

Chapter Six

A Reflection on Curricular and Non-curricular Writing Support for Postgraduate Students in the School of Public Management and Administration

Brenda Vivian, University of Pretoria

Introduction

South Africa's National Development Plan 2030 (NDP) includes quantifiable targets for higher education institutions, namely a 25 per cent graduation rate by 2030 (South African Government 2012: 278). More specifically, part of the NDP's 2030 vision is to '[a]chieve the target of 100 Ph.D. graduates per million per year, [this would mean that] South Africa needs more than 5000 Ph.D. graduates per year...' (South African Government 2012: 278). These national objectives are in line with the University of Pretoria's commitment to increasing postgraduate offerings and output as articulated in UP's Strategic Plan – 2025 (2011: 9):

137

Postgraduate research students are a major engine for producing new knowledge. The future emphasis will therefore fall on research students – Master's, Doctoral and Post-Doctoral students – through active recruitment strategies and appropriate academic and financial support. In addition, attention will be devoted to providing a high quality environment and study programmes to enable postgraduate success.

By way of contributing to the University's goals, the SPMA currently offers one Honours programme, two Master's programmes (a Masters in Public Administration and Policy [MAdmin] degree and a coursework Masters in Public Administration [MPA]) and two doctoral programmes (a Ph.D. in Public Management and Administration and a Ph.D. in Public Policy). Typically, the SPMA's postgraduate students are individuals who work in the public sector and attend modules structured as block sessions. The School's degrees attract students from South Africa and a number of other

African countries such as Ghana, Kenya, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. This is also in line with the University's objective to increase its number of regional and international postgraduate students (UP Strategic Plan 2025 [2011: 16]).

Maluleka and Ngoepe (2018: 1) posit that the growing need for postgraduate qualifications reflects 'the demand on the part of current economies for a highly knowledgeable workforce'. The researchers go on to cite MacGregor (2013) who suggests that the need for postgraduates is due to retiring professionals leaving gaps in the market. These comments equally apply to the public sector and also intersect with the call for the professionalisation of the public sector in South Africa. The National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector (South African School of Government 2022) was drawn up as a response to achieving chapter 13 of NDP 2030's objective of building a capable and developmental state through '[a] professional public service ... where people are recruited and promoted on the basis of merit and potential, rather than connections or political allegiance.' Postgraduate degrees will enhance the professionalisation of the public sector.

The SPMA is uniquely positioned to contribute to the NDP goals of increased graduates, increased number of Ph.D. degrees, the internationalisation of higher education as well as the professionalisation of the public sector. In order to achieve these goals, it is imperative to provide postgraduate students with the support needed to achieve these objectives.

The chapter uses a mixed-methods approach to reflect on the curricular and non-curricular postgraduate writing interventions in the SPMA. Data will be used quantitatively to assess one of the SPMA's curricular postgraduate writing interventions (for the MPA research module NME 801) while qualitative data will be used to assess one of the SPMA's non-curricular postgraduate writing strategies, namely the student-supervisor-language coach model. The objective of using this approach is to identify strengths and weaknesses in the SPMA's postgraduate support offerings and to suggest ways to strengthen the SPMA's curricular and non-curricular postgraduate writing programmes.

Background to postgraduate writing support in South Africa

One of the ways to achieve the above-mentioned national and institutional goals could be by supporting postgraduate writing. The problem in developing postgraduate academic literacy support is seen in this chapter as threefold: assumptions regarding the writing skills of postgraduate students, the constraints faced by writing centres and the need to accommodate international students.

.Many South African universities (such as the University of Pretoria, Stellenbosch University, the University of the Western Cape and the North-West University) offer compulsory, credit-bearing first year academic literacy modules. Although postgraduate students are sometimes tested for postgraduate academic literacy skills using diagnostic tools such as the Test for Academic Literacy for Postgraduate Students (TALPS) (ICELDA: 2023), there are very few compulsory academic literacy modules for postgraduate students. In 2004 Thesen comments that writing is often seen as a skill which undergraduate students need to master and it is thus not the focus of postgraduate programmes. Further, Butler (2009: 291) comments that it can often be assumed that academic writing difficulties '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'. His earlier thesis found this not to be the case and drew links between a student's academic literacy skills and experiencing obstacles in postgraduate writing (2007).

Over the last 15 years, many universities have extended writing support for postgraduate students. A survey conducted by Vivian and Fourie (2016) into non-curricular postgraduate writing support found that most faculties outsource language support to university writing centres, with 39 per cent of the larger universities in South Africa separating their postgraduate and undergraduate writing support (Vivian and Fourie 2016: 153). For the most part, postgraduate writing support is an extension of the university's writing centre services and serves all faculties and levels of studies. The above study showed that the primary activity of writing support is offered by peer tutors who receive training as writing centre consultants and the primary mode of engagement is one-on-one consultations (Vivian and Fourie 2016: 156). Vivian and Fourie's study shows that writing centres often experience budget constraints, this affects the number of consultants that can be hired to support students' academic literacy development and for this reason, combining undergraduate and postgraduate writing support could be financially and logistically efficient (2016: 153). The study found that in order to accommodate the specific needs of postgraduate students, writing centres frequently offered additional support in the form of workshops, writing circles and writing retreats (2016: 157).

