The supervisor’s accountability versus postgraduates’ responsibility within the academic writing arena

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Abstract

One of the most burning issues facing South African higher education, as stressed by the National Plan for Higher Education (Republic of South Africa Minister of Education 2001), is the success rates of postgraduates. Most of the problems experienced in postgraduate work relate to language. In South Africa this problem coexists with a host of other factors, such as students’ prior schooling; exposure to certain necessary resources (e.g. electricity and libraries); literacy provision in the home and community; attitudes towards schooling; and proficiency in English. All of these are aspects that could jeopardise the success of academic writing. In order to address this as part of the human capital development of postgraduates and future academics, one needs to understand that new and more complex skills than in the past (e.g. being flexible, adaptable, quick learners, team players, critical thinkers and problem solvers) are required. However, to transform this area should be a two way process, which does not entail a change in pedagogy (i.e., towards professional educators), but also a change in attitudes, behaviour and the skills of learners.

INTRODUCTION

World-wide, as well as in South Africa, one of the main concerns of supervisors lies within the academic writing arena of postgraduates. Through writing we learn, and finally develop clarity of thought and fertility of ideas – something current postgraduates experience as difficult and intimidating. However, these concerns are even more complicated within the South African context. This is due to the multilingual character of the country, as well as to the fact that it co-exists with a host of other factors such as exposure to necessary resources (e.g. electricity and libraries); literacy provision in the home and community; attitudes towards schooling; and a lack of proficiency in English. The complexity of these concerns is locked up in the integrated external and internal factors playing a role in or determining the end result of the postgraduate product.

This article primarily attempts to explore all the above-mentioned issues and their implications for the supervision of postgraduates in South Africa. The main discussion will be on the challenge with regard to changing the perceptions of supervisors and postgraduates in order to create a conducive environment for dialogue, while also highlighting the crux of learning, as well as dialogic
mediation. The last section will deal with strategies for the employment of accountable supervision and alerting postgraduates to their responsibility.

COMPLEXITIES AND IMPLICATIONS OF POSTGRADUATES’ ACADEMIC WRITING SKILLS

Much has been written in the postgraduate literature about the complexities of academic writing skills. Accordingly, many ‘lists’ of difficulties exist, such as inadequate language proficiency; limited research experiences; as well as inadequate research and discipline knowledge. Two of the implications of these are the decrease of the pass (throughput) rates of postgraduates, as well as the lengthening of time to complete postgraduate studies. In order to deepen the understanding of these implications, the following:

The impact of language barriers on academic writing

According to the literature review, problems about the control of language and with academic writing skills among postgraduates are present both internationally (Lea and Stierer 2000; Elen 1999; Lavelle and Zuercher 2001; Mullan 2001) and nationally (Leibowitz 1999; Henning, Gravett and van Rensburg 2001), as English is the most commonly used medium of instruction (Saville-Troike 1984; Grabe and Kaplan 1996; Van Wyk 2001). However, the reasons for failure differ from country to country. For example, in countries where English is not the vernacular, English proficiency is regarded as one of the core reasons why postgraduates struggle with academic writing skills (found difficult and intimidating) (Leibowitz 1999; Henning et al. 2001). Third-World countries view these problems as a direct result of an inadequate secondary school system and ascribe them to limited human and financial resources (Foster and Leibowitz 1996; Leibowitz 1999). In addition, the majority of postgraduates had inadequate guidance, both in school and at work, to improve academic writing to a required level (Attwood, Broekmann, Nichols and Castle 2003). Even First-world countries with much more homogeneous student populations experience problems caused by the increasingly wide range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds of postgraduates who come from diverse learning backgrounds. As a result of globalisation, much greater mobility exists among the postgraduate students of different countries, while traditional academic subject boundaries are diminishing. The implications of lifelong learning as well as postgraduates entering and returning to higher education at different stages in their lives, contribute to the proliferation of diverse needs experienced by the postgraduate fraternity (Lea and Stierer 2000; Seely 2000; Rankin 2001).

According to Cryer (1997) and Leibowitz (1999), it appears that mother-tongue language and proficiency in the medium of instruction are the major factors in determining the success of postgraduates. For example, the better a student’s English proficiency, the more detailed a description of academic experience and
theory will be present. This assumption links with Silva’s opinion (1993, 668), who found that second-language learners are less fluent (using fewer words); less accurate (making more errors); and less effective (obtaining lower holistic scores) in their academic writing activities. However, problems with academic writing skills are not only a pure language proficiency issue. The lack of accuracy could also result from years of learning in a parrot fashion by means of a second language – thus being partially a meta-cognitive problem (Cryer 1997; Leibowitz 1999). The theoretical explanation for the extractability of language and content is also embedded in the relationship between coherence and cohesion.

