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Research and academic writing are increasingly difficult to prioritise in Higher Education. Academic writing retreats are growing in popularity as means to help academics to write. However, while they have been shown to enhance productivity their potential as wellbeing interventions has received less attention. We explore the experiences of UK-based academic participants in a structured writing programme through a structured questionnaire and in-depth interviews. Our findings suggest that writing retreats can positively impact on both hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing. They may help mediate wellbeing threats, such as isolation, the conflict of work priorities and other pressures associated with academic research and time pressures. The opportunity to privilege writing provided our academic participants with positive benefits, yet we conclude that these effects do not endure if interventions are not maintained.

Keywords: academic wellbeing; writing retreat; community of coping; stress, academic writing; academic identity

Introduction

Research, incorporating the associated activity of writing for publication, has traditionally been considered to be the 'trademark activity of the university academic, and the principal derivation of role definition, identity formation and intellectual fulfilment' (Lea & Stierer 2011, p. 608). However, large rises in student numbers and a growth in the administrative burden placed on academics have marked a shift in the priorities within academia (Sikes, 2006). This has resulted in a conflict between the demands academics face as teachers and researchers and can lead to isolation and disempowerment (Kinman & Wray, 2013; Shaw, 2014).

Although research has established the usefulness of writing retreats in increasing academic writing productivity (e.g. Grant & Knowles, 2000; Moore et al., 2010; Murray & Newton, 2009), there has been less focus on writing retreats as a means of enhancing wellbeing. Dodge, Daly, Huyton and Sanders (2012) define wellbeing as a dynamic system based on the balance between psychological, social and physical resources and challenges. If the amount of resources available to an individual is greater than the challenges, the individual is said to experience a feeling of positive wellbeing. If the number of challenges is greater than the resources available, then the individual will feel stress and negativity.

This research draws on the context of Higher Education (HE) to develop a contemporary understanding of the pressures facing academics, with a particular focus on the conflicts between the demands of teaching, administration and research. It

explores the potential for writing retreats and programmes to function as workplace interventions that not only impact on productivity, but also enhance wellbeing.

Academic context

Globally, HE has expanded enormously in the last 50 years. Within the UK, issues such as widening participation, the pressure to internationalise and the expansion of degree offerings, have led to a rise in student numbers from 217,000 in 1973 (Jobbins, 2013) to over 23 million in 2016/17 (HESA, 2018). In addition, the growing pressure on universities to become financially self-sufficient has led to significant shifts in the nature and management of academia (e.g. larger budgets and an increasingly competitive market).

These changes have fed a move away from a co-operative, collegial and shared–values approach, which traditionally characterised the HE system, towards a more managerial and non-participatory approach (Burnes, Wend & Todnem By, 2014; Kinman & Wray, 2014; Macfarlane, 2005; Tytherleigh et al., 2005). Changes have also resulted in higher workloads (Burnes et al., 2014). These rising job demands are accompanied by an increase in external scrutiny and benchmarking. Within the UK setting of this study, academics now demonstrate 'research excellence' in the form of the Research Excellence Framework [REF[1]], student satisfaction through the National Student Survey and teaching excellence judged using the Teaching Excellence Framework. Against this backdrop a University and Colleges Union survey reported record levels of stress amongst UK academics (Kinman & Wray, 2014). The biggest

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[1] The REF is the system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions, undertaken by the UK Higher education funding bodies.

stressors felt by academics are: job insecurity; issues with work relationships; lack of control (not being involved in decisions affecting their jobs); communication (not being kept informed about what was going on in their organizations); and low levels of commitment to and from their institutions (Tytherleigh et al., 2005). In particular, HE staff reported being concerned by a lack of value and trust from their organizations (Tytherleigh et al., 2005).

