

RESEARCH ARTICLE:

Envisioning a Reconceptualised Postgraduate Support in Research Writing Development for the Future: A Three-Legged Framework

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Abstract

The slow progress of postgraduate students in South African higher education institutions has been linked to a lack of preparedness at the undergraduate level, supervision practices and research writing skills of students. Academic departments and support units play a crucial role in facilitating the development of these students. However, the disconnect between the academic departments and writing centres is of great concern. The study aimed to determine how a collaborative student support initiative can be envisioned to assist postgraduate students in developing their research, academic writing and critical thinking skills. Drawing on the academic literacies lens that views writing and research as a social practice, the article reflects on postgraduate support, through collaborative engagement. The experiences of two academics, in introducing the Postgraduate Week initiative are presented. A lecturer in an academic department conceptualised this initiative. The implementation and facilitation were a collaboration involving this lecturer and the writing centre practitioner, in the same institution. Adopting an auto-ethnography reflective approach, the study interrogates reflections and practices analysed from individual journal entries. In line with auto-ethnography, the aim was to emancipate and transform staff and students so that they ripen as researchers. The paper highlights that interdisciplinary collaboration should be intentionally embedded and promoted to enhance students' research writing development whilst incorporating humanising pedagogy and the lived experiences of university staff members. The article argues for pertinent opportunities for alternate ways to support postgraduate students. A Three-Legged framework is proposed, to highlight the importance of integrated tripartite postgraduate student support.

Keywords: academic writing; online teaching; postgraduate support; three-legged framework; writing centres

Introduction

Writing is an important skill necessary for academic access and success in higher education undergraduate and postgraduate studies. At the postgraduate level, writing is an integral part of the research process where students require the necessary research skills to create knowledge (Healey and Jenkins, 2009). Academic writing happens for a specific purpose and within a particular genre across disciplines (Deane and O'Neill, 2011; Lea and Street, 1998). Cotterall (2011) asserts that academic writing in postgraduate studies equips and exposes students to research discourse. At the postgraduate level, students build new knowledge through academic writing (Wilmot and Lotz-Sisitka, 2016). The function of writing within postgraduate studies is therefore socialisation and enculturation of students into discourse communities (Wellington, 2010). Academic writing is thus a skill that students need to acquire when negotiating postgraduate studies (Lea, 2005). Postgraduate students must learn disciplinary writing conventions to become competent scholarly writers who can contribute to the field of research (Cotterall, 2011).

However, postgraduate students face numerous challenges, particularly in South African higher education institutions (Cloete, 2016) as the postgraduate landscape in South Africa is a transforming academic environment

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(Okeke-Uzodike, 2021). Postgraduate students are mostly the first university generation and struggle to write the required documents from the proposal stage to the final thesis stage. Many students at the postgraduate level encounter difficulties in mastering academic writing conventions and struggle to meet the research writing requirements (Schulze and Lemmer, 2017). These students find research writing a daunting task and lack the critical language skills required for the research process (Chokwe, 2011). Student-writing practices tend to be influenced by the language students are exposed to within the discipline discourse. This general proficiency and expected potential as some of the studies have shown that academic unpreparedness and lack of critical reading and writing for research purposes are the contributing factors to students' academic writing challenges (Pineteh, 2014). According to Archer and Parker (2016), poor academic writing practices emanate largely from the general downturn in student literacy standards. Other challenges include slow progress in postgraduate studies due to factors such as lack of preparedness for postgraduate studies at the undergraduate level, supervision practices, social injustice and lack of understanding regarding what is expected at this level as per national and institutional policies (Conway, 2011; Maasdorp and Holtzhausen, 2015; DHET, 2014). Most postgraduate students struggle with the conceptualisation of research (Ravichandran *et al.*, 2017). In addition, postgraduate students, supervisors and researchers had to endure numerous challenges during lockdowns (Dawood and van Wyk, 2021) whilst working in isolated environments, due to the closure of universities.

