

# An exploration of academic writing development across research degrees: the students' perspective.

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**Abstract:** developing academic writing is a crucial skill for completing research degrees. This paper reports an on-going UK Higher Education Academy-funded study aimed at exploring research students' perceptions of what helps them develop their academic writing. Students and graduates from across university subjects were asked questions about effective feedback for academic writing around four themes: (a) supervisors' feedback; (b) training; (c) cohort experiences; and (d) personal strategies for academic writing development. A review of literature highlighted the need to study this topic from the students' viewpoint. There is an expanding body of literature on writing skills with a focus on undergraduate students (e.g. Fairbairn & Winch, 2011) and as part of handbooks for research students (e.g. Burgess *et al.*, 2006). Handbooks tend to frame any advice on the tutors' viewpoint, offering recommendations on how to 'choreograph the dissertation' and what to do with unexpected findings (Coles & McGrath, 2010). However, when providing advice on academic writing most suggestions tend to emerge from the experience of the authors as supervisors, rather than from the students' perception of what works best for them. Semi-structured interviews were used in this study. As in our previous qualitative enquiries (Odenda, 2007, 2010; Burgess & Wellington, 2010), thematic analysis of interviews was undertaken with the assistance of specialist software (NVivo). Themes emerged from the students' responses outlining the factors influencing the students' writing development. The on-going analysis captures the dynamic processes that affect higher level thinking and build on recent research on professional doctorates (Burgess, Weller & Wellington, 2011). Results contribute to a shared student-staff understanding of effective feedback for developing academic writing, which has value across institutions delivering research degrees.

## Introduction

This paper explores research students' academic writing processes, including individual strategies and a facilitating environment for writing. The Researcher Development Framework (CRAC, 2012) lists academic writing as a key learning area for research students, but this expectation is not reflected in research degree programmes that often focus on methods training. Developing academic writing is a crucial skill not only for completing dissertations but to increase the employability of graduates, who at job interviews have to evidence expertise in preparing reports/papers and

literature reviews (Burgess *et al.*, 2006; Jackson, 2007). This skill is increasingly relevant in the diverse and competitive job market: think tanks, NGOs, universities, corporate and government departments all expect highly developed writing skills in successful research job applicants (Rubio & Hooley, 2010).

This paper is based on a funded UK Higher Education Academy (HEA) project aimed at exploring research students' perceptions of what helps them develop their academic writing. The focus is on the students' viewpoint rather than their supervisors'. Over 40 interviewees were drawn from a range of university subjects to outline the factors influencing academic writing development and the steps students need to take to progress from beginning research-students to graduates. The project's objectives are:

- to develop with and for research students a generative model of their academic writing;
- to make transparent the steps and factors involved in developing academic writing so that areas for development can be shared easily and effectively with research students;
- to create resources to support the development of academic writing feedback across research programmes, initially at the universities of Hertfordshire and Leicester and later across a number of UK institutions.

This project aims to develop shared student-staff understanding of effective feedback for developing academic writing, and to produce resources that will have value across all UK institutions delivering research degrees.

## **Methodology**

This research extends earlier work on enhancing feedback to students (Graham, 2010). In addition to the findings relating to feedback, this earlier work confirmed the benefits of student research in identifying issues and providing unique insights into the student experience which can lead to institutional change (Fielding & Bragg, 2003). These enquiries also identified student understanding of 'feedback language', and the underlying concepts it references, as key issues for student success.

On-going discussions with research students and supervisors to explore this further at postgraduate level have identified feedback/support for academic writing as a key issue. In particular, the complex connections between assessment criteria, feedback comments, a facilitating environment for writing and the students' own skills and confidence in academic writing. Research students tend to see these elements as separate entities rather than as parts of a generative process which support the development and assessment of academic writing skills.

The students' viewpoint on the support received in research degrees is regularly examined through surveys such as the HEA's Postgraduate Research Experience Survey. Nevertheless, surveys usually offer detailed descriptions of the respondents' perceptions but limited analyses of the reasoning and causes behind them. This project will offer insights that hopefully, will begin to address this gap. This will be achieved by using in-depth qualitative interviews, allowing for an exploration of how participants construct and reinforce their ideas, and offering outputs that can impact on practice beyond the participants' setting. Interviewees for our research were selected from across disciplines following a purposive sampling approach to ensure 'maximum variation' (Odena & Welch, 2009, 2012). Over thirty-five students were interviewed using a range of questions on: (a) supervisors' feedback; (b) training; (c) cohort experiences; and (d) personal strategies for academic writing development. The following are some examples of questions used:

- v SUPERVISORS' FEEDBACK
  - υ What type of feedback helped (or would have helped) you better in developing your writing?

