

Supervisor perceptions of the academic literacy requirements of postgraduate students at the University of Pretoria

A B S T R A C T The difficulty that students experience with regard to engaging in productive academic writing at university does not appear to be restricted to students who are new to the tertiary academic environment. A number of postgraduate supervisors at the University of Pretoria (UP) confirmed that many postgraduate students still struggled with academic writing. This article considers the contextual component of a generative framework for academic writing course design. Within this framework, the contextual component serves to describe the academic environment in which students are required to produce written academic texts. The article reports the results of a survey conducted at the UP that determined the academic writing requirements for postgraduate studies offered in different faculties and departments/centres/units at the University. In the construction of the questionnaire, the researcher focused on supervisor awareness and perceptions of the academic literacy levels of their postgraduate students, the specific writing difficulties experienced by these students, the academic writing requirements of postgraduate studies throughout the University, the nature and extent of supervisor feedback and the issue of writing assistance offered to postgraduate students.

Keywords: Academic literacy; academic writing; the writing process; postgraduate supervision; writing requirements; writing difficulties

1. Introduction

Students' academic writing difficulties at university are well documented (Radloff, 1994; Moyo, 1995; Orr, 1995; Braine, 1996; Currie, 1998; Van der Riet, Dison & Quinn, 1998; Flowerdew, 1999; Angelil-Carter, 2000; Liu, 2000; Parkerson, 2000; Boughey, 2002; Leibowitz, 2004; Jackson, 2005; Johns, 2005; Leibowitz, 2005; Butler, 2007). Such problems appear not to be restricted to first year entry-level students, but seem to affect the writing of some postgraduate

students as well (cf. Holtzhausen, 2005; Jackson, 2005). As a result of a growing number of requests addressed to the Unit for Academic Literacy (UAL) at the University of Pretoria (UP) involving writing support for postgraduate students, it decided to investigate academic writing in the tertiary context with the specific aim of offering relevant writing support to students with writing problems.

This article is the first of two related articles that report the results of a larger study focusing on academic writing in tertiary education. The study focused specifically on proposing a generative framework that may be used for the design of writing course materials in tertiary education. A fundamental component of the framework involves a comprehensive description of the context in which university students are required to produce written academic texts.

An essential function of the framework referred to above focuses on gathering information about what supervisors, as the primary audience of postgraduate students' writing, require of such students regarding the written texts they produce. In addition, it was deemed important to document supervisor perceptions about the general academic literacy abilities of their postgraduate students as well as their academic writing ability specifically. The survey reported here therefore had the specific function of investigating whether the concerns expressed by some supervisors were a localised problem or whether it could be perceived to be a more general problem at the University. Although the data discussed here are mostly perceptual in nature, this investigation is seen as a necessary precursor for validating any subsequent research that may offer tangible evidence for the issues investigated in this survey.

The following section reports the results of a survey conducted at the UP that determined supervisor perceptions of postgraduate academic literacy as well as the academic writing requirements for postgraduate studies offered in different faculties at the University.

2. Survey instrument

Although there are numerous documented difficulties in the construction and use of questionnaires as information soliciting instrument (see Nunan, 1992; Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2002), it was considered a suitable **initial** instrument for determining certain general issues regarding academic literacy and writing in the postgraduate context, since a relatively large number of respondents could be reached simultaneously (cf. Dreyer, 1994:222-236). It was thought that more specific, discipline-oriented information could be elicited by means of focus group interviews and ongoing discussions with supervisors in specific disciplines once broad trends have been established.

Having worked with postgraduate students with academic literacy problems in the Academic Writing for Postgraduate Studies course (EOT 300) at the UP for a number of years (as well as having conducted a thorough literature review in the field of academic literacy and writing), I have designed the questionnaire not only to confirm certain assumptions and expectations I had about the academic literacy and writing ability of postgraduate students, but also to gain important additional information with regard to what specific academic literacy and writing requirements supervisors had of their students.

In the construction of the questionnaire, I focused on the following issues:

- the *level of experience* of postgraduate supervisors;
- the general composition of the *postgraduate student population* regarding *language preference and use*;
- the *formal language background* of supervisors;
- supervisor *awareness* about the *academic literacy levels* of their postgraduate students;
- supervisor *awareness* about the specific *literacy and writing difficulties* of postgraduate students;
- the importance that supervisors award to *writing regarded as a process (students producing multiple drafts of written texts)*;
- the *importance* that supervisors assign to *language usage* in the writing produced by students;
- what *strategies* supervisors use to ensure *final language correctness* of written texts;
- specific *requirements* of supervisors with regard to *academic writing issues* (e.g. referencing; appropriate evidence; stylistic requirements); and
- the *willingness* on the part of postgraduate supervisors to *accept support from the UAL on writing matters* (towards a possible closer working relationship between the UAL and specific faculties/departments).