The dual effects of the diversification of the portfolio in HE and the implementation of research assessment exercises have served to diversify the required skill set for academics, who are now required to excel in multiple roles including researcher, teacher, administrator and manager. The changed job demands have splintered the academic identity (Silkes, 2006; Winter, 2009; Bolden, Gosling & O'Brien, 2014), which was traditionally premised on shared values, the value of discipline scholarship, intellectual curiosity and accountability to peers (Ramsden, 1998). The picture is complex within traditional research-focused institutions where, despite research currency remaining most important, prioritisation of the'researcher' is no longer straightforward (Henkel, 2005). In addition, within what were 'teaching-led' institutions, where teaching loads are often higher, the growing research agenda can be seen to conflict with the teaching focus of the institution (Sharp, Hemmings, Kay & Callinan, 2015). Unsurprisingly, researchers have linked the conflicting roles and expectations academics experience to the higher-reported levels of stress and lower levels of organisational commitment found in academic staff (Bolden et al., 2014; Kinman & Jones, 2003; Tytherleigh et al., 2005).

If indeed the expectations and experiences of academics are mismatched, then there is the potential for negative consequences on individuals' health and wellbeing (Kinman & Wray, 2014). Wellbeing has become a well-used term over the past decade. Approaches to understanding and defining wellbeing have broadly been split into two approaches (Huta & Ryan, 2010). Hedonic wellbeing focuses on subjective report of the affective quality of one's life (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). Essentially, it is understood in terms of how an individual feels with regards to positive mood, happiness, life-satisfaction. Eudaimonic wellbeing is a broader concept that encompasses concepts such as the actualisation of human potential and flourishing (Ryan and Deci, 2001), and includes concepts such as self-realisation, excellence, integrity, authenticity and authonomy. Approaches to considering Hedonic and Eudaimonic wellbeing are related but distinct (Huta & Ryan, 2010). Eudaimonic wellbeing goes beyond pleasure-driven happiness to encapsulate being true to oneself and working towards personal growth (Disabato, Goodman, Kashdan, Short & Jarden, 2016).

It is worth noting that wellbeing is not simply at the opposite end on a continuum to ill-being (e.g. Ryffet al., 2006; Huppert & Whittington, 2003). Nevertheless, there is an interplay between stresses and the state of wellbeing. Dodge et al. (2012) argue that if the available resources outweigh the challenges, then the individual is operating within a state of wellbeing. Key to understanding the importance of wellbeing is research that has indicated that increasing wellbeing can do more as an intervention for mental disorders than the focus on treatment and prevention determined by an ill-being approach (see Huppert, 2009). For example, research has demonstrated that higher positive affect enhances attentional focus and cognitive flexibility (e.g. Isen,

1987; Aspinwall, 1998), and enables people to better cope with stress. This research uses hedonic definitions of wellbeing (e.g. Diener, 1984; Diener et al., 2009) to consider positive affect in relation to academic writing. At the same time, we consider the relationship between writing and academic identity in the context of eudaimonic conception of personal growth and flourishing. We will do this within the context of the equilibrium model of wellbeing, proposed by Dodge et al. (2012), given the growing evidence that academics are experiencing a high number of stressors and challenges, without feeling like they have the resources to deal with them.

Structured writing retreats

Although research is considered to be the central linchpin of the academic identity (Lea & Stierer, 2011), there is arguably a conflict between the demand for output, and the opportunity to write, given the raft of other demands on academics' time. The academic writing retreat can function as a facilitative tool to support effective writing, enabling academics to privilege writing over other academic tasks, providing a structured intervention to the writing process (Murray & Thow, 2014).

Academic writing retreats have always emphasised the importance of the 'time to write'(e.g. Morss & Murray, 2001; Elbow & Deane Sorcinelli, 2006). Some forms of retreat involve writing conducted in the same building, with writers meeting at intervals throughout the retreat. The positive impact on productivity and output is a common theme, irrespective of the the writing retreat's mode of delivery (e.g. Boice, 1987; Moore, 2003; Morss & Murray, 2001; Elbow & Deane Sorcinelli, 2006). One aspect of wellbeing potentially related to productivity is the concept of 'flow', described as a state

of total absorption and engagement with a particular activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). From an attentional perspective, flow means that the mind does not wander (Smallwood & Schooler, 2006), and has been described as an almost effortless yet highly focused state of consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). There is a close relationship between flow states and wellbeing, with Csikszentmihalyi (2013) going as far as to say happiness is flow. The experience of flow has been described as a momentary form of eudaimonic wellbeing (Fullagar and Kelloway, 2009), both derived from and resulting in a sense of control and mastery, clear purpose, belief in oneself, engagement in and a positive affect. Crucially, although the wellbeing benefits are thought to emerge from the innate satisfaction the state of concentration gives, there is still an effect on productivity within an academic context, where high level thinking is arguably the currency of research.