Despite these challenges faced by postgraduate students, most of the academic support is mainly offered to undergraduate students (Paideya and Bengesai, 2017). As such, insufficient attention is afforded to postgraduate students. Furthermore, there are different perceptions of what students need to know and the reality of students' academic writing abilities from undergraduate to postgraduate level (Clarence and Dyson, 2017). A handful of studies have highlighted writing challenges faced by postgraduate students (Jomaa and Bidin, 2017; McKenna, 2010; Singh, 2019). These studies reveal that students often struggle to produce acceptable research work from the proposal stage. In addition, anecdotal evidence from postgraduate supervisors has also confirmed these challenges and linked them to students' lack of academic support within and outside of the discipline. However, there is a paucity of studies focusing on what collaborative strategies can be implemented to support students and enable their writing development. This study seeks to ignite the discussion towards envisioning collaborative student support initiatives aimed at mitigating challenges experienced by postgraduate students when embarking on their postgraduate studies. The current study foregrounds the student-centred approach that is premised on the social practice pedagogy of research writing (Lea and Street, 2006). This is grounded on the fact that postgraduate students need to be supported and socialised in research writing. The postgraduate support initiative is further premised on allocating a local meaning to humanistic pedagogy (Zinn *et al.*, 2016) in postgraduate supervision which prioritises the view that students are human beings to be supported as individuals. These frameworks provided analytical space for understanding collaborative postgraduate student support within the socio-cultural context in research writing practices, and especially how these contribute to transforming students into becoming researchers.

The study is guided by these two critical questions:

1. How can an online postgraduate student support initiative be envisioned to explore the role of collaborative support in research writing development?
2. What are the reflections and experiences of two university academics on introducing an online collaborative postgraduate student support initiative?

Literature Review

To understand the challenges of postgraduate students in the South African Higher Education context, it is critical to first unpack the historical background of the South African higher education system. Prior to 1994, qualifications in former Technikons focused mainly on master-servant approach knowledge where the focus was to prepare students for employment (DHET, 2014). There was minimal focus on developing research skills, knowledge generators and academic writing. This resulted in students embarking on postgraduate studies lacking experience in critical thinking, research, academic writing, production of new knowledge or proposing solutions to problems as is now expected through recent national policies. Furthermore, the academic writing skills of students were not fully developed and yet writing is a skill to be developed (Wilmot, 2018), to assist students to grow as researchers (Lee and Murray, 2015). Since the 1994 political transition, South African higher education has presented varied changes, in structure and system, to align itself with global higher education settings. However, in its presentation,

Higher Education of South Africa (HESA, 2014) noted challenges in postgraduate success and graduation rates, particularly for black South African students.

The South African higher education transformation that resulted in the merging of higher education institutions post 1994, is grounded on the dehumanisation of black South Africans. This results in the education system that oppresses and treats black students as secondary, through adopted teaching and supervision strategies. This is evident from the type of knowledge that is promoted, and acknowledged, how the knowledge is generated and who is deemed as 'legitimate' for generating the knowledge. For instance, the language for teaching, learning and research at the university is English which is a second language for most students. Students who are not proficient in the academic language being used in universities, learn that they are not intelligent and that they have little to contribute towards knowledge construction (Ndawo, 2019). They become disadvantaged when they enter English medium (Hove and Nkamta, 2017) universities, even at the postgraduate studies level where they mostly must write in English and a 'thesis language' as guided by their supervisors. Academic and research writing can, therefore, be a manifestation of the broader students' challenges of students in higher education (Boughey and Niven, 2012). Students, therefore, having enrolled in their postgraduate studies, are required to demonstrate proficiency in academic writing discourse as well as build upon effective research writing. There are also challenges associated with different treatment of genders and races (Idahosa and Mkhize, 2021). Furthermore, most postgraduate students found research writing challenging especially for students with English as an additional language (Paré, 2019). It is of concern that social injustice and exclusions were further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic as another contributing factor to challenges faced by some postgraduate students (Dawood and van Wyk, 2021). There is no adequate support for these students to deal with these challenges. As such, Manyike (2017) has recommended the integration of the development of research practices in the curricula, to meet these basic academic research needs. However, in the absence of this, there is reliance on individualistic postgraduate support initiatives.

