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PRESS

Makerere/University of Johannesburg Postgraduate Writing Workshops: A Reflection

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Abstract

Between 2022 and 2024, Makerere University's Department of History, Archaeology and Heritage Studies (HAHS) and the Department of History at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) held three joint postgraduate student workshops. The workshops reflected the structural limits and the organic potential for ground-level collaborations between postgraduate programmes in African universities. This report assesses the achievements and challenges of these collaborations in a changing context of postgraduate humanities education in Africa, which is expanding but also overshadowed by discourses of relevance that prioritize the hard social sciences and STEM. The context was also shaped by the mobility of students across African postgraduate programmes and by both the opportunities and limitations of onlinisation in the wake of the COVID-19 lockdowns. The workshops – which at the time of publication have now continued in 2025 – centred student to student interaction alongside a faculty mentor with the aim of improving the mechanics of student writing and widening cross-regional conversations. The exchanges were contingent on limited funding, primarily from the University of Johannesburg, and the volunteer labour of faculty with the time and resources to participate. Thus, the workshops contended with global hierarchies of academic labour and resources while facilitating collaborative networks among faculty and students.

Keywords: Makerere University, University of Johannesburg, higher education, graduate studies, history

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This report assesses the achievements and challenges of three postgraduate student exchanges from 2022 to 2024 between Makerere University's Department of History, Archaeology and Heritage Studies (HAHS) and the Department of History at the University of Johannesburg (UJ). It reflects on these exchanges in a context when humanities scholarly communities in Africa are expanding but also overshadowed by discourses of practical relevance that elevate the hard social sciences and STEM fields.

These workshops demonstrate both the potential for ground-level collaborations between postgraduate programmes in Africa as well the structural limits and contingencies that shape them. The Makerere-UJ workshops have benefited from existing personal and institutional linkages as well as the re-wiring of academics' approaches to collaborative work in the aftermath of COVID-19 lockdowns. They have also relied on limited pools of resources, primarily from UJ, and the generosity of faculty mentors from universities in the Global North, who donated their time and insight out of commitment to the mentorship of African postgraduate students.

At the outset, we also wish to acknowledge the participation of our postgraduate students, without whom this initiative would not have taken place. The participants in each workshop included postgraduate students whose countries of origin reflect a very mobile politics of academic choice within the continent. Students from the two institutions came from Angola, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. Many already held university employment but chose Makerere or UJ for the opportunity to expand their academic credentials and build their home institutions.

Conceptualizing the Workshops

The early 2020s were a challenging time for universities, as for the entire world. In March 2020, the Ugandan and South African governments each responded to the COVID-19 pandemic with severe lockdowns. Both Makerere and UJ introduced hybrid forms of instruction, but both institutions' intellectual communities – and lives of their students and faculty – were severely disrupted.

Sustaining the intellectual life of departments during the uncertainties of the 2020-2021 lockdowns spurred new practices and skills. From today's vantage point in 2025, one strains to remember how strange Zoom meetings and seminars felt in 2020. However, Zoom enabled global networks of scholars who were locked down around the world to participate in intellectual communities that were previously more distant. For example, Edgar Taylor migrated HAHS's public seminar series to Zoom, which brought Makerere colleagues and postgraduate students in conversation with peers from diverse networks in eastern and southern Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America. The same happened at UJ. Zoom interactions were especially significant for postgraduate students, who had lost face-to-face peer communities as they worked to beat dissertation completion and publication deadlines. This acceleration of *onlinisation* in academic culture in 2020-2021 helped to expand postgraduate students' intellectual networks beyond the traditional gate-keepers of individual supervisors and administrators.

However, just as online connections were expanding students' and colleagues' exposure to wider intellectual communities, the limitations of online conversations

created a growing desire to convert digital networks into more meaningful engagements. It is here that our existing networks proved crucial. Several colleagues who had attended the HAHS seminars online contacted Taylor about ways to build stronger connections with Makerere, particularly given their students' demands for greater engagement with other African peers. Some were scholars of Uganda whose existing ties to Makerere had been interrupted by the lockdowns. Others, such as Natasha Erlank from UJ and Andrew Ivaska from Concordia University, had no research interests in Uganda but saw an opportunity for mutually beneficial postgraduate student exchanges.

