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Doctoral writing through a trajectorial lens: An exploratory study on challenges, strategies and relationships

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Abstract

Doctoral writing has burgeoned as a field of inquiry in the past decade. However, questions still remain as to how doctoral researchers navigate their writing trajectories, the strategies they deploy to deal with challenges, and what and who helps to shape their writing experiences. These questions may have resulted from the rather snapshot perspective followed by some existing research, failing to reveal developmental aspects of doctoral writing. This article argues that a trajectorial perspective on doctoral writing, offered here as a methodological lens, can help to shed some light on such questions, and provide effective guidance for pedagogic interventions. A group of six doctoral researchers were interviewed about their experiences as academic and professional writers, and about the texts they had written along their writing trajectories. An analysis of the data revealed a number of challenges these doctoral writers faced at specific stages of their writing trajectory, the strategies they deployed to deal with these challenges, the relationships they established along the way and how they changed at specific times, and what they have found most helpful to advance their writing. Based on the results, this exploratory study offers possible pedagogic interventions for specific stages of the doctoral writing trajectory.

Key words: doctoral writing; trajectorial perspective; writing strategies, challenges and relationships; writing pedagogy

Introduction

Doctoral writing has attracted the attention of researchers in the field of applied linguistics, writing studies and academic literacies in the last decade (e.g., Aitchison, 2009; Aitchison & Guerin, 2014; Asante & Abubakarib, 2021; Burford, Amell & Badenhorst, 2021; Caffarella & Barnett, 2000; Carter, Guerin & Aitchison, 2020; Casanave, 2019; Huang, 2020; Johnson, 2018; Kamler & Thomson, 2006; McAlpine, Castello, & Pyhaltö, 2020; Paré, 2019; among many others). This increased interest in doctoral writing has resulted from a number of institutional, relational and individual reasons. The existing literature has grouped such reasons into contextual issues (e.g., increasing number of students registered on doctoral programmes, the efforts of universities to link doctoral outputs with research productivity), changes in power relations (e.g., between doctoral students and supervisors), and internal struggles (e.g., the need to develop disciplinary expertise, pressure to publish).

Despite the impressive body of literature published in the last 10 years or so, there remains a number of questions pertaining to how doctoral researchers navigate their trajectories, the strategies they deploy to deal with challenges they face, and what and who helps to shape their writing experiences. The exploratory study reported in this article argues that a longitudinal approach to doctoral writing (Bazerman, 2018; Tusting et al., 2018) can help to shed some light on these questions as well as provide effective guidance for the design and implementation of specific pedagogical interventions. To this end, the article offers a trajectorial perspective as a methodological lens to examine doctoral writing. Based on data provided by six participants, the study is presented as an exploration of these issues and a field where they can be tested before being further examined with a larger group of doctoral writers.

Doctoral writing: Challenges, relationships and the trajectorial perspective

Studies on doctoral writing have focused on a number of key issues relating to the challenges that doctoral students, or doctoral researchers as we prefer to refer to them, face along their writing trajectories, the relationships they manage to establish with supervisors and other researchers, and the complex demands of academic writing. Among the main challenges that these studies have singled out, developing disciplinary expertise and the impostor syndrome seem to recur. Casanave (2019), for instance, has identified disciplinary expertise as a key challenge often reported by doctoral researchers. In particular, she refers to the tension between being an expert and displaying expertise that writing creates for them. In her own words, doctoral writing “is a performance that displays rather than embodies expertise” (p. 58). This tension between the display and embodiment of expertise seems to be a constant struggle that university students are faced with along their developmental trajectory as academic writers, requiring them to navigate the tensions between “knowledge telling, transformation and creation” (Gimenez & Thomas, 2015). Such tensions seem to exacerbate as they embark on doctoral studies, often leading to the impostor syndrome (e.g., Cisco, 2020; Nori & Vanttaja, 2022). As Nori and Vanttaja (2022) have recently pointed out, the high stakes of doctoral studies combined with internal and external factors such as the doctoral researchers’ background, life experiences, aims, and funding issues are all important contributing factors.

Another challenge, seldom mentioned in the literature on doctoral writing, relates to the pressure to publish. Aitchison (2009, p. 905) has pointed to the growing pressure for “productivity and student output” that universities are exerting on both doctoral researchers and their supervisors. In many universities, efforts to link doctoral outputs with universities’ research productivity have intensified (Asante & Abubakarib, 2021; Burford, Amell & Badenhorst, 2021; Mason, 2018). For some researchers (e.g., Burford, 2017; Huang, 2020; Paré, 2010), the overemphasis on getting published along the doctoral journey has meant that

writing as intellectual induction and academic discovery has been replaced by writing as productivity. In their view, doctoral writing has been altered from a “transformative rhetorical experience” (Paré, 2010, p. 33) to a “preservation of market productivity” (Huang, 2020, p. 10), something many universities seem to favour. Universities, however, are not the only source of pressure for published outputs that doctoral researchers experience (Asante & Abubakarib, 2021; Huang, 2020). Real or perceived, demands of future academic jobs and expectations of external examiners represent other sources of stress and anxiety as confirmed by the data from the present study.