When wellbeing aspects of writing retreats are acknowledged in the literature, these are generally as asides to productivity and output (e.g. Grant, 2006; Murray 2014; Wardale et al., 2015). Recent retreat models suggest that benefits can arise not only from the provision of time, but also from a shared writing experience, offering an alternative to the traditional solitary mode of academic writing (e.g. Moore, 2003; Grant, 2006; Murray & Newton, 2009). Examining a residential writing retreat model based around writing within a group setting and strict adherence to a structured timetable, Murray and Newton (2009) suggested that writers forge a community of practice which gains value from interaction (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). The principle focus of a community of practice is on the 'work' that is achieved (Wenger et al., 2002). However, Grant (2006) did note the potential for academic writing retreats to be self-nurturing, ensuring attention to one's wellbeing. Some of the participants in her

all-women retreats 'take the chance to enjoy extra solitude and sleep alongside the writing, an important restorative response to the demanding conditions of their lives' (Grant, 206, p. 484) and she notes emergent outcomes such as increased feelings of collegiality.

This research explores whether a group-writing environment help individuals and groups to develop the necessary agency to cope with what can be potentially 'disabling' stressful working environments (Kempenaar & Murray, 2017). The study examines the impact of a structured writing programme involving academics where REF outputs are predominantly multiple-authored peer-reviewed journal articles. The writing programme involved campus-based structured writing days and an external residential writing retreat. Using mixed methods, we examine the impact of the academic writing programme (the intervention) on productivity and issues associated with academic wellbeing.

Methods

This study focuses on a 12 month writing programme involving academics from the University Of Westminster (UK), the majority of whom were within the Psychology department. It involved: campus-based structured research/writing days; a three-day residential writing retreat (including optional walks, yoga and meditation) and a peer review/mentoring component (Guerin, 2014). Participants worked on all stages of an article during the 'writing' sessions (e.g. data analysis, reading, planning), and they were expected to submit a publication as a result of involvement in the programme. In view of these modifications to the standard structured writing retreat format (e.g.

Murray & Newton, 2009), the approach taken will be referred to as a writing

programme. The impact of this programme on participants was explored through two

phases of research (see Table 1). In phase 1, participants were asked to complete each of

3 questionnaires, over the course of 12 months. Taken together, these captured data

regarding the motivations for participation, as well as feedback on the writing

programme, with a particular emphasis on issues of productivity and wellbeing. Phase 2

consisted of interviews conducted six months after the programme's end date, enabling

us to explore longer-term impacts of the programme, for example on writing

behaviours, wellbeing and productivity. The programme had strong institutional

support.

Participants

Participation was by application. Fifteen members of academic staff

participated: 12 academics who applied to join the programme [Lecturers, Senior

Lecturers (SL), Principle Lecturers (PL)]; two invited 'expert writers' (experienced

academics with numerous internationally recognised peer-reviewed publications) and a

facilitator (the lead author, a trained writing retreat facilitator).

Informed consent was secured from thirteen people on the writing programme

(one attendee declined to participate). Eleven participants were from one department,

and two were from other departments. There were 11 women and two men (cf. men

comprise one third of the academic staff in the main department). Six participants had

been entered into REF2014.

