

Brenda Vivian

University of Pretoria

and

Reinhardt Fourie¹

University of South Africa

Non-Curricular Postgraduate Writing Interventions at South African Universities

Abstract

Formalised postgraduate writing support centres are a relatively new phenomenon at the majority of South African universities and have not yet been researched intensively. This article, which forms part of a mandated study, presents the findings of research into the nature of postgraduate writing support at a number of South African universities. In 2014, an external review into the throughput rate of undergraduate and postgraduate students at a particular South African residential university was conducted, which concluded that there was a need for more support for postgraduate students who were conducting research. (University X, 2014). Accordingly, a questionnaire was distributed to writing centres at various institutions across the country. This

article describes practices relating to staffing, the availability of resources, as well as the positioning of postgraduate writing support within or separate to undergraduate writing centres. Additionally, findings are presented in terms of the different modes of delivery and the related research outputs. While this article provides an overview of current best practice at a number of university-based postgraduate writing centres, suggestions are also made concerning an ideal model for the foundation of such a writing centre at a large residential university.

Keywords: academic writing, postgraduate writing, postgraduate writing support, writing centres, academic literacy.

1. Corresponding author.

1. Introduction

While the formation of writing centres can be traced back to the origin of academic literacy support programmes (also known as academic support or academic development programmes) at South African universities, formalised postgraduate writing support centres are, at the large majority of local universities, a relatively new phenomenon.

In a brief historical overview of these writing centres, Archer (2010: 495-496) notes that they were born out of the context of academic literacy programmes that have been founded in various units, centres and departments at universities since the 1980s in order to address the country's "persisting heritage of educational unpreparedness". Trimbur (2011: 1) identifies the University of the Witwatersrand, the University of Cape Town, and the University of the Western Cape as the first universities in South Africa to found writing centres around the middle of the 1990s. Archer (2010: 507) stresses that local writing centres could potentially possess "enormous power ... by virtue of their positioning" at tertiary institutions. While she briefly alludes to the developmental history of writing centres at local universities (without specifically distinguishing between undergraduate and postgraduate services) the focus of Archer's study is not on the broad practices and characteristics of these centres, but rather on their pedagogies. The book *Changing Spaces: Writing Centres and Access to Higher Education* (2011), edited by Archer and Richards, offers a collection of articles that relate primarily to undergraduate writing centres, written by various individuals involved in writing support at South African universities. Some chapters refer to practical aspects of writing centre setup, but the majority are concerned with issues of pedagogy. The practical aspects of *postgraduate* formalised support – which includes, but is not limited to, centres' mandate and focus; staffing models; staff qualification level and type; resources available; current and completed research projects etc. – have not yet been researched intensively. This article, which forms part of a mandated study, presents the findings of research into the practical aspects of postgraduate writing support at eleven South African universities.

In the first section of this article, we briefly refer to those elements and activities that are often the focus of the broad notion of postgraduate writing support. We work with the specificities of tertiary education in South Africa in mind, but we also cast our view towards the situation internationally. In the second segment, we provide a contextualisation of and rationale for undertaking this project. The third component summarises and explains the criteria utilised in our data collection. The fourth and main part of our article will present our findings, based on the questionnaires that were completed by a number of individuals involved in and responsible for postgraduate writing support at a range

of South African tertiary institutions. Here we will *passim* present our suggestions of best practice in postgraduate writing support, which have been used to inform the establishment of a pilot postgraduate writing support centre at University X¹.

2. Postgraduate writing support

Left undefined, the very concept of “postgraduate writing support” is a broad term that could include a number of different kinds of support and the input of various stakeholders in postgraduate study. What is clear is that writing is central to postgraduate study, irrespective of the discipline. According to Cameron, Nairn and Higgins (2009: 269), “[w]riting is the foundation of an academic career”. As indicated by Coffin, Curry, Goodman, Hewings, Lillis and Swann (2003: 2), “[s]tudent writing is at the centre of teaching and learning in higher education, fulfilling a range of purposes according to the various contexts in which it occurs”. They argue that this relates to assessment (“the major purpose for student writing”), learning (“which can help students grapple with disciplinary knowledge”) and entering particular disciplinary communities (“whose communication norms are the primary means by which academics transmit and evaluate ideas”) (Coffin *et al.*, 2003: 2). It can be argued that the first two of these purposes are embedded within the third and that at postgraduate level it is especially this entrance into discipline-specific academic communities that becomes of paramount importance; it is primarily through certain writing activities that access to these disciplinary communities is granted.

