Enhancing postgraduate research writing efficacies for improved outcomes: Insights from writing retreats

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Abstract

South African higher education institutions face persistent challenges including political tensions, neoliberal reforms, and racial inequalities. Within this context, postgraduate students often encounter barriers such as inadequate funding, access disparities, and limited psychosocial and academic support. This study investigates the impact of structured writing retreats on students' self-efficacy in academic writing. Grounded in Bandura's social cognitive theory and guided by the Kirkpatrick evaluation model, focus group interviews were conducted with 49 master's and doctoral students who attended five-day writing retreats. Findings reveal that these retreats enhanced students' confidence, improved writing habits, and fostered peer collaboration. Free-writing sessions disrupted cycles of procrastination and perfectionism, while tools like reflective journals and instructional videos supported the development of academic writing skills. Access to disciplinary expertise and ongoing communication also played a motivating role. Additionally, the study emphasises the importance of responsive supervision that encourages student autonomy while offering structured guidance. The findings advocate for integrating writing retreats and relational supervision practices into institutional frameworks to support postgraduate success and timely degree completion.

Practitioner Notes

1. Practitioners can implement writing retreats to boost postgraduate students' confidence and writing efficacy.
2. Incorporating peer-support structures helps supervisors address student isolation and encourage accountability.
3. Facilitators are encouraged to use free-writing exercises to reduce procrastination and develop writing fluency.
4. Reflective journals and instructional videos are excellent pedagogical tools that can enhance research writing support.
5. Supervisors should balance academic independence with regular communication and access to disciplinary expertise.

Keywords

Writing retreat, self-efficacy, free-writing, postgraduate students, higher education institutions

Introduction

Higher education institutions are often viewed as esteemed repositories of knowledge. While this perception holds some truth, it is crucial to acknowledge the persistent challenges that hinder knowledge production. In South Africa, the higher education system faces issues such as historical racial tensions, gender disparities, and the practical demands of daily life (Grossman, 2018). In postgraduate education, these challenges manifest as financial constraints, unequal access, and the need for psychosocial and academic support. Additional concerns include limited access to quality supervision, ethical challenges in scholarly writing, and concerns over research quality and throughput (Cloete, 2014; Okeke-Uzodike, 2021; CHE, 2023). These pressures make it difficult for postgraduate students to produce intellectual output efficiently.

To address these concerns, various bodies—such as the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI), which promotes research-driven socio-economic development; Universities South Africa (USAf), the umbrella body of public universities; and the Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology (CREST), commissioned by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), have undertaken national interventions. In addition, institutions themselves have launched internal projects, including the University Capacity Development Grants (UCDG). One such initiative is the Postgraduate Research Support for Enhanced Throughput (PGRS), administered by the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) at a South African traditional university.

Initially planned for 2021- 2023, the project was extended to 2026 with approval from university management and DHET (the department responsible for national post-school education systems and policy). The project addresses the academic writing skills gap identified in national reports (DHET, 2020), including the North-West University's (NWU) National Doctoral Review Improvement Plan (NWU, 2020), which cited high dropout and delayed completion due to poor writing preparedness.

The Centre for Teaching and Learning works with supervisors and research entities to select students who are nearing completion but face academic obstacles. Unlike output-driven models (Fraser et al., 2022), the retreat described in this paper focuses on strengthening writing ability to enhance research competence and graduate readiness.

This study employs Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory (1977) and the Kirkpatrick evaluation model (2006) to evaluate the retreat's impact. The following research questions are explored:

1. How do writing retreats influence postgraduate students' academic writing self-efficacy?

2. In what ways do retreats affect their research productivity?

3. How do students perceive their ability to complete and disseminate scholarly work because of such interventions?

Literature

Writing Retreats: An Overview

Writing retreats serve as globally recognised interventions to enhance research efforts (Castle & Keane, 2017). Their widespread adoption is attributed to the manifold benefits they offer for both academics and universities. For academics, these retreats "provide legitimate, justifiable time to

write, away from conflicting demands and priorities; they give participants permission to dedicate time and space for writing over other conflicting priorities" (Wiebe et al., 2023, p. 39). In other words, they offer a welcome break from taxing academic and personal demands. As the pressures of intellectual and private life intensify, off-campus writing sites transform into "an oasis in a busy life" (Castle & Keane, 2017, p. 207).

