



# Perceptions of writing development among postgraduate students: The role of academic writing retreats at the Durban University of Technology

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## Abstract

In this article we explore the potency of academic writing retreats in strengthening the writing abilities of postgraduate students, particularly at the Durban University of Technology (DUT), South Africa. Since research outputs have become central to the affairs of institutions of higher learning, universities have continued to deploy strategies and devise systems to increase the number of research publications. An approach that has become popular is the adoption of writing retreats to assist in offering support and the improvement of academic writing, especially by building the capacities of postgraduate students. At DUT, academic writing retreats have emerged as an important strategy to enhance academic writing development in postgraduate students. Drawing from the experiences of such students who attended three writing retreat sessions between October 2022 and November 2023, we appraise the organisation of these retreats and explore their perceptions of how these retreats influenced their confidence and engagement in academic writing. We conducted an in-depth exploration of the planning, implementation, and outcomes of these retreats vis-à-vis how they contribute to building academic writing development at DUT. The results from the study revealed that postgraduate students perceived the writing retreat sessions to have been extremely helpful in building their writing confidence and enhancing their research engagement, while offering recommendations on how to improve on the delivery of such sessions especially by focusing on individual strengths.

**Keywords:** capacity-building, postgraduate students, academic writing, writing retreats

## Introduction

The careful design of writing retreats to suit the demands and development of the participating candidates has been known to yield positive results according to research, and postgraduate students have benefited greatly from these initiatives at the Durban University of Technology (DUT). Castle (2017) argued that the increasing pressures on academics in South Africa, particularly early-career academics, to conduct research and complete higher degrees has led many institutions to offer writing retreats that focus on the production of an end product of academic writing, typically a journal article. Traced back to the eighteenth century in North American universities (Aitchison & Lee, 2006), “writing retreats are designed to provide an ambience of peace and quiet—away from ‘normal businesses’ of teaching—that fosters creativity, learning, and inspiration and, thus, aids academic staff and graduate students in reaching their writing goals” (Dube et al. 2017, p. 8). It is within this context that we aim to contribute to existing literature on writing retreats by drawing fresh insights from participants at DUT.

This study is based on Bandura’s (1977) concept of self-efficacy, a key component of his social learning theory. The self-efficacy concept is concerned with the individual’s belief in their own ability to excel in specific situations or to accomplish a task. For Bandura, self-efficacy refers to an individual’s belief in their capacity to execute behaviours necessary to produce specific performance attainments. Premised on Bandura’s tenets, the study by Vincent et al. (2021) found that participating in a writing retreat is effective in promoting participants’ writing self-efficacy and that it increases assurance in writers. They observed further that these improvements in the abilities of the participants were mainly because of the boost in their writing self-confidence that was attributed to the learning of organisational and time management techniques that were explicitly taught during the retreat. An important finding from Vincent et al.’s (2021) study is the emphasis on writers’ self-efficacy being derived from their ability to observe other participants. They argue that the writing retreat imposes a positive social pressure that enhances participants’ confidence and productivity; individuals perform a task while observing others doing the same. It is their view that the presence of others in this supportive and caring environment also allowed participants to feel compassion for each other and recognise individuals’ successes. This study by Vincent et al. (2021) is especially relevant in that it focuses on how writing retreats assist doctoral candidates in enhancing writing self-efficacy, an area that has not received much academic attention, hence the significance of the current study’s focus on postgraduate students. Guided by Bandura’s (1977) theory as mentioned above, this study considers how participation in writing retreats may influence postgraduate students’ writing self-efficacy. However, we recognise that heightened self-efficacy does not automatically equate to measurable improvement in writing quality. Rather, we explore how participants perceive their growth in confidence, motivation, and engagement, all of which can form an important foundation for subsequent writing development.

Drawing from the context of higher education in Canada, Tremblay-Wragg et al. (2020) observed that the country suffers from an alarming rate of dropout and prolongation of study

programmes; they cited the lack of academic writing ability and the feeling of isolation among the aggravating factors that impeded the success of graduate students. The same problem permeates the South African higher education sector where the attrition and continuation rates of postgraduate students are extremely high (Mphekgwana et al., 2020). Aware of the several challenges that postgraduate students face in their studies, writing retreats are identified as a potential solution to support and improve academic writing output (Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2020). At writing retreats, postgraduate students can engage in several hours of academic writing as well as participating in workshops and recharging activities, and socialising with other participants. Tremblay-Wragg et al. (2020, p. 97) suggested that these writing retreats “aim to support students with (a) progressing academic writing based on realistic individual goals; (b) identifying optimal writing conditions; and (c) reducing isolation.” In similar vein, Dube et al. (2017) noted that writing retreats offer an opportunity for guidance, networking, fellowship, and focus during a period of seclusion without isolation or deprivation. They perceived the role of the writing retreat as being likely to yield a community of practice committed to, and engaged in, writing well beyond the retreat itself.

