

How Do Doctoral Students Experience Writing and Thesis production? Qualitative Analysis of the Irish National Survey of Postgraduate Students.

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Abstract.

Higher education (HE) policy emphasises the importance of high-quality doctoral education that prepares graduates for the knowledge economy. To support this, HE policy fora and higher education institutions (HEIs) have focused on institutional training programmes for doctoral supervisors. Writing and thesis production are central to the experience and success of doctoral students yet, in an Irish context, this topic has received little research attention. We applied the research question '*how do doctoral students in Irish HEIs experience writing and thesis production*' to the free-text responses in the 2019 PGR StudentSurvey.ie dataset. Qualitative thematic analysis identified three main themes in doctoral students' comments: a zone of uncertainty, writing and the role of the supervisor and institutional responsibilities. The paper highlights that doctoral students have unmet writing support needs. It also identifies the importance of institutional supports, such as physical writing space, and calls for a reimagination of current doctoral supervision and academic writing practice to enable discursive spaces of collaboration for students, their supervisors and discipline specific writing specialists.

Keywords: Doctoral students; Doctoral supervision; Doctoral writing; PhD students.

1. Introduction.

Ireland, like other European countries, has witnessed a massive expansion in education at doctoral level. Doctoral education is framed in terms of the so-called '*knowledge economy*' through emphasis on the development of human capital and innovation (Bansel, 2011; McWilliam & James, 2002).

Against this backdrop, Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are informed by national and European policies that support quality doctoral education experiences and outcomes (European University Association, 2010; Higher Education Authority, 2015; Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2019). In this context, much attention is placed on supervision practices and institutional quality assurance measures that support student progression and completion through, for example, skills training in research methods, communications and networking. Though these measures are important to the provision of quality doctoral education, such frameworks and policies place less emphasis on the writing and production of the doctoral thesis, an endeavour that is central to the process and outcome of doctoral education.

This paper presents findings from a qualitative analysis of doctoral students' free-text responses to the Irish 2019 PGR StudentSurvey.ie. The analysis aimed to understand doctoral students' experiences with writing and thesis production.

The study is positioned in the context of policy and research literature relevant to doctoral education in Ireland. We focus on two key themes: doctoral writing pedagogy and writing workshops. The research methodology provides contextual background to the PGR StudentSurvey.ie data and our approach to its analysis. Following presentation of thematic findings, the discussion and conclusion highlight the potential for higher education policy and practice to reimagine current doctoral supervision and academic writing practices to enable discursive spaces of collaboration for students, their supervisors and discipline specific writing specialists.

2. Literature review.

2.1 Doctoral Education in Ireland.

Across the OECD, in almost two decades, there has been a significant increase in doctoral education as expressed in terms of PhD graduates (OECD, 2020). This expansion is seen in

Ireland where, since the 1990s, development of the '*knowledge economy*' has initiated significant financial investment in research and development. This investment has expanded the opportunities for doctoral study as well as the diversity of doctoral programmes, that now include professional doctorates and structured PhD programmes that emphasise coursework and skills training (Kehm, 2006). During the period 2015/2016 to 2021/2022 enrolments in doctoral programmes in Irish HEIs increased by 20 per cent from 8,368 to 10,013 (Higher Education Authority, 2023).

Those enrolled in doctoral education programmes in Ireland comprise a diverse population in terms of socio-economic background, age, and nationality. Full-time enrolment is more common than part-time, with the latter comprising around one fifth of all doctoral students (in 2021/22 there were 8,353 full-time doctoral students versus 1,660 part-time doctoral students). During the period 2015/16 to 2021/22 enrolment of international postgraduate students (masters and doctoral) has more than doubled, from 6,840 to 13,500 (Higher Education Authority, 2023).

Reflecting international policy developments in higher education, there has been considerable national attention to the quality aspects of doctoral education, as demonstrated by the number of reports on doctoral and research education provision since the publication of the National Strategy for Higher Education (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2011). Three reports are relevant to the topic of doctoral writing, as they help to shape the resources allocated to doctoral education, the responsibilities of supervisors, the provision of supports to research students and researcher development.

