

## SUPPORTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF POSTGRADUATE ACADEMIC WRITING SKILLS IN SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

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*The ability to write according to the conventions and forms of disciplinary academic writing is essential to success at university. Meeting the demands of quality academic writing is a challenge to the increasing number of English Second Language (ESL) students worldwide, from undergraduate to postgraduate level, who choose to study and publish in English. In particular, postgraduate students in South African universities struggle with the rigours of dissertation writing. Drawing on Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of collaborative learning in a community of practice (CoP), an exploratory, qualitative inquiry was undertaken to examine the support given by six selected South African higher education institutions (HEIs) to promote the development of academic writing skills among master's and doctoral students. Data were gathered from a purposeful sample of 10 expert informants through interviews, email communication, and scrutiny of institutional websites. Findings deal with academic writing skills as the core competence necessary for full participation in the academic CoP; the nature of postgraduate student engagement with core members of the CoP, such as supervisors and language experts; and the availability and efficacy of a range of intra-organisational resources, including informal and formal peer interaction with those who have more expertise in writing, books, manuals, visual representations, and technological tools, to develop academic writing among postgraduate students. Based on the findings, recommendations are made for ways in which institutions can strengthen, enrich, and extend the CoP to support academic writing skills of ESL postgraduate students.*

**Keywords:** academic writing; community of practice; English second language; master's and doctoral students; South African universities.

### INTRODUCTION

Writing is probably the single most important skill necessary for academic success at all levels (Monroe, 2011). Academic writing is essential to the production and sharing of knowledge in all areas of academic specialisations in higher education (Deane & O'Neill, 2011). Consequently, research on academic writing on all levels has proliferated worldwide, with particular interest shown in academic writing in English by both native and non-native English speakers<sup>1</sup> (Li, 2007). This interest can be attributed, firstly, to the massification of higher education, which has widened participation for large numbers of students who were educationally disadvantaged, and secondly, to the increased student mobility across national

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<sup>1</sup> Various terms occur in the literature to describe non-native English speakers, such as English Second Language (ESL) speakers, English Additional Language (EAL) speakers and English Foreign Language (EFL) speakers, among others. For the purpose of consistency, the term 'English Second Language (ESL)' speakers has been used in this paper.

borders, which has attracted English Second Language (ESL) students to universities where English is the educational lingua franca (Nesi & Gardner, 2012). Furthermore, the global academic world increasingly privileges English for publication (Wood, 2001). Thus, English is likely to be used increasingly for writing most academic texts, even in non-English speaking countries (Wachter, 2008). However, pre-university and undergraduate preparation seldom includes extensive academic writing practice (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000).

At postgraduate level, competence in academic writing has become a matter of particular concern, since ESL students frequently struggle to meet the requirements of thesis or dissertation<sup>2</sup> writing (Bitchener & Basturkman, 2006; Han, 2014; Mullins & Kiley, 2002; Strauss, 2012; Tang, 2012), especially in the social sciences where academic writing conventions are less explicit than in the natural sciences (Kaufhold, 2015). Furthermore, in some institutions, publication in English-language journals is set as an additional condition for graduation of doctoral students (Li, 2007). With due consideration to variations in the requirements for academic writing across disciplines (Anderson & Poole, 2009) and correct grammar and accurate spelling, the language conventions in dissertation texts require advanced acquisition of fundamental disciplinary norms governing the conceptualisation, production, and reporting of knowledge in different fields; a structured argument and the implementation of techniques for coherence; adherence to standard conventions for citing, acknowledging, and making judgements about previous research; and the appropriate use of the technical language of the field (Parry, 1998; Swales & Feak, 2004). ESL dissertation writing also requires knowledge of the rhetorical, linguistic, social, and cultural features of academic discourse, as well as knowledge of English as used by specific academic disciplines (Ferenz, 2005).

At South African universities where most local and international students are ESL speakers (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013), poor academic writing competence in English is well documented (Chokwe, 2011). Several initiatives have been launched to support the development of English academic writing skills among undergraduates. Du Preez and Fossey (2012) developed a process framework for the integration of the development of academic writing skills into an undergraduate four-year degree in higher education. Layton (2013) used interactive group discussion based on background texts with first-year ESL students to enhance their academic writing skills. Arbee and Samuel (2015) examined the role of writing centre support on undergraduate students' academic performance in the context of management studies. With regard to postgraduate students, a lack of academic writing skills has been identified as a major obstacle to the successful completion of the dissertation, among a range of problems encountered by supervisors and students during supervision (Albertyn, Kapp & Bitzer, 2008; Lessing, 2011). Kruger and Bevan-Dye (2013) explored the important supportive role played by the supervisor and the language editor in this regard. However, comprehensive endeavours made by South African universities to provide support to postgraduate students engaged in dissertation writing is still a largely unexplored area of inquiry.