A cursory look at university websites shows a growth in support for postgraduate writing. Despite the increase in support for postgraduate academic writing, anecdotal evidence and academic research point to similar, persistent writing challenges experienced by postgraduate students. Sonn's study of selected postgraduate students at Walter Sisulu University (2016: 226) supports Butler's position on postgraduate writing as described above and concludes that '[s]ome of the challenges experienced by the candidates included, inter alia, problems experienced in identifying

the problem statement; the complexity of proposal writing; a lack of professional writing skills.' More recently, du Toit et al. (2022) observed a link between academic success and academic literacy levels in a group of Honours Economic students at a South African university.

The SPMA is cognisant of these issues concerning the need to support postgraduate writing, the constraints faced by writing centres and the need to take into account the context of increasing numbers of international postgraduate students. The problems identified above have shaped the development of curricular and non-curricular embedded and scaffolded writing support for the SPMA's postgraduate students. The rationale behind using an embedded and scaffolded academic literacy framework is explained below.

A pedagogical framework for the SPMA's postgraduate writing support

140

The pedagogical framework used to inform the SPMA's design and implementation of curricular and non-curricular postgraduate academic literacy support is underpinned by a discipline-specific, embedded and scaffolded pedagogy. The limitations of generic academic literacy support mentioned above, suggests that a discipline-embedded approach would be more effective in providing language support which is related and relevant to the student's field of study. More specifically, embedding, that is situating academic literacy within and not alongside the content curriculum may enhance language support. In order to argue for the pedagogical framework used by the SPMA to support postgraduate writing, literature on embedded and scaffolded pedagogies will be discussed below.

There has been much debate about the generic nature of non-curricular writing support traditionally offered by writing centres. Although generic approaches are cost and resource effective as discussed by researchers including Vivian and Fourie (2016: 149) and van der Poel and van Wyk (2013: 169), Thesen (2013: 124) attests that a decade ago that the growing demand for 'generic ... workshops on aspects of research writing' did not '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'. Thesen (2013: 104) refers to these generic workshops as unsatisfying 'pop-up' or 'soundbite' workshops.

Arguments for discipline-specific academic writing support have been made by various academic literacy researchers (Jacobs 2007; Clarence 2011; Butler 2013; van der Poel and van Wyk 2015;

Wingate 2018: 350). Wingate argues that generic academic literacy programmes do not 'prepare students for communicating in their disciplines' (2018: 351) and contends for 'curriculum integrated academic literacy instruction' (2018: 350) which requires co-operation between discipline and academic literacy specialists. Jacobs speaks to the link between academic literacy and concept development and similarly argues for the need for collaboration between the academic literacy specialist and the discipline or subject expert (2007) to embed academic literacy support in the content modules. Jacobs' approach uses New Literacies Studies and Rhetorical Theory which contests the neutrality of language and recognises how language is a social construct (2007: 61). The results of this study show that 'those lecturers who understood knowledge as discursively constructed and the curriculum as how the discipline intersected with the world, were inclined to understand [academic literacies] ALs as being deeply embedded within the ways in which the various disciplines constructed themselves through language' (Jacobs 2007: 70). These studies can be seen as part of a broader research area coined ICLHE (Integrating Content and Language in Higher Education) as outlined by Jacobs in her keynote address for the ICLHE 2013 conference (2015).

Van der Poel and van Wyk's contribution to selected papers published from the ICLHE conference of 2013 also acknowledges language as socially constructed (2015: 167). They focus on the complexities of acculturation of students into the higher education environment, with a specific focus on acquiring academic literacy (Van der Poel and van Wyk 2015: 164). As a result of a qualitative analysis of students, content lecturers and academic literacy specialists' perceptions on generic, discipline-specific and embedded academic literacy support, van der Poel and Van Dyk conclude that 'generic and integrated approaches are not mutually exclusive, but can very well be a both-and situation' (2015: 174) and suggest that generic programmes could be used in the early years of study, progressing to more discipline-specific intervention for higher levels of study. This approach suggests an incremental approach to academic literacy support which could be seen as linking the concepts of discipline-specific academic literacy support with the notion of scaffolding.

Pedagogical scaffolding is not a new concept and can be traced to Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development which refers to the optimal space for learning situated between students' current level of knowledge and the next level of potential knowledge. Although the concept of scaffolding has been applied in a wide variety of contexts, this discussion will concentrate on the pedagogy of embedded and scaffolding learning for academic literacy programmes.

The use of scaffolding pedagogy in curricular academic literacy programmes in South Africa has been well supported (Carstens 2016; Rose et al. 2008). This section focusses on the research by

Van Dijk et al. (2019: 159–162) which describes and justifies the use of scaffolding for an embedded discipline-specific curricular academic literacy programme for undergraduate students in the SPMA. This is relevant to the discussion in this chapter as the SPMA's postgraduate academic literacy interventions are founded on the same principles. We align our practices to more recent definitions of scaffolding as interactive rather than linear, drawing on Delen et al.'s (2014: 312) definition of instructional scaffolding as 'a term used to explain the relationship and interaction between learners and their guides and is a process that enables a novice to achieve a goal or objective which would otherwise be unattainable without assistance – instructional scaffolding is not one-way, but interactive and reciprocal process' (2014: 312). Further, Van Dijk et al. (2019: 161) rely on Carstens' (2016) work in academic literacy scaffolding using van Lier's four-quadrant model (2004). Carstens argues that this model, in conjunction with Walqui's six scaffolding types, provides a scaffolding model for subject-specific academic literacy interventions (2016: 2). Van Lier's non-linear four-quadrant model consists of four scaffolding contexts namely, assistance from more capable peers or adults, interaction with equal peers, interaction with lesser peers and use of own existing resources such as knowledge and experience. Walqui (2006: 170–177) builds on van Lier's model and identifies six instructional scaffolding types namely modelling, bridging, contextualising, schema building, re-presenting text and developing metacognition. The SPMA's postgraduate academic literacy programme is designed taking van Lier's four-quadrant model and Walqui's six scaffolding categories into account.

