Challenges and Support in Writing for a Professional Postgraduate Degree: Students' Perspectives

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***Abstract*—This paper explores the perceptions of students reading for Industrial Masters and Industrial Doctorate degrees regarding how practice-based research differs from academic research, the writing challenges they faced and strategies they adopted to overcome them, and their evaluation of their improvement in writing. These work-study students were working on research projects determined by their companies, in collaboration with the university. The students were enrolled in a 12-week mandatory pass/fail no credit Technical Writing and Communication module. Data was collected via students' submissions in the LMS and an end-of-module online survey with the writing faculty taking on the role of participant-observer. The findings show that most students were not aware about the differences between practice-based research which is more succinct and template-based, and academic research which involves critique of literature. Furthermore, students mainly faced challenges in situating their problem statement in the context of past literature and determining the level of detail and appropriate methods to explain and justify their data collection and analysis procedures. Through self-analysis of journal articles, feedback from the writing faculty and a desire to make their writing relevant to their work, students learned what qualified as 'academic' in research-based writing and found their voice and identity as practitioner-researchers. This epistemological shift from practitioner to practitioner-researcher, however, could be seen more clearly only in the last two weeks of the trimester. Referencing more journal articles and consultations with the faculty often highlighted that academic writing, though succinct, required literature-supported substantiation. The lack of a template to guide their writing might have hindered students' ability to write coherently earlier in the writing process. The students were submitting their drafts for the introduction, literature review and methodology sections in separate documents rather than developing their ideas in the same document. The findings in this study reflect that it is important to clarify early to the students what qualifies as 'academic'. Furthermore, faculty could impress on students that the skills of questioning claims and evidence-based substantiation are valuable transferable skills to enhance the relevance of the professional doctorate to their work, industry and themselves.**

Keywords—professional doctorate, writing challenges, writing support, writing improvement, practitioner-researcher

I. Introduction

The professional postgraduate degree was developed by some universities in response to the need to bridge the gaps between research and practice in the new economy [1]. It aims to enhance students' professional practice and knowledge [2] where practice and research interact in a fluid manner as they engage in critical enquiry [3].

According to [4], research on professional doctorates has increased over the years, particularly after 2001. Furthermore, the most researched professional doctorate globally is the EdD (Doctorate in Education), followed by the DBA (Doctorate in Business Admin) and DClinPsy (Doctorate in Clinical Psychology). Research so far has mostly focused on themes like program content (55%), student experience (30%), aspects of the research degree (9%) and the value of the professional doctorate to the institution (6%). Research on other types of professional doctorates is limited. Furthermore, the research has mainly been based in the British, American, and Australian contexts.

This study hopes to contribute to the literature on professional doctorates in the lesser studied area of writing. The study examines students' writing issues in a Technical Writing and Communication module which is taught formally in the Industrial Masters and Industrial Doctorate programs, in a university in Singapore.

The study aims to explore in what ways academic research writing differed from workplace writing involving research, the writing challenges and strategies students used to overcome them, and their improvement in writing (if any). The study hopes to understand the perspectives of these professional postgraduate students to better inform teaching and learning. The findings would also help improve programs where the seamless integration of industry-academia-student is expected.

II. Related Work

A. Professional Postgraduate Degrees

Professional postgraduate degrees are growing in popularity as more governments encourage broader admission criteria to universities, and a greater integration between institutes of higher education and industry [5]. The professional postgraduate degree caters to mid-career professionals who wish to undertake research that informs their work and profession [6, 7]. It differs from PhD programs as it aims to solve real-world problems and generate practice-based knowledge.

Among the motivations for enrolling in professional postgraduate degrees are a desire for deeper insights into their own practice, which sometimes could be sparked by an incident at work [8], passion for their work, a need to find their voice and identity in the field, for personal development, and to fulfil their expectations of themselves [9].