The first, the National Framework for Doctoral Education (NFDE) (Higher Education Authority, 2015), which aligns with European policy on doctoral education as outlined in the Salzburg Principles (EUA, 2010), provides nine principles for doctoral education. It is concerned with the scope, the quality of students' research experience, and the provision of resources to support peer learning communities in national and international contexts.

The second report, Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Providers of Research Degrees [SQAG] (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2017) outlines quality assurance mechanisms for HEIs. The SQAG refers to matters relevant to thesis production and academic writing in relation to supervisors (p.14), physical facilities (p.15) and training and career opportunities (p.15)

The third report, Ireland's Framework for Good Practice in Research Degrees (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2019) builds on the NFDE and the SQAG. It provides a set of good practice statements for HEIs' research degree provision. The Framework provides more detail

than its antecedents on matters related to writing and thesis production. It outlines good practice statements relevant to writing and thesis production in three areas: researcher development (p.24); resources to conduct the research (p. 40); supervision and formal monitoring of progress (p.42, p.46).

This review of these key documents related to quality provision in doctoral education in Ireland indicates that consideration of the topic of writing and thesis production has become more detailed. Nevertheless, the statutory SQAG tends to frame doctoral writing within a deficit model, the advisory Framework for Good Practice makes more proactive reference to training opportunities and physical space and resources for writing, but also ultimately frames writing in terms of '*deficiencies*'. The NFDE, makes no explicit reference to academic writing. In the following section we turn to academic literature on doctoral writing and briefly discuss two key themes relevant to the present study: doctoral writing pedagogy and the role and place of writing workshops.

2.2 Doctoral writing.

Although thesis production and writing for publication are integral to doctoral education, this practice is often considered in HEIs to be '*ancillary or marginal to the real work of research*' (Kamler & Thompson, 2014, p. 2). However, some researchers have begun to focus on the processes and practices that surround doctoral writing and to demonstrate that these are issues of importance for both students and supervisors (Aitchison, 2016; Aitchison, Kamler, & Lee, 2010; Dufty-Jones & Gibson, 2021; Kamler & Thompson, 2014; Paré, 2011).

2.2.1 Doctoral writing as part of pedagogical practice.

Doctoral writing is a '*social, situated practice*' (Badenhorst & Guerin, 2015, p. 16). It involves discursive and experiential learning between student, supervisor, and peers (Elton, 2010). While this can be characterised as a positive and productive journey of discovery and identity formation (Cotterall 2011; Kamler 2008), it can also be '*an experience of tension, difficulty, powerlessness and helplessness*' (Badenhorst & Guerin, 2015, p. 7).

Supervisors have a key role in guiding doctoral students in the production of their thesis and in other related writing tasks. How they react to their students' writing can impact positively or negatively on students' own perceptions of their work (Carter & Laurs, 2018; Starke-Meyerring, 2011; Wellington, 2010). Feedback processes may generate emotional tension for students in '*awaiting, anticipating, fearing and then receiving feedback*' (Wellington, 2010, p. 137). Thus,

first time feedback is a significant event. It can present an opportunity for supervisors and doctoral students to have a '*living conversation about the processes of writing, not just the product*' and potentially enables students' writing development and their identity as a writer (Wei, Carter, & Laurs, 2019, p. 167). In contrast, supervisory relationships that evoke discourses of power and take a deficit approach can contribute to student stress and anxiety about writing (Elton, 2010; Starke-Meyerring, 2011).

Supervisors may also experience emotional tension with feedback processes. Under pressure of time and with competing demands they may not be well versed in the '*delicate multi-levelled art*' of providing feedback on writing (Carter & Kumar, 2017, p. 69).

Despite the current emphasis in HEIs on research supervision training, this has little emphasis on writing pedagogy and the important role of the supervisor in shaping students' knowledge production (Cotterall 2011; Guerin et al. 2017; Starke-Meyerring 2011). Some supervisors may assume that their doctoral students come already equipped with the skills to write their thesis from the beginning of the doctoral process, or, if not, that these skills will develop during their research (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000; Odena & Burgess, 2017).