After a lengthy process of determining which lecturers in the different faculties at the University were involved with students at postgraduate level, 500 questionnaires were distributed at three campuses (The Main Campus, the Onderstepoort Campus [Veterinary Sciences] and the Groenkloof Campus [Education]). Lecturers had 4 weeks to complete the questionnaires. One hundred and one (approximately 20%) completed questionnaires were submitted. Respondents from a wide range of disciplines (supervisors from 52 departments in 8 faculties) returned the questionnaires with the highest number of responses from the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences.

3. Analysis and interpretation of results

It is important to point out that this analysis of the data is primarily descriptive. Where thought appropriate, however, analyses attempt to establish significant relationships between prominent sections of the data.

Section A: Institutional and professional issues

The first issue addressed in Section A of the questionnaire focused on the language background of supervisors. In a study that investigated the writing needs of postgraduate students, Jackson (2005) emphasises the importance of supervisors' own language awareness in order to support their students better. Holtzhausen (2005) also argues that for supervisors to understand the writing problems of their students better, they need to be acquainted with the appropriate and functional use of language in a tertiary academic environment. Similarly, in this study it was considered important to determine supervisors' language experience in a more formalised context to ascertain how confident they felt in dealing with issues pertaining to the language use of their postgraduate students. Although only 40% of supervisors had had exposure to formal tertiary language training of some kind, a large percentage (67%) had confidence in

their own language abilities to ensure the language correctness of final drafts of postgraduate texts. This corresponds well with their supervisory experience, where the more experienced supervisors generally indicated that their own language ability was adequate in order to ensure such correctness. A large number of supervisors also indicated that to ensure language correctness they made use of a wider support system (other colleagues, people they knew were proficient in the specific language, editors, etc.).

Supervisors of postgraduate students in South Africa face a set of unique challenges in the supervision of higher degrees. One such challenge is the linguistic diversity (and the related issue of acceptable levels of language proficiency in English) that forms part of the higher educational context (Holtzhausen, 2005). The questionnaire therefore also attempted to determine **supervisors' levels of awareness about such language diversity** among the students they supervised. Supervisors were thus asked to make a general distinction between whether their postgraduate students at the time consisted mainly of primary language users of the language of learning, additional language users of the language of learning, or whether there was an even spread between primary and additional language users. Very significantly, 87% of the supervisors indicated that their students were either a mixed group of primary and additional language users or mainly additional language users of the language of learning (see Figure 1). A very small percentage (only 13%) of the respondents indicated that their postgraduate students included mainly primary language users of the language of learning. Although the data reported here are impressionistic in nature (related to the impressions of a portion of supervisors at the University), the general spread they reported between additional and primary language users is largely supported by the official university data available for 2006. From a total of 9952 postgraduate students registered at the University in 2006 (Bureau for Institutional Research and Planning [BIREP], 2006), 3673 students were Afrikaans native language users (see Figure 2). A total of 2731 students were native English users. With regard to their language preference, 7158 students preferred to study in English (see Figure 3). This total includes 948 students who were Afrikaans native language users who preferred to study in English, but also 3479 students who were users of a variety of other native languages and who were, therefore, additional language users of English. Thus, from a total of 9952 postgraduate students, 4427 were additional language users of English (largely similar findings were reported for 2005).

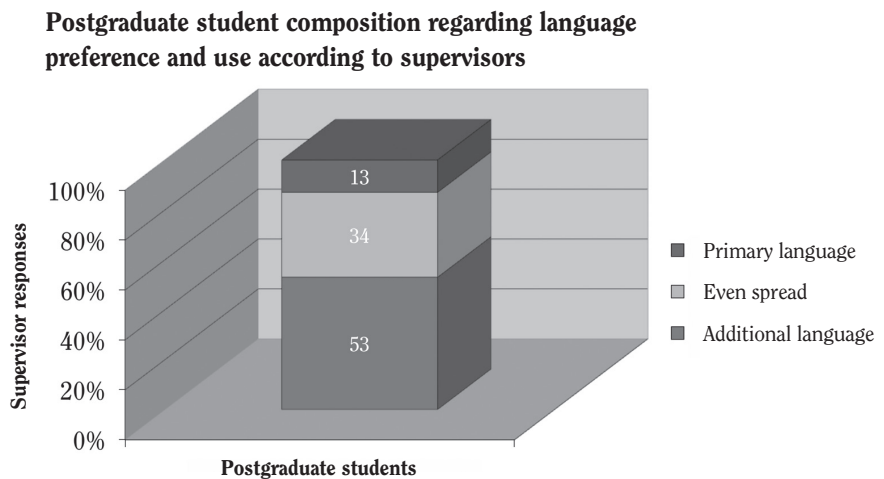


Figure 1 Postgraduate students' language preference and use according to supervisors

