**Practice makes perfect: A WID approach for Human Resource Management Honours students at a South African university**

**Abstract**

There is a lack of research on Research on ‘Writing in the Disciplines’ (WID) programmes for postgraduate students, including in fields related to management. Human Resource Management Honours students at a South African university completed a research preparation module designed according to WID principles. This research explores how the developmental assignments, written as part of the module, prepared students who were writing in groups to submit their research reports. To determine if a group’s writing had improved, the assignments from four groups were evaluated against the students’ rubrics. The redrafted assignments met more of the marking rubrics’ criteria. Since all group members were English as an additional language speakers, this approach might benefit postgraduate students in similar contexts. The findings suggest that the curriculum of similar modules should fulfil three criteria. Firstly, the module should sufficiently scaffold larger, more complex pieces of writing research. Secondly, it should consider different means of assessing qualitative and quantitative research projects that operate from different paradigms. Thirdly, the module should encourage supervisors, who are disciplinary experts, should learn how to teach their students to write in the discipline from support staff members working in the field of academic literacies.

**Introduction**

Universities that recognise how challenging academic writing can be offer undergraduate programmes that teach students how to write across an entire three or four-year curriculum (Russell, 1997). While this instruction may enable the students to write essays, research has found that undergraduate students receive little or no instruction into how to write up research in their discipline (Jackson, Meyer & Parkinson, 2006; Lombard & Kloppers, 2015). Thus, students entering into an Honours degree may find that their way of writing is no longer sufficient to meet the demands of the examiners. For instance, students who enter into an Honours degree may know how to reproduce existing knowledge in essay format, but might not know how to write in a way which shows that they have produced new knowledge in their discipline (Lander, 2002; Jackson *et al*. 2006). In addition, many South Africa students need to begin working immediately after their undergraduate degree to pay off student loans, and financially support family members. Many of these students only enrol in an Honours degree some years or decades after their undergraduate graduation. While all Honours students may need additional support to be able to become knowledge producers, mature Honours students will need even more support to reacquaint themselves with ways the in which knowledge is produced and valued in universities.

Although Honours students may need additional support in order to produce research writing in a particular discipline, relatively little is known about how such students should be taught to write for their discipline (Butler, 2007; Tobbell, O’Donnell & Zammit, 2010; Fergie, Beeke, McKenna & Creme, 2011). This research makes a contribution to the literature by examining how submitting components of an Honours research report multiple times, according to pre-determined criteria during a research preparation module, improved the final research report. The findings from this research could assist academic and support staff who want to develop a support module based on WID principles where students write preparatory assignments prior to submission of the final research report or minor dissertation.

The paper begins by presenting the central research question of this study, and providing an explanation of the different components of the research module. The literature review then discusses how Writing in the Disciplines (WID) and Genre Pedagogy can be used to develop students’ research writing. An overview of how the research module was designed according to WID principles is then provided. The next section explains why this research made use of case study as a research design, and how the students’ assignments were collected and analysed. The two main findings from this study are then presented. The study found that later drafts of the groups all managed to meet more of the research criteria, but that some of the groups’ texts had used argument, language, and tone less effectively. Based on these findings, several ways in which the module could be improved in the future are suggested. The final section of the paper then summarises the key findings.

**Research Question**

To what extent does writing developmental assignments, submitted as part of a research preparation module according to pre-determined criteria, improve the final Honours research report?

**Background**

In 2007 the Higher Education Qualification Framework stipulated that in order to meet the National Qualification Level 8 descriptors Honours degrees should include a 30 credit research component (CHE, 2011). To comply with these requirements, and to prepare students to enter into the Master’s programme, from 2015 the Batchelor of Commerce (B. Com) Human Resources (HR) Honours degree required students to submit a research project. The degree ran for two years, and students completed a year-long research preparation module in the first year of study that prepared them to submit their final research report. The cohort who registered for the degree in 2015 were the first cohort to complete the research module. This module was compulsory and carried the same amounts of credits as the other modules in the degree.