It is worth noting that notwithstanding the positives derived from academic writing retreats, there are also potential inherent challenges in their design and implementation that could result in counter-productiveness. For instance, Tremblay-Wragg et al. (2020) cautioned that despite the many benefits writing retreats offer, they are not a panacea that can remedy all the challenges faced by graduate students since a three-day retreat is not sufficient time in which to complete the requirements of academic success. Drawing from this understanding, the focus of this paper is not only on the positive aspects of these writing retreat sessions since aspects of weakness and suggestions for improvement also form parts of our inquiry since herein lies the essential value of such research into these programmes. While our study draws on self-reported data from participants, it does not measure actual changes in writing performance, so our emphasis is on participants’ perceived gains and motivational experiences.

## The concept of academic writing in postgraduate education

From a global perspective, according to Déri et al. (2022), although the field of graduate studies has grown significantly over the past few years, reports from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have suggested that an average of 50% of PhD and 40% of master’s graduate students drop out of their programmes. One recurrent reason often quoted for this abandonment of their studies is their struggle with academic writing that not only hinders how graduate students progress through their academic journey, but also how they integrate with the scientific community as novice scholars (Déri et al., 2022). Kapp (2015), for instance, noted that students progressing to graduate studies do so without receiving formal education in how to develop their academic writing competencies, namely the norms and practices associated with university level writing. Jacobs (2005) emphasised the dialogic relationship between disciplinary knowledge and writing, noting that effective academic literacy teaching requires understanding how knowledge is constructed

and communicated within disciplines. Nomdo (2006) further highlighted that postgraduate writing is deeply entangled with issues of identity and voice, and that these students must negotiate their positioning in disciplinary discourses.

In conceptualising academic writing, we align ourselves with social practice perspectives that view writing as a situated, disciplinary, and identity-forming activity rather than a neutral skill (Boughey and McKenna, 2023; Lea and Street, 1998; Lillis and Scott, 2007). From this perspective, the notion of writing development entails learning to participate in particular academic discourses and epistemic practices. Hence, throughout this paper, we use the term *academic writing development* to emphasise the social and contextual nature of writing in the context of higher education. Collectively, these perspectives (Boughey and McKenna, 2021; and Jacobs, 2005) underscore the belief that writing development at postgraduate level should be viewed as a socially situated and multilingual practice, rather than a decontextualised skill set that must be mastered in isolation.

A fundamental skill expected at the postgraduate level of education is the ability to write effectively in an academic manner. However, as Boughey and McKenna (2021) argued, academic writing cannot be reduced to a set of discrete technical skills; it is, rather, a socially situated practice embedded in power, identity, and epistemology. Their work in South African higher education has emphasised that supporting writing development involves engaging students in the social practices of knowledge-making rather than merely having them learn grammar and/or structure. Globally, pursuing a postgraduate degree requires an advanced level of academic writing knowledge, including the capacity to express complex concepts with clarity, participate in intellectual conversations, and publish scholarly works in academic journals. Notwithstanding this cruciality in postgraduate education, many postgraduate students have struggled, and continue to struggle, with academic writing for different reasons. These challenges create a need to introduce interventions that can best address the challenges of academic writing, among which academic retreats have been suggested as a helpful way of dealing with these issues. Generally, the goals of these intensive writing retreats are to enhance writing development and provide targeted support, especially for emerging writers by providing time and space for students to focus on writing. Particularly so in academic writing, productivity is associated with recognition, career stability, and progression (Stevenson, 2021). With institutions constantly using the publish or perish culture and threat as a way of pressuring and encouraging academics to publish research work in order to ensure successful academic careers (Oparinde et al., 2024), emerging researchers, including postgraduate students, are often looking to invest in opportunities to hone their writing development.