Dufty-Jones and Gibson (2021, p. 6) argue that research writing pedagogy has evolved to address some of the problematic practices above. Nonetheless, it remains limited in three key areas: a) the reliance on teacher centred '*unidirectional approaches to learning*'; b) the lack of consideration of the '*material and relational spaces*' in which writing happens; and c) not accounting for the institutional politics of higher education institutions that impact on how teaching, learning, and the doing of writing takes place.

Drawing upon approaches from research writing pedagogy and critical pedagogy, they argue for '*engaged pedagogies*' which would take account of the social and situated practice of research writing within an ethics of care framework. In this approach, collaboration and sociality in writing practice is reinforced, rather than individualism. Dufty-Jones and Gibson also critique the '*speeded-up*' nature of contemporary research writing, driven by HEIs' research metrics. Engaged pedagogies permit slower and reflective processes that can support a wide range of writing forms and the social realities in which academic writing takes place (Dufty-Jones & Gibson, 2021, p.10).

2.3 Writing workshops.

Academic skills centres are commonplace across HEIs and often function as places where

students may be directed for help with '*writing difficulties*' (French, 2018). In an Irish context, though largely focused on undergraduate students through the provision of one-to-one writing support, academic writing centres have gained traction as dedicated sites that adopt student-centred practices to enable students' development as writers (Farrell, Tighe-Mooney, & Maguire, 2015).

Generic writing skills courses aimed at undergraduate students have received critique as a '*bolt on*' or '*study skills*' approach to doctoral writing support (Burford, 2017; Elton, 2010; Starke-Meyerring, 2011). Such workshops tend to operate in a remedial fashion and may not sufficiently consider the nuances and disciplinary differences of doctoral education. There is often an assumption '*that writing is a skill that can be learned straightforwardly*' (Burford, 2017, p. 25) rather than as a complex and situated practice that evolves over time in a dialogical fashion between students, their peers, supervisors and in the context of personal, professional and institutional pressures (Burford, 2017; Carter & Kumar, 2017; Johnson, 2019).

In recognition of the limitations of generic writing workshops, there is evidence of growth of other forms of doctoral writing support. Writing centres, writing groups and retreats have the potential to provide a supportive environment of peers and can reduce the stress and anxiety that accompanies the writing process (Buckley et al., 2021; Tremblay-Wragg, Mathieu Chartier, Labonté-Lemoyne, Déri, & Gadbois, 2021).

Doctoral writing groups can address some of the shortcomings of generic writing workshops by addressing the situated practice of writing. They are considered as safe and collaborative spaces where students can provide each other with feedback on their writing and, as such, may also function as a community of practice (Guerin, 2014; Kumar & Aitchison, 2018).

Writing retreats, such as *Thèsez-vous*, allow academic writers the time, space and resources to advance academic outputs for publication (Kornhaber, Cross, Betihavas, & Bridgman, 2016). This Canadian NGO conducts a three-day writing retreat specifically for thesis writers. It enables participants to enhance their writing skills and to develop good routines for thesis writing in a collaborative, supportive and structured, but not rigid, environment (Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2021).

More informal and social approaches to doctoral writing support can also be effective. The US '*Shut-Up and Write*' approach has been applied in doctoral writing groups. Writers meet at a café (or virtually) and chat for around 15 minutes before embarking on a series of 25-minute writing stints (Mewburn, Osborne, & Caldwell, 2014). Key to the approach is the peer support

and the '*time blocking*' that encourages focus on task and self-discipline, as well as the sociable non-institutional space for the activity (<https://thesiswhisperer.com/shut-up-and-write/>). Journal Clubs, similarly, provide a collaborative informal space in which research students can develop skills in critique and in academic writing (Cargill & O'Connor, 2021). In an Irish context, Carragher and Brereton (2022) have used the journal club technique as an intervention to foster students' research skills and critical thinking across disciplinary groups. The application of a taught component at the commencement of the journal club supported students' deep learning, as knowledge was scaffolded over the four-week intervention. It differed to usual teaching and learning practice as students prepared questions in advance for discussion and they heard different disciplinary perspectives - all of which allowed them to build their skills in critical thinking and research.

