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An Evaluation of Research Students’ Writing Support Intervention

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Abstract

Purpose – Achieving quality standards in postgraduate education, particularly among Higher Degree by Research (HDR) students, can be challenging. In addition to the diverse educational and cultural backgrounds of these students, thesis writing frequently involves the development of new skills associated with the comprehension of a large volume of information, critical analysis and the development of an academic writing style. Many students need support in one or all of these key areas. Universities currently provide a number of different writing support activities to address students’ needs. The purpose of this study is to report on a writing support intervention that employed a specialist in academic writing to support HDR students in the business faculty.

Design/methodology/approach – Following a two-year period, the intervention was evaluated to assess the appropriateness and effectiveness of this support using qualitative methods. The results of this study are presented and discussed from different angles. First, a lecturer in academic writing support outlines her observations and reflection on the value of individual consultations and students’ progress. Second, the attitudes and experience of students and their supervisors to this service are discussed. This is followed by the faculty senior management view with regard to the effectiveness and efficiency of this service.

Findings – This research found that both students and their supervisors expressed satisfaction with the service offered. Also it was found that the writing quality of submitted theses is improving; the costs of thesis editing have reduced; HDR students appear to be more satisfied with and confident of their academic writing; the attractiveness of the PhD program has been enhanced, as judged by the increase in PhD enquiries and the quality of potential applicants.

Research limitations/implications – The results reported here indicate that the intervention was successful. However, the sample size was relatively small and the HDR candidates and supervisors were drawn from only one faculty in one university.

Practical implications – The study provides some recommendations that could be taken into account by senior management and academic staff in order to set up and deliver a faculty-based writing support service for HDR students, which would bring benefits to students, their supervisors, faculties and universities.

Originality/value – The value of this research is that the writing program was proven to be beneficial for universities to support research students in the development of their writing skills, which in turn, could improve the quality of thesis and ensure on time completion.

Keywords: Writing support programme; Research students, Theses, Skills

Paper type: Research paper.
Introduction

According to ‘English language standards for higher education’ (2010), outlining standards for successful academic study in Australian universities for both local and international students, ‘...the provider ensures that its students are sufficiently proficient in English to participate effectively in their higher education studies on entry’ (p. 3). Essentially, students need to provide evidence to satisfy the university English language requirements at the time of lodging an application. The provision of that information by the applicant and the subsequent offer of candidature by the university is likely to generate a psychological contract between the candidate and the university (Bordia, Hobman, Restubog & Bordia, 2010) While many universities recognise this contract and provide language support to students, there is a dearth of literature that evaluates such support, particularly in relation to one-to-one consultations (Chanock, 2007a; Wilson, Li & Collins, 2011).

Although international students enter Master by Research and PhD programs with a minimum IELTS overall band score of 6.5 and it is assumed that the local students’ English language proficiency is adequate, not all students feel confident with their written and spoken English. Thus the ability of both international and local students may vary widely. Students who make many general writing errors at the beginning of their studies are considered to be ‘at risk’ because as well as acquiring some principles of academic writing, they need to deal with ‘pre-existing difficulties to produce high quality writing’ (Diezmann, 2005, p.445). Later it can lead to unsatisfactory progress and delay submitting a thesis of high quality. Consequently, there is a link between writing and academic success (Kamler & Thomson, 2004). As a result, it is beneficial for universities to support students in the development of academic writing to improve thesis quality and to ensure students complete on time, providing financial benefits for Australian universities (Woodward-Kron, 2007).

The first part of this article provides a literature review on the role of individual consultations in developing research students’ writing skills. The second part reports on the delivery of an academic writing support program to HDR students within the faculty and discusses students and supervisors’ perceptions of developing HDR students’ writing skills. The academic writing support program was introduced with the aim of achieving writing skills through learning both ontogenetically and microgenetically (Vygotsky, 1978; Wilson, Li & Collins, 2011). The former type of learning would enhance the candidates’ ability to engage with the literature and in interactions with their supervisor, while the latter would contribute to the timely completion of an appropriately presented thesis. Thesis writing can be challenging to both local and international students as it places additional demands on students from those developed at undergraduate level. These include the comprehension of a large volume of information and evaluating it critically. Thus, students may need to place more focus on developing their writing skills while they receive support to improve these skills (Delamont et al., 1999).