In order to understand how postgraduates’ proficiency affects their manipulation of a written medium, cognisance should be taken of the following:

- **Proficiency in the language of learning is a necessary ingredient for academic success** – operating as a sliding scale. Cummins and Swain (1996) alert those concerned to the fact that the more demanding the academic’s task, the higher the required level of language proficiency – implying that, in the absence of the latter, academic success is at risk, because postgraduate work then shows evidence that they have not fully understand the content.

- **An argument often used is that language cannot be tested outside a specific context** (which is currently one criticism against outcomes 6 and 7 for Language in Outcomes-based Education, which implies that one can assess language skills outside of a specific context and tasks).

- **Higher order meta-cognitive skills such as interacting with theory or analysing learning experiences are crucial for success in academic writing.** This implies that a comprehensive and systematic knowledge base in a discipline/field; in-depth knowledge in some area of specialisation; as well as the ability to identify, analyse and deal with complex and/or real world problems by using evidence-based solutions and theory-driven arguments, require something which is more than ‘writing grammatically correct and communicate (sic) competent in English’. This actually emphasises the value of the level descriptors of the New Academic Policy’s (RSA MoE 2001) to both the supervisor and supervisee to have clarity on the applied competence criteria and autonomy of learning.

Within this complex higher education arena, the various language, thinking and writing skills are interrelated and indistinct, which thus require advanced language skills such as paraphrasing, decoding and synthesising (Nagata 1999). It is much more arduous to master these skills in a foreign/second language, as even higher levels of aural-oral skills – including good comprehension, confidence and the ability to use common expression and an expanded vocabulary – are needed to perform (Nagata 1999; Lea and Stierer 2000; Henning et al. 2001). Writing in English as a second or even a third language (which is a common phenomenon in South Africa) is difficult and includes the ability to use appropriate academic
language in a given social context (Larsen-Freeman 1986, 131), as well as writing for the academic context and its discourse community.

Supervisors need to be aware of the following four components of communicative competencies, namely grammatical competence (mastery of the language code, which includes the rules of the language such as vocabulary, word formation, sentence formation, pronunciation, spelling and linguistics semantics); sociolinguistic competencies (appropriateness of meaning and forming rules of politeness, etc. pertaining to the production and understanding of utterances in different sociolinguistic contexts); discourse competencies (the ability to combine grammatical forms and meanings to achieve a unified spoken or written text, in other words, the ability to achieve cohesion and coherence in written or spoken communication); and strategic competence (the ability to compensate for lapses and breakdowns in communication, in other words, the strategies employed by the second-language learners to overcome the inadequacies of their inter-language (Canale 1983; Ellis 1994; Rankin 2001). Understanding these competencies will hopefully assist supervisors to understand students’ specific writing problems.

In order to ensure that the full potential of each postgraduate is achieved, it becomes vital to acquire the necessary driving and steering skills for good practice of academic writing. Although it is difficult to diagnose and measure whether a postgraduate used different language proficiency components sufficiently and on the required level, effective assessment practices are crucial.

Assessment practices and academic writing

For the majority of postgraduates, the bulk of assessment is based on written products whether in the form of extended essays, critiques, dissertations, a script/thesis or examination questions (du Bouglay 2001). Writing activities are thus the main vehicle to display essential skills such as intellectual processing; the application of knowledge; critical analytical skills; and showing insight into the particular discipline and research problem. Therefore, regular assessment in postgraduate work plays a cardinal role – not only to monitor progress, but also to provide constant formative feedback which can serve as an improvement strategy to enhance the quality of academic writing. Thus it is evident that not only writing, but also the teaching and assistance of writing thereof constitute a process.

In order to prevent these complexities and implications of postgraduates’ academic writing skills, the next two subheadings will suggest development and improvement ideas.

A CONTEXT CONducive TO dialogue

In order to adhere to the demands for improving the quality of postgraduates’ research products and to enhance scholarship, it is important to establish a context conducive to dialogue in which supervisors and postgraduates form learning
partnerships, demonstrating the principles of accountability and responsibility as two sides of the working coin during supervision.

Before exploring these two concepts, namely accountability and responsibility within the postgraduate supervision environment, you have to realise that good supervisors do not give good education to postgraduates; they provide experiences that facilitate and motivate postgraduates to educate themselves through trial and error, success and failure. Supervisors can thus model first-rate standards of performance and reinforce the idea that significant learning and personal growth come from hard work and persistence only.