Reflecting on the postgraduate writing skills of doctoral candidates studying geography in the United Kingdom, Burgoine, Hopkins, Rech and Zapata (2011: 463) mention that “even for those graduate students who are not planning an academic career, the focus of the university system in the UK is increasingly geared towards completion [of a study or thesis] within a maximum of 4 years”. In South Africa, a similar timeline has increasingly been adopted by university departments in most disciplines. A number of reasons could be cited for this, including Government subsidy benefits tied to the throughput and tangible research output of postgraduate students, but we do not wish to elaborate too much on this here. A result of this strict timeline, according to Burgoine *et al.* (2011:

-
2. The ethics arrangements at University X prohibit the authors from mentioning the name of the institutions involved in this study. The authors could have applied for permission to mention the name of the institutions, but that process could take between 6 and 8 months. In the interest of making the data from a public institution available to the relevant research community before the data are dated, the authors and Editor decided to publish the article with the reference to institutions according to codes. The authors were asked to provide detailed information about the context of University X and the other participating institutions in Addendum B in order to enable readers to evaluate the validity of research findings.

463), is that “other aspects of writing skills and academic development are either being overlooked completely or placed aside until the thesis is completed”. In fact, Cameron *et al.* (2009: 269) note that a doctoral thesis is for many students merely the beginning of their academic writing careers, as conference papers, journal articles and books will come to be the dominant output of their academic work eventually. Because of the focus on completing the thesis, very little attention is paid to improving the young scholar’s technical writing skills, and subsequently these may be lacking even after the completion of the doctoral thesis, because “important aspects of academic writing tend to be ignored, assumed, and/or learned by trial and error in the training to become an academic” (Cameron *et al.*, 2009: 269, 281). This reveals that writing is seen as a central pillar of postgraduate academic activity, as much as it speaks to a lack of formalised training in different forms of academic writing at postgraduate level. This points ultimately to the question of where the responsibility of addressing these student needs must or will fall.

Butler (2009: 291) remarks that one may be tempted to believe that difficulties related to writing in an academic environment “are restricted to undergraduate students as a result of their assumed inexperience in [an] academic context, and that postgraduate students are mostly experienced, proficient writers in their specific disciplines”. Through an extensive study, involving both postgraduate students and supervisors, Butler (2007) found specifically at one of the large universities in South Africa that this is not the case. Butler’s larger study indicates clear links between the academic literacy levels of students and challenges faced in academic writing at a postgraduate level (2007). Altering a central characteristic of Albert Weideman’s (2003: xi) well-known definition of functional academic literacy – in particular, the ability to “understand a range of academic vocabulary in context” – Butler reformulates this idea for postgraduate students, placing significant focus on productive ability. According to Butler, postgraduate students should be able to “[u]nderstand and *produce* a range of academic vocabulary in context” (Butler, 2009: 294, our emphasis). His view seems to correspond closely with those of Cameron *et al.* (2009) and Burgoine *et al.* (2011) and further points to the need for more rigorous interventions.

The challenges faced by postgraduate students are not unknown to academics who supervise students working towards the completion of research projects. Hill (2007: 59) argues that a central issue in postgraduate supervision is that its “pedagogy is not always explicit”. He clarifies this by noting that supervisors often follow an “osmosis approach” in teaching students to write academically, while some do not provide the type of feedback that could enable a student to address specific writing problems they may experience (Hill, 2007: 59). While it could be expected that some supervisors can and will respond to their students’ individual needs to develop their writing abilities, others may not feel able to or understand how to intervene. In addition to this, Archer (2010: 495) notes that the systematic educational deprivation of large parts of the South African population over many decades has led to a continuing legacy of “educational unpreparedness, which includes linguistic, numerate and conceptual analytical competencies”.

As supervisors for postgraduate study are experts in various particular disciplines, their supervision of the student’s engagement with content specific to the discipline is

often seen as the supervisor's primary task. Subsequently, challenges with academic writing are frequently regarded as secondary issues in postgraduate study, and so the responsibility to address these challenges is determined to be that of other stakeholders. According to Thesen (2013: 104), this has resulted in a tendency at some universities in South Africa to outsource support for postgraduate writing, which can be seen in the growing demand for "generic ... workshops on aspects of research writing". Thesen (2013: 104) questions the actual impact of these types of interventions, comparing them to fast food: "they cannot deeply satisfy the reader," as "they don't engage with the deep structure of postgraduate research and its central function," which is "to make new knowledge".

A too easily accepted idea is perhaps that postgraduate writing is a neatly identifiable set of technical skills that can be taught to any student. Such an assumption does not take into account students' varying individual needs and the particularities of different disciplines and institutions. These problematic suppositions can easily lead to the generic supportive responses mentioned by Thesen (2013: 104); she goes as far as to refer to them derisively as "pop-up" or "soundbite" workshops. It has been identified quite clearly that generic approaches across disciplines and individual needs in student groups do not adequately address educational unpreparedness (see for instance Archer, 2010, as well as Weideman, 2013, who summarise the often inadequate approaches of academic literacy support). This is highly relevant to the case of writing centres, as they are generally placed within the broader context of academic literacies support for historical, but also practical and argumentative purposes.

