

**“...the research... at PhD level, it gets quite lonely...”: Creating a community of practice through a writing retreat**

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## ABSTRACT

Research highlights the effectiveness of writing retreats in enhancing academic productivity by creating environments that are conducive to focused writing away from daily distractions. The current study evaluates a writing retreat that was organised in 2021 by the Father Connections Research Team (FACT), which is based at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). Using qualitative semi-structured interviews, data were collected from seven of the nine academics and postgraduate students who attended the retreat. The findings reveal that the retreat provided a community of practice, which significantly enhanced participants' writing productivity compared to their usual home environments. This study adds to the growing evidence that writing retreats can benefit academics and postgraduate students by fostering productivity, encouraging sustained writing efforts, and supporting independent work within a communal setting. The unique contribution of this paper is its reflexive approach, where the authors, who themselves were participants in the study, use a community of practice perspective to offer critical reflections and deepen the understanding of writing retreat benefits.

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## Introduction

Recent statistics show that between 2005 and 2020, South Africa had a substantial growth in postgraduate enrolments; most notably a 150% increase (from 434 to 23 588) in registration for the students of the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) (Essop, 2025). Over the same period (2005-2020), master's enrolments rose by 36% (44 321 to 60 132), and postgraduate diploma or honours (PgD/H) enrolments increased by 50% (44 970 to 67 548). This expansion reflects a national belief that higher education plays a transformative role in driving the socioeconomic development in a post-apartheid context. The historical inequalities in the Global South continue to shape access to and success within higher education. Therefore, strengthening postgraduate education is particularly significant for cultivating locally relevant scholarship and building research capacity.

However, owing to issues such as student attrition and retention, although there is increased access to postgraduate programmes in South Africa, the completion rates have not kept pace with enrolments. Although there are a few studies on student attrition and retention, research conducted in North American universities found that 40 to 50% of students dropped out of their doctoral programmes (Quecano, Rincon & Moreno, 2024). Then, in the South African context, Khauoe and Fore (2020) lament the country's 15% graduation rate in 2008, which was the lowest in the world in that year. South Africa has also been found to experience an increase in retention of postgraduate students while the graduation rate keeps descending (Khauoe & Fore, 2020).

In line with the above statistics, students encounter several socioeconomic and academic challenges. One of the key socioeconomic challenges experienced by postgraduate students in South Africa is that many of them must take up part-time, or even full-time work, as they usually are also providers for their own children, parents, or extended family members. Some are also self-funded, requiring them to raise their tuition and living expenses (Rockman, Aderibigbe, Allen-Ile, Mahembe & Hamman-Fisher, 2022). The strain that comes with having to balance their time between work, family, and studying could result in burnouts, leading to a stretched period to complete their degree, or dropping out before completion, or, in the worst case, suicidal ideation or suicide (Janse van Vuuren, Bodenstein & Oberholzer, 2021; Nkoala, 2024).

The several academic challenges experienced by postgraduate students in South Africa include delayed feedback from supervisors (Amani, Myeya & Mhewa, 2022; Kgari-Masondo, Chingwanangwana, Chimbunde, Zondi, Umejei & Mosina, 2024). This may make students feel that their supervisors are not sufficiently supportive or invested in their studies. Yet, the role of supervision is central to enhancing the success of post-graduate studies, for example, Van Rooij,

Fokkens-Bruinsma and Jansen (2019) give prominence to the supervisor's availability, arguing that it lowers attrition risk. For Van Rooij et al. (2019), an available supervisor will have frequent, physical presence for meetings with the student, and providing timely feedback to questions via emails. However, for a successful supervisor-student relationship, there is a need for balanced commitment from both the student and their supervisor (McKenna & van Schalkwyk, 2024). Nonetheless, Mbanjwa (2025) argues that supervisors at South African universities often experience a vast amount of pressure when performing their roles because the student-supervisor ratio is often not realistic as the number of postgraduate students enrolled surpasses the number of available supervisors. This affects the supervisor's ability to offer supervision and support to their students, contributing to delayed feedback, thus negatively affecting institutions' ability to keep to their graduation aims (McKenna & van Schalkwyk, 2024).

Another key academic challenge faced by postgraduates, especially in the Global South, is the sociolinguistics of writing (Blommaert, 2013; Ntombela, 2016; Wigdorowitz, Perez & Tsimpli, 2022). The sociolinguistics of writing is an understanding of field-specific language framing (Wigdorowitz et al., 2022). This is discussed later in this paper, especially indicating how a writing retreat can play a crucial role in helping authors align with their field in their writing, helping sharpen their critical thinking as well as facilitating their writing to be more impactful, and field relevant.

Therefore, in this paper, we argue that the lack in supervision support undermines higher education's transformative potential, to fully act as a vehicle for socioeconomic change, as postgraduate students do not have adequate supervisory support to succeed and contribute to scholarship. It further negatively affects the upward trajectory sought by South African universities, of producing 100 doctoral graduates per million (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020). Therefore, many strategies to support postgraduate students are needed and such strategies can include writing retreats. In this paper, we view writing retreats as offering a meaningful, contextually responsive approach to address this gap. We adopt Wiebe, Pratt and Noel's (2023) understanding of a writing retreat, that it is a professional growth opportunity that allows scholars to focus on writing while receiving on-site support for their work.

Our paper is grounded in the principles of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) within the Global South. Hence, we view writing retreats as a mechanism for fostering a community of practice to empower postgraduate students as emerging scholars. Such opportunities can provide structured, collaborative, and sustained writing support during and beyond the in-residence writing retreat period, thus enhancing students' research productivity, strengthening scholarly identity, and increasing the likelihood of timely degree completion.