In the light of this gap in the literature, the main research question has been formulated as follows: How do selected higher education institutions (HEIs) support the development of

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<sup>2</sup> Thesis and dissertation are used interchangeably in the literature. In this paper they are taken to be synonymous.

English academic writing skills among masters and doctoral students? To address this question, a qualitative study was undertaken at six South African universities to gather rich data from a purposeful sample of expert informants. The aim of the research was to examine the initiatives undertaken by the institutions to support the development of academic writing skills among postgraduate students engaged in dissertation writing and not to compare universities as such.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The notion of community of practice (CoP) can be used as a tool to address several problems experienced by postgraduate students engaged in research (Whisker, Robinson & Shacham, 2007). Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of CoPs posits that all learning is a highly social, collaborative activity in which a learner best acquires new expertise through engagement in the learning community that uses that expertise. A CoP refers to members of any group engaged in joint activities and committed to shared values, which reproduce the community over time through the introduction of new members or novices who initially function on the periphery of the community until they become fully functioning members of the community. Through legitimate peripheral participation in the CoP, the novice functions as an evolving member of the community who aims to move to full participation in the community by eventually meeting the set of criteria and expectations, or the 'regimen of competence', whereby the community recognises membership. The regimen of competence comprises: a) understanding what matters and the value of the CoP's enterprise; b) being able to participate constructively with others in the practices of the CoP; and c) correctly using the stock of skills accumulated by the COP through its history of learning (Wenger, 2010:180). Legitimate peripheral participation is characterised by reciprocity, collaboration, and sharing: the learner engages directly in activities, conversations, and reflections in the community; the community, in turn, refines its own practices as new members join (Wenger, 1998). In addition, successful learning requires the production of conceptual artefacts (such as a dissertation in the context of this paper) without which participation in the CoP would be meaningless and ungrounded (Wenger, 2010). Furthermore, learning in a CoP is not only about acquiring skills and information; it is about constructing an identity as a knower in terms of the competence required and expected by the community (Wenger, 1998). A CoP does not operate in isolation but fits into broader social systems that involve other communities and a rich multiplicity of interrelated practices, which Wenger (2010) terms landscapes of practices. Thus, legitimate peripheral participation is a process of multidimensional engagement with practices not limited by geography and time.

The theory of CoP has also been applied to the postgraduate student who is writing an academic text. Academic writing is a core activity of the target disciplinary CoP into which postgraduate students are socialised (Li, 2007). During the writing process the postgraduate student engages in many dimensions of the complex 'landscape of practices' available (Wenger, 2010:163), such as core members of the community, especially the supervisor, disciplinary texts, the student's own prior experience and practice of writing research papers or assignments, the global specialist research community, and the local research community. The latter includes the student's interactive relationships, in person and online, with other students, teachers, advisors, academic peers, and professional associations, to mention only a few (Braine, 2002). Several studies on ESL dissertation writing informed by Lave and Wenger's theory have explicated to what extent postgraduate students succeed or fail in engaging with and negotiating meaning in their respective CoPs. For example, Belcher

(1994) found that ESL students who were less effective in dissertation writing were hampered in full participation in their academic CoP due to a mismatch between the supervisor's and student's notions of research writing goals and research reader expectations. In Flowerdew's (2000) study, ESL scholars faced publishing expectations held by the English-speaking discourse community which were in conflict with those of their own non-English speaking counterparts. Aitchison and Lee (2006) and Kruger and Bevan-Dye (2013) found that, while the traditional conventions of dissertation writing remain located in the dominant dyadic student-supervisor relationship typical of research degree pedagogy in most disciplines, many postgraduate writers do not access the rich academic and social environment of the wider CoP.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **Data collection procedure**

The authors' institution granted ethical clearance for the research. In addition, each participant gave consent for participation.

