

# **'MY SUPERVISOR IS SO BUSY ...'. INFORMAL SPACES FOR POSTGRADUATE LEARNING IN THE HEALTH SCIENCES**

**E. S. Grossman**

East London and Port Elizabeth Health Resource Centres

Walter Sisulu University

Mthatha, South Africa.

e-mail: grossmane@gmail.com

## **ABSTRACT**

This descriptive study investigates a one-on-one writing consultancy as an informal learning space, formed to assist postgraduate research students (PRS) with thesis writing. The consultancy was held monthly on Sundays and appointments booked for up to one hour. During that time writing problems were identified and recommendations made to overcome these. Over the nine months 52 consults were held with 23 PhDs and 21 Master's candidates, the remaining consults were for non-degree writing purposes. Consults proved dichotomous with advice sought for both writing and non-writing related issues. Conspicuous were findings indicative of the high workloads carried by supervisory staff which thwarted PRS interaction. The one-on-one consultancy has many characteristics of alternative research-related spaces used elsewhere to provide PRS support. It is suggested that informal learning spaces, similar to the one-on-one writing consultancy, be investigated as a way to support PRSs and improve their throughput numbers.

**Key words:** postgraduate research writing, informal learning spaces, Health Sciences, supervision, student support, research training, completion rates, throughput, alternative research-related spaces

## **INTRODUCTION**

South African universities, as elsewhere, are grappling with rising postgraduate research student (PRS) outputs within a shifting higher education backdrop increasingly regulated by the New Public Management (NPM) system of corporatisation, managerial performance and accountability policies (Louw and Godsell 2015, 155). Despite an academic environment fettered by an economic downswing, underprovided supervisory capacity (ASSAf 2010, 97) and a steady reduction in permanent academic staff numbers (CHE 2015, 56), South Africa has experienced a pleasing and consistent growth in doctoral enrolments over the past decade (CHE 2015, 29). Furthermore, there remains an ongoing and increased pressure on academic staff to ramp up doctoral enrolments, regardless of low PRS completion rates and prolonged registration times (Louw and Godsell 2015, 130).

Dropout and graduation delays have profound consequences for the economy, the

university and the PRS alike. The South African government expects prompt, efficient and cost effective PRS returns on its university subsidy investments to meet the developmental needs of the country (Habib and Morrow 2007, 114; ASSAf 2010, 27). The subsidy is dispensed via an academic funding formula, allocated according to the numbers of publications and postgraduates a tertiary institution produces (Woodiwiss 2012, 22). The bulk of the monies are only released on successful PRS graduation, which makes timeous completion imperative for the university to achieve economies of scale. Desired completion rates for a full time PhD is two years (part time four years) and one year for a full time Master's (two years part time). However actual completion rates are far from ideal: the average PhD completion rate after seven years is 50 per cent (Mouton 2015) while Zewotir, North and Murray (2015, 3) showed that it took just over two years for 50 per cent of full time University of KwaZulu-Natal Master's students to graduate. Not only are universities financially disadvantaged by slow completion rates, 'pile-up' occurs when PRSs remain in the system for longer than expected, clogging both administrative and supervisory resources (CHE 2009, 11). Finally the PRSs themselves don't want to prolong their registration time: one laments 'We are at a stage in our lives when many of our peers who chose to work are buying houses and cars, while those of us ... [studying] are constantly anxious about our funding and that we continue to be a financial burden on our parents ... aside from the difficulties of raising a family and saving for retirement' (ASSAf 2010, 79).

The 'writing up' of the thesis<sup>1</sup> has been identified as substantially impeding ideal submission time and graduation targets (Lessing and Schulze 2002, 140; Singh 2012, 69; Louw and Muller 2014, 16). In the past, PRSs could confidently turn to their supervisors for research writing training (Ross et al. 2011, 26). This is no longer the case. Murray and Moore (2006, 6) describe academic writing as a challenging, complicated combination of tasks requiring a multiplicity of skills which must be utilised at various times and in different orientations throughout the process. Irrespective of discipline, all supervisors are expected, nay assumed, to be competent in this 'multiplicity of skills'. In reality things are rather different. Firstly a supervisor must have the knowledge and skills to identify exactly what is wrong with a piece of writing and secondly, precisely what needs to be done in order to improve the comprehensibility of the piece (Larcombe, McCosker and O'Loughlin 2007, 60). Health Science supervisors, in common with many others, are seldom taught writing themselves and are unlikely to have been exposed to theoretical aspects of the English language during their academic path. Having learned what they know through 'mimicry' (Aitchison et al. 2012, 441) many supervisors do not have a scholastic background to explain why a piece of writing is

