STUDENTS' LIVED EXPERIENCES OF FORMULATING A RESEARCH PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

Stellenbosch University aims to be a leading research-focused institution in Africa and a globally recognised hub for inclusivity and innovation by 2040. The university emphasises high-quality academic offerings, including Teaching, Learning, and Assessment (TLA) practices. This study focuses on Bachelor of Education Honours (B.Ed. Hons) students' experiences with an Introduction to Research Methods module, specifically on the formulation of research projects. This focus is important for research because the quality of students' preparation and development at honours level influences these students' throughput rates and overall preparedness for master's and PhD studies. The data from semi-structured interviews revealed that despite different supervision approaches across two universities, students have similar challenges, but agentic capacities no less. The findings of the study offer insights for module redesign and postgraduate student success.

Keywords: B.Ed. Hons programme, research projects, students' lived experiences, support structures, agency, communities of practice.

INTRODUCTION

Research education across higher education qualifications is recognised as an important contributor to the development of students' critical thinking skills, as it nurtures scientific scepticism and encourages independent thinking (Schindler, 2011). Davis, Evans and Hickey (2006) regard research knowledge and skills as essential for participation in a global economy. Others, like Waite and Davis (2006), and Cutler (2008), view research skills development as important to sustain lifelong learning and professional development. Shaw et al. (2008) found that undergraduate research projects allow novice researchers to think in innovative ways within their disciplines, and to connect with people within their learning and professional communities.

The advantages of developing research competence are also recognised within the South African higher education context, with the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ) noting the development of academic skills and knowledge amongst student teachers within particular qualification knowledge mixes (Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2011, p. 9). While research education and development may hold benefits for university students across qualification levels, the emphasis on research development increases at postgraduate level qualifications.

Honours programmes offer an entry into these qualifications, and therefore form an important foundation for subsequent postgraduate qualifications (such as master's and PhD qualifications). As such, the research development that takes place at this level forms the foundation of research knowledge and skills that follow. Developing research skills at honours level lays the foundation for integrating young scholars into communities of learning, motivates them to become independent thinkers, prepares them for postgraduate programmes, and provides opportunities for communicating or showcasing their work (Tan, 2006).

There are various challenges associated with research skills development in general that indirectly affects B.Ed. Hons project formulation. This can include accommodating diverse learning styles (Chung and Ingleby, 2011; McGowan and Potter, 2008), time management (Repak, 2011), language barriers (Fan, 2010), and unequal access to research resources (Chung and Ingleby 2011). The lack of academic writing skills (Albertyn et al*.,* 2008; Chokwe, 2011) and a lack of reflection (Singh and Mabasa, 2015), have also been identified as contributory factors. More recently, Mhlahlo (2020) attributed the problem to novice supervisors not having the necessary competence to help students develop these skills.

Despite the contribution this work has made to our understanding of research project formulation at an honours level, we still know little about students' perspectives on the formulation of a research project in terms of successes, challenges, and suggestions for improvement. While student insights greatly enrich studies of research methods pedagogy (Hosein and Rao, 2017; Rand, 2016; Turner et al*.,* 2018), there is limited literature on what that learning looks like at advanced levels (Earley 2014, p. 248). The literature on honours students' experiences of formulating research projects specifically is also limited, especially in terms of decolonising students' lived experiences of formulating a research project in South African universities. This article therefore sets out to reflect on the practice of developing research projects to gain some understanding of the phenomenon through focusing on the students' perspectives.

I used a qualitative-phenomenological study (Viswambharan and Priya, 2016) to interpret and understand the lived experiences of students in terms of formulating research projects. The

literature review is followed by the study design. The findings are presented next, then the discussion, and finally, the conclusion.