Papen and Thériault (2017), in their attempts to explore how writing retreats can support doctoral students' writing, acknowledged that doctoral students can be from diverse groups that have different experiences and cultural and academic backgrounds. This means that the writing strength of each doctoral student is at a different level even though they are all at the same academic level. They are often assessed by the quality of the research they produce in the form of writing. This assertion is true of the South African higher education institutions in

which postgraduate students come not only from all over South Africa, but also from different countries in and outside of Africa. Also, in most cases, graduate students rely solely on the support of their advisors in relation to their written work, with no additional assistance (Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2020). One of the many challenges faced by postgraduate students in South Africa is having to write in a scholarly manner in a second, third, or even fourth language, usually English. Being the language of instruction, English poses challenges for English second and third language speakers at the postgraduate level, thus affecting the quality of their scholarly writing. A point also expressed by Sonn (2016), is that the academic writing challenges among postgraduate students in South Africa can be traced to the fact that for many, the English language serves only an instructional purpose.

Dube et al. (2017) rightly observed that writing retreats have a vital role to play in South African higher education given the enduring legacy of the role of the apartheid system in keeping the vast majority of South Africans disadvantaged. As a result, concerted efforts are required to ensure that emerging researchers have the necessary academic capacity. Since research and writing are at the forefront of central promotion criteria (Dube et al., 2017), emerging academics, starting from the postgraduate level, must be exposed to all the possible academic writing development they can get, and institutions must be ready to invest in programmes that will assist in developing their students. It is for this reason that writing retreats, which have been introduced as a solution to academic writing challenges, must be constantly evaluated and interrogated to ensure that their designs and structures cater to the needs of emerging researchers, including postgraduate students. To this end, our study presents new data on academic writing retreats from participants at DUT.

## Methodology

Through qualitative data collected from participants and facilitators at three writing retreat sessions between October 2022 and November 2023, in this study we analysed the impact of the retreat sessions on the academic writing development of the participants. Following each of the writing retreat sessions, participants were invited to evaluate the writing retreat using a qualitative questionnaire. Although questionnaires have been used mostly for quantitative research, new approaches to qualitative data collection have included the repurposing of the questionnaire method to generate qualitative data from participants (Terry & Braun, 2017). However, unlike the quantitative approach, the qualitative questionnaires tend to use open-ended questions that afford the respondents the opportunity to provide detailed answers as freely as they would prefer. It is important to note that the study relied on self-reported data, so our findings reflect perceived rather than directly observed improvements in writing ability. Questions in qualitative questionnaires aim to prompt opinions and narrative accounts from the respondents. Our qualitative questionnaire was designed in an online format, and respondents were not restricted to using a certain number of words, thus allowing them to answer with as much detail as they liked at a time and place of their own convenience. Comprised of 12 open-ended questions regarding the writing retreat they attended, the questionnaire explored a range of different issues pertaining to it to generate a large body of data for this research. The questions included:

- Please describe your experiences of the writing retreat session(s) you have attended between October 2022–November 2023. Feel free to include positive and negative experiences.
- How do you perceive the organisation and structure of these writing retreat sessions, especially since the structure of the last two sessions was different from the first one?
- What are some improvements you hope to see in the next, or future, writing retreat sessions?
- How would you describe the role of the facilitators during the writing retreat sessions?
- Please describe your own improvement and confidence in your academic writing skills.

Participants at the writing retreat were informed that their responses to the evaluation form could be used for research publication purposes. At the end of the form, a checkbox was provided for participants to tick that they agreed with this. Personal details were not required to ensure anonymity of the respondents and the confidentiality of the information provided. Data was gathered over a five-day period in November 2023 after the online evaluation form had been circulated. Participants were asked to comment on all three sessions they had attended. Overall, a total of 61 postgraduate students at DUT had attended the three writing retreat sessions. As of the fifth day of data collection with daily reminders sent to participants, 44 responses had been received and a quick reading of the responses suggested that saturation had been reached. Thus, we considered the responses sufficient for a qualitative study. Participants were numbered exactly as their responses were received. Since the questions related to participants' recent experiences, several answers were generated with repetitions and/or similarities.

