

# 3 Face-to-face to online: PhD academic writing @Maastricht University

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## Abstract

Maastricht University (UM) has a distinct global perspective and a strong focus on innovation. UM offers an array of PhD courses to distance and campus based students who have access to elective, credit bearing modules and the language needs of these students are catered for by the Language Centre. Many PhD candidates choose to take an academic writing course in their first or second year of their degree. In recent years, demand for a more student focused, flexible academic writing course has grown. In line with UM's policy of supporting innovative teaching practices, the Language Centre's face-to-face PhD academic writing course, PhD Writing 1, has been transformed into a fully online course containing eight interactive webinar sessions named Online PhD Writing, which runs in addition to the face-to-face rendition. On the back of the success of this course, coupled with increased demand for a follow up course, this author was tasked with creating an advanced online PhD academic writing course to cater for global students with diverse time zones and schedules. This paper evaluates the challenges posed and the advances made in constructing both online courses and explores the technologies used in implementing them.

**Keywords:** digital tools, English for academic purposes, webinar, distance learning.

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## 1. Introduction

UM is a relatively new internationalised university situated in the south of the Netherlands. UM has 18,000 students, 52% of whom are international and currently enrolled across six faculties and six PhD schools. Furthermore, UM is the European pioneer of Problem Based Learning (PBL) which is currently implemented across all six faculties and involves students collaborating to identify what they need to learn to solve problems (Hmelo-Silver, 2014). Despite UM's commitment to innovation within education, few fully online or blended learning courses currently exist. Based on this author's conversations with lecturers, curriculum designers, and policy makers, plausible reasons for this reticence to embrace the blended or fully online model range from the belief that implementing it would cause a mismatch with the PBL model, to the assumption that faculty courses cannot be modularised and implemented in an online environment.

UM's Language Centre offers embedded language courses within all faculties and PhD schools and has been implementing fully online and blended language courses for over five years. The purpose of this paper is to explore the challenges and processes involved in the development of two fully online PhD Academic Writing courses.

## 2. Towards the online model

Since 2009, the UM Language Centre has been offering a face-to-face PhD Writing course to UM PhD candidates focusing on the key components of academic writing pertinent to publishing research papers. Many of the participants are part-time PhD candidates living nearby Maastricht. The course includes eight sessions of two hours, incorporates peer review sessions, and is worth two European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). In a view to expand this course to distance students, this author sought to ascertain whether the online or blended model would suit the student demographic. Based on successful meetings with PhD schools and faculty coordinators, Online PhD Writing was created as UM's first fully online credit bearing course.

3. Online PhD Writing

In late 2014, a pilot course was developed and tested in partnership with PhD students from OpenU, the Dutch equivalent to the UK’s Open University. The rationale behind using OpenU as a testbed was that their students were already taking some UM modules, were spread over various time zones, tended to be distance based, and were accustomed to taking online modules. Pilot outcomes led to the re-evaluation of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), Blackboard, and the video conferencing tool, Blackboard Collaborate, being implemented in the course. In addition, the peer review logistics were re-evaluated as a result of data obtained from the pilot.

In early 2015, UM’s first fully online live-taught academic credit bearing course ran its first iteration. [Table 1](#) details the course.

Table 1. Online PhD Writing course

Participants	Webinars	Duration	Content	Teleconferencing Tool	Fees	ECTS
10 x campus based + distance UM PhD Students	8 x 45 mins	8 weeks	English for Academic Purposes	Blackboard Collaborate Ultra	495 fully funded by faculty	1.5
Content Corpus linguistics, readability, paragraphing, conciseness, sentencings, reporting verbs, limitations, abstract construction						

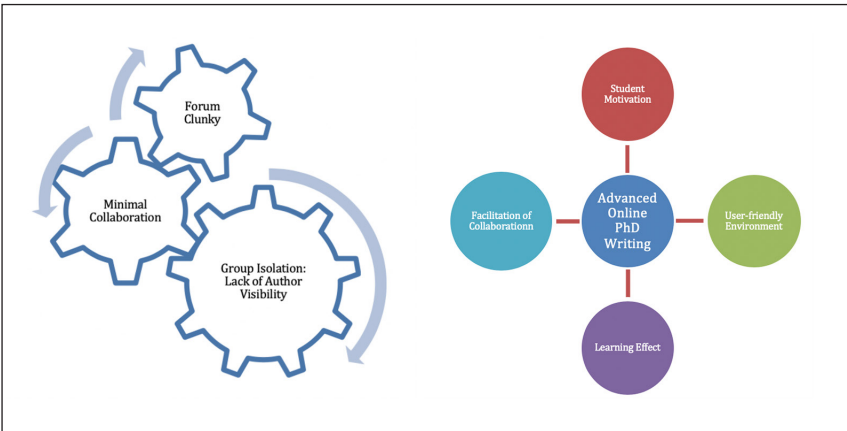
Online PhD Writing has become a stalwart at UM and is offered up to 15 times per academic year. At the time of writing, the course was rated at 8.5/10, making it one of the universities most consistently highly-rated courses, solidifying the UM Language Centre’s position as a provider of quality accredited courses. Some reported reasons for the high rating were the user-friendly interface offered by Blackboard Collaborate Ultra, the on demand

tutor led feedback, access to recordings after each session, and the immediate applicability of theory to current context.