Materials and procedure

Phase 1

Phase 1 of the research process consisted of three online questionnaires, created using Qualtrics and distributed during the programme (see Table 1). Questionnaire 1 was integrated into the writing retreat application, and requested basic demographic information as well as a mumber of details regarding the participant's planned writing project. For example two questions explored why participants thought the proposed model of group working would increase their productivity in article writing, and any additional perceived benefits. Questionnaire 2 (completed at the end of the residential writing retreat), was an evaluation of the residential retreat experience (e.g. providing oppriotunities for both positive and negative reflections). Questionnaire 3 (completed either following the article submission or 12 months after the programme started, if in cases where there was no submission), was an evaluation of the overall writing programme. Questions were similar to Questionnaire 2, but focused on the overall writing programme, rather than simply on the residential writing retreat.

All three questionnaires included a modified version of the Scale of Positive And Negative Emotion (SPANE) wellbeing measure (Diener et al., 2009). Instructions were modified to better explore the respondent's feelings towards academic writing: 'Please think about what you have been doing and experiencing with regards to academic writing during the past 6 weeks'. Participants were required to rate the strength of the following emotions in relation to their writing experiences: good, bad, pleasant, unpleasant, happy, sad, afraid, joyful, angry, and contented on a five-point

Likert scale. A mean score was calculated for positive emotions (SPANE-P), negative emotions (SPANE-N), and this was used to create an overall score SPANE-T (SPANE-P-SPANE-N), where higher scores indicate higher wellbeing. Questionnaire 1 gathered baseline scores for the SPANE. In Questionnaire 2 participants completed the SPANE twice. The first referred to the six weeks prior to the residential writing retreat, and the second referred to the three days of the residential writing retreat. Questionnaire 3 again asked them to reflect on their emotions towards their writing over six weeks previous to the questionnaire completion date.

Phase 2

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 10 of the 13 participants. Two of the original group were unable to participate due to workload (one PL and one SL) and one (SL) had left the University. The interviews took place seven months after completing the writing programme. All interviews were semi-structured and conducted by the retreat facilitator at the host institution. Interviews were conversational in nature (Burgess, 1988) and varied in length between 29 and 51 minutes (mean length 45 minutes) and were professionally transcribed verbatim.

Analysis

The quantitative analysis compared responses to the SPANE-T prior to the intervention to the responses given at different points in the intervention process. As such, participants acted as their own controls. Inference tests, a one-way repeated measures Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), provided an objective indication measure of the

impact of the writing intervention on wellbeing for academic writing. Where multiple tests were used in post-hoc explorations of the main effects, the Bonferroni-Holm correction has been applied.

The qualitative data from both the questionnaires and interviews was analysed using Thematic Analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). In order to recognise the impact of the theoretical drivers on the coding process, a deductive approach was used to identify initial coding categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These focused on productivity, group processes, wellbeing, and stress/writing anxiety. At the same time, whilst the lead author carried out the first reading of the questionnaire responses and coded the data with these themes in mind, additional themes that appeared within participants' responses were also noted. Themes were then discussed within the research team. After familiarising ourselves with the entire data set (questionnaires and transcripts) all authors then went through the interview data, refining the thematic categories and allowing new themes to emerge. Following discussion across the research team, themes were again reorganised and refined. There was a final re-coding and reorganisation of themes into the strongest and most meaningful categories that provided the focus for this paper. Finally, together the team developed a shared understanding which involved us moving between the empirical data and literature, in order to develop an interpretation which we present below.

Results and Discussion

Ten participants completed the SPANE at the three time periods (before the writing programme; during the writing programme but before the residential writing retreat;

after the residential writing retreat). A one-way repeated measures ANOVA indicated that participants had a stronger positive affect towards their academic writing after the writing programme (F (2, 18) =6.90; p=.006; power=.872). The strongest increase in positive response to writing appeared after the residential retreat, compared to before the writing programme began (Mean difference: 8.10, p=.005). With a sample of this size, results should be considered indicative. Nevertheless, the high associated power, which reflects the consistent pattern of participants' responses, provides a strong rationale for future research with a larger sample.