A scaffolded approach acknowledges the complex skills which students require in order to be academically literate. Although this point has been made by numerous researchers, Wingate (2018: 350) articulates succinctly that 'academic literacy [i]s the ability to communicate competently in an academic discourse community; this encompasses reading, evaluating information, as well as presenting, debating and creating knowledge through both speaking and writing. These capabilities require knowledge of the community's epistemology, of the genres through which the community interacts and of the conventions that regulate these interactions.' Van Dijk et al. argue that 'it is the responsibility of higher education institutions to structure their programmes in such a way that they assist students to develop the basic academic literacy skills needed for the attainment of the required level of intellectual content-related skills' and that this can be attained by using a discipline embedded and scaffolded design (2019: 158).

The majority of research discussed above relates to undergraduate (predominantly first year academic) literacy interventions and thus this study on postgraduate writing support in the SPMA is positioned to contribute to discussions on how to support postgraduate writing, taking into account

presumptions around postgraduate academic literacy skills, the constraints that writing centres face and the context of increasing numbers of international students. However, in my opinion, it is important to take note of Butler's reasoned discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of using discipline-specific academic literacy interventions, cautioning against advocacy for this approach without substantive evidence supporting these claims (2013: 80). Butler's concern could also be applied to research into the effectiveness of a scaffolded academic literacy pedagogy. Thus, it is the aim of this research to provide evidence concerning the effectiveness and/or limitations of a discipline-specific, embedded and scaffolded academic literacy programme for postgraduate students in the SPMA.

The nature of curricular and non-curricular postgraduate writing support in the SPMA

As the academic literacy practitioner positioned in the SPMA, I am part of a team that works together to ensure the success of our postgraduate students – that team is comprised of the student, content module lecturers, primary and co-supervisors and myself as the language coach. I was inspired by the 2022 Heltasa conference metaphor of 'a seed awakened by the sunshine and its thirst quenched by the rain...within a landscape of possibilities and potential' (Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of South Africa 2022) and I have extended the metaphor to describe the multidirectional and the multifaceted relationship between the student, lecturers, supervisors and myself. I compare our postgraduate students to seeds producing fruit (a completed thesis) and see the University and the SPMA as providing the necessary conditions (water, sun, nutrients and so on) with my role as providing additional support for seedlings (possibly like a greenhouse) to encourage growth and fruition, recognising that not all plants grow at the same rate and that they require different care to flourish and bloom. So how does this metaphor play out in practical terms?

143

Curricular postgraduate writing support

Our postgraduate students will be typically offered curricular and non-curricular language support throughout their degree. As described above, a scaffolded and embedded pedagogical approach is used for curricular postgraduate language support. Modules offered at postgraduate level are

structured according to block lectures. As the academic literacy practitioner, I work closely with the module lecturers and schedule an academic literacy workshop during each of the degree's modules, supporting the module's writing assessment tasks. This often includes discussion on the wording of the assignment and expectations regarding structure and content.

At the beginning of any curricular academic writing sessions, I make a point of discussing students' rich linguistic heritage and their proven ability to decode and process language. I encourage students to see academic language used at the University and specifically at the SPMA, as a dialect of English which they have the capacity to master, while acknowledging that we use a version of academic literacy that is not universal and is not innately correct or superior to other forms of academic literacy. I acknowledge that the version of academic literacy we use is part of our British colonial heritage and although work is being done in the area of decolonising academic writing practices, much work needs to be done in order to align what is considered good academic literacy in most South African higher education institutions with indigenous knowledge systems. Further, this understanding of academic literacy is important to me in terms of the wide variety of contexts and countries that our students come from. This discussion forms the foundation and understanding of the academic literacy workshops which will assist students in making sense of this version of academic literacy used in the SPMA.

144

For the purposes of this discussion, I will focus on our Masters in Public Administration degree (MPA) which is 2 year course consisting of seven modules and a mini-dissertation. Admission requirements are that students have any NQF level 7 degree and 3 years of administrative and/or managerial experience, preferably in the public sector. Using the discipline-embedded model, I see students face-to-face for a brief orientation session at the beginning of the academic year and subsequently for a 2-hour workshop per content module. Sessions are scaffolded using Walqui's six instructional scaffolding types of modelling, bridging, contextualising, schema building, representing text and developing metacognition as discussed above (2006: 170-177). The orientation session usually focusses on reading strategies, starting to read and organise what has been read towards the goal of writing the research proposal for the mini-dissertation.

Academic literacy support provided to the MPA students is linked to writing a research proposal as the summative assessment for the MPA research methodology module, NME 801. The research proposal written as part of this module, acts as the basis for writing a research proposal for the mini dissertation (which is the focus of the second year of study). The content lecturer covers this module in a block session of 5 days. The NME 801 module is usually held in March and consists of three assessments: a draft literature review and problem statement (due about 10 days after the

block week), a draft research proposal (due end of April/beginning of May) and the final summative research proposal (due in June). The content lecturer marks these three assessments and provides the students with written feedback for each assessment via Turnitin on ClickUP, the University's learning management system (LMS).

