Quality tutoring practices in higher education: The role of writing centres in supporting postgraduate students in South Africa

P. Mutsvairigwa
Department of Human Resources Management
Durban University of Technology
Durban, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1067-109X

N. Govender
DUT Writing Centre
Durban University of Technology
Durban, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9613-0341

ABSTRACT

Writing centres are integral in the promotion of quality tutoring practices that address the varied and evolving writing needs of students in higher education. As postgraduate writers navigate complex academic and research expectations, university writing centres serve as key spaces for developing academic writing competence and confidence. Ensuring quality tutoring in these spaces requires a deep understanding of postgraduate students' writing needs and systematic training for tutors who provide this support. Drawing on Humanising Pedagogy and Communities of Practice, this study examines how writing centres foster quality tutoring that empowers postgraduate writers.

Anchored within an interpretivist qualitative framework, this study the writing centre's role in in supporting postgraduate students and examined how quality tutoring practices are cultivated through targeted tutor development. Data was generated through a focus group discussion with fourteen writing centre tutors, ten interviews with postgraduate students, as well as six interviews with writing centre practitioners at two Universities of Technology (UoTs) in South Africa. Using thematic analysis, supported by NVivo 15, the findings highlight that while tutors possess strong foundational knowledge, many feel underprepared for the specialised demands of postgraduate academic writing. This underscores the need for continuous professional training, institutional integration of writing centre support, and the promotion of empathetic, collaborative tutoring approaches. This study concludes that quality tutoring is characterised by confident, reflective, and adaptive tutors who engage postgraduate writers as partners in the learning process. Most writing centre research centres on undergraduate writers; thus, this article fills this gap by specifically focusing on postgraduate writers' needs and tutor preparedness for that level. By investing in tutor training and institutional collaboration, writing centres can enhance postgraduate writing success and overall academic quality in South African higher education.

Keywords: writing centre, tutors, postgraduate students, training, academic writing support, higher education

INTRODUCTION

In the evolving landscape of higher education, the demand for quality academic support services has gradually become critical, more-so for postgraduate students who are faced with unique challenges in navigating advanced academic writing and research. Writing centres, as essential parts of academic support systems, play a pivotal role in fostering the development of critical writing, enhancing academic literacy, and promoting scholarly success (Mhlongo et al 2023; Namakula and Ndaba 2024). Writing Centres are specialised pedagogical spaces which provide one-on-one and small-group support that promotes writing competence and critical thinking and academic confidence (Clarence 2012). While much of the research on writing centres focuses on undergraduate writers (Evans-Tokaryk and Shabanza 2022; Archer 2010), the growing population of postgraduate students presents new and complex demands that require advanced forms of writing support (Kadenge et al 2019). Postgraduate writing involves engagement with disciplinary conventions, research methodologies, and scholarly argumentation – processes that are often daunting for developing researchers.

The writing centre's role in supporting postgraduate students is particularly significant in South Africa's context where higher education institutions are tasked with addressing historical inequities and diverse student needs (Nkala and Sobantu 2021). Furthermore, the imperative to improve postgraduate throughput rates and research productivity has amplified the importance of writing centres as key contributors to institutional quality and academic development (Council on Higher Education [CHE] 2020). Yet, ensuring quality tutoring practices in these contexts depends heavily on the preparedness, pedagogical competence, and reflective capacity of writing centre tutors. Writing centre tutors are often diverse range postgraduate students (mostly Masters' or PhD candidates) who have exhibited exceptional writing and communication abilities. They are instrumental in assisting students in the development of their own academic writing. Tutors often come from diverse disciplinary backgrounds and may feel ill-equipped to support the nuanced challenges of postgraduate writing, especially in multilingual, multicultural learning environments.

Despite the growing recognition of writing centres' role in postgraduate academic development, empirical research on how tutors are trained and supported to work with postgraduate writers, particularly within Universities of Technology (UoTs) where student profiles, institutional resourcing, and academic cultures differ from those of traditional research universities, remains limited. This gap matters because without a clear understanding of tutors' preparedness and the pedagogical demands placed on them, writing centres risk being under-equipped to meaningfully support postgraduate throughput and research quality at precisely the institutions under the most pressure to improve these outcomes. This gap is addressed by this

study through the examination of how writing centres at two UoTs in South Africa, cultivate quality tutoring practices to support postgraduate writers.