The quantitative data looked specifically at aspects of hedonic wellbeing, and confirms that there is indeed a positive impact of structured academic writing sessions, and in particular residential writing retreats, on academics' emotional affect in response to academic writing. This is in itself suggests a positive impact of academic writing sessions on academic wellbeing. Whilst the sample is small the power of the effect, indicated by a significant effect within a small sample, warrants further exploration with a larger sample.

The qualitative component enabled us to further explore the potential wellbeing benefit of the writing programme on academics, beyond positive affect. The key themes drawn from the data were connected with informants' thoughts and feelings around *Time* and the *Permission to write*; we then reflect on the scope for such writing programmes to move beyond the communities of practice established in the literature (Murray and Newton, 2009) to provide elements of *communities of coping*, but conclude the findings with some words of caution around the *Impact of a one-off interventions*.

Time

All participants specified the need for time to write as an objective for their
participation in the programme. They sought deepened concentration or focus, through
extended blocks of writing time. Responses in Q2 and Q3 indicated that participants
considered this goal to be effectively met by the writing programme. In describing
either what they had achieved, or the benefits of the structured writing retreats or days,
all participants referred to enhanced levels of focus or concentration. Participants talked
about experiences of 'immersion' or 'being in the zone'. For nine participants, this
resulted in significant increases in productivity:

> It would probably have taken me weeks to accomplish what I have now
> done in three days. It usually takes me a while to get into the mode of
> writing, so doing that at work or at home is difficult for me, because of all
> the distractions. I feel that during the retreat, I entered a zone of
> concentration that increased my productivity and focus. (P12: Q3)[2]

This 'zone of concentration' was also identified by other participants, including
the experienced writers:

> You get in to the zone. I think that's what they say. You've got to get in to
> the zone. So you're never too experienced to need that. (P4: I)

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[2] For each Participant (P) we indicate whether it is interview (I) or questionnaire (Q) data, hence P4:I,
refers to participant 4, interview data.

This 'zone' corresponds to 'flow'. Within the flow state, an individual is considered to move into a different reality, away from the daily routine, where attention is effortless and the sense of time becomes distorted (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999):

> Once I'm in it it's like tunnel vision and I can go, but I can get distracted and it's hard to get into that mode and this really helps doing that. (P12: I)

In line with prior understandings (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013), this participant acknowledged that flow can be a pleasurable experience indicating that the experiences itself, and that is being 'in that zone' offers intrinsic rewards:

> But, actually, for most of us once we're in that zone, you don't want to come out for anything. (P6: I)

Participants alluded to the issues highlighted by Mendonca, Mishra and Dash (2015) who found that stress, tiredness, health issues and guilt regarding family and work-life balance were the biggest challenges faced by academics; challenges that the authors note impaired the experience of flow outside the retreat environment. Participants' responses suggested that being temporarily freed of responsibilities, and 'feeling cared for' provided the conditions for them to enter this zone.

> And also having all of your external needs met for a while and not having to worry about what are you going to cook tonight, taking the kids to school and everything

means that the head is even more free of those kinds of things to do the really serious thinking. (P1: I)

In other words, removing external stresses, not just those that arise from the work environment but also those relating to the everyday (e.g. work-life balance), allowed a more secure and supportive writing environment. We would argue that the nurturing elements (e.g. cooked meals, residential aspects, opportunities for exercise) (Murray, 2014), combined with the enhanced positive affect identified in the SPANE, and the associated impacts on attention and cognition (Isen, 1987; Aspinwall, 1998), enabled individuals to maximise the opportunities to develop a flow state. The results are not only enhanced output, but a deeper eudaimonic satisfaction and pleasure in the process itself.

Permission to write

The positive impact of concentrated time on participants' writing was clear. Added to this was the perceived value attached to the institutional validation of that protected time. This impacted on the way in which participants viewed not only the writing process but also themselves. Participants described the elements of the programme as 'time away from work', or as time with no other distractions (6 participants), which provided a 'permission to write' or a 'legitimisation' of the writing process (4 participants), permission not to focus on other things, or other responsibilities (2 participants).

