

The extent to which the writing centre assists students in understanding academic discourse

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Abstract

This study aimed to assess the extent to which the Writing Centre at a selected university in South Africa assists students in understanding the academic discourse utilised within the university sphere, especially regarding writing academic documents such as assignments. The academic socialisation model (Kumi-Yeboah, Brobbey and Smith 2020; Lea and Street 2006) was used as a theoretical framework for analysing the study's findings. This involved extracting key concepts from the model and using them in the analysis. A qualitative research design was employed and data were collected through a sample of 60 evaluation forms provided to first-year students. These forms were used to assess the workshops attended by the participating students as hosted by the selected university's Writing Centre. The sample included three groups of 20 students each, one group per different subject area, namely Introduction to Law, Management Studies, and Public Administration. The findings reveal that students benefit from the academic writing skills gained from the support services provided by the Writing Centre. However, the participants expressed a need to improve some methods by which the Writing Centre services are delivered to students. These findings suggest that the Writing Centre effectively provides academic writing skills to students, enabling them to learn academic discourse. Thus, the Writing Centre should enhance inducting students into the university culture's standards and practices of academic writing, enabling them to use the academic discourse of the university or field of study and gain the capacity to learn the discourse independently.

Key words: academic discourse; academic literacy; academic writing; writing centre; writing development; academic literacy programme

1. Introduction

The goal of this study is to assess the extent to which the Writing Centre at a selected university in South Africa assists students to understand the discourse that is used within the university domain, especially with regard to students' ability to write academic documents (e.g., assignments). University writing centres in South Africa play a vital role in improving

university students' academic literacy. These centres' services have proven invaluable to students who confront the challenge of being unfamiliar with universities' standards of academic writing together with the norms and protocols that are used by universities (Adika 2015, Gasmi 2017, Perin and Holschuh 2019). Such challenges are most experienced by students who are new to university, as they have usually had inadequate exposure to the content or discourse that is necessary for them to have a sense of belonging within the higher education realm (Zahner, Calleros and Pelaez 2021).

Although the inferior education system of the apartheid era came to an end in South Africa in 1979, the symptoms of this system still dominate across the country. In particular, issues associated with this previous system are manifested in the form of continued inequality within and across the current education system (Arend, Hunma, Hutchings and Nomdo 2017). This apartheid-based system caused a large pool of students to live in historically disadvantaged educational backgrounds throughout the country, especially in rural areas, and much of these same divisions and disadvantages remain intact today (Tanga and Maphosa 2018). Such students are the ones who currently and most often confront the challenge of being unfamiliar with the norms and protocols utilised in higher education institutions. The value of this study is that it acknowledges that there is a need to assess university writing centres in order to better understand their strengths and weaknesses. Such an examination could assist the country's various university writing centres' management and/or associated stakeholders in devising ways of improving these centres so as to ensure that they function most effectively in terms of meeting student needs.

The frequently reported mediocre levels of academic literacy in university students are an ongoing concern that confronts numerous universities, both in South Africa and worldwide (Perin and Holschuh 2019, Weideman 2018, Wette 2019). Low academic literacy levels continue to occur despite the fact that good academic literacy has been well-documented as being necessary, as a student's academic literacy level determines his or her ability to build academic knowledge and to be successful at his or her chosen higher education institution (Shrestha and Parry 2019). In the South African context in particular, these noted mediocre levels of academic literacy tend to be most common in students who come from an underprivileged educational background, and/or in cases where English is not the students' home language. Consequently, it is to be expected that such students tend to experience difficulties in relation to engaging in academic writing that adheres to the expected standards found within the university domain (Tanga and Maphosa 2018). Such students, according to Bodnar and Petrucelli (2016), are often underprepared and therefore need the assistance of writing centres to develop their reading and writing skills.

It should be noted that writing centres are expected to provide diverse forms of support to university students, and especially to students who are new to university. For example, these centres' support often includes enabling students to write assignment paragraphs; providing study skills, such as techniques in reading and note-taking; and developing basic skills in referencing (Adika 2015, Beighton and Blackman 2017). Writing centres also strengthen university students' quality of academic writing and enhance their feelings of confidently being capable of undertaking academic writing (Beighton and Blackman 2017; French 2018; Keith, Stives, Kerr and Kastner 2018; Sefalane-Nkohla 2019). These centres further function as hubs that nurture and build the intellectual and linguistic capacity of students thereby enabling them

to “engage and master disciplinary literacies and genres” (Sefalane-Nkohla and Mtonjeni 2019: 1) and contribute to the process of transforming educational projects.

