# TOWARDS DEVELOPING ACADEMIC WRITING SUPPORT FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS: AN EMIC PERSPECTIVE OF POST GRADUATE ACADEMIC WRITING NEEDS AND EXPERIENCES AT UNIVERSITY OF BOTSWANA

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## Abstract

*Post graduate students' academic success depends on the quality of their writing. However, post graduate students often experience a range of difficulties in understanding the requirements of writing at this advanced level. Students at this level are expected to analyse, synthesise and create fresh connections and ideas. This study was designed to investigate the academic writing needs and challenges of post graduate students in an L2 context. A survey was conducted and 54 post graduate students, both at masters and doctoral level responded to a questionnaire. Semi structured Interviews were conducted with 5 supervisors and two focus groups with students were held. The findings indicate that integrating and documenting sources, logical development of ideas and arguments, writing appropriately for the audience and presenting an argument in a coherent manner were a challenge to most students.Additionally, the findings suggest the need to support graduate students as they make a transition from novice to expert members of their academic communities. The results have implications for developing an academic writing course specific for post graduate students.*

***Key words****: post graduate students, academic writing support, academic writing needs, academic communities, student support*

## Introduction

Post graduate students' academic success depends on the quality of their writing. Academic writing is an important component for many coursework assessments and for the completion of thesis writing. However, writing at this level is a complex and challenging task particularly for second language writers. For instance, students at this level are expected to analyse, synthesise and create fresh connections of ideas and create a coherent and extended

text that they can share with other researchers. Ability to sustain an academic argument and synthesis ideas from various sources is also very critical at this level (Hyland 2007).

Post graduate research writing and post graduate academic experience has gained considerable attention, where the focus is on non- native English speakers in Western English contexts. In the light of this, there is substantial research that indicates that post graduate students often experience a range of difficulties in understanding the requirements of writing and gaining mastery of the conventions of academic writing that meets the demands of writing at this advanced level (Belcher, 1994, ; Jeyaraj 2018 ; Kaur, & Shakila, 2007; Kaur, Sarjit & Sidhu, 2009,  Leki, 2007). Jeyaraj (2018) carried out a study in a Malaysian context to investigate graduate students' writing experiences and their challenges in carrying out a research project. The study employed semi structured interviews with postgraduate students from non- native English speaking backgrounds who had enrolled for postgraduate studies in a Malaysian University. The findings of the study indicate that students found academic language demands very challenging and this greatly affected their socialisation into their academic disciplines. Jeyaraj (2018) used the metaphor of the jungle to explain these challenges, which  he terms "understanding the laws of the jungle". These laws of the jungle were identified as "getting acquainted with the conventions of academic writing and skills", disciplinary socialisation" and "gaining linguistic competence" (p.27) .

Novice students are exposed during their studies to various disciplinary practices and genre and are expected to gain mastery of disciplinary conventions through publishing their research findings, writing book reviews and writing abstracts. As they are exposed to these, students are expected to start thinking, acting and adopting values and practices of their 'parent discourse community' (Berkenkotter and Huckin 1995;  Charles and Pecorari , 2016). Students find these values and practices  to be very challenging as they lack familiarity with the ( conventions, expectations and values)  target texts they have to produce.  However, Bhatia (1993) argues that as students continue to write they gradually acquire knowledge of the communicative goals of their academic communities regarding what is acceptable and what is not acceptable in writing, they will ultimately gain knowledge of " standards practices within the boundaries of a particular genre" (Bhatia 1993:14).

Most of the challenges identified in various studies are largely related to students' language proficiency for critical thinking and genre knowledge (Paltridge (2002), the ability to grasp and adapt to "new and different academic expectations in their writing practices" (Singh 2016: 84), understanding the complexity of discipline-specific, graduate level literacy requirements (Singh 2015;

Bronson 2004) and language errors that create negative impression ((Loewy & Vogt, 2000).