Literature on postgraduate research support has focused on the supervision experiences of postgraduate students and supervisors (Oparinde, 2021; Netshitangani and Machaisa, 2021). Postgraduate supervision is important in growing the research capacity and the reputation of the institution (Okeke-Uzodike, 2021). One of the strategies for improving quality in postgraduate studies is paying attention to supervision pedagogies, with the aim of ascertaining which pedagogy is suitable for a particular context. In addition, there should be a focus on enablers and constraints in supervision and the availability of supervision development programmes (Guerin *et al.*, 2015). This is particularly because, academics work in demanding roles of juggling undergraduate teaching, research postgraduate supervision and engagement. Moreover, supervisor workloads and better engagement between students and supervisors are crucial in a postgraduate journey. The supervisor-student relationship is a cornerstone (Okeke-Uzodike, 2021) and yet boundaries are complex but can also influence postgraduate studies (Hodza, 2007; Parker-Jenkins, 2016) and student progress. A misfit between the supervisor and student, when allocating supervisors can lead to the student feeling unsupported and thus negatively impact progress.

Focusing on supervision only as one of the academic support strategies available at the postgraduate level is insufficient, taking into consideration, the increasing number of challenges faced by students and supervisors of postgraduate studies. According to Boughey and McKenna (2016), students at the postgraduate level should be inducted to adjust to changing identities and take ownership of their research. There is also a need to cater for the diverse research writing needs of postgraduate students (Joseph-Jeyaraj *et al.*, 2022) and how these needs can be met. However, McKenna (2010) asserts that the lack of academic support for students to access disciplinary discourse leads to poor performance in higher education. Thus, Khumalo and Reddy (2021) emphasise that it is crucial to substantiate supervision with other collaborative initiatives such as intentionally distributing information to students related to what is expected from them in terms of writing. There is an emerging consensus that deems it necessary for postgraduate students to be socialised into institutional research writing practices for them to succeed in their postgraduate studies (Schulze and Lemmer, 2017). Therefore, collaborative academic support particularly at a postgraduate level is vital to students' development and construction of new knowledge within a particular research field. Yet, there seems to be a lack of such collaborative initiatives.

Theoretical Framework

Lea and Street (2006) affirm that a better framework recognises students' research development within specific academic contexts. This study focuses on collaborative support in research writing development through two proposed frameworks to enhance the postgraduate education experience within a South African University of

Technology. Drawing on firstly the Academic Literacies framework that views writing as a social practice (Lea and Street, 2006; Lillis, 2001). Within this framework, research writing development is more effective when embedded within the discipline. Thus, postgraduate supervisors play a critical role in socialising students in the research discourse in collaboration with other support units. The notion of the social practice of research writing development foregrounds collaborative engagement and interaction with different communities of practice when constructing knowledge (Green, 2016). These communities of practice in the higher education sector could be writing centre practitioners, librarians, language editors, statisticians and computer technicians. The social practice framework challenges the current referral-only practice by supervisors when they refer students to the writing centre for assistance. Within the social practice pedagogy, students engage with their supervisors, peers, and other available academic support collaboratively. This is because socialisation to postgraduate studies not only entails acculturation into the research norms and expectations of distinct social systems but also research writing competence.

The second framework that this study is premised on is the humanising pedagogy (Salazar, 2013) that foregrounds students as critical and radical participants in transforming teaching and learning. Humanising pedagogy has the potential to be transformative and to build support where required, instead of academics focusing on power relationships between themselves and students (Zinn *et al.*, 2016). Within the humanising pedagogy, what is important is to meet regularly, communicate, listen, and adopt mutual decision-making (Zinn *et al.*, 2016). This is particularly because when students enter university, they come with different experiences and knowledge that serve as the foundation to engage and create new knowledge (Farikah, 2019) and these need to be acknowledged. This pedagogical transformation provides a premise for establishing a research support initiative that treats postgraduate students as individuals with diverse needs and challenges. Govender and Alcock (2020) advocate for a responsive writing centre practice that underpins humanistic pedagogy. Drawing from their assertion, the holistic development of research writing is autonomous and therefore students at the postgraduate level play an active role in their learning process (Govender and Alcock, 2020). From our academic experiences, the development of a humanising research support programme was key to enhancing postgraduate support. It was crucial to reflect on the postgraduate support through the humanising lens to understand students' research challenges and needs. Both the academic literacies framework and the humanising pedagogy were instrumental in crafting the research questions of the study, aimed at collaborative support and foregrounding the experiences of the authors whilst envisioning this initiative.