Writing centres are generally based on the model that promotes an egalitarian and dialogic form of interaction between writing centre tutors and students (Fotinos and Sabo 2018). Writing tutors, who function as partners in teaching (see Collett and Dison 2019, Fotinos and Sabo 2018), represent a model that is generally used by numerous university writing centres as a means of cultivating horizontal, peer-orientated spaces for learning (Li and Ngai 2018, Namakula and Prozesky 2019). Within these spaces, language and knowledge are created socially through engaging both individuals and texts in a conversation (O’Sullivan and Cleary 2014, Wilmot and McKenna 2018). This practice includes, but is not limited to, tutors asking provocative questions to students and providing alternative perspectives to them when the need arises. In cases where tutors critique students’ work, they do so in a friendly manner rather than being antagonistic towards them (Carlse 2019). In this way, by embracing a model that promotes an egalitarian and dialogic form of interaction, writing centres can create a climate that allows students to feel free as they negotiate and explore different ideas pertaining to academic writing.

Of further note is that writing centres provide alternative perspectives regarding teaching. For example, most such centres oppose the view that knowledge is something that must always be handed down from a master to a disciple (Brooks-Gillies, Garcia and Kim 2020; Dison and Moore 2019; Nichols 1998; Sanchez and Dikilitaş 2019; Wingate 2019), as such a view tends to perpetuate hierarchical and oftentimes impenetrable spaces within higher education (Moxley and Archer 2019). Such hierarchical spaces are often revealed through a lecturer who, for example, is often perceived as the expert responsible for imparting knowledge to the unknowledgeable students.

While students often come to higher education institutions without possessing the necessary academic knowledge, they do still bring rich life experiences into this sphere, which universities often tend to “neglect to value or actively ignore” (Mhlahlo 2020: 165). Consequently, some lecturers simply bypass the idea that students are also partners in the process of teaching and learning. Such dismissal contributes into a lost opportunity for universities to engage students in the process of teaching and learning as a joint activity between lecturers and students and which begins with students’ experiences (Curran and Millard 2016). Writing centres’ support, therefore, can contribute to universities by creating a healthy climate between students and lecturers that facilitate teaching and learning.

Despite how writing centres undertake the vital role of providing writing development support to students, some centres in South African universities tend to operate with inadequate resources. Examples of resources include physical and human resources (Clarence 2019) as well as multilingual and technology-enriched resources (Archer 2017; Farrell, O’Sullivan and Tighe-Mooney 2015). Resources are key components of any programme (Angaga 2018; Nichols, Erasmus, Ntsepo and Mlahleki 2019) as they can determine its failure or success. If there is a shortage of resources available for writing centres, the nature of support that they can provide to students as a component of the teaching and learning process undertaken in a university could deteriorate (Angaga 2018; Tran, Jean-Marie, Powers, Bell, and Sanders 2016). This deterioration in support could, in turn, inhibit possibilities for students to be enabled to

learn and write independently (Arnebacka and Blåsjö 2017) and/or become successful in their studies (Ezenwafor, Soneye and Ukamaka 2018).

The ideas presented in the extant literature (such as Gasmi 2017, Perin and Holschuh 2019, Wette 2019) are valuable in portraying the contribution of writing centres in developing university students' academic literacy. Despite the evidence of these centres' value, however, little is currently known regarding the extent to which writing centres assist university students to understand the discourse that is used in the domain of higher education (Dison and Moore 2019), particularly with respect to writing assignments. The research questions in this study were developed to address this gap in the literature, and are presented as follows:

- What aspects of the selected university's Writing Centre's services do students find valuable in assisting them to understand higher education academic discourse?
- What aspects of the selected university's Writing Centre's services were not, according to the participating students, functioning adequately and what suggestions did they provide for improving these services?

As part of this research paper, diverse themes and discussions are presented in relation to the concepts of 'academic literacy', 'academic discourse', and 'writing centres'. Also included is a presentation of the academic socialisation model (Kumi-Yeboah et al. 2020, Lea and Street 1998), the research methodology, and a briefing about the selected university's Writing Centre workshops that were used to deliver the relevant services. This paper also includes a presentation of the study's findings and discussions thereof along with concluding remarks.