## Background

Considering the need for more support for postgraduate students' writing, as highlighted in the above section, FACT, based at Wits, has implemented several writing retreats over the years. FACT is a research group that was developed by a team of researchers at the Wits to support postgraduate students and early career researchers in their research endeavours.

Since its origin, FACT has had several long-term and short-term members who are researchers at different academic levels, including professors, doctors, PhD students, and master's students. Over the years, the primary activities for the team were to conduct weekly meetings in which researchers shared their projects to receive constructive feedback. FACT has also organised regular writing retreats, conferences, presentations, data collection, site visits, and member check meetings in various provinces of South Africa. Some of the participants in the writing retreat, specifically focused on in this paper, were members of FACT for several years.

The writing retreats offered by FACT have been aimed at providing academics and students with a valuable opportunity to enhance their research writing skills. They provided a dedicated environment for shaping research through peer review within the writing group. Students could consult with senior scholars present at the retreats and receive feedback from peers with similar research interests and greater expertise; all aimed at fostering productivity and deepening critical engagement through writing, as well as formal and informal on-site conversations.

The writing retreat of focus in the current paper was organised by FACT and we (all authors of this paper) attended it on-site from 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> July 2021 in Johannesburg. This was a three-day on-site writing retreat that brought together two senior academic staff members and seven students at both masters' and PhD levels. The academics were main or co-supervisors to most of the students in the retreat. Reflecting on our experiences during the FACT writing retreat, we hope to show through this paper how such spaces are not only effective to foster productivity and collaborative writing but also to create a community of practice. Moreover, using our experiences, in this paper we elucidate how writing retreats can contribute to the broader intentions of South African higher education to support postgraduate students' success. Noteworthy is that in this paper we are particularly interested in postgraduate students' experiences, and the supervisors or academics are viewed as the support structure for this retreat. Therefore, while the academics' experiences of support are crucial, at this point they were not our focus.

## Literature review

Since their origin around the 1960s, in the United States of America (USA), writing retreats have spread globally to support student-centred learning (Aitchison & Lee 2006; Dube, Maphosa, Mershon & Miner-Romanoff, 2017). Although they have now become popular and beneficial to a broader academic community, most of the early writing retreats had been offered to female students or staff, to afford them space and time to write, away from the pressure they incur owing to work and home responsibilities (Castle & Keane, 2016). This strategy was useful in advancing gender equality while improving general research outputs (Murray, 2012).

Most students who have attended and benefited from writing retreats are postgraduate (master's and PhDs), who are enrolled on a part-time basis within their programmes, and must disproportionately juggle the realities of their professional career, studies, family life, and academic studies (Davis, Wright & Holley, 2016). Similarly, Harrison, Rowland, Wood, Bakewell, Petridis, Long et al. (2023) argue that postgraduate students tend to experience feelings of isolation as they often receive no additional support to progress with their writing, other than from their supervisors. If the supervisor is not sufficiently present to the student, the lack of external support can be challenging, which may lead to academic dropout (Harrison et al., 2023). Postgraduate students who are unsupported and also have pressure from their socioeconomic responsibilities can experience writer's block, procrastination, lack of motivation to continue with their degree programmes, and poor mental health (Buckley, Saetnan, Gerber, Cheetham, Price, Kenyani et al., 2021; Kempenaar & Murray, 2016; Winberg, Jacobs & Wolff, 2017).

### **Socioeconomic and academic challenges faced by postgraduate students**

Existing studies show that, globally, postgraduate students tend to struggle with academic challenges such as poor preparedness to tackle their research. For example, at PhD level some students are unable to conduct and draft proper scientific research appropriately (Akala, 2020). Additionally, a PhD is often considered a lonely journey. Although there are transformations in approach, currently most universities worldwide use the one-to-one supervision frameworks (McKenna & van Schalkwyk, 2024). In this framework, a student has their supervisor as the only support structure, while their programme is not strictly structured. Thus, for most PhD students, they must independently conduct an extensive research project, without attending classes, or submitting any regular assignments. This makes a PhD a lonely experience.

The often-lonely journey of postgraduate studies confines students to writing for imaginary readers. Therefore, for most of the time, the students need to be iteratively reflecting on their own writing while progressively developing their theses or dissertations. This process can be highly challenging for the students, often negatively affecting their progress towards degree completion. Hence, a writing retreat provides opportunities for live discussions that further and more constructively inspire critical thinking, extending the students' own zone of proximal development in ways they could not do by themselves (Kearney & Mbeve, 2025; Mbeve, Mhlanga, Ngidi, Ngwenya, Khumalo, Makongoza et al., 2023). Therefore, a writing retreat stimulates critical thinking towards successful learning through peer reinforcement and feedback (Emig, 1977).

The above various socioeconomic and academic challenges yield poor graduation rates, yet universities are expected to deliver yearly outputs that consist of students' timely completion of their degrees (Mabunda, 2023; Mbeve & Mhlanga, 2022; Mbeve et al., 2023; Thomas & Maree, 2022). While these challenges are observed in normal academic settings, they were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and its related restrictions that forced people to stay at home. As reported in several studies, socioeconomic and academic activities were halted (Mbeve et al., 2020; Mofijur et al., 2021; Naseer et al., 2023). This resulted in several mental health and socioeconomic issues that had a strong impact on students' ability to, mostly independently, continue productive work on their studies, including postgraduate students who were working on their theses and dissertations (Mofijur, Fattah, Alam, Islam, Ong, Rahman et al., 2021; Naseer, Khalid, Parveen, Abbass, Song & Achim, 2023). While struggling to continue and complete their degrees, their support systems were also affected. For example, supervisors and faculties were also in shock from the COVID-19 pandemic, as everyone had to protect themselves and their loved ones from infection (Mbeve et al., 2020; Mofijur et al., 2021; Naseer et al., 2023).