This reflection focusses on the academic literacy interventions for NME 801 during 2021 and 2022. In 2021, during the NME 801 block, I held an academic literacy workshop with the students which was based on the SPMA style and grammar guide. I developed the SPMA style and grammar guide as a user-friendly PowerPoint to address concerns about consistency in using academic conventions and to ensure that students were aware of the SPMA's academic literacy practices. This guide is fairly general but uses Walqui's scaffolding categories of metacognition, modelling, contextualising and schema-building in the way it explains concepts and uses relevant examples. The SPMA style and grammar guide is divided into a macro and a micro section with the macro section addressing topics such as available academic literacy resources, academic style, choice and evaluation of academic sources, logical ordering and structuring strategies such as planning tools and writing from general to specific as well as discussing what constitutes evidence to support an argument. The micro section focusses on practical ways to write clearly and concisely, including sentence and paragraph construction strategies and frequent grammar concerns. Due to the model used at the time, the next block academic literacy session I had with the students would be after the submission of their draft literature review so although the literature review had not been directly discussed during the block academic literacy workshop, I encouraged the students to apply these principles when writing their literature review for their first NME 801 assessment.

Secondary data of module averages for each of the three assessments conducted for NME 801 was used quantitatively to assess the effectiveness of this specific SPMA's postgraduate curricular academic literacy intervention. The class average for the first assessment for NME 801 was 48 per cent which is below the pass mark of 50 per cent and thus raised concern for both the content lecturer and myself as the academic literacy practitioner. A thematic analysis of the lecturer's feedback to students (as represented in Figure 1 below) showed that 53 per cent of the comments related to relevance of the students' writing to their chosen topic, sentence and paragraph construction formed 20 per cent of the comments, 18 per cent related to inclusion of inappropriate or inadequate content, while lack of transitions and structure constituted 9 per cent of the comments.

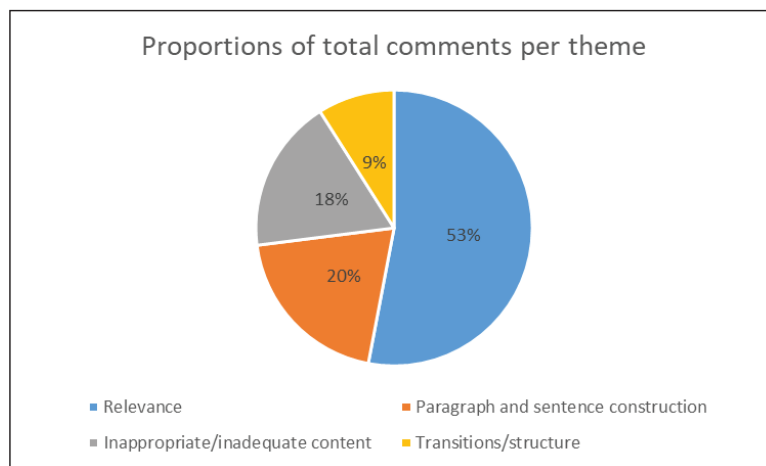


Figure 1. Analysis of lecturer’s comments on first NME 801 assessment 2021

146

This analysis informed the design of two further academic literacy interventions to address the first assessment’s low pass mark (Table 1.1 below reflects the overall programme). The due date of the second assessment was also extended by a week to accommodate building in an extra academic literacy support session. In this way the academic literacy support provided to the students was reflexive, in addition to being embedded and scaffolded. The first intervention workshop focussed on selecting relevant information for a literature review and linking to the research topic, planning the structure of a literature review, grouping information and logical structuring from general to specific. The second NME 801 module assessment which was submitted after this intervention showed a favourable increase in class average of 10 per cent to 58 per cent.

The subsequent (second) academic literacy intervention workshop focussed on structuring paragraphs, creating linking/transitions emphasising relevance between and within paragraphs and sections. Both interventions used the scaffolding approaches of modelling, contextualising, representing text and metacognition by getting students to engage with excerpts from students’ work reflecting a range of academic literacy levels.

Table 1.1 NME 801 programme for 2021

Date	Academic literacy workshop	Format and duration	NME 801 assessment dates
29 January 2021	Brief introduction to academic literacy support	Online orientation for MPA programme (30 min)	
5 February 2021	General academic reading and writing principles (including self-study videos)	2 hour workshop during PAD 801 block week	
11 March 2021	Workshop on the SPMA style and grammar guide	2 hour workshop during NME 801 block week	1st assessment due 22 March: literature review, problem statement and research questions
15 April 2021	Academic literacy intervention 1: Selecting relevant information for a literature review, linking to the research topic, planning the structure of a literature review, grouping information and logical structuring from general to specific.	2 hour workshop during PAD 804	2nd assessment due 27 April: 1st draft research proposal
27 May 2021	Academic literacy intervention 2: Structuring paragraphs, creating linking/transitions emphasising relevance between and within paragraphs and sections	2 hour online workshop	3rd assessment due 11 June : final research proposal

18 August 2021	Workshop on paraphrasing	2 hour workshop during FHB 800	
20 August 2021	Workshop on synthesising	2 hour workshop during FHB 800	

Surprisingly, the module average for the final NME 801 summative assessment remained at 58 per cent. Speculation between the module lecturer and myself and anecdotal comments from students identified that possible reasons why the class average did not improve for the summative assessment were that the interventions were embedded but not timeous and the first workshop conducted during the first content block week was fairly generic and focussed on general academic writing strategies rather than specifically writing a literature review. It was also suggested that academic literacy skills such as paraphrasing and synthesising needed to be addressed and practiced more extensively. Another reason for the lack of improvement in the final assessment for NME 801 was anecdotal evidence from some students who indicated that they were satisfied with the mark they received for the first full draft of the research proposal and so made the decision to submit the final proposal without effecting significant changes. It was decided that although this would not have an impact on final NME 801 results, workshops on paraphrasing and synthesising would be held during subsequent MPA block sessions as these are important skills for academic writing which will support the students in their other modules and in preparation for writing the mini-dissertation in their second year.