2. Academic literacy, academic discourse, and writing centres

This section provides a definition and discussion of the concepts of 'academic discourse' and 'academic literacy' as they pertain to university writing centres. The term "academic literacy" refers to the ability to use language that fulfils the expected standards of tertiary education (Weideman 2018, Mashiyi 2018). This concept also implies the ability to use the academic discourse of a particular field of study or to be able to use academic-level language "across different fields of study" at a university (Weideman 2018: 2). Writing centres have a history of assisting thousands of university students in developing their capability of using academic discourse in a competent manner through improving their academic literacy (Patterson and Weideman 2013, Weideman 2018).

The term "academic discourse", in turn, refers to "a specific kind of language" (Patterson and Weideman 2013: 109) that is used at a university in and throughout the teaching and learning process as well as in the production of academic research (Adika 2015, Ivanič 2004). This term is further defined as the gathering of beliefs concerning writing, the process of learning to write, and the different ways of talking about writing (Kwak 2017). Academic discourse is also associated with a particular field of study that exists within the academic community at a given university. For example, there is a different type of academic discourse that is used in the fields of health sciences, engineering, and management studies. Lum, Alqazli and Englander's (2018) study highlights the kinds of academic discourse that take place in the fields of medicine, nursing, and pharmacy. They note that such discourse manifests in the form of diverse specialised written genres and ranges from reflections to theoretical analysis.

Attempts to improve the academic literacy of students have included establishing university writing centres that are specifically designed to socialise new students into specialised academic programmes and professions (Conana, Marshall and Case 2016, Schulze 2016). These writing centres tend to be integrated within faculties, such as a faculty of Law or a faculty of Health Sciences. There are several arguments that support embracing these centres as a method of teaching and learning as, in order for students to understand academic discourse. Academic discourse must not be taught in a way that separates the specific context from that wherein it naturally occurs (Schulze 2016).

Understanding the context in which academic discourse occurs has a direct influence on the process of meaning-making in relation to a particular topic (Gourlay 2015, Patterson and Weideman 2013, Wette 2019, Zhang 2019). The social context wherein such discourse occurs is particularly important in developing students' understanding of academic discourse within higher education. Students' perceptions of disciplinary norms and institutional expectations also contribute to shaping their choices of textual practices (Benzie and Harper 2019). As Dison and Moore (2019) note, writing development should be executed within specific disciplinary discourses and must allow space for students to engage critically with the norms, culture, and practices of a particular discipline. Therefore, a part of realising effectiveness in facilitating learning involves integrating writing development into the curriculum of a particular discipline rather than executing it on ad hoc basis.

In relation to this discussion, the selected university's Writing Centre makes use of the generic model (Wingate and Tribble 2012) while providing writing development support to students. This support entails the Writing Centre's practitioners working collaboratively with lecturers from different departments and faculties across the university in order to identify any needs or challenges that confront students as they write their assignments. Such a collaborative approach assists in making the Writing Centre's support responsive to students' actual and practical needs or challenges. For example, in some cases, lecturers may request that the Writing Centre's workshops be hosted with the aim of mitigating challenges attributed to specific assignments while simultaneously providing attending students with the generic skills for effective academic writing.

3. The academic socialisation model

The transition experienced by students as they move from high school into the university domain is not simply a change of physical environment but constitutes a cultural change as well (Van de Poel and Gasiorek 2012). This implies that students can often face challenges associated with adapting to the university culture. The university culture is composed of its own rules, needs, traditions, practices, norms, and conventions (Zuma, Popoola and Makondo 2016). The culture also includes the kind of academic writing used at the university level and this writing can often be perceived by students as a mystery or a code that they have to decipher (Clarence 2019).

Writing support programmes therefore play a crucial role in assisting students to adapt into this culture. According to the academic socialisation model (Kumi-Yeboah et al. 2020, Lea and Street 2006), the role of writing support is to assist students to acculturate into a specific academic discourse (Beatty, Collins and Buckingham 2014; Dervin 2010; Hadizadeh and Vefali 2020; Reger 2015; Zhang 2011) – in other words, to provide an induction of students

into the new culture of academics (Cheng and Fox 2016, Kumi-Yeboah et al. 2020, Lea and Street 1998, Wingate 2014). This induction includes orientating students to the standards and practices of academic writing (Banda 2019).