Students completed their research project and all the assignments in groups of three to five members, reducing supervisor load and allowing more students to be admitted into the degree. Measures were included in the module curriculum to ensure that each member of a group contributed to the assignments equally. At the end of the semester each student in the group completed an individual portfolio that described his or her unique contribution to each assignment. Each group also submitted a group portfolio, which was a consolidated report outlining how much each member of the group had contributed to a particular assignment. Students then signed that the information provided in the individual and group portfolio was an accurate representation of their contribution to the assignments. Supervisors used the individual and group portfolios to award higher marks or lower marks to group members based on the individual’s contribution to the assignments.

Prior to the submission of several of the assignments students attended Academic Literacies tutorials where they were shown how to read and reproduce written conventions present in research articles and past students’ research reports. I facilitated half of the tutorials in 2015, the other half were facilitated by a Postgraduate Writing Fellow (PGWF) from the university’s Writing Centre, and all the tutorials in 2016. During two full-day ‘writing-retreat’ workshops each group discussed their writing with a PGWF before they submitted the proposal and research report. Academic staff in the department also reminded students several times during the module to make additional consultations with the PGWFs.

**Literature review**

Writing in the Discipline (WID) is a writing philosophy that emphasises the importance of teaching students how to produce texts that meet the conventions of their discipline (Classen, 2012; Hathaway, 2015). It is important to teach students how to write for their discipline because the way in which disciplines value and share knowledge affects the way in which researchers write in the discipline. Thus, WID rejects the proposition that literacy is a set of skills that can be learnt in one context and easily transferred to different contexts (Wingate, 2006; Downs & Wardle, 2007; Lillis & Tuck, 2016).

The WID approach argues that teaching students a set of generic writing tips, or strategies, will be less effective than a programme which considers the demands that different disciplines place upon their students. While a generic writing programme would not consider how postgraduate students write differently in the natural and social sciences, WID programmes for students in the natural and social sciences could instruct these students differently. Thus, a WID approach might inform students in the social sciences, especially students conducting qualitative research, that certain personal pronouns are used to show the reader how a text is constructed (Hyland, 2005). On the other hand, a WID programme for students in the natural, or hard sciences disciplines, where quantitative research is the norm, might show students how to write without using the personal pronoun to preserve the author’s objectivity (Hyland, 2005). Thus, WID programmes for postgraduate students will need to teach students how to create knowledge claims in ways which are supported by the discipline’s own epistemology and ontology.

Though there are many different ways of teaching students how to write for their disciplines, the module was informed by Genre Pedagogy and the concept of scaffolding. Scaffolding means that students complete smaller and less cognitively challenging, or more developmental tasks, before they complete larger, more complex tasks (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976; Parkinson, Jackson, Kirkwood & Padaayachee, 2007; Grossman, 2009). It is an approach which has been used in the past to help students improve their academic reading and writing (Parkinson *et al*. 2007). Genre Pedagogy is an approach which stresses the importance of teaching students how the Genre, or hidden conventions, work within the text (Hyland, 2003; Clark, 2014). The rationale behind Genre Pedagogy is that once students understand how texts are constructed they will be better equipped to produce similar texts (Hyland, 2003; Clark, 2014).

**Design of the module according to WID principles**

The curriculum of the module was structured so that students completed a number of smaller assignments, which were components of the research report, before the submission of the final research report. Unlike most modules, where students only submit an assignment once, students submitted several assignments twice or thrice as the original assignment was revised and included in the research proposal and/or research report. For more information on the content of each assignment, including how the assignments differed for the 2015 and 2016 cohorts, see Appendix A. Prior to the submission of each assignment students received a detailed rubric that clearly explained the key components that should be included in each assignment. The supervisors graded each assignment according to the marking rubric.

The rubrics were clearly tailored to the requirements of the discipline. Human Recourse Management (HRM) and various other management related fields expect their postgraduate students to produce research which contributes to the body of knowledge and is relevant for industry practioners (Goodier & Parkinson, 2005). Thus, when students submitted the draft and final Discussion Chapter the rubric clearly mentioned that the chapter should make a contribution to theory, or the body of knowledge, and to practice, namely, the HRM industry.

