

## **Graduate Academic Research Writing Initiatives in Tanzania**

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**Abstract.** A rise in interest in graduate academic research writing skills (henceforth GARWS) in higher institutions indicates a growing concern about the dismal quality of writing produced by the majority of graduate students, who as part of their academic life and beyond are expected to centre writing as an integral part of their career. The seminal work by Dowse and Howie (2013:871) raises some very important questions regarding graduate students' poor writing skills in the English medium. Series of initiatives to promote students' academic writing proficiency are at work in various graduate institutions, although with variable outcomes. At various colleges in Tanzania, only standard guidelines for theses or dissertations at graduate levels are employed. This paper assesses a total of fifteen universities to see how they redress the issue of graduates' poor writing proficiency at their institutions. So far, this mini-survey has identified four main pathways for the effective delivery of GARWS: standard *thesis guides*, establishment of *academic writing centers*, organization of *periodical short courses in academic writing skills* and *specialized courses on academic research writing skills*. We draw lessons from this review to inform stakeholders in various colleges in Tanzania about the best way to allow graduate students to become accomplished writers.

**Keywords:** Academic Research, Writing Skills, Graduate Education, Tanzania, Case Study

**Languages:** English

### **1.0 Introduction**

It is widely acknowledged that both new and continuing graduate writers are in a constant battle to submit their research reports, grant proposals, journal articles, or dissertations with high-quality writing. However, Dowse and Howie (2013:871) raise some very important questions regarding graduate academic research writing:

1. "What is the *level* of academic research writing of students entering graduate study?"

2. “How can graduate students be assisted in the *promotion* of academic research writing?”
3. “What *constitutes* academic research writing required at the graduate level?”
4. “How appropriate is the *intervention* in developing academic research writing?”

These four questions will form the basis of our discussion in this paper. Dowse and Howie (2013) have introduced the new term, “academic research writing,” in their work. This term refers to the special academic writing skills that incorporate academic writing, discipline-specific content knowledge and research methodology knowledge. While some institutions pay attention only to discipline knowledge and research methodology, a lack of writing skills will devalue the quality of disseminated and presented research. As the pressure to publish research-based, high-quality writing has increased enormously in the academic world today, the merger of the three pillars of academic research writing as advanced by Dowse and Howie (2013) becomes ever important, especially at the graduate levels. The phenomenon of poor academic research writing is now a vexing academic issue. Graduates cannot continue to be left in the dark while they are also expected to produce clear, consistent and productive academic throughputs.

Leading world universities seem to take the promotion of academic research writing skills seriously. It is no wonder that the majority of those that combine multiple strategies to promote GARWS rank higher in the 2014-2015 World University Ranking by *Times Higher Education*.

This paper will not attempt to venture deeply into the correlation between graduate academic research writing initiatives and the quality of research output or ranking. However, through the analysis of selected universities’ application of the four GARWS promotion tools – including *standard thesis guides, academic writing centers, periodical workshops and specialized courses on academic writing skills* – several lessons can be drawn.

## **2.0 Graduate Students Too Have Writing Problems**

The pertinent questions posed by Dowse and Howie (2013:871) are an open call for reinvigorating GARWS initiatives at post-graduate levels. Each graduate institution is specifically urged to initiate writing support systems, review their graduate students’ entry writing skills and educate graduate students on writing mechanisms. The support system can take the form of the establishment of language centers, the creation of courses in academic writing, the organization of regular writing workshops and the supply of thesis or dissertation guides.

But before we earnestly attempt to evaluate these practices, we would like to discuss each question that Dowse and Howie (2013:871) presented in the context of Tanzania and the world at large and draw lessons from it.