The socioeconomic and academic challenges that are faced by postgraduate students, significantly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, warrant the need for universities to find strategies to combat them. Some strategies that have already been put in place to support postgraduate students globally include various grants such as those that are offered or administered by universities as merit awards and national research funds. In addition to funding support, supporting postgraduate students academically remains paramount, a gap that writing retreats contributes towards filling (Devos & Somerville, 2012). As shown by previous studies, writing retreats have assisted in alleviating the perceived levels of writing stress experienced by postgraduate students writing in isolation (Buckley et al., 2021).

### **Role of writing retreats in supporting postgraduate students**

In our observations, some of the notably effective writing retreats are organised by supervisors. They include writing workshops, individualised and structural goal setting for the duration of the writing retreat, as well as allowing sufficient periods for extensive writing to enhance productivity. Furthermore, some writing retreats encourage contact between supervisors and students (on- or off-site), while writing takes place, to ensure constant feedback is provided. This enhances greater productivity and high-quality outcomes (Singh, 2012; Murray, 2013; Van Rooij et al., 2019). In this way, writing retreats: a) create an environment of trust and safety for productive writing. They also create an opportunity b) for student-to-student assistance as well as students receiving expert assistance from their supervisors or seasoned scholars during the writing process. Furthermore, they: c) create a multidisciplinary community of writers who are able to provide support and constructive feedback to one another, to explore the links between teaching, research, writing, and scholarship; and d) develop space for students and supervisors to contribute to a productive and meaningful experience in which individualised goals are attained, and the potential for future collaborations as well as continued research endeavours can be explored (Moore, 2003).

Some studies have demonstrated various benefits of writing retreats, such as positive effects on the attendees' lives and increased progress in their writing. Furthermore, they are a way to encourage academics and postgraduate students to write when this task has been viewed as threatening and daunting (Chandler, Barry & Clark, 2002; Dube et al., 2017). Additionally, writing retreats offer an opportunity for guidance, networking, and fellowship (Dube et al., 2017; Murray, 2012). For example, our current study demonstrates the writing retreat's effectiveness during a period of seclusion. Owing to their effectiveness, writing retreats have produced positive outcomes such as completion of thesis chapters and learning new writing habits (Coonan, Pratt-Adams & Warnes, 2019).

### **Theoretical framework: Community of practice**

Wenger and Wenger-Trayner (2015:2) developed a framework for a community of practice and defined it as "communities, groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." The community of practice theory is used to describe the practice adopted by a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something that they do (Condrón & Eppich, 2022; Noar, Jeffery, Subbiah Ponniah & Jaffer, 2023). Such a group is considered to learn to do better on what they are enthusiastic about through regular interactions, by advising and supporting each other. This suggests that to understand the ideology of

a community of practice, one must first be able to highlight or describe the problem or challenge that the group of people are facing.

For postgraduate students who participated in the writing retreat organised by FACT, the idea of a community of practice was built on the common interest of supporting each other in further developing research projects and producing some written outcomes, as described later in this paper. Therefore, a writing retreat allows the development of a supportive community of writing practice that extends back to the campus, an approach with which our findings are consistent (Wiebe et al., 2023).

Moreover, Wiebe et al. (2023) state that writing retreats can help with developing an ongoing writing community, characterised by a shared vision of participants, connectedness with other writers, collegial support from peers, mentors, and social interaction through shared meals as well as group activities. This aligns with our participants' experiences and the type of environment that was created during the writing retreat to foster a sense of community throughout the process.

Wenger and Wenger-Trayner (2015) are also of the view that there are three main factors that characterise a community of practice and these are: firstly, domain – where members of a group share a common interest, including academic, grant proposal, conference paper, and journal article writing; secondly, community – where group members have a sense of community through constantly engaging in common activities in the same room and collaborating on work that goes beyond the writing retreat. For example, the current paper is manifest of the second factor, as we have created an academic writing community that has lasted years beyond the writing retreat at which we first met. The third characteristic is practice – in this process, through ongoing activities, community members develop new knowledge, abilities, and resources. As shown with our example, we have continued to engage with each other and collaborated in different ways through sharing knowledge, resources, and time to continuously enhance each other's work. By developing all these three elements in parallel, one can cultivate a community of practice.

### Research methodology

This is a small-scale qualitative study that uses a reflexive approach to offer critical reflections and deepen the understanding of writing retreat benefits. In this study, researchers were, simultaneously, participants, data collectors, and then authors of this paper. The reflexive approach was an important tool that allowed us to think critically about our experiences during the retreat, and to co-generate the knowledge that we report in this paper as findings. Therefore, the processes

of data collection and interpretation were strongly shaped by our roles as facilitators, participants, and then authors of our experiences. This reflexive process, while exciting, had several challenges, that were mostly centred around bias. However, we put in place certain measures that helped us manage the data and attempt to address some of the challenges. We employed strategies such as anonymising the reflective submissions and assigning researchers to analyse reflections that were not their own. We also held collective sense-making discussions where we openly interrogated assumptions, biases, and emerging interpretations.

Since participants interviewed were part of the writing retreat, an opportunistic purposive sampling was used to recruit them. In our last reflection session in the writing retreat, we all agreed that we were going to co-author this paper, but this also meant that all of us were going to be participants. The lead author was selected, and he took on the responsibility to proceed with follow-ups and further arrangements. The data collection process consisted of two phases. In the first phase, participants were asked to write approximately five pages of reflective notes about their experiences during the writing retreat. To probe this writing process, the following questions were posed:

1. What are your overall reflections about the writing retreat?
2. Explain the main attributes of the writing retreat that had an effect on your research write-up?
3. Use your experiences of the current writing retreat to provide some of your key recommendations on writing retreats for postgraduate students?

