



Postgraduate students and publishing in academic journals

In common with other journals, the *South African Journal of Science* often receives submissions from authors who have recently completed a piece of postgraduate research and who are required to provide evidence either of having submitted an article to a journal or having published a journal article before they can graduate. In some cases, students are required to provide such proof before they are allowed even to submit their theses.

This practice raises important questions in a number of areas related to doctoral education. In South Africa, the *Qualification Standard for Doctoral Degrees*¹ draws on the concept of “graduate attributes” in standard setting. Attributes, or characteristics of the graduate, fall into two areas: knowledge attributes and skills attributes. If the Doctoral Standard is to count for anything, assessment of a candidate’s readiness to be awarded the degree needs to include consideration of the attributes, not all of which are easily discernible in the thesis, although disciplinary differences will come into play here.

What is clear, however, is that the requirement to provide evidence of submission of an article or of the publication of an article in a journal, duplicates what is already likely to be evident in a thesis when, arguably, what is necessary are additional assessment requirements that will allow a candidate to demonstrate what is not so readily evident. A thesis in any knowledge area will provide evidence of the acquisition, on the part of the graduate, of “well informed relevant knowledge in the selected field” and of “expert, specialized and in-depth current knowledge of a specific area of research”^{1(p.13)} but may not easily lend itself to a demonstration of the way in which “the specific area of research relates, or is relatable, to other fields of study”, all of which are identified as “knowledge attributes” in the Doctoral Standard. A similar claim can be made of the “skills attributes”, one of which involves the ability to “communicate research findings effectively to expert and non-expert audiences alike”. While a journal article provides evidence of the ability to address expert audiences, another form of writing (in the form of, for example, an article in *The Conversation*) would be needed to be sure that the graduate is able to interact with non-experts.

Requirements to submit to, or publish in, a journal before a degree can be awarded also have important implications for supervision. The quality of supervision was a concern noted in the 2010 ASSAf report on the PhD² as, too, were issues related to the lack of sufficient supervisory capacity in universities and the concomitant overburdening of supervisors. If universities make the submission or publication of an article a requirement for the award of a degree, then, as with all other assessment, students need to be guided towards completing the assessment task. Theses and journal articles are different genres, not least because the readership is different. A journal article needs to take a ‘slice’ of a thesis and report on it succinctly. This means that supervisors not only need to develop students’ capacity to write the thesis but also the genre of the article. Research on doctoral publication trends in South Africa³ shows that fewer than half of all doctoral graduates from South African universities published from their theses within 10 years of their graduation. As many of these graduates working in universities will now be supervising, questions may well need to be asked about overall capacity within the system to provide guidance to doctoral candidates who need to write an article before they can graduate. Can a supervisor

who has not published or who does not publish regularly provide the kind of guidance necessary to allow a student to do so?

In many articles submitted by postgraduate students, the lack of guidance that would be provided by a more experienced writer is immediately evident. Many submissions, for example, are effectively summaries of an entire thesis. As Tomaselli⁴ points out, this then leaves journal editors and reviewers with the task not only of processing a submission but also, ideally, with that of providing the feedback that should have been the responsibility of the supervisor. Although many supervisors do not appear to offer any guidance to students required to write articles, submissions commonly still bear their names and the benefits derived from publication will still accrue to them.

The *Doctoral Degrees National Report*⁵ recommends that universities should develop clear policies on their requirements regarding the publication of articles from theses and “should implement processes” to support them. These processes need to include ensuring that support for writing articles is provided by supervisors who are familiar with the genre of the article and the requirements and expectations of the readership of different journals. Arguably, the recommendation in the Report does not go far enough as it leaves the way open for claims to be made that an institution provides a generic writing course or a writing centre, despite the fact that the kind of expert guidance needed to be able to publish may very well be unavailable in either.

These issues are not unique to South Africa, and in fact our journal receives submissions from graduate students in other countries – students who also often appear poorly trained and supported in academic publishing but are required to produce publications. Tomaselli⁴ has noted in the South African context that requirements for students to publish before they can graduate can be seen as ‘milking’ the DHET subsidy system. One of the purposes of the subsidy is to provide funding for teaching. Without careful thought being given to the role of the publication requirement in both assessment and teaching at postgraduate level, and without appropriate support within universities for graduate students, this claim may well have some merit.

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