### 3.0 “What is the Level of Academic Research Writing of Students Entering Graduate Study?”

As things are now, all Tanzanian universities offer a compulsory course in English Communication Skills (ECS) to first-year undergraduate students as a measure to redress the English communication deficiency in general (Cripper and Dodd 1984, Qorro 1996, Mohamed 2006, Komba 2008). A graduate academic writing skills course in English is not regularly offered in higher institutions in Tanzania. What is evident over the years is that when a student is accepted by a university to undertake Higher Degree Research (HDR) in any college in Tanzania, the candidate is not asked about their level of English proficiency or academic writing competency. The assumption is made that they have adequate English and writing mastery to undertake their studies smoothly. One can ask why it matters to offer formal research or academic writing training at post-graduate levels. The answer is that students still need support in the area of academic writing and publication. As novice authors or mature students, they are compelled to produce effective, extended texts to be read by diverse readers.

Of course, they may come into university with abundant experience and high proficiency in communication, but writing for peer-reviewed journals, presenting at expert conferences, drafting grant proposals, composing abstracts and writing theses constitute a new “culture” that needs introduction and with which students require continuing support. The plight of “unpreparedness” and ceaseless writings “pains” in academic writing is ever present. Diezmann (2005:2) contends that “students’ difficulties with the academic genre should be considered to be the norm, rather than the exception.”

More interestingly, titles of books about academic research writing skills at the graduate level have *burden-laden* language that reveals the writers endured experiences of “Bugging,” “Blocks,” “Pain,” “Sadness” and even “Neglect”<sup>9</sup> (see Mark & Skjei 1979, Appelbaum 1998, Dupre 1998, Albert 2000, Bykosky & Sander 2000, and Germano 2001). These titles suggest that academic research writing is a grueling process. Murray (2006: xii) specifically points to how “new writers in all disciplines ... face constant challenges of getting started and making time for writing.” More revealing is the fact that the difficulty of academic writing is not confined to new writers alone; mature educators, researchers and professionals also succumb to “uneasiness” in their writing routine, as noted in the publication of *Professors as Writers: A Self Help Guide to Productive Writing* (Boyce 1990). In the cross-university study by Parry and Hayden (1994) about mature graduate

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<sup>9</sup> See Knowles, M. (1973). *The adult learner – a neglected species* (3rd ed.) New York: Cambridge Books

students with English as a second language as well as native speakers in need of assistance with academic writing, they write:

Most PhD students struggle with scientific writing and presentations in English, and normally much time in a PhD study is spent in revising papers and preparing for conference talks. Given the amount of time that PhD students spend writing and preparing to present, students should invest in a systematic study of scientific writing and presentations.

The lesson is clear that even mature graduate students need guidance and assistance to develop skills concerning writing and presenting academic proposals, reports, reviews, theses, articles, assignments, posters, pitch slides and conference briefs (Hartley, 2008).

Recently, in September 2014, the Stellenbosch Law Faculty in South Africa held the first national workshop on the development of LLB graduates' writing abilities. The workshop, organized by Geo Quinot and Theo Broodryk, aimed to kick-start a conversation between law teachers and other stakeholders at a national level about what can be done to develop law students' writing abilities. The gist of the meeting is captured in the feedback from the stakeholders that "LLB graduates entering the professions cannot write." The lack of writing skills among LLB graduates in South Africa was declared a "crisis" in legal education. This scenario is pervasive in almost all of the sub-Saharan regions, including Tanzania. This brings us to the second question that Dowse and Howie (2013:871) posed about what sort of initiatives are in place to promote GARWS in various institutions worldwide, bearing in mind the lopsided status of graduate students' writing proficiency.

### **3.1 "How Can Graduate Students be Assisted in the Promotion of Academic Research Writing?"**

This study selected fifteen English-medium graduate institutions to offer glimpses of some initiatives to improve GARWS . The purposefully selected institutions – with their 2014/15 World or National University rankings in brackets – are the following:

1. Stanford University (SU), USA (3)
2. Ohio University (OU), USA (90)
3. University of Arizona (UA), USA (163)
4. National University of Singapore (NUS), Singapore (26)
5. Ritsumeikan University (RU), Japan (926)
6. Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), Ireland (601)
7. Coventry University (CU), U.K. (601)
8. The University of New South Wales (UNWS), Australia (46)
9. University Of London (SOAS), U.K. (50/143) in UK ranking
10. University of Helsinki (UH), Finland (76)

11. The University of the Witwatersrand (WITS), South Africa (201)
12. Makerere University (MU), Uganda (401)
13. University of Nairobi (UN), Kenya (601)
14. University of Dar es salaam (UDSM), Tanzania (ranked 1<sup>st</sup> in Tanzania)
15. Tumaini University of Makumira (TUMA), Tanzania (ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> in Tanzania).