wrong and how to correct it (Ross et al. 2011, 21). This is especially challenging for supervisors who are non-native English speakers (Cameron et al. 2009, 505) which is increasingly the norm in South Africa.

Even if the most dedicated and conscientious of Health Science supervisors would like to give their PRSs the best writing tuition possible, workload realities dictate otherwise. African universities are understaffed with 50 per cent more students per lecturer in Sub-Saharan Africa than the global average (British Council 2014, 3). Heavy academic and clinical workloads, ever increasing numbers of committee meetings and unprecedented administrative duties (Habib and Morrow 2007, 119; ASSAf 2009, 230; Grossman and Crowther 2015, 2; Wright 2016, 5) hinder the sustained and productive face-to-face interaction required for PRS writing development. The feedback process, whereby the supervisor makes appropriate notes and comments on the draft for the PRS's attention, is time consuming. A useful figure in this regard comes from the Professional Editors Guild who calculate, for costing purposes, six to ten double spaced, A4 pages of thesis per hour for a 'light' edit with a 'substantial' edit taking three pages an hour (Grossman 2015). Expressing this in terms of academic workload a 'substantial' edit of a typical 100 page Master's thesis would require 33 hours of academic editing time, with a typical PhD of 200 pages requiring 66 hours. South African supervisors are expected to carry a minimum load of three to seven research Master's and doctoral students at any one time (Ballim 2010, 3) which means an eye-watering total of 900 hours for a single 'substantial' edit for a supervisory load of two PhDs and five Masters. To this figure should be added any number of 'light' edits to get the draft to the point of thesis submission.

As matters stand, the current cohort of research active South African academics is highly productive and are unable to increase their output any further to accommodate increasing numbers of PRSs (auf der Heyde 2015, 6). These 'highly productive' academics, with research writing, publication and supervisory skills, are largely within a frozen demographic of ageing (over 50 years old), permanently employed, professoriate who produce half of all journal papers (Badat 2010, 24; MacGregor 2015, 1). They are being replaced by juniors, often in the process of completing their own Master's or doctoral studies and are battling to come to grips with publication and research in their own field. Because of demand, many are carrying heavy single supervision loads at postgraduate level and are overwhelmed by the demands of supervising other people's studies while dealing with their own higher degrees (McKenna and Boughey 2015, 33; Cloete, Mouton and Sheppard 2015, 113). This situation affects these novices' ability to develop research and writing expertise, having yet to gain a similar depth of independent research and publication experience to transfer to their own PRSs. Thus, the undeveloped

writing abilities of novices, when writing up their own research, is unhappily perpetuated to PRSs whose writing they are supervising.

Universities are aware of the barriers poor writing skills have on their ability to optimally obtain and utilise PRS-generated research subsidies. They have introduced several formal initiatives to address the matter such as dedicated writing support facilities and writing courses among others. In doing so they simultaneously deal with NPM accountability requirements, PRS massification demands, language problems of a diverse PRS body and in theory, relieve the time-consuming supervisor-PRS interaction required for writing development. While these initiatives are suitable for some, they fall short for others. Centrally located university and Faculty writing support facilities and courses are deemed as too generic or too discipline based to meet the diverse and complex needs for all students and do not cover the full gamut of writing problems (Larcombe, McCosker and O'Loughlin 2007, 56; Rosales et al. 2012, 1; Van der Meer, Spowart and Hart 2013, 315). Discontented rumblings are apparent from the student body about such routinisation and commodification of teaching and learning, the introduction of which have ironically, been set in place to accommodate their growing numbers. Ehrenburg et al. (2010, 70) report that students in a large scale PhD education study in the USA requested 'informal' workshops to assist them progress toward their degree, rather than additional formal 'mentoring' per se. Generation Y PhD students in the United Kingdom (Carpenter, Wetheridge and Tanner 2012, 57) considered generic training content ineffective if not tailored to their individual subject areas or needs. They preferred frequent, regular face-to-face support and training via informal providers, specific to their field. Whether this groundswell, towards informal learning arrangements is a reaction against the increasing corporatisation of higher education is not known, but the co-incidence is there.