Doctoral writing workshops are also relevant for supervisors as many may feel ill-equipped to support student writing (Carter & Kumar, 2017; Odena & Burgess, 2017; Starke-Meyerring, 2011). In recognition of this, Hey-Cunningham and colleagues developed a four-week blended programme for research students and supervisors aimed at enhancing feedback literacy. It provided opportunities for self-evaluation and peer feedback on writing, analysis of exemplars, and within- and between-group sharing of experiences. Reflective practice is an important part of the process (Hey-Cunningham, Ward, & Miller, 2021).

3. Methodology.

3.1 Research context.

The biennial PGR StudentSurvey.ie provides an important opportunity for postgraduate research students (Master's and PhD) to report on their experiences in relation to the amount of time and effort that they put into meaningful and purposeful educational activities and the extent to which Irish HEIs provide such opportunities and encourage students to engage. In addition to structured response options across nine survey domains, students can provide free-text comments about their experiences across all survey domains and to two other non-domain specific open-ended questions:

- What aspects/elements of your research degree programme are most valuable?
- What aspects of your research degree experience could be improved?

PGR StudentSurvey.ie does not specifically ask students about their thesis writing experiences;

however, we were interested to find out where students mentioned thesis writing in their comments, what they had to say about it, and in what context. In 2021, for the first time, Irish HEIs received an opportunity through a competitive award to undertake analysis of the PGR StudentSurvey.ie qualitative data.

3.2 Participants and sample.

The 2019 PGR StudentSurvey.ie attracted 2721 respondents registered for a Master's by research (n = 419) or a PhD (n = 2301), full or part-time in one of 22 HEIs. It achieved a 30% national response rate.

Nine-hundred and twenty-eight PhD students, representing 40% of survey respondents responded to the nine open-ended questions with a total of 2152 responses.

Table 1: Number responses to PGR StudentSurvey.ie 2019 open-ended questions (PhD students n = 928).

Do you have any other comments about:	No. Responses
Research infrastructure and facilities	413
Personal outlook	359
Development opportunities (including teaching & demonstration)	321
Supervision	299
Research culture	208
Induction, progression and assessment	201
Student staff responsibilities	170
Research skills development	105
Other transferable skills	76
Total responses	2152

The two open-ended questions '*what aspects of your research degree are most valuable*' and

'what aspects of your research degree could be improved?' received free-text comments from 996 and 941 PhD students respectively.

4. Analysis.

The first stage of analysis involved data-cleaning the survey file. All free-text responses to all open-ended questions within each domain were checked for responses that were redundant/not meaningful e.g. Not applicable/N/A/Don't know/??/

The '*clean*' survey data file [Excel spreadsheet] was exported to NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Free-text responses were auto-coded according to the survey domain in which the response was made. Each survey domain was designated as a content category.

A total of 120 free text comments related to the topic of writing and thesis production were identified across the survey's open-ended questions. Following this, a process of qualitative content analysis ensued. First, a deductive approach was taken with the allocation of text to content categories that related to the key topics derived from the policy and literature review. This resulted in broad content categories of: support, supervisors, writing workshops, physical space, thesis structure, feedback, guidance and training, and publications. The next stage of the analysis involved inductive processes where each content category was examined for the underlying meanings in the text within each category. This process was iterative and involved comparing text within and across categories and the reformulation of categories into meaningful themes and sub-themes. Students' accounts of their doctoral writing and thesis production experiences are presented across three overarching themes, '*a zone of uncertainty*', '*writing and the role of the supervisor*' and '*institutional responsibilities*'.