By early 2022, Taylor, Erlank, and Ivaska had all converged around an idea for an in-person postgraduate student workshop at Makerere. The goals outlined in those early email and Zoom discussions focused on improving postgraduate student writing and widening their cross-regional conversations. As Taylor brought colleagues Pamela Khanakwa, Christopher Muhoozi, and Acting Head of Department Charlotte Mafumbo into the conversation, all agreed that benefit for postgraduate students would come from a combination of faculty mentorship and practice in peer review. Two primary challenges emerged – funding and personnel. Concordia postgraduate students participated in several Zoom seminars and workshops, but efforts to secure funds to bring students from Montreal to Makerere or vice versa proved unsuccessful. The imbalance of resources was a concern throughout the process, but the relatively small scale of the exchanges between UJ and Makerere made it possible for them to proceed. At UJ, Erlank prepared an application for funds to bring herself and three PhD students to Makerere in August 2022, while Khanakwa was able to obtain funds from the Remaking Societies Remaking Persons (RSRP) project to provide catering. The entirety of the funding for the 2023 and 2024 workshops came from Erlank's applications to the University of Johannesburg, and through the inclusion of the 2024 workshop as an add-on to the biennial conference of the Southern African Historical Society.

The organic development of the workshop idea was partly spurred by the unique circumstances of the post-COVID lockdown world, but it also followed existing academic networks. Taylor, Khanakwa, and Muhoozi's career trajectories from North American doctoral programmes to faculty positions at Makerere–in addition to Taylor's experience as a post-doc at UJ–provided a basis for HAHS's outreach to colleagues in South Africa and further afield. As their discussions with Erlank coalesced, it became clear that relying on overworked colleagues in Makerere's and UJ's thinly staffed departments was not feasible. Taylor soon found out that colleagues from foreign universities who visited Uganda for research trips were eager to see the work that Makerere's postgraduate students were doing, partly in response to the desire of universities in the Global North for stronger connections with African institutions. Henri Médard from Aix-Marseille University, Nakanyike Musisi from the University of Toronto, and Florence Brisset-Foucault from the University of Paris immediately agreed to serve as mentors for a workshop at Makerere in August 2022. Ivaska also obtained funds to come to Kampala for the workshop. This approach proved successful again in 2023, when Kevin Donovan from the University of Edinburgh and Marissa Mika, then an independent scholar, also joined

in addition to Julia Cummiskey, then from the University of Tennessee-Chattanooga, who braved the unforgiving time difference to participate by Zoom. When Makerere students visited UJ in 2024, Rob Skinner from the University of Bristol, Zoë Groves from the University of Leicester, and Paul Landau from the University of Maryland, combined their visit to the Southern African Historical Society conference in order to donate their time for a workshop with UJ and Makerere postgraduate students. The students at the 2024 workshop further benefited from having their work read by other conference delegates, whose assistance had been requested in advance. The free time and labour that numerous colleagues were willing to donate made the workshops possible.

The organizers thus faced a challenge that the faculty mentors who were able to donate their time for the workshops were primarily from Global North institutions, while the networks of students were all from and based in Africa. Apart from the logistical and planning issues that arise when recruiting from personal networks, another challenge concerned how to avoid the reification of a false binary of Global North expert and Global South apprentice.

Centring Students

The workshops in 2022 and 2023 each lasted for approximately two weeks. Beginning with mini-seminar conversations on the experiences of faculty and students in growing their academic skills and voices, there followed two days of intensive small group activity, where two or three students and one faculty mentor commented on each other's work. After an extended break, the workshops reconvened at the end of the two weeks for the participants to comment on their revised writing and for extended discussions led by the graduate students about the stakes of their research. The time in-between the two sets of meetings was filled with other activities that embedded the visitors in the academic life of Makerere, including seminar presentations by other scholars and the International Humanities Conference hosted by the College of Humanities and Social Sciences (CHUSS). The rationale for this format lies in attempts to address common issues and difficulties experienced by students based in Uganda and South Africa.