LITERATURE

The advancement of research is a global phenomenon, with assumptions that knowledge plays a central role in economic growth, national welfare, and social development (Cross and Govender, 2022). In Europe, research skills are seen as essential to smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth, while in Southern Africa, East Asia, and Latin America, research capabilities are considered central to the development of knowledge societies (Brennan et al., 2016). In South Africa, research in general and research capacity-building is strongly promoted. The policy document, *White Paper on Science, Technology, and Innovation* (Republic of South Africa, 2018, p. 44) states that "research and the creation of knowledge have far more than just instrumental value", but also contribute to the development of an informed, empowered populace that functions efficiently, creatively, and ethically as a component of a democratic society. Postgraduate education has also been closely linked to socio-economic transformation in both developed and developing nations (Atibuni, 2019). Initially, the Norms and Standards for Educators (Republic of South Africa, 2000) provided a policy framework for teacher education curricula in South Africa, but this policy document was replaced by a new set of policy guidelines formulated in the MRTEQ (DHET, 2011, p. 9) to address the critical challenges that education in South Africa faced – especially the concerns about weak content and conceptual knowledge amongst teachers. Apart from curriculum design and policy implementation, the MRTEQ policy foregrounds knowledge, reflection, connection, synthesis, and research in its conceptualisation of teacher educators' work. The Stellenbosch University Faculty of Education's honours programmes were not aligned with the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework stipulation that all honours programmes must have a compulsory research component of at least 25 per cent (30 credits). In 2013, through its renewal programme, the honours programmes were amended in alignment with the MRTEQ policy (DHET, 2011) and the national focus on restructuring and developing teaching, and training opportunities (Council on Higher Education (CHE), 2013). These amendments include amongst others, a mandatory research component in keeping with national policies aimed at promoting quality assurance (CHE, 2013; Thaver, Holtman, Julie, 2013). The honours programmes provide an opportunity to induct students into the academic research culture (Thaver et al. 2013) and demand "a high level of theoretical engagement and intellectual independence" (CHE, 2013, p. 71).

The research on honours students has revealed a paucity of literature on these students' experiences relating to the formulation of research projects. The literature concerning postgraduate students' experiences of the research centres on master's and PhD-students, with specific aspects like internal and external factors that influence postgraduate students' experiences of the research process in general, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on students' experiences, supervision of honours students' proposals, or teaching research methods for this group of students. Hitherto, little research has been done on honours students' perspectives on the formulation of a research project.

Morgan (2015) explored student transitions from a foundation degree (level 5) into the third year of a BA honours degree and found that honours students in the UK felt ill-prepared for postgraduate studies. Kumar et al. (2021) investigated the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the experiences of honours degree students in the USA. By studying the perceptions of their student participants they learned that the students' well-being was severely affected by Covid-19, but that the supervisors supported the students well.

In South Africa, Ngubo (2018) explored the experience of the honours graduates in psychology and industrial psychology at a South African university and found that the students benefitted from the honours programme in terms of exposure to knowledge and skills required for graduate studies, but that the university needed to be cognisant of students' workplace environments too. Recently, Mhlahlo's (2020) study on honours students in a South African university revealed that the problem with honours students' throughput can be attributed to the lack of support for novice teachers. I focused on the honours experience because it is distinct in many ways (predominantly research-focused, short timeline), although many of the same issues have been reported in PhD training, for example, Wang and DeLaquil, 2020.

A research project is an extended essay that presents a question or statement for analysis and evaluation. In undertaking a research project, the student presents their own ideas and research on a subject alongside analysing existing knowledge. Around the world, however, students identify different challenges in the formulation of the research project. Writing a research report is a requirement for students to pass the honours degree. Rastri et al. (2023, p. 57) note that academic writing is formal writing, such as essays, research proposals, theses, dissertations, or articles, accomplished in an educational setting. In other words, academic writing is a style of written expression with specific intellectual boundaries of expertise. Academic writing plays a critical role in socialising students into the discourse of subjects and disciplines in higher education. Research projects encourage students to think critically and comprehensively about an identified topic. Ruchina et al. (2015) also stress that a research programme is considered an essential component of graduate education as it leads to

professional and personal development. However, students experience many challenges with academic research. Mhlahlo (2020) asserts that students often view the research as an overwhelming project. Some of the main challenges are discussed in the paragraphs below.