- ∨ PERSONAL STRATEGIES FOR ACADEMIC WRITING DEVELOPMENT
  - ∨ What motivates you in terms of writing?
  - ∨ What is the environment most appropriate for you in productive writing? (Where do you write, do you have a space at home/work? Do you prefer individual/group writing?)
  - ∨ What do you use to help you write (e.g. diary, mind maps)?
  - ∨ How were the thesis' chapters produced within the timeline of your research degree?

A thematic analysis of the full transcripts was then carried out to draw out emerging themes. The on-going analysis of research findings around each of these themes is discussed below.

### **Interim findings**

A number of key themes are emerging from our on-going analysis of the transcripts:

#### *Personal Strategies*

Different strategies acknowledged - systematic work as common theme. Interviewees were motivated by deadlines and clear expectations:

- ∨ *I tend to be very focused - not least because I was self-funded...With my supervisors we would set a date for next tutorial each time we met which gave me a time-frame to do the next bit of writing. I would set aside a couple of evenings in the week and Saturday and Sunday afternoons for studying* (doctoral graduate).

#### *Environment*

- ∨ *Initially, I wrote paragraphs on file paper before using the computer as I could do that wherever I was. I found working at the dining table using my laptop (I could occasionally look out at the garden while mulling over how to phrase ideas) was most productive. I needed to have time to think so being in a quiet place on my own was best.* (doctoral graduate)
- ∨ *Working in my 'work' office is not useful as there are other distractions* (part-time doctoral student)

#### *Tools*

- ∨ *I made lots of notes from my reading in A4 notebooks and then I wrote keywords in the margin against each note. This was really useful when organising work into chapters....I used to carry an A5 notebook with me and make notes as ideas occurred to me* (doctoral graduate)
- ∨ *The time spent with the project supervisor is a vital part of the writing process as I am able to confirm my ideas before putting them down in writing, to avoid going in the wrong direction* (1<sup>st</sup> year part-time doctoral student)

#### *Writing Production*

- ∨ *I tried to have an evening off each week but found that I needed to write most days...I wrote the introduction, methodology and literature review early and then amended them as the dissertation developed* (doctoral graduate)
- ∨ *I create a draft and then leave it for a day or so, then go back with a fresh mind and reread for flow and errors. I then ask family to read through for clarity and general errors. My assumption is that if someone with no real prior knowledge of the subject can read and*

*understand the paper then I must have articulated and explained ideas fairly well! (part-time doctoral student)*

#### *English as a Second Language (ESL) Students' Strategies*

An interesting finding that we did not expect was the particular strategies used by ESL students compared to those who had English as their first language. Examples of comments from students indicated that they had to find strategies which enabled them to develop their language skills as well as their writing skills. This often meant learning new words and phrases and how they could be used in academic writing:

- ✓ *I had a notebook only for academic writing so I would add things on that so I developed my writing vocabulary...I divided it into sections. The first one was, if you want to write an introduction or an abstract which are the expressions that you use...when reading articles I would underline expressions that the authors used and copied them in my writing, that helped me very much (ESL doctoral graduate)*
- ✓ *When I say this journal article is very easy to read...I try to copy the phrase...Reading is very good practice, because without input we can't output...I copy the structure as well and those of supervisor feedback (ESL 2<sup>nd</sup> year doctoral student)*

It appears that difficulties faced by ESL students are not fully addressed by the courses on academic writing that they might attend. Such courses may look at writing in terms of identifying 'what's wrong' or trying to distinguish between what the writer is doing and saying, or genre awareness raising exercises. Previous investigations into doctoral students' academic writing indicate there are a number of issues that ESL students face (e.g. Chou, 2011; Cotterall, 2011). Chou (2011) in particular discusses the problems of Chinese students in terms of coming from a learning culture where they are not taught to write critically. Communication verbally can also be a problem if students have not been taught correct pronunciation of words. Other issues that emerged were:

- Writing also boosted their language skills.
- Needed to develop clarity in grammar.
- Some supervisors led them to believe that content and ideas were more important than writing.
- Students were not always clear what was being asked of them by their supervisors.
- When not writing in their own language students felt that the quality of what they were capable of was reduced by 50%.
- Time – writing was often painfully slow.
- Improving writing was less important than doing writing.

#### **Concluding thoughts**

In her study Cotterall (2011) argued that the assumption that being part of a community of other researchers would enable students to develop their writing through peer discussion did not necessarily prove effective. She proposed that supervisors need to embrace their pedagogical role in inducting students into their discipline's writing practices. The interim analysis of our interviewees' perspectives suggest some factors that play a major role in developing academic writing, including: the provision of tools to facilitate development (e.g. formative feedback, writing strategies), the students' own personal characteristics, and the availability of a physical and emotional environment conducive to productive writing. The next step in the on-going analysis and discussion is to draw a generative model of research students' academic writing development, outlining the relationships and balance between the factors influencing this development.

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