Postgraduate Students Academic Writing Skills: The Needs for Supervision and Self-esteem

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Abstract
The study aimed to understand how supervision and self-esteem influence academic writing skills among postgraduate students in Malaysian public universities. Academic writing skills of postgraduate students, particularly PhD students, are essential for them to conduct their research effectively due to the high demands placed on the quality of their study. It is beneficial to understand postgraduate students' self-esteem as well as their supervisor's support in order to boost their academic writing skills. A quantitative cross-sectional survey research design was used in this study. Data were gathered through the use of a survey questionnaire that was distributed to 171 postgraduate students (PhD students). Non-probability sampling (convenient sampling) method was used to select the participants for this study. SPSS version 26 was used to analyse the data. An investigation of the relationship between supervision, self-esteem, and perceived academic writing skills was carried out using Pearson correlation analysis and linear regression. Both supervision and self-esteem were shown to have a moderate correlation with perceived academic writing skills. When compared to supervision, self-esteem is a slightly stronger factor for perceived academic writing skills. The implications of this study can provide direction to those involved in developing the most appropriate strategies to improve the writing skills of postgraduate students. Researchers suggested that more variables in the literature to be studied in future research, which could lead to a better result. Furthermore, future researchers can use a mixed methods approach to gain a deeper understanding of postgraduate students' conditions in order to boost their writing skills effectively.
Keywords: Supervision, Self-esteem, Academic Writing Skills, Students

Introduction
Academic writing is a general term that refers to the various forms and styles of rhetorical prose that are used for research communication in a variety of academic fields (Anderson & Cuesta-Medina, 2019) and widely identified as a crucial skill for students to improve their educational performance at university level (Sajid & Siddiqui, 2015). Thus, academic writing skills must be integrated throughout the graduate studies as a whole (Bair & Mader, 2013). For instance, academics write for a variety of reasons, extending from proposing new projects to sharing their research findings with larger academic community (Chakma et al., 2021).

However, academic writing is usually recognised as one of the most difficult tasks to complete for postgraduate students. Higher education students, particularly doctorate research students whose primary basis of assessment is a written thesis, require excellent written expression (Ferguson, 2009). For instance, when it comes to the thesis section of the course, postgraduate students may experience writing difficulties especially PhD students, in particular, because the demands of the thesis are extremely high and require them to use high levels of critical thinking.

The academic writing practices that students carry with them from their previous undergraduate education diverge from the standards of a graduate community of practice (Singh, 2019). Students who have significant general-writing errors at the time of entering a postgraduate study are considered "at risk," because in addition to learning how to write in a more academic genre, they must also address their pre-existing problems in order to produce high-quality writing, which can be difficult (Diezmann, 2005). Writing literature reviews are not an easy task for postgraduate students; a large number of students do not know how to write their literature review, as revealed by Shahsavar and Kourepaz (2020) qualitative findings. The majority of doctoral students did not appear to be inwardly driven to publish, but rather saw that as a necessity placed on them by their university and supervisors in Malaysia (Baydarova et al., 2021).

In particular, students' inadequate knowledge on how to implant a critical viewpoint in writing their literature review, their failure to finish their theses and publish related articles, and the deliberate dereliction of some supervisors' commitments to provide the students with sufficient knowledge on how to write a literature review are the most serious issues to encounter them (Shahsavar & Kourepaz, 2020). Also, the findings of Lim et al (2016) showed that students were less prepared to write content that was clear and concise and they needed to enhance the quality of their arguments. According to Mohd Isa and Ahmad (2018), the findings revealed that more than half of the respondents of postgraduate research students stated that 'academic writing' was the central issue and difficulty faced in their study, which includes difficulties in expressing their ideas into writing, restructuring sentences, constructing research arguments and a lack of writing skills.

Besides, Selemani et al (2018) stated that 54.7% of postgraduate students strongly felt that they plagiarised due to their lack of academic writing skills (to cite, paraphrase, summarise or write references). Moreover, it is important to note that in Malaysian public universities, both local and international postgraduate students are English as a foreign language (EFL) student. A common complaint among postgraduate students is that they are unfamiliar with "the rules of the game" and with what's really expected of academic writers in a higher education context, which causes them to have difficulty in writing (Holmes et al., 2018). It is more difficult to write a thesis in a non-native language than it is to write in native language. For example, in comparison to their first language, second language students expressed less confidence when writing in English for a variety of sentence structures, reviewing and revising/improving their text, constructing a logical and coherent argument, writing persuasively and critically (Zotzmann & Sheldrake, 2021).