On the other hand, several studies (e.g., Asante & Abubakarib, 2021; Huang, 2020; Mason, 2018) have also identified the benefits of publishing during doctoral studies for both securing a job and career progression in academia (Asante & Abubakarib, 2021; Huang, 2020). Mason (2018) goes as far as to say that publishing as a doctoral researcher can be an indication of greater research productivity. Coupled with this, studies have emphasised the advantages of writing for publication as a learning-to-write-and-publish process, especially in the case of joint publications with supervisors (e.g., Carter, Guerin & Aitchison, 2020; Carter & Kumar, 2017; Huang, 2020; Mason, 2018), as some of the participants in this study mentioned. However, research (e.g., Mason, 2018) has also found out that joint publications may sometimes be evaluated less favourably by examiners as it is not always easy to determine how much of the resulting outcome belongs to the doctoral researcher. Similarly, collaboration between students and supervisors may be more frequent in some disciplines (e.g., science and engineering) than others (e.g., humanities) due to the type of studies favoured in each, which may disadvantage some doctoral researchers over others. Co-authoring is, nevertheless, gradually becoming a common feature of doctoral writing across the board (Huang, 2020).

A second area of interest that existing research has focused on relates to the importance for doctoral researchers to establish positive relationships with both their supervisory team and peers. Key aspects that have been identified in connection to the relationship with their supervisors include negotiating a productive work pattern, building trust, and co-authoring for publication (Carter & Kumar, 2017; Carter & Laurs, 2018; Huang, 2020; McAlpine, Castello, & Pyhältö, 2020; Wei, Carter & Laurs, 2019; Wisker, 2012; Wisker et al., 2010; to mention just a few). Coupled with this, some existing literature has also looked at other writing relationships that doctoral researchers establish. Cotterall (2011), for example, examined the practices of two doctoral students as subject cases. Although her work focused on effective pedagogies for supporting the development of doctoral researchers as writers, Cotterall concluded that doctoral writing should be framed as learning through participation in a community of practice. This approach would bring to the forefront the relationships between those involved in writing as practice, considering both doctoral researchers as newcomers and their supervisors as experts, something Aitchison and Lee (2006) call the “sociality of writing” (p. 271). This relational approach to doctoral writing for both study and publication purposes would also help to relieve some of the anxiety and stress associated with writing a thesis and for publication as the responsibilities can be shared among the doctoral researchers and their supervisory team (Paré, 2019).

Along similar lines in her study on writing groups (WGs), Aitchison (2009, p. 906) found that opportunities to reflect with peers and provide them with feedback are not always part of the relational activities offered to doctoral writers despite the benefits that these practices can bring along (Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Caffarella & Barnett, 2000; Cotterall, 2011; Johnson, 2018), an aspect which has also emerged from the present study. She further argues that such opportunities for social interaction around text offer “a rich site for the study of how writing is learnt and performed through social activity” (p. 907). From a disciplinary

perspective, Odena and Burgess (2017) have argued for the analysis and discussion of discipline-specific texts among doctoral peers as an effective way of learning to write academically. Such examination and dialogue among peers would help students to master the central discourses in their disciplines and develop more appropriate levels of disciplinary criticality in their writing. Despite a few notable exceptions (e.g., Carter, Guerin & Aitchison, 2020; Kamler, 2010; Martinez & Graf, 2016), there is little published work on the writing relationships that doctoral researchers establish with other doctoral students, and how they develop. As later explored in connection to the data of the present study, such relationships play an important role in the writing development of doctoral researchers.

Despite this impressive body of literature, of which we have only offered a snapshot here, and the issues and challenges it has managed to identify, we still know little about how doctoral researchers navigate their writing trajectories, the strategies they use to deal with challenges, and what and who helps to shape their writing experiences. This may have resulted from the rather snapshot perspective that some research has adopted to examine doctoral writing. To this end, a considerable body of recent studies (e.g., Carter, Guerin & Aitchison, 2020; Bazerman, 2018; Bazerman et al., 2017; Tarabochia & Madden, 2018; Tustin et al., 2018) has called for researching doctoral writing from a developmental or trajectorial perspective as we argue in this article. Bazerman (2018), for instance, has remarked that this perspective is needed as writing development is a complex and highly individual process that presents challenges, contradictions and tensions which can only be captured longitudinally. Bazerman's argument is echoed in Tarabochia and Madden's (2018) work which also conceptualises writing development as located, complex and recursive. Tusting et al. (2018, p. 404) further expand on these ideas by recommending that in researching writing development a range of social context aspects such as "identity, multimodality, purpose, power and access, and skills and dispositions" must be attended

to. Despite these calls, little empirical research has been published from a trajectorial perspective.

At the same time, doctoral writing needs to be located in its broader context of production and consumption by examining who and what supports and becomes an integral part of the processes of writing as represented in Figure 1. This consideration, however, cannot be limited to supervisors. As Burford, Amell and Badenhorst (2021: 9) have recently argued in the introduction of their edited collection “we need to understand what writers actually do when they write, as well as the role that others can play in the writing process”. A trajectorial lens on doctoral writing would also consider peers and reviewers as legitimate participants in the processes of doctoral writing. As we will further discuss in the next sections, an examination of the writing trajectories of doctoral researchers would facilitate access to such participants, the roles they play and at what stage of the writing processes they come into play as multiple versions of writing are produced and consumed.