The methodology used in the study was qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). Of the 23 public HEIs in South Africa, six were purposively sampled for maximum variation. This included previously advantaged/disadvantaged institutions; residential/open distance learning institutions; institutions which have traditionally used English/Afrikaans or both languages as medium of instruction; and academic universities/universities of technology. The sample comprised the University of Cape Town (UCT), University of Stellenbosch (US), University of Pretoria (UP), University of the Western Cape (UWC), Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) and University of South Africa (UNISA).

Ten expert participants were selected by purposeful sampling. Six participants were initially selected, one from each institution. This comprised the director of research or the faculty chair of the master's and doctoral committee and, in one instance, the director of postgraduate studies (responsible for support for master's and doctoral students in all faculties). Thereafter, two additional expert participants with responsibilities for support to postgraduate students were located through the institutional webpages of the relevant two institutions and added to the sample. In addition, two language experts with substantial experience as editors were interviewed.

### **DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS**

Data were gathered by interviews, email communication, and scrutiny of institutional websites. The first author conducted individual semi-structured interviews with six participants in their offices, using an interview guide focused on support for the development of academic writing skills of postgraduate students. Interviews lasted for more than an hour, and were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Email communication was used to clarify any issues which arose in the interviews and to gather additional information with both the initial and the additional participants. Such follow-up communication with participants and the scrutiny of the analysed data by both authors enhanced the study's trustworthiness.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was done by means of identifying segments of meaning in the data, coding and organising these, and identifying themes (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). In this way a bottom-up, inductive process of data analysis was followed. For example, units of meaning which were identified included interviewee references to: a lack of student writing skills as a major problem (coded as WSP); students' lack of grammar skills (LG); an inability to present ideas logically (LL) or to paraphrase well (LP); and citation and references list mistakes (CRM). From these coded units, a theme emerged, namely, 'writing skills as core competence in the academic CoP'. Two additional themes were identified in the same way, as illustrated in the next section. Headings used to encapsulate the themes were also formulated in the light of Wenger's CoP theory, which informed the research throughout.

## FINDINGS

Three themes related to the issue of postgraduate academic writing skills were identified, namely: writing skills as core competence in the academic CoP; postgraduate student engagement with core members of the CoP to develop academic writing skills; and intra-organisational resources to develop academic writing skills. These three themes are presented and discussed in the next sections, followed by the conclusions. The aim was to answer the main research question on how selected HEIs support the development of English academic writing skills among master's and doctoral students.

### Writing skills as core competence in the academic CoP

Academic writing is recognised as an essential competence of the CoP into which postgraduate students are socialised (Li, 2007). All participants agreed that advanced academic writing skills underlie the production of the successful dissertation as well as any scientific papers which, together with the dissertation, form part of institutional requirements for the degree. Participants also agreed that, in this regard, most postgraduate students do not demonstrate the 'regime of competence' (Wenger, 2010:180) expected for full participation in the CoP. The lack of writing skills applied to both ESL and English native speakers, as this participant indicated:

*The biggest problem is writing, writing, writing...almost every supervisor complains about that. And it is not necessarily that you [the students] are not proficient in English...it is academic writing.*

In many cases, students lacked even rudimentary language skills, such as correct grammar. A participant noted:

*Academic writing emerged as the ubiquitous key issue for both students and supervisors. Alas, there is no quick fix.... Given the large number of international students whose first language is not English, I found that the students wanted systematic training in basic grammar.*

In particular, the two language experts related how postgraduate students struggled to write coherent paragraphs and how, where they could not grasp the meaning of source material, they resorted to a type of plagiarism in the form of inadequate paraphrasing. Students also failed to comply with the standard conventions for citation and the construction of the bibliography. A participant remarked:

*The most common mistakes I encounter possibly are arguments that are not logically presented; lack of flow of thought in a paragraph; obvious plagiarism...a student with a poor command of the language suddenly presents a few sentences in an inconsistent style, usually characterised by an unjudicious choice of synonyms or terms out of context; and repetition...the same thought is expressed more than once.*

In the light of Wenger's (2010) regimen of competence as applied to academic writing skills, it seems that students do not grasp what matters in academic writing as the primary enterprise of the CoP; they are unable to engage productively with the supervisor and other support staff in producing a quality research report; and they are unable to use appropriately the repertoire of resources (e.g. discursive structure, argumentation and logic, and techniques for citation and the compilation of a bibliography) which the CoP has accumulated through its history of learning. Without evidence of writing competence, the students' full membership of the academic community is not realised and the acceptance of their cultural 'product', the dissertation, by expert members of the CoP (e.g. supervisors and examiners) is jeopardised. The subsequent challenge for institutions is to find ways to take postgraduate students from the periphery of potential membership in the CoP to mature membership during the process of dissertation writing (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002).

