Post Graduate Student Research Capacity Development: Through the Eyes of a Student Mentorship

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Abstract

Research capacity development in most African countries has been by and large hampered by inadequate infrastructure, poor remuneration and inability to mentor graduate students. While the capability of funding is a vital condition, however, there are a number of concrete initiatives that could be taken by the higher education and research institutions themselves. This may include the strengthening of graduate study improvements in the management of research and the pooling of resources within the individual departments, faculties as well as across institutions.

In 2001, the University of the Western Cape initiated the Post Graduate Enrolment and Throughput (PET) project (division for post graduate studies) with the aim of helping post graduate students to complete their theses within a reasonable time frame while at the same time conducting workshops on research skills, technical assistance and research fund applications, among other issues.

This paper discusses the post graduate peer mentoring experiences initiated by the University of the Western Cape. The experience of the writing coaches is discussed in relation to research productivity, capacity building, skills in practice and process of research, and contribution to post graduate student output.

Furthermore, the paper focuses on the best practice and models arising from these experiences, and suggests a peer mentorship model to develop research capacity at institutional level, taking into account institutional strategic priorities.

Keywords: post graduate students, research capacity development, student mentorship, University of the Western Cape

1. Introduction: Post Graduate Student Research Capacity Development

To compete globally, Africa has to pragmatically engage in strengthening its educational systems and various institutions that generate knowledge through research. There is a pressing need to improve research capacity within African universities. Research capacity development includes the development of skills in research work, the quality of the research environment, social development, funding, adequate infrastructure, research incentives, and time available to the researcher (Sawyerr, 2004). However, research capacity development in most African countries has been hampered by lack of funding, poor remuneration, inadequate infrastructure, inadequate teaching of research at undergraduate levels, and inability to mentor graduate students. Sawyerr (2004) points out that, there are a number of concrete initiatives that could be taken by the higher education and research institutions themselves to build their own capacity for research. The University of the Western Cape, like any other institution of higher learning in the world, has developed an ambitious and long-term initiatives to create new knowledge as one of its core missions. This is being done through strengthening of research capacity at the institutional level and the world over. The university continuously strives strengthening of post graduate study improvements in the management of research, pooling resources within the institutional departments,

faculties as well as cooperation with other research institutions and universities elsewhere in the world.

This paper is aims to discuss how the post graduate peer mentoring program, initiated by the University of the Western Cape, contributes to increase in research capacity and improvement of output. The experience of the writing coaches is discussed in relation to research productivity, capacity building, skills in practice and process of research, and contribution to post graduate student output.

Furthermore, the paper focuses on the best practice and models arising from these experiences, and suggests a peer mentorship model to develop research capacity at institutional level, taking into account institutional strategic priorities.

2. UWC's Vision and Mission

The University of the Western Cape's mission statement emphasise that 'UWC as a national university, is alert to its African and international context as it strives to be a place of quality, a place to grow. It is committed to excellence in teaching, learning, and research, to nurturing the cultural diversity of South Africa, and to responding to critical and creative ways to the needs of society'. The mission statement in this regard provides a reflection of the university's commitment in the development of research and knowledge production (Institutional Operating Plan, 2011).

As reflected in the Institutional Operating Plan (IOP) the University of the Western Cape draws attention to the significance of research and research development. The university undertakes a strong case for the importance of research in building new knowledge and its role in the enrichment of the curriculum and thus in the quality of teaching the university has to offer. Through research, the university strives to embrace and deep understanding of the complexities of contemporary South Africa in a globalised world where the "congruencies and contradictions between transformation and global competitiveness" In achieving this objective, the University encourages cross-discipline collaboration and the establishment of teams of researchers with the necessary critical mass to ensure sustainability of the research programmes. In the process, the UWC intends to establish research niche areas defined by constituent research units, centres (Institutional Operating Plan, 2011).

The consequence of this process is the identification and establishment of research niche areas defined by entities such as research units, centres and institutes.