The above background outlines the context which gave rise to the informal one-on-one writing consultation initiative at a South African university Health Sciences Faculty. It was formed primarily to assist PRSs with their writing to speed up thesis submission rates, but subsequently welcomed all academic staff who requested writing advice: in reality many PRSs were staff members as well. The specific *aim* of the one-on-one consultancy was to ramp-up writing skills by providing:

1. An environment for PRSs and academic staff to discuss thesis and research related writing problems with an experienced colleague.
2. Opportunities to apply the advised specific writing strategies and approaches to their own work and discuss the results.

3. A forum for participants to receive immediate constructive feedback on their writing.
4. Encouragement and support to develop academic writing skills and participant confidence as academic research writers.

The *purpose* of this article is to record the effectiveness of the one-on-one writing consultation within a Faculty of Health Sciences and to disseminate a completely unexpected finding arising from the intervention. An extensive search of the literature found no publications examining a similar supportive writing intervention within the current NPM university setting, whether in South Africa or elsewhere

## METHODS

Ethics approval for the study was obtained from the Human Ethics Committee (Medical) of the University of the Witwatersrand (Ref: W-AW-140707-1). One-on-one writing consultations occurred monthly on Sundays from 09.00 till 16.00 in an office on the Faculty of Health Science campus. The consultations were widely advertised within the Faculty, appointments were booked for 30 minutes or one hour and all staff and PRSs invited. When booking, the consultee was required to supply in writing the purpose of the work for which the consult was required, for example, degree registration and type, research proposal, journal paper and so on; the title of the work; the aim of the study and the particular problem causing concern. No prior reading of drafts was undertaken and the provided summary was the only advanced reading accepted to give some indication of the consultee's writing skills. The consultee brought with them a hard copy of the draft to show troublesome writing areas and difficulties encountered. A quick scan of the draft revealed the main writing problem which could be loosely grouped as being poor layout, poor thought (logic) or poor sentence structure. Once identified, the main problem was explained to the consultee and corrective strategies suggested and noted with recommendations as to the way forward. Each consult was summarised by the author and included notes on the session and additional thoughts generated following the consultation. Literature was interrogated during and after the endeavour to better understand the cascade of phenomena which were encountered during the sessions. Finally the National Electronic Theses and Dissertations Portal (NETD) – South African theses and dissertations ([www.netd.ac.za](http://www.netd.ac.za)) website was searched two years after the consults ended to establish whether those participants, close to finishing, had actually completed their degrees and had their theses uploaded onto the system as required. Descriptive statistics and an author self-audit were used to analyse the effectiveness of the writing initiative.

## RESULTS

Fifty-two consults were held over the nine months of the initiative and averaged six (range 3–11) per Sunday. PhDs numbered 23 and Masters 21, the rest being for non-degree related writing advice. Consultees were mainly of science, clinical and allied medicine backgrounds from all Schools within the Faculty of Health Sciences. Research topics varied widely: vascular surgery; protein antigens; nursing education and sleep deprivation among others. Reasons for attending the writing consultation were broadly threefold: self-motivated with PRSs aware they needed extra assistance ‘I am stuck, don’t know what to do’, ‘My supervisor is so busy and I don’t want to bother him’ or ‘My supervisor has given up on me’; supervisor pressures, for example, ‘My supervisor says he is not there to teach me how to write’ and ‘I have been told to come to you by my supervisor’ and finally the supervisors themselves requested assistance: ‘I cannot deal with this student any longer. Help!’ and ‘We don’t know how to move forward on this, any suggestions ...?’. While sessions were planned as a one-on-one interaction, on some occasions PRSs requested a small-group session with colleagues, because they came from a similar discipline or shared a common problem. In those cases the writing intervention was conducted as an interactive group or as a one-on-one consult with the others listening in on each other’s problems. Appeals to participate in the writing consultations were received from Faculties outside the Health Sciences from both PRSs and supervisors. Unfortunately, these could not be met.