Worth noting is that the study suffered a limitation in its use of qualitative questionnaires because of our inability to follow-up with participants. Clarification or expansion, as would have been achieved through qualitative interview studies, was not possible given the nature of the remote, online, and anonymous delivery of the research tool (see Hanna & Gough, 2020). Notwithstanding the limitation, the questionnaire generated rich data that is provided below, in the form of verbatim quotations selected from participants' responses, which are then discussed thematically vis-à-vis relevant scholarly literature. The responses provided by the participants were subjected to thematic analysis, described by Finlay (2021) as a qualitative research method that aims to identify patterns and meanings in data. The analysis of the gathered data was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2019) framework for conducting a generic thematic analysis. Hence, we began by conducting a detailed reading of the data to become familiar with it, after which we proceeded to generate initial codes to derive patterns and themes from the raw coded data. We then carefully reviewed the themes to ensure their quality and avoid duplicates, ambiguity, or lack of clarity before defining and naming the themes that emanated from the data. We then proceeded to the writing stage during which we presented the themes alongside verbatim data which we discussed and interrogated in relation to relevant literature.

## Findings and discussion: Perspectives from participants on academic writing retreats

An analysis of the opinions and views of the participants at the writing retreat regarding the academic writing retreats organised by DUT generated four main themes, namely: structure of the writing retreats; impact of the academic writing retreats; facilitator expertise and engagement; and future directions. The themes provide unique and in-depth insights into the experiences of the participants who attended the writing retreats.

### Individual mentorship, peer support, and structured writing activities

To contextualise the participants' responses, it is important to outline the structure of the academic writing retreats. Each retreat ran for three sessions over five days and typically accommodated between 18 and 25 postgraduate students. The facilitation team was comprised of four writing mentors. The retreat was designed to offer different forms of support including individual one-on-one feedback sessions on manuscripts; group feedback discussions; mini lessons focused on academic writing conventions; and dedicated focused individual writing. In addition, peer interaction was deliberately built into the programme, allowing students to share drafts, discuss challenges, and exchange strategies for improving their writing. This structural design forms the foundation for understanding the feedback presented in the following section since participants' experiences were shaped by their engagement with these various activities.

Participants consistently highlighted two aspects of the retreat structure as particularly valuable namely, the individualised feedback they received from mentors and the peer support built into collaborative activities. Their reflections show that these activities shaped their sense of progress. A recurring concern shared by the participants, was the notion that the first retreat session catered for group needs rather than individual needs, suggesting that participants do not benefit equally because of the reasons they highlighted, such as their research disciplines, prior writing knowledge, and their personal motivations. For instance, Participant 32<sup>1</sup> noted that,

[f]rom the planning point of view, I think the organisers did well especially with the last two sessions. The schedules were clearer, and the environment was conducive. The first session last year placed a lot of emphasis on group learning activities, but the last two sessions have been different with more emphasis on personal development. Some of us were also worried to expose our lack of adequate knowledge in the group, but with the individual sessions we were able to explain our strengths and weaknesses to the facilitators. I had more personal time to write, reflect, and get feedback on my progress. So generally, I think the planning is good in my own view.

Sharing a similar opinion on how the retreat has benefitted individual participants' needs, Participant 18 said,

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1 Participant responses have not been edited.

What I liked the most with the last sessions was how we were distributed to specific facilitators ahead of the retreat. We were told to share our draft manuscript with the facilitators a week before, so I think it allowed the facilitators to prepare feedback for us individually. That was a very great idea, and I think that was what made these sessions very successful because we could connect with the facilitators ahead. I even went to google my facilitator once I knew his name to check out his research publications.

Drawing observations from the first of the three retreat sessions, the follow-up sessions involved connecting participants with facilitators ahead of the retreat to create an initial relationship between them. This meant that participants were already aware of their facilitators and engaged with them through emails to establish a connection. In so doing, as Dube et al. (2017) put it, the retreat had already begun since participants were consulted on what they wanted to have included in the retreat programme. This refined idea of the writing retreat session was vital in preparing the facilitators so that they could arrive at the retreat prepared to discuss aspects of research, writing, journal selection, and publication based upon individual participants' needs (see Dube et al. 2017). The facilitators at the retreat had the opportunity to immerse themselves in the participants' manuscripts and were thus able to provide targeted feedback suitable for the advancement and completion of the papers drafted by the participants.

Participant 26 found the daily group feedback session to be an excellent inclusion in the last two writing sessions. She said,

I like how we were made to provide daily feedback on our daily learning and activities. Since we were assigned to different facilitators, I think the approaches and methods were different from group to group. So, the general feedback session was a good one because we were then able to pick ideas from other groups that we might have been missing in our own group. I think that was an important intervention.

