

# A Writing Center's Hybrid Approach to Supporting English Academic Writing Skills among L2 Postgraduates

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## Abstract

Postgraduate research plays an important role in the knowledge economy, yet attrition rates among postgraduates remain a global concern. Numerous studies have cited anxiety around academic writing as a primary cause for declining completion rates, particularly among L2 students. Further exacerbating the problem is the acceleration of academic life where students are often expected to publish multiple papers prior to graduation. Despite assumptions that L2 postgraduates matriculate with requisite English academic writing skills, countless studies suggest otherwise. Such students face significant challenges developing these skills and accessing relevant institutional support, which calls for innovative solutions. This mixed-method comparative study analyzes historical data to understand the impact of a writing center's hybrid approach to supporting the development of English academic writing skills among L2 postgraduates. Findings reveal that postgraduate students require flexibility in accessing academic writing support and prefer online and distance options over traditional, in-person support. Additionally, findings indicate that program faculty are willing to collaborate with writing centers to support students' academic writing through a hybrid approach. Study findings also suggest that participants from the hybrid approach are more likely to publish prior to graduation compared to those from the traditional approach. These findings offer important insight for higher education administrators, writing centers, faculty, and postgraduate students as the "onlining" of higher education accelerates in the post-COVID era.

*Keywords:* English academic writing, L2 graduate students, hybrid support, writing centers, online learning

Newsome, M., Mollazehi, M., Zidani, M., Sheik, R., & Amiry, J. (2023). A writing center's hybrid approach to supporting English academic writing skills among L2 postgraduates. *Online Learning*, 27(4). 486-507. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v27i4.3688>

Students pursue postgraduate study to develop highly specialized knowledge and skills. This advanced learning is intended to produce experts capable of advancing a topic of study throughout their academic career, particularly through publication of scientific work (Ibrahim et al., 2017). However, the acceleration of academic life means that students are expected to produce more sooner, and this source of anxiety and frustration has contributed significantly to declining completion rates among postgraduates at both brick and mortar institutions (Cho & Hayter, 2020) and in fully online programs (Meyer, Preisman, & Samuel, 2022).

Although there is limited data on the actual global attrition rates, it has been estimated that more than half of postgraduates fail to complete their degree (Litalien & Guay, 2015) and many cite anxiety around thesis writing as a primary cause (Young et al., 2019; Panger, Tryon, & Smith, 2014). Huang (2013) suggests that academic English is no one's mother tongue and points out that while L1 students (those studying in their first language) and L2 students (those studying in a language other than their mother tongue) have vastly different attitudes about seeking English academic writing support, both require it. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that L2 students face additional academic writing challenges (Lin & Morrison, 2021). For instance, L2 students have difficulty engaging in academic criticism (Cheng, 2006), citing source material (Jomaa & Bidin, 2017), avoiding grammatical mistakes (Huwari et al., 2017), and employing a rich, academic vocabulary in their writing (Hawari et al., 2022). Nonetheless, most postgraduates are expected to publish before graduation; however, they often receive little dedicated academic writing instruction to help them do so (Holmes et al., 2018). Furthermore, studies have shown that while postgraduates believe it is important to develop these skills, they struggle to find the time (Rigler et al., 2017; Sutton, 2014).

While much has been done to improve the quality of writing support provided to postgraduate students (McCarthy & Dempsey, 2017; Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2021), the underlying issue of enhancing students' *access* to needed support has received much less attention. Consequently, the current study seeks to contribute to the limited body of literature exploring challenges to academic writing at the postgraduate level and enhancing students' access to relevant institutional support. More specifically, the purpose of this paper is to understand the impact of a writing center's hybrid approach to supporting the development of English academic writing skills among L2 postgraduate students. The implications of this work are relevant to higher education administrators, faculty, supervisors, writing center staff, and postgraduates, particularly English L2 students.

## **Literature Review**

### **Academic Writing in Postgraduate Study**

Strong academic writing skills are essential for success in postgraduate education and for active participation in the scientific community (Ibrahim et al., 2017). Academic writing has been defined as a cognitive skill that engages students in a complex process involving the synthesis of gained knowledge (Defazio et al., 2010) to critically and clearly articulate reasoning into new ideas (Ondrusek, 2012). In academic writing, students are required to connect ideas, concepts, and theories using advanced skills and applying "depth and breadth" learning (Lavelle & Bushrow, 2007). Although it is often assumed that postgraduate students have acquired strong academic writing skills prior to matriculation (Plakhotnik & Rocco, 2016), studies have shown that these students lack necessary skills such as proposal writing (McCarthy & Dempsey, 2017), evaluating and citing source material (Walter & Stouck, 2020), writing effective literature

reviews (Bair & Mader, 2013), synthesizing theories and scientific works (Walter & Stouck, 2020), and familiarity with scientific scholarly conventions (Jeyaraj, 2020). Furthermore, basic academic writing skills such as mechanics, clarity, structure, and paragraph-building have been identified as additional weaknesses among L2 postgraduates (Keong & Mussa, 2015; Mehar Singh, 2019). Moreover, although Holmes et al. (2018) reported anxiety and low self-efficacy about academic writing among both L1 and L2 postgraduate students, a study conducted by Zotzmann and Sheldrake (2021) found that L2 students had lower confidence and less positive beliefs about their writing ability than L1 students.