Universities leverage writing retreats to increase research output by offering distraction-free environments (Paltridge, 2016). By eliminating extraneous activities, retreats are believed to accelerate productivity. This characteristic underscore what Marhaya et al. (2017, p. 56) describe as the "privileged status" of research within universities. The higher the research output, the more credible the institution becomes (Marhaya et al., 2017). The pressure to publish extensively following a writing retreat stems from the need to solidify one's academic career (Callaghan, 2016). Increased publication counts not only support job security but also academic promotions and institutional recognition (Schimanski & Alperin, 2018).

Writing retreats also serve as support sanctuaries, particularly for those grappling with academic writing. Many academics benefit from the mentoring opportunities they offer (Moodley, 2017). This reinforces the *publish or perish* adage, widely acknowledged in academia (Wadesango, 2014; Callaghan, 2016). Failure to publish can derail an academic's prospects. As such, retreats offer safe environments for consulting intellectually stronger peers to improve writing and publishing capacity.

In South Africa, gendered inequities persist in academia (Divala, 2014; Ramnund-Mansingh & Seedat-Khan, 2020). These inequalities cut across racial lines but disproportionately affect Black women (Zulu, 2021). Grant (2006) suggests women may benefit more from retreats than men. Murray and Kempenaar (2020) confirm that women face systemic challenges in academia, including unfriendly institutional policies. Writing retreats provide emotional respite and focused time to produce publications, offering crucial support for women striving to equalise their academic standing. Their value lies in creating equitable space for research development, regardless of gender.

Notably, most literature focuses on academic staff, with comparatively little on postgraduate students, who are, in essence, emerging scholars. This suggests an institutional bias favouring established academics over the academic development of novices. Innovative institutions, such as the traditional university cited in this study, are among the first to invest meaningfully in student-centred writing retreats. Although limited, existing student-focused literature highlights positive impacts on postgraduate participants (Aitchison & Guerin, 2014; Bopape, 2018). Several studies have linked doctoral attrition to deep-seated insecurities around academic writing (Vincent et al., 2021; Aitchison & Guerin, 2024). These struggles are often exacerbated by a lack of structured guidance and limited opportunities for academic collaboration, leading to isolation and reduced confidence (Lee & Boud, 2003; Maher et al., 2008). Consequently, doctoral candidates often develop a diminished sense of efficacy, which hampers their progression and increases non-completion risks (Kamler & Thomson, 2006; Paré, 2011; Vincent et al., 2021).

Moodley (2017, p. 115) adds that poor word choice and weak phrasing can undermine the clarity of a student's ideas. Writing retreats counter this by offering communal spaces for constructive feedback. Through this process, students not only improve their expression but also begin to shift their beliefs about their academic writing capabilities in a positive direction. Sangster (2021)

supports this notion, arguing that writing retreats help students build confidence, particularly during the final stages of dissertation writing. Realising that writing challenges are common can reduce negative self-concept and restore motivation. Unlike brief workshops, retreats offer intensive, sustained support tailored to students' individual needs, across disciplines and institutional cultures. Vivian and Fourie (2016, p. 149) critique such workshops as "pop-up" or "soundbite" events, insufficient for meaningful skill development. In contrast, retreats provide sustained, expert support that helps students discover their writing voice (Garraway, 2017) and develop comfort with the academic norms and practices of their disciplines (Papen & Thériault, 2018).

The literature largely centres on academics, reflecting a trend in which universities prioritise faculty development with respect to writing skills development for increased outputs while overlooking the needs of their postgraduate students. Yet, student voices could offer valuable insight into how retreats enhance writing efficacy, reduce isolation, and improve progression. This paper therefore seeks to fill this gap by foregrounding student perspectives on writing retreats, thereby contributing to the growing body of research on postgraduate academic development.

Writing Retreat as an Activity in the Postgraduate Research Support Programme

The Centre for Teaching and Learning plays a vital role in promoting excellence and innovation in teaching and learning within higher education. It supports both lecturers and students through research-informed guidance, focusing on professional academic development, improved access and success, innovative pedagogical design, and enabling environments for quality teaching and learning. In alignment with its strategic mission, and with funding from the University Capacity Development Grant, the Centre assumed central responsibility for coordinating postgraduate research support between 2021 and 2023, a task still managed within faculties but at varying capacities. This shift aimed to complement faculty-level support and enhance postgraduate outcomes by fostering robust research skills and improving throughput rates.