Specifically, the study aims to: (1) examine writing centre tutors' training needs and the pedagogical challenges they encounter in supporting postgraduate writers; (2) explore how quality tutoring is understood and experienced by tutors, postgraduate students, and writing centre practitioners; and (3) understand how writing centres, as academic development spaces, can be structured and resourced to more effectively support postgraduate student success. By examining the strategies, challenges, and outcomes associated with writing centre tutoring practices, this study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on academic support in higher education and offer insights into how writing centres can better serve as catalysts for postgraduate success in a transforming educational landscape.

This format of this article is as follows: the next section outlines the key strands in the reviewed literature, the theoretical oftenest of Humanising Pedagogy and Communities of Practice that underpin the study, followed by the methodology, findings, discussion, and concluding implications for practice and policy.

KEY STRANDS IN THE LITERATURE

This literature review situates the study within the expansive scholarship on postgraduate academic writing and the role of writing centres in supporting students, with a specific focus on South African higher education. It begins by establishing the national and institutional imperative for postgraduate writing support, before turning to the literature on writing centres as sites of that support. From there, it examines the affective dimensions of postgraduate writing, the preparedness and training of writing centre tutors, and the specific challenges posed by multilingualism in a South African context, before considering how technology and artificial intelligence are reshaping tutoring practice. Across these strands, the authors identify points of convergence as well as unresolved tensions in how quality postgraduate writing support is conceptualised – tensions that this study is positioned to address.

Postgraduate academic writing and the imperative for academic support in South Africa

Badley (2009, 209) defines academic writing as a dynamic process that involves the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of knowledge, the connection, disconnecting, and reconnecting of concepts, the description and re-description of world views, as well as the shaping, mis-shaping, and reshaping of ideas. At postgraduate level, academic writing becomes

a critical vehicle for generating new knowledge and contributing meaningfully to scholarly discourse.

A consistent thread across recent scholarship positions postgraduate research output as central to national development, though each source approaches this claim from a different angle. Zewotir, North and Murray (2015) and Thakane (2020) frame the issue in terms of institutional and policy concern, noting that South Africa continues to lag behind other countries in producing postgraduate graduates, with throughput rates remaining a persistent concern for both universities and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). Chankseliani et al (2020) extend this into a knowledge-economy argument, positioning postgraduate students as central to advancing research, innovation, and the resolution of socio-economic challenges. Shobande and Asongu (2021) offer empirical support for this connection, demonstrating a bidirectional relationship between knowledge generation and economic growth in South Africa specifically. Namakula and Ndaba (2024) converge with this view, arguing that national progress depends on a skilled, knowledgeable graduate workforce capable of competing globally. Taken together, this literature is largely unified in treating postgraduate writing and research output as a national imperative rather than a purely individual academic concern. What this body of work does not resolve, however, is how that imperative should translate into tutoring practice; it establishes why support matters at a macro level but says comparatively little about what quality support looks like in the tutoring encounter itself. Zhan, Sun and Zhang (2021) begin to bridge this gap, arguing that the complexity of postgraduate writing tasks demands tailored academic support delivered through institutional mechanisms such as writing centres, including workshops, mentoring, and access to writing resources. This bridge from policy imperative to institutional mechanism is the point at which the writing centre literature becomes directly relevant.

Writing centres as sites for postgraduate student support

In the South African higher education context, where the enduring legacy of apartheid continues to shape unequal access to quality education and disproportionately affects under-represented student populations, writing centres play a critical and multifaceted role in supporting postgraduate students (Themane 2021). It is against this backdrop that writing centres have been positioned as sites of transformation and equity, tasked with bridging historically entrenched gaps in academic preparedness (Daniels and Richards 2016; Kadenge et al 2019).

Within this shared premise, however, the literature reveals two related but distinct emphases in how writing centres' role is conceptualised. Archer and Richards (2011) frame the

writing centre primarily through an affective and relational lens: a collaborative learning space offering writing companionship using one-on-one and group consultations, in which tutors participate in dialogue to understand students' concerns, goals, and challenges, validating their ideas and encouraging critical thinking in a non-judgemental way. Clarence (2020) reinforces this framing, arguing that this personalised approach is crucial for building students' confidence as writers. By contrast, Khumalo and Reddy (2021) and Khumalo and Onwuegbuchulam (2023) foreground a more epistemic framing, describing writing centres' primary function as facilitating academic literacy – understood as encompassing writing, reading, thinking, and communication within specific disciplinary norms – and socialising postgraduate students into the academic discourse of their fields. Moodley (2024) sits closer to this latter position, emphasising that this socialisation function is particularly critical in South Africa's context, where many postgraduate students are from historically disadvantaged backgrounds and may lack adequate preparation for the rigours of postgraduate study.