Many students and supervisors, however, are not fully aware that there are differences between professional practice and academic practice. Simon [10] identified ten differences between both practices in terms of title, questions, objectives,

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methodology, activities, responsibilities, reflexivity, outcomes, outputs, and location.

These differences often stem from epistemological differences in what qualifies as 'academic' when evaluating practice-based research. Winter et al. [5] found that supervisors tend to struggle in defining what qualifies as 'originality' and 'contribution to knowledge' in practice-based theses as compared to traditional theses. They argued that for practice-based theses, both terms should be seen in relation to the work context the student is in. Carr et al. [11] agreed that supervisors must balance the requirements of academia and practice for the professional doctorate degree to remain relevant to the students' work.

Winter et al. [5] cautioned however, that at the postgraduate level, the thesis needs to demonstrate relevance beyond its immediate context and incorporate theoretical frameworks in support of the solutions developed. Nelson [12] agreed that students need to engage in empirical enquiry by presenting theoretical arguments rather than just a monologue with themselves. This would help students gain deeper insights into their practice.

The position above requires students to shift their identity from practitioners to 'practitioner-researchers' [13, p.29], an evolving mindset shift that needs to take place as they progress in their postgraduate studies [14]. Thus, it is important that supervisors provide space and guidance for students to find their voice and identity so that they can create knowledge using empirical research which is relevant to their practice [15].

B. Writing Issues Encountered

Nelson [13] defined 'research' in three different contexts. Personal research refers to finding out what is already known, professional research involves networking and gathering information for a specific purpose, while academic research refers to conducting a research inquiry to establish new knowledge. The latter two categories require a practitioner to take on the role of a practitioner-researcher where critical reflection and discussions on the research problem and literature readings are constantly conducted to move the study from a localized context to applications in the industry and wider literature.

According to [16], these two latter categories are known as Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge. Mode 1 knowledge is theoretical in nature, investigator-initiated and discipline specific, with the aim of building universal knowledge. Mode 2 knowledge, however, is generated within the work context involving transdisciplinary teams, with the aim of commercializing the knowledge. An example of the difference between both modes is reflected in students' focus on the introduction section. In mode 1 knowledge or academic research, the focus is on clarifying the gaps in knowledge from literature while in mode 2 knowledge or practice-based research, the focus is to resolve the industry-based problem in its context [17].

Students are often unaware about the differences between both modes of research. Thus, they are confused about the expectations of supervisors when writing for professional postgraduate degrees [18]. Furthermore, students often find writing for professional postgraduate degrees novel and daunting as they shift epistemologically from being practitioners to practitioner-researchers [19].

San Miguel and Nelson [7] found that some key writing challenges students faced included problems in framing a real-world problem as a research issue using literature, attributing their own knowledge and practice and those of others objectively and clearly, and using the literature to unpack and critique the theoretical underpinnings in the research problem being examined.

A study further compiled the writing weaknesses seen in students' theses from 31 supervisors in various disciplines [5]. They found that students' writing lacked an intellectual grasp of the key issues and line of argument, lacked coherence, had a poor engagement with literature, lacked originality and generalizability, showed methodological weaknesses, and was poorly presented in terms of structure, style, and reader-centeredness.

The literature above presented writing challenges students faced as they become practitioner-researchers. This study seeks to explore students' perspectives regarding the challenges and supports they used in writing the first three sections of a professional postgraduate thesis. It is hoped that the findings could inform writing pedagogy for practice-based research in a formal teaching and learning context.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed method approach using observations on students' drafts in the LMS and quantitative and qualitative questions in an end-of-module survey to investigate students' writing process.

A. Context

The Industrial Masters and Industrial Doctorate programs offered by the Singapore Institute of Technology, a young, applied learning university, aim to develop talents to innovate and deepen their knowledge in their profession through research. The postgraduate students are placed under joint supervision of an academic expert and an industry expert to solve real problems faced in the students' companies. The Industrial Doctorate program typically takes four to six years to complete while the Industrial Masters program takes about two to four years to complete. All the students are working full-time in their respective companies.