A key component of this initiative is the structured implementation of writing retreats. These retreats are designed collaboratively by the Centre, the university's research directorate, and academic supervisors. Participation is selective, targeting postgraduate students who are actively writing articles or chapters, collecting data, or approaching the final stages of their dissertations report compilation. This article explores the design, objectives, and outcomes of this targeted intervention aimed at supporting timely postgraduate completion and academic writing development of pipeline students. In South Africa, the term *pipeline students* refers to students who are still completing their qualifications from previous years, especially in the context of funding, planning, and academic progression.

Writing Retreats: A Focus on Implementation

The writing retreats, held thrice annually, form a core component of the postgraduate research support programme led by the Centre for Teaching and Learning and funded through the University Capacity Development Grant. These retreats bring together postgraduate students, discipline-specific academic experts, and writing advisers, with the primary emphasis placed on student progress. Over five days, students participate in intensive writing sessions designed to create a focused environment that supports productivity and the completion of research work.

The retreats, as part of the broader research support framework, aim to meet several strategic objectives:

- Enhancing Research Productivity: By isolating students in a conducive environment, these retreats provide a focused space for writing and research. The absence of distractions, coupled with the presence of academic experts and writing advisers, is designed to boost research productivity.
- Accelerating Graduation Rates: A key goal of the retreats is to expedite the research process. By admitting only those students who are actively engaged in the research and writing phases, the retreats aim to push students toward timely completion of their postgraduate degrees.
- Professional Development: In addition to writing, the retreats provide opportunities for students to engage with academic experts, fostering their professional development. Discussions, workshops, and mentorship opportunities are integral components of the retreat experience.
- Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration: By bringing together students from diverse disciplines, the retreats encourage cross-disciplinary dialogue and collaboration, which can be beneficial for expanding research perspectives.
- Enhancing Research Quality: The focused writing environment and interactions with academic experts can result in improved research quality, as students receive critical feedback and guidance.

By integrating writing retreats into its postgraduate support strategy, the Centre for Teaching and Learning reinforces its commitment to nurturing capable and confident researchers.

Theoretical Framework

The discussions in this article are informed by Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory, specifically focusing on his concept of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977; 1994), and by the Kirkpatrick evaluation model (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006; 2015). Both theoretical frameworks provide valuable tools for examining complex and subjective human experiences. Bandura identifies four primary sources influencing an individual's self-efficacy beliefs: "performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological states or emotional arousal" (Bandura, 1977, p. 195). Performance accomplishments are central to developing self-efficacy. They refer to personal experiences of successfully mastering or failing specific tasks. According to Bandura (1977), experiences of success enhance beliefs in one's own capabilities, whereas repeated failures undermine them. For example, a student who consistently receives negative and critical feedback from their supervisor regarding their dissertation chapters may gradually internalise a belief that they lack writing skills. This ongoing negative reinforcement can lead to reduced self-confidence in writing and diminished motivation to complete their studies. In contrast, when a supervisor regularly provides constructive and supportive feedback, the student's confidence in their writing abilities is likely to increase, thus positively influencing their motivation and likelihood of successfully completing their dissertation. Vicarious experiences enable an individual to observe certain behaviours and acquire skills from other people (Bandura, 1994; 1995). In other words, "seeing others perform uncomfortable activities without adverse consequences can generate expectations in observers that they too will improve if they intensify and persist in their efforts" (Bandura, 1977, p. 198). Thus, if a student was struggling to conduct a literature search

for a chapter that they needed to write, observing their peers as they consult the right search engines, could effectively persuade them to do the same. Even if their search is initially fruitless, the memory of their peer's successes could motivate them to persevere until they find the appropriate literature sources. Consequently, students can observe senior peers research engagements and approach as they navigate their writing and research journeys.

Verbal persuasion occurs when "people are led, through suggestion, into believing they can cope successfully with what has overwhelmed them in the past" (Bandura, 1977, p. 198). An example of this could be a demoralised postgraduate student, who listens to the writing challenges of other students and facilitators at a writing retreat. If these parties narrate the strategies that they used to overcome their challenges, this could convince the student of their guaranteed success if they apply the knowledge they have heard. So, through the power of spoken words, they shift from harbouring debilitating beliefs to affirming ones.