Consults proved dichotomous with advice sought for both writing and non-writing related issues. Writing issues included poor flow, lack of ‘voice’, superfluous text, incoherent paragraph construction, layout problems and referencing. Non-writing issues covered research topic feasibility, interpretation of study results, advice regarding examiner corrections, research proposal content and confidence issues about the research work and writing among others. Pertinently, a lack of university procedural and regulatory administrative know-how relating to higher research degrees was evident. Although the consultation time was fixed at booking, some overrode their slot considerably taking up the next appointment, if vacant, to discuss and explore research related concerns and thoughts or simply for a supportive ‘chat’. Two ‘groups’ were formed by PRS attendees for support outside the monthly consultations. In one case a regularly attending PRS served as a conduit to provide writing support to junior PRSs in her department. The other ‘group’ was formed by nine discipline based, largely international PRSs for cohort support outside the consults. Seven PRSs returned up to four times for ongoing advice and support. Although staff additionally requested assistance with publication writing, there

was essentially no difference between staff and PRS neediness: many staff being PRSs as well. Supervisor appreciation was often received together with mention of improved writings of their PRS.

A NETD search showed that of the 17 PRSs who should have completed their research in the light of the stage they were at during the consult, 11 had their theses lodged on the portal, an approximate two thirds of expected completions. Following the author's departure, one-on-one writing consultations were continued, under different circumstances, but the initiative collapsed due to poor attendance. Two PRSs continued to consult privately with the author until their writing projects were completed.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this article was to record the effectiveness of a one-on-one writing PRS consultation initiative in a South African Faculty of Health Sciences. However, a completely unexpected finding, indicative of time and skills issues within the Faculty conspicuously dominated the writing intervention. This is perhaps the more important result and should be discussed first to better contextualize the effectiveness of the writing consultation initiative.

Both the writing and non-writing related issues, which came to the fore during the consultations, point to the expanding black hole which PRSs are grappling with their research studies, the heavy workload carried by academic staff and scarce writing/supervisory skills shortages indicative of inexperience ('We don't know how to move forward on this, any suggestions? ...') present within the Faculty. Specific to the Health Sciences, must be added, the escalating demand for medical services provision provided by specialist registrars completing their Master of Medicine (MMed) and clinically qualified supervisors. These services occur within the resource limited health environment which further encroaches on supervisor-PRS time (Patel et al. 2016, 170). Badat (2010, 7) has earlier warned of the difficult choices, trade-offs and tensions that can arise when any institution seeks to pursue simultaneously a number of values, goals and strategies that are inherently conflictual. The current findings indicate such a tension has been reached between rising postgraduate numbers and cost reduction policies affecting permanent academic staff numbers, impacting negatively on the quality and quantity of supervisor-PRS interaction. Planned initiatives to increase supervisory capacity, such as fast-tracking junior researchers (auf der Heyde 2015, 6); improving the qualifications of existing academic staff (Cloete, Mouton and Sheppard 2015, 36) and incentive-reward-promotion strategies targeting supervisors to produce more PRSs (Cloete, Mouton and Sheppard 2015, 55; Louw and Godsell 2015, 146 ) are in the offing.

However, such schemes are doomed if not accompanied by active steps to relieve the workload currently carried by academic staff, which effectively thwarts supervision time. Indeed, one third of surveyed supervisors feel they currently do not give sufficient time to their students (Cloete, Mouton and Sheppard 2015, 116), and Wingfield (2012, 2) pleads for a relief from administrative tasks to optimally dedicate time to the education of postgraduate students. Things are only set to get worse, as the university morphs to meet its many targets within the current academic scenario which is increasingly fanned by student discontent and a continually eroding skills base of retiring experienced supervisors, researchers and publishers. With the rising numbers of research students and limitations on resources, sustainable options to promote all aspects of higher learning need be considered. An informal one-on-one writing consultancy, as an example of a supervisory support and PRS learning intervention, seems to fit this bill.