Comments are reported as '*Ref*' to indicate the reference number of the comment within the relevant survey domain¹; for example, (Ref, 38 Induction, Progression and Assessment). It is possible that students have provided comments that have not been included in the analyses where the term '*writing*' has not appeared; For example, students have commented frequently in the research infrastructure domain about lack of chairs, desks, appropriate physical space, but we cannot be sure that the comments relate to writing. Nonetheless, we consider that our rigorous approach to data cleaning and text searching, followed by inductive analysis of the content of all text in domain and non-domain open-ended data, provides reliable evidence on

¹ See Table 1 for the 9 survey domains.

the perspectives of doctoral students in Irish HEIs on writing and related issues that require attention in policy and practice.

5. Findings.

5.1 A Zone of Uncertainty: Thesis Production and Writing Challenges.

The first theme, '*a zone of uncertainty*,' captures the difficulties and ambiguities that surround thesis production and writing in doctoral students' experiences in Irish HEIs. This theme encompasses two sub-themes: navigating thesis structure and guidelines and writing for publication.

5.1.1 Navigating Thesis Structure and Guidelines.

Students highlighted structural issues in relation to thesis production and presentation, demonstrating a lack of clarity about thesis production aspects such as word counts, thesis layout, literature review and critical writing. Their comments resonate with research by Starke-Meyerring (2011), who reports that students felt the process of writing and the expectations of what was required were obscured:

'It would be useful to receive a basic guide on how to present your thesis e.g., word count and the viva process.' (Ref 1, Induction, Progression, Assessment)

'I didn't receive any guidance as per how to write and structure my thesis in [HEI]. I only got info from my previous university [HEI] and my friends studying abroad.' (Ref, 38 Induction, Progression, Assessment)

'Clearer guidelines on thesis by publication.' (Ref 77, Improved)

'The communication of existing knowledge (how to write communication papers, what a PhD thesis should contain). The need for formal module provision on the institute side.' (Ref 23, Improved)

'Teaching and educating students about the steps of the research: writing, literature review, methodology, analysis. I felt very lost not knowing how to do the research.' (Ref 76, Improved).

5.1.2 Writing for Publication: Uncertainty in Scholarly Communication.

The publication of doctoral research during candidature potentially demonstrates the scholarly

nature of students' work and their contribution to discipline or wider field (Stoilescu & McDougall, 2010). Indeed, if a doctoral student intends to pursue an academic career there can be an expectation of having already published in high-ranked peer reviewed journals (Cotterall, 2011; Kamler, 2008; Langum & Sullivan, 2017). Publication during candidature may be a good tactic for some candidates, as post-submission publication may be more challenging owing to exhaustion and burnout (Francis, Mills, Chapman, & Birks, 2009).

The second sub-theme, writing for publication, further explores the overarching '*zone of uncertainty*' theme as it delves into the challenges and ambiguities faced by doctoral students when attempting to publish their research. The process of writing for publication can be uncertain for students and is manifested in several ways, including students' struggles to identify suitable publication outlets, understanding the peer review process, and adapting their writing style to meet the expectations of academic journals:

'Writing papers for peer-review to work on my written communication skills. Presenting at conferences for my oral communication skills.' (Ref 14, Improved)

'More supports on developing a publishing portfolio and skills such as preparing for presentations and giving posters and submitting articles to suitable peer-reviewed journals.' (Ref 2, Development Opportunities)

'I found a lack of support from my academic supervisor for publishing and writing papers...' (Ref 34, Development Opportunities)

Together, the sub-themes navigating thesis structure and guidelines and writing for publication contribute to the overall theme of '*a zone of uncertainty*' by highlighting the complexities of the doctoral education experience, specifically in relation to thesis production and writing. They point to the need for greater clarity, guidance and support for students, to navigate these challenges effectively and to produce high-quality research output.

5.2 Writing and the role of the supervisor.

The second theme highlights the role of the supervisor/s in relation to doctoral writing and encompasses the sub-themes: supervisor guidance and mentorship with academic writing and emotional support and encouragement.