Although one of the recent studies by McGinty, Koo and Saeidi (2010) found that postgraduate students studying in Australia see that the role of the supervisor is ‘to guide, encourage and provide honest critique’ (p.523), another study (White, 1998), suggests that editing and proofreading are part of supervisor’s role. This is, perhaps reinforced by the requirement in many institutions that the supervisor advises the Head of School that the thesis is ‘ready for examination’ (RMIT, 2007). However, these quite different expectations are likely to form part of the candidate’s psychological contract with the university. The extent to which the candidate’s expectations of the psychological contract are fulfilled is likely to affect
their wellbeing and satisfaction with their experiences as a doctoral candidate (Wade-Benzi, Rousseau & Li, 2006; Bordia, Hobman, Restubog & Bordia; 2010).

In the study by McGinty et al. (2010) 191 local and international students were asked if their supervisors gave them some training in writing. The results showed that 80 students (41.9%) received some training in academic writing from their supervisors. At the same time 111 students (58.1%) said that their supervisors did not provide such training. The question is ‘How many of these 111 students may have required and /or wanted to have the writing support?’ It can be expected that the supervisor plays the role of a facilitator but ‘…it is fallacious to assume that supervisors are necessarily scholarly writers … themselves’ (Delamont et al., 1999, cited in Diezmann, 2005). Thus, students should be responsible for developing and improving their writing. According to Cooper et al. (1998, cited in Diezmann, 2005), students have to ‘(a) become aware of their writing weaknesses; (b) acquire the appropriate knowledge; and (c) take responsibility for monitoring and evaluating their writing’ (p.274).

The position of supervisors, faculties and the University

At the faculty/university level, academic writing support for postgraduate students can be offered through teaching credit-bearing courses in English; conducting writing groups; organising seminars run within faculties and providing consultations and workshops offered by the Language and Academic Skills (LAS) unit or lecturers in Academic Writing.

Supervisors’ attitude towards dealing with the language aspect of the thesis varies. Although some supervisors advise students, and even teach grammar, clarity of writing, and so on, others may simply not have the skills or time to do so (Woodward-Kron, 2007). Thus, they send students to the Specialist Advisors. The positive side of this is that a specialist in academic writing can help students to identify gaps in their skills and teach certain strategies to improve their writing. In general, supervisors see these consultations as a valuable addition to their support and guidance, sometimes mentioning that ‘…the level of English proficiency of L2 students …could … be a hindrance’ (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006).

Some supervisors associate individual consultations with the notion of ‘editing/proofreading’ which is a ‘one-dimensional view’ of writing support (Woodward-Kron, 2007). A few studies conducted on the importance of individual consultations (Chanock, 1999; Chan, 1996; Clerehen, 1996), underlined the importance of the teaching and learning aspect. To help avoid this misinterpretation, partnership building is required between academic writing lecturers and supervisors.

Individual consultations: SWOT analysis

The importance of individual consultations in developing students’ writing skills has been discussed widely (Gordon, 2003; Harris, 1986; Chanock, Burley & Davies, 1996, Stevens & Kokkinn, 2009; Wilson, Li, Collins & Couchman, 2011). Studies have explored the provision of such consultations to postgraduate students (Woodward-Kron, 2007; Clerehen, 1996; Chanock, 1999; Craswell, 1995). These studies emphasised the crucial role of Specialists in Academic Writing Skills in supporting postgraduate students. The pros and cons of individual consultations discussed in the studies above, can be summarised and are presented in Figure 1.
These strengths can be enhanced if this support is provided by a faculty-based specialist, aware of the discipline and particular students’ needs (Craswell, 1995).

**Strengths:**
- Address individual needs; ‘one size fits one’
- Facilitate active learning;
- Provide mutual feedback;
- Have high self-efficacy;
- Model behaviour in real life situations;
- Provide timely feedback;
- Offer long-term benefits, including financial, to Faculty/University (e.g. reduce the number of ‘at risk’ students; contribute to timely completion and submission of thesis; reduce editing costs).