The institutionally funded nature of the external retreat provided implicit

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permission for participants to separate themselves from other on-going responsibilities:

> Fabulous to remove oneself from the everyday distractions and work on the
>
> paper together knowing that we were "allowed" to do so. (P7: Q3)

This legitimisation is necessary because a tendency to consider research and academic writing as a 'luxury', which should not be prioritised, also emerged:

> Writing always comes last when prioritising activities, after teaching,
>
> administrative and pastoral duties. The writing retreat forced me (allowed me?)
>
> to spend dedicated time on a writing project. (P9: Q3)

This participant's self-correction around whether to frame her writing on the retreat as an *obligation*, or a more positively framed *permission* to write, is interesting given the structured format of the retreats. Participants valued the opportunity to make writing a priority, restricting the tendency for other activities to take over:

> It forced me to focus on research/writing when otherwise I would have been
>
> subsumed by the ever increasing demands of academic life (and workload) more
>
> generally. (P8: Q3)

This term 'force' came up frequently, but this was often positioned positively. The impact of institutional validation was not simply the possibility of time to write, it provided the permission to more fully express a key part of their academic identity. Indeed, the motivations to participate included the affordance of the opportunity to

address a personal goal, whether that be to return to a piece of work which had remained incomplete (3), or simply to fulfil the desire to research (2), which can be problematic even for active researchers with a heavy teaching load. Furthermore, one participant described the guilt that can arise from difficult research:

> Without the focus of the retreat, the setting of deadlines and goals, and peer support, I know I won't return to the project (I consider it every year and feel guilty). (P: Q1).

The above extract hints at the inherent conflicts experienced by academics given individual and institutional goals and demands. Here participant 1 refers to the value she associates with retreats as legitimising the writing activity:

> …a legitimisation of this activity as part of the core work of an academic (it is, yet, sadly, it's the activity most vulnerable to being displaced by urgent deadlines). (P: Q2)

The reference to the 'core work' of academics hints at the multiplicity of academic roles and identities, and the various challenges involved in meeting increasing expectations and conflicting expectations (e.g. Bolden et al., 2014; Clegg, 2008; Sharp et al., 2015) . It was clear that the motivation to write, or research, was important for many of our participants, and the institutional endorsement of that aspect was key:

> It's like someone validating, it's okay we can write, it's alright to spend a day doing this. Instead of feeling like you're almost indulgent if you take a day out

to do it. It's almost indulging your fantasies, rather than it being an absolute

concrete part of what you do… I think it makes you feel like you can be a

researcher again. (P6: I)

Critically, it also enhanced the relationship between academics and their institution:

…You're actually treated as an academic...I found the provision of it really

reflected a sense of being valued, for the first time. We got a real sense of that,

it felt really important. (P3: I)

The value attached to the institutional support for the writing programme was prevalent

throughout the interviews. As well as suggesting the potential for writing retreats to

function as important interventions to create, develop and sustain a conducive

environment for research, it allowed participants to bring to the forefront the research

and writing aspects of their academic identities. In the context of wellbeing, for these

academics, writing is not simply about meeting a requirement of a job, it goes beyond a

hedonic 'like' and into a eudaimonic 'need' (Jayawickreme, Forgeard, & Seligman,

2012). In many instances within the structured writing retreat academics in this research

were able to fulfil an internal desire, which took them beyond happiness to a

eudaimonic sense of fulfilment. The result is flourishing (Ryan & Deci, 2001).

Towards a community of coping

For many participants the main motivation for participation in the writing programme

were fairly individualised goals to do with finding time to pursue their writing projects.

However, another theme which emerged from the first questionnaire, was the desire to be part of a group research/writing process. Five of the 12 participants (Q1) explicitly stated that they were drawn to the group processes, either sharing the writing experience with colleagues, or the peer mentoring process. While Murray and Newton (2009) suggest the value of communities of practice, our findings go further, suggesting that these communities can go beyond the practice itself offering specific wellbeing benefits more attune to the communities of coping developed in Korczynski (2003).