In recognition of the difficulties experienced by graduate students there is growing interest in supporting graduate students in the form of academic writing courses (Williams SCONUL_Focus_69_0.pdf ).

Many western universities have developed EAP courses that specifically address the needs of post graduate students and aim to develop their writing skills. Storch and Tapper (2009) reports on the impact of a writing course (Presenting Academic Discourse Course) at a University in Australia developed for post graduate students. Their study sought to investigate  whether there has been any improvements in the writing of students enrolled in this course. The students' written texts were analysed for fluency, linguistic accuracy, use of academic vocabulary, overall structure and cohesion and coherence. Storch and Tapper (2009) reported that students writing in terms of text structure and rhetorical quality and grammatical accuracy improved after the course.

Post graduate numbers have increased significantly in the University of Botswana . There is increased enrolment of international students from various linguistic backgrounds who have been working for a long time. There is also increased enrolment of students who have graduated from their first degree and have never worked. It can be inferred from the studies above that the students here may be facing similar challenges that post graduate students face in other contexts. However, post graduate writing research and support seems to be under researched in our local context. The majority of support that students receive is at undergraduate level in the form of academic literacy courses that equip students with the skills to meet the demands of academic rigor at undergraduate level.

It is in the light of this that this study sought to explore graduate students' academic writing needs, challenges and their experiences with writing at graduate level in the Botswana context. This study reports the preliminary results of a larger study designed to assess graduate students' academic writing needs and challenges. The larger study will employ several research methods and investigate students' perspectives and experiences on a wider scale. This study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the academic writing needs and challenges of post graduate students at UB as perceived by the students?
2. What are the academic writing challenges of post graduate students at UB as perceived by the supervisors?
3. How are these challenges being addressed by departments?
4. What are the pedagogical implications for graduate academic writing support?

**Methodology**

**Theoretical Framework**

This study views academic writing as socially situated and is therefore informed by the academic literacies' model which views writing as inseparable from context. It views learning to write academically as learning to gain a range of linguistic practices which are based on multiple sets of discourses, identities and values (Lea & Street, 1998; Street, 1999). Academic literacies theorists reject the idea of non-contextualised generic study skills and academic socialisation model. They instead propose a more holistic writing pedagogy that comprises the study skills and academic socialization approaches as it strives for a "more encompassing understanding of the nature of student writing within institutional practices" (Lea & Street, 1998: 158; Coffin & Donohue, 2012).

The study skills approach treats writing skills as generic and independent of the context therefore, gives emphasis to the surface language features. Thus, it considers students' knowledge of writing as easily transferable from one context to another However, unlike the skills model the academic socialisation model acknowledges that there are different genres and discourses for different subject areas and disciplines (Lea & Street, 1998).The proponents of the academic socialisation approach believe that inducting students' in social interaction in a specific academic discourse community enables them to become familiar with the academic conventions, values and expectations of that discourse community. They perceive students as capable of reproducing a particular academic discourse without difficulty after social interaction and participation.

In contrast, academic literacies "constitutes a shift, as it sees writing as a social phenomenon" (Lillis 2001, p.27) and as "social practice" that vary with context, genre and power dynamics (Lea and Street, 1998, 2006). Unlike the skills approach it moves away from students and their writing as the problem by putting emphasis on both the students' needs and the institutions' conventions or practices (Lea & Street, 2006; Lillis & Scott, 2007). Academic literacies does not view academic writing as merely a set of 'skills' one can acquire outside of their discipline, but rather that it is a diverse socially negotiated practice. Lea & Street (1998), however, acknowledge the need for a multifaceted approach that incorporates the language surface features emphasised in the skills approach and the academic socialisation emphasis on inducting students in the discipline specific conventions and discourses. They argue that focusing only on skills and acculturation aspects is inadequate for students to " understand the complex relationship between meaning making in academic texts and the different ways of constructing the world and social identities that underlie this process" (Canton, 2014, p. 53). They contend that for students to develop holistically as academic writers they need to acquire a complete understanding of language as the expression of social identities and values and therefore proposes a writing pedagogy that encompasses the focus of the three teaching approaches.