**Weaknesses:**
- Are time consuming;
- Cannot be a ‘quick fix’ as a developmental approach is required.

**Opportunities:**
- Can be ‘highly’ recommended to ALL incoming research students, thus more students will potentially benefit from this support;
- Can build strong partnership/collaboration (student – supervisor – Academic writing support lecturer – Faculty management);
- Expand the service (if provided in a limited capacity.)

**Threats:**
- Can be misinterpreted and seen as a form of editing/proofreading;
- Can be seen as expensive (if not taking into account long-term benefits that can potentially outweigh short-term expenses), which, in turn, could lead to service reduction.
- Crossing the ‘boundaries’

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**Figure 1. Individual consultations: SWOT analysis**

**Faculty support for HDR students at the sample University**

The Faculty of Business and Enterprise has seen increasing numbers of HDR enrolments between 2011 and 2012. Since January, 2011 individual consultations have been offered to HDR students within the faculty. All new HDR students in 2011 and 2012 were informed about the service at the HDR Induction. Funding for the service of 3-4 hours per week of sessional staff time was obtained from the Faculty research budget. The funds were administered and the service monitored by the Associate Dean (Research) with quarterly progress reports provided by the service provider. Key objectives of the service were to: improve the quality and standard of theses; reduce the costs of thesis editing; shorten the time to completion; and ensure that graduates left the university with a high standard of academic English. Other, subsidiary aims were to increase the level of support to students, particularly those seen to require extra support, and to enhance the reputation of the faculty PhD program. At the outset there were 50 equivalent full time students (EFTLs) eligible for the service, rising to 61 in year two.
The aim of the consultations was to continue developing/improving students’ academic writing skills through learning both ontogenetically and microgenetically. Consultations were held once or twice per week depending on students’ demand. Overall over 2011-2012 thirty-one students attended the consultations. Among them 13 students (10 international) attended regularly over a two-year period (Figure 2). In 2011, 19 students took advantage of the service, 14 international and 5 local. From 2011 to 2012 there was a 30% increase in the number of students attending consultations. In 2012, 25 students (21 international) utilized the service. It is worth noting that the majority of local students were from non-English speaking backgrounds. The service was used mostly by the first year students, followed by the third year, second and fourth year students.

At various stages of enrolment postgraduate students have different needs and expectations in terms of academic writing support as part of their psychological contract with the university. The process of learning happens both ontogenetically, which is a long-term development and microgenetically when step-by-step changes occur (Vygotsky, 1978). One of the main advantages of individual consultations, therefore, is that they focus on the individual needs of particular students (Stevenson & Kokkin, 2009; Wilson, Li & Collins, 2011). The majority of students coming to these consultations for the first time are ‘dependent’ writers and the purpose of the consultation is to provide systematic feedback on their writing so that they become confident, competent and independent writers who are capable of self-editing their work.

At the beginning of the first meeting with a student, a short assessment was conducted to identify and record the student’s individual needs. The students were asked to identify the areas (Table 1) that needed to be improved or required special focus/attention. It was found all the students identified the following areas: grammar and expression use; linking ideas; sentence structure; chapter/thesis structure; summarising or paraphrasing; and style of writing.

![Figure 2. Attendance pattern](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Targeted areas</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading (R)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R1 – conventional written texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2 – e-texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R3 – reading strategies</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Writing (W)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W1 – grammar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W2 – expression</td>
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Students were asked to send a piece of their writing prior to the meeting. This gave the specialist an opportunity to become familiar with their work, correct (to a certain extent) mistakes and think of key points that should be raised at the consultation.

Providing guidance with academic writing involves teaching critical thinking skills, ways of incorporating other people’s ideas into writing and developing one’s own ‘writing voice’. According to Cooper et al. (1998, cited in Diezmann, 2005), errors in thesis writing can be divided into three groups; they are mechanical errors (e.g. grammar mistakes); errors in microstructure of writing (e.g. flow of argument); and errors in macrostructure of writing (e.g. clarity). When dealing with various types of mistakes, the writing support specialist must be cautious of ‘not crossing the boundaries’ into the content of a piece of work. As Wilson, Li and Collins (2011) stated: “The learning advisor has certain privileged knowledge (understandings of academic literacy) while the student has insider knowledge of the discipline...”. According to these authors, this approach respects the candidates’ knowledge of the discipline and enables them to extend their zone of personal development.