In response to this challenge, the university has initiated a mentorship/coaching program in accelerating the development of the talented researchers. These coaches or mentors play an invaluable role in the mentoring of the post graduate students in their research development and capacity. For UWC to become a global player in the research arena its research programmes have to be at the cutting edge, alongside the leading international research institutions and this can be achieved through collaborative partnerships with the leading international institutions in research (Institutional Operating Plan, 2011).

3. Research Policy

A research policy for the University of the Western Cape takes into account the university's long term goals as defined by its vision and mission. Nonetheless, it also recognizes the reality of the current situation so as to promote and support the research enterprise of the university and respond to the current national and regional challenges in research and development. In effort to fulfil its objectives and as articulated in its strategic plan, the university focuses on the following areas:

1) Excellence in Research: Identification of Research Niche Areas; Establishment of Research Units, Centres, Institutes and Programmes.

2) Research Capacity Development: Attainment of Doctoral Qualification; Black male and woman academics into research leadership; harnessing the expertise of retired research scholars; Honorary research appointments.

3) Strategic Research Partnerships: Internationalization; Collaboration with Science Councils, Commerce and Industry; Partnerships for an Engaged University.

4) Research Incentive Scheme: Research Publications, Graduating Doctoral Students; NRF Rating, Postdoctoral Fellowships.

5) Internal Research Funding Scheme: conference attendance; support for research projects, research assistants, seed funding, leverage funding, and research equipment.

6) Research Ethics Policy: animal experimentation; humanities and social science research; research ethics education.

7) Protection of Intellectual Property and Commercialization thereof (Institutional Operating Plan, 2011).

4. Definition and Benefits of Peer Coaching

A student or peer coaching group can be defined as a small group of students who meet at regular intervals to help one another in proposal writing, thesis guide, generate rough drafts, revise and learn to critique each other's work (Pam, 1991; Broderick, 2011). However, the UWC support groups commonly known as coach coordinators are easily accessible, interactive and supportive community of students who provide postgraduate particularly masters and PhD students an opportune platform to write confidently, consistently and productively, without loneliness, confusion or feelings of being overwhelmed. Hiatt, (2009) indicates that, the ultimate goal of peer coaching assists students to push each other toward completion of the thesis and or dissertation within the reasonable amount of time. Consequently, the Division for Post Graduate Studies at UWC has five coaching clusters each comprising of eight to ten writing coaches, each headed by five coordinators. These coaches and students keep each other moving forward and ensure that students finish their thesis or dissertation and earn a respective degree in the reasonable amount of time. The group also encourages students to produce and complete long-term writing projects for publication.

This coaching initiative constitutes an effective participation of coach coordinators and as such allows students to learn valuable lessons such as new habit of consistent writing, and develop new strategies and practice them in a supportive environment (Hiatt, 2009).

Nevertheless, if African universities can compensate the lack of remuneration for its lecturers by implementing such support groups in each faculty and departments at their respective institutions will surely be a stepping stone toward building research capacity and development on the continent. It is imperative that some money be allocated, partly as an incentive, to writing coaches to support their work with postgraduate students. At the University of the Western Cape, this money comes in the form of work study stipend. The coaches use the money to assist them to meet their social needs, boost their self-esteem and to some extend use the money on their tuition.

It is public knowledge that students often drain their energy and self-esteem as they procrastinate on their long-term research projects. Therefore, to solve such issues, a student may join a coaching program which will incite him or her to write much more productive and consistently. Thus, this helps alleviate their procrastination.

Broderick (2011) attests that a writing coach support group has many benefits, for example it builds character such as self-discipline in writing. It also improves students writing skill and ability and can also play a pivotal role towards encouraging students to venture into scholarly publications. In addition, students would at least expect to receive and provide good company and support in what can be a time of great isolation. Together, students encourage and motivate one another. Coaching also allows students to take courage from the fact that most master's and doctoral candidates face the same kinds of problems while producing either the thesis or dissertation. With coaching initiative in place, students will hold themselves accountable for moving ahead. Accountability is one of the best ways to encourage and motivate students to keep working in order to finish their projects, especially when one feels discouraged or stuck (Arbor, 2000); Delmont et al, (1997b). Students can use the coaching opportunities at their disposal to expand their network of resources that helps them to achieve academic and personal goals. In addition, it is an opportunity to learn from others who have chosen to take the same journey.