Lastly, the physiological state of an individual affects how they feel about accomplishing certain goals (Bandura, 1977). If a registered postgraduate student unexpectedly falls pregnant, for example, it will induce many physical changes. In turn, it will trigger emotional states, which will influence their efficacy beliefs about completing their studies while coping with parenthood.

The project outlined in this paper aims to expedite and enhance the writing abilities of graduate students who struggle with academic writing. The four pillars of reciprocal determinism that Bandura identified, cognition, environment, and behaviour, were used to teach program participants. These skills were subsequently analysed using the Kirkpatrick Model, the most well-known technique for assessing and evaluating the results of training and educational initiatives. The Kirkpatrick evaluation model, devised by Donald Kirkpatrick in 1959 (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006), has maintained its reputation as a straightforward yet logical approach for evaluating the effectiveness of diverse programmes. It consists of four levels, namely:

- Level 1 scrutinises the target group's reactions to the programme. Participants can offer their commentary about "the training content, materials, instructors, facilities, delivery methods", and so forth (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006).
- Level 2 focuses on "the extent to which participants change attitudes, improve knowledge, and/or increase skill as a result of attending the programme" (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006, p. 22). In other words, this level aids assessors in measuring the specific knowledge acquisition that occurred after participation in a developmental programme.
- Level 3 evaluates any behavioural changes that occur from exposure to a programme. This level is crucial as it documents the practical application of any newly acquired skills by the programme participants (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006). The transition from knowledge transfer to practical application serves as the driving force behind any intervention. If this shift unfolds as envisioned or surpasses expectations, organisers should deem their intervention successful.
- Level 4, the ultimate stage, gauges the overall impact of the program/intervention (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006). Essentially, program organisers seek to determine whether their investment in the program was worthwhile or if it proved to be futile.

Bandura's social cognitive theory and the Kirkpatrick evaluation model serve distinct but complementary roles within this study. Bandura's theory offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the psychological processes underpinning students' self-efficacy beliefs about

writing, thereby enabling an in-depth exploration of their personal development and perceptions of ability. In contrast, Kirkpatrick's model provides a structured method for systematically evaluating the effectiveness of the writing retreats at the institutional and programmatic levels. While Bandura's theory primarily captures students' internal experiences and psychological changes, Kirkpatrick's evaluation model addresses the external outcomes and tangible benefits of the programme. Together, these two frameworks enable a holistic understanding—connecting personal experiences of self-efficacy (student perspective) with measurable outcomes and effectiveness (institutional perspective). In addition, Kirkpatrick's model guided the construction of evaluation instruments used to empirically measure changes in students' efficacy beliefs, directly linking the psychological insights derived from Bandura's theory with actionable evaluation data.

Method

Ethical Statement

The writing retreat emerged as an offshoot of a broader postgraduate support project. Permission to conduct all facets of the research was obtained from the Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BaSSREC) at the case institution. Accordingly, student engagement in all data collection endeavours was entirely voluntary, with informed consent secured from each participant, alongside the provision of rights to withdraw from the study at any juncture. These ethical guidelines were informed by the principles delineated in the Declaration of Helsinki (DoH) (World Medical Association (WMA), 2013).

Research Design

This study utilised an interview methodology to gather data from audio-recorded and transcribed focus groups. The interviews were conducted in English to reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation. The interview method employed a semi-structured approach, allowing participants to articulate their perspectives while also permitting researchers to pose clarifying enquiries regarding the topic.

Data Collection and Sampling

The study aim was to gather comprehensive and nuanced data from the students, making a qualitative data collection approach the most suitable (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2004). To be precise, data were obtained through semi-structured focus group interviews, each lasting an hour and facilitated by a project member. The discussions were conducted in English and later transcribed.

The participants of this study were students registered for master's or doctoral study. The inclusion criteria were that they must be in the process of completing a research dissertation report linked to their curriculum and have spent the required time-to-complete their study. The participants identified themselves as males and females with female students being the largest group (73%).

The participants were purposively selected (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013), meaning that they were all postgraduate students who had voluntarily attended the retreat. This included master's and PhD students regardless of their academic disciplines. It is important to note that the participants' diverse disciplines did not impede the data collection process, as written research output consists

of standardised components. In fact, their differences provided the project research members and authors of this paper with a more nuanced understanding of the retreat's impact on students with varying academic backgrounds.