Much of the time was spent teaching how to overcome mechanical errors in the first instance. For that purpose, the writing support specialist corrected mistakes, giving explicit explanation of the rules. Grammar exercises were provided for additional practice at home. Once a particular grammar aspect was mastered, students were encouraged to practise identifying such mistakes, learning to eliminate them.

Addressing errors in micro- and/or macrostructure often took longer compared to mechanical errors. The specialist provided an explanation using a talk-through procedure before students proceeded with guided practice followed by individual feedback. One of the common challenges encountered by English as Second Language (ESL) students is translating from
English into their mother tongue, thinking and then translating back into English. Students were encouraged to eliminate this habit by demonstrating the benefits of ‘thinking in English’ while reading and writing in English. At the end of each session, a list of common mistakes/issues based on the current piece of work was developed and discussed. This helped students to pay closer attention to a particular aspect of writing while working on their next piece.

As students learned at their own pace they started accepting responsibility for improving their own writing skills. Communication with supervisors was important and contributed to positive writing support outcomes (Chanock, 2007a). As a result, informal meetings with supervisors were also encouraged to discuss the students’ progress and supervisors’ expectations of students’ academic writing. At these meetings supervisors were found to be positive about this support for research students and encouraged students to continue attending sessions to further improve. If students’ writing was of particular concern, the writing specialist, together with supervisors, developed strategies to help the students to progress. These meetings were helpful in building a strong ‘Student-Supervisors- Academic Writing Support Specialist’ partnership to achieve short- and long term benefits (Channock, 2007a).

**Students and supervisors’ views**

Having implemented the writing support program in January 2011, a formal evaluation of the program was conducted in the second half of 2012 (Stevenson & Kokkinn, 2009). The aims of this evaluation were to seek students and supervisors’ views on the value of individual consultations and students’ progress, as well as gauging students and their supervisors’ experience of the service. The aim was to evaluate whether this method of identifying specific gaps in students’ skills and providing students with customised strategies to improve their writing was effective. At this stage, learning both ontogenetically and microgenetically were being gauged.

**Evaluation Methodology**

In this research phase qualitative methods were employed to solicit the views of students and supervisors because, unlike quantitative methods, qualitative processes can be used to gain a deep understanding of people’s perceptions while allowing emerging themes to be explored (Patton, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This was important in this evaluation as noted by Chanock (2007) who stated that insights from individual consultations should be supported by targeted relevant questions. Group interviews were chosen for this purpose because they allow the facilitator to introduce key themes and topics to be discussed and elaborated upon by respondents, while encouraging individuals within the group to participate. In this way the facilitator can intervene if elements of ‘group think’ emerge or if one participant tends to dominate the discussion (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell & Alexander, 1995). Once an ethics application had been approved, two group interviews were held with students and one with supervisors. Four students participated in each group interview (eight in total) and four supervisors were also interviewed. In order to achieve consistency and validity the supervisors selected to take part in the interview were those that supervised the students that had been interviewed.

Students were asked to discuss their reasons for using the service, what they felt were the best aspects of this type of intervention, and whether they had noticed any improvement in their
communication skills. They were also asked to identify what sort of improvement they experienced and to discuss how they implemented the recommendations provided at consultation sessions and how these sessions might be improved.

Supervisors were asked about the number of research students they currently supervised, whether they felt that a lack of oral and written communication skills was an impediment to successful thesis progression. They were also asked who they felt was responsible for teaching language, research and communication skills to HDR students and how much time they spent addressing ‘the language-related issues’. How these issues were addressed and whether they had noticed any improvement in their students as a result of attending sessions were also canvassed.

Each group interview was recorded, transcribed and coded. This was followed by an analysis of the interview data to identify common themes in respondents’ views.