5.2.1 Supervisor guidance and mentorship.

Some doctoral students reported positive supervisory experiences in the context of writing and

emphasised the strength of their supervisory relationship and of the responsiveness in how feedback is provided:

'I have an excellent relationship with my supervisors. They provide really good feedback on any writing I submit to them. They are always on hand when needed and very responsive to messages.' (Ref 5, Supervision)

'The supervision I have received has proved invaluable. I have benefited enormously from the expertise of my supervisor, as well as my fellow PhD peers. This has enabled me to develop my academic writing and collaborative efforts.' (Ref 69, Valuable).

Conversely, some doctoral students experienced what (Gurr, 2001) refers to as '*benign neglect*' in their supervisory relationship. In this context, they reported difficulties with receiving feedback on their writing, particularly when supervisors were slow to respond, did not respond, or provided little useful feedback:

'Once I manage to meet them for a face-to-face meeting, I can get good feedback and direction. However, for the most part, they are very slow to respond to requests for meetings or for guidance. They rarely respond to emails, are very slow to give feedback or corrections, and very rarely contact me first about my research. Meetings are regularly cancelled and postponed.' (Ref 7, Supervision)

'[M]aintaining positive relationship with supervisor can be challenging. Receiving timely feedback for writing can be difficult.' (Ref 26, Supervision)

'Although I have often asked supervisors about structure and content of thesis for submission, many questions have been ignored and I have not been consulted in the design of some parts of thesis.' (Ref 37, Induction, Progression, Assessment).

5.2.2 Emotional support and encouragement.

This sub-theme highlights the emotional aspect of the supervisory relationship and focuses on the role of the supervisor in the provision of feedback, which can be an emotionally charged experience for students. How supervisors support students' writing is thus important. Feedback that is destructive underlines the power imbalance in the supervisory relationship and can impact negatively on students' learning experiences (Cotterall, 2011):

'I did complete my thesis to my <jobtitle removed> recommendations within the allotted time frame and had it changed by <jobtitle removed> who called my phone and told me

his children could do better.' (Ref 49, Improved)

'They provide retrospective feedback ... of limited help in defining research strategies, goals, suggested approaches or in shaping my work. They prefer to wait until I have completed a substantial body of work and then to dismantle it. I am wary of writing new material as a result.' (Ref 12, Supervision).

In conclusion, the role of the supervisor is a crucial factor in the doctoral writing process, particularly in terms of feedback. A positive supervisory relationship, characterised by timely and constructive feedback, can significantly contribute to the development of students' academic writing and foster a supportive environment for their research. Instances of *'benign neglect'* or destructive feedback can exacerbate the power imbalance within the supervisory relationship and adversely affect students' learning experiences.

5.3 Institutional responsibilities.

The third theme, *'Institutional responsibilities'*, encapsulates the sub-themes: physical space for writing and writing support modules.

5.3.1 Physical space for writing.

The need for access to a regular, appropriate, physical space for writing is a recurrent theme. Students emphasised how lack of access to a regular desk space, and the physical conditions of their workspace, impacted their work:

'It would be nice to have a PhD only centre well equipped with desktop spaces that can be used. While office spaces are good stations, a writing/reading only zone for PhDs is imperative because team PhDs differ and clash with those singularly taking their PhDs. When it comes to managing teamwork and team meetings in office spaces, many people recommend BIG headphones, but after a while, your ears begin to burn – uncomfortable.' (Ref 20, Research Infrastructure and Facilities)

'I am now in 3rd year and since returning two months ago from fieldwork I had to desk share until the department secured me another space to work, which I am now happy with and hope that I can stay until the end of my PhD. . . .generally space seems to be a major issue and it is not ideal for PhD students in 3rd and 4th year when writing up not to have a workspace guaranteed.' (Ref 25, Research Infrastructure and Facilities)

'The department does not have enough desk space for all the postgrads. Most of the

time I need to write and study in the lab and this is not the best environment for focus. Only before the writing of your thesis, you have right to a desk space.' (Ref 33, Research Infrastructure and Facilities).