These two emphases, i.e., writing centres as relational, affective spaces versus writing centres as epistemic access points, are not mutually exclusive, but the literature has not fully reconciled how they operate together in practice, or whether tutors are expected to hold both roles simultaneously.

Tutor's role in fostering quality academic writing support

Given the above-mentioned roles of writing centres in assisting postgraduate students, it is essential that writing centre tutors become trained and equipped to effectively assist them. Tutors are at the heart of the effectiveness of the writing centre. Tutors need to be equipped with a diverse set of skills and knowledge that speak to the unique academic writing challenges that postgraduate students face, as outlined in earlier sections.

Postgraduate students often experience a challenging and isolating research journey (Harrison et al 2023), and Clarence's (2020) research on the affective dimensions of scholarship shows that this isolation frequently manifests as anxiety and stress specifically tied to writing tasks. Literature positions writing centre tutors as mentors, coaches, commentators, counsellors, and allies in addition to being skills instructors as they offer assistance that goes much beyond criticism of writing techniques (Gustafsson and Ganobcsik-Williams 2016; Liu and Harwood 2022). Muryani, Romadhon and Mustofa (2024) add a peer dimension to this picture, showing that peer-to-peer mentoring and collaboration – facilitated by writing centres through one-on-one sessions, workshops, and feedback exchanges – significantly enhance postgraduate students' writing development, confidence, and sense of community.

This affective strand converges with, but also complicates, the epistemic-access framing established in the previous section: if writing centres are expected to provide both disciplinary socialisation and emotional containment for isolated postgraduate researchers, this raises the question – largely unaddressed in the literature reviewed here – of whether tutors are adequately prepared to hold both roles at once.

Given the dual epistemic and affective demands placed on writing centres, tutor preparedness becomes central to whether quality support can be delivered at all. Research broadly converges on reflective practice and ongoing professional training as the primary mechanisms for sustaining tutoring quality (Roper, 2025; Lochtie et al 2025; Govender and Ndadziyira 2023; Khumalo and Onwuegbuchulam 2023). Govender et al (2022) emphasise the importance of creating space for tutors to reflect on their roles and the writing development process, through mechanisms such as regular workshops, peer observation, and structured feedback – a view grounded in Schön's (1983) foundational work on reflective practice, in which tutors evaluate their approaches, question assumptions, and iteratively improve their engagement strategies.

This optimistic, training-oriented literature sits in tension with Wingate's (2019) more critical finding that many tutors tend to dominate conversations during writing consultations, inhibiting student participation and critical thinking regardless of training received. Where Govender et al (2022) and Schön (1983) suggest that reflective practice is a sufficient mechanism for quality, Wingate's finding implies a persistent structural problem that training alone may not resolve – a gap between what tutors are trained to do and what they actually do in practice. Liu and Harwood (2022) and Aldohon (2021) offer one practical response to this tension, arguing that tutors must be trained to balance higher-order concerns (structure, argumentation, coherence), traditionally prioritised in orthodox writing centre pedagogy, with lower-order concerns (grammar, mechanics), particularly for multilingual students. Liu and Harwood (2022) note, however, that in practice tutors often adapt their roles based on student need, at times departing from these orthodox, non-directive norms altogether. This adaptive, context-sensitive picture of tutoring practice, as opposed to a fixed pedagogical ideal, sets up the final and most significant contrast in this review.

The convention-based framing of quality tutoring discussed above (Liu and Harwood, 2022; Aldohon 2021) assumes a relatively stable set of disciplinary and academic writing conventions that tutors should help students meet. A distinct strand of literature challenges the legitimacy of that assumption directly. According to Landry et al (2023), there is a significant training gap because many writing centre tutors feel underprepared to assist multilingual students effectively. Pilin et al (2020) locates this gap more specifically in tutors' limited

understanding of the challenges multilingual students face, including language proficiency and unfamiliarity with academic discourse norms that are themselves culturally and linguistically specific. Namakula, Kimani and Kadenge (2025) push this critique further, arguing that traditional monolingual, English-only approaches in academic writing support marginalise students from diverse linguistic backgrounds, and that writing centres, through their tutors, can instead disrupt dominant language ideologies by incorporating translanguaging practices that foster linguistic justice. Tai and Wei (2020) provide the theoretical grounding for this position, conceptualising translanguaging is a pedagogical method that enables learners to utilise their entire linguistic repertoire, while Shube (2024) and Zhou and Landa (2019) elaborate on translanguaging as the practice of integrating multiple languages or language varieties within a single discourse. This stands in direct tension with the disciplinary-convention framing in the previous section: where Liu and Harwood (2022) and Aldohon (2021) treat academic writing conventions as a relatively fixed standard tutors should help students meet. Namakula et al (2025) and Tai and Wei (2020) challenge the legitimacy of that standard itself, particularly in a multilingual South African context.