Suyadi (2020) argues that these challenges are varied and can range from internal (personal) to external. Personal factors can include emotions (Driscoll and Powell, 2016), such as interest in writing, anxiety, lack of self-efficacy and confusion, which have particular effects on students' writing processes. Pintrich and Schunk (2002, p. 5) comment that "motivation is something that gets us going, keeps us moving, and helps us complete tasks but there continues to be much disagreement over its precise nature". Motivation can have a good or bad influence on students. Self-efficacy, for example, the perceptions of one's capabilities to produce actions, also affect choice, effort, persistence, achievement and career choices (Schunk and Pajares, 2002). Some honours students may believe that a positive outcome will result from certain actions, but also think that they lack the competence to produce those actions (Schunk, 2001). Postgraduate students, and honours students specifically, need emotional support and assistance in research (Maistry, 2017). The challenges that honours students experience can also have to do with external factors that can be linked to the quality of writing support.

Writing in a foreign language, for example, can be challenging, especially to those whose native tongue is not English (Yuvayapan and Bilginer, 2020). Boughey (2002) argues that students' difficulties with lexicalisation and English grammar prevent them from expressing their thoughts coherently. Inadequate academic literacy is a major challenge, especially for disadvantaged students and those from rural areas. While Bitzer and Albertyn (2011), and Ndlangamandla (2017) regard academic literacy, gained through postgraduate qualifications, as a vital tool for a competitive advantage in the workplace, inadequate academic literacy can make some students feel excluded from academic discourses in their specific fields. Unfamiliar with the university academic discourse, these students often struggle into the postgraduate level where deficient academic literacy (Tapp, 2015) becomes a barrier and permanently places these students on the periphery of the academic community. The quality of institutional support and guidance can also have an impact on honours students' experiences. Morrow (2009) postulates that the history and conditions of an institution can either constrain or create an enabling environment of epistemological access to academic literacy. Therefore, it is universities' responsibility to provide an enabling environment that facilitates the development of academic literacy of students, for instance, by providing access to writing centre services for both undergraduate and postgraduate students (Grossman, 2016). Formal writing is challenging in many ways, which often includes issues like structure, grammar, mechanics and vocabulary (Ariyanti and Fitriana, 2017). Suryatiningsih (2019) highlights issues such as clear composition

of the background to the study, references to support the quotations, finding a gap in the previous research, and revising the essay drafts. The challenges associated with writing skills can therefore also influence honours students' ability to formulate research projects.

Honours research project formulation is a stage where the student begins to make the shift from a personal trouble to a public concern (Mills, 2004). As Jansen, Herman, Pillay (2004. p. 79) assert, "success in the journey of postgraduate studies varies for students as this journey is filled with obstacles, reversals, breakdowns". Shifting from practice-orientated identities to academic orientation is often an additional challenge for most honours students.

In the "Introduction to Research" module at Stellenbosch University, honours students can choose whether to use empirical or non-empirical research methods. If empirical, the research method could be either quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods. The student would be required to describe how they will conduct the research by outlining the research design, the exact method to be adopted, the nature of the sample intended to be used, the research instrument(s) that will be used to collect data, and how the data will be analysed and interpreted. A quantitative research project would require the student to include the statistical methods intended to be used to interpret the data collected.

Non-empirical research/conceptual research does not involve empirical research and is based on working with issues at a conceptual level. This kind of research seeks solutions to problems using existing knowledge as sources. It works with concepts and ideas – and the assumptions on which they are based – as they appear in texts. Therefore, conceptual research focuses on how texts frame particular issues and the concepts that influence them. Conceptual analysis can take the form of discursive analysis and content analysis. Such research can take on a variety of forms such as theory development, historical research, systematic literature reviews, and critical analyses. Furthermore, depending on the specific form, it may also utilise hermeneutics (i.e., the art or science of interpretation) or semiotics (i.e., the study of signs and symbols especially as they occur in language or other forms of communication such as texts) as a specific research method. There is no clearly defined or standard "template" which can be used to engage in non-empirical research and each of the approaches listed may use one or more methods to accomplish its objectives.