The diverse characteristics of the 49 participants are described in Table 1. For privacy reasons, the identities of the students are withheld. We assigned random numbers to accompany their direct quotes, which were then incorporated into this article. The project collaborated with research supervisors to identify students who would derive the greatest benefit from the retreat. Consequently, the organising team for the retreat made deliberate efforts to establish an optimal environment for the students to overcome challenges within the university pipeline. As a requirement, each student had to bring a dissertation chapter or some other form of written work to be completed during the retreat.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics

	Doctoral Students						
Discipline	Black Female	Black Male	White Female	White Male	Female of Colour	Male of Colour	Total
Biology	2	1	0	1	0	0	4
Philosophy	2	1	0	0	1	0	3
History	2	0	0	1	0	0	3
Law	2	1	1	0	1	0	4
Environmental Science	2	0	1	0	0	0	3
Psychology	2	0	0	1	0	0	3
Education	2	0	1	0	0	0	3
Chemical Engineering	2	0	1	0	0	1	4
Total	16	3	4	3	2	1	27
	Master's students						
Biology	2	0	0	0	1	0	3
Philosophy	1	0	1	0	0	0	2
History	2	1	0	0	0	0	3
Law	3	0	0	0	0	0	3
Environmental Science	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Psychology	2	1	0	0	0	0	3
Education	3	1	0	0	1	0	5
Chemical Engineering	2	0	0	0	0	0	2
	16	3	1	0	2	0	22

The demographic distribution of master's and doctoral students (Table 1) reveals distinct patterns in race and gender representation within each group. Among the master's students, who constitute 44.9% of the sample, Black females represent a significant majority at 72.7% of this group, highlighting a strong presence of this demographic in the master's cohort. Black males follow at 13.6%, while White females and females of colour each account for smaller proportions at 4.5% and 9.1%, respectively. There are no White males or males of colour represented within the master's cohort. In contrast, the doctoral cohort, comprising 55.1% of the total participants, displays a more diverse distribution across racial and gender lines. Black females remain the largest demographic within this group, making up 59.3% of doctoral students. However, this proportion is lower than in the master's cohort, indicating a relative increase in diversity. Black males account for 11.1% of doctoral students, while White females comprise a more substantial 14.8%. White males also represent 11.1% of the doctoral group, underscoring a more balanced gender and racial composition at the doctoral level. Finally, females of colour and males of colour together make up a modest portion of the doctoral cohort, representing 7.4% and 3.7%, respectively.

Data Analysis

The focus group data underwent manual thematic analysis following the methods outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019) and Clarke et al. (2015). This approach involves identifying, examining, and interpreting patterns of significance, known as 'themes', within qualitative data (Clarke et al., 2015). Basically, the researcher immerses themselves in the data, mining it for key topics that consistently emerge. We opted for this method as it required us to engage more extensively with the data compared to other analysis modes. The steps followed, as informed by Braun and Clarke (2006), to convey the postgraduate students' views are: Familiarising yourself with your data by generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and finally, producing the report.

Results

The main themes that emerged in this study are summarised below.

Theme 1: Satisfaction with a Structured Writing Environment

Participants expressed strong appreciation for the structured format of the writing retreat, describing it as a turning point in their postgraduate journeys. Many shared that the retreat provided clarity, direction, and renewed motivation.

> I first got the opportunity to organise my thoughts and re-evaluate where I am currently with my PhD – and where I want to be and what I need to do to get there. I realised that although I wanted to work on my chapters, the article that is part of my PhD [Chapter 2] ... needs to be adjusted and submitted to a new journal. I really wanted to do more. However, this took long but was an important puzzle piece in my journey and therefore I feel satisfied with completing the article. (Participant 3)

> I am happy. I'm very satisfied. I think my biggest highlight for me is how I have been free – I think one of the things that I wrote is that I want to be able to fully concentrate, you know, commit to my work daily. So, I think I have built enough

momentum, and I think I will keep it on …. So, I'm very satisfied with the work that I have done here. (Participant 2)

Our focus group participants emphasised several skills that postgraduate students acquired at the writing retreat. The most frequently mentioned skills by students were:

Theme 2: Acquired Skills

Discovery of Writing Voice

Participants indicated that the retreat helped them develop confidence in their writing style and voice, moving beyond perfectionism and writer's block.