Findings

Confidence building

All of the students that agreed to take part in the research came from non-English speaking backgrounds. They disclosed a variety of reasons for using the service explaining that they perceived their need for support included the fact that academic writing is different to what they described as “… normal daily writing …”. However, gaining confidence in their writing was a primary reason. As one student explained “… when you come from a non-English speaking country we have a lack of confidence. Even the things that we already knew we thought we couldn’t express properly and thought that we needed that support”. Part of gaining confidence for the students was the second opinion (from the writing support specialist) on their writing.

Some students revealed that getting an opinion from somebody who is not directly involved in business studies was important because, if they understand what they are writing, students feel more confident. However, others felt that the fact that the specialist had built up knowledge of business studies and business theses was a distinct advantage, which gave students further confidence. The fact that the service was delivered by a person who is a writing support specialist and holds a PhD was seen as an added bonus because they were seen as being more capable of commenting on writing and the evolution of the students’ thesis. Students felt that when their supervisors were busy they still had someone to read and make comments on their work. One student also described the specialist as a writing manager who maintained progress “… like a project manager for writing”, however, because students were presented with options rather than prescriptive directions during their consultations they retained a level of independence and control.

Self-correcting was also a skill that students felt they had developed and all advised that they strive not to repeat mistakes once they had been corrected. One measure of improvement one student discussed related to his work as a tutor in the faculty. He advised that he had recently marked about 70 assignments and had noticed grammatical errors. This gave him additional confidence because he was able to identify these errors and he realised that academic writing is not just an issue for students from non-English speaking backgrounds. As he put it:

Even though the mother language is English it doesn't mean that they would be perfect in a writing style. Therefore on almost all those assignments I
made the comment “improve your grammar” and I checked this with my supervisor, who is also a native English speaker, and she said “yes the students do need to improve their grammar.” So that makes me confident but I think that even the English-speaking students especially research students need to be given support with the writing because they have to publish the knowledge not only do they want to create the knowledge but they want to publish the knowledge. Therefore academic writing is so important for them as well whether they are local or international.

**Bridging the ontogenetic-microgenetic divide**

All students agreed that the service improved their drafts so that in the next piece of writing they did not make the same errors. All opined that they had noticed an improvement in their research and communication skills since they started attending the sessions. They were also able to self-edit having learned to identify elements in their work as “not professional”. They explained that, in the course of the program, they had learned how to better start a sentence, how to develop it, structure it and then to link sentences together.

The evolution of their writing was also evident in the developmental approach adopted. As one student explained:

> She [writing support specialist] gives options and asks “what do you want to focus on during the time we meet?” So you might say this time I want to focus on reading … and then she would give me some advice on reading, reading for writing and explain to me how to write a paragraph from what I am reading and then developing a literature review.

**Improving the service**

Students made a number of recommendations that they felt would improve the service. Working through written thesis drafts together was seen as an advantage, so that when the specialist is reading the work and there are elements that she does not understand, she can ask the student and the issues can be addressed. A disadvantage of this method was that the process was perceived to be a little slow covering only about 5 pages in each session.

Students also expressed a range of views on what was perceived to be adequate in terms of student contact hours with the specialist. This, they felt, should vary at different times of the research journey. In year one, one hour per month was seen to be sufficient. However, they proposed one hour per fortnight in the “…second year is really important because you’re writing more”.

**Relationship development**

One issue deemed important at the beginning of the relationship was to have a meeting with the students’ supervisors so that all stakeholders had an understanding of what could be expected of the service. All parties were aware of limitations when dealing with discipline specific theses, however, while the writing specialist was not a content expert, she was able to capitalise on the dominant knowledge of the student to help “build the field” and allow the student to retain ownership of the disciplinary discourse (Wilson, Li, Collins & Couchman, 2011).
Students were concerned that the writing support specialist’s writing style might be different to that of their supervisors; however, they had developed a novel way of overcoming this. That is, they would seek to write in the style of their supervisors’ published articles and incorporate that writing style into the drafts that they brought to the writing support specialist so that she could work with the supervisors’ writing style.

Lastly the personality of the specialist was noted and she was described as approachable, friendly and caring. These were seen as important attributes in terms of developing confidence. As one student put it:

She is very friendly and I can freely approach her and freely talk with her and another thing she empathises with us because her mother language is also not English, it is Russian, so she can understand our context.