### **Challenges for Writing Centers**

Writing centers play a crucial role in academe because regardless of the changes that take place in higher education, students will continue to want and need support (Kail, 2000). Kail (2000) points out that only writing centers have both the willingness and ability to engage student writers “sentence by sentence, phrase by phrase, word by word, comma by comma, one-to-one” (p. 25). Kail adds that while no one else can or wants to do this work, everyone wants it done. Unfortunately, writing centers face many challenges to their efforts. To begin with, the persisting assumption of many faculty and administrators that postgraduates should arrive skilled in academic writing seriously hinders student success. Aldrich and Gallogly (2020), for example, point out that students internalize these assumptions in the form of shame, insecurity, or imposter syndrome (p. 307), which often leads to procrastination, anxiety, low self-efficacy, and avoidance from seeking needed support (Gernatt & Coberly-Holt, 2019; Rahimi & Hall, 2021). In addition, many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) leave the issue of addressing postgraduates' academic writing skills to thesis supervisors.

However, studies have shown that supervisors lack the time and know-how to teach their mentees the ins and outs of academic writing (Cotterall, 2013; Whitman et al., 2014), and, unfortunately, studies have shown that problems in academic writing rank among the top sources of conflict between students and supervisors (Adrian-Taylor et al., 2007). Alostath (2021) reported the primary method used by supervisors to improve academic writing consisted of simply encouraging students to read more scholarly work, while Basturkmen et al. (2014) found that supervisors emphasized linguistic accuracy in thesis feedback because it requires less time and effort than content-oriented feedback. Several studies have also suggested that students are unclear about thesis feedback provided by their supervisors and have difficulties following up due to supervisor time constraints (Saeed et al., 2021; Xu, 2017).

None of this is to suggest, however, that writing centers can meet students' needs without the help of program faculty and thesis supervisors. To the contrary, the advanced nature of academic writing at the postgraduate level requires attention to disciplinarity, which is best addressed when writing center staff, faculty, and supervisors work together to support students (Aldrich & Gallogly, 2020). Finally, postgraduate students' demanding schedules pose significant challenges for writing centers as well (Nicklin et al., 2018). A study conducted by Davis (2012) suggests that roughly 82 percent of postgraduates work and study, while more than half have full-time employment. Research has also linked the financial conditions of postgraduate students to rising attrition rates and burnout, which leaves little time or energy for the development of academic writing skills (Litalien & Guay, 2015; Rigler et al., 2017). Nonetheless, postgraduates have a desire to improve their academic writing skills, but as Nicklin et al. (2018) point out, those desires are often overshadowed next to the priorities of program

requirements, family obligations, and financial constraints. Consequently, writing centers need more flexible and innovative ways of supporting postgraduate students' academic writing needs.

### **Traditional Approach to Postgraduate Writing Support**

When the postgraduate writing center involved in this study was established in 2018, it employed a traditional approach to supporting students characterized by one-to-one in-person consultations and one-off writing workshops. During this period, students could schedule an appointment by accessing the center's website and emailing staff. The center also accepted appointments on a walk-in basis, which were manually logged using Excel. In-person workshops were scheduled on a semester basis and posted online. The center's workshop schedule was also shared with students via email at the start of each semester. Workshop attendance was also recorded manually using Excel. Writing center staff prepared a written post-support summary following one-to-one appointments and workshops as part of the center's continuous evaluation and periodic reporting. Self-evaluation during the center's first four semesters of operation revealed several challenges and shortcomings affecting the approach used to support students. To begin with, most postgraduates (even advanced students) lacked fundamental English academic writing skills needed at the graduate level. Furthermore, most postgraduates (more than half) were employed, and many were married with children, which created time constraints around visiting the center for needed support.

Additionally, Doha (the capital of Qatar) is a small city of only 132 square kilometers with a population of 2.3 million inhabitants, so even for students without work commitments, dealing with congested traffic to visit campus for supplemental writing support posed serious time challenges for students. Further complicating the issue was that writing center staff are considered academic non-teaching employees, which means they are responsible for being on campus during the day. Therefore, staff needed to stay late on most days to be available to support postgraduates who were attending their classes in the evenings. Such long hours were causing burnout and fatigue among staff. Consequently, several innovative changes were implemented in the postgraduate writing center, which comprised the center's hybrid approach.

### **Hybrid Approach to Postgraduate Writing Support**

**Hybrid One-to-One Consultations.** Due to the time constraints postgraduates struggle with, the center implemented a hybrid approach to one-to-one consultations, which provided students much-needed flexibility. Rather than expecting students to find time between work/family obligations, congested traffic, and evening courses to physically visit the center, a user-friendly online appointment system was created where students could request writing consultations via web, in-person, or phone (many students in the current context find phone appointments useful and efficient when they are at work or commuting). Additionally, students were able to indicate what area of support they needed, with whom they would like to schedule, and attach any relevant material such as a writing passage or source material pertaining to the purpose of the visit. Upon logging in to the system, students' university information (i.e., student ID, college/program, level, etc.) was imported and students were prompted to make a few additional selections to generate an automatic email notification for the appropriate writing specialist. In turn, the specialist confirmed and coordinated the meeting request via the students' preferred method (WebEx, Zoom, Google Duo, phone, face-to-face, etc.). The idea behind this approach is that students are not expected to take on additional inconveniences to meet with center staff such as using a complicated appointment system or downloading an unfamiliar

application needed for an online session. Instead, the center is flexible to the mode of communication comfortable for the student, be it an in-person meeting, phone call, or video/voice call via an online conferencing tool. The online appointment system provided basic descriptive analytics for continuous enhancement and ad hoc reporting.