As can be noted, the selected universities all offer graduate programs in the English medium. Most of these institutions are highly ranked at the world or national level. Five continents are represented (America, Europe, Asia, Australia and Africa). Some institutions have a majority of English native speakers but also admit non-native speakers into their graduate programs. Tanzania is represented by two institutions ranked 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> in the national ranking in 2015. These selected institutions have put in place all or some of the following initiatives in their pedagogical practices. These are:

- (i) *Guidelines* for theses and dissertations
- (ii) Establishment of academic writing *centers or directorates*
- (iii) Regular training *workshops* or seminars in GARWS
- (iv) Delivering of distinctive GARWS *courses* or modules

In thesis or dissertation guides, institutions provide guidelines and regulations for processing and preparing a thesis or dissertation. The guides only direct candidates to formatting style and copyright protocols. Here, staff support enrolled graduate students in preparing and submitting their theses or dissertations. Normally, guides come in the form of manuals and only target a specific edition of the style manual in the discipline (e.g. the *American Psychological Association (APA) Style Manual*). However, the thesis or dissertation guidelines cannot support students in mastering the art of crafting sentences, phrases or paragraphs. Spelling, punctuation and the mechanics of grammar are skills outside the scope of such guidelines. It is also the responsibility of a graduate student to learn the skill of précis or paraphrasing writing independently. General skills of proofreading and editing are also beyond what is covered in thesis or dissertation guidelines.

On the establishment of academic writing centers, several universities in the world have permanent established institutes, centers or directorates specifically supporting writing “clinics” (Swales & Christine 2007, Deng et al 2010, Zang 2011, Sillin et al 2015). These centers offer support for advanced scholarly writing for theses, dissertations, publications of conference or peer-reviewed papers, or book chapters. Some offer online services (see <http://thinktank.arizona.edu/tutoring/writing>) or retreats. Graduate students enjoy individual and face-to-face meetings aimed at fixing

writing mistakes, and they are also encouraged to become critical thinkers and negotiators (Haswel, 2000, Pemberton 2006; McKinley 2006, 2010).

At Ohio University, three types of writing centers are in place: the Graduate Writing and Research Center (GWRC), the English Language Improvement Program (ELIP), and the Center for Writing Excellence (CWE). At SOAS in the UK, they have established the *Academic Development Directorate (ADD)*. Closer to home at Makerere University in Uganda and Witwatersrand University in South Africa, they have established the Directorate of Research and Graduate Training (DRGT) and the Wits Writing Centre (WWC) respectively. These distinctive houses have one major goal, and that is improving academic research writing skills through writing workshops and on/off campus retreats.

Regarding the regular organization of *workshops* for GARWS, several universities have the dates for conducting scholarly writing workshops in their almanacs; Makerere University is one university in the East Africa Block that practices this. The purpose of their consortium workshops is to enhance writers' quality of research dissemination and to nurture a publication culture, especially among graduate students and staff. The graduate writing workshop offers mentoring services to allow graduates to gain transferrable competences in writing publishable academic outputs. At WITS in South Africa, they consider writing workshops to be a part of the critical "ladder of learning".