The exploratory study reported in this article aims to add to the existing research by examining through a trajectorial lens how six doctoral researchers at different stages of their candidature went about writing. This trajectorial approach has contributed to our understanding of the challenges, strategies, and relationships involved in writing along the trajectories of these doctoral researchers. At the same time, it has thrown some light on who and what supports doctoral researchers as academic and professional writers, and more importantly, at what point of the doctoral trajectory these things happen. The results of applying such a perspective have informed a few suggestions for pedagogical interventions at specific stages of the writing trajectory of individual doctoral researchers.

The questions the study set out to answer were:

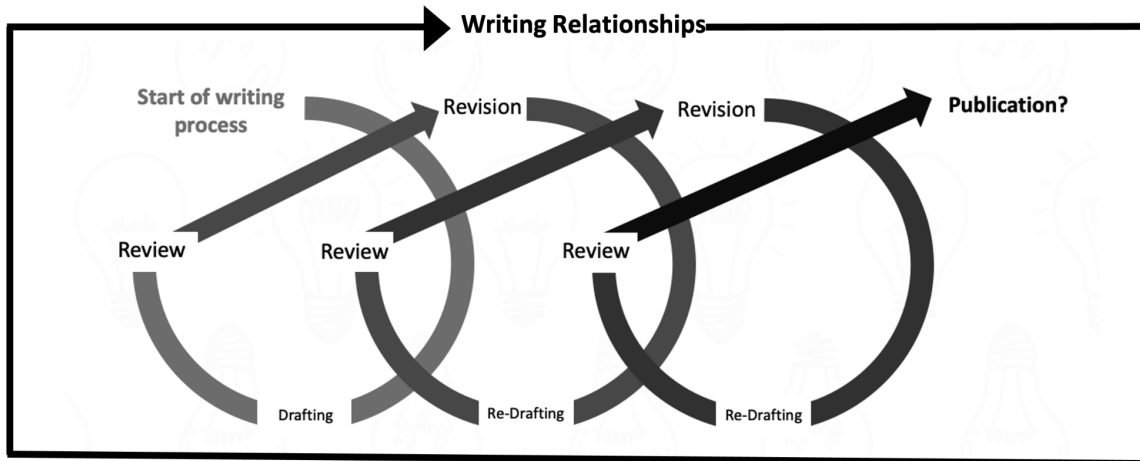
1. What main challenges did the doctoral researchers in the study face at different stages of their writing development?
2. What strategies did they deploy to deal with the challenges?
3. What writing relationships did they establish? How did such relationships influence writing along their trajectory?

Methodology

Aims and procedures

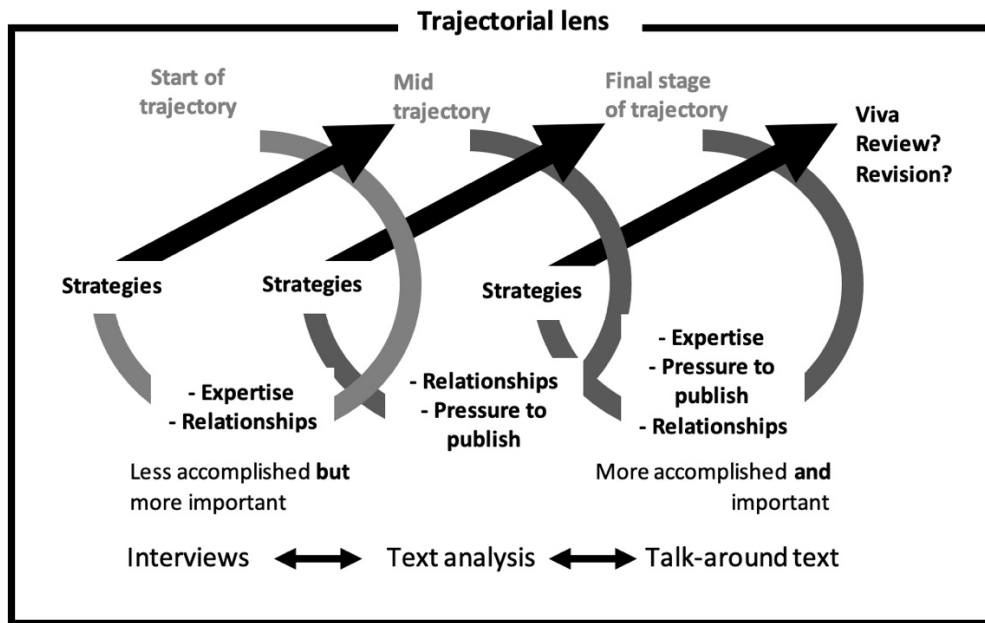
The research reported on in this article aimed to examine the main challenges six doctoral researchers faced, the strategies they used to deal with such challenges, and the relationships they established along their writing trajectories, focusing on the texts that they had produced for publication in parallel to their doctoral thesis. Multiple, rather than single, versions of such texts were examined in order to bring to the fore patterns and directions of travel within the written texts (Gimenez, et al., 2020). By following the processes of drafting, reviewing and redrafting the same text over time, this research aims to reveal the complexity of the practices involved in doctoral writing experienced by the participants as well as the different agents involved in such practices. In designing the research, a model of the writing processes (draft, review and revise) was developed (see Figure 1) to aid in drawing out the processes of production and consumption of a particular text over time. Looking at writing in this way was important to examine doctoral writing from a trajectorial perspective.