STUDY DESIGN

The study used a qualitative phenomenological research design. Phenomenology is an approach to research that seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspectives of those who have experienced it (Teherani et al., 2015). A phenomenological design describes or interprets the participants' lived experiences. Researchers' interpretation of

these experiences can provide further insights into a phenomenon (Cohen and Omery, 1994). In this phenomenological study, a researcher familiar with the research project formulation process interviewed the participants, thus providing a perspective on their lived experiences of formulating a research project.

The participants were required to respond to questions in a semi-structured interview via Teams. At the end of the study, themes and common patterns were extracted from their responses. I used purposive sampling (as outlined by Patton, 2002) to select the participants for the study. Three honours students (given pseudonyms to protect their identities) who had completed the formulation of a research project and had first-hand information of the phenomenon (Cresswell and Clark, 2011) participated in the study.

I conducted thematic data analysis to identify, analyse, and check for patterns as the thematic analysis approach can produce insightful and trustworthy findings (Nowell et al., 2017). The semi-structured interviews generated detailed and in-depth descriptions of the participants' lived experiences of formulating research projects. The research commenced after ethical clearance and institutional permission was obtained (see SU Project ID: 28335). Each participant signed a consent form to participate in the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section the data is presented, and the findings discussed.

Overall experiences

Bongi completed his honours degree at Stellenbosch University as a full-time student immediately after completing a PGCE certificate. He had mixed feelings about his experience of the honours research project, stating:

> "Overall, for me, it was a bit of a mixed bag. Because there were aspects of it that were pleasant, like the adrenalin rush of being thrown into the deep end after PGCE and the not so pleasant, like having to operate on a whole new level. I eventually passed this section but got fairly average marks for it."

Carol completed her honours studies at Northwest University (via correspondence), six years after doing her undergraduate studies. She was working full-time as a teacher while doing her studies. She found the experience of research project formulation "generally enriching". She remarked: "I found it generally enriching, like putting the puzzle together."

For Amina, who completed her honours part-time at Stellenbosch University, the overall experience of the formulation of the research project was "challenging, but informative". She added, "The experience of this process, although challenging, taught me valuable lessons about scientific problem formulation and the overall structuring of a research project."

The data showed that although the participants studied at two different universities, the differences in their experiences of the research proposal formulation were not noteworthy. The Council on Higher Education, in line with the South African Qualifications Authority, allows for different universities in South Africa to register B.Ed. Hons modules offered in different modes, as long as the minimum national admission requirements of a four-year professional teaching degree or an appropriate bachelor's degree and a recognised professional teaching qualification are met. The knowledge mix is discretionary and dependent on the focus of the specialisation with the proviso that it includes a research component to which a minimum of 30 credits at Level 8 have been allocated (DHET, 2011, p. 36). The effect is that all B.Ed. Hons students, irrespective of the university in South Africa, must be exposed to some form of research activity.

Challenges

This sub-section focuses on the challenges the participants experienced and how this affected their experiences.

Bongi explained the different challenges he faced in the process. He mentioned:

"Having to identify my own research focus, putting it into research questions, choosing an appropriate methodology and the major one, knowing the appropriate theoretical framework to use.
Yoh … it was hectic."

He remarked that these challenges "gave [him] lots of sleepless nights" and "took [him] a while to make progress initially".

Carol commented on her challenges:

"Although I studied via correspondence, there was no online-meetings options available to me. It was only my supervisor's email correspondence. Also, my supervisor was a bit technologically challenged. I had to make sense of my supervisor's emails and decipher what she was trying to say and that often took long. I often felt blind during the process."

These challenges, Carol said, "placed limitations on making implicit things, explicit".