Finally, some universities, in addition to employing the above writing initiatives, have designed specific mandatory modules or courses on GARWS. These writing courses have a myriad of titles such as:

- "Presentations, Scientific Writing and Research Ethics"
- "Writing for Research-Thesis and Dissertation"
- "Academic Writing in Graduate Studies for All Graduate Students"
- "Graduate Reading and Writing, Essay Writing for Postgraduate"
- "Writing for Scholarly Publication"
- "Introduction to Research Design & Writing."
- "Writing in the Sciences"

At SOAS in the UK, they have gone so far as to offer a full-time, one year MA in *Academic Writing Theory and Practice*, where they cover writing and publishing tips, academic writing resources, and academic writing's place as a distinctive discipline with its own realm of theories and practices. Not all graduate institutions have reached this milestone of offering academic writing as a mandatory module. TUMA and its affiliated constituent colleges fall into this group. Dowse and Howie (2013:871) ask us to consider, "What really constitutes academic research writing required at graduate level?" This will be covered in the next sub-section.

### **3.2 “What Constitutes Academic Research Writing Required at Graduate Level?”**

Looking at the learning outcomes for most courses geared toward imparting academic research writing *skills improvement*, plus a number of readings on the subject, the overarching themes that emerge are that graduate students have to be supported in:

- (1) *Writing quality scholarly journal articles*
- (2) *Making quality conference presentations*
- (3) *Appreciating ethics-related issues in academic writing*
- (4) *Acquiring skills in thesis writing, publishing and copyrighting*

The eight-week course *Writing in the Sciences* offered by Stanford University in the USA (3<sup>rd</sup> in the World Ranking) is a benchmark for training graduate scientists to become effective writers. The course entails the following subjects:

- (1) Principles of effective writing
- (2) Tricks for writing faster and with less anxiety
- (3) The format of a scientific manuscript
- (4) Issues in publication and peer review
- (5) The art of disseminating research findings

What is to be learned from the above course is that to be an effective writer, one has to plan and present the plan either in proposal, thesis, article, report or grant application writing. Clear and effective writing covers the art of crafting sentences, organization and formatting, citing sources and editing a text. The academic writers must have ethical and legal know-how that can be applied to the writing and dissemination of their research findings. Based on the various works of Marsen 2003; Hailman & Strier 2006; Mathews & Mathews 2008; Crème & Lea 2009; and Murray 2011, we deem the mandatory components of any GARWS program to be:

1. Typology of writing
2. Audience profiling and awareness
3. Consistent style, unity and coherence
4. Grammatical accuracy, clarity and mechanics
5. Critical thinking, development of coherent argumentation and synthesis skills
6. Crafting effective sentences, paragraphs and sections
7. Paraphrasing, quoting, summary writing and literature review
8. Referencing issues: systems, citations, avoidance of plagiarism and research integrity

9. The peer review editing process: feedback, proofreading and revising
10. Individual writing voice, conclusions and recommendations
11. Academic publishing strategy, working paper revision and journal selection
12. Copyright and patent issues

Academic writing is alive, useful and also formidable if treated haphazardly. GARWS initiatives must support each other in combination. Partially addressing writing skills or ignoring them can have dire consequences on the throughputs of institutions and graduates. There are no quick solutions to low-quality writing. How appropriate it would be for an institution to institute graduate academic research writing initiatives is our next issue for discussion.

### 3.3 “How Appropriate is the Intervention in Developing Academic Research Writing?”

This question will be answered in a way such that the results of the GARWS survey in the selected graduate institutions will inform TUMA colleges. At this point in time, we can tentatively speculate the correlation between those institutes that have fully utilize GARWS initiatives and those that have partially done so, i.e. excluding a specialized course in GARWS. Drawing a rough relationship between universities’ GARWS initiatives and their World University Rankings will serve as a preamble to the hypothesis that the greater the inclusion of GARWS initiatives, the higher the research throughput and, eventually, the higher the world or national ranking of the institution. We present a table of the GARWS initiatives verses the selected graduate institutions and their rankings below.