**Research Design and methodology**

This was a qualitative case study focused on understanding a particular phenomenon: the role of the developmental assignments in preparing students to submit their research reports. In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon, the assignments from four groups, which were submitted as part of the research preparation module in 2015 and 2016, were analysed. Though the analysis of the assignments was the main data source, additional insight was gained through focus group discussions with each of the four groups, and interviews with the groups’ supervisors. The four groups had three supervisors, because two of the groups were supervised by the same supervisor.

**Data collection**

Data was collected once ethical permission for the study had been obtained from the Faculty of Education’s Research Committee. In total I collected 36 of a possible 38 assignments. For more information, see the table on the next page:

**Table 1: Assignments in the research preparation module**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Assessment |  |
| Substantiated Problem Statement | Group A, B, C, and D (4) |
| Literature Survey | Group A, B, C, and D (4) |
| Research Questions | Group A, C, and D (3) |
| Literature Review | Group A, B, C, and D (4) |
| Concept Research Design | Group A, C, and D (3) |
| Proposal | Group A, B, C and D (4) |
| Data Collection | Group C and D (2) |
| Results | Group C and D (2) |
| Abstract, Discussion, and Conclusion | Group C and D (2) |
| Research poster | Group A, B, C, and D (4) |
| Research report | Group A, B, C, and D (4) |

Group A and B completed the module in 2015, and Group C and D completed the module in 2016. The Data Collection, Results, Abstract, Discussion, and Conclusion assignments became part of the module in 2016.

**Data analysis**

In order to analyse the students’ assignments, I developed a grid for each assignment based on the criteria outlined in the marking rubric. I completed the grid by indicating whether a group’s initial assignments, and the subsequent versions of the assignment, submitted as part of the proposal and/or research report, had met or had not met the criteria. An example grid is shown in Appendix B.

Once the grid was completed, I wrote a summary of how each group’s initial assignment, and subsequent versions of the assignment, had met or failed to meet the criteria. I used this summary to compare the progress that each group had made to the progress made by the other three groups. By comparing each group’s progress against Butler’s (2007) seven criteria for academic writing (Formality, Conciseness and exactness, Impersonality and objectivity, Nominalization, Grammatical correctness, Coherent and cohesive (logical) structure and argument, Appropriate use of evidence) I gained additional insight into how each group’s writing had developed over the course of the module.

**Findings**

**Conceptualising the research problem**

Research suggests that students struggle to understand the discipline and the chosen research topic in enough depth to conceptualise a research problem (Davidson & Crateau, 1998; Rinto, Bowles-Terry & Santos, 2016). Students in 2016 completed the literature survey before the problem statement assignment, and I was interested to see if reviewing the literature had helped students to write better quality problem statements. I found that Group C and D, who completed the module in 2016, did write better initial problem statements than the groups who completed the module in 2015. This result indicates that students were better able to complete a problem statement after reading through the literature.

While the initial problem statements of the two groups in 2016 were more precise, all four groups managed to write well-substantiated problem statements in the research report. All four groups met the criteria outlined in the rubric as they were able to: explain the context of the research, provide evidence that research on the topic was lacking, and explain how this research would contribute to the ‘knowledge gap’. The final problem statement may be of such a high quality because each group submitted the substantiated problem statements three times: Firstly, as an assignment, secondly as part of the research proposal, and thirdly as part of the final research report. Submitting the same assignment multiple times meant that the groups used their supervisor’s feedback, which included a completed rubric showing where students had met and had not yet met the rubric’s criteria, to revise the problem statement further. The process of revision enabled students who were initially unfamiliar with the process of knowledge production to write problem statements in the research that situated the research problem within the body of knowledge. The module was therefore able to acculturate students into the ways of knowing which should be displayed by knowledge producers. This finding supports previous research which has found that scaffolded support helps students to improve their academic reading and writing (Parkinson *et al*. 2007).