The academic literacies social perspective view of writing as inseparable from context, is supported by Lave & Wenger (1991) situated learning theory who argue that learning occurs as learners engage in what they call "legitimate peripheral participation". They argue that novices become experts not simply by observing or explicit teaching but by engaging in activity on the side-line and gradually develop the necessary abilities and knowledge to become full participants of a discourse community. The situated perspectives value ethnographic methodologies that involve both observation of the practices surrounding the production of texts as well as emic perspectives on the texts and practices.

**Context of the Study**

The context of this study is Univerity of Botswana. The university graduate student population comprises of local and international students. The main language of instruction is English. The majority of students use English as a second language and come from different linguistic backgrounds. A large number of post graduates are part-time students who have full time jobs and some of whom have been away from academic life for a number of years. These are students who have challenging schedules between work and school and therefore have very little time for research and writing. Full time students are usually international students and those that have recently completed their first degrees. There is no formal academic writing course for post graduates offered at the university. Academic departments assume that students that enroll at post graduate level already have acquired the skill of writing or that they will acquire the skills on their own.

Workshops for new graduate students are usually conducted at the beginning of the academic year by the departments and Office of Research Development (ORD). Different departments conduct workshops mainly on research methodologies. ORD usually offers generic workshops on proposal writing focusing on structural issues. The Communication and Study skills Unit (CSSU) which is mandated with teaching academic literacy skills to year one students does not have a direct Academic writing course for post graduate students. However, the Unit through the Writing Clinic, offers support to post graduate students byconducting academic writing workshops on different academic writing topics such as coherence and cohesion, reporting verbs, integration of sources. These workshops are usually not well attended presumably because they are offered during the day when most students are at work.

2.3 Study design and sampling

This study used a descriptive research design with a mixed- methods approach in which both quantitative and qualitative methods for data collection were used. A total of 54 masters and doctoral students from various disciplines and different levels of study and 5 supervisors from different disciplines participated in the study. It was important to involve participants from different academic disciplines in order to provide a broader understanding of the graduate student experience. Table 1 below indicates the student participants' demographic profiles.

**Table 1: Demographic profile of student participants**

| CROSS TABULATION: Age, Academic status, graduate program stage across gender | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Age | | | | | Academic Status | | | | Graduate program stage | | | |
| Gender | < 25 | 25-29 | 30-34 | 35-39 | > 40 | Masters | Mphil | PhD | unspecified | Proposal writing | Data collectio | Write-up | Course-work |
| Male | 0 | 4 | 4 | 2 | 15 | 12 | 2 | 12 | | 10 | 7 | 7 | 1 |
| Female | 1 | 13 | 5 | 1 | 9 | 23 | 0 | 1 | | 10 | 11 | 6 | 3 |
| TOTAL | 1 | 17 | 9 | 3 | 24 | 35 | 2 | 13 | 4 | 20 | 18 | 13 | 4 |

**Data Collection Methods**

Data was collected from three different sources.

 Questionnaire

All postgraduate students whose email addresses were available were sent a questionnaire and requested to voluntarily complete it. The students that responded to the questionaire came from  different departments.

A questionnaire was used to collect data from students. The questionnaire had five sections which consisted of 55 rateable items and three open-ended questions. Participants used a five-point Likert scale to rate items in sections two to five.  Section one addressed participant's background information and the second section consisted of 3 items and required participants to rate the importance of academic writing.  The third section required participants to indicate writing tasks frequently required in their departments, rate difficulty of tasks and finally indicate amount of support they needed during the writing process. Three open ended questions required participants to indicate writing support they were provided with by their departments and to  state whether they thought it was necessary for them to take an academic writing course at graduate level and lastly, they were required to suggest what an academic writing course for graduate students could focus on.