**Webinars and a Grad Student Blackboard Community.** Two other key changes implemented by the center were (1) transitioning in-person only lectures/workshops to online webinars and (2) establishing a Grad Student Blackboard Community. Consequently, academic writing lectures were presented as live, online webinars, which were recorded and uploaded to a video library within the Grad Student Blackboard Community. Whether students were able to attend a live webinar or not, this change allowed them to watch/re-watch relevant webinars at their own convenience. Additionally, building the webinar library allowed the center to offer a wider variety of content targeting different stages/levels of the writing and research process as opposed to repeating a handful of the most popular sessions each term/year. The Blackboard community also provided access to a variety of other important resources such as style guides, learning modules, thesis/dissertation databases (i.e., ProQuest and the institutional repository), thesis templates, handouts, tutorials, discussion boards, supplemental reading, as well as grad humor. In addition, the Blackboard community was intended to facilitate a student-friendly infrastructure of support by providing a centralized point for accessing information and resources, communicating with other students, contacting center staff, and connecting to other university support such as the library, counseling services, and student grants. Finally, the Blackboard community aimed to cultivate a sense of community and camaraderie among students. All postgraduates were automatically enrolled in the Grad Student Blackboard community each term and remained part of the community while they were enrolled at the university. The Blackboard Community also provided useful analytics for periodic reporting and evaluation.

**Lecture Requests.** Because evidence shows postgraduate students lack adequate academic writing skills, have barriers to developing these skills, and face tensions with thesis supervisors over academic writing, the center implemented a lecture request system. This system allowed faculty teaching postgraduate students to request a lecture from among a list of topics relevant to academic writing and writing for publication. Center staff delivered the requested lectures at the regularly scheduled class times, which was a convenient option since students were already required to attend, and the content of the requested lectures supported the achievement of course objectives. Also, faculty used this system to recommend new lecture topics to writing center staff, which opened communication between the center and faculty creating a culture of collaboration around postgraduate writing support. The lecture request system was also used to provide additional feedback regarding the specific academic writing and research issues postgraduates faced in various disciplines.

**Flexible Working Hours for Center Staff.** The four academic writing specialists working in the center involved in the current study are considered academic non-teaching staff and are, consequently, expected to be on campus during the day. Since most postgraduate students are only available in the evenings and to avoid staff burnout, the center implemented flexible working hours. With flexible hours, staff were able to keep a weekly log of one-to-one consultations, webinars, and lecture requests held in the evenings and deduct those hours from the time they needed to be on campus in the mornings. For example, a specialist giving an hour webinar and a two-hour lecture request after 2:30 pm could come in three hours later the same morning. Although the trust system was very effective in the current study, confirming staff hours can be easily accomplished by checking meeting request and lecture request system reports.

### **COVID-19 Interruption**

The global COVID-19 pandemic beginning in early 2020 caused a massive interruption to higher education due to the sudden and forced closure of virtually all HEIs (Marinoni & Land, 2020). Many institutions, for example, lacked adequate contingency plans for the transition to remote learning (Hodges et al., 2020), and, in many cases, faculty and students alike lacked the skills needed for successful online teaching and learning (Baczek et al., 2021). The postgraduate writing center in the current study was not exempt from these interruptions. Postgraduate students and faculty were understandably overwhelmed with the new mode of learning and the different skills and competencies expected of them. Consequently, activity in the writing center slowed down significantly in the first few months. It is important to point out that postgraduate study was mandated to be remote for one semester (spring 2020), after which postgraduates were able to attend classes, while undergraduates were still expected to attend online. This is likely due to the smaller class sizes at the graduate level, which allowed for easier adherence to precautionary measures.

## **Methods**

A mixed-methods research design was used in this comparative study to understand the impact of the center's hybrid model for supporting the development of English academic writing skills among L2 postgraduate students. In this approach, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed for meaningful interpretation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Specifically, the study explored the impact of the center's transition from offering traditional writing support to a hybrid support approach by analyzing frequency data for the following: (1) one-to-one consultations, (2) workshops/webinars, (3) lecture requests, and (4) Blackboard Community. Additionally, the study analyzed data extracted from the institutional postgraduate research experience exit survey to examine the relationship between the center's support approach and postgraduates' perceptions regarding the usefulness of that support as well as whether the support approach impacted students' publication status. Finally, historical data in the form of qualitative feedback from center staff and postgraduate students was compiled and analyzed to support study findings and provide further insight. The philosophical underpinnings of this study are rooted in the tenets of pragmatism where the aim is to better understand "what works" in a particular context (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

## Study Context

The current study took place in a postgraduate writing center at a large national university in Qatar during spring 2022. The study examined data collected in the center from spring 2019 to fall 2021, which encompassed two different approaches to supporting the development of students' English academic writing skills: the traditional approach (spring 2019 to fall 2019) and the hybrid approach (spring 2020 to fall 2021). Discussion of the center's two approaches (traditional and hybrid) is provided in the sections below. The center involved in this study was established in spring 2018 and has a staff of four academic writing specialists. The center serves a student population of approximately 1,400 students enrolled in more than 50 graduate programs where most programs (76%) use English as the medium of instruction. Furthermore, the postgraduate student body consists of 63 percent females and 37 percent males of which 30 percent are Qatari nationals and 70 percent are non-Qatari. The average age range of postgraduate students is 24 to 36 years old, and more than half of the postgraduates are employed. Although the center provides academic writing and research support to postgraduates studying in both Arabic and English, the current study focuses on support for English academic writing among those L2 students enrolled in programs where English is the medium of instruction.