Given the above it is no wonder that there was an overwhelming and gratifying endorsement from supervisors towards the consultancy. This finding is contrary to other reports which describe unhappy academic staff concerned about interventions which could ‘interfere’ with their own PRSs or existing programmes (Van der Meer, Spowart and Hart 2013, 318). Many South African supervisors feel PRSs should have obtained writing skills prior to the point of entry with supervisory inputs confined to overseeing research training. University policy reads ‘Detailed correction of drafts and instruction in aspects of language and style are not the responsibility of the supervisor’ and ‘[Supervisors] ... will provide ... referrals for language training and academic writing’ (University of the Witwatersrand 2016). Such policy reflects the views of many others (Lessing and Schulze 2002, 140; De Gruchy and Holness 2007, 120; Aitcheson et al. 2012, 441; Cameron et al. 2013, 2). Consequently, Faculty supervisors were delighted to have a space to which they could direct their PRSs for writing development and that their PRSs were no longer solely relying on them for writing feedback and strategies. Furthermore, the writing consultancy provided institutional and procedural knowledge plus the writing and research skills many supervisors did not have and thereby freed up time the supervisors could usefully employ elsewhere.

Why were the PRSs drawn to the one-on-one writing consultancy? Students are quick to recognise experienced sources of authentic help and guidance which met their preference for informal, face-to-face meetings and individual needs (Ehrenberg et al. 2010, 70; Carpenter, Wetheridge and Tanner 2012, 57). Further, PRSs appreciated the support of an adviser who came from ‘outside’ the Faculty, and the guarantee that work exchanged and discussed would remain confidential, a finding similarly recorded by Larcombe (2007, 62) and Wisker (2005, 361). The consultation was available to all, informal, constructive and stress-free with plenty



of praise and encouragement, no matter how bad the writing. Praise and encouragement are important confidence builders for PRSs (Lessing and Schulze 2002, 147), academic literature being replete with references of student demoralisation following writing encounters with their supervisors (Aitcheson et al. 2012, 439). The consultee received undivided and expert personal attention for the length of the consult and was given independent, immediate and practical advice on their concern or problem, be it writing or otherwise. Immediate feedback was important to the PRSs, a similar finding recorded by Lessing and Schulze (2002, 148). Once the writing problem was explained and a solution suggested, they could move on and further progress with their writing. Being fired up and motivated, they did not wish to sit out the suggested two to four week turnaround time for supervisor response to their writing (University of the Witwatersrand 2016), neither 'bother' their supervisors nor wait for a rerun of a formal writing course to obtain direction. In addition, the consultancy provided a supportive forum to voice writing-unrelated issues and bounce ideas and thoughts for which seemingly their supervisors had no time.

The Sunday arrangement also played a role in PRS attendance. It is a non-working day and therefore the PRS was assured of uninterrupted attention. In this instance one could argue the consultees were not representative of Faculty PRSs, as they were a positively biased group, deeply motivated, committed to graduation and prepared to give up free time for writing development. In summary, the one-on-one writing consultancy filled a skills gap, gave additional PRS support in the form they wanted and assisted supervisors by spreading their load.

The one-on-one consultancy has several downsides which require mention. Dealing constructively with a day of unedifying writing on diverse topics was mentally intensive and exhausting. Another problem concerned supervisors not reading drafts of prepared chapters, rewritten and submitted for comment by PRSs following a writing consultation. This inaction defeated the gains made by the PRS during consultation. Should any future one-on-one writing consultancies be planned, the probability of bulk reading of drafts, to maintain PRS momentum, should be factored in. Further, the disconcerting lack of institutional and procedural knowledge of supervising staff was deeply alarming and should raise red flags to those intent on achieving PRS throughput targets while refusing to accept the dilemma arising from shrinking, experienced, supportive capacities. One limitation of this study should be noted in that it was performed in a large, well resourced, South African health science faculty in South Africa and thus a unique educational setting. Nevertheless, in spite of limited scope, it is felt that the experiences encountered in the study are present in the broader South African academic

environment. Thus the findings might be generalised and prove to be helpful when considering possible training and educational interventions in other fields which require the writing of a mandatory thesis. For the author, the exercise was stimulating, gratifying and a rewarding meeting of eager minds and fresh ideas.