Student Focus group discussions

The qualitative technique used to collect data were focus group interviews. Two researchers conducted the interviews. We used focus group interviews based on the notion that the participants are an essential source of information about their thoughts and feelings (Best & Kahn, 2006) and will be able to express their academic writing concerns and challenges. Focus group discussions also allows participants to listen to others and consider their own views and reduce the researchers influence on the participants. Further, it allows researchers to probe to get more depth in the participants' responses regarding academic writing challenges and the interaction of the participants are often deeper and richer than those obtained from one-to-one interviews. Two focus group interviews with 3 participants in each focus group were conducted. The discussions focused on academic writing support provided by departments, the students' concerns and challenges. Each session lasted for about 30 minutes . In each session participants were notified about the purpose of the study and purpose of the focus group interview. The interview started once the participants gave consent. The two researchers took detailed notes during the interview.

Supervisor interviews

Five supervisors from different departments were interviewed to establish their perceptions of post graduate students' academic writing challenges they face, and the support supervisors and the department gave them. Purposive convenience sampling was used to explore the supervisors' different perspectives from five different departments across the university. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted about 30 to 35 minutes. The sessions were not audio recorded but detailed notes were taken during the interview. This was followed by discussions and checking the facts with the respondents to ensure clarity and consistency of information provided.

Data analysis

The questionnaire data obtained was analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to record, organise and evaluate the quantitative data. The frequencies and means of all items were analysed to compile information on students' perceptions of their academic writing challenges and support they needed. For the student focus group and supervisor interviews, the coding of the data was done using thematic analysis to identify, evaluate and describe themes within the data.

**Findings**

The results will be presented according to the research questions. The first research question sought to find out the academic writing needs and challenges of post graduate students at the University of Botswana as perceived by the students.

3.1 Students' perceived academic writing needs

Students were asked to indicate the degree of need they felt regarding academic writing on a five-point scale where 1 is no need, 2 is low support, 3 is moderate support, 4 is high support and 5 is very high support. Table 2 below summaries the results where student indicated that they needed high to very high support in various writing aspects ( 4 and 5) .

**Table 2: Task statements in the writing process rated as needing high (4) and very high support (5) by graduate students**

|  | high | Very high | % (High + Very high |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1. Having rich vocabulary and expressions | 19 | 13 | 59 |
| 2. Using proper connections and transitions | 22 | 8 | 56 |
| 3. Choosing correct words (field related terminology) | 19 | 10 | 54 |
| 4. Presenting my argument in a coherent manner | 12 | 16 | 52 |
| 5. Organising paragraphs | 14 | 13 | 50 |
| 6Writing for the intended audience | 16 | 11 | 50 |
| 7  Organising the whole text | 15 | 11 | 48 |
| 8.  Authorial voice | 14 | 12 | 48 |
| 9.Avoiding plagiarism (how to quote, paraphrase or cite) | 13 | 12 | 46 |
| 10. Making use of sources in writing | 10 | 12 | 41 |
| 11 Using correct punctuation and spelling | 11 | 9 | 37 |
| 12. Developing ideas | 11 | 9 | 37 |
| 13. Drawing conclusions | 11 | 9 | 37 |
| 14  Using proper mechanical conventions (e.g APA style) | 7 | 11 | 33 |

As shown in table 2 the participants rated high and very high an array of  writing features. 59% indicated rich vocabulary and expression , 57% indicated using proper connections and transitions, 54 % of the participants indicated choosing correct words (field related terminology), 52% indicated presenting an argument in a coherent manner while 50% of the participants needed organising skills. Generally, the skills identified by the majority of students indicate that students needed support related to having rich vocabulary, using proper connections and transitions to present a coherent argument, and choosing correct words, which are very important for text construction.

3.2 Students perceived academic writing challenges

 To find out the challenges that students faced, we first asked students to indicate the types of writing assignments they wrote at graduate level and how often they did them on a scale of 1-5, where 1 is never, 2 is rarely, 3 is sometimes, 4 is often and 5 is always.   Table 3 below summarizes the type of written assignments that the majority of students frequently write.