## Data Collection

Frequency data for the different types of academic writing support was extracted from the center's end of semester reports and the descriptive analytics provided through the center's online meeting system, lecture request system, and Grad Student Blackboard Community from spring 2019 to fall 2021. Data was disaggregated by the introduction of the hybrid approach to student writing support. Consequently, data from spring 2019 to fall 2019 comprised the "traditional approach," while data from spring 2020 to fall 2021 comprised the "hybrid approach." In the traditional approach, frequency data was collected for one-to-one appointments, in-person workshops, and workshop attendance. Because the intent of the hybrid approach was to increase students' access to academic writing support by providing flexible online and distance options in addition to in-person options, the hybrid approach collected frequency data for the following: one-to-one consultations (in-person, online, and phone), in-person workshops, in-person workshop attendance, webinars, webinar attendance, webinar views on the Grad Student Blackboard Community, and lecture requests. In addition, descriptive data was extracted from end of semester reports for Lecture Request topics by college. To examine the impact of the hybrid approach to supporting the development of English academic writing skills among postgraduates, data from the traditional approach was compared to data from the hybrid approach.

To help understand the impact of the center's hybrid approach, the researchers also extracted data from the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) for the period of traditional support (spring 2019 to fall 2019) and the two most recent semesters of hybrid support (spring 2021 and fall 2021) for analysis. The PRES survey (Park et al., 2007) was adapted to fit the local context by the Office of Graduate Studies at the institution involved in the current study and is administered as an exit survey to graduating students every semester. It is important to note that while all graduating students receive the exit survey via their institutional email, completing the survey is optional. Furthermore, the PRES survey is provided to students in Arabic and English where students have the option to complete the survey in their preferred language. Although the 40-item survey is comprised of six scales (Supervision, Intellectual

Environment, Infrastructure, Thesis/Dissertation Examination, Goals and Expectations, and Industry Engagement), only the below item (see Table 1) pertains exclusively to the postgraduate writing center. To assess whether there was a significant difference in students' perceptions of the usefulness of academic writing support between the two approaches, both parametric (independent sample t-test) and non-parametric (Mann-Whitney U test) statistical tests were employed to analyze the survey responses. The outcomes of the independent sample t-test and the Mann-Whitney U test are discussed in the findings section.

**Table 1**  
*Relevant PRES Item*

Item No.	Item Description	1	2	3	4	5
14	The additional support provided through the Office of Graduate Studies helped me improve my academic writing and research skills	Strongly Agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

Because the current study is concerned with English academic writing, only responses from the English version of the survey were considered. Consequently, of the n = 287 graduating students invited to take the PRES survey from the period of traditional support, n = 70 participated, which represents a response rate of 24%. Of those students invited to take the PRES survey from the period of hybrid support (n = 355), n = 84 participated, which also represents a response rate of 24%. To determine whether there was a significant difference among students' perceptions about the usefulness of academic writing support in the two approaches, a non-parametric test, Mann-Whitney, was used to analyze survey responses. Additionally, and because publishable research is commonly considered a measure of successful academic writing (Li & Flowerdew, 2020), the researchers also explored the relationship between the support approach used by the postgraduate writing center and students' publication status. For those respondents who completed the English version of the PRES survey during spring 2019 and fall 2019 (traditional approach) and spring 2021 and fall 2021 (hybrid approach), the researchers extracted responses to the demographic item identifying whether the student had published an academic paper out of their research prior to graduation and performed a Pearson Chi-square test. The results of the Pearson Chi-square test are discussed in the findings section.

Finally, to support the quantitative analysis and provide additional insight regarding the impact of the hybrid approach used by the postgraduate writing center, the researchers gathered feedback data that had been submitted by students and writing center staff during the period of hybrid writing support. Qualitative feedback was compiled from end of semester reports, post-appointment summaries, webinar chats, email, and the Grad Student Blackboard Community discussion boards. To maintain the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, all identifying information was removed from the feedback data before analysis. The feedback was then analyzed for patterns and themes.

## Results

### Increase in One-to-One Consultations

Table 2 presents a comparison of the frequency of one-to-one consultations in the two approaches (traditional and hybrid) used in the center. As seen in Table 2, there was an increase in the frequency of one-to-one consultations using the hybrid approach compared to the traditional approach. More specifically, in the two semesters of traditional support there were 156 in-person meetings, while there was a total of 220 consultations (phone and online) in the first two semesters of the hybrid approach, representing a 41% increase. Likewise, the frequency of both online and phone consultations consistently increased each semester over the last two years. Furthermore, although physical meetings were available, very few students chose that option for the past four semesters (5%) preferring instead online meetings (57%) followed by phone sessions (38%).