The view of Participant 26 includes what Tremblay-Wragg et al. (2020) termed recharging activities which, they argued, provide an outlet that allows participants to unwind as they represent invaluable opportunities to exchange ideas with others. They referred further to this as a sharing space from which emerges a cohesive community of graduate students. Significant to these exchanges between the participants is also the efficacy of peer-to-peer review and engagement, especially during the writing retreat sessions. Participants valued the feedback they received from co-participants during the sessions, and this is evident in the view of Participant 6, who said,

One thing that I really like about these writing sessions is that I can learn from other participants, share my view with them regarding their manuscripts, and also receive feedback from them as well. For example, there is always that limitation you have with your supervisors and even the facilitators because they are already experienced compared to people that we are on the same level. So, it is a little easy to share

feedback with colleagues sometimes even jokingly and that removes the seriousness and formality at times for me.

Many participants expressed similar views regarding the peer-to-peer review method as affording them an even more conducive environment in which to share their views. They emphasised that the support they receive from their peers is significant in building confidence in the writing process. In fact, according to Déri et al. (2022) postgraduate students tend to engage with their peers to get the required support without impinging on the evaluation of their academic performance. For Dube et al. (2017), this strategy enables postgraduate students to aid and advise other peers, moving beyond a participant-expert vertical dyadic relationship and creating a more dispersed, horizontal and community-based pedagogy which Aitchison & Lee (2006) have often advocated.

### Impact of the academic writing retreats

Participants' reflections suggest that the impact of the academic writing retreats stemmed largely from two interrelated components—the focused, individualised feedback provided by facilitators on draft chapters and proposals along with the peer support embedded in the collaborative activities and shared writing spaces.

Responses from participants suggested that the writing retreat sessions were impactful in their writing development. The concept of writing self-efficacy, which Mitchell et al. (2017, p. 206) perceived as “encompassing everything inherent in a writer’s belief about their ability to write, such as capabilities requiring multiple skills, strategies, and knowledge within a specific context” was apparent in Participant 6’s response:

Those writing sessions were the game-changer for me. I have developed myself greatly honestly in my writing abilities. Personally, one of the issues I had was proper guidance from [my] supervisor due to his workload and so on. So, I was unable to get adequate feedback. With the retreats, I received personal support and timeous feedback more than I have received from my supervisor in the last two years. I think DUT has to continue with these programmes. Currently, I have a paper accepted in a journal and I have just completed another one at the last retreat.

Similar to the above, Participant 9 noted,

I was really struggling with how to turn my thesis to a paper. I already had the rough draft rejected by a journal before I brought it to the writing retreat. Before I came for the retreats, I struggled with writing a journal article. The ‘writing for publication’ retreat sessions helped me to understand the difference between the thesis and the journal article and now I have submitted a proper draft to a good journal. I am proud of myself.

The view expressed by Participant 10 is that peer interaction also played a significant role since sharing drafts, exchanging strategies, and discussing challenges with fellow students enhanced their motivation.

I was beginning to lose interest in my postgraduate program[me] honestly. The writing retreat helped me to get my interest back. Firstly, with the retreat, hearing other people's stories and experiences made me feel a little more at ease that I was not alone. It felt like a safe space for me. Secondly, what I like more was how we went through the nitty gritty of writing in a way that was well broken down. During those sessions, I learnt my weaknesses and how to overcome them. I will surely recommend writing retreats for postgraduate students like me. The writing process of my thesis is now somehow easier because of the things at the retreat which I didn't know before. Some of these things could not easily be learnt from supervisors honestly, so I am really happy I attended the retreats.