In order to foster postgraduate responsibility, the term first has to be clarified. The term ‘responsibility’ captures the fundamental nature of self-discipline as the capacity to behave properly without direct supervision (Wayson and Lasley 1984; Evans 1999). For the purposes of this article, postgraduate responsibility encompasses the capacity and desire to (1) behave properly without direct supervision; (2) try and correct one’s own behaviour when it is improper; and (3) assist others in behaving properly. Comprehending the term postgraduate responsibility, the investigation continues to explore various sources of information to identify the opportunities for postgraduates to exercise responsibility. These opportunities not only include behaviours dealing with postgraduates’ own learning and social behaviour, but also include assistance of peers and supervisors to make the learning environment more productive. In order to have a more holistic view on the above-mentioned, the starting point will be a brief discussion of the following postgraduate responsibility opportunities (Duke and Jones 2001, 278–280).

- **Establish and adjust postgraduate supervision rules and procedures**: Discuss with the supervisors the type of guidance and comment they found helpful and agreeing on a schedule of meetings. In addition, ensure familiarity with all procedures and regulations concerning postgraduate work. Such involvement has the added advantages of providing experiences in decision-making and feeling self-worth.
- **Establish and adjust consequences**: Take the initiative in raising problems or difficulties, however elementary or severe they may seem.
- **Evaluate own behaviour**: The postgraduate must understand the difference between guidance rather than being told step-by-step what to do. The research proposal is a review to measure the ability and aptitude of the postgraduate. Thus postgraduates’ behaviour can merely be improved by monitoring their own behaviour – due to the investment in and responsibility for examining and changing their own behaviour by decreasing the time and energy supervisors must commit to change behaviour.
- **Record and/or evaluate own academic progress**: Maintain the progress of the work in accordance with the stages agreed with the supervisor, including in particular the presentation of written material as required in sufficient time to
allow for comments and discussion before proceeding to the next stage, as well as to gain sufficient insight to and understanding of the chosen area of research within more or less nine months in order to develop with confidence own ideas and basis of research. Involving postgraduates in monitoring their own progress increases postgraduates’ accountability, while helping particularly low-achieving postgraduates to develop a clear picture of areas in need of improvement. Other gains of monitoring your own progress are, for example, better learning habits and using own achievement as a motivator for constant improvement.

- **Participate in academic goal-setting:** Provide a thesis proposal by the required deadline, furthermore deciding if they wish to submit, taking due account of the supervisor’s opinion which, however, should be advisory only. If the supervisor does not agree that the thesis should be submitted, he or she will write a letter to this effect, which will be placed on file. This entails activities that help postgraduates to develop responsibility and experience a greater sense of control over and accountability for their work.

- **Select learning activities as part of a development plan for correcting own behaviour:** Raise any training needs. If necessary, take courses in spoken and/or written English. According to the attribution theory (Anderson and Prawat 1983), learners – in this case postgraduates – are more likely to improve their behaviour if they view it as something they can influence.

- **Work in groups:** This entails a project within a larger group the postgraduate’s thesis must spell out carefully the work done by the postgraduate and the work done by the rest of the group. In addition, to develop informal contacts with peer postgraduates, work in a similar or the same field in order to gain understanding of others’ research work. This co-operative learning may enhance the development of a wide range of academic and social skills such as interpersonal relationships, communication, negotiation, decision-making, etc.

- **Work independently:** By the time the research proposal is produced, the postgraduates must be in the position of ‘taking off’ on their own line of thinking and initiatives. Furthermore understanding, with the guidance of the supervisor, the postgraduate must be responsible for the original contribution to the subject, as well as for developing a mature, critical knowledge of the subject area and the context. The postgraduate must also be familiar with the latest developments, trends and controversy in the chosen subject area. The above-mentioned evidence confirms that independent work may be an important ingredient in facilitating the attainment of higher level cognitive achievement and decision-making skills.

- **Provide feedback to supervisors:** Inform the supervisor when absent or when problems are experienced. This confirms that postgraduates remain an important source of evaluation data for matters such as the climate of learning and the clarity of instructions.

- **Participate in meetings:** Students must attend all courses, seminars, etc. as required by the supervisor. Furthermore, use a pro forma as a tool to clear
communications between the postgraduate and the supervisor. Not only do open discussions with postgraduates do stimulate cognitive thinking, but decision-making, communication, critical analysis and argumenting skills are also practised.