**Table 2**

*Frequency of One-to-one Consultations*

Approach	Term	In-person Sessions	Online Sessions	Phone Sessions	Total
Traditional	Spring 2019	84	-	-	84
	Fall 2019	72	-	-	72
Hybrid	Spring 2020	0	63	39	102
	Fall 2020	12	70	48	130
	Spring 2021	6	82	53	141
	Fall 2021	10	108	74	192
Total		184	323	214	721

### Increase in Frequency of and Attendance to Webinars

There was also an increase in both the frequency of and attendance to academic writing workshops using the hybrid approach. Table 3 shows 15 in-person workshops with a total attendance of 115 postgraduates during the period of traditional support compared to 39 webinars and a combined virtual attendance of 354 students in the first two semesters of hybrid support. This represents a 160% increase in workshops offered and a 207% increase in attendance in just one year. The low number of webinars (nine with an overall attendance of 105) in spring 2020 can be attributed to the interruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, over four semesters of hybrid support there was a total of 112 webinars and a combined virtual attendance of 1,108 students. Furthermore, the establishment of the Grad Student Blackboard Community enabled the writing center to build an extensive academic writing and research webinar library, which allowed postgraduates to access needed webinars at their own convenience. Consequently, Blackboard webinar views were also analyzed each semester and treated as post-event attendance. With this perspective, the total attendance/views for the 112 webinars provided during the hybrid approach was 5,585. In fact, the webinar library accounted for the majority of students' participation. For example, in the most recent semester of hybrid support (fall 2021) the center delivered 41 webinars, which garnered an attendance of 449 students and 2,677 Blackboard views.

**Table 3**  
*Frequency of Workshops/Webinars and Attendance*

Approach	Term	In-person Workshop	Physical Attendance	Webinars	Webinar Attendance	Blackboard Views	Total Attendance
Traditional	Spring 2019	7	52	-	-	-	52
	Fall 2019	8	63	-	-	-	63
Hybrid	Spring 2020	-	-	9	105	-	105
	Fall 2020	-	-	30	249	966	1215
	Spring 2021	-	-	32	305	834	1139
	Fall 2021	-	-	41	449	2677	3126
Total		15	115	112	1108	4477	5700

### Demand for Collaborative Support

The center also yielded positive outcomes from the implementation of the lecture request system, which allowed faculty to invite center staff to their classes to deliver academic writing/research lectures. The lecture request system was implemented in January 2021 and resulted in 42 lecture requests in its first year (see Table 4), which suggests a demand for writing centers to collaborate with postgraduate programs to support the development of academic writing and research skills among students. The results presented in Table 4 also suggest that faculty in both STEM and non-STEM disciplines believe their postgraduates lack the requisite academic writing skills needed at the postgraduate level. Finally, the results suggest that postgraduates in a variety of colleges need support with not only the basics of academic writing (i.e., paraphrasing and paragraph building) but also more advance topics such as developing good research questions, demonstrating critical thinking in writing, and strategies for getting published.

**Table 4**  
*Frequency of Lecture Requests and Topics by College*

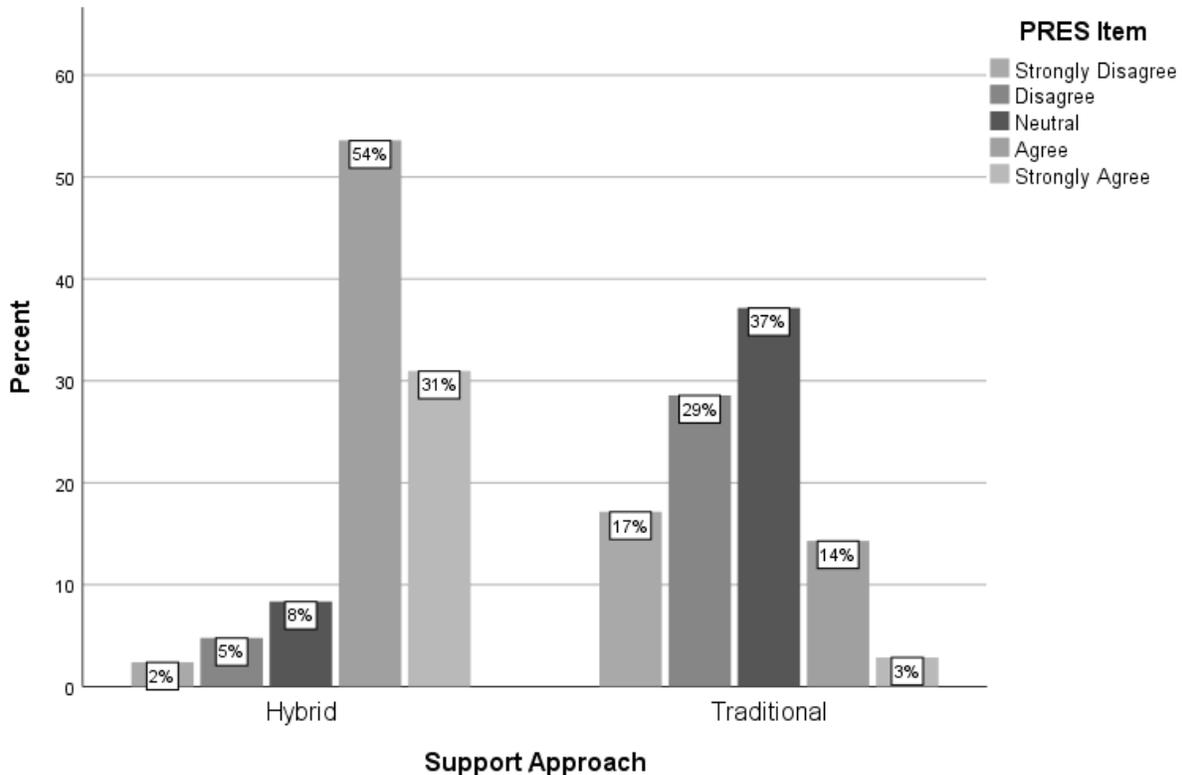
Term	Requests	Lecture Topic	College
Spring 2021	20	Introduction to Academic Writing	Education
		Understanding Writing as a Process	Education/Arts & Sciences/ Pharmacy
		Building Body Paragraphs	Education/Pharmacy
		Sentence Style and Variety	Education/Pharmacy
		Writing Reflections and Writing e-Portfolio	Education
		Overview of Qualitative Research Design	Arts & Sciences
		Methods of Qualitative Data Collection & Analysis	Arts & Sciences
		Developing Qualitative Research Questions	Arts & Sciences
		Understanding Plagiarism and Similarity	Pharmacy
		Referencing with Zotero	Pharmacy
		Avoiding Plagiarism through Proper Citation	Pharmacy
		Quoting, Paraphrasing, and Summarizing	Pharmacy
		Constructing an Argument	Pharmacy
		Editing vs Proofreading and When to do Both	Pharmacy
Critical Thinking in Scientific Writing	Pharmacy		
Creating a Good Poster	Law		
Fall 2021	22	Introduction to Academic Integrity	Education
		Understanding Writing as a Process	Education
		Building Body Paragraphs	Education
		Referencing Source Materials	Education
		Approaching the Literature Review	Arts & Sciences
		Avoiding Plagiarism through Proper Citation	Education/ Business/Arts & Science/Sharia & Islamic Studies/ Engineering/Health Sciences/Pharmacy
		Understanding Intentional/Unintentional Plagiarism and Similarity	Education/ Business/Arts & Science/Sharia & Islamic Studies/Engineering/Health Sciences/Pharmacy
		Strategies for Getting Published before Graduation	Arts and Science/Education/Sharia & Islamic Studies