Measuring the effectiveness of writing interventions is notoriously difficult. Cameron et al. (2009, 508) has pointed out the complications of using quantitative measures such as publication or graduation rate as indicators of writing intervention 'success'. In the present case, quantitative indicators for the one-on-one writing consultancy included (1) the demand for a consult was greater than could be provided; (2) participants returned several times for ongoing advice and further support; (3) two thirds of those PRSs expected to complete did so with their theses appearing in the NETD portal within 24 months and (4) the fact that ongoing advice was given to two attendees after the author left the initiative. Qualitative indicators to assess writing interventions are 'self as data' in writing groups (Badenhorst et al. 2013, 1006) and personal reflection and leader self-reflection used to evaluate informal peer support groups (Buissink-Smith, Hart and Van der Meer 2013, 9). In this, the notes made following each consult guided the ideas, reflections and analysis of success or otherwise of the initiative. A further literature search, to consolidate and better understand the dynamics of the one-on-one writing consultancy, led to recent reports on the effectiveness of alternative research-related spaces (ARRSs) in PRS learning which are pertinent to this study.

Bell, Shackel and Steele (2013, 2) among others have become increasingly aware that PRSs require ARRS for learning and optimum degree completion. This has opened a fresh avenue of investigation into peer-related and informal learning platforms. While the idea of ARRS is not new in higher education, they have only recently been afforded space in academic literature. A wide range of settings, structures and pursuits means a wide range of names for this activity (Steele, Shackel and Bell 2012, 4; Stracke and Kumar 2014, 2). ARRSs have a social and/or academic function and can be interdisciplinary or discipline specific (Buissink-Smith, Hart and Van der Meer 2013, 9). They are primarily formed to provide opportunities for PRSs to offer support and share experiences of the research journey (Buissink-Smith, Hart and Van der Meer 2013, 9). Importantly, they are seen to complement the supervisor-student relationship, not to replace it (Steele, Shackel and Bell 2012, 4; Stracke and Kumar 2014, 12). What such groups have in common is that they meet on a regular basis, function outside the formal degree components such as supervision and mandatory study units and are not institutionally regulated. They are transient in nature, thereby mirroring the transience of the PRS population. Being personality and leader driven, they tend to collapse when the driver

leaves or graduates (Bell, Shackle and Steele 2013, 2). Most such groups develop in a ‘bottom up’ manner from a relatively spontaneous grouping of peers within a particular programme of study although Buissink-Smith, Hart and Van der Meer (2013, 9) have demonstrated that such groupings can also be ‘manufactured’ in a top-down manner by overt institutional support. As research continues, the notion that ARRSs are restricted to student peers has changed. It has become apparent that some form of academic staff participation can be both desirable and beneficial to provide input, facilitate activities, assist with organisation and maintain the group on an ongoing basis (Buissink-Smith, Hart and Van der Meer 2013, 8; Bell, Shackle and Steele 2013, 7; Batty and Sinclair 2014, 9; Stracke and Kumar 2014, 11).

The one-on-one writing consultation shares many of the characteristics of an ARRS in that it provided an alternative space for PRS learning, had a regular monthly schedule, was informal and proved to be transient in collapsing when the driver left. Worthy of mention is the development of two support groups active between monthly one-on-one writing consults, similar to those generated in the Buissink-Smith, Hart and Van der Meer study (2013, 6). All the above implies that the one-on-one writing consultancy can be viewed as an ARRS and adds yet another permutation to the notion that there is no one ‘right’ formula to establishing an ARRS (Buissink-Smith, Hart and Van der Meer (2013, 6).