Responses to the above questions were submitted to the lead researcher, who anonymised the submissions by replacing real names on them with pseudonyms. The anonymised reflections were distributed to team authors for analysis and each author analysed a reflection that was not theirs. After a two-week period, researchers submitted their identified key themes to the lead researcher. The lead researcher compiled the themes into a Google Document for further review. Subsequently, the entire team convened for a meeting to discuss the themes. The team reached a consensus to proceed to conduct a second phase of data collection and analysis, focusing on the selected themes from the first phase. In the second phase, the team organised semi-structured interviews that were conducted online via Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and WhatsApp, based on the participant's preference.

The interview questions explored participants' general understanding of the communities of practice as a theory and their experiences of writing retreats. The questions further explored the factors that influenced their studies, such as personal, academic, and contextual factors. These included: family support, academic goals, experiences related to them studying for their degree, and the COVID-19

pandemic. They further examined the perceived value, relevance, and impact of the writing retreat on students' academic progress and sought recommendations for future retreats.

Three researchers volunteered to lead phase two, overseeing the interviews, initiating data analysis, and spearheading the manuscript writing process. In total, seven participants from the writing retreat were interviewed for this study. The interviewed participants consisted of five students and two supervisors. The students were a mixture of both master's and PhD students at different levels of their studies. The following two tables describe the participants.

Table 1: Student participants

Pseudonym	Degree pursued	School	Year of study	Gender	Age (years)
Java	PhD	Human and Community Development	4 <sup>th</sup>	Male	Early 60s
Emmanuel	PhD	Social Sciences	4 <sup>th</sup>	Male	Early 30s
Lilly	Master's	Human and Community Development	1 <sup>st</sup>	Female	Early 30s
Sheila	PhD	Human and Community Development	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Female	Early 30s
Miriam	PhD	Social Sciences	4 <sup>th</sup>	Female	Early 30s
Selin	PhD	Public Health	1 <sup>st</sup>	Female	Late 20s
Naomie	Master's	Human and Community Development	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Female	Late 20s

Table 2: Description of instructor/advisor participants

Title	Pseudonym	School	Department
Dr	Sihle	Human and Community Development	Speech Therapy
Prof.	Sanele	Human and Community Development	Social Work

### Thematic data analysis

To analyse the data, we followed Clarke and Braun's (2013) six-step data analysis phases, especially for the in-depth qualitative interviews. This included familiarising ourselves with the transcribed data, through reading and re-reading the transcripts. In this phase, we generated codes that we combined into themes. We then reviewed the themes to ensure that they aligned with the participants' experiences, based on their responses. This was followed by a process of ensuring the significance of the themes for this paper. We generated this paper through reporting of the findings, as outlined in the following section.

## Discussion of findings

The findings of this study are grouped into five key themes, which are: 1) challenges faced by postgraduate students; 2) previous experiences influencing students' participation and perceptions of the current writing retreat; 3) focused writing retreats as a community of practice enhancement; and 4) community of practice's cumulative benefits for postgraduate students. The findings are unpacked in detail below.

### Challenges faced by postgraduate research students

Most of the students who participated in this study had to balance their work, study, and social responsibilities, with most of them not having full funding for their studies, yet some of them had families that they cared for. While they did not complain about having too much work, they mostly spoke about trying to balance these responsibilities, and how it affected their studies. An example of the challenge for balancing work and studying was presented by Mirriam, a PhD student who also worked full-time. She explained:

*"Okay, so basically, I'm a PhD student and also work for my department. So, what that means is that my contract, or terms of reference, with the department is that I have to do my PhD 50% and work 50%"* (Mirriam, PhD candidate).

Mirriam gave a snapshot of her experiences as a PhD student, as she officially had to divide her workload such that she conducted her PhD research 50% of the time that she was registered, and for the other 50% of the time, had to do departmental work. However, during the time of this study, Mirriam was managing a national project that, for her, required far much more than the 50% of the time that she was officially expected to spend; she explained:

*"...you can register (as a PhD student) full time, so [but] basically yeah, I'm registered full-time, but I also work full-time... the balance is not always straightforward it's... You know, sometimes the work overlaps and it's 90% so yeah"* (Mirriam, PhD candidate).

Indicated in the above quotation, Mirriam's PhD research was heavily affected by her having to balance the demands of work and study, often having to sacrifice her study time for work, as it gave her an income which she needed. The challenge of balancing work and study commitments extended the amount of time of completing her PhD to about eight years, when the university had expected her to complete it in three years. However, Mirriam's experience is not unique, as all the PhD students in this study had surpassed the time of completion for their degrees, owing to several socioeconomic and academic challenges. Yet, in South Africa, no study has specifically focused on how socioeconomic and academic challenges lead to an extended period of degree completion,

particularly for PhD students. But our findings and anecdotal evidence allude to a need for this research focus, along with major reforms.

Other participants in the study also explained having had traumatic experiences while reviewing their workload in relation to their overall studying goals and realising that it was not the best decision for them to have had to study for an onerous degree (PhD) while working. Java (PhD, candidate) narrated, *“I must tell you, before going for a retreat, there was a time when I was thinking, you know, I was interrogating myself whether I made the right decision? Because I was now lagging well behind...”*

A combination of his heavy workload, and studying for a PhD, led to Java contemplating his decisions to take on both tasks at the same time. Java’s reflections were based on having been a full-time director of a non-profit organisation (NGO), while he was also a PhD student. Java was also a senior student who had a family that required much of his attention to be present and play his social role as a father. He went on to explain why and how he had to divide his attention as follows:

*“...You know, at home, and sometimes at work, when you don't pay full attention and when you start a thought process and an argument, then somebody knocks and you start attending to them. Then you go back to your writing”* (Java, PhD candidate).