Students at postgraduate level often take longer than required by their universities to complete their studies. The standard time to completion for a doctorate at both Makerere and UJ is three years full time. There are many reasons to explain this problem, including challenges of accessing archival sources, limited opportunities for rigorous methodological and analytic training, the difficulties of managing a PhD with other personal and professional commitments, and lack of funding. However, the most significant factor that students raised was limited preparation for the mechanics and style of scholarly writing, whether for a chapter, an article, or a dissertation. This sometimes extends from the basics of sentence and paragraph construction to the organisational work of explaining a nascent idea for a research project. Postgraduate students in history at Makerere and UJ often come to their work with great enthusiasm and important local knowledge but can feel incapacitated without sustained mentorship not only on the content of their work but also on the mechanics of written communication and analysis.

To remedy this problem, universities and state research facilities funding the development of postgraduate students have introduced support systems such as writing retreats or workshops to help postgraduate students to successfully complete their degrees in time. In South Africa, the Centre for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) is one of the organisations to have done this. Makerere's Centre of Research Excellence in Research Teaching and Learning (CERTL) was launched in 2020 with a similar goal.

University staff have used a variety of models to organize and facilitate writing workshops. Some prefer to take a select cohort of postgraduate students from different universities and different disciplines away for a weekend to a lodge. There, each student would be paired with an academic mentor. Over the next two to three days, students theoretically write and receive detailed feedback from their academic mentors.

Undoubtedly, some of the students benefit from this model. However, others struggle, particularly when the academic mentor is not fully acquainted with the student's work and the student's academic strengths and limitations. This format of student-mentor interaction also tends to encourage a top-down academic approach, where the academic mentor is perceived as an 'expert' with all the answers and the student as the consumer of the 'expert's' knowledge. It limits broad and rigorous academic engagement, while foreclosing wider peer discussion.

The model used to facilitate the Makerere-UJ 2023 writing workshop was different. Firstly, the workshop was organized over two weeks. This offered students and academic mentors, who met daily and in-person (a few academic mentors participated via Zoom), enough time to get used to each other. This time also helped the students to acquaint themselves with each other's work. Because of this, trust developed amongst the workshop participants, and it became easier for the students to engage with each other's work critically and honestly in a supportive setting.

Secondly, each student was given an opportunity to present his or her work to the whole group and so the workshops also offered students the opportunity to perform their academic skills in a supportive environment. Comments and suggestions did not only come from the academic mentors, but also from students. It was heartening to hear students not only posing clarifying questions to their peers but also sharing challenges in their academic journey and offering suggestions about how their peers should frame their research questions or which sources to use. In 2022, the South African students included several working on gender issues. They pushed other students to think through the implications of only interviewing men as sources on a project to do with traditional authority. Students learned from each other and from the academic mentors, who did not only share their expertise but also challenges they have experienced in research and writing. For example, Charlotte Mafumbo shared the challenges she was experiencing in dealing with ethical issues pertaining to her research work on child soldiers in northern Uganda.

This is different to the workshop model outlined above because this model helps to expand a broad and rigorous academic engagement. When students learned that even academic mentors had experienced challenges (and still do) in their academic work, they realized that they were not alone nor were these challenges peculiar to them. Many commented that this awareness boosted their confidence.

Thirdly, in addition to the presentations by students, the workshop also broke into small groups, made up of students and academic mentors. In these small groups the latter workshopped the work of each student assigned to them. The academic mentor, who read the student's work in advance, provided critical comments and suggestions. Other students in the group also participated. This allowed deeper conversations to emerge between the academic mentor, the student author, and their fellow students. In one of the sessions facilitated by Tshepo Moloi, Heather Ndlovu, a PhD student at Makerere, found a new framing of her research topic on Zimbabwean archives that better aligned with the content of her data and writing. Months after the workshop, she emailed Tshepo notifying him that she changed her topic from 'Archiving the documentation on the history of the war of liberation by the national archives of Zimbabwe' to 'Archiving the silenced memories of the nationalist liberation movements,' which enabled her to engage more directly with a wider scholarship on memory and silence.