In order to address the often highly individualised challenges that postgraduate students experience in not only understanding, but especially in producing new knowledge, many South African universities have responded by offering more formalised skills support. These programmes often manifest as postgraduate writing centres, where specialist tutors can both offer workshops to groups of students and work one-on-one with students to address their distinct needs. As Archer (2010) indicates, the writing centre tradition in South Africa spans three decades. However, while some research has been conducted into suitable pedagogical models and focuses for the teaching of writing skills, this article aims to map the typical practices and characteristics of existing postgraduate writing centres. Based on this, we have drawn conclusions that have informed the creation of a pilot postgraduate writing centre at University X.

3. Contextualisation

When our initial data collection was conducted in 2014, University X, an urban institution, had a total student enrolment number of 55 877, with 21 130 of these students enrolled for postgraduate courses in nine faculties (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2016: 8). The institution has the following faculties: Economics; Education; Engineering; Health Sciences; Humanities; Law; Natural and Agricultural Sciences; Theology; and Veterinary Science. In 2014 an external review of the throughput rate at all levels at

University X was conducted. In line with the university's stated strategic commitment to develop and improve the quality and quantity of postgraduate scholarship, significant emphasis was placed on student throughput from undergraduate level into postgraduate studies. The review panel concluded that there was "a need for more intensive support for year 3 and Honours students in the more sophisticated writing required in Honours and research" (University X, 2014: 5).

A writing centre to support undergraduate students in the humanities faculty at University X had already been launched in 2014 within the division of the faculty responsible for undergraduate academic literacy interventions. Consequently, the same division was mandated to explore the possibility of founding a similar centre for postgraduate students by investigating the presence and function of such centres at other tertiary institutions. The focus of our research is mainly concerned with issues of operational and day-to-day activities at postgraduate writing centres in order to identify elements of good practice at these centres around South Africa. As such, the effectiveness of certain delivery methods, pedagogical approaches, and organisational structures were not *per se* assessed beyond what can be deduced from prevalence, which may admittedly not necessarily correlate with effectiveness. Since our study set out to determine best practice, we decided to focus our investigation on institutions categorised by the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) as Historically Advantaged Institutions (HAIs) – a category within which University X also falls (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2014). We believe that the other HAIs will tend to have very similar access to resources as University X, and so we opted for comparability. With the exception of University F, our study does not include universities categorised as Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs) by DHET. We neither wish to perpetuate nor support the notion that HDIs do not offer innovative support to both undergraduate and postgraduate students. We do feel, however, that the challenges faced by HDIs would require an investigation that would take into account the specific challenges that these institutions face (particularly of a financial nature), as well as the details of their innovative approaches, both of which fall outside the immediate scope of our study.

In order to focus attention on trends in the sector rather than on individual universities, the institutions that participated in this study have been anonymised³. Of the eleven universities we refer to, eight utilise English as the medium of instruction (Universities A, B, C, D, E, F, I, and J), while three of the universities operate bilingually (Universities G, H, and K). Ten of the institutions are traditional universities and only one is classed as a university of technology. University X's language policy states that the institution's medium of teaching is bilingual.

3. An anonymous, alphabetical list of the participating institutions with information about their location, faculties and the number of students at undergraduate and postgraduate levels is published in Addendum B to enable readers to contextualise the validity of the research findings. The language policy arrangements of the institutions are discussed in section 3 above.

In our data collection, we firstly conducted a preliminary search through institutional websites. The websites of the various institutions offered varying, and at times very limited, data. As the information provided was most often limited to matters of a practical nature, such as contact details, we will not include this in the article. Through our consideration of the writing centre websites, we were, however, able to narrow down a set of criteria in order to guide our investigation. We focused specifically on the following matters, as they would be central considerations in setting up a new centre:

- the nature of the centre (separate from or combined with undergraduate centres);
- the mandate and focus of the centre (faculty-specific or university-wide);
- the staffing (permanent and temporary, administrative/support or academic);
- the modes of delivery (face-to-face, online, blended, etc.);
- the resources available to students;
- the resources available to staff; and
- any existing or current research into postgraduate writing support hosted by or housed within the centre.

After the criteria had been set, a questionnaire was drawn up and sent out to a number of tertiary educational institutions throughout South Africa (Addendum A). The decision to utilise an open-ended questionnaire was made in order to allow for a rich variety of responses to be analysed qualitatively. We acknowledge that, due to the open-ended nature of the questions, gaps may exist in the data. As pointed out above, this article does not analyse the effectiveness of practices, but rather the operational structures. Lastly, it must be borne in mind that this data was collected in the middle of 2014 and so may not reflect current practices.

4. Overview of findings

This section presents a comprehensive discussion of our findings, structured according to the criteria set out under point 3.