While the groups’ problem statements were well written overall, one aspect which two of the groups could have improved upon was the formulation of the research objectives. Both Group C and D mentioned that an objective of their research was to distribute questionnaires, and one of Group C’s objectives was to conduct a literature review. Both groups failed to understand that while distributing a questionnaire and completing a literature review do contribute to the study’s objectives, they are not stand-alone objectives that should be mentioned at the start of the research report. In future, more clarification on how aspects of the study such as, questionnaire distribution and writing the literature review differ from the objectives of the research should be provided.

**Locating the study in a context**

Postgraduate students must choose how to explain their study in relation to existing concepts and theories (Davidson & Crateau, 1998). As per the marking rubric, students were asked to write literature review assignments that discussed the key theory underpinning their concepts. However, each of the four groups’ initial literature review assignments explained prior theories and concepts in a superficial way. For instance, Group B’s use of bullet points to explain key concepts meant that the literature review resembled a list instead of a discussion. In addition, Group A, B, and C’s use of numerous and/or repetitive sub-headings made the literature review structure unclear. The unclear literature review structure impeded the reader’s ability to understand how the chosen theories and concepts related to the present study.

All groups substantially revised the literature review assignment before submission of the final research report. The groups revised the assignment in four main ways:

1. Removing theories and concepts which were not relevant to the study,
2. Providing definitions or clearer definitions of key concepts,
3. Revising the sequence of ideas-so that general information was presented before specific information, and
4. Renaming unclear headings.

The initial literature review indicated that the groups were unfamiliar with the literature on the topic, and had limited knowledge of how to write literature reviews. However, the final Literature Review Chapter of all four of the groups better integrated the ideas from multiple sources to introduce the reader to the current debates and controversies in the discipline (Davidson & Crateau, 1998). The quality of the final Literature Review Chapter suggests that students can improve the research report’s Literature Review Chapter if they receive structured feedback on multiple drafts via a marking rubric. By redrafting the Literature Review Chapter multiple times, the four groups were able to improve the structure of the chapter and the chapter’s main argument (Butler, 2007).

**Confusion around pre-writing tasks**

**Literature survey assignment**

Students completed a literature survey assignment by reviewing each article through the use of a grid. An example of the grid used to complete the assignment can be found below:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **No** | **Title of paper** | **Full reference** | **Problem \*(Problem and list of key concepts investigated)** | **Context \*(Definition of concepts & theories and arguments)** | **Methods** | **Findings \*(Discussion, assumptions, and limitations)** | **Link to own research** |

**Table 1: Example Literature Survey Grid Headings**

\* Criteria shown in brackets was added in 2016

Students wrote the literature survey assignment so that they would have enough knowledge from the literature to write the literature review assignment in 2015 and the problem statement assignment in 2016. One of the reasons why the literature survey failed to meet the criteria outlined in the rubric was because students often completed the assignment by merely transferring whole sentences from the articles into the literature survey grid. Since these sentences had been written as part of an article, the verbatim copying produced a disjointed literature survey grid that often failed to meet the criteria for the assignment outlined in the rubric.

Another reason why the literature surveys did not meet the marking rubric’s criteria may have been the time allocated for the task. In 2015 the students had two weeks to survey 30 articles, and in 2016 the students had three weeks to survey 20 articles. Even though the groups in 2016 had more time and fewer articles to read, reading and summarising 20 articles in three weeks was challenging for the students, because they had only recently begun the module. If academic staff in the department want students to engage deeply with the literature they could consider asking students to review fewer articles, or giving the students more time complete the assignment. Providing the students with more time or a reduced scope could benefit academically weaker groups, such as Group A, who struggled to read the articles at the level of understanding required. As the groups did not use many of the articles reviewed in the survey to construct their literature survey, it is doubtful whether they fully grasped the purpose of this task. Thus, academic and support staff need to ensure that during the course of the module students are explicitly told what the purpose of the literature survey is. If students produce better literature surveys they will have more relevant information with which to construct problem statements, and this could help groups to construct problem statement that are better substantiated by the available literature.

**Literature review questions**

At the end of the literature review assignment students were required to submit several literature review questions, which were questions that their literature review would address. After reviewing Group D’s research questions, it was clear that they had confused the literature review questions and the main research questions.