> In this writing camp, I have been able to understand the fundamental ways in which I can write. I am now able to worry less about perfection but focus on being able to put something down in the best way I know how... Now, the best part has been being able to achieve one of my goals, and that being completing my first draft of my literature review. (Participant 5)

> The big thing I'm taking away... is the phrase: 'Just Write'. I think the very first day we had that exercise where Dr R said: 'Just write. Don't worry about punctuation.... Just write'... So, just those two words alone: 'just write', has now stuck with me to see that I can open a laptop... and just write whatever I want... Then I can reformulate it again and again and again. (Participant 18)

Mental Health Coping Skills

Several participants shared how the retreat improved their emotional wellbeing and helped them overcome feelings of isolation and pressure.

> I realised that I am not alone in my struggle to complete my postgraduate studies. Mentally I'm now in a better space and now motivated [with a plan] to complete my PhD this year. I also enjoyed the conversations we had with each other and learned from my fellow writing camp colleagues. (Participant 27)

Practical Academic Research Skills

Participants appreciated the involvement of academic mentors who provided discipline-specific feedback. Many reported improved writing quality and increased confidence.

> Got valuable feedback from a critical reader in the writing camp which improved the quality of my work after being able to completing the technical editing of chapter 1 and the reference list with the dedication time to work at least 2,5 hours per day... Learned the value of free writing! Gained more insight on soft skills that will also help my future post-grad students am convinced to organise a similar 'boot camp' for our own post-grad students... (Participant 13)

> Not just writing, but an opportunity to sound-board ideas with a more knowledgeable person was very instrumental for my confidence. (Participant 27)

Theme 3: Mastering Supplementary Pedagogical Skills

In addition to the discipline specific knowledge, the focus group participants outlined secondary pedagogical methods that purportedly enhanced their writing and research skills. These included the personal journals that they were asked to keep, the instructional videos that were imported into the sessions, and the professional dexterity that was instilled in them. They expressed their appreciation for these tools as follows:

Personal Journals

Participants noted how journal-writing exercises helped them focus their arguments and structure their research more clearly.

> Being taught to use the journal has also helped me for this week. I used the journal to write my thesis [argument] in the size of a matchbox. This skill has helped me with my writing thus far, so that I do not derail as I continue writing. (Participant 22)

Instructional Videos

Instructional videos shown during the retreat were described as informative and comprehensive, with participants citing them as practical tools for academic writing.

> Those videos that we were watching, on how to build your argument, how to keep your reading journal... I don't think there's anything that has to do with studies that was left out." (Participant 34). "The videos were very good educational resource and the discussion that followed allowed for more understanding and application to my writing. (Participant 22)

Professional Proficiency

Some participants described becoming more critical and intentional in presenting their work, indicating growth in writing professionalism.

> What stood with me is that I need to take pride in my work and critic myself... I made sure that... I asked myself, would this be clear to the person who would be reading what I have presented here?... If I put a graph here did I interpret it nicely? (Participant 45)

> I am no longer in pressure to write perfectly on the first draft but to perfect my sentences gradually. (Participant 47)

Theme 4: Balancing academia and family

Participants, especially female students, highlighted the retreat as a rare opportunity to separate themselves from caregiving responsibilities and focus on their studies.

> I learnt that my children and household can survive without me for a few days at a time and even though I don't feel like I deserve such treatment after taking so long to complete my degree. (Participant 40)

> There have so much procrastination and to think that I was almost ready with the entire research report but lacked the motivational push to just get away to a

location far from work and my home. My day-to-day duty as a mother never gives me a chance to finalise my research duty. (Participant 44)

Thus, the summary of the key findings is:

- The writing retreat provided a structured and distraction-free environment that helped postgraduate students overcome procrastination and regain control over their research progress.
- There is evidence of enhanced self-efficacy in academic writing, especially through completing tasks they had previously avoided, aligning with Bandura's notion of performance accomplishments.
- Students gained practical strategies with free writing skills, which enabled them to develop their writing voice and reduce anxiety around perfectionism.
- Sustained motivation and confidence through regular verbal encouragement and peer interaction during the retreat helped shift negative beliefs.
- Improved attitudes toward research work, with a renewed sense of direction and emotional resilience, as well as the development of time-management strategies with established daily writing routines, indicated lasting behavioural change.
- Technical academic skills were strengthened through expert feedback from facilitators (teaching supervision specialists and faculty supervisors), contributing to improved writing, editing, and referencing practices.
- Mental health benefits were widely reported, including reduced feelings of isolation, improved emotional well-being, and increased motivation to complete postgraduate studies.
- Peer engagement and shared experiences helped participants realise they were not alone in their academic struggles, reinforcing vicarious learning and community support.
- Supplementary tools such as journals and instructional videos were highly valued and contributed to how to develop argument development as a writer's voice and critical engagement with literature.
- Female postgraduate students can achieve a better work-life balance thus creating a time-to-write away from family obligations.