4.1 Separate or combined centre

Six of the eleven researched postgraduate writing centres are combined. For example, University B's writing centre serves both undergraduate and postgraduate students and forms part of a centre for learning, teaching and academic development. This facility is closely aligned with a sister writing centre on the university's education campus. Other universities that run combined undergraduate and postgraduate writing centres are University A, which has a physical writing centre space that is used by students from all levels of study, and University K, which offers an integrated writing centre as part of a centre for language practice. Additionally, University E offers writing services to both undergraduate and postgraduate students at its academic literacy centres on its various campuses. Each of these centres offers a face-to-face research writing service for postgraduate students.

Some of these combined centres have strong affiliations with other postgraduate structures and services at their respective universities. For instance, University C's writing centre works in collaboration with, and is funded by, the university's umbrella postgraduate centre. Similarly, University H's postgraduate writing centre works closely with its postgraduate office and library.

Additional or special services for postgraduate students are highlighted by some of these combined centres: University A has a consultant available exclusively for postgraduate students weekly in the library's research commons and at the graduate business school. University H also provides postgraduate writing consultations weekly in the library's research commons.

A number of institutions (Universities D, G and F) operate separate undergraduate and postgraduate writing centres. However, University I and University J do not have postgraduate writing centres as such. Instead, University J employs a writing coach who only serves students from one particular school in the institution, while University I operates a writing support programme under the umbrella of a centre for postgraduate studies.

The chart below illustrates the integration of the researched postgraduate writing centres with undergraduate writing centres.

Separate or combined writing centre

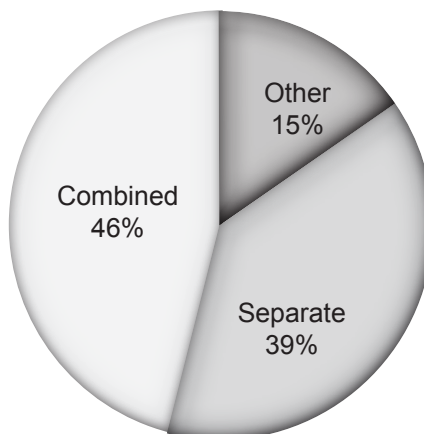


Figure 1: Separate or combined writing centre

Whether a postgraduate writing centre is combined with an undergraduate centre or is separate is highly dependent on respective internal university structures and on funding considerations. However, our overview suggests that the benefit of shared resources makes a strong case for a combined writing centre that caters to both undergraduate and postgraduate students. Separate or additional training for postgraduate writing consultants would surely be necessary and would need to be investigated further.

4.2 Mandate/focus of the writing centre

Students from all faculties and all levels of postgraduate studies can make use of the writing support offered at nine of the eleven investigated institutions. However, as mentioned above, at University J, postgraduate writing support is limited to students from the business school. Currently, University K's writing laboratory predominantly serves undergraduate students and thus postgraduate services are limited. It is clear from the collected data that the vast majority of postgraduate writing centres at these HAs offer support to students across all faculties at the university and at all levels of postgraduate study.

The emphasis of many postgraduate writing centres is on a “support system that is designed to be an ongoing one, which students can participate in throughout their postgraduate studies” (University I) and the “transferability of academic writing skills” (University A). Therefore, at University A, students are “encourage[d] to make use of the service continuously”. The focus of University D's writing centre seems to be similarly holistic, as the centre focuses on what a “postgraduate student does from point of registration to graduation”. In keeping with this general philosophy, University F points

out that they “do not work with a finished product [,] i.e. not proof reading [sic] or editing”, and the focus therefore seems to be on the nurturing and actual development of writing skills. Similarly, University A emphasises that they do not provide an editing service. This suggests a broadly conceptualised commitment to cognitive skills development at a number of institutions, rather than *ad hoc* language correction.

A few of the writing centres stress that they focus on all levels of writing and not just inexperienced writers. In order “to avoid the remedial stigma”, University B “present[s] [itself] as relevant to everyone in the University and offer[s] academic and creative writing support” and University A “believe[s] that all students can improve their writing, novices or experts, and therefore improved writers should not stop visiting the Centre”. Significantly, University D serves students “as well as emerging researchers/staff” while University H’s “Writing Laboratory wants to create an environment in which all students and staff of the [university], no matter what their status [and] their level of experience [,] can develop writing skills.” This is echoed in University I’s mandate for its writing programme, which aims “to move away from more deficit models ... to provide a more holistic and social-practice-based approach to academic writing”.