Postgraduate student distribution regarding primary language in 2006

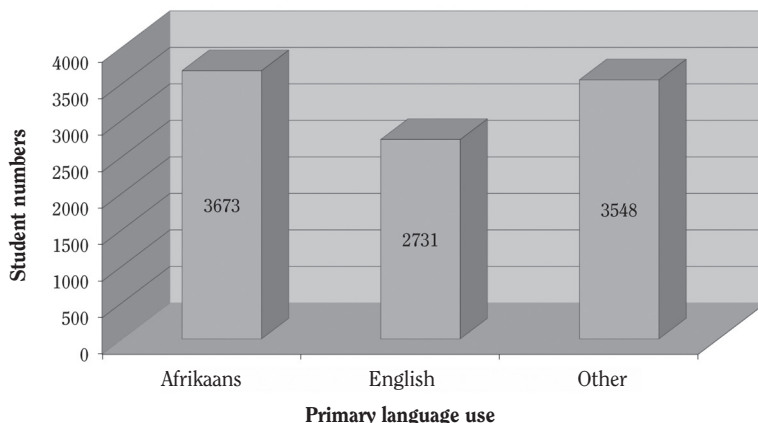


Figure 2 Primary language use of postgraduate students at the UP for 2006

Language preferences of postgraduate students for 2006

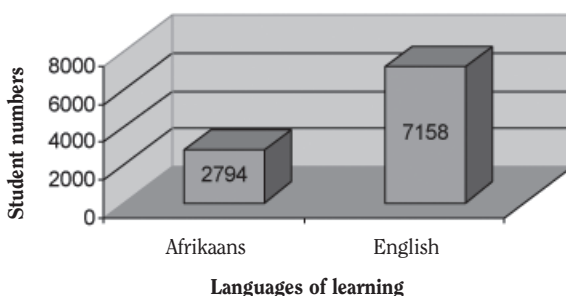


Figure 3 Language preference of postgraduate students at the UP for 2006

Although students have a choice between using either English or Afrikaans as a language of learning at the University, there is a tendency for postgraduate students to prefer to write in English regardless of their primary language. They are also sometimes advised to do so. The reason for this is probably related to the status English enjoys as a *lingua franca* in South Africa but also perhaps because English is widely perceived as a world language that provides access to employment and international communication (Horne & Heinemann, 2003; Van der Walt, 2004). The inclination of postgraduate students to write in English in South Africa might further be influenced by the small number of accredited academic journals that are still available in Afrikaans. A study by BIREP (2006) found that, for example, from a total of 236 journals that were accredited by the Department of Education (for 2005), only 15 had Afrikaans titles. During 2005, only 6.5% of journal articles by UP academics were published in Afrikaans journals. The trend regarding language preference and use mentioned above is alarming when one considers the generally low rating supervisors in this survey awarded their additional language students with regard to academic literacy and writing ability specifically. This aspect is discussed comprehensively in Section B below.

Section B: Supervisor perceptions about the academic literacy levels of their students

In the construction of the questionnaire, it was deemed vital that respondents understood exactly what was meant by the term 'academic literacy'. Therefore, in order to create a shared understanding of what academic literacy meant in the context of this survey, the term was defined in the questionnaire as:

The integrated academic language ability of students that enables them to cope with the demands of studying in a tertiary academic environment. Such ability incorporates, amongst others, aspects of how students deal purposefully with written texts in their interpretation and production of such texts. This mainly includes: an understanding of how different academic texts work (their structure, type of content and how language is employed to create this structure and content), strategies for selecting, arranging and generating information appropriately in their academic argumentation and how students generally integrate their familiarity with academic language conventions (e.g. register, style and appropriateness and correctness of language) in their production of academic texts.