148

The experience of the 2021 NME 801 module and academic literacy support informed the structure of the MPA academic literacy programme for 2022. We realised that although the interventions were scaffolded and discipline-embedded, they needed to be more closely aligned with the assessment schedule. In 2022, more workshops were held earlier in the year so that there would be time to introduce general academic literacy strategies as well as to develop skills and strategies for writing a literature review before the first assessment was due. The programme is summarised in Table 1.2 below.

Table 1.2 MPA academic literacy programme for 2022

Date	Academic literacy workshop	Format and duration	NME 801 assessment dates
27 January 2022	Brief introduction to academic literacy support	Online orientation for MPA programme (30 min)	
8 February 2022	General academic literacy principles using SPMA style and grammar guide Reading strategies and reading towards writing the literature review and problem statement for the research proposal	2 hour workshop during PAD 801 block week	
16 and 17 March 2022	Workshop 1: Referencing the SPMA way, paragraphing and paraphrasing strategies Workshop 2: Tone and style of writing Skills needed for writing a literature review: critical reading/analysis / organising principle/synthesis	2 x 2 hour workshops during NME 801 block week	
23 March 2022	Tool for evaluating logical structure in writing Upload PowerPoint on using transitions/linking to create structure and flow in writing	2 hour online workshop	1st assessment due 4 April: literature review, problem statement and research questions

25 April 2022	Discuss lecturer's feedback on 1st assessment Research proposal alignment tool Paragraphing, structuring and transitions PowerPoint	2 hour online workshop	2nd assessment due 2 May: 1st draft full research proposal
8 June	Discuss lecturer's feedback on 1st draft research proposal	2 hour online workshop	3rd assessment due 10 June: final research proposal
18 August 2022	Wellness check-in	30 min in-person session during FHB 800 using AnswerGarden to gauge emotional and writing support needs	
7 September 2022	Referencing and plagiarism	2 hour online workshop at students' request	
27 October 2022	Exam essay writing	2 hour online workshop	

The class averages for the three NME 801 assessment were 58 per cent, 52 per cent and 61 per cent respectively. The first assessment showed a 10 per cent increase in average from 2021 to 2022. However, there was a decline in average from the first assessment to the second assessment of six per cent and also a decline of six per cent in the average of the second assessment between 2021 and 2022. We would have expected the embedded, scaffolded academic literacy interventions to produce linear and incremental module results. Clarity on what was required for the full research proposal during a two hour workshop focussing on the lecturers' feedback on the draft research proposal (assessment two) yielded pleasing results of a 9 per cent improvement for assessment three, which was also a 3 per cent improvement on 2021's summative assessment average.

The results of the three assessments for the NME 801 module over the last two years show that interventions need to be timeous, not only embedded in the content curricula but also aligned with the module's assessment schedule and reflexive in analysing and responding to students' needs as they arise. Further, this analysis highlights that even with a scaffolded pedagogy, development in academic writing may not necessarily be linear. We are yet to unpack all the variables that contribute to these results. A longitudinal study of this module may yield more insight into the long-term results of these interventions on thesis production in the second year of studies as well as throughput rate.

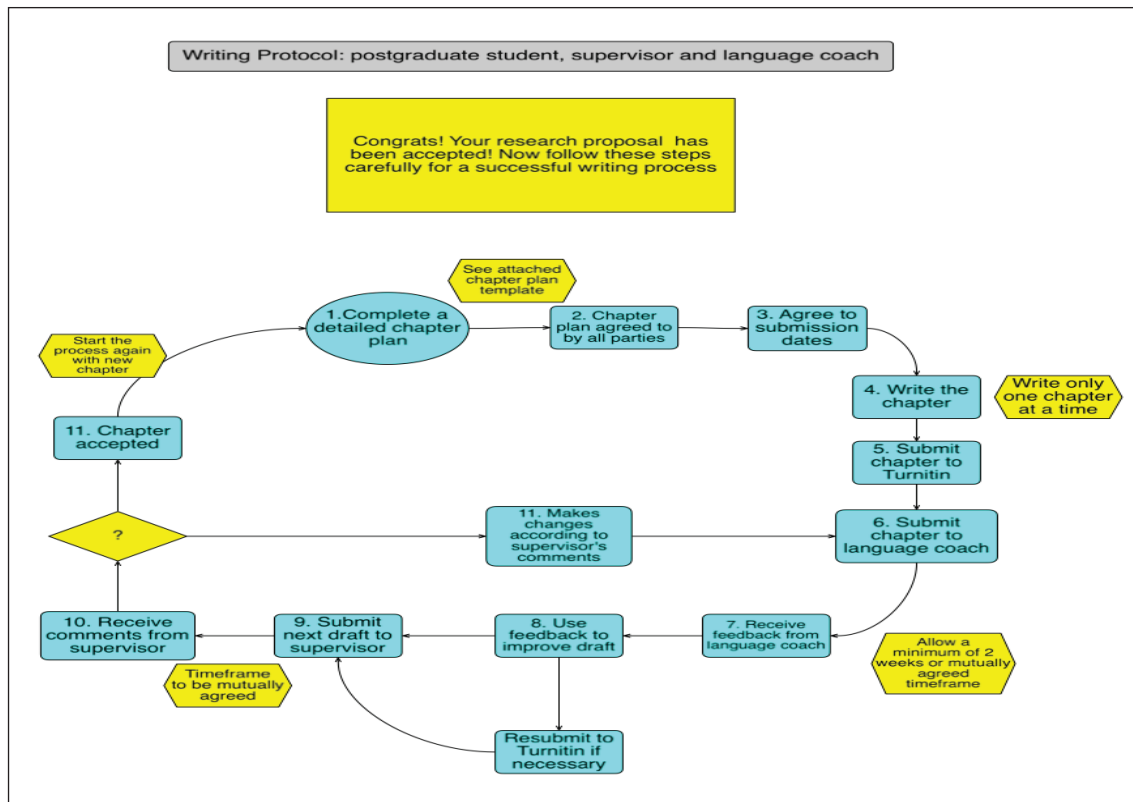
Non-curricular postgraduate writing support

