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Abstract
Academic Supporting Strategies for Students' Graduate Research

Students pursuing graduate studies at a School of Education (SOE) encounter challenges in meeting the required standard of academic writing and submission deadlines for their drafts and final theses. In renewing their commitment to support their graduate students' research, SOE explored various strategies for helping these students overcome their academic challenges that included the following: research proposal workplan, research e-clinics, research presentation templates, sit-in writing coach service, and online academic writing assessment. The latter can help to inform best practices for graduate research support in advancing higher education in the Caribbean.

Key words: academic support, research e-clinics, academic writing , research proposal

<p>Introduction</p> <p>Pursuing graduate studies can be challenging for students, especially as working adults with full-time jobs and/or family commitments. Despite successfully completing graduate coursework in record time, lengthy lags are not uncommon among graduate students in completing their final theses. Some students may never complete after investing in years of study and graduate tuition (Bandsman-Dieters, 2013). Among the factors contributing to such lags are inadequate time-management skills, academic resources/support, and academic writing skills (Farrell & Tighe-Mooney, 2015; Ngozi & Kayode, 2013). Thus, a School of Education (SOE) at a prominent regional university is no exception where 80% of graduate students request extensions on their thesis submission deadline, annually (Rena Sookdeo, personal communication, March 15, 2015). This paper highlights recent academic supporting strategies the SOE has piloted and is in the process of adopting that were mostly informed by situated</p>	<p>Feedback from an e-blast to SOE faculty on students' (undergraduate and post-graduate levels) academic writing challenges included the following: sentence construction, organization, research documentation, paragraph development interpretation of topic, and plagiarism. Consequently, the current author wrote a proposal for funding a sit-in Writing Center coach at the SOE library (Ferdinand, 2016a). The proposal met the approval of the SOE Director and faculty and was to be implemented in the May – June 2016 semester. However, due to current financial cutbacks, the project was put on hold until funds become available.</p> <p>In an effort to extend further support to students for enhancing their academic writing, the author embarked on developing an online academic writing assessment product. Today's 21st Century students are used to digital learning spaces that allow them the flexibility and convenience to learn</p>
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learning theory (SLT). These ongoing academic supportive initiatives can help to inform best practice in advancing higher education in the Caribbean.

Situated Learning Theory

The strategies used to support students' graduate studies were informed by the tenets of situated learning theory (STL) as purported by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in the early 1990s (Sein, 1998). Specifically connecting students' needs and concerns to a timely learning experience is a primary tenet of STL, which informed the SOE's provision of academic support at a strategic point in time when students needed it most. For example, while they were writing up their final theses. According to STL, students learn in a real-life context and acquire skills and knowledge through social interaction with others in an authentic learning context. Thus, SOE's graduate students were required to interact with supervisors, research "doctors", and peers in expressing their academic challenges in receiving the necessary academic support toward the timely completion of their final research project reports.

Time Management

Graduate research takes time and requires much planning between supervisor and student in order to achieve the goal of timely successful completion of the graduate thesis (Remenyi & Money, 2012). To this end, students were offered an optional workplan template that delineated the key milestones and supporting steps for completing their graduate research thesis in accordance with the respective graduate thesis assessment criteria. Supervisors used the latter to monitor their students' research progress and made adjustments where necessary. Similarly, an optional PPT template was also provided for preparing and presenting their research proposal in keeping with these criteria. They were also advised to use a developmental approach in conducting their research. For example, the Background or Introduction to the research study would be "fleshed out" first by an agreed date between student and supervisor before moving to the research problem. In this way, students could

anywhere at any time (Ferdinand, 2016b). This online assessment product (OAP) specifically targets SOE's students' academic challenges as evident in the questions asked during research e-clinics and past research reports of students' final graduate theses. The OAP consists of test exercises on various aspects of academic writing that appear to be weak in their graduate research studies such as bibliographic referencing and academic expression (Ferdinand, 2016a; Ferdinand & Umachandran, 2016). These tests are short in duration (e.g., 1-2 minutes) and begin with easy questions that gradually become more difficult to facilitate students' engagement and motivation.

Research e-Clinics

In addressing the lags towards students' completion of their graduate theses, the author piloted Research e-clinics one month prior to the submission deadline. These research e-clinics aimed to answer any questions students had about their research, provide guidance on requested revisions from their supervisors, and assisted with accessing needed literature to support their research. Notably, the clinics (liken to a health clinic with a doctor) were not meant to replace the role of master's students' supervisors but rather for students to use them to improve their research chapters and submit to their supervisors for review. The research e-clinics were offered asynchronously via the University's MyeLearning platform (Moodle customized) using the discussion forum tool supported by a SOE research team that was funded through a staff research award (Ferdinand, 2015). In keeping with the University's blended learning initiative (Blended Learning Committee, 2013), students were able to conveniently access the clinics anywhere and anytime. Their reactions to the latter after an online research e-clinic survey included the following: being able to complete the chapter that was giving much difficulty; correct a misconception; and choose the appropriate data analysis method for the study. A total of 21 students graduated on time out of a pilot test group of 32.

feel a sense of accomplishment in meeting their milestones that helped to motivate them to continue following their workplan towards completion of their graduate research.

Academic Writing Support

Academic writing is considered a key foundational skill for higher education students. However, recognition of its importance happens mostly during students' graduate studies that require a fair amount of academic writing. As such, writing support services are usually offered by Universities worldwide via their Writing Centers. Yet, SOE graduate students frequently do not visit the on-campus Writing Center inclusive of the following reasons: lengthy walk to Writing Center from SOE; unreliable shuttle service; and clashes with class schedule (Janique Dennis, personal communication, December 8, 2015).

Conclusion

Using strategic approaches for addressing students' academic challenges in their graduate studies are not generic. Those discussed in this paper are specific to the needs of the SOE students such as offering research e-Clinics that provided research support while students were working on their final graduate research project reports. Graduate Studies departments needing to find strategies for reducing lags in students' completion time for their graduate research may adapt or adopt these approaches, accordingly. Extending similar research support such as the research e-clinics can be beneficial to early career faculty who are lagging behind in developing their publication record for tenure. However, a needs assessment survey would need to be conducted so that such e-clinics could be strategically tailored to these faculty. In addition, the research e-clinic facilitator would have to be a very experienced researcher, perhaps an emeritus professor who can mentor the early career faculty, accordingly.

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Presentation theme: 2. *Professionalism and best practices in student learning and development*
Sub-topic: *Impact of Student Support in Advancing Higher Education in the Caribbean*

Presentation Type: Showcase – Highlighting best practices in programme delivery – 30 minutes