The participants’ reflections above showcase the overall experiences of many postgraduate students in the Southern African region in general, where they face challenges with accessing sufficient financial support to enrol and complete their degrees (Masutha & Motala, 2023; Statistics South Africa, 2017). These challenges may result in deregistration or delayed completion of their degrees (Rapanyane, 2020; Sebothoma, Masuku & Moroe, 2021). Some postgraduate students are also providers for their families or live alone away from any family support (Case, Marshall, McKenna & Mogashana, 2018). This exerts pressure on them to manage the requirements of work to make an income, while at the same time trying to focus on completing their degrees. Under this heavy pressure in South Africa, as in other parts of the world, there have been cases of postgraduate students committing suicide, and in other contexts the abuse of substances such as alcohol and drugs has been reported (Du, Zan, Cho, Fenton, Hsiao, Hsiao et al., 2021; Pillay, 2021; Scherer & Leshner, 2021). Sheila expressed how much pressure she had being a mother, PhD candidate, and full-time employee:

*“...I think that's another factor that made it quite difficult. I work full time. I have a two-year-old. Yeah, I have a two-year-old. That's a lot... I am constantly trying to work on a structure... work has its own time... The baby needs additional help as well, that I get. Yeah, and yeah, I'm just floating, really. I don't know how to... there isn't a balance. There isn't a clear balance,*

*especially in moments where my child falls sick everything falls off literally” (Sheila, PhD candidate).*

As she listed above, Sheila had a responsibility to fulfil her equally highly demanding roles. Such demands exerted immense pressure and required various skills and coping mechanisms for her to be able to survive her PhD journey. The quotations analysed in this theme offer the main challenges that the participants in the current study experienced. These affected their abilities to work well on their studies and complete their theses or dissertations on time, thus formulating a problem, or common challenge, that the community of practice could address by ensuring that postgraduate students’ writing is a success (Condrón & Eppich, 2022; Noar et al., 2023).

Using the community of practice that was formulated by the writing retreat, participants’ intentions were to use the few days away from the pressure that they faced from work and family to only focus on writing and sharing their experiences, as a community. However, it is worth noting that the students in the current study had already also taken a step to address their existing challenges by initiating some structures or had previously participated in other community-of-practice settings. This was advantageous for them as they brought their previous knowledge and experiences to the current writing retreat.

Previous experiences influencing students’ participation and perceptions of the current writing retreat.

This paper focuses on one writing retreat, but it also showcases the strengths that students already had and demonstrates how these were helpful in facilitating this writing retreat. Students had tried to address their obstacles towards completing their degrees. This is worth noting, to be able to compare the specific contributions that the FACT writing retreat had to offer and that which participants appreciated. Participants such as Mirriam had already attended at least three writing retreats organised by her department since she had registered for her PhD: *“I attended three (writing retreats during her PhD so far), if my memory serves me well, I think... All three were organised by the department that I am currently pursuing my PhD in” (Mirriam, PhD candidate).*

Emmanuel also reported having previously attended several writing retreats:

*“...it was not really my first-time attending writing retreats. I have been attending writing retreats before in different settings. Sometimes stay-in like we did for (FACT organised Writing retreat). Sometimes, you know, you come every day and you write during the day and that’s it, and then you go back home and stuff like that, or just three days or one week, you know, something like that. I have done that...” (Emmanuel, PhD candidate).*

Emmanuel had already attended several writing retreats starting from his enrolment for his first postgraduate degree (honours). These students had had an experience of attending and participating in writing retreats, which acted as a community of practice. However, there were some participants who had not attended a writing retreat that they considered as well-structured and pertinent, such as Sheila, who said: *"...it was like my first proper writing retreat that I've attended..."*.

Sheila's quotation leads the discussion towards a focused analysis of the specific benefits that were feasible from the FACT retreat, that we discuss in the following theme. Sheila viewed the lack of structure in her previous writing retreats as a weakness, which affected her ability to fully benefit from them. In contrast, communities of practice offer organised structures, such as a clear schedule for writing, reflections, consultations, and meals that help community members undertake their goals (James-McAlpine, Larkins & Nagle, 2023; Nistor, Daxecker, Stanciu & Diekamp, 2015). These are more effective in the on-site writing retreats, allowing students instant access to academic support, sufficient rest, and motivated writing. The writing retreat also allows each member to feel as belonging to and having ownership of the community, which offers them the courage to suggest a structure which would benefit them, and the rest of the community (Condrón & Eppich, 2022; Noar et al., 2023). Furthermore, despite having attended various writing retreats, Emmanuel reflected on the uniqueness of the FACT writing retreat below:

*"But I think there is one thing that was unique about that one (FACT organised writing retreat), which I think I had not experienced much in other writing retreats, although reflections were there in other writing retreats that I had, I attended before that one, I think they were much based on sort less accountability and, so that which it did not necessarily push you as the author" (Emmanuel, PhD candidate).*

The lack of structure was also associated with the departmental support in general, where participants felt that their departments had no clear structures to strongly support their postgraduate journeys, as Mirriam (PhD candidate) said: *"When I started, honestly, there wasn't much structured support. I think I relied on the supervisors and some peers, you know, in terms of giving advice about my PhD, and thinking through some of my questions."*

The structure reported by Mirriam could be realised through a community of practice (Condrón & Eppich, 2022; Noar et al., 2023), and this was visible during the writing retreat. However, to deal with the limited departmental support, Mirriam demonstrated a healthy sense of self-efficacy as she said that she had participated in formulating what she and her peers named a 'PhD support group,' in which they developed strategies to support each other on their PhD journeys; she explained:

*"...As time went on, especially last year, from February, if I'm not mistaken, we formed a PhD support group which has really been helpful in terms of accountability, emotional support, and*