*Table 1: GAWRS Improvement Initiatives in Selected Graduate Institutions  
(Source: Mini-Survey 2015)*

<i>HES</i>	<i>Guides</i>	<i>Workshop</i>	<i>Centre</i>	<i>Course</i>	<i>Ranking</i>
NUS	√	√	√	√	26 WR
RU	√	√	√	√	926 WR
SU	√	√	√	√	3 WR
UA	√	√	√	√	163 WR
OU	√	√	√	√	90 WR
DIT	√	√	√	√	601 WR
CU	√	√	√	√	602 WR



UNWS	√	√	√	√	46 WR
SOAS	√	√	√	√	50/143 NR
UH	√	√	√	√	76 WR
WITS	√	√	√	√	201 WR
MU	√	√	√	√	401 WR
UN	√	√	0	0	601 WR
UDSM	√	0	0	0	1/ NR
TUMA	√	0	0	0	3/ NR

The data in Table 1.1 indicate that several graduate institutions offer multiple GARWS initiatives in their pedagogical practices. The pattern shows that most advanced higher institutions, whether in English-speaking countries or not, offer a mix of approaches in improving GARWS. In sub-Saharan countries including Tanzania, the initiatives only include graduate thesis guides or graduate directorates that do not specifically cater to GARWS. We need to ask ourselves if the research academic writing workshops and specialized writing support systems are temporary or passing initiatives.

At this stage, we can only speculate that the rationale for the minimal effort to promote GARWS is due to the presumption that graduate students are enrolled with substantial writing skills garnered at the undergraduate levels through compulsory communication-skills modules. However, the mini-survey of the sampled universities suggests this presumption is false. Makerere and Witwatersrand in Sub-Saharan Africa have shown that it is possible to put GARWS into practice in its entirety by exhausting multiple pathways to develop academic writing competency in graduate students. They are ranked higher in the 2014-15 World Ranking.

In other words, it is unproductive to continue with the current practice of offering communication skills (CS) at undergraduate levels while knowing that writing skills are a lifetime endeavor that cannot be mastered in one module or a year. The current CS programs have to be revised to accommodate the academic writing demands of our time. Continuing with “business as usual” tendencies at both graduate and undergraduate levels will prove tantamount to producing half-cooked scholars who find academic writing a laborious and extremely painful task. Many of our master’s and PhD aspirants can only provide unpublished theses or dissertations as evidence of their writing outputs; theses or dissertations are mere scholarly exercises with potential to become publishable research articles or conference posters.

#### **4.0 Lessons to Tanzanian Universities**

First, from Dowse and Howie's (2013) canonical inquiry, we can conceive five pertinent questions for each college:

- (i) Do we teach graduate students how to write clearly and effectively?
- (ii) Do we have a graduate academic writing skills support system in place?
- (iii) Do we have a separate course at postgraduate levels that deals with academic writing skills?
- (iv) Are academic writing workshops or retreats part of the university almanac?
- (v) Are thesis and dissertation guides sufficient to support graduate writing skills?

Each TUMA college has to assess itself on the basis of the above checklist. The answers can be coupled with general comments on graduate students' performances. Do we have an overall picture of how skills such as academic writing norms, style, voice and clarity are faring? Have we stamped out the practice of plagiarism, not through enacting by-laws, but through promoting the skills of citation, quotation, referencing and paraphrasing to our graduates? Can they critically argue and counter other scholarship or theses in their fields? And, more seriously, how much research output is still "dumped" into our archives for lack of dissemination strategies at large? How much can we learn from Stanford or Makerere as far as GARWS is concerned?

#### **5.0 Conclusion**

We have in this paper assessed four questions and four pathways for the promotion of graduate students' academic writing competency in some selected graduate institutions. Although most institutions in Sub Saharan countries have thesis guidelines, the majority still avoid offering a substantive academic research writing course as a mandatory module to enhance graduate academic literacy and research writing skills. This study has shown that writing is a complex process that needs institutional or administrative support to create an institutional culture of writing.

This paper further recommends that each Tanzanian college considers addressing these issues as a prerequisite for professional development. And, starting at the SCACA meeting, institutions must spearhead changes in pedagogical practices through the promotion of GARWS, which will effectively and sustainably enhance universities' reputations and improve their rankings, attract joint funding, and develop graduate students' and staff's career prospects.

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