Two further developments have reshaped the tutoring landscape in ways the literature has only begun to address. First, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a shift to virtual tutoring, with Rempel and Friesen (2022) highlighting both the challenges and opportunities this shift presents, and the corresponding need for tutors to adapt their pedagogical practices to sustain engagement in online contexts. The COVID-19 pandemic had a direct and disruptive bearing on writing centre tutors specifically, rather than simply accelerating a generic shift to online tools. Namakula and Kadenge (2024) document how peer tutors at a South African university writing centre were required to transition abruptly from face-to-face to online consultations, with little preparatory training, placing new demands on their digital literacy while stripping away many of the in-person relational cues (discussed in the affective strand above) that tutors had relied on to build rapport and trust with postgraduate writers. Tutors' resilience, rather than institutional preparedness, is identified as the primary factor that sustained academic support during this period. Rempel and Friesen (2022) similarly note that sustaining student engagement in online consultations required tutors to adapt their pedagogical practices considerably, though without the same institutional support or training that might have eased this transition. This literature suggests that the pandemic exposed rather than resolved the tutor preparedness gaps identified, and that any lasting shift toward hybrid or online tutoring models carries implications for how tutors are trained and supported going forward.

Second, the emergence of AI writing tools such as ChatGPT has introduced a more contested set of findings. Solak (2024) reports that ChatGPT significantly enhances writing

fluency and efficiency, though this raises ethical concerns around originality and authorship. Mutsvairigwa et al (2024) reach a more cautious conclusion: while AI tools may free tutors to direct more attention towards higher-order concerns such as structure and argumentation, over-reliance on these tools, risks producing writing that is polished but intellectually superficial, and risks diminishing the personalised interaction central to the affective and relational functions of tutoring described earlier in this review. These two findings are not strictly contradictory, but they represent a meaningful difference in emphasis – technological optimism about efficiency gains versus caution about what may be lost – that has direct implications for how tutors should be trained to use these tools responsibly.

The literature converges on a shared premise: postgraduate writing support is complex, multidimensional, and consequential – for individual students, for institutions, and for national development. However, this review has identified several points of unresolved tension that bear directly on this study's focus: the relationship between writing centres' epistemic and affective functions; the gap between reflective-practice training models and observed tutoring behaviour; and, most significantly, the tension between convention-based and translanguaging-based conceptions of what "quality" tutoring for postgraduate, multilingual students actually requires. What remains largely absent from this literature is a clear account of how writing centres, and the tutors within them, conceptualise and measure quality in postgraduate writing support specifically, particularly within South Africa's higher education context where transformation and access remain central and unresolved concerns. This study addresses that gap by exploring the experiences, perceptions, and practices of tutors, practitioners, and postgraduate students themselves.

The theoretical framework informing the study, i.e. Humanising Pedagogy and Communities of Practice, is discussed separately in the section that follows.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Two complementary theoretical frameworks underpin this study, namely, Freire's (1970) Humanising Pedagogy and Wenger's (1998) Communities of Practice (CoP). Both frameworks are grounded in a broadly social constructivist epistemology, which holds that knowledge is not transmitted from expert to novice but is actively and collaboratively constructed through social interaction, dialogue, and shared experience (Vygotsky 1978). This epistemological commitment is central to the present study: if academic writing competence is understood as socially constructed rather than individually acquired, then the quality of tutoring cannot be assessed solely by tutors' technical knowledge of writing conventions – it must also account for the relational and communal processes through which that knowledge is negotiated between

tutor and student. It is this premise that justifies pairing Freire's relational pedagogy with Wenger's theory of situated learning.