### Postgraduate Research Experience Survey Results

To explore the impact of the center’s hybrid approach to supporting English academic writing among postgraduates, data from the relevant item of the PRES survey was extracted for the period of traditional support and the two most recent semesters of hybrid support (spring 2021 and fall 2021), and a cluster bar chart, independent sample t-test, and Mann-Whitney U test were conducted. Based on Figure 1, among those who experienced the hybrid approach, 54% agreed and 31% strongly agreed that the support was useful for improving their academic writing and research skills. Only 2% strongly disagreed, while 5% disagreed, and 8% remained neutral regarding the usefulness of the hybrid approach. In contrast, for those who experienced the traditional approach, a smaller percentage of participants agreed (14%) and strongly agreed (3%) that the support was useful. However, a larger percentage of participants either strongly disagreed (17%), disagreed (29%), or remained neutral (37%) about the usefulness of the traditional approach for improving their academic writing skills. Moreover, the study conducted both an independent sample t-test and a Mann-Whitney U test to compare students' perceived usefulness of the support provided by the postgraduate writing center for improving their academic writing skills between the hybrid and traditional approaches. The results revealed that

students in the hybrid approach (N = 84, Mean = 4.06, SD = 0.90) reported significantly higher perceived usefulness than those in the traditional approach (N = 70, Mean = 2.57, SD = 0.03). The independent sample t-test demonstrated a significant difference in perceived usefulness between the two groups,  $t(152) = 9.586, p < .001$ . Additionally, the Mann-Whitney U test corroborated these findings with a significant chi-square value,  $\chi^2(1) = 62.398, p < .001$ .

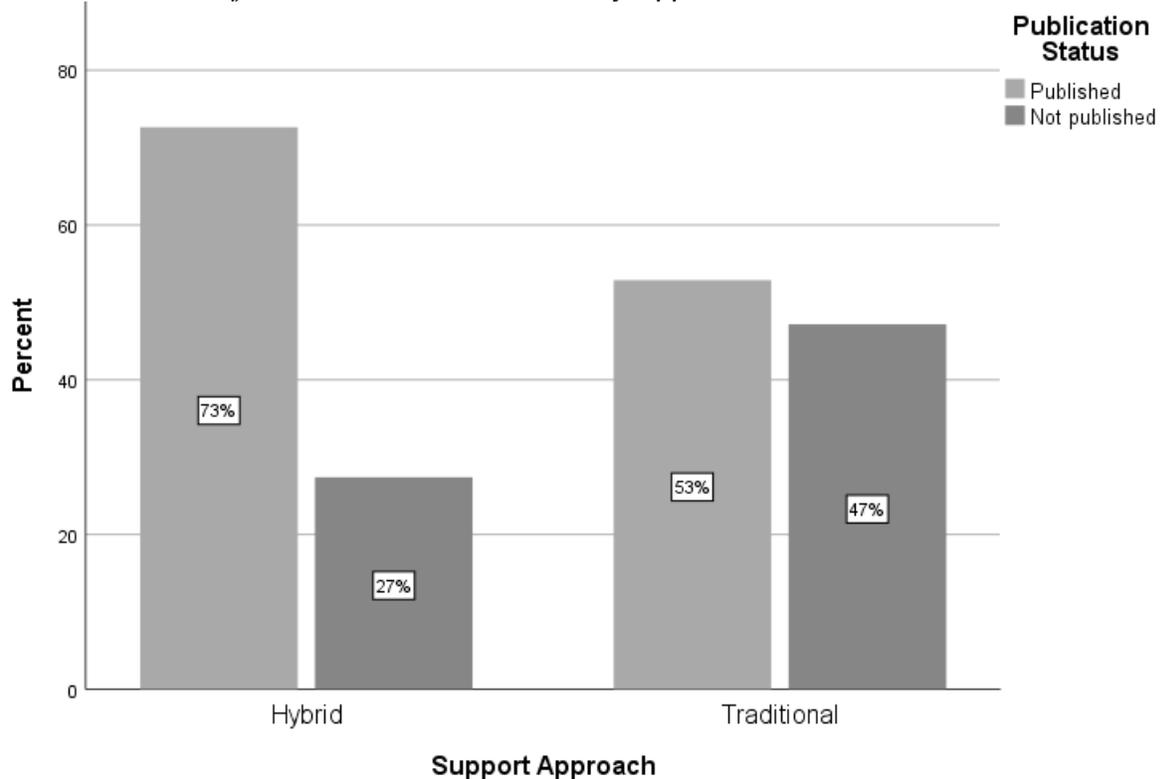
**Figure 1**  
*Cluster Bar Chart of PRES Survey Item by Approach*