*academic support. Yeah, and you know also helping in terms of pushing forward, because we have writing retreats, we have check-ins, and you know we share information about how people handle PhD struggles and challenges. So, I think those are sort of kind of the supposed support systems that we structured as students. I've also applied for conferences or workshops" (Mirriam, PhD candidate).*

In line with findings in a few existing studies on South African higher education, it seemed that the peer-to-peer support group that Mirriam and her peers formulated was highly effective in supporting PhD students (McCray & Joseph-Richard, 2020; Yu, Wang, Tang, Wu, Tang & Huang, 2021). Other studies have also shown that in addition to just academic support, higher education students benefit greatly from socio-psychological support, which may be undermined by institutions (Mbeve & Mhlanga, 2022; Yu et al., 2021). Students tend to be left to fend for themselves, and cope with individualised pressure and stress related to the progress in their studies, leading to depression and even some fatal cases (Mbeve & Mhlanga, 2022). Furthermore, these peer support groups tend to create resilient graduate students who may tackle the research arena and support the development of several interventions and innovations, much needed within the southern African region.

Moreover, in the current study, postgraduate students were highly diverse, for example, being at different levels of their degree programmes (master's and PhD) and years of study (some still at proposal level while others were nearly completing their studies). They were also studying different courses, namely: Migration and Displacement, Social Work, and Psychology, hosted in different schools (again, see Table 1). Also, as indicated earlier, some students had attended several writing retreats while others were attending for the first time. This diversity seemed to enhance intra-student consultations with minimum guidance from supervisors required. The students formed on-site peer-to-peer support systems by helping one another based on their lived experiences. This approach has the potential to be broadly helpful in addressing some of the cognitive and psychosocial causes of attrition in postgraduate studies.

### **Focused writing retreat's community of practice enhancements**

The current study's findings suggest that an effective community of practice is beyond a focused, 'work-only,' relationship. It is more holistic, including social and psychological support. What seemed more recognisable in the current writing retreat's sense of community of practice was that it provided a supportive environment where individuals with specific, and at times similar, goals worked together to achieve them. This was mostly achievable through a structure that was well organised, and a conducive environment. Mirriam explained, "...I think one thing that I've just taken

*off from attending different writing retreats is I think it also depends on who's facilitating the writing retreat and the kind of environment that they're trying to set."*

As shown in Mirriam's quotation above, the conducive environment in which the community of practice was realised made some participants feel that they were supported. This, as shown in the following quotation, had to be an environment where peers were interested in each other's work, despite disciplinary differences. Mirriam reported below:

*"...what I appreciated about the one that we had was you know you really could feel the sense of community. You could feel the sense of support and you know that... people were rooting for you. People were really interested in your topic and the feedback was really (showing that) people (were) really invested because... time was spent on my topic, and I really appreciated that because... I really felt that people were invested in trying to help me and really understand what I'm trying to do" (Mirriam, PhD candidate).*

As reported in the above quotation, the interest reported by Mirriam resulted in students giving each other sufficiently constructive feedback. Students' interest on each other's work and peer feedback creates healthy pressure for them to feel the need to meaningfully, progressively work on their research projects (Mavri, Ioannou & Loizides, 2021; Stone, 2021; Terry, Nguyen, Peck, Smith & Phan, 2020). The sense of community was similarly appreciated by Sheila, who felt that a PhD was a problematically lonely research undertaking, as is also reported in other studies (Bettinson & Haven-Tang, 2021; Cantor, 2020;). The feeling of loneliness was also especially applicable to Sheila, who was also a mother to a toddler, working, and having to conduct her PhD in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Sheila appreciated the community as follows:

*"It felt like a community, actually... for those days... and this is in relation to both writing retreats, I really appreciated that sense of community. I felt valued as well because I think the research, and especially at PhD level, gets quite lonely and you don't know what you are doing with who as well" (Sheila, PhD candidate).*

Furthermore, in the above quotations, Mirriam and Sheila demonstrated some principles of the theory of community of practice, including shared interest and identity (de Carvalho-Filho, Tio & Steinert, 2020), where she felt supported. The identity that Sheila felt is particularly being part of a group of postgraduate students working together on writing and supporting research projects to produce high quality work. This kind of identity can also be developed subsequently, where the participants take on the responsibility for supervising their own students. Thus, the writing retreat creates a community of practice for developing future careers, beyond just students completing their degrees (Wisker, 2023).

Sheila's community of peers and organisers supported her by formulating a sense of joint enterprise (de Carvalho-Filho et al., 2020; Irving, McPadden & Caballero, 2020; Xue, Hu, Chi & Zhang, 2021), instead of negatively critiquing her work and abilities. The feeling that people were invested in her work as a joint enterprise also shows that there was well-intended and constructive support which was generated over a period of a week. The writing retreat reviewers shared their work by talking about it with peers and organisers in several organised formal sessions and casually during the lunch or break times. This community of practice helped Mirriam see value in her own doctoral project, especially in an environment of people whom she was mostly meeting for the first time. She could see that her study had an important impact, which boosted her confidence to talk more and be more progressive in her writing. It was the feeling of joint enterprise and a spirit of camaraderie that was further appreciated by Emmanuel, another doctoral candidate, who said:

*"...I think it was a successful one for both of them. I think in those retreats, when we were having those short reflections compared to other retreats that I have attended... I have been attending writing retreats before in different settings. Sometimes stay-in like we did. Sometimes, you know, you come to the venue every day. You write during the day and that's it, and then you go back home or to your hotel room and stuff like that... I have attended those writing retreats before. But I think there is one thing that was unique about that one, reflections... they were there in other writing retreats that I attended but they were different... I think they were much based on sort of accountability and, so that it did not necessarily push you as the author. So, you sort of had that... you know, freedom that, well you can do what you want" (Emmanuel, PhD candidate).*