The first question in this section of the questionnaire focused on the importance supervisors assigned to academic literacy ability and its connection to student achievement. Eighty-three per cent of the respondents indicated that academic literacy played a significant role in the completion of postgraduate studies. In the explanation for their choice, responses ranged from language and literacy-related difficulties experienced by students that complicated their studies to a relationship between the duration of studies and academic literacy levels. One respondent, for example, indicated that: *'Literacy levels facilitate access to literature reading in order to develop concepts and expression of opinions and ideas.'* In effect, a number of supervisors indicated that students with lower levels of academic literacy generally took longer to complete their studies. One respondent noted that: *'It does not prevent them from successfully completing their studies, but definitely the ease with which they complete their studies/takes longer to complete.'* Another related issue involved the increased effort and time spent with lower literacy level students on the part of supervisors. Some respondents were adamant that: *'reading and writing skills compromise them, it takes enormous amounts of time from me.'* In this context, there are important consequences for the institution that are obviously complicated by students who do not have an adequate literacy ability. The first issue is that of students who do not complete their studies as a result of their struggle to deal with the academic literacy demands of postgraduate studies. The second issue is that students may take longer than the required time to complete their studies. This impacts the postgraduate throughput rate at universities in South Africa. According to Lessing and Lessing (2004:74), tertiary education in South Africa should be alerted by the fact that "attrition rates and completion rates of postgraduate students are becoming statistics of vital concern." This is a crucial issue that warrants constant monitoring and investigation in order to ensure that there is a continuous supply of highly qualified, employable professionals.

Responses to a question about the general academic literacy levels of postgraduate students were elicited by means of a Likert-scale. On a scale of 1-5 with 1 described as poor and 5 as excellent, 77% of the responses ranged between levels 1 and 3 ('poor' to 'average'). Only 23%

of the respondents felt that their students approximated an excellent level of academic literacy. Although this perception of their students' literacy levels can be expected within the wider context of the history of education in South Africa, this is generally not the literacy profile that one would expect from postgraduate students, given the fact that they have been exposed to the tertiary environment for a considerable time.

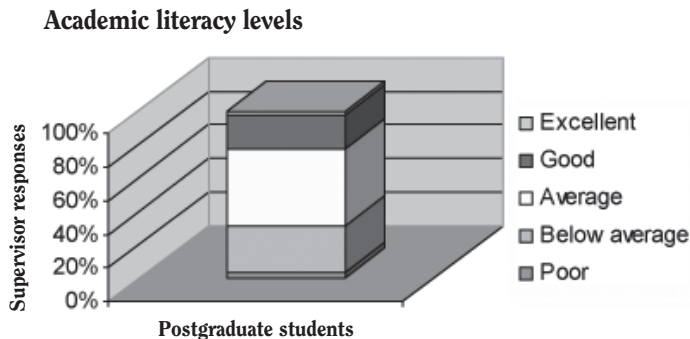


Figure 4 Postgraduate students' general academic literacy levels according to supervisor perception

Although a large majority of respondents (96%) felt very strongly that the students who were admitted to postgraduate studies should already be academically literate in their disciplines, there was general agreement that the measures and strategies they had in place to select academically literate students were not always successful. Regarding an average mark (in this case 60%) for the previous qualification being a good indicator of academic success, 82% of the respondents felt that it was either not a good indicator at all, or not necessarily a good indicator. As explanation for this choice, a large group of respondents mentioned that in their disciplines, undergraduate studies often did not prepare students adequately for the demands of postgraduate writing. This may be a result of students often being expected to merely provide an account of memorised information in undergraduate writing tasks. According to Grabe and Kaplan (1996:5) it is essential that students in tertiary education should be able to move beyond the mere 'telling' of information to transforming information in their construction of academic arguments (cf. also Van der Riet, Dison & Quinn, 1998). If students are not exposed to appropriate writing tasks that would enable them to transform information in building an acceptable academic argument during their undergraduate years, one may well find that they have difficulty in producing such writing when they engage in postgraduate study. One respondent noted that: *'60% is a low mark – proficiency in a technical subject does not imply proficiency in the use of language.'* Although one would expect that an intermediate degree such as 'honours' would provide more exposure to the rigours of extensive writing tasks, this was also not necessarily the case in all disciplines. Regarding this issue, a respondent mentioned that: *'Honours is lecture-based. When they reach master's they have to do extensive writing and they start suffering.'* Where students are, therefore, not exposed to much writing in their undergraduate studies (as well as on honours level), supervisors/lecturers would do well in proactively addressing this issue in the form of extra support for students who experience literacy difficulties.