Considering these responsibilities, it has become evident that certain knowledge and skills have to be taught for the purpose of increasing postgraduate responsibilities, namely

- self-monitoring
- goal-setting
- self-talk
- physical adjustment strategies
- communication skills
- social skills
- study skills
- decision-making skills
- conflict resolution skills
- instruction in specific values
- moral development activities
- peer assistance skills
- monitoring the learning environment
- group skills.

Efforts to encourage postgraduates’ responsibility centre around two critical issues. First, what is the relationship between the acquisition of postgraduate responsibility and academic learning? Certain strategies for developing responsibility, such as independent learning, may not be as effective as direct instruction in the promotion of basic skills learning. Obviously it takes time and energy to teach and learn responsibility. As long as higher education achievement is defined narrowly in terms of postgraduate achievement, the chances of successfully cultivating responsible postgraduate behaviour as defined, are remote. The second issue concerns individual differences among postgraduates. These differences do not only include academic abilities and interests, but also include the capacity for responsible behaviour. The question that now arises is: ‘should the entire higher educational system be geared to the lowest common denominator or must more be done to acknowledge postgraduates who behave responsibly?’

Clearly higher education can do more to foster postgraduate responsibility. Lack of public and professional agreement about the purposes of postgraduate work is one factor. Fear that some postgraduates would misuse opportunities to learn responsibility is another. Supervisors need to reframe their basic questions in order to fully appreciate the importance of cultivating postgraduate responsibility. Instead of asking how higher education which is more ‘effective’ or ‘excellent’ can be provided, the first query should be: ‘effectiveness or excellence for what
purpose?’ If one of these purposes is, as it surely must be, to prepare a responsible citizen, supervisors have an obligation to help postgraduates learn responsibility.

This above-mentioned obligation links with supervisors’ or a supervisor’s accountability. This concept implies the responsibility of the supervisor to the postgraduate or for some supervision activity designed to maintain or improve the quality of learning (Dill 1999). In addition to clarifying the concept, the responsibilities of the supervisor will now be discussed.

The supervisor of a postgraduate takes full responsibility for all the academic matters in the progress of the postgraduate. This includes advising the postgraduate and monitoring his or her performance. Thus the supervisor’s responsibilities include:

- All actions prior to first registration.
- Giving guidance about the nature of research and the standard expected; about the planning of the research programme; about literature and resources; attendance and classes taught; and about requisite techniques (including arranging for instruction where necessary and possible).
- Maintaining regular contact.
- Giving detailed advice on necessary completion dates for successive stages of the work in order for the thesis to be submitted on time.
- Requesting written work as appropriate and returning such work in reasonable time with constructive criticism about the form and content.
- Arranging for the postgraduates to talk about their work at seminars in order to prepare for oral examinations.
- Ensuring that the postgraduate is made aware of inadequate progress of work or of standards of work below what is generally expected.
- Reading and commenting on the candidate’s draft thesis, while recognising that the thesis should be the postgraduate’s own effort.
- Undertaking reporting and other administrative responsibilities as required by the faculty/institution.
- Agreeing with the postgraduate’s method of working.
- Discussing any training needs and action where appropriate.

These postgraduate supervision responsibilities emphasise the pressure involved in postgraduate work. In addition, it should be emphasised that supervisors have become ‘educators for responsibility’ by creating safe, caring, respectful and productive learning environments where open dialogue is possible, but also crucial to enhance the academic writing arena. This confirms the importance and value of acknowledging and engaging with different voices that find expression at different moments of a postgraduate’s experience through dialogue (both written and spoken). In order to be successful as a ‘supervisor for responsibility’, tools and techniques will subsequently be discussed.
STRATEGIES FOR BEING AN ACCOUNTABLE SUPERVISOR AND A RESPONSIBLE POSTGRADUATE STUDENT

Within this interrelationship – an accountable supervisor versus a responsible postgraduate – higher education institutions have to be proactive, diagnostic and have remedial strategies in place in order to prevent and decrease problems in postgraduate work. In order to accomplish this, an example of an ethical concern which arises here has to be addressed. Is it the supervisor’s and the postgraduate’s duties to act according to conscience in any matter for the protection of the deeper good of the higher education institution – as part of its scholarly, educational and academic purpose? Dealing with institutional ethics, it is not the institutions that behave well or badly, it takes people to behave well or badly. It is clearly important that mutual trust, like that which exists between doctors and patients, should also exist between supervisors and postgraduates. This implies that they ought to be able to expect to treat and be treated on a similar ‘collegial’ basis of mutual respect. This again proves that open dialogue, as well as the following tools and techniques being suggested, is vital for postgraduate success:

- A code of conduct (both in manual and electronic format) would not only assist both parties regarding what should be done, but would also serve as a guide towards the most effective and efficient source of information regarding both academic, personal and administrative issues.
- Academic policies with regard to responsibilities, integrity, registration and degree requirements have to be in place to prevent ambivalence. These policies should also be supported by the academic community by sharing the responsibility with the institution for creating conditions where violations of academic integrity are curtailed. These efforts must, in addition, be supported by guidelines and procedures that are designed to deal with violations in order to maintain the integrity of the institution and to ensure that the institution’s standards are upheld.

To establish an academic honour system at an institution which is based on the premise that each postgraduate has the responsibility to:

- uphold the highest standards of academic integrity in the postgraduate’s own work;
- refuse to tolerate violations of academic integrity in the institutional community; and
- foster a high sense of integrity and social responsibility on the part of the institutional community.

Intervention strategies for the development of academic writing skills should be addressed at various institutional levels by using diverse proactive strategies in order to follow a holistic developmental approach. It would be to the advantage of
the postgraduate, the department and the institution (as a strategic partner) if a language proficiency test for postgraduate students could be designed to identify possible gaps in the students’ language proficiencies. This test should not be used to turn students away or put them down, but as a diagnostic tool for remedial actions. Unmistakable skills of academic writing such as meta-cognitive processes, critical analytical skills, the ability to formulate clearly and unambiguously, etc. need to be items in such a test. Once a student’s limitations have been identified, the correct intervention strategies can be chosen. Even if it means the student will have to enrol for a prescribed semester course, it might eventually shorten the duration of study.

*Ad hoc* unplanned and unco-ordinated efforts, which are not part of the institution’s teaching/tuition policy, should be discouraged. Most initiatives that are not part of an integrated institutional plan and vision are often doomed to fail.

Writing assistance should already be provided within all the disciplines from undergraduate level. Generic writing courses or generic ‘edit and fix’ writing centres could create a pathology view of students’ struggle to enter the discourse. It is proposed to discipline specialists, specifically those who have an interest in language, to design and implement circular courses on undergraduate level (although on an elementary level-building) to postgraduate levels to develop and rectify problems. This would mean that the discourse conventions are learnt along with language and within the specific discourse community.

The possibility of a bridging qualification for master’s and doctoral students needs to be researched thoroughly. Such a bridging qualification could address the needs of students who (1) lack the necessary and required academic writing skills, as well as research knowledge and experience; and (2) those older students who return after a substantial period to enrol for postgraduate studies.

Criteria of applied competence and autonomy of learning (RSA MoE 2001) should be the guiding tools and serve as a quality assurance mechanism for both supervisor and supervisee. This could not only clarify expectations between the above-mentioned two parties, but pace the way for assessment to be transparent and assessors to be accountable.

Obviously the above-mentioned aspects have implications for academic staff development. Academic staff should be enabled to articulate and contest their own conventions and create a meta-language that is included in the education of the learners upon entering the discipline and the higher education institution. The development of academic writing skills should become the responsibility of all departments – obviously playing different roles such as identifying, diagnosing and referring students.

**CONCLUSION**

In this article the argument was based on Socrates’ view that you cannot teach anybody anything, you can only make them think. In addition, it was based on the
perspective that learning in supervision has to be mediated by means of dialogue between the postgraduate and the supervisor as the human mediator. Based on this notion, a discussion followed as to why and how the lack of academic writing skills of postgraduates should be addressed via a two-way process to address both the lack of visionary faculty development and postgraduates’ inadequacies. The development of these skills as a laborious and expensive activity is currently a widespread problem, but crucial for quality academic writing during the Information Age. This was followed by an exposition of the increase in obstacles that prevent postgraduates and supervisors from proceeding with the core business of postgraduate education, namely the conceptualisation of the research, the content, and the quality of the final research product. This discussion was linked with the debate of the accountability of supervisors versus the responsibility of postgraduates. Finally, I believe, that although accountability places a burden on the supervisor and mandates a reporting of the results of the responsibility, it must rather be seen as a tool for the innovative, professional supervisor of the future. Without accountability, there is furthermore little basis for programme support and without postgraduate responsibility there is little basis for programme change. Thus this article claims that supervisors should open the door, but the postgraduates must enter by themselves.

REFERENCES


RSA MoE see Republic of South Africa. Ministry of Education.