According to the academic socialisation model, the higher education culture is homogeneous in nature and is constituted by norms and practices that can be learned without much difficulty. After learning this culture, students should effectively be able to gain access into the full realm of any given higher education institution (Lea and Street 1998). Students also have the responsibility to put in the necessary effort to adapt their writing style to align with mainstream academic discourses (Zhang 2011). The academic socialisation model thus suggests that writing support is responsible for assisting students through enabling them to learn the practices that best epitomise their discipline or subject-area community, including in relation to their thinking, talking, and writing (Lea and Street 2006). This kind of socialisation also includes inducting students into the learning and interpretation of learning tasks by means of conceptualisation (Lea and Street 1998). The model further suggests that disciplinary discourses are relatively stable and that once students have learned and understood a particular discourse, they become capable of producing it without experiencing further issues (Lea and Street 2006, Zhang 2011).

Based on this current study's aim, the academic socialisation model was deemed as offering an appropriate lens through which to conduct this research. Specifically, the model was used as a theoretical framework for analysing this study's findings. That is, it functioned as a guide in the process of making sense of the study findings and to assess the extent to which the selected university's Writing Centre assists students to understand academic discourse.

4. Research methodology

This study was conducted at a selected university in South Africa located in the Eastern Cape Province during the year 2019. A qualitative research design was used as a vehicle to achieve the study's aim. The data collection process entailed providing evaluation forms to first-year students who attended workshops on essay writing and referencing hosted by this Writing Centre. The evaluation forms were used as a means of assessing these workshops. A total number of 60 evaluation forms were included in the final study sample and were composed of three different modules of students who attended the workshops, namely Introduction to Law, Management Studies, and Public Administration. Each of these modules was represented in the study by 20 evaluation forms and provide a subset of the total number of 240 students who attended the workshops.

The total number of 240 students constituted the overall population size of the study. All the participating students filled in the workshop evaluation forms on a voluntary basis and indicated their interest in learning the academic writing skills presented in the workshops. Three groups of students were selected for participation as they fulfilled the study criteria needed in order to gain different views regarding the Writing Centre services. These groups included (i) first-year students who attended the workshops presented by the selected university's Writing Centre, (ii) students from diverse modules, and (iii) students selected through judgemental sampling by finding different groups of first-year students from across different modules who attended the identified workshops.

5. Briefing about the selected university's Writing Centre and its workshops

The nature of support provided by the Writing Centre at the selected university involves familiarising students with the standard of academic writing as well as the norms and protocols used within the university sphere, therefore in alignment with Adika (2015), Gasmi (2017), and Perin and Holschuh (2019). The intended outcome of such support is that students develop the ability to implement academic writing skills across various forms of academic documents. This writing ability should extend to written assignments, referencing associated with specific fields of study, the promotion of students' academic integrity, and exam preparation.

The method of developing students' academic literacy used by the selected university's Writing Centre involves making use of different forms of services, including (i) workshops that address diverse topics (namely, essay writing, referencing, mitigating plagiarism, and exam preparations); (ii) face-to-face consultations with students, as per Collett and Dison (2019); and (iii) providing written feedback on students' assignments submitted to the Writing Centre's website. This study focused on the 16 workshops hosted between March and October 2019 by the Writing Centre. These workshops were also used for aiding in the selection of the sample for this study. The duration of each workshop was approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes and most were hosted in lecture halls across the different campuses of the university. Often, a workshop was presented to a group of between 30 and 200 students in a single classroom or lecture hall. There was one facilitator for all the workshops but sometimes a Writing Centre-affiliated postgraduate student assisted in the workshops' facilitation.

The Writing Centre works in collaboration with lecturers which assists in identifying the needs and challenges of students pertaining to academic writing. The aim of such collaboration is to develop workshops that are most responsive to students' specific needs and challenges, while also aligning students with the discourse associated with their specific discipline. The selected university retains four Writing Centre offices which cater for approximately 28 000 students. Each office is responsible for students at a specific campus across multiple campuses and/or departments. Three of the four Writing Centre offices are located on the university's main campus, with one office located at the satellite campus. This study only included workshops offered by one of the three offices located on the main campus. For the year 2019 in which this study took place, each respective main campus office employed its own Writing Centre practitioner, who was responsible for overseeing its operations, along with two Writing Centre tutors. At the satellite campus, there was a Writing Centre practitioner and a total of six Writing Centre tutors.