Fig. 1 The Draft-Review-Revise processes in doctoral writing for publication



To ascertain what was happening at each stage of this process, a trajectorial lens was applied. This methodological tool, illustrated in Figure 2, allowed us to trace the developmental path of doctoral writing along space and time. To this end, a mix of interviews and textual analysis of documents was undertaken. Two interviews of a semi-structured nature were conducted with the participants covering different stages of their doctoral trajectory. These semi-structured interviews [INT] allowed for free-flowing conversation about academic writing in general and writing for publication in particular. Interviewees were selected through a combination of seeking volunteer respondents and then selecting those who had “particular experiences” (Blee & Taylor, 2002: 92) in relation to writing beyond their thesis (e.g., for publication). Between the interviews, the participants shared drafts and iterations of the work they were producing, including comments from reviewers, supervisors and, where applicable, peers. Thus, the second interview was actually a talk-around-text (Ivanic, 1998; Ivanic & Satchwell, 2007) discussion [TAT] which provided insights into the practices, agents and challenges involved in drafting and redrafting of their doctoral texts.

Fig. 2 A trajectorial lens on doctoral writing



The participants and their writing context

As shown in Table 1, the participants were doing doctoral studies in a number of knowledge areas and were investigating topics that showed a range of disciplinary interests. Five were studying on a full-time basis and one was a part-time doctoral researcher although this did not show any significant differences in the data collected. The participants were at different stages of their doctoral trajectory.

Place Table 1 about here.

The participants were enrolled on a doctoral research programme in their own disciplines at a university in London. The programmes are co-ordinated by the Graduate School of the university and they facilitated access to the participants by circulating an invitation to all doctoral research students once ethical clearance was obtained by the researchers. Besides writing for their dissertation, most researchers on doctoral programmes at the university are strongly encouraged to write for publication before they are examined.

Data collection and analysis

As mentioned above, the study collected the lived experiences of six doctoral researchers on two occasions: a semi-structured interview and a talk-around text discussion. In order to fully understand the materials collected through interviews and various iterations of writing, it was important to undertake a structured and systematic review of the data collected. Following the work of Salaña (2015), interviews and discussions underwent a process of first and second cycle coding – including eclectic coding, simultaneous coding, writing memos and theming. All interviews followed an interview protocol and guide, but allowed interviewees to elaborate on certain points or to bring new ideas into the discussion. The design of the protocol and guide was informed by existing literature (e.g., Aitchison & Guerin, 2014; Badenhorst, Amell & Burford, 2021; Huang, 2020) and adapted to support the trajectorial perspective of the study. The guide, which interrogated aspects of doctoral trajectories such as research area, challenges and achievements, approaches to and processes of writing, writing relationships, and writing for publication, was updated and added to throughout the research as new themes and patterns began to emerge. Talk-around-text discussions were guided by the analysis of the drafts the participants had made available to the researchers.

The data collected were examined in order to reveal the way in which writing changed or was preserved through different iterations of the writing process and to provide context relating to how, in their production and consumption trajectories (Authors et al.), texts become “associated to a new context and accompanied by a particular metadiscourse which provides a sort of ‘preferred reading’ for the [new] discourse” (Blommaert, 2005: 47). Such examinations allowed for a deeper understanding of the challenges the participants faced, the strategies deployed to deal with the challenges, and the relationships they established at different stages of their doctoral trajectory.

In all, three top level codes and 14 sub-themes were identified and used in the analysis of the interviews and talk-around-text discussions (see Table 2).

Place Table 2 around here.

Findings and discussions

The findings have been grouped into challenges, strategies and relationships, following the research questions of the study.

Challenges

Developing and displaying expertise

The tension between feeling an expert and displaying expertise has often been explored in the literature on doctoral writing (e.g., Carter, Guerin & Aitchison, 2020; Casanave, 2019; Huang, 2020; Kellogg, 2006). The data from the present study have revealed that the participating doctoral researchers also experienced a strong sense of “impostor syndrome” (Nori & Vanttaja, 2022). They reported strong pressure to display expertise in the topic they were researching as a ‘rite of passage’. This is possibly the result of how doctoral programmes in countries like the UK have been set up. On these programmes, doctoral researchers are not registered as such until they have been upgraded after one or two years into the programme. The upgrade system requires candidates to show they have developed substantive expertise in their field of research as well as in academic writing to merit being upgraded to doctoral status. This type of enrolment system seems, at the same time, to be part of a larger contextual and power structure where the display of expertise serves as the rite of passage to being considered of doctoral standard.

