

The Contexts of Research Writing Support

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The 'Traditional' UK PhD(as in the 1990s)

- A 1-to-1 apprenticeship with supervisors as almost sole points of reference in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. In the Sciences it could mean being a member of a team with a Principal Investigator.
- Writing support (if any) made available to non-native speakers of English via EL courses. And maybe a workshop on getting published?

How PhD study has changed

- European standardization and move towards 'globally competent graduates'
<http://www.vitae.ac.uk/policy-practice/1705/Bologna-process.html>
- Wider career-related aims
- Different types of doctoral study: 'Traditional', 'new route', 'practice-based', 'professional'.
- Types of doctoral thesis: 'big book model', 'papers model'
- Organization of PhD study: GRAD schools, generic skills training, completion limits
- Technological innovations/access to knowledge
- 35% international students in 2007 and rising

The Roberts initiative and the RSF

A PhD research skills framework first appeared in 2001 and was then revised in 2010. The 2001 publisher, **UK Grad**, also changed to **Vitae**

- <http://www.vitae.ac.uk/CMS/files/upload/RCUK-Joint-Skills-Statement-2001.pdf>
- <http://www.vitae.ac.uk/CMS/files/upload/Vitae-Researcher-Development-Framework.pdf>
- <http://www.vitae.ac.uk/>
- Concordat:
<http://www.vitae.ac.uk/policy-practice/505181/Concordat-to-Support-the-Career-Development-of-Researchers.html>

The result: doctoral training/support given by ...

1. PhD supervisors (as before)
2. Research skills trainers (in each discipline) via ESRC/AHRC Doctoral Training Centres
3. Research skills trainers (generic) via LDUs/LTUs
4. Transferable skills trainers (generic) - Careers
5. EAP teachers (language support for NNS)
6. EAP teachers (generic)

To some extent a set of parallel universes?

How supervisors view writing: 1

- “Writing is an important part of an academic’s job. It helps you get your ideas across to others and also to get recognised. It also gives a significant sense of achievement. But writing isn’t just a matter of conveying completed ideas but is a process of working out those ideas. The process of writing is multi-skilled and no one is born with all of the skills. It’s also a learning process that never stops and that’s something to recognize and to try to address, increasing your skills over time.” (PhD Supervisor, SOAS 2010)

How supervisors view writing: 2

“Writing is not just putting words on paper – it involves thinking things through. I want to make my work accessible to a wider readership... I don’t just want to write for 10 academics who understand a secret code. I always get excited about writing but there is anxiety as well. Fear of not being able to fill the page is always there no matter how much I write. But this can also produce adrenalin – it’s a bit scary but it’s also positive like giving a conference presentation. Getting it down on paper, the 1st draft is the most difficult. But once this is done, working with this can give lots of pleasure.”

(PhD Supervisor, SOAS 2010)

A PhD student view

“It is really helpful to learn more about the writing process - that it is not just a 'knack' but there are practical skills and methods that can be used to improve. The contact with other students and the confirmation that writing/reading for a PhD is a messy process has also helped me to cope with many of my concerns”. *(University of Essex PhD student 2011)*

An author's view

“Producing a PhD is normally a longer piece of writing than anything you have done before. If you have to tackle a ‘big book’ thesis then it may easily be the longest text you ever complete

The longer the text the more taxing it becomes for you as an author to understand your own arguments and marshal them effectively. It is also harder for your readers to follow your thoughts as the text grows in size” (Dunleavy 2003:11-12)

Which aspects of research writing ?

Technical aspects:

- Developing research questions and claims through reading and writing, planning and producing literature reviews, analysing and reporting research data, etc.

Psychological aspects:

- Building self-confidence and self-discipline, overcoming writers' block, dealing with constructive feedback, coping with isolation.

Whose job is it to support research writing?

- The supervisor alone?
- The supervisor supported by Learning and Development Unit trainers?
- The supervisor supported by EAP teachers?
- All of these to some extent? If so, effective ways of working together need to be developed. Many examples in this PIM.

Some examples of 'good practice'

1. The BPSN network:

<http://courses.grad.ucl.ac.uk/bloomsbury/>

2. Writing courses:

[http://www.essex.ac.uk/skillscentre/
documents/USC PhD Support.pdf](http://www.essex.ac.uk/skillscentre/documents/USC_PhD_Support.pdf)

3. On-line resources: <http://port.igrs.sas.ac.uk/>

Others will be presented in PIM sessions.

Implications for MA/MSc study

- MA/MSc study has also changed with more and more students taking a 1+3 route using their Masters research as a stepping-stone to doctoral study.
- At the same time there are growing proportions of international students not familiar with UK research writing conventions and/or in need of English language support

Panel discussion: questions to consider

1. What are the specific needs of research writers at PhD and Masters levels?
2. Do needs vary greatly across disciplinary areas?
3. Should provision of support for native/non-native speakers of English be the same or different?
4. At what stages of PhD or Masters research is support for writing most needed?
5. To what extent is support for academic reading also needed?
6. How can we help research student writers engage with specific tasks including: the development of research questions and claims through reading and writing, planning and producing literature reviews, analysing and writing up research data?
7. How can we help research student writers engage with the whole range of 'less-central' texts such as preparing funding applications and personal statements?