A major contributor to the perceived development of these students was the one-on-one feedback sessions, during which mentors provided targeted guidance, clarification, and detailed commentary on their draft writing. Evidence from the data suggests that participants perceived increases in their confidence and in their motivation to write. While the study did not measure writing outcomes directly, participants' reflections indicate perceived progress and enhanced engagement. The data illustrates that participants perceived in themselves enhanced confidence and motivation to write, which aligns closely with Bandura's (1977) notion of self-efficacy. In this sense, the writing retreats appear to have strengthened students' beliefs in their writing capabilities through opportunities for social modelling, guided feedback, and mastery experiences. Self-efficacy in academic writing involves a student's confidence in their ability to produce an excellent piece of academic writing. This sort of confidence and motivation can be built during academic writing retreat sessions, as we have noted above in participants' statements. Essentially, according to Sangster (2021), the implementation of academic writing retreats has been revealed to be a useful and helpful strategy to manage productive writing time as well as to increase confidence in the process of writing itself, and to increase collegiality. Furthermore, the views shared regarding supervision align with the findings of Sangster (2021), that students attending writing retreat sessions benefit significantly from having increased contact-time in the newly established gap period, during which students do not normally receive supervision. Thus, Sangster (2021) has noted that writing retreats foster increased confidence and enhanced motivation, both of which lead to potential behavioural and attitudinal changes that produce a more positive and enjoyable writing experience.

In similar vein, Quynn & Stewart's (2021) study reported that graduate students affirmed that the retreat they attended had a significant impact on their writing confidence since 26 of the 30 participants in the study reported that they either met or exceeded their retreat goals. Confirming the impactful nature of writing retreats, they acknowledged that academic writing retreats assist emerging writers to dedicate time to writing, structure their writing day, build collegial relationships, and provide opportunities for feedback and new perspectives on current projects. Like the current study during which participants attended three retreats, the participants in Quynn & Stewart's (2021) study who "participated in more than one writing retreat within a year expressed feelings of greater writing confidence and increased writing production, suggestive of their learning and practice of writing sustainably" (p. 1386). As

evident in this study, the attendance by the graduate students at many writing retreats allowed them to build successively on the knowledge they acquired at previous retreats. This ensured that postgraduate students were not abandoned with the background knowledge they had acquired at the first session but were followed up at further writing retreat sessions in order to increase their academic writing confidence. Together, the focused individual feedback and structured peer engagement constituted the core sources of impact identified by participants, shaping how they perceived progress in their writing development during the retreat.

### Facilitator expertise and engagement

One theme that is reflected strongly in the gathered data is the central role played by the facilitators in shaping the success of the writing retreat. In the context of this study, facilitators performed two key functions: they delivered short mini lessons on academic writing conventions and language use; and they provided focused, individualised feedback on students' draft chapters and proposals. These dual responsibilities shaped how participants understood the value of the retreat and contributed to their perceptions of writing development. Aitchison (2009,) perceived the characteristics of an excellent facilitator in pointing out that

the facilitator models and monitors appropriate feedback behaviours and provides explicit instruction for the critique of member's writing. The 'guidelines on giving and receiving feedback' emphasise the focus on language, rather than content, the need to respond to author requests, to balance positive and negative commentary, and to give concrete examples from the writer's text to illustrate points. Facilitators also regularly provide language-focused 'mini lessons' as issues arise, covering aspects as diverse as apostrophe use, meta-discourse, voice, or writing processes. (p. 913)

Participants expressed their views on how facilitators' expertise and engagement assisted their own individual writing development. While Cunningham (2022) also admitted that writing retreats are generally productive sessions since they certainly increase confidence in the community-of-practice, she also emphasised that the role of the facilitator is often missed and rarely surfaces in discussions about the efficacy of writing retreats. This study also addresses this neglected area; Participant 39 said,

I think the facilitators were excellent. Before now, I attended two writing retreats during my master's program[me], and I feel very different with the last sessions. I felt I learnt more because our facilitator was in my discipline and other facilitators were also tailored to their disciplines. I think that is very important because when facilitators are not in the particular discipline like with my master's experience, we are unable to relate properly and that is a challenge for writing progress in my view. My facilitator knew everything about my research, so he was thoroughly engaging and that really helped me very much.

Similarly, Participant 19 contributed,

What I find very interesting with the facilitator was how attentive and engaging she was. She listened carefully to my concerns and gave me feedback that wowed me because they were things that I think were already there but that I didn't notice. I was hitting writing blocks several times and she helped me think outside of the box and I received prompt feedback. This helped me a lot because we were engaging on progress made for five days and many times I even got practical feedback that allowed me to properly understand the context of my writing.