From a trajectorial perspective, our data showed at what point in the trajectory the need to display expertise is the strongest (also see Figure 2). At the beginning of their

doctoral trajectory, interviewees showed the typical signs of the impostor syndrome. As NO3PT mentioned, “I...I was not, I I wouldn't... I wouldn't have even pretended to be an expert in the area you know...” [INT]. However, as they progressed along their trajectories, the feeling of being an impostor diminished and a sense of expertise in both their disciplinary knowledge and writing capabilities started to develop. This sense was sometimes even reinforced by comments from supervisors. As AP4FT expressed:

I think there was one instance where they were reading over a chapter and um my main supervisor put a note in the text which they said something like you're the you're now the expert on this bit ... [INT].

However, our data indicated that the need to display expertise, but not the impostor syndrome, resurfaces again towards the end of the trajectory when doctoral researchers have to put their chapters into a coherent narrative for submission, and prepare for the viva. As SB4FT mentioned when they referred to their final submission “...making sure my supervisors and the examiners too realise I know what I'm talking about.”

As suggested by previous research (e.g., Carter, Guerin & Aitchison, 2020; Casanave, 2019; Huang, 2020), the data from the present study indicated that owning and displaying expertise is a recurrent challenge faced by doctoral researchers. At the same time, our data have also highlighted the specific points along their trajectory when showing expertise feels more crucial, something which would have been lost without a trajectorial lens. This should help to design pedagogic interventions to support them at specific times as we suggest later in the paper.

Pressure to publish

The second main challenge that emerged from the data relates to pressure to publish. As mentioned in the literature (e.g., Asante & Abubakarib, 2021; Huang, 2020), many doctoral

researchers feel under pressure to publish their work at some point in their doctoral trajectory. From the trajectorial perspective, three most significant aspects of such pressure emerged from the participants' narratives: the nature of the pressure, the time when it happens and intensifies, and its negative consequences. As to its nature, and different from what has been reported in the existing literature (e.g., Aitchison, 2009; Huang, 2020), participants experienced more internal than external pressure to publish. Some of them reported they wished to pursue a career in academia and so they felt that they needed to have some publications even before they applied for a teaching job. Others thought that having publications, which they could refer to in their doctoral thesis, would be seen in a favourable light by the external examiners as publications may help to strengthen the quality of their work. However, they admitted not having discussed this with their supervisors, emphasising the internal nature of the pressure. EC3FT mentioned that they had developed a certain degree of internal pressure after discussing the importance of publishing with their peers. They particularly felt the pressure when peers spoke about either their published papers or their ambition to publish, thus making EC3FT wonder whether they should also be doing the same.

The following quotes from our interview data reflect the nature of the pressure to publish experienced by some of the participants. Although external factors (e.g., expectations of job interviewers and examiners) may have triggered a sense of pressure in the participants, the language they used to refer to this pressure (e.g., "I know...", "I understood...", "If I was going to make the case...", "...you wonder what am I doing...") seems to indicate that the pressure had already been internalised at the time of being interviewed:

SB4FT: I know that in order to to get a a lecturing position or a research position that you need to publish, preferably during your PhD you need a PhD and then then preferably some publications as well. [INT]

NO4FT: I understood that you know if I was going to make the case that you know this is a quality piece of work, I would need to get it published and so that's the way I've kind of thought about it [INT]

EC3FT: ...when I see the ambitions of other people like this is their ultimate goal probably this is when you feel some pressure, right? Like you wonder what am I doing or why I'm not so pressured to publish. [INT]

Another related aspect of the pressure to publish emerging from the data of this study refers to the stage at which it happens and the point at which it intensifies, which has been under-researched in the literature. Not surprisingly, participants who were in the early stages of their doctoral studies saw the value in the opportunity, but did not feel the pressure to publish as yet. One participant who was at the data collection phase of their research felt that there was little in the way of pressure. As they approached the end of the journey, however, some participants reported different “degrees of pressure”. Those that were nearing a middle point in their trajectory for instance, referred to feeling some sense of pressure, while those in their final year made explicit reference to being under pressure to publish. Obviously, the intensity of the pressure increased towards the end of the doctoral trajectory. One of the final year participants felt that they needed at least one publication before submitting their thesis, even when they were not pressured by their supervisor to do so:

NO3PT: I think you do need to have at least 2 to 3 publications. It could be even more or even less, but the bottom line is that you would need to kind of have at least one publication by the time you finish. [INT]

Our data have also shown that pressure to publish can also have negative consequences for doctoral researchers, especially those studying at universities which strongly encourage publication before thesis examination. One participant mentioned that, after having submitted a manuscript multiple times to different journals, they finally decided for a less prestigious journal with a higher acceptance rate but with a publishing fee charge (NO3PT: They're not prestigious journals by any stretch of the imagination... You need to

pay and it's not cheap [TAT]). They thought this option was preferable to not having the manuscript published at all.

By the same token, examining where the pressure comes from and how widespread it is is also important for helping us to understand the ways in which these doctoral researchers might be supported in their desire and dispositions to publish, or to remove this pressure when it is seen as detrimental. What became clear from this study is that the pressure to publish is something that is highly internalised, as reflected in the interview responses by some of the respondents. While the literature suggests that pressure to publish comes from considerations around career progression (Asante & Abubakarib, 2021; Huang, 2020) and improving productivity (Mason, 2018), these reasons were less explicitly reported by the participants of this study. Rather, interviewees noted that publishing was something they 'were meant to have done' (SB4FT, INT). Others suggested there was a perception that everyone else was doing it, so it felt they had to be doing it too, the main pressure being the 'ambition of other students' (EC3FT, INT).

