

Developing academic writing support for postgraduate researchers at the University of Wolverhampton

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The University of Wolverhampton (UoW) is a post-1992 university split across four campuses, with eighteen schools and institutes housed in four faculties. Support for students' learning and academic development is provided by Learning and Information Services, part of the Directorate of Academic Support, both in person at the university's four learning centres and online. The Skills for Learning team within Learning and Information Services is responsible for providing academic skills support for students from all disciplines and levels in the form of embedded sessions, stand-alone workshops and one-to-one support. The service is extremely popular with students and very well used by staff, with good engagement across all faculties. Whilst all students are welcome to access support, it became apparent that the skills workshops, which are more introductory in tone and content, were being used by doctoral research students. A need was therefore identified for extra academic skills support that was appropriate and relevant for research students' requirements, resulting in the development and piloting of a new programme of doctoral academic writing support.

A need for doctoral student support

Whilst academic skills support (and specifically academic writing support) for undergraduates is generally well signposted and easily accessible, provision for postgraduate researchers (PGRs) to build on core skills in this area can be overlooked because it is assumed that students at this level develop these capabilities independently (Odena & Burgess, 2015). This outlook largely neglects the fact that many students enrolled on doctoral programmes require supplementary academic support for various reasons (for example, returning to university after a break, or progressing directly from undergraduate to PhD study, as is common in some disciplines), and promotes a view of students at this level as essentially homogeneous and sharing a broadly similar skillset. More than 75% of doctoral students fail to complete their studies within the expected four-year time frame or part-time equivalent (HEFCE, 2010), and it is estimated that issues with academic writing and thesis completion are contributing factors (Odena & Burgess, 2015). The identification of various 'thresholds' that doctoral students must overcome or progress past gives further support to the notion that almost all PGRs, at different stages of study, may require additional assistance or strategies for developing their learning further (Kiley, 2009)

In enhancing the work that we could do with PGRs, we focused on developing specific academic writing support that could sit alongside existing provision for students in areas such as English for academic purposes (EAP) (open only to non-native speakers of English), and broader researcher development in line with the Vitae Researcher Development Framework. At UoW, assistance and guidance are amply provided in these areas by the Doctoral College and the International Academy, so it was essential that additional skills for learning support should concentrate on academic writing for the purposes of thesis completion. This would not only distinguish the areas for which we could provide support, but would also create appropriate guidance for doctoral students who are native speakers of English yet require additional academic writing instruction, a group that can be neglected due to lack of assistance for home students that mirrors EAP provision and associated writing support (Wingate & Tribble, 2012).

The fact that PGRs required academic writing support was demonstrated by the consistent use of Skills for Learning workshops by research students. A surprising number of PGRs attended these sessions, especially workshops relating to the writing process, the most popular being Academic Writing, Writing a Literature Review and Introduction to Critical Thinking. There was an even distribution of students from such diverse backgrounds as biomedical science, musical composition, psychology and fine arts. The skills sessions ran weekly throughout the year, whereas PGR support in other areas tended to be clustered in semesters one and two; student feedback noted that more

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frequent sessions and one-to-one appointments for PGRs would be helpful. Thus, there appeared to be a gap – and a need – for suitable doctoral-level academic writing support that was year-round and easily accessible.

Developing writing support for postgraduate researchers

The main areas that needed to be addressed were support tailored to this level of study, and issues of timing and regularity. Whilst support for undergraduates could be targeted to periods of enrolment, starts of semesters, teaching weeks or deadlines, the nature of doctoral study requires a more flexible approach. Although many PGRs commence their degrees at designated intake points throughout the year, their progress thereafter (and attendance on campus) is much more sporadic and unlikely to follow a set pattern. The time constraints of part-time students, distance learners and those completing professional doctorates are more complex still and require proper consideration. It was also important to pay attention to what students were actively seeking help with: namely, introductory academic writing support appropriate for doctoral-level study. Supervisors confirmed that general writing skills were indeed often lacking, and that more support was needed.