For Amina, the shift to making her once private writings known to others was challenging:

"Making what was usually one's private thoughts on an issue public – for others' scrutiny – was an unnerving experience for me. I was not foreign to reading and writing, but just not used to a kind of public scrutiny by experts like the academics in the department. It was also hard to make shifts from superficial engagement or simply cutting and pasting literature to now making sense of it and applying it in a convincing way. Thinking of problems in practical terms and everyday language differs from thinking about them and expressing them academically".

Her challenges initially made Amina feel "insecure" and caused her to be "tentative at first".

The challenges that the respondents mentioned ranged from the difficulty of structuring the project and knowing what theoretical framework to use, and modes of communication between supervisor and students to opening up the academic writing for external scrutiny and finally, making the shift in thinking of a problem from a practice-based perspective to an academic perspective. Of significance here is students' challenges in shifting from their common sense knowledge bases to academic thinking and writing. The personal and professional identities of students who are also full-time professional practitioners are often shaped by socialisation in schools which then becomes embodied. This practice-orientated identity initially informs most honours students' approach to research in postgraduate studies and makes them gravitate towards research problems that align with their practical experiences. Such students often find it challenging to abstract themselves from their professional contexts and engage with the problem from different (often theoretical, and critical analytical) perspectives. In their reflection on teaching research methods to honours students, Thaver et al. (2013) suggest that most students enter the course with fixed, common sense knowledge bases, with a set of concerns that are somewhere between, "I want to learn about corporal punishment" and "Learners misbehave therefore their marks are low" (Thaver et al., 2013, p. 1143). For Thaver and colleagues, this demonstrates students' yet undefined intellectual puzzles. To be told otherwise creates doubt and anxiety among such students.

Institutional support

The participants had nuanced answers to the question on the kind of institutional support they received while formulating the research project. Bongi responded that, in the main, he received institutional support in the form of his supervisor, but also additional support. In his own words:

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I received support in various ways, namely from my supervisor who did a lot of Teams writing and talking sessions as well as tutoring. As a full-time student living near the university at the time of my studies, I could physically go to the library regularly and access other on-campus resources like the computer labs and postgraduate research sessions. The hons programme is so full and fast, I really don't know how anyone can do this on a part-time basis."

Carol attributed the institutional support to "my supervisor believing in me and putting the puzzle together eventually". She elaborated:

> "Because the course was via correspondence, we received module packages with readings and guides and so on, which was not that helpful. I remember for the research project module specifically, I had to rely on one of my husband's old books from the time he did his Hons. We could access the university's online library though."

For Amina, the main source of institutional support came from her supervisor. In her response to the kind of institutional support she received, she stated, "My supervisor, yoh … my supervisor was just amazing … always there when I needed help or got stuck … rock solid and always available with advice." She continued: "Yes we had other support like online presentations of the different sections of the research project and group discussions, but my supervisor was key."

For all the participants, the supervisor was the main source of institutional support to guide them through the research project formulation process. The type of institutional support to which they had access as well as the period in which they did their research projects differed. Bongi, who was a full-time student and who lived close to the university at the time, was physically able to access additional university resources to help him. Carol could only access her university's online library while Amina had access to online tutoring too. The next section focuses on the students' own navigational practices.

Own support structures

For Bongi, "remaining disciplined, setting daily targets and monitoring [his] own progress through the research project process" was central to his own navigation through the research project formulation. He experienced that "studying examples of other research projects and tackling the research project in little chunks" aided his navigation through the project. Bongi also relied on a group established among his fellow students. He verbalised it as follows:

> Our WhatsApp support group was my additional source of support which gave me a safe space to just talk to others also going through the struggles of research project formulation at the time. In this space, we could catch up, talk freely and in our own language and share thoughts, give and receive help about things you might not want to ask your supervisor because no one wants to come across as stupid … you see?

In terms of own support structures, Carol remarked:

> "What helped me further was the fact that our hons course was structured with a small project … but also the WhatsApp groups we established among ourselves. This allowed a space to vent,

skinner… sorry, but it's true … and you know, just to be able to belong in a like-minded space or a group of people doing the same thing. Otherwise, it's a very lonely journey in which one can easily feel isolated. Then also one got to manage your time correctly to be able to juggle between personal and professional and of course one's studies. Hearing and reading how others have done it was helpful for me."