Table 1: Mandate/focus of the writing centre

Institution	All faculties	All levels	Limited services for postgrads	Selected Faculties
University A	√	√		
University B	√	√		
University C	√	√	√	
University D	√	√	√	
University E	√	√		
University F	√	√		
University G	√	√		
University H	√	√		
University I	√	√		
University J				Limited to the university's business school
University K	√	√	√	

From the information above it would seem that most universities favour a centralised hub for writing support, with many making the case that both students and staff from all faculties (in the case of the latter, likely to be developing researchers) should be welcome at writing centres. The main focus also seems to be on the development of research and writing skills, and not on technical aspects of preparing writing for final submission (that is, proofreading and editing).

4.3 Brief overview of staffing

University A, B and F all employ a programme coordinator and at least one administrative assistant on a full-time basis. While the coordinator at University I is full time, its administrator is on a part-time contract. In addition, University I employs a director on professorial level, whose position is jointly funded by the university and an outside entity. Some of the coordinators' full-time appointments at this institution are permanent while others are in temporary posts. The majority of writing centres that specified the qualification levels of staff indicated that a minimum of a master's degree was required for coordinator positions. University E has within the last two years switched from full-time fixed-term contract appointments to *ad hoc* temporary appointments.

Similarly, University C's coordinators must hold a master's degree, preferably in linguistics or language education. However, since this university's writing centre is divided into separate units which serve the different campuses, each of these units is headed by a full-time coordinator who is either employed permanently or on a three-year contract. As University H is officially a bilingual institution, two writing centre heads are employed, respectively for English and Afrikaans. Additionally, a workshop coordinator, an office manager/consultation coordinator, and an administrative officer are employed full time in the centre. It should be noted that at all universities, but especially at those that operate bilingually, changes in institutional language policies will need to be borne in mind as part of the planning and priorities of writing centres.

At some institutions, writing centre consultants are postgraduate students with a minimum of an honour's degree employed on a part-time basis (Universities A, B, C and H). At University D, two of the three consultants employed are retired professors. At the time that the questionnaire was sent out, the number of consultants employed ranged from 16 at Universities A and B, to 25 at University H and 36 consultants (assisted by seven postgraduate writing fellows) at University C. It should be noted that University A and University C emphasise that most of their consultants should be registered for a master's degree, while University E's writing centre consultants must already hold the minimum of a master's degree. Similarly, at University F, day-to-day support services are offered by 40 doctoral students. As indicated above, the majority of undergraduate and postgraduate writing centres are integrated and thus these staffing requirements reflect the writing centre as a whole, and not postgraduate writing consultants specifically.

The exceptions to this pattern are Universities K, I, J and G. As mentioned above, University K's postgraduate services are limited, and consequently consultants are not employed specifically for postgraduate consultations. The respondent from this institution

also mentions difficulty in finding consultants suitably qualified to assist postgraduate students. Some permanent academic staff members run workshops at University K for these students. Furthermore, University I does not employ consultants, but its writing support programme is serviced by the staff complement mentioned above. One full-time staff member is employed at University G and only one staff member is employed on a part-time basis at University J.

From this it would seem that the minimum requirement for postgraduate writing staff is an honour's degree. If the needs of doctoral students are also to be met, one would expect that some consultants would be required to hold a doctoral degree. However, it is clear that at some writing centres, staff with lower-level qualifications is expected to also assist students working towards completion of a doctoral thesis, a trend that would need to be arrested.

The appointment and line management of staff will be very dependent on internal university structures and funding models. It could be posited that the duration and type of appointment will have an impact on staff turnover, and, as will be noted further on, this may also influence the research output of postgraduate writing centres.

4.4 Modes of delivery

One-on-one, face-to-face consultations are the primary mode of delivery used by writing centres (see Table 2). Some writing centres also offer online assistance: Universities A, C, E, and F do this via e-mail and Skype; University K also uses e-mail responses with track changes or verbal feedback via Backchat (an online communication application), while University H uses Skype and an online writing platform. University B is in the process of developing an online service for postgraduate students.

University G's primary mode of delivery is through courses presented within the faculties. University I also emphasises the need to "embed writing support within the disciplines" and offers both generic and discipline-specific workshops to achieve this goal. These generic workshops series include respective workshops on postgraduate orientation, research design, and academic writing. Discipline-specific workshops are offered by the writing centre in conjunction with specialist academic staff.

Similarly, and as a supplement to face-to-face consultations, University A offers more general courses on topics such as writing a proposal or a literature review as well as specific workshops as requested by particular departments. These types of workshops are also given by the postgraduate writing centres at another six of the investigated institutions (Universities B, C, D, E, H, and K).

In addition to the modes of delivery already mentioned, University A offers blended learning opportunities through a partnered division that assists students with language development, and University K is in the process of developing a blended learning approach as well as an online writing lab. University C finds its e-mailed consultation system valuable for students who are not on campus or who are disabled. However,

blended learning pedagogies are yet to be fully explored by the majority of South African writing centres.