5.3.2 Writing support modules.

It is commonplace for doctoral students to enrol in programme modules as part of their research degree. Some, in their comments about compulsory modules, provided insight into their experiences of modules concerned with writing and thesis production. Some were positive about such modules, even with caveats:

'We have to do modules in order to progress each year - ABSOLUTELY!!!! Everyone should be made on a compulsory basis to do a module in critical writing.' (Ref 21, Improved)

'Taught modules, industry placement, engaging in collaborative writing for academic journals.' (Ref 53, Valuable)

'The writing courses and ECTS on research integrity have been excellent.' (Ref 16, Development Opportunities).

While some students commended modules geared to writing development, others reported their writing skills had improved because of being self-driven. Such agency was further illustrated with an example from one student who established a peer-writing group for mutual support:

'I am a member of a small peer review writing group set up by 2 PhD candidates and this is a mainstay of support, motivation and opportunities for exchange on research relevant to mine.' (Ref 14, Research Culture)

In summary, the institutional responsibilities theme emphasises the significant role of higher education institutions in supporting doctoral students' writing development. The provision of appropriate physical space for writing is crucial, as it directly affects students' ability to focus and maintain productivity. Furthermore, writing support modules can provide valuable resources and guidance for students, helping them hone their academic writing skills. However, it is also important to recognise the value of student agency and peer-support initiatives, as these can complement institutional resources and contribute to a vibrant and collaborative research culture.

Overall, the analyses of students' free-text comments related to doctoral writing and thesis production show that the topic of writing is important for doctoral students enrolled in Irish HEIs. Doctoral writing and thesis production relates to several dimensions of students' experience: research infrastructure; development opportunities; supervisors; induction and progression; and research culture. This finding of itself highlights that doctoral writing is a multifaceted issue and concerns a range of stakeholders in HEIs. In the following we consider the implications of the findings for HEI policy and practice.

6. Discussion.

The opportunity to access the free-text data in PGR StudentSurvey.ie 2019 allowed investigation of an aspect of doctoral student experience in Irish HEIs, writing and thesis production, that has not been captured in the survey's quantitative indicators, or, to the best of our knowledge, in any other Irish study. We set out to establish where doctoral students mentioned the topic of writing or thesis production in their free-text comments across the entire survey and what they had to say about it.

Our analyses identified three key themes: '*A zone of uncertainty*', '*Writing and the role of the supervisor*', '*Institutional responsibilities*'. Across these themes, and the sub-themes within each, students provided insight to their experiences that point to the need for HEIs to focus greater attention on this crucial aspect of the doctoral student experience.

Students' comments about doctoral writing emphasised their concerns about the structural aspects of thesis writing and production and writing for publication. These aspects were located in a '*zone of uncertainty*' in their doctoral experience. In this regard, doctoral students in Irish HEIs are not alone. International research indicates that many doctoral students begin writing their doctoral thesis under-prepared and without the necessary academic writing skills (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000; Carter & Kumar, 2017). Although many students have experience of completing an undergraduate or Master's dissertation, they may fail to recognise that the intellectual effort required for a doctoral thesis is considerably greater (Kearns & Gardiner, 2020). The tendency for doctoral research and writing to be framed as a linear process (Stokes & McCulloch, 2006), where 'writing up' takes place at the end may also add to the uncertainty.

Doctoral students also reflected on the role of their supervisor(s) and writing. Our analysis of key policy documents relevant to doctoral education, particularly the SQAG and the Framework for Good Practice, has highlighted that supervisors have a key role in supporting students with

writing and thesis production. Within these documents, the role of doctoral supervisors mainly concerns their identification of student writing deficits and monitoring of progress. The findings indicate that some students have experiences of supervisor feedback that went beyond the identification of writing deficits where constructive feedback was provided on the process and products of their writing. Yet, others reported a negative experience characterised by deficit-laden feedback, which to some extent reflects the tenor of the policy documents. The importance of constructive and timely feedback cannot be underestimated. When feedback is not constructive it can generate anxiety and fear that can negatively impact students' confidence and future development as a writer (Elton, 2010) and can also contribute to decisions to drop out (Starke-Meyerring, 2011). It is important to consider that supervisors may also experience stress and anxiety as they guide doctoral students with their writing in a context of growing and more diverse cohorts of doctoral students (Carter & Kumar, 2017).