Discussion

Theme 1: Satisfaction with a Structured Writing Environment

The structured environment of the writing retreat significantly contributed to postgraduate students' renewed sense of direction and motivation. Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy posits that performance accomplishments are a powerful source of confidence. The opportunity for students to set goals, receive guidance, and accomplish key writing tasks likely enhanced their belief in their ability to complete their postgraduate studies.

On Level 3 of the Kirkpatrick evaluation model, it is evident that behavioural change occurred as participants reported returning to their academic work with momentum and clearly defined goals. As Wiebe et al. (2023) noted, structured retreats provide a protected space away from daily demands, which can be just as beneficial for students as for academic staff. This aligns with the participants' perception that the retreat helped them overcome procrastination and reframe their writing journey as manageable and worthwhile.

Theme 2: Acquired Skills

Discovery of Writing Voice

The retreat allowed students to experiment with free writing, a pedagogical method known to foster fluency and self-expression (Castle, 2017). As participants shed perfectionistic tendencies, they began to articulate arguments more confidently. Bandura (1990) suggests that verbal persuasion and successful task completion are key mechanisms for strengthening efficacy beliefs, and both were present during the retreat through peer and facilitator encouragement. In terms of the Kirkpatrick model, this corresponds with Level 1 (reaction) and Level 3 (behavioural change), as students not only responded positively to the intervention but also began applying the skills to advance their work.

Mental Health Coping Skills

Mental health emerged as a significant concern, with several participants expressing how the retreat alleviated isolation and emotional exhaustion. Vincent et al. (2021) argue that the solitary nature of doctoral work can exacerbate mental strain, especially when students feel unsupported. The retreat counteracted this by creating a sense of community. Bandura (1995) highlights the role of improved physiological and emotional states in building efficacy; students' comments demonstrate how peer support and structured engagement helped them reset their emotional and academic bearings.

Practical Academic Research Skills

Facilitator input helped bridge gaps in students' technical and academic writing competencies. Bandura's concept of "mastery experiences" is evident here: direct feedback and task completion-built participants' academic confidence. Disciplinary-specific mentorship contributes to postgraduate writing success (Kamler & Thomson, 2014). Furthermore, the behavioural intentions expressed, such as implementing boot camps for others, reflect Kirkpatrick's Level 4 results, suggesting that the retreat had institutional ripple effects.

Theme 3: Mastering Supplementary Pedagogical Skills

Personal Journals

Students benefitted from journaling to focus and refine their thesis arguments. This method not only supports metacognitive development but also aligns with Bandura's (1977) theory on self-regulation through repeated, reflective practice. Journaling enabled students to process and organise ideas, contributing to intellectual clarity and ownership of their research.

Instructional Videos

The instructional videos complemented the writing exercises by modelling academic behaviours and thought processes. According to Bandura (1994), vicarious learning occurs when learners observe competent models. This strategy was especially effective in reinforcing complex skills like argument construction, critical reading, and literature engagement.

Kirkpatrick's Level 2 (learning) and Level 4 (results) can be applied here: the tools used had both immediate and long-term effects on students' attitudes and practices.

Professional Proficiency

Participants described becoming more critical and reflective about their academic outputs. The shift from passive writing to intentional crafting of arguments and visual data demonstrates a higher level of scholarly engagement. This development is congruent with Bandura's (1990) idea of forethought: the ability to anticipate, plan, and guide future actions. It also affirms the goal of the retreat to cultivate not just writing competence but academic maturity.

Theme 4: Balancing academia and family

Female participants highlighted the value of being temporarily removed from domestic responsibilities. Grant (2006) and Murray & Kempenaar (2020) both stress that women in academia face distinct challenges related to caregiving and time constraints. The retreat provided much-needed space for sustained writing, contributing to renewed motivation.