It was clear that participants valued the shared practices, which in addition to writing included auxiliary activities such as eating, socialising and exercising. The most often repeated perceived benefit of the structured writing programme could be described as 'the group process'. For nine of the participants, this was related to writing as a collective, with participants variously describing the benefits of 'accountability', a 'supported environment', 'motivating colleagues' or the 'group endeavour'. This is summed up by the following participant who illustrates how the writing programme encompassed a number of goals and benefits, framing its success in the 'collegiate atmosphere' and the 'sense of feeling supported':

> It also provided a collegiate atmosphere which was supportive and positive. The structured approach was really helpful promoting rest, discussion and focused writing time. It was the most helpful initiative that the university has provided to staff to improve productivity, a sense of control, a sense of validation and a sense of feeling supported in the quest to meet REF targets (P3: Q3).

The benefit of the group process emerged more strongly in participants' discussions

regarding their experiences of the residential retreat itself. The power of the group experience was noted even in the development of 'flow', which is more often considered as a purely individual state:

> Other people also experiencing that flow, you know, it's a bit like being in a sports team rather than it being an individual sport in a way, that you're all having the same successes at the same time, it's that sort of social facilitation effect type of thing (P1: I).

Given that academic writing is a traditionally solitary practice, and the largely individualistic goals with which participants applied to the programme, the emergent group aspects were powerful: 'The fact that you're in a room with others, who are "in the same boat" is very motivating, and deceases my anxiety about writing.' (P12: I). However, for many participants what was most powerful in the process was not simply group writing, it was group writing combined with a feeling of peer support:

> So in some ways it's good meeting other people and having that conversation because you realise, well yeah it's not actually all that different to how it was at the beginning.…I've got better at it [writing] and I'm not troubled by it. And that helps other people who are setting out…who don't have quite as much experience. Because everyone, sort of, thinks, oh it's so tough doing this. And when they realise even people who've been publishing for years who have got quite a good publication record etc, still have the same trouble. …I think it does get more efficient. I really enjoyed meeting all the other people, you know, and chatting to

them ... [about] what you're going to be doing, was it got you to talk to people that you wouldn't normally talk to. So that was quite good. (P7: I)

The social aspect of the retreat supported the development of a sense of community which was supported by the informal discussions that people had throughout the day over meals and in social time:

'So I found the residential aspect really, really good, and some of the unexpected positive aspects of that were being away with colleagues and the social aspect and team-building type aspects which was nice and a bonus' (P1: I)

The importance of the socialising aspects and the benefits of the 'café culture' (P9: I) that developed are reinforced by Stroebaek (2013), who identified the importance of the 'informal, selective and spontaneous social structures' (p.391) in the development of communities of coping in the work environment.

In an academic climate punctuated by feelings of isolation, the power of this process came from the development of a sense of community, support, and shared purpose. Thus, the structured writing retreat was not purely about succeeding with practical objectives (e.g. completing/submitting a journal article). It was about joining a group with a shared purpose; it can be both motivating and empowering, and about spending positive, relaxed time with a community of academics. Writing interventions can create an effective community of coping (Korczynski, 2003). The majority of participants in this research came from one academic department but all standardly produced collaborative publications. Future research could explore the impact of this

model on disciplines which generally produce sole-authored publications.

The impact of a one-off intervention

The post-retreat questionnaire responses communicated the retreat's positive impact: 'it was a very positive experience' (P11: Q3); 'It's been a morale boosting and productive enterprise' (P8: Q3) and participants felt optimistic about the future:

> I really enjoyed it, and I feel better now about writing in the future. From what I gather from colleagues is that most of them are quite positive about the retreat, and I think this can be very good for the university as well, since I am sure productivity in terms of publications will increase. (P12: Q3).

The benefits to the university were reiterated, with a focus not only on productivity, but also on staff wellbeing:

> An excellent well-organised extremely valuable initiative that I was pleased to participate in. It has transformed my approach to writing and this initiative should be supported by the university as a long term investment for REF output, staff experience and well-being. (P3: Q3).