A further disconcerting statistic is that although it appeared as if supervisors were suitably aware of the academic literacy difficulties experienced by their students, only 45% of these supervisors indicated that some form of formal academic literacy assessment was required before admitting students to postgraduate courses. Furthermore, the strategies for determining such levels varied greatly, with 84% of the respondents who indicated that they did assess academic literacy, stating that their strategies were either not successful or only partly so. The reasons for their choice included that even with a relatively good mark for the previous degree, one was often still unsure about students' level of literacy and that undergraduate studies did not prepare students adequately for the literacy level required at postgraduate level; to a concern about the quality of previous tuition at other institutions (both locally and from other countries) and that it was probably unwise to trust marks from other institutions as a sole indicator of students' literacy abilities. As one respondent summarised: *'A good average mark is not necessarily indicative of academic literacy.'* Obviously, the increasing pressure to produce growing numbers of master's and doctoral graduates will to some extent influence access to postgraduate studies. However, institution-wide knowledge of and access to a reliable assessment instrument such as the Test of Academic Literacy Levels [TALL] (cf. Weideman, 2003a; Van Dyk & Weideman, 2004a; Van Dyk & Weideman, 2004b; Weideman, 2006) or the more recently developed Test of Academic Literacy for Postgraduate Students [TALPS] (see Butler, 2009) could provide a strategy to determine literacy levels accurately and could assist supervisors in identifying and addressing literacy problems timeously.

With regard to the perceptions of supervisors, it was important to determine what they thought was the most difficult aspect of postgraduate studies for their students. A study by Lessing and Lessing (2004:83) indicates that, apart from problems in writing up their research, postgraduate students are also "often unable to critically review, sift and query information gathered from the literature." Although respondents in the survey at the UP had the opportunity to award prominence to the perceptive ability of understanding the literature (or for that matter anything else they thought important), it appeared as if students struggled most with the actual process of writing (72% of the respondents indicated that the actual writing of the academic text was most difficult). In my experience, many postgraduate students (especially inexperienced writers) struggle with writing because they still entertain the idea that writing is a more or less once-off event. The misconception that 'you are not a good writer if you cannot do it right the first time' or just mere ignorance about writing as a process, can be addressed productively by exposing students to a multiple draft approach to writing. Such an approach allows for the incremental development and honing of students' writing ability right from the initial stages of developing a thesis, planning their writing and collecting and incorporating sources of information, through to producing numerous drafts of a written text while making use of revision and editing strategies (cf. Murray, 2007). Conceptualising writing as a process has the potential to foreground soundness of argumentation, the acceptability of evidence, the cohesion and overall coherence as well as language correctness of the texts students produce.

Section C: Specific literacy and writing difficulties experienced by postgraduate students

A number of studies emphasise the detrimental effects of language proficiency and related academic literacy difficulties in the completion of postgraduate studies (cf. Rochford, 2003;

Holtzhausen, 2005; and Van Aswegen, 2007). One of the aims of this study was, therefore, to establish whether specific areas of academic literacy difficulty were more prominent than others according to supervisor perception. Such perceived problem areas could then be investigated empirically, and possibly be utilised productively in the design of writing interventions.

Therefore, in order for the broader concept of academic literacy to be interpreted more specifically with the aim of providing a possible focus for writing courses, I decided to make use of a slightly altered version of the definition of academic literacy of Weideman (2003b:xi) in the design of the questionnaire. This definition identifies a number of functional components of academic literacy with regard to what students could practically do with academic texts. Supervisors had to respond to twelve statements based on this definition in the form of rating specific aspects of their students academic literacy ability on a Likert scale.

The first two statements that dealt with students' use of general academic vocabulary and subject-specific terminology respectively did not appear to present as big a problem as some of the other issues addressed. However, the fact that for both these statements the highest percentage of responses (56% and 48% respectively) identified postgraduate students as being 'average' in these abilities is unexpected at postgraduate level. One would expect that most students who have progressed this far in tertiary education should at least have a thorough command of subject-specific terminology. Although the issue of general academic vocabulary could be addressed in a functional manner in a literacy course, subject-specific terminology is best left to the designs of subject experts.

According to supervisors, issues such as 'academic style' and mastering specific genres (e.g. a technical report, thesis) and functional text types (e.g. argumentative, descriptive writing) used in the academic environment presented a noteworthy problem to students. A very large group of respondents (87%) indicated that their students had an 'average' to 'poor' ability to write in an academic style. Eighty-eight per cent of the respondents indicated that their students experienced difficulty (an 'average' to 'poor' ability) in making productive use of the genres and functional text types regularly used in the tertiary environment. This finding is important in the context of recent positive teaching results in genre studies that promote genre as a basis for writing development (see Johns, 1997; Goodier & Parkinson, 2005; Johns, 2005; Thomson, 2005). Within the context of writing course design, focusing on genre is an aspect that allows for the development of a competence in writing in those types of genres most often used in specific disciplines (cf. Carstens, 2008). Because of the noted variability in supervisor/lecturer expectations about various aspects of academic writing (see Harwood & Hadley, 2004), writing course materials that focus on genre should be developed in close consultation with discipline specialists.