Methodology

The study adopted an auto-ethnographic, intending to make a scholarly contribution (Chang, 2016). The study involved two staff members working at the Durban University of Technology (DUT), Midlands Campus in South Africa. Qutshi (2015) alludes to the benefit of auto-ethnographic research as that of emancipating and transformation. These are crucial in the South African higher education sector which is still transforming from undergraduate level to postgraduate level, to redress the imbalances of the past associated with suppressing Blacks. Therefore, the study is premised on the emancipatory paradigm. Auto-ethnography was used to analyse and interpret the experiences (Chang, 2016) of the two authors regarding the introduction of the collaborative postgraduate student support initiative. Data was collected using journal entries and peer discussions between the two authors. Author one, Dr Dongwe is a black female lecturer and postgraduate coordinator in the Department of Finance and Information Management. She teaches Undergraduate Research (UR), as well as Transformation and Change Management. In her role as the postgraduate coordinator, she is responsible for assuring and enhancing the quality of postgraduate studies in the department. This ranges from assuring that the university processes are adhered to. She has taken this role further by identifying common challenges faced by students and implementing student support initiatives at the departmental level. The department offers two postgraduate qualifications: Master of Management Sciences in Administration and Information Management as well as the Doctor of Philosophy in Business and Information Management. Author two, Dr Khumalo is a black female writing centre practitioner, based at the same campus. She is responsible for supporting students and staff in developing their academic and research writing for undergraduate and postgraduate. The writing centre offers one-to-one and group consultation, and discipline-specific workshops that are responsive to students' writing needs. Writing centres are safe spaces where students are initiated into and mentored to deal with the complexities of academic and disciplinary communities (Shabanza, 2019). Since 2015, the writing centre has been collaborating with different academic departments on the development of academic and research writing practices, however, these have been mostly at the undergraduate level.

In this paper, data was in the form of reflections written in a journal regarding our experiences in implementing and facilitating the postgraduate week initiative, which was executed for the first time in the department in 2022. Discussions between the two authors were also incorporated as data. As academic practitioners and postgraduate supervisors, this reflexivity meant thinking deeply about how we have been supporting students at the postgraduate level. Reflexivity can assist in dealing with self-doubt (Kirk and Lipscombe, 2019), thus laying a solid foundation for growth. This is in line with Cohen *et al.*, s' (2011) assertion that the aim of the researcher within the emancipatory paradigm is the emancipation of individuals and groups through research and the creation of knowledge that allows critical reflection towards emancipation and social justice. Hence, Reflexivity is increasingly being used in academic research (Okeke-Uzodike, 2021). Through our reflections, we hope to transform our postgraduate support model and purposefully support students at the postgraduate level. This study reflects on the collaborative support initiative through the postgraduate week program between the academic department and the writing centre.

In 2019, both Dr D and Dr K attended the course, Strengthening Postgraduate Supervision (SPS) to learn about postgraduate supervision. As both novice postgraduate supervisors, this course provided an opportunity to learn about different supervision approaches and a space for a support network with colleagues from other institutions of higher learning. Against the backdrop of completing the SPS course, prepared us for the re-envisioning of the postgraduate educational experience for the future. We engaged in self-reflexivity to illuminate the academic challenges of postgraduate students to offer more effective and responsive postgraduate support (Pithouse-Morgan *et al.*, 2009). Data was generated through our reflections using journals provided by the institution at the beginning of each year. Journaling started from the conceptualisation to the implementation of the Postgraduate Week Program, from June to September 2022. The reflective journals aimed to document ideas and thoughts (Dongwe and Zulu, 2022). To adjust to changing identities and take ownership of their research, the journal entries were reviewed and analysed inductively by both authors, to document the trajectory, challenges and benefits of implementing the Postgraduate Week Program at the departmental level in 2022. The findings from the current study were drawn from the reflections of the two researchers, the reflections from both authors provide insights into the challenges faced by postgraduate students and the strategies they used to overcome them. These reflections were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006). Thereafter the reflections were coded under the two themes: Intentionality and notable progress. These findings were presented at the Durban University of Technology (DUT) Learning and Teaching Imbizo in November 2022. Through this support program, we aim to contribute to the postgraduate support discourse that foregrounds interdisciplinary collaborative initiatives.