The above views resonate with the findings of Vincent, et al. (2023) that facilitators can also encourage relaxation and engagement in recharging activities during breaks. This idea is what Cunningham (2022) also perceived as the mentorship style of facilitating a writing retreat. By the facilitators acting as mentors and engaging with participants carefully, they are also creating a more engaging relationship with the participants that allows them to speak freely and ask relevant questions to advance their understanding. For Vincent et al. (2023), facilitators made use of several techniques such as Pomodoro, adapted for academic writing, to facilitate time management; SMART for specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound goal-setting method so participants can separate and narrow down their objectives; and the Kanban giant board which is a three-column board that serves to categorise participants' SMART goals into *to do*, *in progress*, and *completed work*, thus allowing individual task monitoring and group progress visualisation. Participant 28 commented on the use of Kanban board in saying,

I was not even familiar with the Kanban boards before the retreat. But I really found it to be a very helpful tool. The facilitator made us set our board at the beginning to allow us to clearly see what we need to work on and tracking the progress. I was able to visualise my tasks and divide them into several stages. I normally felt overwhelmed with my writing before, but because I was able to split them into phases, I felt more organised with my writing. Also, the way I was rearranging my tasks based on what I have done and that gave me a sense of the things I had achieved during the retreat. At the end of the retreat, the items in my completed column were more than the ones in progress and to do. I really liked that. Personally, I can also use the Kanban board in the mini form for my personal writings and journal articles. I wouldn't have learnt that if I didn't go to the retreat.

The findings from the participants present obvious evidence that the facilitators demonstrated expertise and engaged with the participants. Allen (2019) noted that the facilitator is a central actor in terms of the effective management of writing groups, and facilitators should approach each member participant in the form of a supporter of their work to boost their confidence.

### Opportunities for the future

Although the findings from this study suggest that writing retreats are extremely beneficial for postgraduate students, the collected data also reveals some areas requiring improvement. As Sangster (2021) also noted, despite the numerous benefits of holding writing retreats that

have been identified, there are still some challenges, and retreats do not remove all problems faced by students. Participant 14 said,

One issue that I complain about is [that] after the retreat ends, there no more follow ups or engagement with facilitators regarding the progress. That is an issue that I think the organisers need to address. At times, I make good progress at the writing retreat, then after when I get stuck, I am unable to get such support. It would be nice at least if we can contact the facilitators virtually to get one-on-one engagement again at least till the particular work is finished.

Dube et al. (2017) also acknowledged that an often-overlooked aspect of writing retreats is the impact of follow-ups. In their view, follow-ups should be a cooperative process, developing gradually, sustained throughout a writing retreat, and should serve ideally as a follow through' to maintain writing and publishing. Follow-ups, as an iterative process, not as a one-shot deal occurring solely at the very end of a retreat, become a set of ongoing relationships enabling increased capabilities, motivation, and self-efficacy (Dube et al. 2017). An important aspect of the writing retreat process that should never be ignored is that supported students need further attention for continued and enhanced capacity development. It is important therefore, as recommended by Participant 14, to ensure that engagements between participants and facilitators do not cease after the writing retreat.

Another view shared by Participant 26 is the necessity to introduce technology, especially in the form of virtual writing retreats. According to this participant,

I think one of the things the organisers need to consider is to try to also have these writing program[me]s virtually. For instance, although I recognise it is beneficial to be away for a few days to write, the truth is it is challenging for some of us who have children to be away for that long. So, in the future, maybe you can consider virtual academic writing retreats for people who cannot make the physical one to also not miss out completely so we can always use technology to our advantage in that case.

It is the view of the participants that having virtual writing retreats will expand access to more participants who might find it challenging to be physically present at the writing retreat. Notwithstanding that the nature and benefits of the physical writing retreats will potentially outweigh the virtual retreat sessions virtual participants will also be looking to draw some knowledge from the facilitators despite the lack of their physical presence. Borrowing from Koulaxi & Kong (2022), who advocated for the adoption of virtual writing retreats during the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual writing retreats are relatively flexible in terms of time and space and offer an opportunity for community building and academic productivity, especially for distance learning. The flexible nature of the online writing retreats is indeed a commendable feature and participants unable to stay away physically for the writing retreat would be able to learn virtually about academic writing. According to Koulaxi & Kong (2022, p. 12), "virtual writing retreats can create communities and generate emotional support—something that has fostered student communication and interaction despite physical

distance and social constraints.” This is further observed in the form of a virtual library that helps maintain productivity as well as enhanced learning experience.