Group D’s main research question was: *“To what extent does the breach of the psychological contract influence psychological capital?*” The group then posed two less clear sub-questions:

1. “*Does psychological capital measure reliably?*
2. *Does psychological contract measure reliably?*”

Group D did not understand that the purpose of the literature review questions was to guide the literature review, and that these questions should not be included in the final research report. Since students submitted these questions as part of the initial literature review, they may not have realised that these questions were actually part of the planning phase that occurs before the writing begins. In order to avoid this confusion in the future, academic and support need to clarify that the literature review questions help students to plan their work and do not need to be included in the final research report. This clarification will enable students to write research questions that relate to the main focus of the study in the final research report.

**Differences in how qualitative and quantitative projects met the specified criteria**

Three of the four groups provided a justification for the chosen research design and methods. It was significant that the three groups who provided a justification for the research design and methods had either conducted qualitative research, or a supervisor who is familiar with qualitative research. Groups conducting qualitative research may have justified their research design and methods choices, because qualitative research is less likely to view knowledge as neutral and more likely to acknowledge its constructed nature (Hyland, 2005). Thus, the two groups who conducted qualitative research were more likely to understand that they had to justify the choice of research design and methods for the reader’s benefit. The third group conducted a quantitative research project, but because their supervisor was familiar with both qualitative and quantitative research they were able to provide a justification for the chosen research design and methods.

The one group (Group D) who did not provide a justification for choosing a particular research design or method conducted a quantitative research project under the guidance of a supervisor who specialises in quantitative research. Quantitative research is more likely to view the world as a series of self-evident, context neutral value propositions (Hyland, 2005). Thus, quantitative researchers are less likely to justify any choices that they have made, and it is not surprising that this group did not describe why they had chosen a particular design and set of methods. However, it is problematic that groups conducting quantitative research who are supervised by a specialist in quantitative research, will be less likely to meet certain criteria outlined in the research report’s marking rubric. One way to manage this situation would be to adopt different criteria for qualitative and quantitative research projects. These criteria could be adopted if the majority of academic staff members agreed that qualitative and quantitative research projects have fundamentally different epistemologies and ontologies and should be graded differently.

However, if the academic staff members feel that both qualitative and quantitative researchers should be able to justify choices related to research design and methods, a different approach would have to be taken. For instance, supervisors who only work with quantitative research could collaborate with supervisors who are familiar with qualitative research. To some extent there is already some collaboration between supervisors as academic staff in the department provided groups with feedback on their research proposals and research reports as a panel. The panel was supposed to inform each group how their research report could be improved. However, one of the supervisors described the panel as ‘*constrained*’, because supervisors were told, “*Do not in any way imply that there are alternative ways, you confuse our students*”. While supervisors may be concerned about their students receiving conflicting advice, supervisors may also not want their students to receive feedback from other staff members. This is because some supervisors feel that if their students receive feedback from other sources this will undermine what they perceived to be a private relationship between themselves and their students (Manathunga, 2005).

As some supervisors might find it difficult to accept peer feedback in panel form, alternative peer-feedback methods could be used. For instance, supervisors who only supervise quantitative projects could review or mark their students’ work in private with a colleague who is familiar with qualitative research. The role of the supervisor who is familiar with qualitative research would be to articulate why and how a group could justify particular research design and methodology choices. If either alternative criteria for quantitative groups, or peer collaboration between qualitative and quantitative supervisors was used, then all groups conducting quantitative research would be more likely to meet the criteria for the Research Design and Methodology Chapter.

**Effect of additional scaffolding in 2016**

In 2016 Group C and D drafted two versions of the Results Chapter, Discussion and Conclusion Chapter, and the Abstract, whereas in 2015 Group A and B only submitted a final version of these chapters and the Abstract. This gave the groups in 2016 an advantage over the groups in 2015. This advantage could be one of the reasons why the groups in 2016 wrote better Abstracts, Results Chapters, and Discussion and Conclusion Chapters. The groups in 2015 did not meet several of the key criteria stated in the rubric. For instance, the groups’ Abstracts did not explain what the study’s contribution to knowledge was. In addition, the groups’ Results Chapters did not discuss how the findings addressed the research questions, and the Discussion and Conclusion Chapters did not adequately describe how the study had added to the body of knowledge, and could assist HRM practioners. In summary, without the additional opportunity to submit draft versions of the final chapters and abstracts, neither of the 2015 groups’ final two chapters or Abstracts achieved their purpose.