The curricular postgraduate writing programme is supported by non-curricular one-on-one consultations with students which take place online or in person for all levels of students and at any stage of writing. At this level I function as a one person in-house writing centre for the SPMA and see myself as a language coach in this context. I provide written feedback, mostly in the form of track changes on Microsoft Word documents. Sometimes I will work with students on their research proposals and/or one or two of their dissertation chapters as that is all they support that they need. In some cases, I will work with a student chapter by chapter for the whole dissertation writing journey.

151

In 2017 I developed the SPMA's student-supervisor-language coach model (Figure 2 below) as a response to my observations concerning one-on-one work with students. I identified a chicken and egg dilemma: who should look at the writing first, the supervisor/s as content experts or me as the academic language specialist? Supervisors report of struggles in understanding the chapter's content because of language constraints and so would prefer me to look at the chapter before they do. I would work with students on a chapter, identifying ways to improve the student's writing but sometimes I was not convinced that the chapter content was sound and felt that the students and I may be working on content that the supervisor might suggest is not relevant for the chapter or could be eliminated from the chapter. To ensure that the content of the chapter is sound, the first step of the model advises that the student and supervisors agree on a detailed chapter plan before the student starts writing the chapter. The idea is that a detailed chapter plan will prevent underprepared students from starting to write. The chapter plan will soon highlight any gaps in reading and research which need to be filled. Further, it will encourage students to organise and

structure the chapter properly before writing (I found that often students write without having a clear structure and direction for the chapter) and it will also give students the confidence to start writing the chapter.



152

Figure 2: Student-supervisor-language coach model

By using the suggested model, the structure and content of the chapter is agreed to before the writing process begins. Once the chapter has been written, the student will submit the chapter to me for comments. This approach gives me reassurance concerning the content and direction of the chapter so, as the language coach, I can focus on the student's writing and language. Students then consider my comments, refine their chapter and submit it to their supervisor/s. This process will continue until the supervisor is happy for the student to proceed to the next chapter and the process

begins again. Using this approach, I work closely with both the student and their supervisor/s. We prefer to work on one Word document and comments remain visible to all parties until it is agreed that the comments have been resolved. Sometimes it is also effective for all parties to meet in person or online to circumvent lengthy e-mail round robins. In this case, I see myself as supporting both the students in their writing process and the supervisor in their role of overseeing and guiding the student's dissertation. Our goal is to work together to make the thesis writing process streamlined with reduced chapter drafts and achieving the final goal of a completed thesis.

Further to this, one-on-one consultations allow me to consider the linguistic background of our students, particularly international students, some of whom come from Francophone or Lusophone countries. I am sensitive to cultural differences in terms of communication and interaction customs. I believe it is important to be cognisant of potential lexical-grammatical differences and respectful of stylistic differences in other academic writing conventions, for example, the use of more elaborate and descriptive sentence and paragraph construction, the use of digression and repetition juxtaposed with the British influenced academic literacy focus on clear and concise writing.

In order to provide qualitative evidence of student and supervisors' perceptions on my role as an academic literacy specialist in the SPMA, primary data was collected through a survey which was sent to purposively selected postgraduate students and supervisors in the SPMA. The purposive sample consisted of approximately 40 students and supervisors who have worked closely with the SPMA's academic literacy specialist using the the School's student-supervisor-language coach model. The survey asked four questions namely:

1. What is/was your experience (as either a student or supervisor) of language coaching during the postgraduate writing process?
2. What do you think the role/s of an academic language coach are in a postgraduate writing environment?
3. Do you think the role/s of the language coach have shifted during and post-Covid? Please explain.
4. What do you think can be done to strengthen the language coach/student/supervisor interaction in the postgraduate writing process?

Responses to question one, yielded similar responses from students using words such as 'insightful', 'beneficial', 'very helpful' and 'crucial' and rating the quality of the coaching using words such as 'excellent' and 'exceptional'. The one respondent stated that they became aware of developing writing skills as a 'continuous learning process'. I would like to single out a comment from an international postgraduate student due to the goal of internationalising higher education as discussed in the chapter's introduction:

As an international student studying in a foreign country (during the Covid-19 pandemic) – the least I was expecting was another tough supervisor! But to my surprise (something that I keep talking about even up to now) was the kindhearted, patient and deeply committed language coach. She embraced my grammatical flaws, poor sentence construction...name it. She took time to read every single document I ever sent her and with grace, she guided me along the way. She boosted my self esteem and made me believe that I could write better. I am so grateful to the School of Public Management and Administration at UP for being intentional about my formation process while at UP.

154

Although one comment cannot be generalised to the whole group, it was encouraging to hear that the postgraduate writing support provided by the SPMA was well received by one of our international students. Supervisors often state that not being a language expert, they do not know how to support students' writing and that the language coaching process makes students feel supported and they do not feel alone in their thesis writing process.