Writing circles or writing support groups are modes used by writing centres such as Universities A, I and H. Furthermore, University B expands the typical writing centre repertoire with writing retreats and literary festivals, which aligns with its all-inclusive approach mentioned above.

Table 2: Modes of delivery

Institution	Face-to-face	Online	Workshops	Other
University A	√	√ e-mail; Skype	√	Writing circles, blended learning
University B	√	In development	√	Writing retreat, literary festivals
University C	√	√ e-mail; Skype	√	Reading consultations, specialised consultations, support to students with special needs
University D	√		√	
University E	√	√ e-mail	√	
University F	√	√ e-mail, Skype		
University H	√	√ Skype, writing forum	√	Writing circles
University I			√	Writing circles
University J	√	√ e-mail		
University K	√	√ e-mail, Backchat	√	Developing online writing lab, blended learning

The prevalence of one-on-one and group face-to-face consultations suggests that this is the preferred mode of delivery for most writing centres across the sector. As communication technology has improved, it has become possible and necessary for postgraduate support to be extended to open and distance modes of e-learning. It would seem that no university writing support centre has yet fully explored online writing courses or even MOOCs (massive open online courses). This is possibly an area where inter-university cooperation could greatly benefit postgraduate students nationally, while optimising institutional resources. Support from academics working in specific disciplines

would be of great value in developing e-learning resources.

4.5 Resources available to students

As mentioned above, it would appear that one-on-one, face-to-face consultations are the most widely used resource at these writing centres. A few writing centres, such as University H and University E, require postgraduate students to make appointments and do not offer walk-in assistance, and University K also prefers that students make appointments.

Additionally, paper-based resources are available at most centres, with the centres showing differing levels of utilisation of this type of resource. University B, for example gives out “some hand-outs”, University F describes “an extensive collection of research related materials and books that can be accessed in the centre” while University A refers to a “host of paper-based resources”.

The use and accessibility of additional electronic learning resources is widespread at writing centres across the country. For instance, the paper-based resources, as well as workshop slides, are available online to students from University A through a student resource site. Similarly, University E adapts its paper-based resources for online use. Students from University D have access to online resources in the form of an online database, and University F offers its students online sources that deal with a variety of postgraduate writing topics. University G sends a monthly newsletter to its registered postgraduate students with tips and guidelines for writing. This could be a cost-effective intervention mechanism for continuous support. University K states that limited online resources are available for its postgraduate students, whereas University H directs its students to external online resources. University I makes workshop slides and task sheets available to students.

The need for different kinds of resources will vary greatly from institution to institution based on student demographics. The results show that the most widely-used resource is one-on-one, face-to-face consultations. However, as previously stated, we believe there is some value in exploring writing support via online teaching models.

4.6 Overview of resources available to consultants

The vast majority of postgraduate writing centres offer consultation and/or office space and access to telephones, the university library, computers and the internet. Coordinators generally have their own fully-equipped working spaces, although in some cases, facilitators may need to share computers and telephones. In addition, University B has its own small library and University E offers additional resources to facilitators, such as a text messaging service to advertise workshops and resources to students.

The resources available at a centre will yet again vary greatly depending on institutional funding models, needs, and type of staffing. Facilities such as computers and access

to the internet are essential if postgraduate students are to be offered blended learning modes and online resources.

4.7 Research by postgraduate writing centres

At the time that the questionnaires were completed, Universities B and G had consultants who were busy with doctoral research relating to postgraduate writing. Universities C, K, and H indicated that they had research projects underway. Articles have been published under the auspices of institutions A, C, and F. Additionally, University D stated that a student satisfaction survey had been conducted previously and that there were plans to repeat this at the end of 2014. University I was in the process of producing a reference booklet “offering a theoretical and practical overview of academic literacy in general and academic writing in particular” and a source book which will outline “best practice writing support initiatives” at the university.

The most comprehensive publication to date that deals with writing centres in South Africa is *Changing Spaces: Writing Centres and Access to Higher Education* (Archer and Richards, 2011). However, as we mention above, while the book features contributions from a number of individuals active in writing centres at universities across the country, the book has a decidedly undergraduate centre focus. Lucia Thesen and Linda Cooper have also published the findings of a research project in the book *Risk in Academic Writing: Postgraduate Students, their Teachers and the Making of Knowledge* (Multilingual Matters, 2013).

We believe that the production of research output in the area of postgraduate writing support would be greatly enhanced if writing centres were supported by personnel who form part of the academic division of the particular institution, as academic departments at all universities are mandated to conduct research on a regular basis. In addition, lower staff turnover and attractive remuneration and research benefits similar to those offered to academic teaching and research staff could attract talented and driven writing support experts who also have an interest in research in the field.