**Argumentation and language**

By the end of the module, groups whose supervisor paid more attention to the ways in which language created meanings in text were better able to use language to create arguments in text than groups whose supervisors focused more on content. Group C’s supervisor was particularly focused on the students’ writing, which was evident from the comment made by one of the members of the group, “*He sort of focused more on the language and yah not necessarily the content*.” Consequently, this group was the only group to use personal pronouns for persuasive effect in the Discussion and Conclusion Chapter. In the final chapter, Group C addressed the reader directly through the use of the word we in the following sentence: “*In conclusion of the results we can confidently accept all the research questions*.” The use of the first person pronoun in this sentence made the group’s argument more explicit to the reader, and also directed the reader towards a particular reading of the text. Previous authors have also found that postgraduate students use relational markers, such as the word we, to persuade the reader to agree with their argument (Akbras, 2012; Lamberti, 2013). In contrast, the supervisor of Groups A and B explained that “*I do not see it* [the language]” and found it easier to provide feedback to the students on the content rather than the language used in text. Even though Group A and B had also completed a qualitative research project, where the use of personal pronouns is more acceptable, the two groups did not manage to use personal pronouns to persuade the reader to agree with their interpretation of the research.

All the groups were exposed to tutorials and received advise from the PGWFs, but the group whose supervisor was willing and able to offer advice on language matters developed their ability to argue the most. The way in which the module is designed and the different types of expertise that the role players have, means that supervisors, tutors, and PGWFs improve the students writing in different ways. The tutor is expected to teach tutorials which help students understand the conventions of a specific genre, for instance the Abstract, but he or she may not know how Abstracts are constructed in the discipline. The PGWFs, like many consultants working at Writing Centres, are trained to ask the students questions to help them reflect on their own writing and ultimately decide how they should improve their writing (Leibowitz, 2013). Supervisors as disciplinary experts and the arbiter of the students’ marks are best placed to advise students on whether or not their writing displays mastery of the content domain and meets the expected criteria (Leibowitz, 2013). All postgraduate students are expected to construct arguments in text that are appropriate in the discipline. However, the supervisor who found it difficult to see the language, along with many other supervisors, may have internalised the disciplinary conventions; therefore, rendering them invisible (Jacobs, 2007). In such instances, support staff, who work in the field of academic literacies, can help supervisors to articulate for themselves and their students how language is used to convey meaning in their disciplines (Jacobs, 2007; McKay & Simpson, 2013).

While supervisors as disciplinary experts should be involved in teaching their students how to write in the discipline, students also valued the feedback that they received from the academic literacies tutor and the Postgraduate Writing Fellows. A student from Group C found that the Writing Centre helped them to understand their research problem,

“*I think we already realised what our problem was when we went to the Writing Centre. That’s where they actually unpacked it and then it actually made sense you know everything just made sense*”.

This was a very valuable contribution, because unless postgraduate students understand what they are researching it is unlikely that they will be able to argue why their research is needed and how their findings have made a contribution to the field. Research by Leibowitz (2016) has also shown that postgraduate students appreciate the availability of writing consultants who work at Writing Centres, and their ability to provide dialogical and non-judgmental feedback. It was therefore highly problematic that only the supervisors and I were available after hours. Most of the Honours students worked full-time and found that it was a struggle to arrange consultations with the PGWFs during office hours. Though PGWFs offered email consultations, the dialogical nature of the feedback was lost, and one supervisor commented that the email feedback was ‘*very generic’*. At present part-time students at the university, who must already balance work and their studies, are further disadvantaged by the lack of access to writing consultants after hours. Universities that expect their part time postgraduate students to make use of the support services, such as the Writing Centre, need to make these services available after hours.