Through working with the Doctoral College – and building on the patterns identified in the PGR use of Skills for Learning workshops – a new timetable of workshops and one-to-one support was developed, including a tailor-made Academic Writing at Doctoral Level workshop, which ran both on the Doctoral College's Research Skills Development series and in a separate Skills for Researchers programme. The workshop addresses macro and micro issues relating to thesis writing that are common across all disciplines. The workshop starts with a wide perspective, including thinking broadly about readership, what each section of a thesis needs to argue or achieve, and strategies for creating structure across chapters and sections. It then looks more closely at how to write engagingly while making a clear and effective argument. Students are encouraged to critique sections from journal articles and theses, examining what makes a particular style of writing interesting or difficult to read. There is time at the end of the session for students to discuss work individually.

The need for more regular support (and one-to-one help) was also addressed through drop-ins, which run twice a month across the university's two largest campuses, and appointments at all campuses available by request. Further assistance and interim support between workshops have proved popular. Appointments are available for discussing sections of writing in detail. Researchers requiring additional help finding information or using referencing software have also used them. Drop-in sessions tend to be accessed by students with questions or issues to discuss rather than for writing support, and are also used for arranging follow-up appointments.

Doctoral Drop In Skills for Learning

City Campus
First Wednesday of every month
Harrison Learning Centre: Pod 1
2 – 4pm

Walsall Campus
Last Wednesday of every month
Walsall Learning Centre: Pod 1
2 – 4pm

Saturday drop-in sessions
Walsall Learning Centre: Helpzone
12.30-2pm
Next drop-in session: 6th May

Skills for Learning Skills for Researchers

Doctoral Appointments Skills for Learning

PhD and Prof-Doc appointments
By request at all campuses – please email skills@wlv.ac.uk to book

Tuesday evening appointments
Walsall Learning Centre: Helpzone
5.30pm-7.30pm
Please email skills@wlv.ac.uk to book an appointment

Not on campus?
Email skills@wlv.ac.uk to arrange an appointment on Skype or ASSIST

Skills for Learning Skills for Researchers

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Marketing for doctoral support at the University of Wolverhampton

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Findings, challenges, successes and surprises

Since the start of this academic year (2016–17), uptake of the new PGR academic writing support has been very good – initial academic writing workshops were oversubscribed and interest in follow-up sessions remained high. Feedback on workshops and one-to-one support has been overwhelmingly positive: users of appointments have mentioned increased confidence and proficiency in their writing, along with improved feedback from supervisors, whilst workshop attendees also noted their usefulness, particularly for assessing and critiquing examples of academic writing and applying their findings to their own work.

Thanks for the privilege. It was an intuitive workshop. I wish I had one like this when I started my PhD. Once again thanks. – Final-year Education PhD student

Just to update you on the outcome of my supervisors' meeting last Friday – they were really pleased with the work and in fact one of them remarked that 'my work is starting to look like a PhD thesis' – Second-year Business PhD student

The service appears to be used in quite a linear way, in that attendees at workshops often book follow-up appointments, which then become regular bookings. Many have also noted how helpful it is to discuss their research with an independent and impartial listener who is not a subject specialist, as this forces them to explain their ideas and arguments more clearly – a process that often leads to greater clarity in their writing. For some students, a form of support outside their relationship with their supervisors is also valuable. Others also find interaction with a range of students in the workshops is a welcome break from some of the loneliness and isolation of doctoral study, which can be a common issue (Wisker, et al. 2007).

One of the surprises has been how strongly PGRs favour face-to-face daytime weekday meetings, despite evening, weekend and online support being available. Whilst flexibility is essential, users of the provision are evidently keen to attend where possible, some even appearing to use face-to-face meetings as an incentive to come onto campus. Particular challenges of providing support at this level have become apparent too, most notably around creating workshops that provide specific support relating to thesis writing that are generic enough to be applicable to most disciplines. A common issue in feedback for workshops is that students want to work with texts that are more subject-specific, yet it is difficult to achieve this when offering university-wide sessions open to all PGRs. Whilst the importance of discipline-specific texts in developing academic writing techniques is well known (Wingate, 2012; Odena & Burgess, 2015) this is perhaps a line of support that is best addressed through supervisory assistance. Nevertheless, the new workshops and one-to-one sessions so far appear to be highly effective in providing the majority of students with useful first steps in developing their thesis writing and considering the approaches they may take.

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