Students take the Technical Writing and Communication module in the second or third trimester of their studies. It is a 12-week, three hours per week, no credit, pass (a minimum of a B grade) or fail module which is mandatory for all postgraduate students. Typically, students would have gone through their first Technical Committee presentation by then. The learning objectives of the module are to help students conceptualize, refine, organize, write, and present the first three sections of their thesis. The module was taught by a faculty from the Centre for Professional Communication, who is also the author of this paper, via zoom.

The module covered content on writing the introduction (9 hours), literature review (12 hours) and methodology (6 hours) sections of their thesis using discussions, critiques of journal articles and feedback consultations with the faculty with further on-demand feedback consultations (9 hours). Written feedback was given in the LMS prior to the verbal consultation with the faculty.

B. Participants

There were five students enrolled in the Technical Writing and Communication module in Trimester 2 of

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Academic Year 2023. This is the fourth run of the module. Out of the five students, two students were reading for their Industrial Masters degree and three students for their Industrial Doctorate degree. Four of the students were STEM students while one student was from the Applied Health discipline. The students were working full-time in their companies and studying part-time for their postgraduate degrees. The research projects the students engaged in for their postgraduate studies were projects they had to deliver in their workplace. The students' first language of instruction prior to their postgraduate studies was English.

C. Data Collection and Analysis

The students posted their submissions to the university's learning management system (LMS) where all submissions were kept for reference by the students and faculty. The LMS folders were titled according to the weekly tasks the students had to submit. Only the final submission in week 12 was graded.

At the end of the module, the students were invited to respond to an online survey. The students were informed that their participation was voluntary, their responses in the survey anonymized (names were not collected) and had no impact on their grade for the module.

The survey covered qualitative items on ways in which writing academic research differed from workplace writing involving research at work, writing challenges encountered, and strategies that students used to overcome these challenges. The students were also asked to rate their improvement in writing on a Likert scale of one (least) to five (most).

The faculty teaching the module is the author of this paper and played a participant-observer [20] role in this study. To maintain objectivity in analysing the data, the responses to the survey questions were reported as it is.

IV. RESULTS

The results from the survey are presented below.

A. Differences between workplace and professional postgraduate writing

Four students found that there were differences in their writing strategies for both contexts.

> At work, mostly I write in documentation style and document the use cases. But here I need to write it in the specific format (S1).

> This research proposal writing demands some standardized format and structure that doesn't typically needed or mandated in workplace (S5)

> In the workplace, my writing has to be succinct, and my references are used in a straightforward manner (paraphrasing instead of interpreting) (S3).

> The proposal I write at work is dependent on the format given by the funder. Depending on which funding we are applying to, there is a pre-defined list of questions one needs to answer to (S4).

Another student did not report any differences in writing for both contexts as they have not been exposed to such work.

> Not sure as have not done one at work (S2).

The students' responses reveal that writing at work mainly aims to document work done. Thus, it is informative and succinct, using company or funder templates. Professional postgraduate writing, however, requires a critical response to literature, often involving interpretation of the literature cited rather than paraphrasing.

The 'specific format' referred to by S1 and S5 was the PROSANA framework [21]. The writing faculty encouraged the students to follow the PROSANA framework more closely in writing the Introduction section of the proposal as the initial draft was monologue-like [12]. The PROSANA framework was taught in class to help students frame the problem statement. PROSANA stands for problem, root causes, focus, solutions, approach, novelty, and argument. In a typical introduction section with three subheadings, the 'problem' and 'root causes' could be explained in the background subsection; 'focus' in the objective subsection; 'solutions', 'approach', 'novelty', and 'argument' in the motivation subsection.

B. Writing challenges and strategies

The writing challenges faced and the strategies the students adopted to write the three sections of the thesis are shown in Table I.