Freire's (1970) Humanising Pedagogy provides the ethical and relational foundation for this framework. Central to Freire's work is a distinction between banking education, in which students are treated as passive recipients into whom knowledge is "deposited," and problem-posing education, a dialogic process in which teacher and student jointly investigate and construct meaning as co-participants. Freire argues that banking education is fundamentally dehumanising, reducing students to objects of instruction rather than recognising them as capable subjects with their own knowledge and agency. Through dialogic engagement, problem-posing education instead fosters *conscientização,* or critical consciousness – an awareness that enables learners to critically engage with, and act upon, their own social and educational realities. Applied to writing centre tutoring, this distinction matters because it provides a concrete standard against which to evaluate tutoring quality: a humanising, problem-posing approach treats the postgraduate writer as a capable scholar with valid ideas requiring dialogic development, whereas a banking approach, evident, for instance, in prescriptive or corrective tutoring, risks reproducing the very deficit thinking that writing centres claim to resist (Govender and Alcock 2020). This is particularly consequential in linguistically diverse and historically unequal contexts like that of South Africa's higher education, where deficit framings of multilingual and first-generation postgraduate students remain a persistent risk (Govender and Alcock 2020).

Complementing this relational foundation, Wenger's (1998) Communities of Practice (CoP) framework, building on Lave and Wenger's (1991) earlier work on situated learning, offers a way for understanding how learning occurs through sustained participation in a shared social and professional context. Wenger identifies three defining elements of a community of practice: a domain (a shared area of interest or competence that binds members together, such as academic writing development), a community (the relationships and joint engagement through which members learn from and support one another), and a practice (a shared repertoire of resources including tools, language, routines, and ways of resolving problems that members develop over time through their joint activity). These concepts matter for this study because they reframe the writing centre not merely as a service that delivers support to individual students, but as a community in which tutors, postgraduate students, and practitioners jointly construct shared understandings of what quality academic writing and quality tutoring looks like. This community dimension proved particularly significant during periods of disruption, such as the move to online tutoring during the COVID-19 pandemic, when writing centres

relied on this shared practice and mutual support to sustain inclusive, flexible engagement with students despite the loss of in-person interaction (Namakula and Kadenge 2024).

Integrating Humanising Pedagogy and CoP provides a robust conceptual foundation for analysing quality tutoring in writing centres. Where Freire (1970) foregrounds the ethical and relational dimensions of tutoring – empathy, dialogue, and the rejection of deficit framing – Wenger (1998) foregrounds the social and collaborative processes through which tutoring expertise and academic writing practices are developed and shared over time. Together, these frameworks position quality tutoring as both a humanising act and a communal, situated process, rather than a fixed set of technical competencies. This integrated lens enables the analysis not only of what quality tutoring looks like in practice, but of how it is co-constructed relationally and communally within the specific institutional and linguistic realities of South African higher education.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative, multiple case study design situated within an interpretivist paradigm to explore quality tutoring practices in higher education, with specific focus on writing centres' role in supporting postgraduate students in South Africa. The interpretivist paradigm was selected because it rests on the ontological assumption that quality tutoring is not a fixed, objectively measurable construct but is socially constructed and differently understood by tutors, postgraduate students, and practitioners according to their lived experiences (Creswell and Poth 2018). This assumption is consistent with the study's theoretical framework, which similarly treats academic writing competence and tutoring quality as co-constructed through relational and communal processes (see Theoretical Framework). A multiple case study design was adopted because it enabled an in-depth, comparative exploration of writing centre practices across two distinct institutional contexts, allowing points of convergence and divergence between the two sites to be identified (Yin 2018). This article reports on a small-scale study emanating from a larger doctoral study.

The study was conducted at two universities of technology (UoTs) in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, namely, the Durban University of Technology (DUT) and Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT). Both institutions maintain established writing centres offering one-on-one and group consultations to students across all levels of study, staffed by contract tutors under the coordination of writing centre practitioners.

The target population consisted of 40 contract tutors at the DUT Writing Centre and 6 contract tutors at the MUT Writing Centre. Selection of participants for the focus group discussions was through purposive sampling, drawing from tutors who showed their interest

and willingness to take part in the study through informed consent. Tutors were recruited via email invitations containing a letter of information and consent that outlined the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of participation. The resulting focus group discussions comprised 10 tutors from the DUT Writing Centre and 4 tutors from the MUT Writing Centre, totalling 14 participants. Writing centre practitioners were similarly contacted via email and confirmed their availability to participate; six practitioners across both UoTs, responsible for the operational and strategic management of their respective centres, were interviewed individually. Ten postgraduate students, purposively recruited via email and representing a range of disciplines, were also interviewed individually about their experiences of using writing centre services.