Revitalising Postgraduate studies at the Departmental level through the introduction of the Postgraduate Week Program

With the introduction of the Postgraduate Week Program, academic departments can revitalise postgraduate studies, making them more responsive to students' writing needs and more impactful. It can become a cornerstone event that enhances the overall academic experience and prepares postgraduate students for both academic and professional success. The experiences of two academics in introducing the Postgraduate Week initiative are presented below.

Dr D: A Postgraduate Supervisor, Coordinator and Undergraduate Lecturer

Attending the SPS Course, enabled me to pause and reflect on my current practices. This was in line with the different identities I occupy, which are black South African Female Academic, Higher Education Scholar, Postgraduate Supervisor, Postgraduate Coordinator and undergraduate Lecturer. It became evident that my practices have been largely informed by how I understood postgraduate supervision and coordinator based on my experiences as a student and what has been practised in the department. After reflecting, I intentionally resolved to the adoption of a humanistic approach to postgraduate studies. Based on my lecturer and supervisor's identity, it became evident to me that there is a huge gap between what is taught at the undergraduate level to national and institutional expectations at the postgraduate level. Therefore, the current one-on-one supervision model was inadequate to bridge this gap as students were still struggling with their writing. These were indicative of socially unjust undergraduate and postgraduate studies and more concerning dehumanisation of students at the postgraduate level which I had also experienced as a student, thus prompting a need to reflect on to what extent my current practices as a lecturer, postgraduate supervisor and postgraduate coordinator are further perpetuating the social injustice and dehumanisation and what changes need to be implemented. After attending the course, I questioned to what extent have I focused on supervisory development (Guerin *et al.*, 2015), holistic student

development and whether students are aware of expectations, procedures and policies. Although there were various pressures which could have continued to dictate how I ought to supervise and coordinate, self-studying my practices, revealed a need for improvement. Focusing on myself first, enabled me to reflect on my current supervision strategies to effect improvement, to emancipate myself and my students, towards becoming renowned scholars in a particular field or discipline. This further gave rise to a need for me to exercise vulnerability and share the struggles I experienced as a student. Further, this enabled me to grow as a supervisor and postgraduate coordinator and to evolve into a change agent and innovator during the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the first postgraduate week in the department.

The completion of the SPS course coincided with the end of semester one for the teaching, learning, supervision and coordination which was all conducted online, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The transition to postgraduate studies, epistemological access and students' success are regarded as a complex process which this study is trying to address with different postgraduate support interventions such as the establishment of the Postgraduate Week Program initiative. Taking into consideration the lack of postgraduate support programs, these students were severely affected. We noted the challenges they experienced due to transitioning from face-to-face to online supervision. That meant that the research proposal defence, supervision meetings and consultations with the writing centre practitioner were conducted online using the MS Teams platform. As academics, we had to reconceptualise our postgraduate student support practices to ensure that students were still supported and making progress in their postgraduate studies. We had to be adaptive and intentional about how our collaborative support was responsive to students' research needs.

Donnelly and Politis (2021) in an Irish context, reflected on how undergraduate students were affected in their learning of research and supervision of their projects during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, in the South African context, post focusing on my online teaching of undergraduate research modules during lockdowns (Dongwe and Zulu, 2022), I decided to plan the very first Postgraduate Week Program. The planning and implementation were during the first week of semester one (18 – 21 July 2022). I was fully aware that the information I have been exposed to from the SPS course, on how best to reflect on supervision practices and how to support postgraduate students, should be transferred into practice and communicated using various platforms. Okeke-Uzodike (2021) emphasises the importance of formal and informal communication in postgraduate studies. Communication between students and supervisors is critical in research development and in eliminating possible miscommunications and variations in purpose (Åkerlind and McAlpine, 2017). Firstly, the planning of the postgraduate week was communicated to all staff, during a departmental meeting. Secondly, I distributed the first draft of the schedule of events as a Postgraduate Coordinator and Departmental Research Committee (DRC) Chair to all DRC staff members for comments. Upon not receiving any comments from the DRC staff members, the schedule of events was considered final. Thirdly a writing centre practitioner (Dr K) was formally invited to be part of the program. The aim of the interdisciplinary collaboration with the writing centre was to develop a research writing support programme for postgraduate students. In line with the academic literacies' framework, which is premised on social practice pedagogy (Lea and Street, 2006). Therefore, Dr K argues that research writing support is more effective when using the 'built-in' approach through interdisciplinary collaboration where learning is developed holistically within the discipline (Wingate, 2012). In the context of this study, we argue that postgraduate students need to be intentionally supported and socialised to the research writing discourse. The Postgraduate Week Program was structured to focus on holistic support initiatives for our postgraduate students. This considers expectations from the policy level to the expected behaviour of postgraduate students. Day two focused on the research writing development from the research proposal to the thesis stage, as well as the benefits of postgraduate support for the student's academic success and completion of their postgraduate studies. Table 1 reflects the schedule of events focusing on the first three days. The last two days were dedicated to research writing and student engagement with the supervisor and writing centre practitioner.

