

## But who's counting? A follow up evaluation of one year of structured writing retreats. Kempenaar Larissa, Murray Rowena, *University of the West of Scotland, UK*

### Context

Research output is considered essential to a University's academic reputation and financial support. However, many early career academics do not have sufficient skills and discipline to write for publication and many Universities lack a supportive culture of writing. To address this problem, the University of the West of Scotland hosted 9 residential, structured writing retreats (Murray and Newton, 2009) in 2013 for new and experienced staff and postgraduate students. Although the immediate, short term benefits of writing interventions have previously been published (McGrail et al, 2006), there are few studies which have reported on the longer term impact on research output and writing practices of those attending structured writing retreats.

### Methods

All 66 participants who had attended writing retreats in 2013 were invited by email to complete a SurveyMonkey questionnaire in March 2014. The questionnaire consisted of 3 sections including participants' characteristics, research output since participation in the retreat and writing practices, including participation in writing groups. Two reminders were sent to those participants who did not reply to the invitation. The survey was closed at the beginning of May 2014.

### Findings

Fifty-six (85%) responded to the questionnaire. The large majority of participants worked in Universities (n=42, 75%) and on average participants had worked for a University for 10 years (range <1-30 years). Other employers included FE colleges, and the NHS. Twenty participants had completed doctoral degrees (35.8%), while 27 participants (48.1%) were undertaking doctoral degrees at the time of the survey. Most participants had attended just one writing retreat (n=34, 61.8%), while 22 participants (39.3%) had attended more than one retreat.

Twenty-two participants (39.3%) reported any kind of research output. Most of these participants had more than one type of output. This included 15 journal article submissions by 12 different participants. Six of these were accepted for submission. Six of the 27 PhD students reported to have completed thesis chapters. These comprised a total of 18 chapters with a newly produced word count of approximately 120,000 words. Sixty-five other types of publications were reported as research outputs, including conference submissions and book chapters. For 39 of the 65 publications word counts were provided which added to a word count of 121,000 words.

Twenty-one participants (37.5%) reported that they took part in writing groups since attending the retreat. They met with varying frequency: daily, monthly or ad hoc. Some of the groups were seasonal in occurrence depending on other work commitments, such as teaching. About half attended most groups (n=12), whereas the remainder attended more infrequently. On average 4 participants attended each writing group (range 1-8). These micro-groups were made up of people from a variety of disciplines, and half of group members from multiple Universities.

Participants varied greatly in the time they reported spending on writing in a typical week. Five participants stated that they did not write at all while 19 participants out of the 49 who responded reported that they wrote for a certain number of hours per week and provided a range of hours per week or reported to not have a typical week. This averaged as 8.6 hours per week on writing (median 6 hours, range 0-40).

Participants were asked to rate how often they used specific writing strategies. The strategy that was used most was that of 'setting goals for writing', followed closely by 'peer discussion' and 'free writing'. These are all embedded in the structure of writing retreats. Those who had reported research output, were nearly all either in the process of completing a doctoral degree, or had already completed a PhD. No relationship could be found between output and years of working in a University, which suggests that it is more important to have, or be undertaking a doctoral degree, than for how long a participant had worked for a University. Participants were twice more likely to have research output if they had attended more than one retreat. 12 participants who attended one retreat (29.4%) indicated that they had progressed in writing since attendance, as opposed to 14 participants who had attended more than one retreat (63.6%).

## Discussion

Although this is a conservative estimate of the writing produced by the participants; the output reported is substantial, as 240,000 words produced by 13 participants since the retreats, equates to 2 novels or 3 completed theses. However, it was interesting to note that many participants did not report their output. Notably only 6 out of 27 doctoral students reported output, and only 5 were able to report word counts. This means that 21 participants seemingly had no noteworthy progression. With current emphasis on progression and completion of theses this seems unlikely. This was also reflected in the participants who attended writing groups. Many of them were not able to provide details on progress. As those attending the writing groups were writing during these meetings, it would seem odd to think that they would be sitting behind their laptops, not producing any kind of writing.

This gives the impression that we are missing a trick by focussing too much on the end points of writing which is engendered by exercises such as REF2014, rather than also focussing on ongoing activity in writing, by means, for example, of word counts. Word counts make progress more visible and are, therefore, more likely to lead to a sense of achievement and satisfaction with progress and efforts towards research output in early career academics and researchers.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that structured writing retreats have a positive impact on writing output and practices of participants. Multiple attendances at writing retreats increase the likelihood of this change. While there are other means of measuring progress in writing, this evaluation recommends the use of word counts as a strategy for early career academics and researchers to enable them to record and monitor progress, and develop the confidence that they are indeed moving forward. This will contribute to a positive culture of academic writing, which is more likely to improve a University's performance in terms of research outputs.

McGrail, M. R., Rickard, C. M., & Jones, R. (2006). Publish or perish: a systematic review of interventions to increase academic publication rates. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 25(1), 19-35.

Murray, R., & Newton, M. (2009). Writing retreat as structured intervention: margin or mainstream?. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 28(5), 541-553.