Data were generated through two methods to enable triangulation and strengthen the credibility of the findings: one focus group discussion with the fourteen tutors, and individual semi-structured interviews with the ten postgraduate students and six practitioners. All focus group discussions and interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes and were guided by a moderator guide (for the focus group) and a semi-structured interview guide (for the individual interviews). Both instruments were piloted prior to data collection to ensure clarity, relevance, and appropriate framing of questions.

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis, aided by NVivo 15 software for data management and coding. This included getting acquainted with the data by reading the transcripts several times; creating preliminary codes throughout the dataset; compiling codes into potential themes; evaluating and improving themes in comparison to the coded extracts and the dataset overall; clearly defining and labelling the final themes; and creating the analytical narrative, which was bolstered by participant quotes. NVivo 15 facilitated the systematic organisation and management of the large volume of qualitative data generated across the three participant groups.

Credibility was strengthened through methodological triangulation, drawing on focus group and interview data across three participant groups (tutors, postgraduate students, and practitioners). Dependability and confirmability were supported through the maintenance of a detailed audit trail of coding decisions within NVivo. Transferability, rather than statistical generalisability, is offered through the thick, contextualised description of participants' experiences, allowing readers to judge the applicability of the findings to comparable institutional contexts.

The researchers have worked as staff within the two writing centres under study. This insider positioning offered valuable contextual and institutional knowledge that informed the design of the study; it was also actively managed through reflexive engagement throughout the

research process, including reflexive journaling and peer debriefing among the co-researchers, to guard against undue influence on data collection and interpretation.

Ethical approval was obtained from both UoTs' institutional ethics review committees. Informed consent was secured from all participants, and confidentiality was maintained through anonymisation. Tutor responses were coded T1–T14, postgraduate student responses R1–R10 and writing centre practitioner responses P1–P6. Participants were made aware of their entitlement to withdraw from the study at any point in time without repercussions.

This study is limited by its focus on two UoTs in KwaZulu-Natal, which may affect the transferability of findings to other institutional types or provinces. This limitation is mitigated by the study's in-depth, multi-source qualitative approach, which prioritises depth of understanding over breadth of generalisability.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Three major themes that surfaced from the thematic analysis are used to structure the study's findings: (1) quality tutoring as a relational and reflective practice; (2) the need for specialised tutor training to support postgraduate students; and (3) institutional collaboration and support for quality writing centre practice. These themes are discussed and supported by participant quotes and contextualised within the broader literature on academic writing support in higher education. The findings revealed core areas where training is needed.

Theme 1: Quality tutoring as a relational and reflective practice

This theme explores how writing centre tutors conceptualise "quality" in daily tutoring work. This theme recognises that quality tutoring is relational, i.e., grounded in empathy, dialogue, and reflection. Tutors' one-on-one writing centre consultation sessions with postgraduate students were seen to improve the productivity and quality of work of the postgraduate students. The findings showed that by encouraging writing development, confidence, and self-efficacy, writing centre tutors significantly contribute to raising the calibre of students' work.

> "My experience at the writing centre has been transformative, actually, because one of the most important benefits that I gained… was actually focusing on the quality of my research... gaining the ability to structure my work so that it can be presentable and make my arguments more refined" (R8).

The findings indicate that tutors offer essential support in areas such as paraphrasing, referencing, writing style, tone, and organizing research articles. This improves students'

capacity to prioritise the quality of their research and to organize their work efficiently. This was emphasised by postgraduate student R10:

> "They have assisted me by providing guidance on my writing style, the tone of my work and the structuring of my research article" (R10).

The above statement on tutor guidance provided highlights the collaborative nature of writing centre consultations. As noted by Lundin, O'Connor, and Wynn-Perdue (2023), consultations at writing centres create a collaborative atmosphere that empowers students to make knowledgeable choices regarding their writing. Tutors utilise empathy-driven techniques, including listening, providing guidance, and encouraging, customised to meet the unique needs of each student. This approach diminishes anxiety and boosts self-efficacy, allowing students to produce work of higher quality (Ryan and Earles 2019).

Certain tutors, including T11 and T12, expressed that they offer helpful feedback to assist students facing challenges with academic writing and to enhance students' self-assurance.

> "Giving constructive feedback to the student is one of the strategies that I actually apply …the last thing you'd want to do is demotivate students or sort of not encourage the students" (T11).

> "I think I would agree here about giving constructive feedback. I was doing that a lot during sessions. I would read the assignment with the student, make them be able to identify where they are lacking and explain to them how to approach their writing" (T12).