Table 1: Postgraduate 2022, week structure

DAY 1	DAY 2	DAY 3
Unpacking the expectations	Collaborative Session on developing writing skills	Peer Support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Welcome and Introduction of staff and students Purpose of Postgraduate Week 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Writing centre aim Academic and research writing support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Peer support Students sharing survival tips at postgraduate studies

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roles and Responsibilities of Students and Supervisors. • National policies regarding the postgraduate qualifications • Institutional policies, processes and forms • Consequences for not adhering to policies and procedures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common writing challenges faced by students • One-on-one tutorials and workshops • Tutor and student engagements • Writing centre and supervisor expectations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Postgraduate student support group
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Source: Authors own compilation and presentation

The postgraduate week also served as a social safe space for students, to support each other. This was to allow them to discuss their postgraduate journeys, with those who have submitted their thesis for examination, initiating the discussions. Students were encouraged to discuss challenges and share tips on how they dealt with these challenges, thus foregrounding emotional support. This is premised on the seminal work of Garrison *et al.* (2000) which postulates that social presence is crucial in online interactions when participants present themselves as real people.

From the engagement with students who participated in the collaborative Postgraduate Week Program, it was evident from their evaluations that the support initiative was beneficial and offered a safe environment for critical engagement. Students indicated a positive attitude towards this initiative and construed this community of practice as very beneficial. The results indicated that students appreciated the collaborative student-centred approach of the program. They highlighted that the postgraduate journey can be daunting and very lonely, they will now engage with each other and the writing centre when developing their research chapters. Following this initiative, we have noted an increase in student engagement between postgraduate students, supervisors and the writing centre practitioners. This has culminated in students returning postgraduate forms (proposals, and thesis chapters) sooner as compared to previous three to four months intervals, post receiving comments from supervisors. Before the initiative, students were not responding to comments and feedback from supervisors in a timely way. The postgraduate week initiative was therefore beneficial due to the following observations as a postgraduate supervisor and coordinator:

- Received draft research proposals and chapters from students.
- Students requesting and setting up supervision meetings.
- The positive response from the evaluations

Further to this, Dr K indicated that more postgraduate students are engaging in the writing centre. The postgraduate student support initiative was also crucial in assisting students to complete their postgraduate qualifications within a minimum time. It was fulfilling to note the attendance of postgraduate students from other academic Departments. They appreciated the engagements and information shared. Dr K noted a significant increase in the number of postgraduate students' bookings at the writing centre. Through email engagements, postgraduates were able to submit their draft chapters for critical feedback before submitting them to their supervisors. However, we reflected on what needs improvement to ensure that postgraduate support puts students' interests and needs at the centre of the initiative. Since the postgraduate week was conducted online, there was a lack of facial expressions which could be recognised during face-to-face engagements. Thus, it was challenging to elaborate on various issues as there were no students' facial expressions, indicating confusion and discontent. Furthermore, there was limited engagement as some students did not ask any questions during this online event. A similar concern was noted by Donnelly and Politis (2021) in that during online engagements it is difficult to gauge students' understanding and feelings through their body language and facial expressions. It was clear from the evaluations that there was a need for supervisors to be part of the event. This may be due to various factors such as exorbitant workloads during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since they are directly involved with students, supervisors are critical for the sustainability of the support network. The authors acknowledge that the suggestion for supervisors to be part of the event may have an ancillary impact and change the dynamic in the consultation between students and the writing centre, in which the students may feel inhibited during the consultation. It is however envisaged that this change in dynamics would not immensely jeopardise the outcome of the consultation.