TABLE I. STUDENTS' CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES

Section in the Proposal	Challenges Faced	Strategies to Overcome
Introduction	I had to keep my idea clear and ensure smooth flow	Feedback and more samples
	This was okay	The PROSANA helps
	To decide on key points to communicate the context.	Choosing what would be necessary for the reader to understand the subsequent parts of the proposal.
	I think it is knowing how to begin and the direction in which the introduction should be going towards. It takes time to read the literature before deciding how to best write the introduction.	Read a lot of published papers.
	Not to be too lengthy and by the same time want to convey the overall scope, purpose and description of the research proposal in this section in a short and concise manner.	Consistent and excellent feedback/-coaching from the module professor
Literature review	To focus on the flow of connecting previous research and approaches in the same field	Tried to read through more and see examples and relevance
	I think it is finding the literature needed and scoping down	A lot of discussions with prof, and a lot of reading helps
	Synthesizing different train of thoughts and points. I felt that in the initial phase of drafting, my thoughts where very intertwined and jumbled that it was challenging to distinct them and pair with papers and references.	Having read through most of the papers that I included in the lit review to know how to connect my train of thoughts.
	Similar to introduction. But for this section, I think the biggest challenge is finding the literature and gaining access to the journals.	I purchase library access from a few institutions from UK, US and Singapore.

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	Strategies to synthesize information and selecting approach (eg., theme based or methodology based or concept based)	Taking some reference from the literature shared in class/workshop and continual feedback/fine tuning from module professor
Methodology	I had a lot of repetitive content	To analyze each paragraph
	Mainly the details cause i'm missing a bit of data	Referencing against literature helps
	Determining how detail I should explain my experimental work.	Referring to other papers and seeing what the common key points were.
	Trying to understand why one statistical method is better than the other.	I have to read a lot of papers just to identify the statistical method used then read on the method to understand why the analysis is done that way.
	Reliability and validity, Justification components	Taking some reference from the lectures shared in class/workshop and continual feedback/fine tuning from module professor
Coherent proposal	The content and flow	To proofread, ensure my facts
	I think just needed direction	A lot of discussions and feedbacks
	None	Ensuring that the points are connected and related to the problem statement. Reading through my proposal multiple times and considering how I can phrase it better for the reader to interpret and understand.
	Sometime what appears to be a clear plan in your mind may not appear so when presented to others. And this is often overlooked.	I will write and let the proposal rest a few days before reading and amending it again.
	Aligning the proposal in the chronological order of something like a story to ensure even a non-specialized subject reader could able to connect and understand the proposal	Taking some reference from lectures shared in class/workshop and continual feedback/fine tuning from module professor

The following elaboration includes a mention of the number of students who mentioned specific writing challenges or strategies adopted in parenthesis.

The students reported issues in framing the problem they are trying to solve in the Introduction section of the thesis. They faced challenges in deciding on the key points to communicate the context of the problem (2) so that the ideas are concise, clear, and organized (2). One student mentioned that it was difficult to write the introduction without first having a firm grasp of the literature.

To overcome these challenges, the students looked for more journal articles to reference how to write the Introduction (2), with further guidance from the writing faculty (2). One other student found the PROSANA framework, which was taught in class, useful. Interestingly, this student did not report any specific challenges in writing the Introduction section. Another student was very aware of the importance of framing the issue to set the context for readers to understand the relevance of ideas in the Literature Review and Methodology sections. This student adopted a forward-looking approach in writing as they understood how the information in one section related to other sections in a thesis.

The students found writing the Literature Review section particularly challenging. This is partly because this section differed the most from their writing at work. The students needed to find the relevant literature (2) and scope it relevant to their research question (1), synthesize literature (3) while finding their own voice in the literature (1), and find a direction for their literature review (1).

To overcome these challenges, the students referred to more journal articles (4) and those discussed in class (1) as models on how to write the literature review, with further guidance from the writing faculty (2).