The role of the language coach, according to the responses to question two, includes guidance and assisting with developing structure, formulation of ideas, academic reasoning and critical thinking. Further, one comment saw language coaching as 'determining the strength and weakness of student writing abilities...To help students and supervisors to enhance their writing skills...' which I felt was pertinent in that it highlights that the role I play extends beyond the deficit model and supports both supervisor and students' writing.

A common theme that emerged from the responses to questions one and two involved the affective dimension of language coaching in terms of mentoring, guiding and supporting. A comment from one supervisor reinforced this notion by stating that '[language coaching] is [an] amazing support structure that both the students and supervisors have. The students feel supported and it takes some of the load off of the supervisors.' This supports the anecdotal evidence from check-in sessions with students who said that they needed 'moral support', even 'hugs'.

The majority of responses to question three suggested that the content of postgraduate writing support remained the same during and post-Covid and that only the format changed from being primarily face-to-face pre-Covid, to online during Covid restrictions and then hybrid in the post-Covid context. Numerous respondents indicated that a hybrid approach gave opportunity and flexibility for more frequent sessions with the language coach as illustrated in the following comment which emphasised that 'with the adoption of utilising online platforms ... it has made the language coaching services more accessible as the sessions are not bound to be at campus and there is more flexibility with time also. Thus, language coaches are becoming more of a first point of reference in terms of asking for assistance instead of a lecturer, compared to the period prior [to] Covid.' There was also reference to a heightened need for language coaching during the Covid-19 period and that my role may have 'enhanced a bit as a result of the pandemic due to the fact that some students may have been affected differently'. I feel it is significant to take note of the comments which indicate a preference for 'physical engagement ... which has allowed a bond between coach and student' and the response that post Covid restrictions, 'we can also hold meetings face to face, which helps people like me, as I suffer with speaking to people over the phone (especially an academic who has more knowledge than me). I believe for me, being face to face may help me omit some mistakes that I could've made when online.' These varying responses highlight the need for me, as language coach, to be flexible according to individual student's needs, context and learning styles.

155

In terms of strengthening the student-supervisor-language coach model (question 4), numerous respondents referred to increasing the frequency and timing of the academic literacy interventions of both curricular and non-curricular postgraduate language support. It was recommended that more workshops, possibly in the form of a dedicated academic writing block, take place early in the year, ideally before the commencement of the academic year. The responses indicated that the hybrid approach is necessary, although this question also evoked a few comments suggesting that students value in-person contact. Two respondents' comments spoke to strengthening the relationship between student, supervisor and language coach with one respondent suggesting that the 'supervisor should have access to the language coach's comments and visa versa, in order for the two to avoid duplications'. This speaks to an instance in which the student-supervisor-language coach model is not being followed effectively as the model advocates that all parties should make comments on the same Word document to avoid repetitive or conflicting comments and opinions. Further, a few comments were made concerning the language coach to student ratio, highlighting the limitations of one language coach for all SPMA postgraduate students.

The results of the survey show that academic literacy support is multi-directional as student,

supervisors and language coach need to work collaboratively to support postgraduate students in their studies. The relationship between student, supervisor and language coach needs to be strengthened in some cases. The survey's responses emphasise that a flexible, hybrid approach to language coaching is vital to supporting students' postgraduate writing process. Additionally, academic literacy support is multi-faceted and does not only address surface level grammar and semantic issues. It is perceived to aid students' critical thinking in terms of conceptualisation, formulation and structuring of arguments. It is also clear that the academic literacy process has an important affective dimension in boosting students' confidence, providing emotional support and encouragement through relationship-building.

Concluding comments towards a way forward

156

Taking into account both curricular and non-curricular academic literacy support given to postgraduate students in the SPMA, some lessons have been learned and thus some concluding comments can be made. The SPMA is in a privileged position of being able to provide in-house, discipline-specific academic literacy support. Although a discipline-embedded and scaffolded pedagogy yielded overall improvement in the class averages for the module NME 801, students' progress is not always linear. The process is more nuanced than expected and further research needs to be conducted concerning what factors could have an impact on the non-linearity of results. As suggested earlier, a longitudinal study on postgraduate students' throughput rates and degree completion time may yield useful insights into the student's writing progress over the course of their degree.

Reflexivity is needed in terms of timeously identifying and responding to students' needs (which may be reflected through students' assessment results). Using the SPMA's block lecture model to schedule an academic literacy block early in the year may give students a head start in terms of developing the academic literacy skills required for successful completion of their degrees which is dependent on the completion of a thesis. Subsequent workshops should continue to be embedded in the content modules and specifically aligned to address the assessment criteria for the module. The frequency of postgraduate writing support can be increased by continuing to use a hybrid approach as a two-hour workshop per module is not sufficient to support the complexity of writing at a postgraduate level.

The feedback on the student-supervisor-language coach model shows that this approach to

one-on-one academic literacy support is valued and considered effective by both students and supervisors. The understanding of and sensitivity to the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of students, enhances the SPMA's support for both domestic and international students. It must be noted however that the student-to-language-coach ratio is high and this limits the extent of one-on-one non-curricular academic support that can be provided and providing timeous feedback. It is evident that the process of supporting postgraduate students' critical reading, thinking and writing, is enhanced by the multidirectional and multifaceted interaction between student, supervisor/s and language coach. Thus, in part, the success of the model lies in successful relationship building which in turn boosts students' confidence and self-esteem. Mechanisms to further solidify this tripartite relationship need to be considered.