**Table 3: Written assignments at graduate level**

| Task | never | rarely | % (Never + rarely) | sometimes | often | always | % (Often + always) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Critiquing research article | 2 | 3 | 9 | 10 | 24 | 15 | **72** |
| Book review | 12 | 14 | 48 | 9 | 8 | 11 | 35 |
| Brief summaries of articles | 2 | 8 | 19 | 15 | 16 | 13 | 54 |
| Critical writing – reflection papers | 0 | 6 | 11 | 14 | 18 | 16 | **63** |
| Group writing projects | 7 | 8 | 28 | 10 | 15 | 14 | 54 |
| Proposal writing | 0 | 4 | 7 | 12 | 20 | 18 | **70** |
| Annotated Bibliography | 8 | 8 | 30 | 8 | 14 | 16 | 56 |
| Literature Review | 0 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 21 | 27 | **89** |
| Research/Project Proposal | 0 | 2 | 4 | 9 | 19 | 24 | **80** |
| Technical Report e.g., a lab report or stat report) | 21 | 5 | 48 | 11 | 10 | 7 | 31 |
| Case-based Writing | 13 | 6 | 35 | 14 | 17 | 4 | 39 |
| Abstract for a conference | 14 | 5 | 35 | 15 | 9 | 11 | 37 |
| Reflective Essay | 10 | 8 | 33 | 19 | 12 | 5 | 31 |
| Writing to answer questions in paragraph(s) (e.g., essay exams, posting on a blog/discussion forum for your course) | 6 | 5 | 20 | 16 | 17 | 10 | 50 |

The overall response as indicated in table 3 shows that the majority of students often wrote a literature review (89%), project proposal writing (80%), critiquing research articles (72%), writing reflective papers (63%) and writing annotated bibliographies (56%). This is not surprising as these genres are common at graduate level for most programmes. A few students indicated that they were required to produce scholarly writing as part of assessment. Such scholarly writing include writing an abstract for a conference and writing a book review.

As a follow up, participants were asked to indicate the written assignments they found to be difficult or challenging. 54% of the participants indicated that they found writing book review and critical writing to be very difficult, 52% of the participants found critiquing research article to be very difficult, 46% of the participants found research proposal writing to be very difficult and lastly 43% of the participants found writing brief summaries of articles to be very difficult. Related to the written assignments the majority of students found the following very difficult and challenging: focusing the scope of research, integrating and documenting sources, synthesizing ideas from different sources and logical development of ideas, which the majority of students found to be very challenging.

The data provided by students in the focus group interviews on challenges students faced also corroborated the questionnaire data. The following recurrent themes with regard to graduate students' academic writing challenges emerged:

- *Identifying the research problem and creating own niche*
- *Writing the literature review section*
- *How to structure a research proposal*
- *Using own language*
- *Initial stages of writing a proposal*
- *Limited vocabulary*
- *Writing in acceptable academic language*
- *Organizing thoughts*
- *Developing own stance*

Follow-up open ended questions which probed students to indicate whether it is necessary to take an academic writing course at graduate level was asked. The majority of the students (89%) participants indicated that it was necessary to have an academic writing course at graduate level. Furthermore, 83% of the participants indicated that it was important to have their work published during the course of their study.

When probed further about why an academic course is necessary, the participants' comments indicated that they needed to improve their writing. One of the participant indicated that *"it is very very very important because it is assumed we master the skills of writing and referencing while it is not the case"*. Another commented: "*so as to make my work to be scholarly*"

The results of the open-ended questions were also corroborated by focus group discussions. In discussing their needs during the focus group discussions, the participants brought up linguistic inadequacy as a problem. One of the participants mentioned that "I *struggle with English it is not my mother tongue. I need to think first in my mother tongue and then translate to English I do not know if I have captured all I wanted to say*". Another participant indicated that "though *I did my first degree in English I definitely would want academic writing course. I only learnt how to pass exams at graduate level"*. The students also emphasised that they lacked confidence in skills like synthesizing ideas from different sources or data.