As noted by Shackel (2023), tutors should highlight particular elements of the writing that are effective, such as well-defined arguments or captivating introductions, as this aids in boosting students' confidence and reinforcing positive practices. It is essential for tutors to offer constructive feedback to students since this enables them to identify and tackle their weaknesses without becoming disheartened. The purpose of constructive feedback is to assist students in enhancing their writing while preserving their confidence and drive (Carlse 2019).

Theme 2: Specialised tutor training to support postgraduate students

Postgraduate writing typically requires a deeper engagement with research methodologies, theoretical frameworks, and discipline-specific conventions, which can be daunting for tutors who may not have extensive experience in these areas (Liu and Harwood 2022). This lack of familiarity can lead to self-doubt among tutors, and postgraduate student R2 noted this:

> R2: "The experience that I've got or what I've seen is when the tutors, especially if maybe they're doing master's degrees only and if someone comes and they'll they want to consult for a PhD, they

> will tend to feel threatened and it's like maybe they'll be doubting themselves because it will be something or it's a level way above them."

Tutors agreed with this finding, noting that because they were often postgraduate students themselves, they occasionally experience insecurity and intimidation when working with students who have challenging academic needs. Tutors noted that when this occurs one strategy they employ if they do not feel comfortable consulting another postgraduate student is to collaborate with another tutor who is more advanced.

> "But at the same time, if you could see that maybe you're not well equipped for what the student requires, obviously, you just partner or refer that person to someone you know who's experienced so that that person is assisted accordingly" (T11).

They are able to collaborate and take strategies with them when consulting with postgraduate students in the future. Writing centre tutors leverage their peers' strengths whether that be expertise in a certain discipline, providing language help, or ways of giving feedback to create a dynamic learning community for themselves. Collaborating to enhance student work also creates community amongst tutors as they feel more interconnected to their peers and organically allows knowledge-sharing to happen. When tutors collaborate, they are participating in what Wenger (1998) calls CoP. Reciprocal participation, working as a team, and sharing a common repertoire are things that occur naturally when people are involved in a community of practice. By sharing what they know, tutors are able to complement one another and help each other achieve the writing centre's objectives.

Theme 3: Institutional and technological support for quality writing centre practices

The third theme identified from the dataset addresses institutional and technological issues impacting writing centre practices for sustainability and quality. Respondents such as practitioner P2 and P4 discussed how shortages of resources, personnel, and logistical challenges inhibited writing centre operations.

> "Ok. Number one, is capacity, right? So we would like to roll out to many, many more students, but we don't have the capacity in terms of the numbers" (P2).

> "It comes down to resources, you know, staff capacity… that also impacts a lot on what we can do for you" (P4).

These observations are consistent with the research conclusions of Okoro and Phiri (2023) whose study noted that various school-level conditions, such as the lack of tools and equipment necessary for learning, and inadequate basic computer-related infrastructure, would all interfere with the normal operation of tutoring work. A key point to note is that all student writing centres often operate on extremely limited budgets. The two University of Technology (UoT) writing centers mentioned in this article derived all their operating funds from the external University Capacity Development Grant (UCDG), with no other stable sources of funding. Insufficient funds directly created a number of practical limitations, notably, it made it impossible to launch comprehensive training programs that covered all needs, which naturally failed to meet the diverse requirements of tutoring. This conclusion that funding constraints impact training capacity is also consistent with the studies of (Cheatle and Cotos, 2020; Barron et al 2023). In addition to the problems caused by funding, a general lack of available resources often leads to an insufficient number of formally employed tutors, which cannot keep up with the growing tutoring demand from students. The shortfall in staffing first falls on the existing staff, unnecessarily adding to their burden. Furthermore, it encroaches on the time that could otherwise be used to conduct in-depth professional training for tutors and provide mentorship and guidance for new hires.

The influence of both UoT's institutional strategic plans also shapes how the respective writing centres operate. Participants such as practitioner P2 explained that tutor training sessions incorporate discussions and reflections of the institution's strategies, guiding principles and values:

> "Currently, we have ENVISION2030. Our training is also geared towards achieving the objectives of ENVISION2030; the living values serve as guiding principles for the work we are doing. So, even in training, we ensure we impart those living values. We are sensitising our tutors to these living values, which they should practice in their daily work" (P2).

Research by Govender and Alcock 2020 points out that systematic training that fully incorporates the institution's own goals enables tutors to prepare in advance to meet the tutoring needs of students from diverse backgrounds. These research conclusions indicate that the tutor training program for writing centres can be designed in alignment with the institution's core priority matters. For example, fostering an inclusive campus atmosphere, helping students improve their academic literacy, and increasing student retention rates, can be integrated into the training design, to align the tutors' work with the institution's overall orientation.