The lack of expertise in English structure, negative attitude towards writing, poor writing experiences in the past and insufficient knowledge in academic writing all lead to the feeling of anxiety while writing (Al-Shboul & Huwari, 2015). It is crucial for postgraduate students to have strong writing skills since these interact and communicate ideas in a chronological and logical manner, while also being grammatically correct for their research studies in writing. Academic writing in English is a crucial component of postgraduate study

phase in universities where English is the dominant language of instruction; it can be a significant challenge for both domestic and foreign students (Houston, 2015). Additionally, writing at postgraduate research level requires a justifiable competence from the students. Students reported frustration and a lack of clear path during the writing process and they needed to learn the conventions of academic writing in English in order to meet the demands of their postgraduate studies (Jeyaraj, 2018). In spite of the fact that language proficiency lies at the heart of academic writing, the underlying issue for postgraduate students is that they have failed to meet the expectations of academic readers in the target language (Al-Zubaidi, 2012).

According to Jeyaraj (2020), it was discovered that students required assistance in the supervision process as academic writing is a vital skill in postgraduate research, what supervisors may be obliged to do is provide writing assistance to students to assure their development and success. In the process of supervision, supervisors are not only expected to provide encouragement and support, but to supply students with resources and information, comments and thesis writing guidelines (Sidhu et al., 2014). As a results, students benefit from the comments and advice of their supervisors in order to produce good research thesis and papers. There is no doubt that many research supervisors are committed to providing their supervisees with the best possible supervision (Muthanna & Alduais, 2020). The writing of theses and journal articles must also be pedagogically driven, with students being taught how to write for academic purposes throughout the process (Jeyaraj, 2020).

Many students' writings were found to have a broad range of common errors, such as: (a) meaningless or ambiguous statements, (b) sentence fragmentation; (c) failure to provide clear detailed information regarding the topic, (d) incorporation of irrelevant information, and (e) failure to separate additional ideas into separate paragraphs and (f) instances of plagiarism as well as copy and paste (Amiri & Puteh, 2017). When providing guidance on academic writing, the majority of suggestions tend to be derived from the authors' own supervisory experience rather than from the students' view of what is most useful for them in the circumstance (Odenaa & Burgess, 2017). Due to the importance of appropriate feedback formulation for postgraduates' academic writing, feedback should be properly made to actively and critically involve postgraduates in their academic writing (Saeed, Al Qunayeer, & AL-Jaberi, 2021).

According to Baydarova et al (2021), Malaysian supervisors showed reluctancy in trying to comprehend and clarify the expectations that students have of them, preferring instead to communicate their own expectations directly. Supervisors seem to be the ones that work most closely with students throughout the dissertation writing process and they are also the ones who are most responsible for the development of best practices and the dissemination of knowledge (Schulze & Lemmer, 2017). The quality of supervision can indirectly contribute to enhance the image of a school or university. Students who are eager to enrol as postgraduate students at a certain school or university will be interested to that institution if the supervisory society is strong. It is because they believe they will learn something from their supervisor along their research journey and that they will be able to graduate on time and achieve self-actualization as a result of their efforts. Additionally, the graduate can make a contribution to the country and community.

Students' writing problems can be shown by forming a connection between their self-esteem and their writing skills (Fahim & Rad, 2012). Apart from that, postgraduate students' self-esteem can help them in developing self in their ability to complete their task and increase the overall quality of their work. Individuals with high self-esteem are confident in

their own opinions and abilities to do what is right and appropriate (Baumeister & Vohs, 2018). In contrast, individuals with low self-esteem find it hard to make choices and frequently postpone them; when faced with many options, people with low self-esteem will get blocked up and allow others to make the decision for them (Perry et al., 2018).

Self-esteem is described as one's positive or negative attitude towards oneself, as well as one's overall assessment of one's own thoughts and feelings in relationship to oneself (Rosenberg, 1965a). However, individuals with low self-esteem find it hard when making choices and frequently postpone them; when faced with many options, such people will get blocked up and allow others to decide for them (Nwankwo et al., 2015). The notion that one's self-esteem has a causal effect on every element of human life would have looked reasonable in the heady days of the 1970s (Baumeister et al., 2003). To sum up, self-esteem is a positive thinking about oneself that can increase the confidence of postgraduate students. It can assist postgraduate students to feel more confident when writing their theses or papers and come up with more ideas without experiencing writing anxiety. Individuals with high self-esteem have a reservoir of positive emotions from which they can draw to get them through hard moments, while people with low self-esteem appear to have much less of such a reservoir and are more discouraged or even shattered by initial failure (Baumeister & Vohs, 2018).