Availability was another positive element. The specialist was seen to be able to accommodate urgent appointments. Urgent was defined as “when I need to produce a piece of work for my supervisor and I need an urgent appointment…”. The specialist’s understanding of these situations and additional time she provided were positively received.

**Approach**

The particular approach taken by the specialist was also important. This was described as a scaffolding approach that complemented the supervisors’ input (Gibbons & Hammond, 2005; Woodward-Kron, 2007).

She uses a step-by-step approach and I think that her approach is good and I get equal language assistance from my supervisor so we are not fully dependent on Elena because my supervisor also provides language assistance for me. Therefore, I get two types of support one from my supervisor and one from Elena therefore now I feel more confident.

The only real negative comment concerned a matter relating to supervisors where one student advised that “… sometimes supervisors do not provide proper supervising there is a risk you will lose time while you're waiting …”. However, the writing support specialist was perceived to bridge this gap and assist students to keep progressing while waiting for supervisors to review their work. Students felt that they had improved in developing structure in their writing style and developing an argument.

Overall students felt that the writing support provided was complementary to that provided by their supervisors and that their dependence on the writing support specialist had been reduced as they improved their writing. However, they did see the need for more support as they got closer to submission and, for example, in the development of conference papers.

One student noted that occasionally changes suggested by the writing support specialist were not agreed to by the supervisor. This was mainly related to some specific terms or use of language and this became difficult for the student who felt the distinction between writing support and academic support needed to be more pronounced. These issues were then added to the interview schedule for supervisors.

**Supervisors’ views**

While supervisors were generally positive about the writing support program, some concerns were expressed. The first was that some students continued to make similar minor
grammatical errors, however on further investigation it was found that these students had been enrolled for some time and had only recently accessed writing support. Apart from these issues, supervisors had noticed an improvement in students’ writing and many expressed some relief that the quality of the thesis was improving and that their input in terms of English expression, grammar and general writing style was reducing. They were also pleased that improvements in written communication skills would translate into more rapid progress and on-time completion.

The other issue that supervisors expressed concern about related to the role of the writing support specialist. Some supervisors were concerned that occasionally feedback to students in the writing support program ‘crossed the line’ between writing support and supervision. However, all supervisors agreed that it was not their role to teach language and communication skills to HDR students. Their suggestion for improvement was to have a formal structured meeting with the student and the writing support specialist at the beginning of the program to clearly differentiate and define the roles of the “specialist” and the supervisor. This should then be supported by intermittent meetings throughout candidature.

**Conclusion**

The results of the study show that students’ needs included gaining confidence in academic writing, which they distinguished from other types of writing. Indeed, all students reported a need to develop the craft of academic writing, which they felt was a component of their psychological contract with the university. They perceived writing support to be evolutionary in that it would address their immediate needs but also allow them to continually improve to the standard required for thesis submission. Their progress in self-editing highlighted the bridge between the ontogenetic and microgenetic learning.

Individual consultations offer support to students who wish to improve or further develop their academic writing skills. All incoming students are informed about this support at the beginning of their candidature; some of them take advantage of it immediately, others may seek this support 12 to 18 months later. Although students progress at different paces, it may be that early intervention would improve outcomes. The students who attend writing consultations regularly are likely to produce a quality thesis, within the time frame. These consultations cannot be treated as a ‘quick fix’. They require a developmental and incremental approach, a long-term investment which could be beneficial to research students, their supervisors, the faculty and the university. Preliminary findings from the first two years of the service are that the writing quality of submitted theses is improving; the costs of thesis editing have reduced; HDR students appear to be more satisfied and the attractiveness of the PhD program has been enhanced, as judged by the increase in PhD enquiries and the quality of potential applicants. It is too early to judge at this stage if timely completions have improved.

A major recommendation emanating from the research was that the writing support specialist and the students’ supervisors should meet at the beginning of the relationship and agree on how the process should proceed. This should then be supplemented by meetings once every six months with the three parties meeting (the supervisor, student and service provider) to discuss progress, any specific areas that are that need attention and to agree on the objectives, goals and expectations for the next period. This approach is supported by Chanock (2007b) who advocates such collaborations.
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