During the focus group discussions, students described their experiences of studying at graduate level. They described the transitional process from undergraduate writing to post graduate writing as "*traumatic*" "*a huge leap*" "*lonely*," and "*survival of the fittest*". The students lamented lack of or inadequate departmental and institutional academic writing support at this level. They reiterated the fact that they are expected to have acquired writing skills at undergraduate level. One of the participants pointed out that "*we are thrown into deep end ... lecturers give us guidelines, but it's not enough*." Another participant indicated that they "*only get supervisory support. Anything else will be self-taught*.' They indicated that the supervisors focused more on methodological and general issues.

The participants offered several suggestions for improving graduate writing experiences. Firstly, the students indicated that they needed guidance and instruction in academic writing and were willing to take a writing course. Some of the content they suggested to be included in the writing course was coherence and cohesion, referencing, organisation and structure of a dissertation/thesis, and taking a stance in academic writing (voice). Other participants

could not single out particular content and said "*include everything*". One participant pointed out that "at *undergraduate we learn to master content to pass but post graduate requires us to develop own ideas and have your own stance so we need to learn a lot*". Secondly,the students suggested that the challenges faced by graduate students could be reduced by creating a platform for post graduate students to interact at departmental and graduate school level. They desired to be provided with opportunities to engage wih peers in group settings in the form of peer support groups to get writing support from peers. Participants cited different reasons why peer support groups would be valuable. They pointed out that it would help them discuss writing issues, share their ideas and receive suggestions from peers.

This is consistent with Lave & Wenger (1991) "communities of practice" (CoP). They argue that CoP offer an effective environment that enables new graduate students (novices) become experts not simply by observing or explicit teaching but by engaging in genuine peripheral participation. Furthermore, Cuthbert & Spark (2008) and Wigglesworth & Storch (2012) emphasised that writing groups play a potential role in encouraging members to better commit to writing and offer members a sense of support in becoming independent, confident, and motivated writers.

3.3 Supervisors perceived academic writing challenges of post graduate students

The second research question sought to find out the supervisors' perceptions on the academic writing challenges of post graduate students they taught at UB. The views of the supervisors converged with those of the students to some extent. The supervisors generally felt that many of their students' experience challenges with various aspects of academic writing. The major concerns raised include problems associated with academic writing skills and academic discourse - lack of the necessary knowledge and language skills for proposal writing, acknowledging sources, familiarity with appropriate discipline specific terminology, understanding basic concepts of academic writing, making convincing arguments, analyzing arguments and coherence. One supervisor lamented that "*Students do not understand the basic concepts like what should go in the abstract, introduction, how do you structure literature review*"

One of the supervisors raised the concern of "*lack of graduate mind*", which the supervisor explained as lack of critical thinking, reading extensively and understanding how to read strategically and comprehending what they read. Other concerns raised by the supervisors included problems associated with students' personal factors such as inability to multitask between their full-time jobs and graduate work, lack of time to balance different priorities and concentration on research writing, and inability to be self- directed. One of the supervisors made this interesting observation that "*academic writing requires concentration, if students cannot concentrate they cannot think, reflect, to write a good paper, you need to think*".

The supervisors also brought out institutional factors such as no common graduate guidelines at the institution, limited support from departments and no supervision monitoring structure and supervision skills as some of the challenges faced by graduate students. One supervisor captured it this way; "*students are on their own and supervisor help*" "*No structured support from departments*" One supervisor emphasized the need to foster academic skills development through a mentoring process. The supervisor indicated that mentoring is very critical as it would increase students' confidence as writers.

3.4 Support given to students

The third research question asked supervisors how the students' challenges were being addressed by the departments. All the supervisors reported that the support that they mainly

give to students as supervisors is to provide them with faculty guidelines, research methodology workshops, tips on how to do research, and ask students to do presentations on different areas.