In Malaysian public universities, a gap that exists in the current literature is the evidence supporting this correlation between postgraduate students' supervision, self-esteem and academic writing skills is inconclusive. It is possible to infer the findings of this study to the higher education context in Malaysia, particularly among PhD students and in host nations where graduate studies are conducted in English as an EFL as well as the PhD research requirement.

Research Objectives

The study aimed to develop an understanding of supervision and self-esteem towards perceived academic writing skills of postgraduate students.

1. To examine the relationship between supervision and perceived academic writing skills among postgraduate students in Malaysian public universities.
2. To examine the relationship between self-esteem and perceived academic writing skills among postgraduate students in Malaysian public universities.
3. To examine the contribution of supervision and self-esteem towards the variation of perceived academic writing skills of postgraduate students in Malaysian public universities.

Research Questions

1. Is there any significant relationship between supervision and perceived academic writing skills among postgraduate students in Malaysian public universities?
2. Is there any significant relationship between self-esteem and perceived academic writing skills among postgraduate students in Malaysian public universities?
3. Do supervision and self-esteem significantly contribute to the variation of perceived of academic writing skills of postgraduate students in Malaysian public universities?

Methodology

Quantitative approach was used in the existing research. This study applied a survey research using a questionnaire to collect the data. The Institute of Postgraduate Studies helped to disseminate the questionnaire link via PhD students' emails. All the respondents in

this study were chosen using non-probability sampling method (also known as convenient sampling method). The reason for using convenient sampling was that the respondents' willingness to complete is low due. It is preferable to use convenient sampling in order to obtain voluntary responders who will complete the questionnaire.

A total of 171 respondents participated in this study. All of the respondents were having their PhD degrees from the same university; however, in order to protect the students' identities, the name of the university will not be revealed. In this study, Pearson correlation and linear regression was used to assess the relationship between supervision, self-esteem, and perceived academic writing skills. SPSS version 26 was used in analysing the data.

Instrumentation
Supervision

The instrument to measure postgraduate students' perceptions of supervision was modified based on the use of questionnaire developed by Park, Hanbury, Kulej, and Lee (2007) entitled Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) 2007, which consisted of six items.

Based on the expert's feedback, one of the items was divided into two parts to be measured, which were as follows: "I have been given good guidance in topic selection by my supervisor/co- supervisor and "My supervisor/ Co-supervisor helps me to refine the research topic". As a result, this section comprised seven items. All of these items were evaluated on a Likert scale with 1 indicating "strongly disagree" and 5 indicating "strongly agree".

Self-esteem

Self-esteem was measured using *Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)* developed by Rosenberg (1965b). It comprised 10 items related to self-esteem. All these items were measured based on a four -point Likert scale of 1 = "strongly disagree" to 4 = "strongly agree". According to the results, all 10 items on Rosenberg Self-esteem scale had appropriate levels of item fit and rating scale item difficulty and level of reliability were also judged as acceptable (Park & Park, 2019).

Perceived Academic Writing Skills

Perceived academic writing skills were measured using the instrument (Lim et al., 2016) developed by Sidhu et al (2015) namely *Perceived Academic Writing Skills of Postgraduate Students*. It consisted of 12 items. This section was based on three dimensions of perception of writing skills in academics; content, organization and structure and accuracy of language. Thus, this section had 10 items. All these items were measured based on a five-point Likert scale of 1 = "very limited readiness" to 5 = "very high readiness".

Results

There was a total of 171 respondents in this study. Table 1 shows descriptive frequency based on the gender, nationality, age, study status, marital status and years of study of the respondents. In this study, convenience sampling method was used. A total of 171 respondents took part in this survey. Table 1 contains the descriptions of the final sample. As seen in the table, more than half of the sample (52.6%) were female. The PhD students in this study were between the age of 26 and 35 (59.1%). Furthermore, the vast majority of PhD students pursued their studies in full-time mode (93%). For marital status, the majority of PhD students (52.0%) were single, followed by married (43.9 %). The years of study for the sample in the current study were quite average, ranging from less than 1 year (28.1%), 1-2 years (23.4

%) and 2-3 years (25.7%). All participants were informed of the study's purpose before taking part. Their answers would be kept strictly confidential, and their participation could be withdrawn at any time. All PhD students volunteered to take part in the study. The survey took roughly 20 minutes to complete.

