Supporting international doctoral student writing

University of Sussex

Pilot project into the international student experience in the UK 2017-18

UK Council for International Student Affairs

UKCISA

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Aim

This pilot project aimed to design, run and evaluate a writing group for a range of international doctoral students studying in the UK who were writing-up their thesis in the Social Sciences. The project was prompted by the need for writing support for international researchers that went beyond instructional concerns of language and grammar. Its purpose was to explore, and to critically engage with, broader matters of linguistic, social and cultural assumptions embedded within UK research traditions.

The project established the 'Writing into Meaning International' (WIMI) group and blog space. This was piloted at the University of Sussex and at Goldsmiths University, London. The group was evaluated through 19 interviews and a focus group with six international doctoral students. This has produced recommendations for practice, as well as an online toolkit, to enable others to run similar groups elsewhere.

The University of Sussex and Goldsmiths University were chosen as examples of universities with strong reputations for research within social disciplines. Both have around a third of their student body comprised of postgraduate students with 32% (Sussex) and 25% (Goldsmiths) coming to study from outside the UK.

How was the project set up, run and evaluated?

The WIMI group is a collaboration between three colleagues in the Department of Education at the University of Sussex who have interests in writing, inclusive teaching and supervising doctoral students, the majority of whom are international. WIMI was intended to be a supportive and productive space to write together, to think about how processes of writing are shaped by identities and socio-cultural experiences and to consider creative ways to develop the quality of research writing and thinking.

WIMI at Sussex was comprised of weekly two-hour sessions on Wednesday afternoons in the autumn term of 2017. The sessions ran for 11 weeks and were a mix of peer-led and facilitated activities. It was advertised to students via relevant school doctoral co-ordinators. Sessions were facilitated fortnightly by the project team and were interspersed with peer-led workshops to provide participants with an independent space to think and write. Facilitated sessions included creative prompts for getting started with writing (including pebbles, drawing and poetry), space to write and critical discussions of each individual's writing and the processes of producing it. Peer-led sessions were based around a reading or question suggested by

the facilitators or by members of the group. In addition, WIMI had a blog which included resources and additional readings, as well as reflective posts composed after each session by either facilitators or students. The blog provided opportunities for further writing and the possibilities of remote participation.
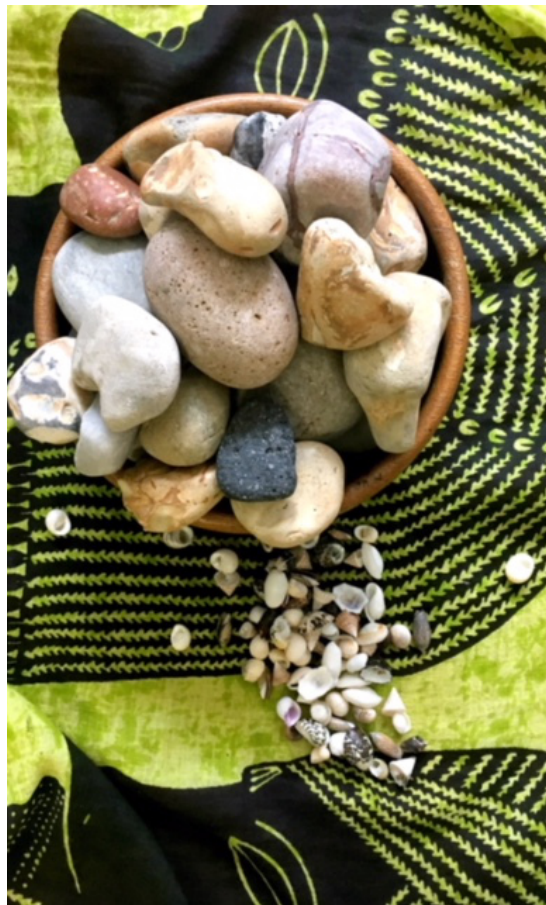
The weekly topics for Sussex WIMI were:
1. Coming to research writing: my plans and priorities
2. Position and identity: what of me do I bring to my research? (Peer-led)
3. Writing internationally: crossing disciplinary/cultural spaces
4. Getting it 'right': what might it mean to 'master' research writing? (Peer-led)
5. Writing about data: finding a way in to making meaning
6. Writing as a method of analysis (Peer-led)
7. Re-writing the thesis for different audiences: capturing its totality
8. Who is my audience and where is my voice? (Peer-led)
9. Peer feedback on writing - the value of writing together
10. Open session (to be decided by the group) (Peer-led)
11. Writing for publication

There was a core of around 10 students attending the group each session. These included those studying Education, Social Work, Gender Studies, Media and International Development. Participants' countries of origin included Germany, USA, Zambia, Chile, India and Malaysia. The group was not exclusive to international students and included those who crossed this boundary, for example, their first language was English but they were conducting their research in an additional language. We also ran a session of the group at Goldsmiths University in March 2018 on 'The International Researcher Experience of Academic Writing'. This was attended by 15 students from a range of disciplines and countries of origins including the USA, Taiwan, Canada and Italy.