Only two statements in this section of the questionnaire focused on grammatical aspects of language usage. Both issues – one focusing on structuring sentences and paragraphs and the other on making use of connecting devices towards achieving fluency in writing – received low ratings. Eighty-seven per cent of respondents rated their students as having an 'average' to 'poor' ability in structuring sentences and paragraphs, and 86% felt that their students had an 'average' to 'poor' ability in making use of connecting devices. This is a clear indication that supervisors believed their students to be experiencing language proficiency problems as well in

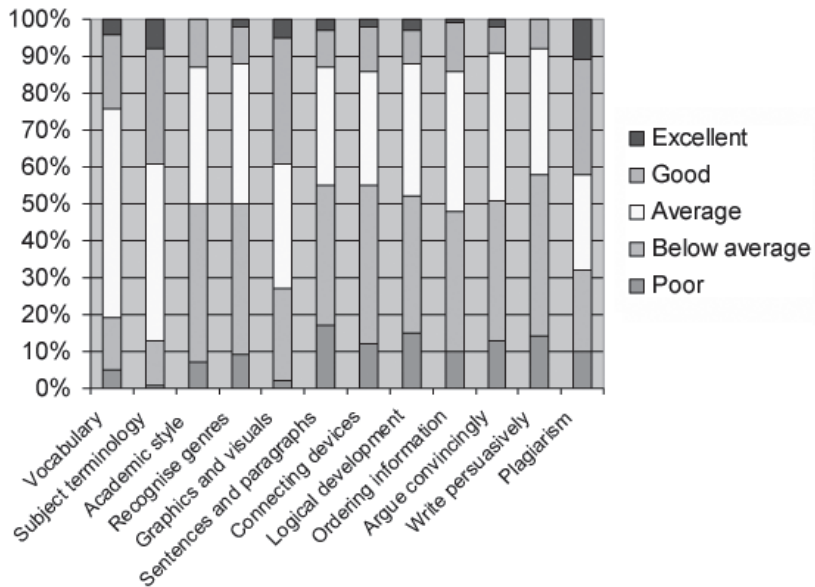


Figure 5 Supervisor perceptions about the academic literacy difficulties of postgraduate students

the sense that some students were not proficient enough in the language of learning in order to make functional and appropriate use of the language when they wrote.

With regard to issues concerning the logical development of texts, ordering of information, convincing argumentation as well as persuasive writing, more than 80% of the respondents rated their students as having between ‘average’ to ‘poor’ ability. The only two issues that students appeared to have some control over were their understanding of plagiarism as well as their use of graphic and visual information. The majority of supervisors (68% and 72% respectively) indicated that their students had an ‘average’ to ‘excellent’ understanding of the implications of plagiarism and made appropriate use of graphic and visual information in their writing. Although supervisors might have been of the opinion that their students indeed understood the implications of plagiarism, this does not seem to prevent some students from plagiarising others’ work. In my experience, even postgraduate students are often shocked to find out that they are not allowed to use someone else’s exact words without quoting directly, and seem relatively unaware of lecturers’ ability to notice when some source has been plagiarised.

Although some supervisors mentioned that it was difficult to generalise about the academic literacy difficulties of their students, the analysis above is a clear indication that supervisors perceived many of their students to be experiencing difficulty with various aspects of functional academic literacy. It is important to note at this point that the impressionistic data provided by supervisors in this section of the questionnaire was supported by the results of an academic literacy test (the Test of Academic Literacy Levels [TALL]) that was used in the broader study to assess the academic literacy levels of a target group of postgraduate students. It was further supported by a comprehensive analysis of a written academic text produced by the same

students. The blueprint for the test is based on the same definition of academic literacy referred to above that was employed in the development of the questionnaire. Very significantly, 60% out of a total of 52 students tested showed significant risk regarding their academic literacy levels in English. The test results were borne out in the text analysis, showing significant language proficiency and functional academic literacy difficulties in the texts students produced (see Butler, 2007 for a comprehensive discussion of these results).