Amina narrowed it down to a few strategies:

"Constantly having my research questions next to me and reading theses on more or less similar topics were key for me. I would read to understand how others write and mimicking the writing style … you know … not copying others' words, but using their style of writing, because different sections of the research project require a slightly different style of wording. And then another thing that helped me was watching YouTube video clips of theory explanations and so on. I have always loved to read so reading theses was not boring for me. In fact, it has become a good habit which I would advise anyone to do to help you get to know the kind of language in a research project."

Amina's mother was an additional source of support. She said:

My mother was also doing her master's studies in nursing at the time, which helped me a lot … because I could ask her for advice, and we could sit together late. I could also rely on her for emotional support.

Like the others, Amina also mentioned the student support group. In her words:

This has nothing to do with the capabilities of supervisors … they are great, but our student WhatsApp group helped me tremendously. In this group I could ask others their opinions, talk frankly, and you know … just be open with others. People could sulk, complain, ask for assistance, catch up on work or just feel emotionally supported. This is kind of a student safe space, and it really helped me a lot.

The participants' own navigational practices included self-discipline, self-management, time management, chunking down work, managing between personal and professional lives, reading others' work, watching YouTube videos, and mimicking writing. All the participants viewed the supervisor's shepherding role through the research project formulation as critical. Although building and maintaining effective relationships is vital for both postgraduate students and supervisors, there are multiple challenges like the supervisor's experience and expertise, overload, and students' own preparedness for the programme (Yende, 2021, p. 136) that has an impact on the supervising process. Supervising an honours student's research project very often takes the same amount of time and effort as supervising a master's student's work – although it is not generally seen that way. Therefore, the factors Yende (2021) alludes to should be carefully considered when students are allocated to supervisors.

Over and above their own navigational strategies, some students rely on familial support too. Familial capital (Yosso, 2005, p. 79) - knowledge forms gained from families - provide the participants with a form of agency that helps them navigate the challenges in the project formulation process. Emirbayer and Mische, (1998, p.965) see agency as "a human ability to shape the circumstances in which they live". Exercising agency thus has the power to change the participants' circumstances.

All the participants alluded to a WhatsApp group among students as a supportive space through the research project formulation journey. This shows that students can be agentic in terms of forming their own support structures independently from that of the university. WhatsApp groups can serve as a Community of Practice (CoP). The idea of a CoP is rooted in Wenger's (1998) idea of learning being an activity based on social participation where the individuals are active participants in the practice of social communities and construct their identities through these communities (Wenger, McDermott, Snyder et al., 2002). In this study the CoP was the students who, together with other students, established WhatsApp groups by themselves in which they participated in the shared activity of being busy with the formulation of a research project. In this CoP these students could engage with each other as equals and contribute to each other's mental wellbeing by merely listening, making suggestions, or just being part of a group of people experiencing the same challenges and anxieties. CoPs are thus a worthy consideration in our thinking about honours students' engagements and experiences of research project formulation.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Three main themes, namely transition from common sense orientation to academic, the supervisor's role and student agency, as well as possible scaffolding practices emerged, as discussed above. The participants also made noteworthy suggestions that will be useful in one's consideration of approaches to research project formulation. The following suggestions were put forward:

- "More show and tell sessions for honours students in which each section of the project is explained with examples of language use, in-text referencing use, academic writing style and length of the section. Tutoring should be a compulsory additional to the lectures, and discussion sections in research project formulation". (Bongi)
- "More explicit-making activities on the use of educational theories and more regular developmental activities for students as things that would improve the teaching of research project formulation at honours level". (Carol)
- "A breakdown of the whole project formulation process into bite-size show and tell-videos that explain each section in the project with examples for students" (Amina)

Making the implicit more explicit, breaking down the whole project into smaller pieces and more assistance in the form of tutoring emerged as key suggestions. The significance of this is that scaffolding practices are essential in assisting honours students to gain a better understanding of what is required of them. Chunk learning and including academic literacy in our teaching content are some examples.