Although completing a masters or doctoral degree is a demanding process that brings a unique set of challenges, such as emotional and psychological issues, it can be overcome with the initiative of coaching assistance. As Arbor (2000) has alluded to, students who join writing coaching do look for therapy that keeps the individual's focus on academic goals. It is important to note that the writing coach initiative is meant to provide guidance and direction only. Writing coach services are not meant to be substitutes for supervisors or counsellors, though in most cases the writing coach finds himself or herself being thrust into these roles. We do feel that, a department or faculty at any university should encourage students who feel the need for therapeutic help to do so within the framework of the writing coach or support (Arbor, 2000). To assist such students, professional support can be offered like the one Division for Post Graduate Studies at UWC is offering.

5. Coaching in the Making

As observed by (Arbor, 2000); Delmont et al, (1997b) adequately implemented, coach writing or peer mentoring can be a very powerful tool in building capacity and enhancing research development in African universities. To achieve the usefulness of peer coaching, it is equally valuable for a particular university to design and cater for successful writing support groups that would meet the needs of each department or faculty. To design and establish a successful student mentoring or support group, universities need to consider some of the following key features that must be set from the outset;

a)   The group should be set in a way that students have a clear idea on what they want to get out of the group. For instance, a student should indicate exactly what she or he wants to gain from the writing coach.

b)   Time management is crucial for the accomplishment of a task, and this is not different for managing and

coordinating a successful support group. Time has been instrumental at the University of the Western's PET project. For instance, from the outset, writing coaches usually set regular time to meet with students for a specific number of meetings and decide whether to renew the commitment in the session before the last of the agreed upon meetings is reached.

c)   Decisions should be made between the student and writing coach on the frequency of meeting which is crucial for all parties to maintain a healthy and progressive working environment.

Peer coaching helps students create a healthy social obligation to get work done. A student may, for example, promise: "to bring four pages to the next meeting." Arbor, (2000) points out that if one feels shame about not getting more work done, then instead of self-criticism, self-deprecating voice being the only voice she or he hears, she or he can in fact hear many voices supportive and encouraging voices. However, having the guts to report to someone that the work is not going well will sharpen one's self-criticism and help the student to approach the work afresh. Hence the Division for Post Graduate Studies at UWC is doing just that and a significant number of post graduate students have since benefited from the peer mentoring/ coaching program since its inception in 2001.

6. Student Coaching Model

Bloom and Robinson (2011), describes student coaching model as a tool that empower and equip students to develop a personal plan that exclusively fits the individual and at the same time best positions him or her to be academically successful. The authors (Ibid) stresses that a coaching model helps students set goals and action plans that would maximize the potential of ultimately helping a student earn a degree in his or her field of study.

Nevertheless, the UWC Writing Coach Model (WCM) is called an assembly line model. The assembly line model has a definite input point and a definite output point. In between, all processes lead to the output in a unidirectional process—much like a vehicle assembly line. Thus, the model is linear but with branches feeding into the mainline. (see figure 1 below)

Figure 1. The UWC-WCM process
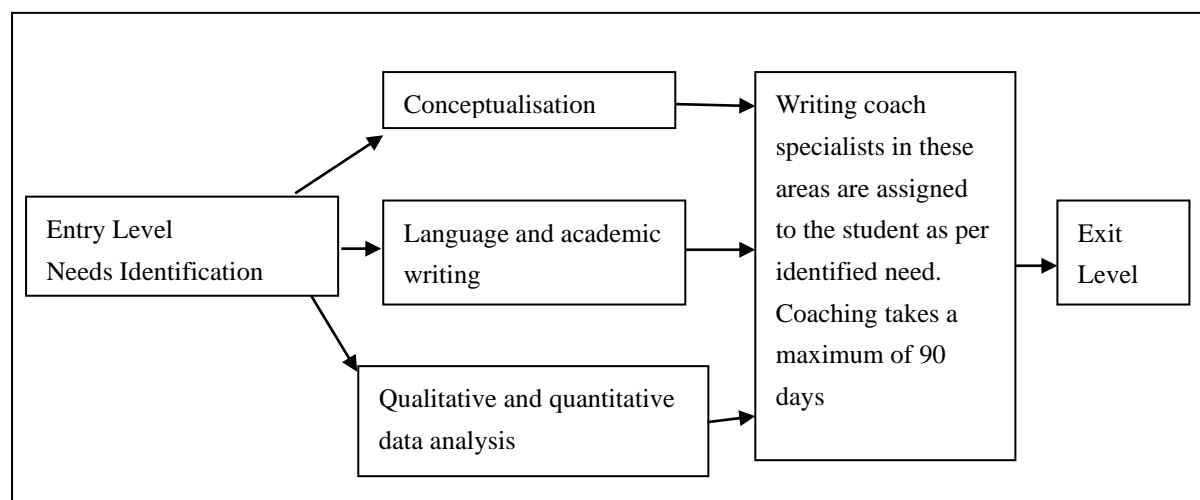
The model is guided by four elements, i.e.:

a)   Needs identification; the entry point is the student seeking assistance. The assistance sought is broken down into "packages". These are mainly of three types: i) conceptualisation, ii) language assistance and iii) data analysis. The student fills in a service agreement form stating exactly the type of assistance required. The students are required to state their needs in manageable packages. For example, a student who needs help with writing up a proposal, but is bad in academic writing and also needs help in thinking through what they want to do, would be encouraged to first of all express their needs in terms of conceptualisation of the research. When they have been assisted, they can then "apply" for language assistance and so on. They are not allowed to combine all their needs. This method of need identification helps to clarify the problem for the student as well, as in most cases they present a problem then later on realize that actually, what they need is different from what they say.

b)   Identification of a suitable writing coach; not all coaches are competent in all areas of the research development process. Four writing coach co-ordinators provide overall leadership and supervision in the

allocation of each client student to suitable writing coaches, matching the needs of the client to the available expertise of the coaches. The WCM provides for each writing coach co-ordinator to have a team of coaches with different specific competencies in the areas identified above, so that they can match client requirements with specific competencies. Using this alignment, the co-ordinator then assigns the student to the coach best suited to assist in that area of requirement. The coach then works with the client to complete the specific task.

c)   Delineating maximum times of engagement per unit of service; just like an assembly line, the WCM provides a time limit to completion. This time limit provision creates a sense of urgency, and business-like environment. This enables both client and coach to remain focused on the task at hand. At the moment, the time limit is 90 days after which the client should sign off.

d)   Satisfied clients complete a completion of service form, which not only provides feedback on the quality of service and customer satisfaction provided, but also highlights the major difficulties that the "client" student continues to experience. Thus, each completed package is like the product at the end of an assembly line—validated and certified by the clients themselves.

If necessary, the student client can then complete a new form for a new service or motivate why they want to extend the current service. This form can end up with a different co-ordinator, who will similarly assign it to a different, but competent coach and the process begins anew. This helps to keep the coaching on a professional level.

The service completion forms provide feedback which is periodically analysed and used in capacity building and skilling workshops for writing coaches. The Division for Postgraduate Studies conducts a year-long capacity development and skilling programme for writing coaches where they are exposed to state-of-the-art techniques and skills in all aspects of research development, mentoring and counselling.

7. **Uptake of the WCM Among UWC Postgraduate Students**

The WCM in its current form was only introduced this year. However, a previous version of the model has been in operation for two years now. The older version did not permit for an in-depth analysis of student needs, but did provide useful statistics on the general utilisation of the service. The following statistics demonstrate the extent to which the service is being utilized by postgraduate (Honours, Masters & PhDs) students across the University's faculties and research niche areas.