5. Towards a model for University X’s postgraduate writing centre

These observations informed the establishment of a pilot postgraduate writing centre at University X in 2015. Although this study suggests that an integrated undergraduate and postgraduate writing centre would be more practical, separate funding sources necessitated that University X’s postgraduate writing centre was established as a separate entity. Consequently a coordinator and three consultants were appointed. Following the findings from the study, the coordinator has a master’s degree and the consultants have a minimum of an honour’s degree, and are preferably registered for a master’s degree. All appointments are on a part-time basis with the coordinator on a

25 hour per week contract and the consultants employed using the three hour practical tariff. Consultants have received training in both generic postgraduate writing skills as well as training on specific faculty requirements. The centre's mandate is to serve all postgraduate students at all levels of study, with a strong emphasis on specific departments within both the natural sciences and economic management faculties that were identified for non-curricular postgraduate writing intervention. As such, the writing centre coordinator has worked closely with and built relationships with lecturers and supervisors from these departments. It has been encouraging to note that students at all levels of writing have made use of the services provided by the centre.

Consultation facilities with computer and internet access are shared with the undergraduate writing centre for practical reasons and due to funding constraints. In line with most of the writing centres investigated as part of this study, the main resource and mode of delivery is one-on-one, face-to-face consultations. Consultations are booked 48 hours in advance via e-mail. Additionally, the centre provides for Skype consultations for working postgraduate students who are not able to come for a consultation on campus. Currently, paper-based resources are used as a supplement to the face-to-face consultations, but are not used as a primary mode of delivery. Students are referred to reputable external internet sources when deemed necessary. The centre has also conducted a range of discipline-specific workshops which have mainly been a response to specific faculty needs and requests. The response from students, both in numbers, and positive written feedback requesting the expansion of the services of this postgraduate writing centre, further supports the model which has been implemented to date.

6. Conclusion

Postgraduate writing support has become an important goal for most South African universities. While we were only able to offer some insight into the practical aspects of postgraduate writing centres across South Africa, it is clear that the majority of institutions who participated in the study have significant formalised support for postgraduate centres, with many gesturing towards further growth and development. As acknowledged earlier in the article, our study, in its endeavour to investigate best practice at comparable institutions, did not include institutions categorised as historically disadvantaged by DHET. A necessary and urgent follow-up study would be to ascertain postgraduate writing support practices at these universities, particularly insofar as they must work within institutions facing a continued state of under-development that came as a result of inequalities entrenched by apartheid within the higher education landscape.

Most significantly, perhaps, further investigation is required into the effectiveness and success of the different modes of delivery, resources, pedagogical approaches, staffing models, etc. that are utilised at the various postgraduate writing centres around South Africa. Determining the success of particular practices could further direct the nature and activities of formalised postgraduate writing support.

Overall, this article indicates that writing centres that offer support to postgraduate students have become well established at a large number of South African universities. Our investigation has shown that postgraduate writing centres can further develop blended modes of delivery, while cooperation between different institutions may also deserve serious consideration.

The elements of best practice identified through this study have strongly informed the establishment of a formalised postgraduate writing support centre at University X. Through reflective consideration as well as further investigation and research, the nature, activities and offering of this writing centre – and other centres – can be further refined, improved and expanded to enable centres to respond effectively to the many writing challenges faced by its students.

References

- Archer, A. 2010. Challenges and potentials for Writing Centres in South African tertiary institutions. *South African Journal of Higher Education* 24(4): 495-510.
- Archer, A. & Richards, R. (Eds.) 2011. *Changing Spaces: Writing Centres and Access to Higher Education*. Stellenbosch: SUN PReSS.
- Burgoine, T., Hopkins, P., Rech, M.F. & Zapata, G.P. 2011. 'These kids can't write abstracts': Reflections on a postgraduate writing and publishing workshop. *Area* 43(4): 463- 469.
- Butler, G. 2009. The design of a postgraduate test of academic literacy: accommodating student and supervisor perceptions. *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* 27(3): 291-300.
- Butler, H.G. 2007. A framework for course design in academic writing for tertiary education. Unpublished PhD thesis. Pretoria: University of Pretoria.
- Cameron, J., Nairn, K. & Higgins, J. 2009. Demystifying Academic Writing: Reflections on Emotions, Know-How and Academic Identity. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 33(2): 269-284.
- Coffin, C., Curry, M.J., Goodman, S., Hewings, A., Lillis, T.M. & Swann, J. 2003. *Teaching Academic Writing: A Toolkit for Higher Education*. London: Routledge.
- Department of Higher Education and Training. 2014. *Report of the Ministerial Committee for the Review of the Funding of Universities*. Pretoria: Department of Higher Education and Training.
- Department of Higher Education and Training. 2016. *Statistics on Post-School Education and Training in South Africa: 2014*. Pretoria: Department of Higher Education and Training.