Contrary to what previous research has suggested in terms of pressure to publish by universities (e.g., Aitchison, 2009; Asante & Abubakarib, 2021; Mason, 2018), there was little evidence of such pressure in our study. However, the doctoral researchers nearing the end of their trajectories did feel an enormous pressure to get at least one publication 'under their belt' before they finish their studies. This mismatch in expectations has led to some unintended consequences related to the support provided to doctoral researchers in their efforts to publish. The lack of pressure from supervisors – a position that reflects a caring and compassionate approach to supervision that tries to shield the researcher from other pressures so that they might focus on their work – might actually be having a detrimental effect. Rather than discouraging doctoral researchers from publishing, this position results in them attempting to publish – driven by the wider higher education expectation – with less support

than might be required. Following a trajectorial perspective, consideration needs to be given to this balance in order to ensure doctoral researchers are given support to write for publication at the right time, while also ensuring that this does not transform into pressure to do so where this might be detrimental to their core research work.

Strategies

Our data have also shown a series of strategies the doctoral researchers interviewed deployed to deal with the challenges they faced. In relation to developing writing expertise, AB1FT, for instance, recounts how they moved from analysing the writings of what they considered to be good writers in the field to imitating them:

... one of the strategies is that when I see experts writing and you get a sense of their writing styles. And that really helps me. So if I read an author I download a few articles from that particular author and I seem to get a sense of what, how they write whether it flows well [...] So after a while you can start to discern a good writer from a not so good writer and so imitate the good ones. [INT].

Co-writing with more seasoned writers such as supervisors is another strategy that our participants used to develop as experts in both their discipline and in doctoral writing. When discussing their contributions to the content of a paper they had co-written with their supervisor, AB2FT said “Yeah this was learning in progress of both things [expertise in their area of research and in writing] and I think this will happen with every other article I will be co-writing.” [TAT]. Other interviewees also mentioned resorting to networking, including their supervisor’s professional connections, as a strategy not only to develop their expertise in the field but also to improve their future career prospects:

I have become more experienced and know more about my topic as I've expanded my network in academia and I think that has also improved the relationship with my supervisor because he's a very well networked academic himself, kind of quite public which has helped [SB4FT, INT].

From a trajectorial perspective, our data have also shown the stages at which the strategies the participants had self-consciously developed became important: from analysing to imitating other writers at the beginning of the doctoral trajectory to co-writing with supervisors and other professionals towards its end.

Strategies to deal with the pressure to publish also emerged from the data. As mentioned above, AB2FT had co-authored a paper with their supervisor, a process which they found to be extremely helpful and supportive. They explained that their supervisor helped to structure the paper and that they reviewed each other's sections of the work, a development strategy AB2FT had found very useful. They further mentioned that seeing how their supervisor responded to reviewers' comments was also good modelling behaviour – both for future publication and in addressing comments related to their own thesis.

In the case of interviewees who had little opportunity for co-authorship or were unsupported in publishing on their own, other strategies were deployed. In the case of SB4FT, whose supervisor only suggested which journals to submit to, they turned to peers to have feedback on their draft papers even if this happened only sporadically. NO3PT's supervisors were a little more involved but not to the point of “co-writing” as in AB2FT's case. They therefore resorted to what may be considered a ‘negative strategy’, that is, submitting their work to prestigious journals and deciding after several rejections on a not-very-prestigious, pay-to-publish journal.

Relationships

The existing literature has identified the role that the relationship with supervisors plays in doctoral studies, in particular in connection with establishing productive work patterns, building trust, dealing with feedback, and co-authoring for publication (e.g., Aitchison & Lee,

2006; Asante & Abubakarib, 2021; Kamler & Thomson, 2006; Paré, 2019). It has also looked at relationships with peer doctoral researchers, especially in relation to peer feedback and disciplinary discussions (e.g., Aitchison 2009; Odena & Burgess, 2017). Following a trajectorial approach, our study reveals some equally important relational aspects of doctoral writing.

Relationship with supervisory teams

As would be expected, the closest writing relationships are often established between the doctoral researchers and their supervisors, who could be considered the primary “literacy brokers” (Lillis & Curry, 2010). Although this term has previously been assigned to mediators in the texts of established academics, many doctoral students have aspirations to publish, and their degree of expertise in their chosen field may be in advance of already published writers. The participants in our study all acknowledged the influence of their supervisors in the development of writing, albeit with different expectations from the point of view of both doctoral researcher and supervisor. This seems to reflect wider issues of contextual and power structure by which supervisors who are experts in the field of research of their supervisees appear to be more involved in their supervisee’s writing trajectory. Both SB4FT and NO3PT felt that although they were given some advice on writing practices, they were mostly left to navigate the research process by themselves, as supervisors saw the doctoral researchers as self-directed and independent, or because they were not experts in their field.