In addition to institutional matters, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and the growing influence of technology and AI have introduced new complexities into writing centre

practice and restructured the practices and roles of writing centre tutors (Khumalo and Onwuegbuchulam 2023). Tutors observed that postgraduate students are increasingly using AI tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and citation assistants to draft, edit, and refine their work. While these tools can enhance productivity and learning when used responsibly, they also raise concerns about academic integrity, over-reliance, and superficial understanding. This was emphasised by tutors T7 and T8:

> "I think there are more challenges, and also with ChatGPT, how they just take everything, it just brings a lot of challenges. They would write it, it would look good and all, but where do they get the references now?" (T8).

> "We try to let them know that you can see that this content is not properly credited. Therefore, you would advise them to paraphrase" (T7).[1]

These advancements have brought forth benefits as well as obstacles, necessitating that tutors modify their pedagogical approaches and technical proficiencies. (Mutsvairigwa et al 2024). This suggests that writing centres must adapt their pedagogical models to include AI literacy and digital ethics as components of quality tutoring. Quality support now requires tutors to be technologically literate and prepared to discuss the affordances and limitations of AI in academic writing.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored how writing centres in South African higher education institutions contribute to high-quality tutoring practices that support postgraduate students. The findings reveal that quality tutoring is a multi-dimensional process that requires well-trained tutors, reflective and relational pedagogy, and strong institutional and technological support systems.

Tutors are central to postgraduate writing development, yet many feel underprepared to address the complex demands of advanced academic writing. This underscores the need for ongoing, structured professional development that enhances their pedagogical, disciplinary, and emotional competencies. Furthermore, the study highlights that quality tutoring extends beyond academic skills; it involves empathy, reflection, and adaptability that foster students' confidence, autonomy, and scholarly identity. Hence, the study suggests that tutors should be urged to engage in ongoing reflective practice through guided reflection journals, workshops,

[1] All respondents' responses were drawn from data originally reported in Mutsvairigwa, P. 2025. *A framework for the training needs of writing centre staff supporting the development of postgraduate students at selected UoTs in KZN.* Doctoral Thesis, Durban University of Technology.

or supervision. This reflective practice will enable tutors to meaningfully adjust and improve their practice.

The rise of AI and digital technologies casts a duality of opportunities and challenges for writing centres. Tutors face the dual obligation of steering students towards ethical AI use while ensuring that technology enhances rather than replaces critical thinking and deep learning. Institutional policies and training should thus be developed to promote ethical and pedagogically sound use of AI tools in writing consultations. Institutions therefore have a strategic role in integrating writing centres within broader digital learning and quality assurance frameworks, ensuring they are resourced, recognised, and equipped to meet evolving academic demands. Ultimately, quality writing centre tutoring contributes not only to postgraduate student success but also to the development of institutional human capital, enhancing research productivity, innovation, and the transformative goals of South African higher education.

This study recommends that training programmes focus on fostering an appreciation of the unique challenges encountered by postgraduate students, integrating writing centre support into institutional policies, promoting collaborative writing practices with academic departments, and addressing the affective dimensions of academic writing support to empower tutors not only as academic guides but also as empathetic facilitators of student success. By investing in training tailored to postgraduate students, writing centres can establish meaningful, high-quality tutor-student connections and contribute to postgraduate student success in South African higher education. Furthermore, collaboration between writing centres, academic departments, and research offices should be promoted to align tutoring with disciplinary and research goals. In addition, institutions should provide adequate funding, staffing and space to ensure equitable access to writing support across faculties.

IMPLICATIONS

The study highlights the need for writing centres to evolve as strategic partners in postgraduate education. Quality tutoring requires investment in tutor development, reflective pedagogy, and digital readiness. Institutions should not view writing centres as remedial services but as principal academic development units that shape postgraduate success. Findings suggest that national and institutional quality assurance frameworks explicitly recognise writing centres as contributors to postgraduate throughput and research capacity. Policies should mandate sustained funding, tutor training, and inclusion of AI literacy within academic support programmes.

Further studies could explore how AI and digital platforms are reshaping writing centre practices across diverse South African universities or analyse students' perspectives on what

constitutes quality tutoring in hybrid or online settings. Longitudinal research could also assess how sustained tutor training influences postgraduate writing outcomes over time.

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