The fourth distinction about the Makerere-UJ writing workshop is that it complemented the student-supervisor relationship while supporting a sense of community among students across the two universities. The academic mentors often worked to reinforce the comments of the students' supervisors. Moreover, the time the students spent together at the workshop inculcated a sense of camaraderie between them. They began to trust each other to freely share the challenges they each experienced in their academic journeys; they discussed their frustrations and the way they dealt with criticism from their supervisors; and they talked about the aspirations they had in their careers and in the impact of their work. Such discussions set each student at ease that the ups and downs of academic life were not peculiar to them. The regular interactions and discussions, both formal and informal, besides assisting the students to learn about the challenges and frustrations their peers experienced, also helped the students to acknowledge their limitations–and the critical importance of networks with peers from other places.

Finally, the participation of academic mentors from different countries and academic backgrounds fostered especially productive conversations about historical methods, research, and writing. Rather than reinforcing a hierarchal binary between mentor and student or between Global North and Global South, the format allowed both for the sharing of academic knowledge and skills development as well as open-ended discussions of the mechanics and ethics of history, in which participants shared their experiences and insights from diverse subject positions.

The Mechanics and Ethics of History

From the outset, all who were involved in organizing the workshops hoped to address two challenges in postgraduate training: the mechanics of dissertation writing and the limited regional or national scope of many students' work. Our goal was to facilitate reflections on research, academic writing, and thinking beyond the ethno-geographic boundary of colonial archives and popular discourse in southern and eastern Africa.

As the first workshop progressed, the contrasts and similarities between Makerere's and UJ's postgraduate programmes became more evident. The graduate

handbook from Makerere University's Directorate of Research and Graduate Training (DRGT) provides guidelines for structuring proposals and dissertations. These guidelines were originally intended as broad suggestions for guiding student writing, but students and many faculty have taken them to be cast in stone. As a result, many Makerere students' writing is guided by fixed categories, given form in a very rigid template: background, statement of the problem, literature review, methodology, findings, and discussion of results. In a context where readers from outside the humanities–including in the political and NGO worlds–often perceive historical research to lack scientific rigor, students often gravitate toward the performative language of quantitative social science in order to defend their work. Many struggle to develop sustained historical narratives with clear arguments and evidence. UJ students are much freer to choose a more narrative structure for their dissertations, but they too experience the social-*scientisation* of research through faculty processes that evaluate proposals and ethics applications against positivist criteria. Both groups at Makerere and UJ shared the challenges of narrative writing.

The disciplinary specificity of the workshops in history was an important guiding principle. Following a programme to fund doctoral students by the Gerda Henkel Stiftung that began in 2018, CHUSS at Makerere introduced mandatory 'cross-cutting' courses for all PhD students in the college, namely Advanced Research Methods, Philosophy of Method, Advanced Gender Research Methods, Statistical Methods and Computer Application in Research, Qualitative Data Management and Analysis, Information Competence and Management, and Scholarly Writing. As a result, individual supervisors struggled to ground students in the norms of their particular disciplines – especially those students who did not have prior training or experience in historical research and analysis.

Much as the geographically diverse group of students at the workshops demonstrates the vibrancy of cross-regional African academic networks, the field of African history still often nurtures narrowly national or ethnic frameworks. Each of the doctoral students who participated in the workshops was pursuing research about their home country or home region, where they were already embedded in an academic community. The result is that many were at ease writing for a narrow audience but struggled to scale up their analyses for readers with different regional specialisations. This is a common challenge in the training of all historians, but it takes on particular significance in a context where African historians on the continent are seeking a stronger voice in global debates and in the global institutions that shape scholarly funding. Some students viewed their nationally or ethnically grounded research as a principled rejection of academic traditions that eschew continental knowledge. Samuel Nyasha Chikowero, a participant in the programme who now lectures at the University of Zimbabwe, has written very eloquently in his recently completed doctorate, about the need to avoid over-reliance on Western scholarly paradigms. His work, and the work of other students, is important for how it places the local constitution of knowledge and African knowledge frameworks at the centre of analysis. However, the doctoral student participants were also eager to develop questions and paradigms with their peers elsewhere on the continent. There was a subtle tension between ingrained regional scholarly outlooks and efforts to forge continental or global conversations.