The challenges faced in writing the Methodology section was in terms of the level of detail required (3), forming a single coherent story (1) and deciding which statistical methods were more appropriate to be used to analyse the data (1). The writing faculty mentioned that the procedures should be written sufficiently for replication by an independent researcher. The students were not clear however, as to the level of detail required for it to be considered replicable. The students either had too much or too little explanation and justifications for their experimental design. One other student had a lot of repetitive content in this section. This was due to a desire to explain the experimental procedures thoroughly but lacking a story-like thread in the explanation. The other student wanted to find the most appropriate statistical methods to measure his data. This was because the area of research was new to him and thus, he was not familiar with the statistical methods used in that area of research.

To overcome these challenges, the students mentioned again that reading more journal articles helped them to understand what were the common key points that needed to be included in the methodology section (4). One other student decided to analyse each of their paragraphs to reduce repetitions across the subsections and to ensure a more coherent flow throughout the methodology section.

Once the students have completed writing their first draft for each section of the thesis (with feedback), they had to relook their thesis again as a whole. The focus was now to present a coherent story across the sections in the thesis. Among the challenges they faced were determining what content to include and to present the content in an organized manner (1), needing more clarity on the direction of their writing (1) and being reader-centred in writing so that the reader can understand the arguments made (2).

To overcome these challenges, the students had discussions with and organized their writing based on written comments from the faculty (2), re-read their thesis multiple times to check for accuracy (1), alignment to the problem statement (1) and class content (1), and for reader-centredness (1). Letting the draft rest for a few days also helped them to get a fresh perspective on how to improve the draft (1).

The faculty observed that the students seem to be able to develop more coherent and substantiated writing only in the

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last two weeks of the module. This might be due to writing being a recursive process where writers keep on improving their drafts. It might also be due to the students writing a section of their thesis without reference to previous section(s) as the folders in the LMS were titled according to the weekly tasks they had to submit. The faculty observed that the student who wrote their Introduction section and continued the Literature Review and Methodology sections in the same document could develop their story much faster and in a more coherent manner compared to those who submitted each section at a time in separate documents. Thus, having a single document or template for the students to build their story could work better for future runs of the module.

C. *Improvement in writing*

The students were asked to evaluate their improvement in writing for this module on a scale of one (least improvement) to five (most improvement). Four students gave a 4 rating for improvement in writing while another student gave a 5 rating (Table II). These ratings were attributed to feedback from the faculty which helped them to frame their thoughts (4), their own efforts (1), discussions in class (1), referencing relevant literature to see how to write the respective sections in the thesis (1), and identification of appropriate resources to support the writing process (1).

TABLE II. STUDENTS' IMPROVEMENT IN WRITING

Rating (out of 5)	No. of students	Factors contributing to the rating
4	4	The feedback and efforts (S1) Guidance from lecturer, verbal discussions that helped frame thoughts, references from literature research (S2) I think the module that I attended helped me to identify the best resources that I can use to write a coherent and concise proposal (S4) Effective lectures, sharing in classes and most importantly feedback sessions from module professor (S5)
5	1	The pointers to consider when writing a lit review (S3)

Interestingly, only one student mentioned during the final consultation that they used AI tools to help them in their writing. The student used ChatPDF to help them identify key ideas in journal articles and organize their ideas for the literature review section. They explained that these articles could be too long and difficult to digest compared to workplace writing which was succinct. After understanding the key points in the articles, the student could organize their ideas better. The other students mentioned that they preferred to write without the aid of AI tools as they preferred to have full control over their writing process.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The professional postgraduate degree differs from a PhD degree as the primary purpose in reading for the former degree is to solve real-world issues that are of value to their respective companies. Thus, the immediacy of their context, which focuses on practical and applied knowledge, is primary to the students [5, 15].

The aim of this study was to explore how academic research writing differed from workplace writing involving research from the students' perspective, the writing challenges students faced and strategies they used to overcome the challenges, and their rating of their improvement in writing.