On a practical level, it will be important to make supervisors aware that most of the issues mentioned above (with the possible exception of subject-specific terminology) can be addressed practically through academic literacy interventions (cf. Radloff, 1994; Orr, 1995; Smith, 2000; Gough & Bock, 2001; Goodier & Parkenson, 2005; Jackson, 2005; Jacobs, 2005; Bharuthram & McKenna, 2006; Butler, 2007).

When asked specifically about the academic writing ability of their students and distinguishing here between the ability of primary and additional language users, 52% of respondents rated the writing ability of their primary language students as 'good' to 'excellent'. This was not the case, however, for their additional language students. Ninety-three per cent of respondents rated their additional language students as having an 'average' to 'poor' writing ability. This is significant in the UP context since 87% of the respondents indicated that their postgraduate students included additional language users. It is even more significant when one considers that responses to the following question showed that a large majority of respondents (90%) believed that the successful completion of postgraduate studies depended to a large extent on students' writing ability.

Academic literacy difficulties

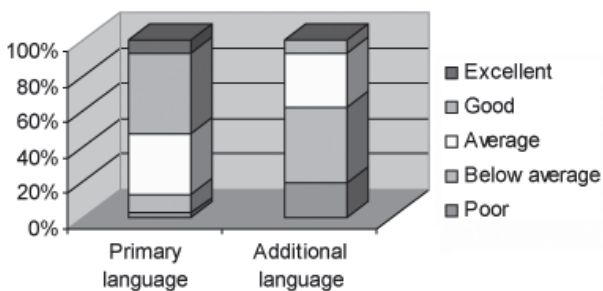


Figure 6 Supervisor perceptions on the writing ability of postgraduate students

Section D: Academic writing requirements of disciplines

One of the more prominent characteristics of working with ideas in the tertiary academic environment is that academic arguments are usually built on evidence. As could be expected, this was confirmed by all of the respondents (100%) who said that claims should be substantiated in academic argumentation. With regard to different types of evidence used in this context, a large group of respondents identified 'empirical evidence' and 'evidence from the literature' as acceptable evidence. This is, however, an issue that calls for a focus on specific disciplines (and may be addressed adequately in focus group interviews with supervisors from such disciplines), since a number of options mentioned by respondents were discipline-specific in nature. Among

these were preferences such as ‘mathematical proof’ in Mathematics, ‘statutes and laws’ in the legal field and ‘photographic evidence’ in Mining Engineering as well as in Plant Production and Soil Science.

With regard to a specific referencing system that supervisors expected students to employ in their writing, 64% of the respondents indicated that they preferred the Harvard method. Fourteen per cent, however, indicated that referencing was done according to discipline-specific journals. Based on these results it seems, therefore, that the Harvard would be a good default method to use in writing course design. Used as a point of departure, one should be able to make productive comparisons that focus on important principles of referencing when comparing the Harvard to other, more idiosyncratic methods preferred in specific fields.

Section E: Supervisor feedback

In the study by Lessing and Lessing (2004), it is emphasised that it is not the task of the supervisor to write the thesis or to do language editing. The issue of supervisors taking responsibility for correcting students’ language has been referred to earlier in the article, and is a contentious one because supervisors are not necessarily language experts (Van Aswegen, 2007). This section of the questionnaire therefore elicited responses on the prominence of language in the feedback that supervisors provided on student writing. A somewhat unexpected result was that a very high percentage (99%) of the respondents indicated that they did provide feedback on the language use of their students throughout the writing process. Of this group, 83% focused on ‘language correctness’, ‘style and register’, ‘structure’, ‘clarity of meaning’ as well as to the ‘logical sequencing of ideas’. Although only 51% made use of a fixed marking scheme in the final assessment of their students, 81% of respondents thoroughly discussed the way in which students would be assessed with them before the actual assessment. Seventy-one per cent of those who did make use of a formal marking scheme included a language component in the marking scheme and awarded an actual mark for language use. Respondents were also asked to rate the language issues that were emphasised in the final mark. In response to issues such as ‘language correctness’, ‘style and register’, ‘logical flow of ideas’, ‘overall structure’ and ‘clarity of meaning’, the use of ‘style and register’ appeared to be least important. All other issues appeared to be equally important in judgements about language use. One would have expected, though, that an analysis of this data specifically would have revealed significant patterns that could have been investigated further towards offering suggestions to supervisors on the provision of language-related feedback. This limitation of the data in that it does not differentiate meaningfully between these language issues could possibly be a result of supervisors not fully understanding what such issues entail. This is also a matter that could be further explored in focus group interviews with supervisors.