The trajectorial approach of the present study has also revealed that the participants’ relationship with their supervisors was by no means static but developmental. An examination of how the participants at different stages of their trajectories referred to their relationship with supervisor and the roles they played shows the developmental aspect of

relationships. These move from distant, directive and expert-to-novice at the beginning of the doctoral trajectory to more involved, academically and pastorally more supportive, and colleague-to-colleague as the relationship developed. As indicated in Figure 2, this type of relationship appeared 'less developed but more important' at the beginning of the doctoral trajectory and 'more accomplished and important' towards the end. This is illustrated by the following quotes:

I think our relationship is more involved now. It's really getting to know the other person, so I I'm getting a better idea of what to expect and all of them looking for in terms of my research... (AB1FT, INT)

I don't only get their support for the writing and the things that I do for the PhD, but just so you know, some personal support. And they expect me to ask for help and advice. That's nice when you have good relationship with your supervisors. (AB2FT, INT)

We've become.. moved more towards.. being colleagues rather than being a student teacher relationship (AP4FT, INT)

What seems important to note in the quotes above is that the main roles and expectations of both supervisors and doctoral researchers changed as their relationship developed. As they moved along their trajectory, doctoral researchers changed their expectations about the role of their supervisors (e.g., from directive to collegial) and their supervisors of them (e.g., from dependent to self-directed and independent). This important aspect of the supervisor-doctoral researcher relationship would have gone unnoticed should a snapshot research perspective had been taken.

Relationship with peers

Establishing and maintaining productive relationships through participation in a community of practice has been identified as a key element for the development of doctoral researchers (Cotterall, 2011). However, our data suggest limited opportunities for engagement in a community of practice (CoP), with any writing relationships serving more as a functional

product of limited peer review activities. For example, AP4FT discussed how it was useful for them to have conversations with fellow doctoral researchers from a similar professional background as they had a mutual understanding of their topics, something which also contributes to developing their expertise. Discussions typically took place in informal settings such as a pub near the university, or in the university's dedicated PhD room. During the Covid-19 pandemic these informal meetings were no longer possible, although weekly Zoom meetings were set up for doctoral researchers to present and discuss their work. However, EC3FT, who was nearing the end of their doctoral trajectory, felt very protective of their work and believed that sharing it or participating in a CoP would be intimidating and even possibly detrimental to their progress. Other participants, notably SB4FT and ON3PT, acknowledged that engagement with other doctoral researchers was at best sporadic, and both would have appreciated a more developed sense of a CoP. One reason for CoP not being established and maintained was a lack of formal taught modules, where new doctoral researchers could form both working and personal connections with peers.

The relational approach to peer writing (Aitchison & Lee, 2006), where doctoral researchers are encouraged to engage in writing as a social event, was not something that participants were familiar with. Our findings correlate with the experiences of other doctoral researchers in which good practice in relational activities was recognised but not experienced (Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Caffarella & Barnett, 2000; Cotterall, 2011; Johnson, 2018). There were different but related reasons among participants of this study why WGs were not exploited as means of fostering peer engagement. SB4FT admitted that they did not find the university, and especially the library at their campus, a motivating place to work. They added that it was primarily because they did not live near the campus, and that living in a smaller city might have made a difference. Similarly, NO3PT expressed a preference for working from home, as a shared office space for writing was not an attractive proposition. In both

these cases the lack of an inviting common space and of a sense of academic community was a barrier to establishing WGs.

Unlike WGs, activities based around peer review were a more appealing idea. Although being at the start of their trajectory and having not yet started writing, AB1FT recognised that engaging in writing activities with peers would be beneficial. Interestingly, they expressed a desire for peer review from other disciplines as this would expose them to a wider variety of writing styles and research methods. Their desire challenges much of the current literature (cf., Doody, 2021) which does not feature the benefits of interdisciplinary peer review. Additionally, peer review can sometimes be seen as not equally beneficial for all participants. For example, SB4FT mentioned that when engaging in peer review activities they were doing more for others. Doctoral researchers may be less likely to participate in such activities if they perceive it as not being cost effective in terms of the time and effort invested. Furthermore, if doctoral researchers are not made aware of the benefits of peer review, or not given the opportunity to take part in it, while recognising the roles their peers can play, then the forging of potentially valuable professional relationships could be missed.

Pedagogic interventions

As doctoral researchers move along their trajectory, the challenges they face and the relationships they have established change, thus producing new realities and needs. For instance, as they near the end of their trajectory, they feel more in control of disciplinary expertise and they may start to feel the need to get their work published. Similarly, the recognition of expertise in their research areas and academic writing by their supervisors changes the nature and dynamic of their relationship, creating a new set of expectations and exerting new pressures. This developmental view calls for a set of pedagogical interventions that take into account the changes that doctoral researchers experience along their trajectory

and the stages at which they would be more effective. Some such interventions are presented below.

Writing as participation in a doctoral community of practice: As doctoral researchers develop from novices to experts in their disciplines and academic and professional writing, the support they are provided with could be scaffolded to reflect such development and thus be offered when most needed. For instance, interventions could begin by organising relational activities to bring together doctoral researchers supervised by the same team. These activities would offer opportunities for the analysis and discussion (consumption) of disciplinary texts among peers. Building upon this, a second phase of the intervention could bring participants together with a view to co-authoring (production) such texts. In universities that have an academic writing team to support doctoral researchers like ours, writing workshops and retreats could be organised to provide doctoral researchers with a space for sharing experiences and useful developmental strategies. This would also create opportunities for reflective practices between newcomers and experts, leading to the development of expertise in their research areas and specific genres which are central to their disciplines, including the doctoral thesis.