6. Findings and discussion

The goal of this current study was to assess the extent to which the selected university's Writing Centre assists students to better understand the discourse that is used at the university, particularly in relation to writing academic documents such as assignments or exams. In this investigation, all the participating students were given evaluation forms that they had to fill out, each form had five questions. Based on the five questions, two specific questions were utilised as research questions for the study. The researcher selected the two specific questions across each group of students, since they were deemed appropriate for realising the goal of the study. The two main questions presented on the student evaluation forms were as follows:

- What aspects of the selected university's Writing Centre's services do students find valuable in assisting them to understand higher education academic discourse?
- What aspects of the selected university's Writing Centre's services were not, according to the participating students, functioning adequately and what suggestions did they provide for improving these services?

6.1 Aspects of the selected university's Writing Centre's service that the students liked

The service that was provided to students pertaining to this question was presented in the form of workshops. The responses to the question included two main themes: (i) skills gained relating to academic writing, and (ii) appreciation of the Writing Centre's support of students.

Academic writing skills

Students' responses disclosed that they enjoyed learning about ways to create the correct structure of an assignment or other related aspects. An assignment structure refers to building its different components, namely the introduction, body (which may or may not have different sub-headings), and conclusion. This also includes the numbering and delineation of different components of an assignment (i.e., through the use of headings and sub-headings).

In response to this first question, students mostly highlighted their enjoyment of learning how to structure a paragraph. The participants expressed that a document structure is a valuable framework that can help guide their thinking in and during the process of writing assignments. Students further stated that this kind of workshop provided a good opportunity to learn different types of sentences that constitute a paragraph (e.g., topic sentences, supporting sentences, and concluding sentences). Some students disclosed that initially they were writing without being aware of the structure of a paragraph. As a result, learning about a paragraph's structure was helpful to them as they took part in the process of writing various discussions for assignments. Some examples of the participating students' comments regarding this finding are presented as follows:

I liked the information and structure of assignment writing.

I liked everything about breaking down an assignment while discussing the structure of a paragraph.

I have enjoyed learning about how to connect paragraphs.

The study's findings in this regard also revealed that many of the participating students provided generic comments that suggest that they liked learning about techniques that could be adopted while writing an assignment. Students' views further indicated that they were happy with learning about numbering and paying attention to detail. In respect to numbering, some respondents indicated that they were not aware that numbering plays a significant role in enhancing the layout of an assignment and can make a document easier to read. The responses also highlighted how many appreciated learning about the value of taking care of various details while writing assignments, such as using the correct referencing style, full stops, and commas. Examples of such comments are as follows:

It was nice to get more information on the layout of writing an assignment.

I liked the techniques of writing, especially making an assignment presentable.

An analysis of the data also uncovered that students tended to enjoy learning about key words. In particular, participating students reflected that using key words could assist them in breaking down complex assignment questions into manageable tasks. This compartmentalisation could in turn assist students in better formulating different sections of their assignments. Some of the respondents also highlighted that using key words could help them with the process of conducting a literature search when using the online library system, as it could prevent them from downloading reading materials that are not relevant to their assignment topics. The participating students' views also indicated that many were not aware that they could use key words as a tool for brainstorming activities. Therefore, many participants revealed that learning about key words proved to be potentially helpful for them when formulating arguments for their assignments and making assignments relevant to specific assignment topics. Some examples of the students' comments in this regard are as follows:

The presenters were able to show us how to deal with the topics, breaking them down, and the slides they used made it very clear, and they showed us examples.

I liked learning about how to unpack an essay question in an exam.

Of further note was that students' responses disclosed that many enjoyed learning about referencing. Such learning included understanding different types of referencing styles, in-text citation, and creating a list of references. Some participants lamented that it is not easy to do referencing well, as references are done in different ways across different departments and also tend to be very detailed in nature. These students thus particularly appreciated learning about the diverse types of referencing styles that are associated with specific fields of study as well as learning various approaches that can be implemented in order to mitigate referencing challenges. Some students also disclosed that they have to keep on practising referencing techniques in order to be able to use them according to the expected standards of the university. The participants' responses were expressed through examples such as these:

I am happy to learn about the structure of an essay and referencing because I struggle a lot with them.

How to properly reference when writing essays, in-text and the list of references.

From the presented findings, it can be asserted that writing development provided by writing centres such as the one examined in this current study is crucial as it enables students to better understand the protocols of academic writing that are used at university level. The students' identification of different aspects of academic writing that they enjoyed learning more about in the workshops disclosed the nature of the challenges with which students are confronted before being exposed to such workshops. These aspects include the creation of document structure for assignments, essay-writing techniques, the use of key words, and referencing.