The authors also explored the relationship between the support approach used by the postgraduate writing center and students' publication status by analyzing students' responses to a demographic item on the survey regarding whether they had published an academic paper out of their thesis prior to graduation. Consequently, a Pearson Chi square test was used. Figure 2 shows the relationship between the center's support approach (traditional and hybrid) and students' publication status. As depicted in Figure 2, a comparison of students' publication status before graduation reveals a notable difference between the two support approaches. In the group that received traditional support, 53% of students published prior to graduation, whereas 73% of those who received hybrid support achieved the same milestone. A chi-square test revealed a significant relationship between the center's approach to academic writing support and students' publication status,  $\chi^2(1) = 6.444, p < .001$ , with a Cramer's V of 0.205. These findings suggest that the hybrid approach employed by the center to foster academic writing skills may contribute to students' ability to get published before graduation.

**Figure 2**

*Cluster Bar Chart of Student Publication Status by Approach*



### **Qualitative Feedback from Postgraduates and Center Staff**

The use of student and staff feedback to improve quality in higher education is well documented (Henderson et al., 2019; Razinkina et al., 2018). Consequently, the researchers relied on qualitative feedback from postgraduates and center staff to support study findings and offer unique insight regarding the impact of the hybrid approach explored in this study. An analysis of the feedback gathered from historical data in the center suggests two general takeaways: (1) postgraduates need flexible ways of accessing academic writing support, and (2) writing center staff feel empowered using a hybrid approach. Table 5 provides evidence to support.

**Table 5**

*Qualitative Feedback from Postgraduates and Writing Center Staff*

<b>Takeaway 1: Postgraduates need flexible ways of accessing writing support</b>	
<b>Source Scenario</b>	<b>Students' Feedback</b>
A female master's student in Pharmacy via webinar chat	<i>I'm in a small resting room at the hospital working 12 hours a day; I'm grateful I can attend online even if I am exhausted. This is really great to be able to join.</i>
A second-year master's student in Computing via one-to-one Zoom meeting	<i>It's a blessing to meet during the weekend; it's very hard for me to manage during the week with classes and work, but please ignore if my 4-year-old comes in while we're working.</i>
An Engineering Management doctoral student via one-to-one phone consultation	<i>I'm calling on my lunch break because it's the only time I can talk to you. I really need your help on organizing my lit. review.</i>
A Gulf Studies master's student via one-to-one phone consultation	<i>I'm meeting you at work, I'm sorry in case my boss calls, I will have to leave you.</i>
An Environmental Sciences PhD student via one-to-one on WebEx	<i>When will yesterday's webinar be available on the Blackboard community? I couldn't attend because of work, but I need help with how to organize the lit. review. I want to watch it before I have to meet my supervisor.</i>
A master's student in Public Health via email	<i>I want to share that we face a lot of challenges that limit us from attending your great sessions. We finish work at 2pm and most of us have classes at 4 pm, so we are usually driving to campus during the time of your webinars. I really appreciate that you are recording those sessions for us to use later.</i>
<b>Takeaway 2: Writing center staff feel empowered using a hybrid approach</b>	
Excerpts from self-evaluations and end of semester reports prepared by writing center staff	<i>I love the flexibility we have now and how it allows us to reach more of our students. The best part is when students call in for a quick meeting to clarify a few points before they need to submit a piece of writing, and they end the meeting by saying things like "You saved me!" or "I don't know what I would have done without you". I think it really helps build their confidence by reinforcing their thinking and writing, and that gives me a lot of satisfaction.</i>
	<i>I have noticed that the more flexible we are in how we meet with students, the more they reach out to us for support. I actually see more students in less time because I don't have so much down time waiting around the office for students to show up.</i>
	<i>It's logical that we need to adapt to students' schedules; we have all been in their shoes and know the demands on them; it's about empathy. We tried the traditional approach, and it worked to a certain extent. But, since shifting to the new way, there has been a real change; we simply meet more students. It's very motivating to keep supporting students this way. It definitely requires me to be more available outside typical work hours. One might say I work more, but that's not true; I just work differently now. If I work with a student during the weekend, I just compensate for that time somewhere else in the week. In fact, I actually spend far less time in the office even though I see more students; it's nice to be able to help students from the comfort of my own home also. I don't get overwhelmed because my work is so flexible now, which helps me be more patient with students.</i>

The qualitative feedback provided above offers useful insight into the unique challenges graduate students face and aligns with recent studies urging universities to provide more student support services virtually (Bouchev, Gratz, & Kurland, 2021). Furthermore, such feedback illustrates how implementing a more flexible, hybrid approach to supporting academic writing at the postgraduate level can be beneficial for not only students but staff as well. These findings confirm other studies suggesting a hybrid work model offers employees a greater work-life balance, more job satisfaction, and increased productivity (Kurdy, Al-Malkawi, & Rizwan, 2023). However, such an approach can only be successful if staff are accepting of the implications for their schedules and, perhaps most importantly, there is trust and transparency among the team and management to maintain a motivating and supportive environment. This feedback is intended to spark dialogue around innovative ways of enhancing postgraduates' access to supplemental support.