The ability to argue is only one feature of academic writing, academic texts are also meant to use language precisely (Butler, 2007). While each group tended to express their ideas more succinctly over time, some of the words in the final research report were used incorrectly. For instance, Group D said that they had to test the ‘*portability*’ of the questionnaires instead of their reliability and validity. All the students in the module were English as additional language speakers, and during a tutorial several admitted that they wanted their texts to sound impressive. Future cohorts may be less likely to choose words that merely sound impressive, if the module emphasises the importance of using language accurately to convey particular meanings in academic texts.

Coherent language is only one marker of a well-written academic text. Academic texts should also be written in an “*objective tone*” (Canagarajah & Lee, 2015: 90). In the Discussion and Conclusion Chapter Group D strayed from the expected tone in the following sentence: “*This is a stern warning to business [SIC] that they should prevent psychological contract breach at all cost*”. The tone of the sentence makes Group D seem more like advocates of a particular cause than postgraduate students, because researchers generally do not use emotive language to argue their point. Instead researchers urge the reader to adopt a particular stance based on the strength of the findings. If academic staff in the department decide that students should not sound like advocates, then the module should show students how the implication of the study for HRM practioners in industry can be emphasised without resorting to the use of emotive language.

Another aspect of tone is the balance between the use of tentative language, or hedges, and the use of language which conveys certainty, called boosters (Lamberti, 2013). All groups used both hedges and boosters, but Group D used too many hedges, and used the word may seven times in the Abstract alone. The overuse of the word may, particularly in a quantitative research project, made the group seem uncertain about how credible the study’s findings were. Academic staff in the department and support staff will have to decide how students should be taught to use an appropriate mix of boosters and hedges during the module.

**Conclusion**

The process of using supervisor feedback to submit multiple drafts of the same text was beneficial to the students, who were all English as an additional language speakers. The texts generally became less verbose as ideas were expressed in simpler and shorter sentences. The formulation of the problem statement and the structure of the literature review also improved, which indicated that the students had been able to read, interpret, and synthesis the literature on the topic. However, some groups did not understand the purpose of the two pre-writing tasks, the literature survey and the literature review questions. One way of helping students to understand the purpose of these tasks would be to emphasise that writing is a process and that certain tasks, including these two tasks, are completed before any actual writing takes place (Murray, 1972).

Compared to groups who completed the module in 2015, the groups in 2016 completed an additional three assignments prior to the submission of the research report. Students were required to complete these assignments in order to prepare them to write the Abstract, Results Chapter, and the Discussion and Conclusion Chapter. After analysing the assignments, it was clear that the Abstract and final two chapters of the research reports submitted in 2016 met more of the criteria in the rubric than the comparative sections of the research reports submitted in 2015. Thus, one of the ways in which WID programmes can ensure that students are able to complete larger research texts is to provide students with assignments that prepare them to complete each sub-section of the main text.

The group whose research project was quantitative did not meet certain criteria outlined in the marking rubric for the research report. Though the marking rubric specified that all groups should justify their research design and methods, this group did not explain why they had chosen a particular research design and method. As quantitative researchers generally do not make their research design and method explicit, similar programmes will need to decide if quantitative and qualitative projects should be assessed differently. Alternatively, supervisors operating from a quantitative paradigm could learn from supervisors who are familiar with qualitative research how and why researchers provide appropriate justifications for methodological choices.

The group who learned to argue the most effectively had a supervisor who was very concerned with how the group expressed themselves through their writing. The fact that the other groups did not learn to argue as effectively shows that this module may have relied too heavily on part-time tutors and PGWFs to provide the students with advice on writing research reports. Since support staff are rarely experts in the discipline, supervisors are best placed to teach students how to create arguments in texts which will be acceptable in their disciplines. The best way to give supervisors the tools to teach their students how to write in their discipline is to partner them with support staff who specialise in the field of academic literacies. The support staff’s function is to help supervisors draw on their tacit knowledge so that they can now see how meaning is created in the discipline, and find ways to teach their students how to decode disciplinary conventions.