A general observation made by the supervisors was that research courses and workshops that students are offered in the departments did not prepare students adequately for academic writing. The supervisors offered suggestions that graduate students need to be introduced to academic writing to help them acquire academic writing knowledge and skills. The supervisor emphasised discipline specific academic writing support and collaboration between acdemic literacy skills lecturers and supervisors in the disciplines. They also suggested different academic writing workshops for different faculties and the development of a detailed standing guide with a step by step format for each chapter, structured to suit texts that each faculty deals with.

Students on the other hand reported frustration with the level of institutional support they get. They indicated that when they enroll for graduate studies, it is often assumed that they can write and there is no bridging system in place to help them. One of the students emphasized that they 'only *get supervisory support. Anything else will be self-taught'* .Another student pointed out that *"we are thrown into deep end ... lecturers give us guidelines, but it's not enough"*. The students agreed that they needed to develop their academic writing skills.

**Discussions and Implications**

The study sought to find out the academic writing needs and challenges of post graduate students at UB as perceived by both the students and the supervisors. The analysis of the results has highlighted challenges that graduate students experience as they make a transition from being novice writers to becoming competent and scholarly writers in their disciplines. Recurrent themes in the interviews was a sense amongst the students and supervisors that graduate students find academic writing challenging and that there was very little support offered to ease this challenge.

The preliminary findings from the questionnaire, focus group discussions and interviews with supervisors allowed us to understand students' academic writing challenges from different perspectives. Students and supervisors' perceptions supported and complemented each other. For example, both supervisors and students perceived academic writing to be a skill that presents a persistent challenge for students and contributes to low completion rate of programmes of study by graduate students. Both students and their supervisors made a few suggestions to help lessen these challenges. As indicated by the results (both students and their supervisors), many of the students' perceived writing challenges seem to be related to lack of linguistic competence. These challenges are similar to challenges faced by post graduate L2 students in higher education in other L2 contexts (Jeyaraj, 2018,; Singh, 2016; Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006). In these studies, the majority of students and supervisors highlighted lack of confidence in areas of specialised discipline specific vocabulary and difficulty with expressions, and rich vocabulary as some of the challenges students face.

Students further made repeated reference to challenges which are important for text construction like the ability to organise a text and ability to present an argument in a coherent manner, organising paragraphs and using proper connections and transitions and writing for the intended audience. Students also indicated that they lacked familiarity with the conventions of academic writing, and expectations of the target texts that they must produce. It became evident in the interviews that students were very much aware of their writing challenges and the kind of support they yearned for.

Like the students, the supervisors also referred to students' linguistic challenges. However, the supervisors tended to highlight that the students lacked multitasking skills between their responsibilities that compete with their studies for their limited time and attention and understanding how to read strategically. The supervisors also confirmed Holmes et al. (2018) concerns that students did not give themselves time to concentrate and develop their writing skills. Undeniably, producing quality academic writing requires commitment and time. They further revealed that what compounds the challenges was lack of academic writing support for students struggling in the departments besides the help they get from their supervisors. For example, the supervisors stated that a number of students drop out from the programmes after the course work and do not complete their theses because of writing challenges. This is not surprising in view of the fact that students faced a lot of time constraints and lack of writing instruction.

There was similarity in the supervisors and students' views on the support needed by the students. Both students and supervisors generally felt that the support they got from departments and the institution is not adequate to help students improve their academic writing practices as it was skewed toward generic skills like research methods and not on academic writing needs. The students and supervisors corroborated Cooley & Lewkowicz, (1995); and Yeh's (2010) conclusions that post graduate students needed more guidance and instruction in research writing.

Furthermore, the results of the study indicate that students engaged in new academic genres that they are not familiar with at different stages of their program. Such new academic genres include writing book reviews for publication, writing proposals and submitting an abstract for a conference as part of their assessment. The results also indicate that some students are also expected to start participating in disciplinary conversations like submitting papers for publication as part of the requirements of their programme before graduation. This can be viewed as disciplinary socialization. The pedagogical goal of engaging students in these high-stake writing is that through their participation in these genres, students will learn the practices, norms and values of knowledge production in their disciplines and become socialized into the academic discourse of their target communities.