A suggestion made by Participant 37 is to tailor future retreats to the specific needs of different disciplines and levels of writing expertise. This participant explained,

Our writing levels are different, and I think our expectations are also different. So, maybe in the future, the organisers can start by evaluating our knowledge and expertise first. And we can also be asked to state our actual expectations and the specific areas we want the facilitators to help us with. So we will be able to get necessary support on exactly what we lack.

The view above resonates with the findings of Dube et al. (2017), who recommended that participants be allowed to set their own goals for writing retreats. In their view, “we were convinced that allowing the participants to state their needs in the planning stage would not only help us determine the genuine concerns of the participants but would also give them an opportunity to take control and ‘ownership’ of the process” (p.11). Essentially, giving the participants the opportunity to plan their outcomes allows the facilitator to engage with the needs of the participants carefully by customising relevant and suitable content, as well as support strategies, that would enhance effectiveness.

The findings from this study, alongside insights from the literature, point to the need for structured planning that sustains writing development beyond the retreat itself. Drawing from participants’ recommendations for ongoing support, differentiated approaches, and pre-retreat preparation, the following framework proposes key elements for planning effective and sustainable academic writing retreats.

## **Towards an intervention framework for effective writing retreats**

Developed for the purpose of improved functionality of writing retreats, the framework below presents a simple approach for the planning and organisation of a writing retreat. As Déri et al. (2022) put it, the overall goals of a writing retreat include: boosting publications; teaching writing; developing scholars; community building; increasing confidence; exchanging advice/feedback; creating a safe space; enhancing student retention; facilitating writing in a second language; and improving mentorship relationships. Thus, building on these observations, we propose what one should to consider when planning an effective writing retreat session.

**Figure 1**

An intervention approach for planning an effective writing retreat session



The above framework represents the important activities, at different stages, involved in the organisation of a successful academic writing retreat. Having established the importance of the familiarisation between the facilitators and the postgraduate students, the pre-retreat phase is the stage at which students are assigned to facilitators and facilitators become aware of the topic/focus of each individual student they will be mentoring during the retreat. At this stage, postgraduate students can also be invited to identify their strengths, weaknesses, and expectations from the retreat to tailor the retreat to their writing development demands. In so doing, the agenda, style, and plans of the writing retreat are available ahead of the retreat. Such a strategy allows the retreat to begin even earlier.

Building on the first phase, the second phase, during which the actual retreat happens, becomes more streamlined and targeted towards the participants' capacity. One-on-one sessions, as well as group engagements, will assist the participants not only to present their manuscripts but also gain a further understanding through interactions with facilitators and peers by cross-pollinating ideas. This retreat phase should also have scheduled breaks for participants to decompress as well as writing down the lessons they have learnt thus developing their manuscripts or thesis further before receiving supplementary feedback from peers and facilitators. Also significant in the retreat phase, is the need for daily feedback reports to determine areas of excellence and improvements. At the final stage, the post-retreat phase, while many retreat sessions merely end with the organisers inviting evaluation feedback for the participants, the proposed framework adds an additional activity in recommending that follow-up support sessions be introduced at the end of the retreat to further ensure that the progress made by participants is not derailed.

## Conclusion

We have demonstrated that academic writing retreats at DUT are perceived by postgraduate students to be a useful intervention for strengthening their engagement and confidence in academic writing. From the perspective of self-efficacy, the retreats are seen to nurture belief in students' capacity to write productively. By offering targeted support, the retreats make a major contribution to the writers' academic progress while they also benefit from a scheduled writing time in a conducive environment. The overall influence on writing quality highlights the efficacy of writing retreats as we have shown in data generated by the participants.

Evident from the study is that participants genuinely appreciate the academic writing retreats, citing that the support they receive from supervisors at times is not entirely enough because of the supervisors' workloads. Most of the participants agreed that they found the writing retreat sessions extremely beneficial based on the growth they experienced in just three writing sessions. Through new data provided in this paper, we present additional information on the successful organisation of writing retreats, especially for postgraduate students, by analysing current practices and looking into improvements for the future. The proposed framework also responds to the expressed needs of participants and synthesises lessons from the study into a model for future retreat planning. To gain further understanding of the benefits of the writing retreats, additional research is recommended to assess the long-term impact of writing retreats on postgraduate students and emerging researchers. Established researchers, who at one stage went through such a writing retreat process, could also offer new data on how such retreats assisted them in becoming excellent writers. Such longitudinal studies could be expected to provide insights into the sustained benefits of academic writing as well as offering areas for improvement.

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