The Writing in the Disciplines Approach focuses on teaching students how to write for their particular discipline, or disciplines. The value of this approach is that it teaches students how to write texts that will be acceptable to members of a disciplinary community, including examiners and journal reviewers. Staff who want to teach students how to write in their disciplines need to ensure that the curriculum is informed by a WID approach. In this module the assignment criteria were aligned to the conventions of the discipline as each assignment rubric outlined how students could produce a section or chapter of a HRM research report. For instance, the rubric for the Discussion Chapter clearly stated that in addition to a theoretical contribution the students also had state what the practical significance of the findings were from Human Resources mangers in industry.

Another central WID tenant is that students should be well supported to produce complex texts. This is why the final research report was scaffolded, and students submitted smaller assignments and multiple revisions of the same assignment prior to the research report. University staff who want to implement a similar WID programme should provide students with sufficient scaffolding before they are required to submit large, complex tasks. Any criteria used to assess the pre-tasks or assignments must adequately reflect the disciplinary conventions that students are expected to reproduce in texts. In addition, the separate role of the academic staff and support staff, and the “*interactional strategies*” which these staff will use to collaborate with each other need to be carefully mapped (Leibowitz, 2013: 38). Ideally, support staff with an academic literacies background can help the curriculum designers and supervisors make any instruction given to students on their writing more explicit.

In summary, this study found that a research preparation module designed according to a WID approach could benefited a group of Human Resource Management Honours students. The findings from this study also suggest that universities should ensure that WID programmes for postgraduate students should 1) provide students with adequate scaffolding, 2) assess qualitative and quantitative research projects differently, and 3) ensure that supervisors should learn how to teach their students to write from academic literacies specialists. The analysed assignments were from English as an additional language (EAL) Honours students; therefore, these findings are particularly applicable to supervisors and support staff working with EAL students conducting a limited scope project, such as an Honours project, or a minor dissertation Master’s degree.

**Limitations**

I had initially planned to analyse only the assignments that had been developed under the guidance of a single supervisor in both 2015 and 2016. Unfortunately, the person who supervised the two groups in 2015 was a contract lecturer and did not lecture the students in 2016. This meant that I had to compare the two groups who completed the module in 2015 to two groups who were supervised by different supervisors in 2016. The fact that the supervisors of the groups were different did add some interesting variety to the study. However, it was impossible to tell how much of the variation in the way in which the assignments had been written occurred because the groups in 2015 and 2016 had been supervised differently. Future studies on similar phenomenon should try to ensure that all the texts are produced under the direction of the same supervisor.

I did not collect the marked rubrics or the written feedback which supervisors gave to their students. It would have been interesting to note how students used their supervisor’s feedback to re-write a text. Of particular interest to me would be the ways in which the supervisor’s feedback was understood and misunderstood.

**Acknowledgements**

Thank you to my supervisor, Professor Brenda Leibowitz for her guidance, the DHET for founding the nGAP programme, and to the University of Sol Plaatje for sponsoring a writing retreat for nGAP lecturers.

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**Appendix A: Comparison of the assignments in 2015 and 2016**

**Figure 1: Comparison of the assignments in 2015 and 2016**

2015 Assignments 2016 Assignments

Substantiated Problem Statement Literature Survey

Literature Survey Substantiated Problem Statement

Research Questions Literature Review

Literature Review Research Questions

Concept Research Design

Proposal

Data Collection

Results

Abstract, Discussion, and Conclusion

Research poster

Research report

The difference between the submitted assignments in 2015 and 2016 was that in 2016 students completed three additional assignments and submitted the first four assignments in a different order. Staff in the department made these changes to the curriculum, because they believed that they would better prepare students to submit their research reports.

**Appendix B: Example of grid used to assess the students’ assignments**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Assignment: Substantiated Problem Statement** | | | | | |
| 2016 Criterion | An appropriate title is formulated | Proper introduction  to the subject under investigation | Description of the context is clear | Clear evidence that research will lead to new knowledge | Evidence  relevant to the problem is identified |
| 2015 Criterion |  | Introduce the subject under investigation | Context clearly stated | Research  problem is substantiated body of knowledge (gap in knowledge) | |
| Group A-Assignment | Yes | Yes | No | No | Yes |
| Group A-Proposal | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Group A-Research Report | No changes made | | | | |