In closing, I would like to return to the seed metaphor used in section 4 of this chapter. Reflection on the findings of this investigation, reinforces the greenhouse image of the language coach providing extra protection and nurture for plants during difficult times, giving the students a safe space and time to clarify their thinking and explore transforming their ideas into words. Through addressing the weaknesses and building on the strengths, of the SPMA's curricular and non-curricular postgraduate writing support programme, the School will be even better positioned to contribute to achieving the NDP goals of increased graduates, increased number of Ph.D. degrees, the internationalisation of higher education, which will in turn contribute to the professionalisation of the public sector.

157

References

- Butler, H.G. 2007. *A framework for course design in academic writing for tertiary education*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis. University of Pretoria, Pretoria.
- 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.
- 2013. Discipline specific versus generic academic literacy intervention for university education: An issue of impact. *Journal for Language Teaching*, 47(2): 71–88.
- Carstens, A. 2016. Designing linguistically flexible scaffolding for subject-specific academic literacy interventions. *Per Linguam*, 32(3): 1–12.
- Clarence, S. 2011. Collaborative writing development with students and lecturers at the UWC

writing Centre. In: *Changing spaces: Writing centres and access to higher education*, edited by A. Archer and R. Richards. Stellenbosch: AFRICAN SUN MeDIA: SUN PReSS. Pp. 101–114.

Delen E., Liew J. and Willson, V. 2014. Effects of interactivity and instructional scaffolding on learning: Self-regulation in online video-based environments. *Computers and Education*, 78: 312–320.

du Toit, J., Pretorius, A., Louw, H. and Grundlingh, M. 2022. Perceptions of writing prowess in honours economic students. *South African Journal of Economic and Management Sciences*, 25(1): 1–13.

Higher Education Learning & Teaching Association of South Africa. 2022. HeltasaFest2022, held online from 5–9 December 2022. [Online]. Available at: <https://heltasa.org.za/festival-2022/> (Accessed on 10 February 2023).

ICELDA. 2023. *Tests of academic literacy*. [Online]. Available at: <https://icelda.com/our-tests/> (Accessed on 19 March 2023).

Jacobs, C. 2007. Towards a critical understanding of the teaching of discipline-specific academic literacies: Making the tacit explicit. *Journal of Education*, 41(1): 59–81.

——— 2015. Mapping the terrains of ICLHE: A view from the south. Keynote address. In: *Integrating content and language in higher education: From theory to practice. Selected papers from the 2013 ICLHE Conference*, edited by R. Wilkinson and M.L. Walsh. Frankfurt: Peter Lang. Pp. 21–38.

Maluleka, J. and Ngoepe, M. 2018. An analysis of the throughput rate of doctoral students in Lis Schools in South Africa, 2005–2015. *Mousaion*, 36(3): 1–17.

Metaferia, T.B. 2021. *A phenomenological study of the lived validation experiences of African international students enrolled in community colleges*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Grand Canyon University, Phoenix, AZ.

Park, E., Klieve, H., Tsurutani, C. and Harte, W. 2017. International students' accented English—Communication difficulties and developed strategies. *Cogent Education*, 4(1): 1–15.

Rose, D., Rose, M., Farrington, S. and Page, S. 2008. Scaffolding academic literacy with indigenous health sciences students: An evaluative study. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 7(3): 165–179.

School of Public Management and Administration. 2023. *UP SPMA Programme Brochure*. Pretoria: University of Pretoria.

South African Government. 2012. *National development plan 2030*. Pretoria: Government Printers.

South African School of Government. 2022. *A national framework towards the professionalisation of*

- the public sector*. Pretoria: National School of Government.
- Sonn, R. 2016. The challenge for a historically disadvantaged South African university to produce more postgraduate students. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 30(2): 226–241.
- Thesen, L. 2013. Risk in postgraduate writing: Voice, discourse and edgework. *Critical Studies in Teaching & Learning*, 1(1): 103–122.
- University of Pretoria. 2011. *UP Strategic Plan – 2023*. Pretoria: University of Pretoria.
- van der Poel, K and van Wyk, T. 2015. Discipline-specific academic literacy and academic literacy integration. In: *Integrating content and language in higher education: From theory to practice. Selected papers from the 2013 ICLHE Conference*, edited by R. Wilkinson and M.L. Walsh. Frankfurt: Peter Lang. Pp. 161–180.
- van Dijk, H.G., Vivian, B.A. and Malan, L. 2019. Creating epistemic access through a scaffold approach: Academic literacy skills development for South African first-year public administration students. *Teaching Public Administration*, 37(2), 156–174.
- Van Lier, L. 2004. *The ecology and semiotics of language learning*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic.
- Vivian, B. and Fourie, R. 2016. Non-curricular postgraduate writing interventions at South African universities. *Journal for Language Teaching*, 50(1): 145–165.
- Vygotsky, L.S. 1978. *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.
- Walqui, A. 2006. Scaffolding instruction for English language learners: A conceptual framework. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 9(2): 159–180.
- Welikala, T. 2015. Universities don't understand how international students learn. *The Guardian*, 3 July 2015. [Online]. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2015/jul/03/universities-dont-understand-how-international-students-learn> (Accessed on 20 March 2023).
- Wingate, U. 2018. Academic literacy across the curriculum: Towards a collaborative instructional approach. *Language Teaching*, 51(3): 349–364.
- Zhang, Y. and Mi, Y. 2010. Another look at the language difficulties of international students. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 14(4): 371–388.
-