Table 1. Utilization of the writing coach service in 2010 and 2011

Faculty	Hons		Masters		PhDs		2010 Totals	% of 2010 Totals	2011 Totals	% of 2011 totals
	2010	2011	2010	2011	2010	2011				
ARTS	12	5	37	32	3	0	52	18.2	37	15.9
CHS	35	3	83	59	4	3	122	42.7	65	27.9
EDUCATION	0	13	42	26	6	2	48	16.8	41	17.6
EMS	3	4	7	21	1	0	11	3.8	25	10.7
LAW	0	0	7	10	0	3	7	2.4	13	5.6
SCIENCE	3	1	15	43	12	3	30	10.5	47	20.2
SOCIAL SCIENCE	10	0	6	4	0	1	16	5.6	5	2.1
Grand Total	63	26	197	195	26	12	286	100.00	233	100.00

Table 1 provides a summary of the service utilization by client students. From table 1 it is noted that the main beneficiaries for the writing coach services are the Masters students, constituting more than two thirds (69%) of all clients in 2010, and more than four-fifths (83%) in 2011. In addition, the main recipients of this service came mainly from the Community and Health Sciences Faculty in 2010, who contributed 43% of the clientele. In contrast, in 2011, perhaps due to the increased awareness of the service through all the faculties, and the improved reporting system, more faculties got almost equal slices of the service pie, with CHS contributing only 27% followed by the Science (20%), Education (18%) and the faculty of Arts (16%). The improved operational model thus appears to have found greater appeal across the University Faculties. An analysis of the 2011 service requests, as obtained from the service application forms, reveals that the vast majority of masters' students use the service to get assistance and coaching on issues pertaining to academic language construction and

organisation, and issues relating to instrumentation and data analysis. A good number of students still require assistance with the conceptualisation of their study, and had issues around the design of their research, the formulation of applicable research questions and referencing systems.

The coaching initiative inspires and motivates postgraduate students to enjoy their research work with ease, although it may sometimes be complicated and challenging. The writing coach initiative at the University of the University of the Western Cape is a friendly, encouraging environment, which supports and enables post graduate students to get more work accomplished. It is a confidential environment that allows a student to speak freely about the problems they encounter in their research, writing abilities, and relationships in their respective departments.

Writing coaches at UWC are quite aware of the challenges students face since they are in the same environment. It is quite obvious that dissertation writing can be lonely and often in isolation but with the guidance of a writing coach, encouragement is provided, focus improves, motivation and inspiration becomes apparent. The coaching service thus creates a symbiotic environment in which both coaches and clients learn from each other.

8. Feedback

Giving feedback is very importance for a better development of the coaching program. To receive better feedback of the work, each student assigned to a writing coach should be expected to hand in some work either online or hard copies of his or her feedback of the work that will be discussed during the session. In addition, during the meeting, the discussion coach advises the student accordingly based on the errors identified. The assistance rendered will allow a student to see more than one perspective on the writing task and will allow the student to make the appropriate amendments to improve his or her work.

However, according to Broderick, (2011) and Chisholm, (1991) coaching often hinges on asking the writer the right questions before offering the coach's opinions and suggestions. Chang (2007) points out that working closely with students through feedback would develop a practice in hope that students develop concepts and skills of logic in order to successfully solve problems and construct new knowledge.

Good coaching also always starts with the positive, with respect to questions and comments. Samples of coaching questions you pose to a student are:

• What do you like about this piece of writing?

• In terms of the content, what do you think works well? What doesn't?

• In terms of the quality of the writing, what works well? What doesn't?

Clarifying questions

• What did you intend to do [in this part]?

• How does [this section] link to [another section]?

• What do you mean by [this statement]?

9. Conclusion

At the close of this paper that explores peer or student writing support group or coaching as one of the immediate panacea or solution to enhance research development in the African universities, it is therefore imperative to point out that peer coaching is a fundamental tool in a postgraduate learning environment.

However, this paper discusses the peer or students support group as a resourceful strategy to develop research capacity. The paper, first defined peer support group, UWC's mission and vision, uptake of the coaching model to UWC's postgraduate students, feed backs, and the university's research policy. Secondly, it discussed the benefits of the support group. Finally, a model of support group and its key features were recommended as a model that can serve as a base line to design and establish successful students mentoring programs. Although the paper sought to achieve its goal by discussing the importance of peer mentoring/coaching program, it did not cover all aspect of the problems that face African universities in matter related to research nor did it uncover all aspects of mentoring initiatives; it gave preference to some key features and their benefits.

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