## Discussion

This study suggests several key findings. First, postgraduate students are more inclined to request one-to-one writing consultations when they have the flexibility of being able to do so without needing to physically visit campus. These findings compliment recent studies indicating that students, whether enrolled in face-to-face or online classes, benefit from online support options and that sustainable learning environments in all contexts should use class designs that take distance learning into account (Ashida & Ishizaka, 2022). Secondly, findings suggest that while live webinars are more convenient for students than in-person workshops, the flexibility of accessing content remotely via a webinar library offers students the most convenience. These findings are supported by a recent study among Saudi medical students conducted during the pandemic, which found that while students were satisfied with both synchronous and asynchronous learning, students believed that asynchronous learning helped them manage their time better (Alzahrani et al., 2023). With graduate students' busy schedules and need to prioritize academic classes, a distance approach to providing supplemental writing support seems useful. Thirdly, study findings suggest that program faculty are willing to collaborate with writing center staff to develop the English academic writing skills of their students.

These findings may serve as some consolation to recent studies highlighting the challenges writing centers face in recruiting highly qualified tutors with specialized knowledge in target fields to support the needs of postgraduates (González, & Videgaray, 2022). That is, rather than burdening writing centers with further recruitment challenges, study findings suggest that center staff and program faculty can work together using a lecture request tool to maximize on each other's expertise to support students at a time when they are already required to be present. Furthermore, study results suggest that postgraduates in a variety of colleges and disciplines need support with fundamentals as well as more advanced aspects of academic writing, which is well-supported in the existing literature (Newsome, 2023; Jeyaraj, 2020; Mehar Singh, 2019). Additionally, study findings suggest that students perceive a hybrid approach to supporting the development of academic writing skills to be more useful than that of a traditional support approach and that students from a hybrid approach are significantly more likely to publish prior to graduation. One possible explanation is that a hybrid approach allows the center to offer more support on a wider array of topics to a greater number of students than a traditional approach. In addition, the hybrid approach offers students more flexibility in terms of how they access support as evidenced by the findings reported in this study.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

The relatively low response rate to the PRES survey was a limitation in the current study. Additionally, the survey had only one-item dedicated to evaluating the quality of academic writing support provided by the center, which allowed for limited insight regarding students' perceptions. Because the PRES survey is an exit survey that is administered to graduating students by the Office of Graduate Studies each semester after they apply for graduation, the writing center involved in this study had no authority to modify the survey items. Furthermore, students received a single email invitation inviting them to participate in this optional survey; therefore, the center was not able to send reminder emails to potentially improve the response rate. Consequently, more studies are needed investigating students' perceptions of the usefulness of a hybrid approach for improving their academic writing skills using instruments designed particularly for that purpose. Another limitation of the study is its generalizability. Because the study focused on a hybrid support approach at a single postgraduate writing center, the results have limited generalizability to other writing centers or academic support services in different settings. Future studies could include more diverse samples and various institutions to broaden the applicability of the findings. This would help to further validate study findings and offer a deeper understanding of how best to support the development of postgraduates' academic writing skills.

## **Conclusion**

Despite assumptions that L2 postgraduate students matriculate with the English academic writing skills required to do well in graduate study and produce scientific publications, study findings align with existing literature to suggest otherwise. In fact, the current study confirms that postgraduates across all disciplines lack requisite academic writing skills and face significant challenges accessing needed support. This mismatch between skills and expectations can lead to feelings of anxiety and desperation, imposter syndrome, isolation, and even depression. While faculty and thesis supervisors are often expected to fill this gap, most are unable to do so because they either lack the time or the know-how. Even when institutions have centers dedicated to supporting academic writing at the postgraduate level, like in the current context, students struggle to find time to take advantage of such support, despite it being a priority. Consequently, postgraduates need flexibility in how they access academic writing support. The current study explored the impact of a writing center's hybrid approach to supporting the development of English academic writing skills among L2 postgraduates, and several key findings emerged. Firstly, postgraduates prefer online and distance options for receiving academic writing support compared to in-person options. Secondly, postgraduates perceive a hybrid support approach as more useful for improving their English academic writing skills than a traditional support approach. Similarly, study findings suggest that providing flexible ways for postgraduates to access needed academic writing support likely has a significant impact on helping them publish prior to graduation. Findings also reveal that while faculty find the academic writing skills of postgraduates to be inadequate, they are willing to collaborate with writing center staff to support the development of their students' skills. The findings from this study are intended to ignite discussion around the English academic writing challenges L2 postgraduates face and to encourage more research efforts aimed at finding innovative approaches to supporting the development of these skills.

### **Acknowledgements**

This work was supported by the Office of the Vice President for Research and Graduate Studies at Qatar University. We also wish to thank the anonymous reviewers of this article for their insightful suggestions on how it could be improved.

### **Declarations**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest in this research. The data used and analyzed in the current study are available from the author upon reasonable request.

### **Ethics Approval**

This study was approved by Qatar University Institution Review Board under Research Ethics Approval Number QU-IRB 1385-E/20.

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