Dr K: A Writing Centre Practitioner and Postgraduate Supervisor

Drawing from our perspectives and experiences as postgraduate supervisors, we argue that research writing support is critical in socialising postgraduate students in the research discourse. Postgraduate education and supervision practices are thus central to knowledge production. As such, Dr K argues that research writing support initiatives play an important role in developing research identities. Effective postgraduate support is therefore vital in the development of research writing and socialising students to new research disciplinary discourse. The current study reflects on how postgraduate support is conceptualised between the academic Department and the writing centre through a research support initiative. Since the writing centre supports students from undergraduate to postgraduate, the initiative sheds light on how best to support research writing development. Within the writing centre space, the writing development focuses on the student writer. In this space, students are afforded learning opportunities to experiment with different genres, without being judged (Archer and Richards, 2011). Dr K asserts that postgraduate students engage with different communities of practice when researching, thus ensuring the development of research writing skills. According to Manjeya (2021), the writing centre is a space of critical engagement where ideas and disconnected thoughts are structured. Dr K engages with academic staff in integrating academic and research support into the discipline. Writing centres as collaborative learning spaces play an important role in facilitating the development of academic and research writing. Within the writing centre space, this has meant reconceptualising how supervisors engage with postgraduate students in their critical reading, thinking and research writing by developing new support strategies. It is largely as a response to such challenges and recommendations that several postgraduate support programmes such as the writing centre and postgraduate week initiatives have emerged, to augment some of the research practices required by postgraduate students. Understanding that postgraduate students' needs and challenges differ, the postgraduate week initiative was crucial in fostering and enhancing academic support that is responsive to students' needs.

From the study findings, it can be noted that the social practice pedagogy that informed the support initiative, only focused on policies and students' research writing development. What this intervention did not tackle sufficiently is the postgraduate supervision support framework that includes all the stakeholders (Students, Supervisors, and Academic Support units including the library practitioners, as they are key when students search for literature). The role of transdisciplinary learning in scholarly writing development is critical in ensuring quality research output (Åkerlind and McAlpine, 2017). Thus, strengthening collaboration between academic departments and support units enhances research writing practices. Writing centres focus on critical thinking, and academic and research writing development by utilising different pedagogies and theoretical underpinnings (Clarence, 2017). Discipline supervisors, on the other hand, focus on critical thinking, structure of the argument and that the student is adhering to the standards of a qualification. The authors noted the communication disconnect between postgraduate supervisors and writing centre staff. During the postgraduate week, supervisors did not attend the 2022 online programme or offer input on the support initiative. The implications of this will still need to be determined and may constitute grounds for future research based on this finding. However, the findings point to the need to devise approaches towards sensitising research supervisors on the need to participate in such support initiatives going forward.

The Proposed Three-Legged Framework and Implications for Future Plans

Arising from these findings, the study recommended the introduction of postgraduate support initiatives to other academic Departments to ensure the progress of students and sustainability. The adoption of the postgraduate week program as a yearly event within departments and faculties will contribute positively to postgraduate students' experiences. The study will influence the policies and processes on the current postgraduate registration trends, which currently is a long tedious process. Currently, the registration takes the entire first semester and involves the approval of concept notes, provisional titles and allocation of supervisor/s prior to orienting the student. Therefore, the study proposes the postgraduate week event be scheduled for the second semester of the academic year. This will take into consideration the involvement of all the stakeholders that contribute to students' experiences at the postgraduate level. When implementing student support initiatives, strategies must be intentionally implemented to further enhance the engagement of students with supervisors and facilitators. As the humanising pedagogy postulates, what is important is to meet regularly, communicate, listen, and adopt mutual decision-making (Zinn *et al.*, 2016). This can be achieved using various instruments to obtain feedback from students such as creating an online space, for example, Padlet or MS Team platforms for students to engage and ask questions, as they progress in their research journey and notice progress and lack thereof. In line with social theory, the study proposes a Three-Legged complementary framework to support postgraduate students.