As can be expected at this level of tertiary education, supervisors appeared to be well aware of the important role language played in postgraduate studies, and seemed to spend considerable time and effort on language-related matters. Some supervisors, however, expressed the need to be able to *‘focus more on the content rather than on correcting language mistakes all the time’*. This is an important issue for the mere reason that reading for quality of content does not necessarily coincide with reading for fluency and correctness of language. It is, therefore, often required that texts be read at least twice in order to adequately address both issues.

As a result, supervisors could be saved considerable time and effort if the written texts they receive are relatively error free. In such a case, they could concentrate on the value of ideas and reasoning.

Section F: Academic literacy support

A crucial issue in providing writing (and overall literacy) support to postgraduate students in a variety of disciplines is whether subject specialists regard language and literacy specialists as being capable of providing such support to their students. In response to the question on who should take responsibility for teaching writing to their students, the majority of respondents (64%) indicated that a combination of subject and language specialists should be responsible. It is clear that subject specialists do award a role for language and writing specialists in this regard. Seventy-six per cent of respondents further indicated that they thought their students would benefit most in attending an integrated academic literacy course rather than language specialists providing an editing service only.

Although a large majority of supervisors depended on their own ability as well as that of their co-supervisors to ensure the final language correctness of postgraduate student texts, there was also a clear indication that supervisors were aware of other available support structures that could be accessed if needed. Fifty-two per cent indicated that professional language editing was a requirement before submitting final drafts of written texts (specifically dissertations and theses). An important issue addressed by a number of supervisors was that professional language editing could become a tremendous burden if the editor was not also a specialist in the specific discipline. It was therefore strongly emphasised by these respondents that editors be used who were knowledgeable about the discipline.

It is further a very positive indication that after having completed a very lengthy questionnaire on academic literacy, 67% of the respondents were prepared to participate in a follow-up interview that would focus on more specific issues regarding academic writing in specific disciplines.

4. Implications of the results for writing course design

The results of this survey that involved postgraduate supervisors demand further exploration into issues of postgraduate academic literacy at the UP. At this point, important implications of these findings can be divided into two main issues. Firstly, although only a minority of supervisors have been exposed to formal tertiary language training of some sort, they appeared to be fully aware that many of their students experienced academic literacy problems. A large majority of respondents indicated that they supervised the studies of additional language users. Throughout the questionnaire, it was apparent that supervisors were of the opinion that additional language users experienced more severe problems with academic literacy compared to primary language users. This level of awareness is not completely unexpected, since such supervisors had obviously been exposed to postgraduate studies themselves as students and also had varying degrees of experience in acting as supervisors for postgraduate students.

Respondents further acknowledged the important role of academic literacy in the completion of postgraduate studies, and were aware that a major consequence of students with literacy

problems was that they needed to exert a far greater effort in encouraging such students to complete their studies. Another result was that students with literacy problems seemed to take longer to complete their studies. On a practical level, a co-ordinated effort in determining the academic literacy levels of postgraduate students timeously could go a long way in providing relevant support to students with literacy problems. Such support has the potential to lead to a decreased workload on supervisors as well as to a shorter completion time of postgraduate studies. However, offering support to students in addressing some of their literacy problems can only be part of a more complex initiative that also involves affective problems (such as motivation) and financial constraints.

A potentially positive consequence of the awareness discussed above is that if such supervisors know that, apart from the availability of a reliable testing instrument that could assist them in assessing literacy levels, relevant support is available in the development of their students' writing ability, it should not take much from them to avail such an opportunity to students. As stated previously, the Unit for Academic Literacy has already received a number of enquiries from supervisors involved in various disciplines as to how the Unit could support their students with writing development. With regard to the data analysis, the majority of the supervisors who took part in the survey believed that their students could benefit from literacy support offered by literacy experts in improving their students' writing ability. This is a very positive finding in the context of a close working relationship between subject and literacy specialists, and has more potential in offering relevant writing support than following an isolated approach. In such a context, the responses to the whole of the questionnaire could be used productively in terms of serving as a guideline for continuous discussions with supervisors in specific disciplines.

5. Conclusion

Obviously, the impressionistic nature of much of the data provided by the supervisors calls for verification. The broader study addressed this issue by adding a number of additional data sets (i.e. data from follow-up focus group interviews with supervisors in specific disciplines; a comprehensive student profile that included data from a survey on their academic literacy needs; and data from two student assessments – an assessment of their academic literacy levels and of a specific academic writing task [see Butler, 2007]). These data sets all contributed towards providing a more comprehensive student profile that could be used in designing discipline-specific academic writing courses. The results of these investigations will be reported in a follow-up article.

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