The conversations at the workshops generated several insights into points of mutual interest across regional boundaries. Some of the students in the 2022 workshop were studying topics related to ethnic politics in Uganda and their work represented a deep dive into Uganda's social history, or the social history of kingdoms within Uganda. In 2023, several of the South African students were similarly focused on local histories, micro-histories even, and struggled to frame the background of their studies for a foreign audience. One of the workshop benefits lay in allowing these kinds of studies to take a more outward-looking approach as students questioned one another on topics outside of their regional specialisation. The reliance on known locales as a research location is a fairly common feature of historical research undertaken in under-resourced universities. Students lack funds to conduct research outside of their immediate context, or they also work full time and so are unable to travel widely for research. Only one of the students over the two years (Perside Ndandu of UJ) had undertaken research outside of their home country, which was for a project with joint principal investigators in the UK and in South Africa. We tried to place students with thematically similar topics in the same groups and ask them to find points of commonality in their work.

Discussions across regional contexts generated important conversations about the ethics of historical research and writing. These conversations clearly showed that ethics are always situated in particular contexts, in which catch-all templates of ethical accountability are woefully inadequate. Students who were conducting interviews in their 'home' communities faced different ethical challenges to those conducting interviews in communities where they were considered an outsider. 'Conflict of interest' fails to convey the complicated path that students have to traverse to interview community peers and community authority figures, including and especially if students are anticipating finding employment in the same communities when they graduate. The workshop discussions focused on deconstructing this interviewer-interviewee stickiness and navigating politically charged interviews.

The organizers also encouraged students to consider a wider understanding of ethics not only in research practice but in the content and dissemination of their writing. For some students, the politics of writing was already a key motivation for their work. For others, the broader understanding of ethics challenged notions of impartiality that they had imported from social science scholarship. Both William Musamba of Makerere and Cindy Ochu of UJ found the workshops helpful in thinking through their own positionality with respect to their research by incorporating a more ethnographic style of writing that allowed them to reflect on how they themselves were part of and affected by their research.

Structural Challenges

In what we have written so far, some of the challenges and opportunities present in this initiative have begun to emerge. In this section, we examine some of those challenges more closely, especially in relation to our institutional and national positions.

One of the first, and most critical, challenges of South-South postgraduate collaboration relate to funding. Most doctoral students in CHUSS at Makerere are

either self-funded or have received competitive fellowships from the Gerda Henkel Stiftung, which provides funding for the three-year programme. The Gerda Henkel funding reflects both a regional interaction and an outward-facing form of North-South interaction that can open opportunity while also masking inequality. The funding programme has encouraged cross-regional dialogue by bringing students from across eastern, southern, and western Africa to Makerere (a similar cross-regional dynamic exists at UJ, for different reasons). It also reinforces strict timelines, as students may be liable for the funding they receive if they have not defended their dissertations and published two peer-reviewed articles within three years. The funding is dependent on the renewal of the programme with the German foundation and the conditions that they apply.

UJ has a different funding architecture compared to Makerere. Compared to other South African state universities, it is cheaper to enrol at UJ. Where Makerere has no internal funding for postdoctoral students, many students at UJ have their fees covered through being attached to funded research projects or qualify for university bursaries that do not exclude students on the basis of nationality. There are also national bursaries available which allow foreign students to apply based on a ratio of nationals to non-nationals. Although students from elsewhere on the continent face difficulties in securing visas to study in South Africa, non-nationals can access university funding based on merit. Furthermore, the history department at UJ (like other departments in the university) has tutor posts available for postgraduates and many students co-fund their studies through employment as tutors.