The findings show that the main differences were in the purpose of the writing which also affected the organization, and the style and tone adopted. Workplace writing was informative, to document work done, often using work templates, and succinct [22]. Professional postgraduate writing, however, was more critical, requiring writers to interpret and draw connections between the relevant literature and their study.

Furthermore, the writing challenges students faced were in framing their problem statement beyond their immediate work context; elaborating their literature review in a scoped (with a clear direction) and organized manner, incorporating their critique of literature without much redundancy in content; and determining the level of detail and appropriate method to explain and justify their data collection and analysis procedures. These findings support those by [7, 10] who identified that the differences in practice research and academic research included challenges in phrasing the issue as a research issue and elaborating on the theoretical underpinnings for their study. The students thus needed to shift epistemologically from workplace writing to literature-supported writing as they progressed in writing the different sections of their professional postgraduate thesis [14]. The students seemed to be able effect this shift to elaborating theoretical arguments [12] by the end of the module as they rated the improvement in their writing in the range of 4 to 5 out of a scale of 5.

The epistemological shift was aided mainly through their analysis of journal articles of their choice which they modelled after in their writing. The one-to-one written and verbal consultations with the faculty also helped them to frame their problem statement and set the appropriate direction and organization for their writing. This is supported by [13] who found that discussions are important with practitioners-researchers to help them move their study from their immediate context to applications in wider literature.

Another factor which aided students' epistemological shift to practitioners-researchers was their desire to make meaning of their writing relevant to their practice [11], [15]. While the students are being encouraged to demonstrate the relevance of their study beyond their immediate work context in their writing for their theses, the students wanted the space to identify what 'originality' and 'contribution to knowledge' [5] meant relevant to their practice and work [15]. Thus, the students took full ownership of their learning process. For example, the one student who used AI tools mentioned that the tools aided idea extraction from lengthy journal articles. However, after the initial AI output, the student took control of their writing by organizing their ideas to form the story they wanted, relevant to their study. This was motivated by the students' desire to gain deeper insights into their practice [12].

VI. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The findings from this study reflect that the transformation from practitioner to practitioner-researcher is a gradual self-discovery process which involves analysis of relevant journal articles on how the respective sections of the thesis should be written, feedback from faculty on the appropriate direction for their writing, and a desire to create knowledge which is relevant to their practice. A few suggestions are presented for practice and research.

The writing support in the first instance, needs to acknowledge students' motivations in reading for a

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professional postgraduate degree. As mentioned by [11], at the end of the day, students need to see how the degree adds value to their professional work. Thus, what qualifies as 'academic' in academic research [5] need to be clarified early in the writing support process. Questioning claims and presenting evidence from multiple credible sources are skills which the faculty hoped to hone in the students via verbal and written consultations. As the research projects are part of the students' key performance indicators in their companies, the students might not see the value and implications of their research project beyond that for their company, and to the industry. These skills could help students see meaning in their research work to themselves besides that for the company.

Students also need to understand that writing a thesis is a recursive process [23] where the content goes through multiple and continuous revisions. Having a template or a single document (rather than 'sectional documents') in which students develop their ideas could help students see the need to revise their drafts continuously to enhance the alignment across sections. Faculty thus needs to take on a coaching approach [24] to point students in the right writing direction and help them persevere in the writing process.

It is acknowledged that the findings in this study are not generalizable due to the small sample size. The university is a young university, and the number of postgraduate students enrolled is set to increase in the future.

In terms of research, further work could be conducted on the use of AI tools in helping students to write their literature review. This is because this section differed the most from their writing at work. It is acknowledged that understanding and critiquing literature is a fundamental component in the training of postgraduate students and there is value in students analysing the literature review sections in relevant articles in their discipline. However, prompts could be written to guide conversations between AI tools and the students so that students' engagement with literature could be facilitated in a less painful and meandering way.

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