Writing as relations development in a doctoral community of practice: As doctoral researchers advance in their trajectory, relationships become more central to the development of their disciplinary and writing expertise, as our data have shown. An effective way of supporting them is by setting up WGs as the existing literature has demonstrated (e.g., Aitchison, 2009; Aitchison & Guerin, 2014). Although organised mostly for doctoral researchers, these groups may also include supervisors who could play different roles (e.g., mentors, readers, co-authors), depending on their expertise, availability and disposition. A scaffolded version of WGs could provide face-to-face and/or virtual spaces for working with peers first, and may include supervisors at a later stage, thus providing opportunities for

relationships to develop in nature and dynamics: peer-to-peer, novice-to-novice, novice-to-expert, and expert-to-expert.

Writing as participation in a larger community of practice: As discussed above, publishing seems to become a concern for most doctoral researchers at some stage of their trajectory. Thus, doctoral researchers concerned with publishing their work could be supported by means of specific interventions which cover issues ranging from choosing an appropriate journal for their work and meeting its requirements for publication to creating a quality manuscript, dealing with reviewer feedback and the politics of publishing. Ideally, these interventions could include activities involving the analysis and discussion of previously published manuscripts in the chosen journals. This could be complemented by recorded advice on how to get published by journal editors and reviewers, supervisors, and writing specialists. Many journals now include video clips with such advice. In this way, the complexities and dynamics of publishing could be unpacked more effectively, and the negative consequences resulting from the pressure to publish minimised.

Limitations

There are two main limitations to this study. Firstly, it only followed the trajectory of a very limited number of participants (n=6). This has a direct effect on the generalizability of the results. We cannot know, for example, whether other doctoral researchers in our university, let alone other institutions, experience the same challenges, deploy similar or different strategies, and establish similar or different relationships with supervisors and peers. Secondly, the data have been collected from one university in the UK. Thus, the results reported here may be rather idiosyncratic and lack wider representation.

Conclusion

The exploratory study reported in this article examined writing practices within the context of a programme for doctoral researchers at a London university. In particular, it examined the development of disciplinary and writing expertise, and the increasing pressure to publish as key challenges faced by the doctoral researchers participating in the study. It also looked at the strategies they used to deal with such challenges, and the relationships with supervisors and peers that they established and developed along their doctoral trajectory, and how these influenced or failed to have an impact on their writing development.

Despite its limitations, a number of observations have emerged from the analysis of the data. First, the role of supervisory teams in contributing to and even developing both disciplinary and writing expertise should be examined as it changes at different stages of the trajectory of doctoral researchers. This could also help supervisors decide when they are mostly needed and when they could take a back seat. Secondly, the strategies that doctoral researchers self-consciously develop from interactions with supervisors and peers to become experts in their fields and to cope with a number of challenges could be more widely discussed so that other doctoral researchers could benefit. Thirdly, both supervisors and their doctoral researchers would benefit from becoming aware that the different stages along the doctoral trajectory may pose different challenges but many also bring about new opportunities like co-writing for publication with supervisors and peers.

We are aware that the exploratory nature of the study requires more data to further explore these emerging tendencies in the trajectories of doctoral researchers. It would be interesting to further investigate this specific area of study in a series of larger scale studies in a number of different international contexts, following a trajectorial perspective. We hope this paper will serve as a springboard for such studies.

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Tables

Participant code name	Discipline/ Year and mode of study: [FT] Full-time; [PT] Part time	Research topic	Date of interviews
SB4FT	Media Studies 4th Year [FT] writing-up	The history of broadcasting	1 st Interview: 10/02/21 2 nd Interview: 17/02/21

AB1FT	Applied Management 1st Year [FT]	Social media platforms governance	1st Interview: 09/02/21 2 nd Interview: 12/02/21
AB2FT	Linguistics 2nd Year [FT]	English medium instruction in higher education in Uzbekistan	1st Interview: 12/02/21 2 nd Interview: 24/2/21
EC3FT	Media Studies 3rd Year [FT]	The use of internet in the Cuban context	1st Interview: 26/2/21 2 nd Interview: 12/3/21
NO3PT	Computer Sciences 3rd Year [PT]	Prediction processes of business outcomes	1 st Interview: 12/02/2 2 nd Interview: 26/02/21
AP4FT	Architecture 4th Year [FT] writing up	The uses of groundwater in South Indian cities	1st Interview: 10/02/21 2 nd Interview: 12/02/21

Table 1. Profile of the participants

Top level code	Sub theme(s)
1. Disciplinary expertise	
	Area and topic of research
2. Experiences on their doctoral studies	
	Supervisor and writing
	Pressure to publish
	Research trajectory
	Writing and research processes
	Relationships
3. Writing for publication	
	Writing trajectory
	Feelings or views about writing trajectory
	Supervisor and publishing
	Peer review
	Feedback
	Text is ready
	Challenges
	Future direction or plans

Table 2. Codes developed through interview analysis