Bandura (1995) emphasises that efficacy beliefs are strengthened when individuals successfully navigate difficult circumstances. For these women, participating in the retreat without negative family consequences improved both self-perception and writing productivity. In Kirkpatrick terms, this reflects both Level 2 (positive attitudinal shift) and Level 3 (changes in work-related behaviour).

Conclusion

This paper demonstrated how writing retreats produced positive efficacy beliefs among postgraduate students. The findings of this study are consistent with broader national and international research that emphasises the importance of structured writing interventions in postgraduate education. For example, Vincent et al. (2021), in a Canadian study, found that writing retreats significantly enhanced PhD candidates' writing self-efficacy and self-regulation. Similarly, in the Australian context, Maher et al. (2008) highlighted how doctoral writing groups functioned as supportive spaces that reduced feelings of isolation and fostered research productivity. In South Africa, Castle (2017) and Vivian and Fourie (2016) argued that writing retreats created a third space in which academic agency and writing confidence could flourish. These comparisons affirm that the structured and socially supportive nature of writing retreats can enhance postgraduate writing efficacy and reinforce the relevance of the present study's findings in both local and international contexts. While we recognise that generalisation is somewhat difficult in qualitative designed research, there are valuable insights that education practitioners, including curriculum planners and designers, university teachers, and higher education managers, can extract and apply to their educational practice:

Mandating Peer Support

The literature indicated that postgraduate study gives the students more autonomy than necessary. Gradually, this excessive free time leads to social isolation and reduced productivity. The combination of seclusion and an inability to complete academic tasks drastically lowers the students' morale for prolonged periods. Fortunately, our findings indicate that this defeatist state can be successfully combated with regular peer engagements. Our participants revealed that they felt validated and supported when they could vent the frustrations that are *par-for-the-academic-course*. Consequently, we posit that if academic practitioners who supervise postgraduate students mandated peer support systems within their departments, efficacy beliefs would improve

exponentially. In turn, this could accelerate productivity rates and possibly propel postgraduates out of the system in record time.

Regular Free-Writing Sessions

Our data revealed that unrealistic standards of academic perfection were often responsible for the students' procrastination. They reported that when they felt intellectually inadequate, it inhibited their ability to write. However, once they were introduced to the free-writing method, these limiting beliefs were circumvented. Based on these assertions, we are confident that if (senior) academics integrated compulsory free-writing sessions into their postgraduate supervision activities, their students would benefit immensely. Over time, the required free-writing sessions may evolve into an ingrained habit that propels students toward their thesis submission deadlines and supervisors toward promotions through efficient supervision.

Employing Pedagogical Tools

Our students also disclosed that exposure to a variety of learning tools was essential for sustaining positive efficacy beliefs. These tools encompassed encouragement to maintain reflective journals and watching instructional videos that expanded their theoretical knowledge. These practical strategies assisted the students in feeling a sense of mastery over the challenging aspects of academic writing. For the supervising academics, this implies that they need to constantly keep abreast of the latest innovations and then prescribe them to their postgraduate students. If there are new technological advances, they need to ensure that these are shared with their students. Based on our findings, we theorise that even seemingly minute pedagogical strategies can have profoundly positive influences on students' efficacy beliefs and productivity levels.

Disciplinary Expertise

Clearly, ready access to disciplinary experts played a pivotal role in maintaining academic productivity among the students. Their motivation was significantly heightened when they were assured of having senior academics well-versed in their subject matter nearby. This suggests that if the current cadre of knowledgeable academic supervisors makes themselves available to students, improvements in graduation rates might ensue. We propose that supervisors should take a proactive approach in maintaining open communication with their students. Our suggestion does not promote academic co-dependency but rather advocates for knowledge reciprocity between senior academics and their novice postgraduate students. Furthermore, academic supervisors should grant their students the freedom of academic autonomy within the realm of their research topic, fostering collaboration with other peers in the same discipline.

In conclusion, the challenge of cultivating positive self-efficacy beliefs among South African postgraduate students is intricate yet holds substantial potential for extensive empirical investigation. The sample size used in this study was a major limitation. Hence, further exploration could serve as a catalyst for generating innovative insights into postgraduate students and strategies to expedite their graduation from academic institutions. However, this endeavour could also offer valuable benefits for education practitioners at local universities. We aspire that the succinct insights presented in this article will serve as a foundation for more in-depth studies in the future.

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