In comparison to his previous retreats, Emmanuel noted that the current writing retreat offered him a more constructive community of practice, which enforced his responsibility to write. He felt that he was encouraged by the current retreat to be accountable for his reflections. In community of practice theory, reflection acts as shared practice where participants reflect on their progress, challenges, and goals (de Carvalho-Filho et al., 2020; Irving et al., 2020; Xue et al., 2021). These reflections were followed by peers' and organisers' advice to finding solutions to the challenges that each participant shared. Participants could also share motivational feedback such as their progress in writing, and strategies that they used. Therefore, there was what seemed to have been positive peer pressure, which was helpful for participants' writing progress. Emmanuel explained further:

*"I think in that retreat there was accountability, and I think that worked because of peers as well. You know, sometimes we talk about peer pressure as a bad thing, but I think the presence of peers... It gave me a reason to push. I saw others work and I heard others speak about their work and their struggles and their successes and how they were pushed by their peers or even the supervisors to push themselves to work harder or, you know, or to be more critical and stuff like that. And the opportunity for me to give others feedback as well. When I give others feedback, that similar kind of feedback, when I'm in my room and trying to think about my work, then I also think, 'yeah, but that's what I said to that project. And maybe that also works for me.' And so, I had a chance to reflect, be reflexive and try to use any available tool to*

*actually work, because it was not competitive, there was no competition. But the peers that were working just like I was supposed to” (Emmanuel, PhD candidate).*

It was beneficial for the community to be made up of participants who had expertise, such as students’ peers. Since they all had knowledge of research, they could offer constructive and crucial feedback which was accepted by peers and had a strong impact on their research work, leading to a changed direction, planning, and new decisions, as noted by Lilly below:

*“...I think it was very insightful. I mean, I think for the first time when I got there, it was. You know, you kind of just think to yourself, did you use the correct methodology, because I remember at some point, I was telling myself, I'm going to do mixed methods and all of that. Yet, I don't even know where to start with quantitative, you know? So, I was like, thank goodness... because even then, the constructive feedback that I got from the peers actually helped even those offsites conversations that we had later on. Those really helped as well in answering just the basis of questions and how do we approach certain things with qualitative methods” (Lilly, Master’s candidate).*

Lilly’s quotation also hints to the challenge of an ineffective or specialised research methodologies classes at master’s level, leading to her not knowing the quantitative methods, as she noted.

However, the context of peer support, and commitment to one goal of better understanding their individual research projects, as well as write ups, yielded positive outcomes for the participants, especially within the COVID-19 context that affected students’ progress. In the next theme we discuss the specific benefits that participants realised from the writing retreat on which we are focusing.

### Community of practice’s cumulative benefits for postgraduate students

This paper uses cumulative benefits<sup>1</sup> conceptualisation to collate and discuss various benefits that participants reported about the community of practice in which they participated. All participants reflected on having an opportunity to refocus their efforts for completing their research tasks compared to when they were alone. For example, Mirriam spoke about having been helped by the retreat to refocus and reorient herself to her doctoral research project:

*“...the writing retreat helped me orient myself to my PhD because I was new to the migration field and just new in the department. So, to be honest, I was just going with the flow. I was doing what I thought you're supposed to do in a writing retreat. Obviously, you set goals and objectives... just using the space as a writing community to or to think through my ideas, because I rarely had time to do that so that's how I approach them, I had little progress... I had a breakthrough in terms of writing, something that I was able to submit to my supervisors” (Mirriam, PhD candidate).*

<sup>1</sup> A collection of the benefits of the current writing retreat and/or in comparison to others in which participants wished to reflect on.

In the above quotation, Mirriam demonstrated two of the previously reported benefits of a community of practice, which are: problem solving and professional development (Costanza-Chock, 2020; de Carvalho-Filho et al., 2020). Concerning problem solving, Mirriam had previously faced difficulties in progressing with her degree by herself, and she was uncertain on how she would address this challenge until she had an opportunity to attend a writing retreat, which created a community of practice. Therefore, Mirriam's participation in a community of practice offered her an opportunity to develop a different perspective on how she could approach her study. This is linked to professional development, where several critical reviews supported her perspective in understanding migration research, which she was conducting for her doctoral degree (Costanza-Chock, 2020; de Carvalho-Filho et al., 2020). She also could develop more critical thinking, which is crucial in and beyond higher education (Mbeve & Mhlanga, 2022; Mbeve et al., 2023; Lee, Wang & Lim, 2024; Shaw, Liu, Gu, Kardonova, Chirikov, Li et al., 2020), and applied herself better, compared to when she did not understand her field, as she described, "...just going with the flow..." that is, referring to the feeling she did not have sufficient critical thinking and engagement with her own work. A sense of professional development was also realised by Java below:

*"...I think a PhD study is a lonely journey and the retreat helped me quite a lot. And, you know, when you are just studying and not bouncing ideas, sometimes you think you are hitting the nail on the head only when you sit with others to realise that you can do better. So, I think those forums were extremely, extremely helpful for me"* (Java, PhD candidate).

A dedicated time and an environment that was filled with opportunities for conversations and arguments made it possible for students to view their studies from a different perspective. This is seen in Java and earlier, Mirriam's, quotations. These opportunities are often not available for postgraduate research students who are expected to be mostly independent, especially in the South African context. While independence offers the postgraduate students an opportunity for freedom and autonomy, based on the current findings, it also takes away students' opportunity for critical growth and development. Potentially, this affects the strength of research that emerges from the graduates in the country, and the southern Africa region broadly. Sheila added her perspective on the overall benefits that participants had:

*"...we were given an opportunity to really write and also give feedback on... I mean, to share our ideas with the team and then also get input from the rest of the team. And I appreciated that a lot because it was like having multiple brains, you know, collaborating on one project. I mean, that's always... I think that's always quite valuable, rather than just working on your research study alone, seeing things from your perspective and yours alone, you know, so I think that really helped. I mean, benefiting from... I don't remember how many there were but about +10 brains just really getting in depth and critiquing the research topics. I appreciated that"* (Sheila, PhD candidate).