### **Postgraduate student engagement with core members of the CoP to develop academic writing skills**

Postgraduate supervisors are core members of the CoP with whom students have intensive and regular interaction. Supervisors participate most actively with the student in the process of dissertation writing and are primarily responsible for best practice development and knowledge sharing. They perceive the benefits of developing the student's academic writing skills for their own faculty and the wider institution, while the student's successful graduation also brings them professional recognition from the CoP (Probst & Borzillo, 2008). According to one participant, 'supervisors are the first squadron this side when it comes to getting the writing up to par'. This creates a dual responsibility for the supervisor with concomitant demands in terms of time and effort: the guidance and quality control of disciplinary content as well as the empirical research component; and the nurture of advanced writing skills. Unsurprisingly, supervisors find that they focus on editorial issues to a great extent in their advisory comments to students (Kumar & Stracke, 2007). Supervisors thus become primary resources for language development in general and writing development in particular. They have to remediate poor writing, act as a writing mentor, model good academic writing, and link students to other writing support networks. Several participants pointed out that many supervisors currently struggle to fulfil this dual responsibility. They mentioned that an increasing number of supervisors in South African HEIs are emerging researchers, who are new to supervision and novices in academic writing.

A participant commented:

*The way that institutions try to steamroller students through to increase their throughput numbers has, as a consequence, that inexperienced academics are involved in supervising students...this impacts on everything from the methodology to the writing of the thesis.*

This finding is supported by Kapp, Albertyn and Frick (2011), who document the ongoing need for and popularity of writing workshops for inexperienced academic authors in South

Africa, many of whom are university educators already engaged in supervision. Another participant observed that many poorly written dissertations were submitted for examination with the supervisor's approval, indicating the latter's incompetence to judge the quality of the writing. Similarly, in their analysis of examiners' reports on dissertations, Mafora and Lessing (2014) found that a recurring theme was the occurrence of weak discursive structure, poorly formulated ideas and poor writing in general. This suggests that some of the selected institutions lack a solid core group of members of the CoP who can transmit and exemplify the good practice required to support the development of academic writing among postgraduate students who are still on the periphery (cf. Probst & Borzillo, 2008; Wenger, 2010). For this reason, in addition to providing support for postgraduate students, institutions have been compelled to offer voluntary supervisor training to novice supervisors, although the requirements of academic writing per se are not the primary focus thereof. In the light of these weaknesses in the core CoP at several institutions, Wenger (2010) points out that the usefulness of CoP as learning theory to organisations cannot be romanticised. External factors over which learning participants have scant control may constrain their production of good practice, and 'a community of practice can be dysfunctional, counterproductive, even harmful' (Wenger, 2010:2).

In order to strengthen the existing CoP and to address gaps in the expertise of core members, universities in the sample frequently recruit the assistance of external experts, such as mentors and language editors. At one institution, students who were considered 'extreme cases' were assigned academic mentors who were tasked with the improvement of the mentee's writing skills; however, the availability of suitable mentors did not meet the growing demand. One participant explained that, at her institution, the problem created by poor academic writing had been delegated to individual faculties and academic departments, who should then devise their own strategies to support the necessary skills development. A common solution used by several faculties was to appoint an online mentor, commonly a retired emeritus professor, to support postgraduate students with dissertation writing. Another institution employed a very small number of language support staff on campus to assist struggling students. 'Not an ideal case scenario as there are only a few [language supporters] assisting [the students]...not sure about numbers, but less than five', the participant said.