Evaluation

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 19 international doctoral students at the University of Sussex and a focus group with six participants at Goldsmiths University. Interview participants came from 15 different countries including Germany, India, Egypt and Macedonia and were all studying PhD programmes in social sciences or humanities. Nine had taken part in WIMI and the others were recruited via emails from school doctoral co-ordinators. Focus group participants similarly came from diverse contexts including the USA, Taiwan and France and were all studying social sciences

Fig 1: Brighton beach pebbles used as part of a group freewriting activity

PhD programmes. They were invited to take part in the group after the writing workshop. These interviews were transcribed and analysed using NVivo software and via a collaborative analysis meeting.

Students' real names have been changed for this report.

The themes that emerged included:

- **The problematic label of 'international'**. Many students did not identify with this, feeling that the term is too generic to account for the differences among them particularly in terms of language proficiency. As one focus group participant stated: **'What do you mean by international? In my mind, my work is not wedded to any declination or community'**. Many interviewees also experienced the tendency for 'international' to be used as a form of negative 'othering' in relation to their writing, rather than as a way of recognising the strengths. Another focus group participant agreed **'to use that word [international]… can create hierarchies or certain power dimensions'**.

- **Experiences of racism and misrecognition through writing and research practices.** This included references to experiencing a dismissal or a patronising attitude in group discussions. One participant, Gajra, said: **'you don't feel as included in things as you thought it would be'** and that this 'lingers' across 'the whole doctoral journey and the writing process'.

- **International researchers felt the 'double duty' of acting as a translator of context, as well as ideas to those, including supervisors, who were unfamiliar.** In addition to the issues raised by translating texts, such as the need to find the right words to convey nuanced meaning, there were also concerns about translating cultural contexts appropriately. As Alfonso explained: **'I need to give justice to what was said… I have the responsibility to get the message across.'** This lack of familiarity by others, was experienced by some interviewees an 'an extra load' (Kate) in terms of their time and input in explaining them to others.

- **International as a term also bringing a wealth of research abilities.** This includes access to a wider range of literature and different cultural practices. In addition, the lack of understanding of their context offered the opportunity for the student to explore their unique and enhanced perspective in interesting ways. This could be regarded as an asset to the enhancement of their thinking, researching and writing. As Kate explained: **'it's a good use of my skills, [ ] to be able to access this world and make it then accessible for others who can't otherwise access it.'**

- Participants expressed the need for **multi-faceted support for writing**, including advice on negotiating emotional and cultural boundaries, as well as the practical and logistical aspects of doctoral writing. The use of freewriting as a strategy explored within WIMI, was described by Erika as being 'strengthening and very positive for my writing processes'. Raina described the group as being 'very therapeutic'. In addition, Raul found attending the workshops useful in helping him to develop what he saw as the correct English 'etiquette'. However, while the focus on a supportive and generative space for thinking about writing was important, the evaluation also revealed the need for there to be a balance between doing this and making time for more 'actual writing' at particular stages of the doctoral journey. Gajra explained that she **'was in a very precarious stage when that group started…and I felt, oh, I need to do more structured writing. I don't want to do free writing'**.

- **The group as a 'collective' support for writing** using peer and facilitated writing spaces was discussed by interviewees as being very

supportive as a way of enabling the sharing of writing concerns, for the generation of new ideas, and for the formation of writing networks. Raina shared the feeling that the group's benefit was **'the realisation that I'm not alone, to feel lost in this maze of writing a PhD thesis'.**

These findings have enabled us to reflect on the challenges faced by international doctoral students, as well as consider what might be done elsewhere within the University and sector to better support their development.

What was the timescale of the project?

The project lasted between September 2017 and June 2018. WIMI ran at Sussex between October-December and in Goldsmiths in March. The interviews and a focus group were conducted with international doctoral students alongside this. April and May 2018 involved analysis of the data, followed by the development and dissemination of the online, research-informed, toolkit in June 2018.