In the context of this study, we therefore propose a new framework, the Three-Legged framework as a complementary framework to enhance postgraduate supervision support. The Three-Legged framework is premised on transdisciplinary learning that emphasises collaborative engagement between different stakeholders (McGregor, 2017). For the effective development of research writing practices, the framework is in three dimensions (Joseph-Jeyaraj *et al.*, 2022) presented in Figure 1. These dimensions are postgraduate students, supervisors, and academic support staff. The postgraduate support framework foregrounds a collaborative approach rather than the current disconnected and isolated postgraduate supervision. Academic support practitioners engage directly or indirectly with postgraduate students and supervisors in the development of research writing. Academic support units such as writing centres and libraries have an integral role to play as an incubator for students. They ensure that students are effectively supported to mitigate any academic challenges. The Interdisciplinary collaboration with discipline experts and supervisors can ensure synergy in research development support and successful postgraduate completion. These continuous engagements with all stakeholders will assist in the sharing of good practices and knowledge development through research.

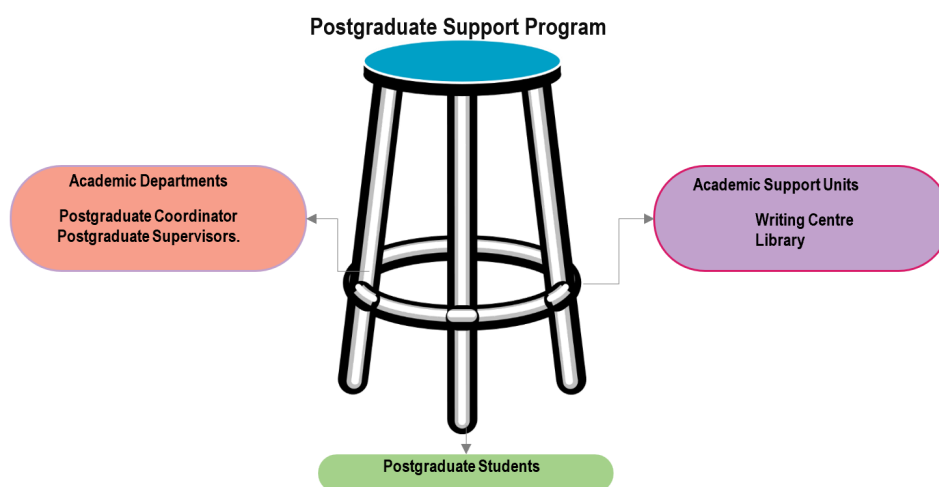


Figure 1: The Three-Legged Framework for supporting postgraduate research writing
Source: Authors own compilation and presentation

Conclusion

Working towards epistemic access, success, social inclusion and a humanistic approach to postgraduate studies, this paper presented the interdisciplinary collaborative initiative in supporting postgraduate students. We propose the shift from the current one-on-one supervision and writing centre consultations to intentional collaborative support practices for the development of postgraduate students that are responsive to students' research writing needs. We highlighted the benefits of intentionally providing a nurturing safe environment for postgraduate students to engage with staff and to formulate relationships with peers. As postgraduate supervisors, we reflected on the SPS course that inducted us into the postgraduate supervision discourse. We hold the view that our role as academics is beyond ensuring alignment between policies, processes and practices but to contribute to the transformation of the student for a better future. Thus, it was imperative to reflect on the factors that negatively impact student progress at the postgraduate level to offer effective and responsive support to students' needs. Postgraduate support initiatives are critical in influencing and shaping supervision practices. Therefore, we believe that it is our role to bridge the gap between academic departments and support units through collaborative engagements which can yield visible progress. The study offers insight for postgraduate students, supervisors and academic support practitioners on the new emerging trends in how students are supported at the postgraduate level for an envisioned future higher education.

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Declarations

Interdisciplinary Scope: The article demonstrates an interdisciplinary scope by integrating insights from consumer law, economics, and social sciences to analyse, from a social justice paradigm, the challenges faced by socio-economically disadvantaged consumers in South Africa, emphasising the role of consumer legislation in addressing these issues.

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