However, research indicates that students often lack familiarity (conventions, expectations, values) with the target texts they have to produce and do not understand the complexity of discipline-specific, graduate level literacy requirements (Singh 2015: 13, Bronson 2004) . Academic writing is a challenging activity for learners because students are expected to familiarize themselves with "institutional and disciplinary conventions, develop an appropriate 'voice' and learn to adopt an authoritative stance in their writing (Cotterall 2011:413). What compounds the graduate student challenges (as indicated by some students) is that writing in itself is a challenging activity for learners who are writing in a second or third language.

The findings presented in this preliminary study seem to nullify the assumption that post graduate students can write a dissertation/thesis without guidance and instruction in academic writing. Research indicates that students' writing challenges could be related to inadequate preparation in academic writing ( Holmes et al 2018).The practice is that in many instances students' writing problems are treated as problems that universities can fix by mounting writing workshops or that students will obtain the writing skills independently by just being part of a community of researchers (Cotterall, 2011; Odena & Burgess, 2017).

However, it is evident that students' writing development and support should be an integral part of post graduate programmes. Returning to the academic literacies' perspective view of writing being dependent of context, providing support for students' writing should take place within a discipline where students are trying to gain knowledge of ways of writing in that

discourse community. There is need for an organized support system to help students develop into better and confident writers. This organized support could be done by developing an academic writing course that addresses the needs of the students in the faculties as suggested by the supervisors (Sallee, Hallett, & Tierney, 2011).From an academic literacies' perspective, a writing course that is situated within the context of a discipline will benefit the students as writing is informed by disciplinary practices and that writing cannot be separated from the learning of a discipline.

Infact, research into graduate students' support identify departments as sites of student socialisation into their disciplines. As students enrol into graduate programms as novices , they start participating at the periphery of their discourse communities ( faculties and departments) and try to gain entry into their discourse communities as Lave and Weneger (1991) indicated. As such, faculties and departments have an important role to play in fostering academic writing skills development. Collaboration with academic writing experts will be critical for the development of an academic writing skills course.

## Conclusion

This study took place within the context of the University of Botswana and it invloved a limited number of both students and their supervisors. Because of this limitation, the results of the study need to be be interpreted with caution as the findings can not be generalizable but rather used as a bridge for further research. However, these preliminary results provide insights and help us to understand better, the challenges that students face as they make a transition from undegraduate to graduate writing.

The analysis highlighted themes that resonate with existing literature like lack of linguistic competence or language proficiency, lack of ability to grasp and adapt to "new and different academic expectations in their writing practices" (Singh 2016: 84), inability to understand the complexity of discipline-specific, graduate level literacy requirements (Singh 2015: 13, Bronson 2004) and inadequate institutional support.

The findings of the present study could contribute to knowledge regarding how post graduate students and their supervisors percieve their academic writing skills. In particular, the results provide evidence to the fact that there is need for the University to make efforts to improve graduate students' academic writing support. However, what is now needed is a cross institutional study involving all faculties and post graduate students.

The relevance of the academic literacies perspective is clearly supported by the current findings. The most obvious finding to emerge from this study is that graduate students need guidance and writing instruction. We believe that providing support for students' academic writing can be better managed at faculty or departmental level by developing a writing course that can improve students experience and participation in higher education. We believe that placing an academic writing course within the context of a faculty will help students gradually acquire knowledge of the communicative goals of their academic communities or their "parent discourse community", what is acceptable and what is not acceptable in writing, and that students would ultimately gain knowledge of "standard practices within the boundaries of a particular genre" (Bhatia 1993:14). Therefore a dialogical and collaborative effort between the academic literacy unit and departments to develop an approach to teaching graduate writing that considers the complexities of academic writing would be a sustainable student oriented support approach.

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