- Hill, G. 2007. Making the Assessment Criteria Explicit through Writing Feedback: A Pedagogical Approach to Developing Academic Writing. *International Journal of Pedagogies and Learning* 3(1): 59-66.
- University X. 2014. Undergraduate Curriculum Review: Executive Summary Report. Unpublished report: University X.
- Thesen, L. 2013. Risk in Postgraduate Writing: Voice, Discourse and Edgework. *Critical Studies in Teaching & Learning* 1(1): 103-122.
- Trimbur, J. 2011. Foreword. In: Archer & Richards (Eds.) 2011. *Changing Spaces: Writing Centres and Access to Higher Education*. Stellenbosch: SUN PReSS. pp. 1-3.
- Weideman, A. 2003. *Academic Literacy: Prepare to Learn*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- Weideman, A. 2013. Academic literacy interventions: What are we not yet doing, or not yet doing right? *Journal for Language Teaching* 47(2): 11-23.

Addendum A

Questionnaire

1. Does your postgraduate writing centre operate as a separate centre, or is it combined with your undergraduate services?
2. What is the mandate/focus of your writing centre? (Do you for instance serve students from all faculties, or only some faculties? Do you offer continuous support to postgraduate students at all stages of their studies/research?)
3. Could you give a brief overview of the staff that works within the writing centre? (Are they full-time or part-time? Do they work as academic or as support staff? What is the minimum qualifications and experience required? Is remuneration comparable to that offered to lecturers/support staff, or is an entirely different remuneration model utilised?)
4. What modes of delivery are used by the postgraduate writing centre? (Face-to-face, online, blended methods, etc.)
5. What resources does the writing centre offer its students? (Paper-based resources at the centre itself? Walk-in assistance by writing centre staff? Online resources?)
6. What resources does the writing centre offer its staff? (Access to offices, telephones, computers, email, internet, library, etc.)

7. Has the writing centre conducted any research on postgraduate writing, or are any such research projects currently underway?

Addendum B

Alphabetical anonymous list of participating institutions with contextual information (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2016:8)

Institution code	Descriptions of location	Number and types of faculties at institution	Total number of undergraduate students³	Total number of postgraduate students
A	Urban	7: Education; Economics; Engineering; Health Sciences; Humanities; Law; Science	15 969	8 968
B	Urban	5: Economics; Engineering; Health Sciences; Humanities; Law	21 661	10 719
C	Urban	9: Architecture and Design; Economics; Education; Engineering; Health Sciences; Humanities; Law; Management; Science	42 415	7 223
D	Urban	6: Applied Sciences; Economics; Education; Engineering; Health Sciences; Informatics and Design	31 233	1 831

-
4. This excludes those students categorised as occasional students; i.e. “students who are taking courses that are part of formally approved programmes, but who are not registered for a formal degree or diploma” (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2016: 8).

E	Urban	8: Accounting; Agriculture and Environmental Sciences; Economics; Education; Graduate Studies; Humanities; Law; Science, Engineering and Technology	273 135	41 085
F	Urban	7: Arts; Community and Health; Dentistry; Economics; Education; Law; Natural Science	16 159	4 423
G	Urban	7: Economics, Education, Humanities, Health Sciences, Law, Natural and Agricultural Sciences, Theology	22 757	6 812
H	Rural	10: Agricultural Sciences; Arts and Social Sciences; Economics; Education; Engineering; Law; Health Sciences; Military Science; Science; Theology	17 766	10 227
I	Rural	6: Education, Economics, Humanities, Law, Pharmacy, Science	5 152	2 307
J	Urban	4: Agriculture, Engineering, and Science; Health Sciences; Humanities; Law and Management Studies	32 655	11 626
K	Rural	5 on Campus A: Agriculture, Science and Technology; Economics; Education; Humanities; Law 8 on Campus B: Arts; Natural Sciences; Education; Economics; Law; Engineering; Health Sciences; Theology 2 on Campus C: Economics and Information Technology; Humanities	49 735	21 130

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Brenda Vivian

Unit for Academic Literacy, Faculty of Humanities, University
of Pretoria, Lynnwood Road, 0028 Hatfield

E-mail: brenda.vivian@up.ac.za

Brenda Vivian provides both curricular and non-curricular academic literacy support for all levels of students within the School of Public Administration at the University of Pretoria (UP). She was previously attached to the Unit for Academic Literacy at UP, where she was responsible for postgraduate writing support. Her current research area is postgraduate writing interventions with a particular interest in mature, part-time, and international students.

Reinhardt Fourie

Department of English Studies, College of Human Sciences,
University of South Africa, PO Box 392, 0003 Unisa

E-mail: fourir@unisa.ac.za

Reinhardt Fourie lectures literary theory and literature in the Department of English Studies at the University of South Africa (Unisa). He has also taught academic literacy and Afrikaans literature at the University of Pretoria. His current research focuses on comparative readings of English and Afrikaans literature.