Gera et al. (2022) contend that chunk learning (or chunking) makes it easier for people to find the information they need quickly and that it supports personalised learning. Kamler and Thomson (2006) see chunking of sections of the research project as more useful than students having to produce a complete project first for the lecturer to give input. Chunking is important in honours students' full programmes, while also having to juggle personal and professional priorities with studies. Not only does chunking help to make the information stick, but it also saves time and allows students to prioritise.

Our university is a public university situated on the African continent and should serve the needs of African students (black or white). To decolonise students' lived experiences of formulating a research project therefore requires deliberate intervention strategies. Firstly, one needs to acknowledge and understand that historical and colonial contexts that have shaped research methodologies and frameworks, often reflect dominant colonial narratives and perspectives, and can exclude indigenous perspectives. Deliberate intervention strategies can narrow this gap. Fataar (2012, p.57) asserts that pedagogy remains the key leveraging site for providing an ameliorating platform for social justice in education. Pedagogy, he continues, addresses the how of the transmission and reproduction of knowledge (Fataar, 2012). I want to suggest that deliberate scaffolding pedagogies can facilitate productive engagements between students' indigenous perspectives and ways of working and the formal curriculum requirements in the research project process. While I make scaffolding suggestions below, one must remain cognisant of the fact that decolonising research project formulation processes is ongoing and requires continuous reflection and adaptation.

Instead of simply outsourcing to the writing centre, there is a growing body of research that argues that the teaching of academic reading and writing should be embedded in disciplines because academic literacy is not a generic practice (Bharuthram and Clarence, 2015; Boughey and McKenna, 2021; Jacobs, 2013, in Bertram et al., 2022). Including academic literacy pieces in their own texts provides a useful scaffolding method which makes language patterns explicit to students and shows them how to re-write or paraphrase academic texts (Bertram et al., 2022, p. 166).

Tutors can work closely with lecturers and supervisors to assist students in making disciplinary practices and conventions in research project formulation explicit especially in the

early stages of the *Introduction to Research* module. Shiely and McCarthy (2019) found evidence that student engagement and learning was enhanced by additional small-group tutors. Lecturers and tutors working closely can for example show students how to find new ways to "capture the gist" of the original source.

Instead of verbatim quotes, students can be encouraged to read sources effectively to know what information to use for writing purposes as well as how to integrate the material into their own texts so that it forms part of their own arguments (Hirvela and Qian, 2013, p. 87). Emphasis can be placed on a good balance between the cited sources and the author's own voice. Citing and paraphrasing activities can be an ongoing activity throughout the module. Not only did the students' attitude to engaging with their programme in Shiely and McCarthy's (2019) study improve, but also their positivity towards learning.

CONCLUSIONS

The study sought to shed light on honours students' lived experiences of formulating a research project. The findings of the study show that there are no noteworthy differences in the three honours students' overall experiences of the research project formulation process, although they studied at different universities. Acknowledging and understanding colonial legacies requires of academics to carefully manage B.Ed. Hons students' transition from common sense knowledge to academic thinking and writing because of how historical events in the country positioned students differently in the education system. Although the supervisor remains central in shepherding the student through the research project formulation process, additional scaffolding practices like chunking and the inclusion of academic literacy activities with the help of tutors can help to productively engage with colonial legacies. Finally, working with students' own agentic capabilities like establishing their own communities of practice should not be underestimated and should be integrated into the research project formulation process as a way of incorporating indigenous epistemologies.

Although the study was done on a small scale, it offers a unique perspective of the complexities involved in honours students' experiences of research project formulation. Future research can consider a bigger scope of honours students that includes honours students across departments in a faculty and even across faculties. This might be useful to gain a broader understanding of the complexities in honours research project formulation.

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