

Higher Education: More than a Degree

Academic Communities

Case Study 1: University of Dundee Virtual Writing Retreats

Hailey Austin, Doctoral Researcher, and Sandra Oza, Doctoral Academy Manager, University of Dundee

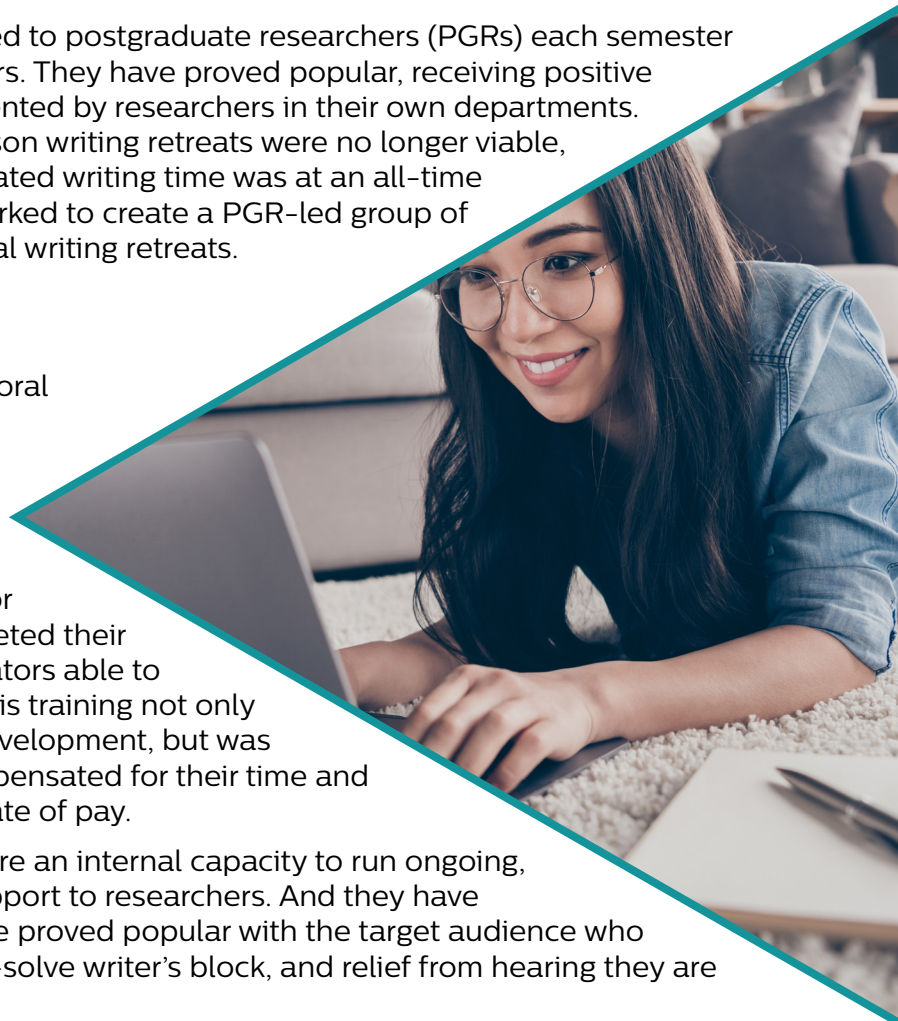
What was the issue?

In-person writing retreats have been offered to postgraduate researchers (PGRs) each semester at the University of Dundee for several years. They have proved popular, receiving positive student feedback and even being implemented by researchers in their own departments. During the first lockdown, however, in-person writing retreats were no longer viable, while the need for peer support and dedicated writing time was at an all-time high. As a result, the Doctoral Academy worked to create a PGR-led group of newly-trained individuals to facilitate virtual writing retreats.

How was it solved?

Electv Training was contracted by the Doctoral Academy to run a virtual writing retreat for postgraduate researchers from several universities, including Dundee, Abertay and St Andrews during lockdown. This was in part to gauge interest in the writing retreats, but also to serve as an example for four PGRs who were nearing or had completed their research degree to be trained as co-facilitators able to deliver subsequent retreats themselves. This training not only aided the peer-facilitators' professional development, but was also financially beneficial – they were compensated for their time and continue to receive a professional tutor's rate of pay.

The aim of these retreats has been to ensure an internal capacity to run ongoing, regular writing retreats to provide peer-support to researchers. And they have succeeded. Once again, these retreats have proved popular with the target audience who report more motivation, ability to problem-solve writer's block, and relief from hearing they are not alone in their research journey.



What comes next?

There are currently four PGR peers who deliver virtual writing retreats twice per month, with one session being a full-day session and the other a half-day session. These have run uninterrupted since September 2020 and have received consistently positive feedback from attendees. While the pandemic has caused strain on university retention, the outcome of these writing retreats should positively impact completion rates. These retreats will continue to be offered twice per month virtually until it is safe for postgraduate researchers to access campus for non-research purposes. Afterwards, there may be a blended model of one in-person and one virtual writing retreat each month to offer further in-person, peer-led support. There will also be consideration for succession planning for new peer facilitators as this need arises.



Find out more

This case study is one of 13 published as part of the Student-led Project from the Resilient Learning Communities Enhancement Theme.

The project in year 1 explored issues and themes relevant to how higher education institutions and students' associations/unions have recreated student communities in an online environment during the COVID-19 pandemic, what enablers and barriers this has created, and provides the opportunity to showcase and share examples of practice.

You can find further case studies and resources on the [Enhancement Themes website](#).