Table 1
Demographic Information of the Respondents (n=171)

Items		*n*	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	81	47.4
	Female	90	52.6
Nationality	Malaysian	95	55.6
	Non-Malaysian	76	44.4
Age	<25	5	2.9
	26-35	101	59.1
	36-45	56	32.7
	45-55	8	4.7
	>55	1	.6
Study Status	Full-time	159	93.0
	Part-time	12	7.0
Marital Status	Single	89	52.0
	Married	75	43.9
	Divorced	5	2.9
	Others	2	1.2
Years of Study	<1	48	28.1
	1-2	40	23.4
	2-3	44	25.7
	3-4	30	17.5
	4-5	3	1.8
	>5	6	3.5

Table 2
Correlation between Supervision and Perceived Academic Writing Skills

		Perceived Academic Writing Skills
Supervision	Pearson Correlation	.41**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.00
	n	171

Note. **. Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2 shows the correlation between supervision and perceived academic writing skills. The results showed that Pearson's *r* was .41. Therefore, it shows a moderate strength and positive correlation between supervision and perceived academic writing skills. The significance level was .00, suggesting that the correlation is significant. The sign is positive, indicating that as the level of supervision increases, so does the level of perceived academic writing skills.

Table 3
Relationship between Supervision and Perceived Academic Writing Skills

Dependent Variables	Independent Variables	Std. Coefficient Beta	VIF
Perceived academic writing skills	Constant	.28	
	Supervision	.06	1.00
R^2	.17		
Adjust R^2	.16		
p-value	.00		
Durbin-Watson	2.03		

Note. Std.= Standardized

Table 3 shows the relationship between supervision and perceived academic writing skills. The R^2 is .17, thus, about 17% of the variation in perceived academic writing skills is explained by supervision. Durbin-Watson value was 2.03, which falls within the acceptable range of 1.5 to 2.5. The *p* value <.05 illustrates that supervision significantly predicted perceived academic writing skills.

Table 4
Correlation between Self-Esteem and Perceived Academic Writing Skills

		Perceived Academic Writing Skills
Self-esteem	Pearson Correlation	.50**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.00
	n	171

Note. **. Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4 shows the correlation between self-esteem and perceived academic writing skills. The results showed that Pearson's *r* was .50. Hence, it shows a moderate strength and positive correlation between self-esteem and perceived academic writing skills. The significance level was .00, suggesting that the correlation is significant. The sign is positive, indicating that as the level of self-esteem increases, so does the level of perceived academic writing skills.

Table 5
Relationship of Self-esteem and Perceived Academic Writing Skills

Dependent Variables	Independent Variables	Std. Coefficient Beta	VIF
Perceived academic writing skills	Constant	.30	
	Self-esteem	.10	1.00
R^2	.25		
Adjust R^2	.25		
p-value	.00		
Durbin-Watson	1.86		

Note. Std.= Standardized

Table 5 shows the relationship of self-esteem and perceived academic writing skills. The R^2 is .25, thus, about 25% of the variation in perceived academic writing skills is explained by self-esteem. Durbin-Watson value was 1.86, which falls within the acceptable range of 1.5 to 2.5. The *p* value <.05 illustrates that self-esteem significantly predicted perceived academic writing skills.

Table 6
Association of Supervision and Self-esteem with Perceived Academic Writing Skills

Dependent Variables	Independent Variables	Std. Coefficient Beta	VIF
Perceived academic writing skills	Constant	.87	
	Supervision	.27	1.07
	Self-esteem	.62	1.07
R^2	.34		
Adjust R^2	.33		
p-value	.00		
Durbin-Watson	1.95		

Table 6 shows the association of supervision and self-esteem with perceived academic writing skills. The coefficient of multiple determination was .34, therefore, about 34% of the variation in perceived academic writing skills of postgraduate students is explained by supervision and self-esteem. In the present study, the values of VIF were below 10, showing that there is no multicollinearity. Durbin-Watson value was 1.95, which falls within the acceptable range of 1.5 to 2.5. The *p* value < .05 shows that supervision and self-esteem are the predictors for perceived academic writing skills.

Discussion
The goal of this study was to look at the link between perceived academic writing skills with supervision and self-esteem. Academic writing skills are crucial for postgraduate students to express their research ideas for their thesis effectively and publish in a constructive manner, as well as to complete their studies without the need to lengthen their candidature. For example, all the participants agreed that advanced academic writing skills are vital for successful completion of a thesis, as well as any scientific articles that may be required as part of the institution's requirement for the degree (Schulze & Lemmer, 2017). Aspirations for increasing the number of PhD students and 'knowledge workers' in Malaysia

are lofty and if they are to be fulfilled, a more systematic approach to promote research writing and researcher development would be required (Jeyaraj, 2018). The difficulties that postgraduate students experience in their academic writing are complex issues.