For the above reasons it is suggested that informal learning spaces in South Africa are deserving of greater scrutiny and research as ARRSs could provide a scarce skills solution to the intractable tensions between the numbers of values and goals arising in South Africa’s higher education environment. It is prudent to identify ARRS roles in PRS research training and development, but perhaps more importantly to examine the reasons why they were formed in the first place. In this regard an observation by Louw and Godsell (2015, 149) raises concerns. They report that departments, in efforts to create and support research cultures to aid PhD and research production, are reliant on individual informal initiatives because university-allocated resources are perceived to be too limited to do so. They confirm that such initiatives can disappear very quickly because of their informal nature. If university resources are indeed so limited, and with the current #FeesMust Fall initiative (<http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/feesmustfall-named-as-newsmaker-of-the-year-for-2015-20160309>) this seems to be the case, one of the few workable options available to our universities to achieve its postgraduate ambitions lies with ARRSs. It is suggested that ARRSs, currently run by dedicated academics, who do this under the radar and over and above their job description, should be investigated. The mentor programmes which have successfully been running on campuses around the country using emeritus professors (Louw and Godsell 2015,

130) should also be viewed with fresh eyes for unappraised benefits which might have escaped notice. Current mentoring programmes tend to be associated with specific departments and as such are unavailable to the larger PRS cohort. Yet the existing arrangement could serve as a platform for retired academics, who are generalists, to run ARRSs to provide any number of avenues for PRS support. In both the latter cases the monies expended are small in return for the goodwill and expertise that are garnered, together with capturing skills which would be lost under the current NPM system.

The PhD Study (ASSAf 2010, 61) was prescient when cautioning that effective PRS throughput should not be based on postgraduate-supervisor ratios alone. Indeed, Finding 24 of The PhD Study (ASSAf 2010, 103) reads ‘More research is required to develop a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of doctoral education in South Africa’. The present study draws attention to the contribution of informal learning spaces utilised by PRSs and adds to the knowledge base of this, a hitherto unexplored area of research. It suggests that a comprehensive understanding of the South African PRS dynamic cannot be fully understood without an audit of the informal learning spaces which contribute towards postgraduate learning and why they were formed. By shining a light into this unexplored corner of South African postgraduate education it is hoped to stimulate research into ARRSs and their contribution to higher degree learning environments which are more complex than often appreciated.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study has shown that a one-on-one writing consultancy can provide writing support to PRSs across all departments within a Faculty of Health Sciences and can ameliorate the poor writing abilities of supervisors. By extrapolation, similar initiatives could be equally beneficial across other academic disciplines to enhance writing skills. Not only that, it can improve all round quality and quantity issues related to postgraduate and research throughputs by catering to individual needs of our diverse and multicultural PRSs. Secondly the non-writing issues raised during consultations showed an alarming shortfall in PRS-supervisor interaction, a deficient understanding of supervisory responsibilities and overall paucity of required skills, experience and knowledge of postgraduate administrative procedure. These dearths seem to arise from NPM strategies to increase academic workload while reducing permanent academic staff numbers. This has had a profound impact on the available time a supervisor can spend with the PRS and has brought about a loss of long term institutional memory and procedural knowhow. The consultancy was able to supply this eroding knowledge within the informal, face-to-face mentoring and learning arrangements preferred by current PRSs. While this

innovation served to supplement the supervisory role it incidentally enabled the upskilling of supervisors themselves, because the PRS served as a conduit between the consultant and supervisor, relaying pertinent practice. Thirdly, space must be found, in some or other informal capacity, to retain retired, experienced staff to pass on their valuable academic, research and supervisory skills, hard won over many years. Fourthly, the dynamics of existing ARRSs and other informal campus learning spaces should be interrogated to better understand how such informal spaces operate. Their potential in higher degree learning can be beneficially exploited to optimally meet the needs of our rising numbers of diverse and multi-cultural PRSs. Finally, the loftier goals dictated by NPM policies appear to have had unintended negative consequences on the needs, progress and completion figures of PRSs. Perhaps the time has come to re-examine such policies, to fully ascertain their impacts on postgraduate research student experience and completion.

## NOTE

1. The formal written research component submitted for an advanced degree is termed differently, depending on the university conferring the degree. To simplify matters the term ‘thesis’ will be used to cover all research component types.

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