What challenged the delivery of the project on time and on budget?

The project progressed on time and to budget but two aspects of the project plan were altered. First, the function of the research assistant, Marta Paluch, was modified from collating materials for the toolkit to instead conducting the research interviews themselves. The project team felt that proper attention should be given to listening to, and critically evaluating, what international students thought about the project and the provision of support to international students. Second, the project team decided not to present at the University of Sussex teaching and learning conference. Instead they decided to go further afield at points during the duration of the project to honour their commitment to critically engaging with 'international' contexts more authentically. This perspective led to the delivery of a conference paper and writing workshop at Hiroshima University Japan, and at the Royal Northern College of Music, UK; the delivery of a research writing workshop for early career-researchers at the University of Seville in Spain; and consultancy on supporting doctoral writing at the Europa-Universität Flensburg, Germany (to be repeated in January 2019). Conference attendance was funded by the inviting organisations or through existing university research grants.

Will the project be sustainable?

The considerable work involved in this project was not calculated within the project team's teaching workload. However, given that work was shared across the team of three, the programme will continue to run at the University of Sussex for the next academic year in a slightly modified form. This will include the workshops becoming part of the University's researcher development programme to enable broader representation from across schools and departments.

In addition, an online toolkit for other facilitators has been produced to support them in creating a similar space for writing. This has included the production of handouts, lesson plans and examples of research readings to stimulate discussion. The purpose of this is to enable the project to grow, sustain and modify itself beyond the University of Sussex. Key evidence that this has already happened has been that many of the WIMI participants have set up a data analysis group, using many of the WIMI writing techniques, named 'Writing Data into Meaning'.

Reflections on implementing learning points at the institution

1. Overall the pilot was a success. The creative and supportive format of the group, as well as its attention to matters of culture, emotionality and identity were very well received. Feedback indicated that the group offered an important contribution to supporting the doctoral writing journey for those involved to counter feelings of isolation and despondency.

2. One participant questioned whether there was enough specific targeting towards international students and what this might look like given the differences between participants. There is a need, going forward, to approach the 'international' both more broadly, and more specifically. This is important to account for the diverse range of experiences and perspectives that international students bring, as well as creating a space to discuss both the challenges and opportunities faced by researching across cultures and languages, including, especially the fascinating issue of translation and its practical, theoretical and methodological challenges.

3. The writing group format is adaptable to suit the context. Before undertaking the pilot, the 11-week course was felt to be crucial to creating a comfortable and affirming space for the participants. However the success of the Goldsmiths afternoon workshop also indicated that other formats may work well too. Consequently the project team felt the success of such a group is not so much about its duration (although regularity seems important) but more about the quality of the space provided.

Recommendations for other UK institutions

1. Design writing support for international students that provides a way to discuss and deal with the emotional and cultural boundaries crossed by a range of international students. While writing support for grammar and vocabulary is essential (and needs to be provided through some named channel), the group's focus on going 'deeper' and 'wider' into what constitutes 'good' doctoral writing is important in engaging with the range of challenges faced by international students.

2. Approach writing (and the support for writing) collectively and collegially, where possible. Working together as facilitators and as participants was a productive and enjoyable way to navigate the highs and lows of research writing (for the project facilitators as much as the students). It is important to create the writing group as a space in which learning will be uncertain and surprising for all whether as facilitator or student.

3. Create opportunities to get started with writing that are joyful and upbeat. Instead of assuming that writing will pour from head to page, experiment with techniques of 'writing as inquiry' such as free-writing, drawing or writing poetry, to inject creativity into the writing process and, consequently, into the production of final doctoral texts. Such approaches challenge the notion that only certain prescribed formulations of text are appropriate and legitimate. The project found that this is particularly important for international researchers to be alerted to in order that the richness and diversity of their cultural, multi-lingual, and identity experiences can be championed in the final doctoral text. As one focus group participant said after the Goldsmith workshop: 'I really liked it [the workshop] because it helped me feel with the fact that that's my style. That's how I do things and here I'm learning something different but I don't need to not do it in that way because that matches who I am and how I write and that's okay'.

Links to further information:

The project website provides more detail on the key findings from our evaluation, as well information on the way the group was organised and run, resources and reading that inspired us and blog reflections from international students and facilitators. It also includes a toolkit for others to use in order to run similar doctoral writing groups.

http://writingintomeaninginternational.wordpress.com

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The UK Council for International Student Affairs is the UK's national advisory body serving the interests of international students and those who work with them.

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