of the members' academic workload. Additionally, academic staff members should be willing to dedicate the time required for the project. The composition of such teams is also important. Including in the project team at least one supervisor at professor level, and other discipline or methodology specialist supervisors who are interested in writing or learning is also key to successful collaboration and implementation. Ideally, one person from the context in which the writing integration is to take place should coordinate and drive the project.

Given the substantial investment in time that such projects require, we suggest that measures be taken to ensure that they have maximum impact. Giving new researcher education programmes formal recognition, making student participation mandatory, and ensuring that supervisors are supportive of and involved in such programmes, constitutes the only way to ensure that all students benefit.

DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no personal or financial interests or relationships that could have influenced this study or its findings.

The authors ascribe to the highest standards of ethical conduct in all their research. The Wits Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical) approved this study before data collection commenced (Protocol Number: H22/01/01).

NOTES

1. We use the term programme to refer to both the degree programmes for full research students, as well as the schedule of induction events for new research students.
2. Throughout the article, the word "writing" is used to refer to scholarly communication in its broadest sense, as characterised by Wingate's definition of academic literacy: "the ability to communicate competently in an academic discourse community; this encompasses reading, evaluating information, as well as presenting, debating and creating knowledge through both speaking and writing" (Wingate 2018, 350).
3. At Wits, the term "full research student" refers to a candidate enrolled for doctoral studies or Master's by research (i.e. without a coursework component).
4. To retain confidentiality, and in an attempt to ensure anonymity as far as possible, the two participating schools are referred to as School X and School Y, respectively.
5. To retain confidentiality, and in an attempt to ensure anonymity as far as possible, each focus group (FG) participant has been assigned a pseudonym using the convention: FGP (Focus Group Participant), X or Y (depending on the school), followed by a number, for example, FGPY1.
6. While we acknowledge that the concept of curriculum is complex, here we use the term to denote those structures designed to help guide and scaffold learning. Such structures are often absent in South African doctoral programmes.

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