These findings confirm previous literary assertions that academic writing skills are vital in strengthening the learning opportunities of students in higher education institutions (Perin and Holschuh 2019, Wette 2019). Universities' high reliance on written assessments means that

academic writing determines, to a large extent, students' success within their different disciplines. Despite such a large need for good writing, there are many concerns regarding the continuously deteriorating standards of many students' writing capabilities (Beighton and Blackman 2017, Conana et al. 2016, Gasmi 2017, Prahmana 2017, Wischgoll 2016). For example, some students have been found to exhibit reading and writing skills that are below the level required in order to ensure meaningful learning at university (Perin and Holschuh 2019), while others tend to perceive the rules that are involved in writing at the university level as a mystery or code that they first need to decipher (Clarence 2019). In certain instances, students' struggle with writing is perpetuated by their unawareness of the writing process and/or the strategies and skills that they could adopt to assist them to write well. Students thus often tend to focus on the *product* of writing instead of being more concerned with the *process* of writing. The process is important because the actual learning of academic writing is found therein (O'Sullivan and Cleary 2014).

Writing centres across universities therefore have a responsibility to constantly devise approaches that are most appropriate for teaching students about the process of writing. For example, these centres may utilise digital technologies, integrate reading and writing instructions, or execute disciplinary and contextualised approaches (Perin and Holschuh 2019). By gaining academic writing skills, students are more likely to be capable of communicating through the discourse that is used at university level (Conana et al. 2016). By improving their writing skills, students may also gain greater access to their "disciplinary community and its knowledge practices" (Conana et al. 2016: 28). As argued by Banda (2019), writing centres take on this responsibility through socialising students into academic writing standards and practices.

All in all, the findings of this study reveal that the selected university's Writing Centre contributes effectively to the socialisation of the university's students into the standards and practices of academic writing. The robust views from students presented in this section further reflect this contribution.

Feeling supported

The findings pertaining to this second theme indicated that the participating students were glad about the Writing Centre's workshop service, which provided them with appropriate information regarding how to write various academic documents, including assignments and exams. Some of the respondents indicated that students are often not aware of the Writing Centre; therefore, bringing its services to them was helpful. The students also appreciated how the presenter(s) of the workshops had the necessary expertise to assist them in devising different ways of writing academic documents. Through an analysis of the participating students' responses, it was also uncovered that they were happy with the encouragement that they received regarding how to approach challenges related to academic writing. These findings suggest that the participating students were happy overall with receiving the workshop support service from the Writing Centre, which assisted them in effectively overcoming academic writing challenges. Some examples of participants' responses are as follows:

The workshop has provided me with in-depth information about ways of writing assignments, which I do not normally get from my lectures.

I feel like my confidence in writing assignments has improved. It is good to have these workshops available to us during the time when we need them for our assignments.

As presented previously, the university community has its own culture (Cheng and Fox 2016, Kumi-Yeboah et al. 2020, Van de Poel and Gasiorek 2012). University writing centres thus act as programmes that facilitate this culture through inducting students into it. One of the primary components of any culture is language. In the case of the university environment, language manifests in the form of academic discourse. As stated earlier in this paper, academic discourse is defined as a specific kind of language that is used at university for teaching, learning, and/or producing research (Adika 2015, Patterson and Weideman 2013). Writing centres facilitate students' abilities to understand this language.

The literature further confirms this role of writing centres by stating that they have a history of assisting thousands of university students to develop their competencies in using academic discourse (Patterson and Weideman 2013, Weideman 2018). Once students understand academic discourse, they gain a sense of belonging in both the broader academic community and in their specific affiliated departments. This sense of belonging contributes to the creation of more opportunities for students to be successful in their university studies.

As disclosed through this study's findings, the participating students were happy with the fact that the selected university's Writing Centre made its services available to them, as the workshop service enabled them to learn the specific kind of language that is used at the university, which in turn aided in their ability to write their assignments and other academic work. The students were also appreciative of the information they gained through the Writing Centre's workshops as they believed that they could effectively use the provided information to gain greater academic literacy. These workshops thus functioned as a tool that encouraged students' learning of the academic discourse of a particular field of study as well as "across different fields of study" throughout the university sphere, as supported by previous findings (e.g. Weideman 2018: 2). This study's findings therefore suggest that the selected university's Writing Centre is a valuable programme for students, particularly with regard to inducting them into the academic culture.