While both the SQAG and the Framework for Good Practice advocate for physical space/facilities and training to support writing, institutional structures and supports can help or hinder, particularly the physical spaces provided for writing. While some students might lack any physical space for their writing, a one-size fits all approach is limited, as it does not account for different needs and contexts (Dufty-Jones & Gibson, 2021).

As our assessment of key Irish policy frameworks for doctoral education indicates, the topic of writing and thesis production remains at a low-level in terms of institutional responsibilities and tends to promote remedial action. Thus, the findings suggest the potential for more explicit actions that enable discursive spaces in which constructive dialogue takes place formally and informally and where both student and supervisors engage in understanding their roles in the writing process

To this end, there is an opportunity in HEIs to build on the well-established '*writing retreat model*' and extant supervisor training programmes for the development of such discursive spaces. This would involve supervisors, doctoral students and discipline specific writing specialists in a collaboration underpinned by reflective processes (Hey-Cunningham et al., 2021) that also recognises the social realities in which writing takes place (Dufty-Jones & Gibson, 2021). Our findings suggest that these workshops can play a pivotal role in addressing the uncertainty that surrounds doctoral writing. By creating spaces for collaborative learning, peer support and dialogue, workshops can provide students with the tools they need to navigate the complexities of thesis production. They can promote a sense of agency among students by fostering a

supportive environment where they can share experiences, discuss challenges and develop strategies to overcome obstacles. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise the potential limitations of writing workshops. For instance, they may not cater to the diverse needs of students or be accessible to all. The findings highlight the importance of considering various approaches to writing support to address such limitations, as demonstrated by students themselves as they addressed gaps in their own knowledge and skills through their organisation of peer support groups. Such action reflects contemporary developments in doctoral writing support that advocate for student agency, collaboration and less structured approaches (Buckley et al., 2021; Kumar & Aitchison, 2018; Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2021).

In conclusion, our analysis of the PGR StudentSurvey.ie 2019 data has provided valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with doctoral writing in Irish HEIs. We have identified key areas of concern and potential avenues for improvement, including the creation of discursive spaces that involve students, supervisors and peers, the promotion of student agency, and the integration of various writing support structures such as informal and contemporary models of writing retreats, peer support and structured training programmes. By positioning writing as a crucial part of the doctoral student experience there is potential for HEIs to work towards enhancing the overall doctoral student experience, ultimately fostering the development of confident, capable writers equipped to succeed in their academic endeavours.

7. Study Strengths and Limitations.

Our analyses of students' doctoral writing experiences in Irish HEIs have been made possible by access to their generous free-text contributions to the PGR StudentSurvey.ie. This paper adds to the literature on doctoral writing and contributes to the growing body of research that employs free-text analysis to survey data. Despite the large volume of free-text data across the entire survey, the data pertaining to comments about writing and thesis production is relatively limited, with 120 comments identified with varying levels of textual depth. Notwithstanding, the findings indicate consistent patterns across this sample and have been beneficial in surfacing issues for further exploration in future quantitative questions and in-depth cohort studies (Harrop, Morgan, Byrne, & Nelson, 2016) in relation to doctoral student writing experiences. Nonetheless, there are also limitations in the use of pre-existing datasets in terms of their lack of flexibility (MacKay, Hughes, Marzetti, Lent, & Rhind, 2019). For example, a key limitation of PGR StudentSurvey.ie concerns the reliability of international student data: students are

currently categorised as domicile = Irish or non-Irish. Given the expansion in Irish HEIs of international doctoral students, there would be merit in undertaking research about their doctoral writing experiences.

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