One of the many common themes is the difficulty of critically reading academic texts and writing in acceptable academic language (Kaur & Abdul Manan, 2007). In order to become successful in their study, postgraduate students must be more independent in their research. Students in PhD degrees particularly are expected to take part actively in academic writing and to work towards improving their writing skills through the use of quality standards and evaluation procedures (Can & Walker, 2011). The findings revealed that there is a significant correlation between supervision, self-esteem, and perceived academic writing skills. Supervision and self-esteem have moderate correlation to perceived academic writing skills. Self-esteem has slightly higher correlation to perceived academic writing skills compared to supervision. Besides, the value of R^2 = .34, meaning that 34% of the variance of perceived academic writing skills is explained by the association of supervision and self-esteem.

In fact, the supervisor plays an important and responsible role in guiding and monitoring the students as they progress through the research process. The supervisors can identify the types of writing that they assign to their students on a practical level (Lee & Murray, 2015). According to Wolff (2010), it is essential to provide feedback to students who are writing during their higher research degree. Reviewing and providing constructive feedback to students' writing tasks are particularly important. Because of this, students are better in terms of their ability to identify problems and develop research methods. This will help them to improve their writing skills. However, if the supervisor fails to meet the requirements of their supervisory role, as a consequence, students may experience difficulties with their research work, writing skills and other aspects of their academic careers. This will lead to mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, and depression if the situation worsens in any way.

With regard to postgraduate students' academic writing, Diezmann (2005)'s approach is guided by performance orientation that is focused on assisting students in managing a high-quality thesis within the specified time frame. Supervision is essential for postgraduate students to enhance their writing skills in research since the supervisor's instruction or feedback will point them in a proper direction and help them improve the overall quality of their research. Postgraduate students' academic writing skills will give quality engagement with their scholarly research if their supervisors can assist them in reducing or eliminating the issues they encounter.

Besides that, most writing problems are directly related to psychological characteristics, with self-esteem being the most important concern that has a decisive impact on language acquisition (Fahim & Rad, 2012). Regardless of the fact that writing is a productive skill, one participant indicated being unable to outperform in the writing of their research proposals, primarily due to their fear of making mistakes (Sudirman et al., 2020). This study revealed that postgraduate students who have high self-esteem have trust in themselves and their abilities and they intend to achieve their full potential in all their attempts.

It is noteworthy to highlight that the belief in the value of academic writing might reflect both aims and practices for achieving such goals, ultimately expressing ideas about what 'good academic writing' could or should entail (Zotzmann & Sheldrake, 2021). However, writing thesis or paper might be unfamiliar and daunting for postgraduate students who are not confident in their writing skills. Therefore, postgraduate students' confidence is built on their sense of self-worth, which can enable them to boost their positive thinking while also performing well in their research writing.

Implications

The present study found empirical evidence of the beneficial impacts of supervision and self-esteem on postgraduate students' academic writing skills. Understanding the writing skills and areas of support for postgraduate students enables the development of strategies to reduce late completion rates among these students, as well as the identification of areas that could lead to greater student satisfaction (Jeyaraj, 2020). The findings may provide some helpful ideas for supervisors who are keen to find solutions related to postgraduate writing skills. For example, understanding academic writing skills can aid supervisors, counsellors, and administrators in designing suitable activities and programmes to improve students' writing skills and reduce the difficulty of writing papers and theses. Furthermore, related parties need to provide additional assistance regarding postgraduate students' behaviours and attitudes in order to improve their self-esteem, which can in turn assist them in becoming more motivated to develop knowledge and writing skills.

In sum, it is expected that the insights gained from this study will be useful for future research and will improve the research writing skills of postgraduate students. Providing practical guidance and psychological support to postgraduate students, such as improving their self-esteem, can help them to cope with the challenges they are facing as well as improving their academic writing skills, allowing them to complete their thesis within the specified time.

Conclusion

The ability of postgraduate students to write academically has the potential to increase the quality of their research. The guidance of the supervisor is critical for the academic performance of postgraduate students. Besides, postgraduate students' self-esteem can boost their confidence in carrying out their studies successfully. In higher education, it is essential to provide these students with the support they need for them to reach their full potential and achieve satisfactory outcomes, such as passing grades on evaluations that necessitate academic writing, especially when these grades are used to decide their overall degree course classification (Zotzmann & Sheldrake, 2021). The model may be improved in the future by looking at the relationships with students' various characteristics, personality traits and demographic aspects such as field of study.

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