#### 4. Developing advanced Online PhD Writing

Having completed Online PhD Writing, many PhD candidates enquired about the possibility of receiving additional writing support. Based on these requests, in the autumn of 2017, the author contacted six past students and ran a four-week pilot advanced Online PhD Writing course. The pilot used Blackboard as the discussion forum, included reduced linguistic theory, and did not include any webinars. Upon analysing the feedback, the following themes emerged detailed on the left side of Figure 1. Before a course could be offered to the PhD schools, these issues had to be addressed. In this regard, the author focused on four main aspects detailed on the right side of Figure 1 below.

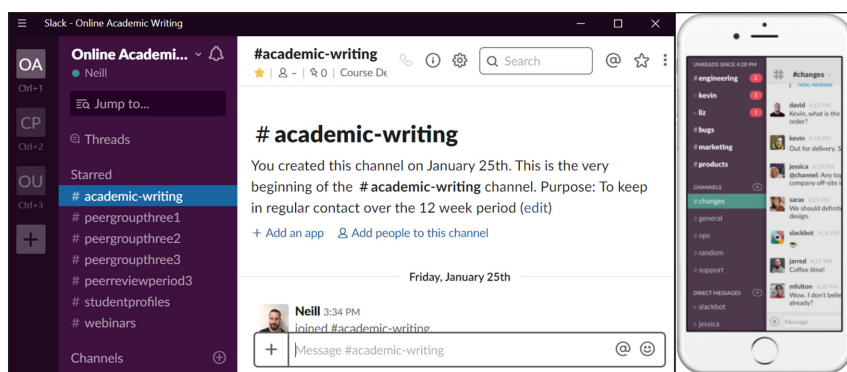
Figure 1. Pilot participants' feedback and considerations



One application seemed to address all of these concerns: the Slack tool. The author implemented Slack into the course design, a freely accessible, smartphone friendly tool, which facilitates many add-ons and caters for the rapid dissemination of information via channels to members. Small groups can be

created which caters for peer review sessions and documents can easily be added via drag and drop. **Figure 2** details the interface.

Figure 2. Slack interface



## 5. Advanced Online PhD Writing

Armed with Slack, the author designed a 12-week advanced Online PhD Writing course and offered it to the PhD schools as a credit bearing course in the spring of 2018, the details of which can be seen in **Table 2** below.

Table 2. Advanced Online PhD Writing

Participants	Webinars	Duration	VLE	Fees	ETCS
Campus based + distance UM PhDs who completed Online PhD Writing or equivalent.	c.4 on ad-hoc basis	12 weeks	Blackboard Collaborate Ultra & Slack	450 fully funded by faculty	2
Outline 3 x 4-week peer review periods over 12 weeks; 12 weeks of tutor led feedback on demand; theory presented via ad-hoc webinars and presentations in Slack; student collaboration required.					

At the time of writing, there have been three iterations of the advanced Online PhD Writing course and early feedback suggests that the students enjoy the

collaborative and fluid nature of the course along with access to high quality tutor feedback on demand over a period of 12 weeks. In particular, implementing Slack in the Advanced course has been a significant benefit in terms of collaboration and social presence among the students. It is hoped that this course will have a similar impact as Online PhD Writing and further bolster the UM Language Centre's reputation as a high quality provider of accredited courses.

## 6. Conclusions

The author experienced several challenges in creating both fully online courses. One of the most difficult aspects was convincing faculty members and managers that the online model had added value. As with many institutions, engendering a culture of change can be a delicate process as many staff who have been performing their duties well in the classroom see little reason to adapt to this model.

Funding was another obstacle that was surmounted by offering free or discounted pilots as a means of attaining high quality feedback to reinforce proposals to management. The author was fortunate to have access to reliable teleconferencing software. Costs involved in acquiring software can pose problems in the early stages of such innovations so identifying freeware, of which there is an abundance, is essential. For example, the author has only ever used the light version of Slack which has been sufficient for running the course.

Finally, as a result of creating the Online PhD Writing and advanced Online PhD Writing courses, an estimated 500 additional PhD students have received high quality instruction in English for academic purposes. This is a small but reliable indicator that greater accessibility to courses should be at the forefront of educational innovations, and while effort is required, the results can be rewarding.

## 7. Acknowledgements

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## Reference

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