Another benefit of the community of practice, reflected on by Sheila, is the retention of expertise which she realised in the writing retreat. She suggested that the large number of people who understood research was beneficial to her own progress and critical thinking, as Maria and Java reported above. Furthermore, Mirriam benefited from a sense of comfort and the safe space in which to reflect and ask for guidance, knowing that it was a community, wherein she was participating as a joint adventurer:

*“... I felt vulnerable and as you know, nothing was... when I wasn't productive, or struggling with A, B, C, and D, I would ask someone or in the reflections, how do you navigate that and I think, you know... you know people can just be honest. Whether they met their targets or not...”* (Mirriam, PhD candidate).

The feeling of a joint enterprise (de Carvalho-Filho et al., 2020; Irving et al., 2020; Xue et al., 2021) offered Mirriam an opportunity to freely seek guidance and enhance her productivity, linked to professional growth in her organisation and planning. This is the support that a supervisor, who is responsible for teaching other classes, conducting their own research, and supervising many other students, may not be able to offer to each individual student. The expectations of such a supervisor are for the research drafts to be sent, and they may only give feedback on the quality of that work, while there is little about supporting the student's actual structural struggles, such as planning their times and making progress. Ultimately, as exemplified by Lilly below, the participants demonstrated that the community of practice, which was created by the writing retreat, helped them to learn, be motivated, and continue with their new routines, to progress with their writing:

*“...I felt like at the writing retreat, there were people who held me more accountable, who helped me or even helped me hold myself accountable to what I promised about my goals for that weekend. And, you know, it's when people shared the ideas of what they thought about the topic and how to approach it, I walked away with some really good insight, and I walked away wanting to continue with the paper. I want to do more work with the paper... after that, I really got into doing the work and I still had that thing of holding myself accountable... So, I started adopting different working styles that people had. And that really helped me in the end, you know, because I literally submitted at the end of that year, for an examination”* (Lilly, Master's candidate).

## Conclusion

In this study, we aimed to reflect on one of the FACT organised writing retreats that was held on the 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> July 2021. This paper shows that it is crucial for postgraduate students to be provided with various forms of support for their writing, including through the creation of communities of practice, which the participants of the current study received through a writing retreat. Upon reflecting on the writing retreat that participants attended, the paper recognises the crucial role that was played

by the writing retreat through the community of practice that was made of a group of peer postgraduate students, some of whom had known each other previously, and others who met for the first time. The intimate and comfortable space, clearly defined work schedule, critical engagement with each other's work with constructive attitude, and the presence of supervisors who were senior academics, provided a safe environment that was conducive for students to make significant strides in writing their individual research projects, resulting in continued routines for writing, feelings of better understanding of their own studies, and some completing a few chapters of their work.

Overall, this study reports on some of the previously discussed factors that are key benefits of a community of practice, such as, knowledge sharing, where students and their peers, as well as with senior academics, share views and support each other with their expertise. However, the current study makes a scientific contribution through an application of the community of practice theory to postgraduate students, especially in South Africa, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The current study also specifically demonstrates that, while students benefit from the senior academics' expertise, it is important for a community of practice to create opportunities for intra-student sharing of own studies and contributing critical views on their peers' studies, within a conducive space. A safe space in the current study is found to be an environment that acknowledges and supports students' critical thinking.

The current study's findings suggest that allowing students to share their critical views within a conducive and safe space helps them to become more confident and comfortable to speak publicly about their studies. This is also linked to another community of practice benefit, which is learning and development, where reflections and reflexive learning must be promoted (Costanza-Chock, 2020; de Carvalho-Filho et al., 2020; Kearney & Mbeve, 2025). Furthermore, the current study's findings suggest that the community of practice that students may benefit from must ensure opportunities for them to use critical thinking to solve their own and their peers' problems such as writing blocks or advising each other about their individual studies.

Other benefits of a community of practice for postgraduate students that this study suggests are networking, over break time or lunch time, and later after the end of each day of writing. This is more effective in a context where students live in the same hotel and could be able to meet at common places even outside the writing times as per the retreat's programme. In the current study, this is seen to be highly beneficial, as students could report back to the overall group at every morning, afternoon, and evening reflection session. Students may gain more knowledge when conversing with their peers, to supplement their supervisors' inputs. This peer-to-peer learning has

also been reported to be crucial in a previous study in the same university where the current study was conducted (Mbeve & Mhlanga, 2022).

In this study, both peer-to-peer and student–senior academic interactions fostered a strong sense of belonging within the community. Students felt that they were working collaboratively and experienced the benefits of teamwork, which extended beyond the writing retreat itself. One of the key outcomes of this retreat was the writing and production of this research paper, which emerged from a network of trust, a strong sense of community, and a shared willingness to collaborate. A community of practice is highly beneficial to the South African higher education system, particularly for postgraduate students and the broader research environment. It can also contribute significantly to advancing science and supporting the development of early-career researchers.

### **Recommendations**

This study shows the importance of writing retreats, particularly those that promote communities of practice. Therefore, it is crucial for higher education institutions to consider using this avenue more and to avail funding to support retreats to ensure that students in postgraduate studies benefit from the creation of communities of practice. It is also recommended that writing retreats must be in spaces where authors are able to meet in formal and informal spaces to ensure that there is sufficient room for reflections, engagements, discussions, and support of each other. Additionally, it is recommended that further research be conducted on this topic to inform the design and implementation of writing retreats, moving beyond mere logistical planning. Such research would help develop more structured, evidence-based writing retreats.

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