Funding structures at Makerere and UJ place students under immense pressure to complete their studies in short timelines. Administrators and supervisors have emphasized the usefulness of these timelines in order to prevent the long delays and interruptions that unfunded doctoral students often experience in their programmes . However, these timelines also impose a significant amount of pressure on students that can be detrimental to their career growth. For example, doctoral students in CHUSS at Makerere are required to defend their dissertations and publish two peer-reviewed articles within three years after entering the programme. Consequently, many students in their final year seek out low-impact journals with high acceptance rates and quick publishing timelines to fulfil their requirements. Often the resulting articles contain the data that most interests them but which they have not had the time to refine into a sophisticated, scalable argument. For students who graduate and immediately enter faculty positions with high teaching and administrative responsibilities, it is often difficult as junior faculty members to generate articles for more selective, high-impact publications when they have already published their best material without the time to refine it for a wider or more specialized academic readership. Promotion requirements in Uganda and South Africa both emphasize the rapid publication of articles. The emphasis on speed and quantity over the space for the slow gestation of quality writing and deeper engagement with a wider scholarly literature inhibits writers' impact on wider scholarly debates.

There are also other time constraints. Many of the postgraduate students, both in Uganda and South Africa, work full time. Although funding programmes at Makerere and UJ require full-time registration in doctoral programmes , the reality is

often that some students with previous academic employment are lecturing for their thinly staffed home departments while pursuing their degrees. For some, the leave granted by their employers had expired or was uncertain, requiring a complicated renewal process on an annual basis. Students who were teaching while writing their dissertations faced the greatest challenges in progressing with their writing, especially given the large numbers of undergraduate students that they were responsible for. The pressure that many felt to complete their programmes and return to their places of work affected students' projects in different ways.

The structural constraints on students' time also applies to their supervisors. In HAHS at Makerere more than at UJ, faculty in an understaffed department struggle to cope with high numbers of postgraduate students. According to Makerere policy, each faculty member should supervise no more than six students (two PhD and four MA). The reality contravenes the policy. Some colleagues have seven or more PhD students with several MA students as well, all while serving on the committees of numerous other doctoral students. These responsibilities impact on the quality and frequency of supervision and feedback. When supervisors are not able to work with students on their writing in a sustained and regular fashion, the quality of students' writing suffers, and many Makerere students consequently felt particular anxiety about sharing their writing with their peers.

A much debated but little addressed challenge of postgraduate education at both institutions is the language of communication. The plurality of languages and the range in levels of language proficiency can be a challenge and an opportunity in postgraduate training in the humanities. On the one hand, postgraduate supervisors often spend substantial time helping students with the mechanics of grammar, spelling, and the norms of scholarly prose. On the other hand, there is a danger that the technical language of academic prose, particularly the jargon of quantitative social science, can overshadow the insight that students bring to the linguistic complexity of their sources in other languages. The workshops were designed to assist students in the mechanics of academic writing while helping them to cultivate unique personal voices in their work. Within a two-week workshop, students' capacity to benefit from these efforts were heavily affected by the prior preparation and mentorship they had received.

Future Opportunities

The writing workshops between Makerere and UJ have now run successfully for three years. They now boast eleven successful doctoral graduates (seven from Makerere and four from UJ), including faculty members at universities in South Africa, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, and Malawi. HAHS at Makerere and the Department of History at UJ are working together on a memorandum of understanding, working through the unique bureaucratic labyrinths of each university. The two departments are also benefitting from shared conversations about curriculum reform, including through a panel at the 2025 European African Association Conference (ECAS) in Prague on challenges facing the humanities in Africa. There are plans to replicate the previous years' initiative, with more time targeted for rewriting and possibly expanding the focus to include recent PhDs in new faculty positions. Beyond earlier

challenges, funding is now the main issue. Still, we remain hopeful. As humanities programmes expand in Uganda and South Africa, interdepartmental collaboration is vital for advancing meaningful scholarship.