6.2 Aspects of the writing centre's services that require improvement

The second research question investigated aspects of the selected university's Writing Centre service that were not functioning efficiently, along with ways of possibly improving them. The findings indicated that (i) there is a need for greater student participation during the workshops (i.e., the presenter should more deliberately involve students in the session by, for example, asking them some questions and/or giving them activities to execute); and (ii) students need the workshops to be conducted more regularly. The following are some examples of students' responses concerning these findings:

It will help to have classroom activities to check if we really understand the lessons.

We need classroom activities for us to participate.

Workshops like this should happen more often but at least a month before assignments' due dates.

These workshops should be provided twice before the deadlines of assignments.

According to previous studies, writing centres have the ability to induct students into their new academic culture and orientate them to specific academic discourse (Beatty et al. 2014, Cheng and Fox 2016, Lea and Street 1998, Reger 2015). This ability is, however, determined by these centres' availability of resources, including sufficient finances, offices, writing development practitioners, and writing centre tutors. Since resources are amongst the key components of any academic programme, they can significantly determine the success or failure of a programme in question (Namakula and Prozesky 2019, Nichols et al. 2019).

In the field of higher education, the availability of necessary resources contributes to the development of quality teaching and learning. Resources are thus the means by which a programme can achieve its goals. Without resources then, a programme would not be able to execute its activities successfully. In order for a programme to be functional and effective, there must be consensus between its resources and its goals (Angaga 2018). It is also crucial that resources be used effectively and efficiently, to achieve programme goals. One goal of any writing centre is to enable students to learn and understand a particular academic discourse (Lea and Street 2006, Zhang 2011). In so doing, these centres can create possibilities for students to learn and write independently (Arnebacka and Bläsjö 2017), which can result in the ultimate realisation of students graduating and being competitive contributors to the workplace (Ezenwafor et al. 2018).

In contrast, inadequate resources are more likely to result in the mediocre achievement of set goals. In the case of the Writing Centre at the selected university, limited resources were found to influence the way its services (i.e., the workshops) were delivered to students. As disclosed in this study's findings, the Writing Centre's office has insufficient human resources in comparison to the greater number of students (approximately 28 000 students) it has to serve across the entire university. This creates difficulties in hosting regular workshops for each course in a particular department. A viable option that was often adopted by the Writing Centre's office was to host each workshop to bigger groups of students (e.g., present a workshop to a group of between 80 and 200 students in a single lecture hall).

However, bigger groups do not allow much freedom for the presenter to engage students, such as dividing them into sub-groups and giving them activities to work on as, upon observation of the workshops in this study, it was noted that when students were divided into sub-groups and given activities to undertake, the group tended to be uncontrollable. For example, while the presenter was still busy facilitating a particular sub-group of students in a lecture, some other students took the opportunity to do other activities that were not relevant to the given workshop activities (e.g., chatting, using cell-phones, or walking in and out of the lecture hall). When the presenter asked questions to students in various larger sub-groups, most displayed lower levels of willingness to participate. This was in contrast to when the presenter facilitated smaller groups of students (i.e., a total of 30 to 40 participants), as these smaller groups were characterised by students who felt freer to participate.

As noted previously, limited resources for writing support programmes have a negative effect on the way such programmes deliver their services to students. This negative impact often results in services only being delivered to a limited number of students or in an unsatisfactory manner. Hence, it is crucial for university authorities, according to Tran et al. (2016), to increase

access to institutional resources in order to provide effective support services to students, and especially to students from previously disadvantaged educational backgrounds. Such access could better enable students to graduate with competencies that are appropriate to the global labour market demands of the 21st century (Ezenwafor et al. 2018).

The selected university's Writing Centre was found to contribute towards the desired outcome of students' efficacy, both at university and in the workplace, through developing students' academic writing skills and enabling them to understand the academic discourse used within the university sphere when writing their academic documents. However, its contribution could be inhibited by limited resources, more of which are necessary to provide its services to all students in need thereof. Thus, this study's findings confirm assertions by Cheng and Fox (2016) that limited resources inhibit writing centres from inducting students effectively into the new academic culture and the academic discourse that is used at university or in a particular field of study.

6.3 Concluding remarks regarding the study findings

The findings of this current study were based on robust views gathered from participating students. These students identified learning areas they appreciated being presented in the workshops of the selected university's Writing Centre, as well as some aspects that were not functioning efficiently within the services provided and which needed improving. In relation to the academic socialisation model (Kumi-Yeboah et al. 2020), writing centres play a crucial role of inducting students into a new culture (i.e., the culture of academia; Kumi-Yeboah et al. 2020, Lea and Street 1998, Wingate 2014). This induction includes enabling students to use the academic discourse of a particular field of study or across diverse disciplines at a given university (Weideman 2018).