At four of the six institutions, students were required to have the final draft of the dissertation edited by a professional language expert or editor before submission for examination. In one instance, the editor was required to provide a written declaration of editing before the submission of the dissertation for examination. A participant described this procedure:

*We have a list of accredited editors...people who are affiliated with language editing institutions...because we had, for example, a supervisor who asked his wife, a secretary, to do the editing of his doctoral student. If editors are affiliated and examiners complain about the editing, we can report the editor to the organisation. We have done that once; the external examiner extensively commented on the language and the student needed to revise and resubmit on the grounds of language problems. However, supervisors normally recommend someone to their students.*

In contrast, another participant explained that her institution did not require professional editing of the dissertation: 'That is resisted here...the student has to take responsibility for the grammar and the layout and cannot outsource that.' Notwithstanding, she acknowledged that some supervisors encouraged students to use editorial services, but it was not policy. When

she received requests from students in this regard, she provided them with a list of consultants, 'but it is entirely a private agreement'. Participants' comments also indicate that professional editing of a thesis is seldom a collaborative development exercise between editor and student and it does not include any formal instruction in academic writing. Only in exceptional cases will a language editor engage in lengthy discussion with an ESL student during the editorial process in order to give developmental feedback with a view to nurturing the student's academic writing skills (Flowerdew, 2000). Furthermore, this kind of transferral of the responsibility for new members' learning from the CoP to external consultants does not necessarily increase the new members' know-how in a domain where they require improvement (Probst & Borzillo, 2008). To foster a reciprocal, collaborative learning environment (Wenger, 1998) for academic writing, language editors would have to be drawn into a CoP and not merely limit themselves to the copy-editing tasks normally viewed as appropriate in the editing of dissertations (Kruger & Bevan-Dye, 2013).

### **Intra-organisational resources to develop academic writing skills**

A battery of intra-organisational resources to support academic writing can extend and enrich the core CoP, such as informal and formal peer interaction with those who have more expertise in writing, books, manuals, visual representations, and technological tools, to mention only a few (Barron, 2014). All the HEIs in this study enriched the learning environment of postgraduate students along these lines to some degree.

All institutions offered workshops for postgraduate students. However, the efficacy of the workshops for the development of academic writing skills is questionable since the workshops were primarily aimed at the provision of general rules or tips on a multitude of topics related to dissertation writing. Furthermore, in most cases workshops were of short duration: from a morning to two days. At one institution which offered a workshop for students who had recently registered for the proposal writing stage of the dissertation, a session of only 30 minutes was allocated to academic writing, which is clearly inadequate for an in-depth presentation on the topic. Participation in such workshops is usually voluntary, which means that many students miss the opportunity. As one participant explained, 'there are students who think that they don't need writing support, but in fact they do'. This confirms that practice reflects the individual meaning negotiated by those involved in it, regardless of external efforts by the organisation to mould, regulate or mandate practice (Wenger, 2010).

Participants further explained that workshops were often staggered according to the rhythms of the academic year. At the commencement of the year, workshop facilitators addressed proposal writing; mid-year workshops dealt with the guidelines for the literature review; end-of-the-year workshops covered editing and finalising the dissertation. All institutions provided access to plagiarism detecting tools (Turnitin was used by five of the six institutions) and training or guidelines in the use of this software were available for supervisors and students. Most institutions also offered informal peer-orientated groups where postgraduate students could share their research and discuss dissertation writing among other issues, such as the '*New Voices in Science*' communication initiative and '*Pop Up Cafés*' at the US; and weekly 'buzz-groups' and 'brown bag' sessions at other HEIs. However, these informal groups were not explicitly aimed at giving postgraduate students a structured opportunity to practise writing, share their writing with peers, and exchange

feedback, all of which are necessary for creating a community of emerging writers (Newell, 2006).

The provision of dedicated writing groups or workshops for postgraduate students was less common. The US Postgraduate and International Office (2016) advertised workshops to assist postgraduate students to ‘hone their writing skills’, among other topics such as ‘the use of Google Scholar’, ‘article writing’, and ‘plagiarism’. It also advertised a ‘*Shut Up & Write*’ lunch-hour session which aimed to provide postgraduate students with ‘a collegial, enjoyable writing space’ (US Postgraduate and International Office, 2016). Only UCT offered focused training in the development of academic writing skills. This included workshops of longer duration on specific topics as well as a writing retreat for those students who were required to write articles in addition to the dissertation as part of the PhD. This retreat included writing coaches to support the skills development of participating students. The participant explained:

*We offered a five-day face-to-face workshop called ‘Navigating Research Literacies’ and we were busy developing an online version of the course.... We also offered a five-day course on academic writing especially for students in the sciences (Natural Sciences, Health Sciences and Engineering). In addition, a number of workshops aimed at academic writing were offered: ‘What am I expected to do when asked to “Critically discuss...”?’; A one-day workshop on developing the narrative thread in a thesis; a workshop on how to organise the literature review; a workshop on writing a proposal; a workshop on editing your thesis; a workshop on sustaining the argument over the length of your thesis; and a two-and-a-half day writing retreat with two writing coaches for PhD students. This retreat was aimed specifically at those students who needed to write articles for publication from the research they had done.*

Although not directly linked to postgraduate studies, the English Language Centre at UCT (UCT English Language Centre, 2015) offered a year-round continuing education programme, ‘English as a Foreign Language’, to international participants of all ages and at various levels and another course (eight to 32 weeks, depending on English proficiency levels) on reading academic texts, argumentation, and use of grammar and vocabulary. This institution’s library was also very active regarding information retrieval and citation techniques and advertised a consolidated calendar of writing related training events. The participant stated:

*So there might be a workshop in data management for archives, or looking for data...and they will also do things like how to do a literature review, how to use Mendeley or Harvard notes, or the Harvard referencing system...how to avoid plagiarism...and proper citation.*

A further development at UCT was the introduction of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) to support ESL students in their academic writing (UCT Centre for Innovation in Teaching and Learning, 2016). MOOCs are free online courses with no entry requirements, designed for mass participation. A participant stated:

*I made available the following MOOCs: Principles of written English (parts I, II and III); English Composition I: Achieving expertise; Think again: How to Reason and Argue; and SciWrite: Writing in the Sciences.*

Moreover, these MOOCs were supplemented with face-to-face tutorials with experts and peers where students engaged in writing activities regulated by the central office; maximum attendance was 20 students, which enabled interpersonal interaction and individualised assistance.

*I supplemented the MOOCs with weekly face-to-face tutorials in which the students collectively discussed the online material, raised queries and practised, practised and practised actual writing. The drop-out rate in MOOCs is staggeringly high, but having a weekly set class, facilitated by a language tutor, really helped to monitor progress and keep students engaged.*

These abovementioned efforts are singular in their provision of explicit writing practice for students. At another institution, disciplinary-orientated writing groups functioned in certain faculties, for example the faculty of law. These also gave students the opportunity to write and present their work to each other for critical comment.

The websites of all six institutions contained significant information related to academic writing for students; this frequently included downloadable material. The ODL institution, UNISA, relied heavily on this strategy to distribute all learning material to registered students via the myUNISA system, which included general guidelines for academic writing, citation techniques, and the structure of a research proposal. UWC had a similar resource on its website in the public domain. The US Postgraduate and International Office's (2016) website provided information about essential resources (e.g. a list of editors, accredited journals and predatory publishers, a self-help guide for the dissertation format, instructions for downloading the publishing software LaTeX and requirements for authorial integrity, ethics and library use); opportunities such as those mentioned in the foregoing section (e.g. writing workshops and short courses on library research); and a central calendar listing the available sessions per month, many of which relate to writing.

## CONCLUSION

This paper explored the provision made by six South African HEIs to support the development of academic writing skills among postgraduate students through a qualitative inquiry informed by Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of CoP. Findings indicate that academic writing is central to the 'regimen of competence' required for full membership of the academic CoP through the successful production of the dissertation. Furthermore, most postgraduate students engaged in dissertation writing are reliant on supervisors as primary language resource, who are often inexperienced themselves – both as supervisors and academic authors. Finally, the resulting context for the support of academic writing among postgraduate students in the selected institutions is characterised by short-term ad hoc initiatives aimed at a range of broad topics of importance to the student; the dissemination of information 'about' academic writing rather than explicit and intensive opportunities for direct engagement in writing, coaching and peer review; and voluntary participation in writing skills development. Explicit instruction in academic writing and organised opportunities for writing practice were limited to one institution. It is concluded that the support of academic writing deserves a priority place on universities' agendas, from undergraduate to postgraduate levels, across all disciplines. All successful and sustainable CoPs have focused, well-defined purposes that are directly tied to the sponsoring organisation's mission, and opportunities for learning should be organised around these

purposes (Wenger et al., 2002). Thus, it can be concluded that the induction of postgraduate students as competent members of an academic community would require a purposeful and integrated institutional strategy which provides explicit writing skills for specific disciplines. Although generic writing courses are time and cost effective, academic writing should preferably be embedded in a subject field, in accordance with the idea of a CoP.

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