A number of participants explicitly stated that they would not only like to see the writing programme run again, but they would also like to see the external writing retreats run more often: 'It would be useful to have a couple of these per annum as it is so productive.' (P7: Q2).

In spite of this success, the programme was not repeated the following year, due to reductions in staff development budgets. The interviews revealed a sense of disappointment that the programme would not be continuing:

> And I think that was very good, and I did feel incredibly productive, I just didn't have enough of it. It was like somebody showing you a lovely big chocolate cake with Smarties on top, and then they give you one of the Smarties, but they don't let you have a piece of the cake. (P9: I).

However, the negative impact was stronger than simply disappointment. The 'community' did not endure. In the follow-up interviews, respondents suggested that although they were more likely to talk with colleagues than perhaps they had previously, the potential community of coping (which in particular emerged during the residential retreat), had not solidified into something more long term. For one respondent who had particularly valued this social element, the return to the status quo led them to feel even more isolated than they had before the retreat:

> But the down side…it would probably be about, more wanting to be part of something and then not really, even at the end of all of that, even at the end of all those sessions, feeling that I'd achieved that for myself…like you walk on the sand and you leave your footprints, and it's there until the tide comes in and washes it all away. (P13: I)

Thus, although responses at different stages of the programme suggested the potential

for the development of communities of coping, as with all communities it needs to be nurtured and supported. The offering and then loss of a community to those who feel isolated can be damaging.

Conclusions

The academic environment is experiencing substantial change, increasing academics' experiences of stress, adversely impacting the dynamic balance of academic wellbeing (e.g. Dodge et al., 2012). This study sought to establish whether structured writing initiatives could provide wellbeing benefits, beyond the traditional focus on increased productivity. The quantitative measure identified an increase in positive affect towards writing, with reports of deepened concentration and focus. Positive emotions were also engendered by the experience of group-writing, and the support and motivation derived from that. Research has identified the benefits of an upward spiral relationship between concentration and positive affect (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002). We would argue that the benefit of the structured writing retreat, with the model of nurture, time and group writing, facilitates that reciprocal relationship between positive emotion and heightened attention and cognitive processing, to spiral towards a state of flow.

This achievement of flow could be beneficial for any individual involved in writing that involves deep thinking and concentration. This in itself provides eudaimonic benefits (Fullagar and Kelloway, 2009). However, for academics for whom research forms part of their core identity, the writing process also seemed to addresses a core eudaimonic 'need' fundamental to their academic identity. Perhaps one of the most profound observations was that many of the participants valued the way in which the writing

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programme gave them an institutional endorsed 'permission' to fulfil this need. Participants described it as 'time away from work', and noted that the institutional support provided a legitimisation of the writing process – a legitimisation of this personal 'need' – the outcomes of which also benefit the institution. These are striking statements, given that people were exactly there to fulfil a standard requirement of the academic role – to write.

Our findings indicate that beyond the permission to write, part of the power of this process comes from the shared structured writing sessions. Although all participants on this programme originate from disciplines for whom collaborative co-authored publications is a standard, the process of writing itself is most often still an isolated one. Participants noted the collegiate atmosphere through the creation of a writing community. Writing retreats facilitate the creation of support networks around shared interests; provide opportunities for informal socialising and in so doing create an environment within which work can be completed whilst stress and anxiety are simultaneously reduced.

This observation does come with an important caveat. Sustainability is crucial. By enhancing productivity residential writing retreats effectively support institutional goals - encouraging more writing, more publications, and thus contribute towards greater research currency. However, they do bear a cost implication. As such, the positive increase in affect as a result of the campus-based academic writing days should be noted (see also Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, Talbot, Verrinder & Ward, 2009). Providing time is allowed for managing and running these days, they can be run virtually cost free by the institutions. Whether residential or campus-based, providing academics with a

structured institutionally-validated space to write enhances wellbeing in a stressed and overworked environment. Writing retreats result in positive affect, they create collegiate support networks, and for some academics, enable them to nurture and fulfil a key aspect of their academic identity, through which they can flourish.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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