The study also found that the selected university's Writing Centre workshops provided students with the opportunity to learn academic writing skills, which are essential in helping students learn the academic discourse used in higher education institutions. The academic socialisation model argues that after students have learned and understood a particular discourse, they gain the necessary capacity to produce this discourse without experiencing further difficulties (Lea and Street 2006, Zhang 2011). The assumption in this study was thus that the participating students would go on to use the academic writing skills that they gained from the Writing Centre workshops as they write their assignments, which should enable greater opportunities for them to learn independently and apply the academic discourse that is used within the university domain. Hence, this study was able to determine that the selected university's Writing Centre does effectively assist students to learn the academic discourse that is used within the university sphere.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this current study was to assess the extent to which the Writing Centre at a selected South African university assists students to understand the discourse that is used within the university sphere, particularly with regard to writing academic documents (e.g., assignments). In order to meet this aim, the academic socialisation model was used to analyse and interpret the collected data and overall findings of the study. The first research question posed in this study investigated learning areas presented within the services of the selected university's

Writing Centre that students enjoyed most and which they believed could best assist them in understanding the institution's academic discourse. The findings related to this first question indicated that students enjoyed gaining academic writing skills through the Writing Centre workshops as well as the availability of support designed to assist them in overcoming their academic writing challenges.

The second research question entailed understanding aspects of the Writing Centre's services that were not functioning adequately and finding ways of improving them. The findings related to this question indicated that there was a necessity for (i) opportunities to be created for students to participate in the classroom during the presentation of workshops (e.g., through being given activities to do), and (ii) these workshops to be conducted more regularly. As argued earlier in this paper, the currently limited human resources available in and to the Writing Centre office versus the large number of university students specifically resulted in limited opportunities.

In comparing the views of students gathered in this study, findings indicated diverse learning areas that were appreciated by the students which were provided in the Writing Centre workshops. This diversity was in contrast to the fewer areas that students identified within the workshops that were not functioning properly and which needed to be improved. The academic socialisation model states that the role of writing centres is to induct students into the culture of academia (Cheng and Fox 2016, Kumi-Yeboah et al. 2020, Lea and Street 1998, Wingate 2014) which is constituted by the standards and practices of academic writing (Banda 2019). The views of the students in this study's findings suggest that the selected university's Writing Centre is performing effectively in its responsibility of inducting students into the standards and practices of academic writing that are utilised at the university. This is because the academic writing skills that are provided through the Centre's workshops are specifically designed to enhance students' opportunities to learn the academic discourse that is used within the university domain and to adapt to the culture of the academic institution.

This study contributes to the debate currently presented in the literature (see Dison and Moore 2019, Sanchez and Dikilitaş 2019, Wingate 2019) concerning the role of writing centres in developing university students' academic literacy, especially in respect of those students who are unfamiliar with the university standard of education (Gasmi 2017, Perin and Holschuh 2019). This study's findings support some part of the debate by determining that the selected university's Writing Centre does effectively assist students to learn the academic discourse that is used within the university sphere. A specific focus of this debate has been on students from underprivileged educational backgrounds in developing countries such as South Africa (see Nichols 1998, Nichols et al. 2019). This study's findings could also be valuable to lecturers, writing centre managers, and higher education institutional stakeholders in terms of devising ways of improving the support that writing centres provide to university students. The current study's contribution may be particularly visible in how it has confirmed that writing centres must continue strengthening students' academic writing skills, as these skills enable students to learn the academic discourse that is used in higher education institutions and to adapt to the academic culture. To devise ways of hosting workshops without each being presented to a vast group of students, the Writing Centre's practitioners must negotiate dates and venues with lecturers who request workshops. For instance, a class of approximately 100 students could be divided into three groups, and then each group could attend a separate workshop on different dates while using the same venue, or each group could attend its workshop on the same date

but using different venues. University authorities should also provide more resources to writing centres so as to enable these centres to provide writing development support to a greater number of students and improve their methods of providing support to students. This study opted for evaluation forms as the appropriate and viable tool for answering the research questions during the time of conducting this investigation. Further evidence is required, using individual in-depth or focus group interviews with university students, to provide alternative methods to explore the effectiveness of writing centres in developing students' academic literacy practices.

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