

## Accessing Success through the Writing Centres at a University of Technology

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**ABSTRACT** University students are diverse not only in their demographics, but also in their academic literacy needs. To meet and accommodate the writing needs of all learners, writing centres were established in 2013 at a selected University of Technology (UoT). This study explored the factors that influence use of the writing centre at a selected UoT campus, using a descriptive qualitative design. The study triangulated data collected from interviews with 15 purposively recruited participants and responses from 50 consultations forms. The study findings provided insights into the academic needs of participants, factors influencing use of the writing centres and participants' evaluation of the writing centres in relation to their academic pursuit. Participants' academic literacy needs included issues with grammar, public speaking and pronunciation. Taking account of the range of needs of writing centre users at the selected UoT and the diverse factors affecting use of the writing centres, it is recommended that the writing centre invests in the continuing development of its staff so that they can be more responsive to the writing needs of its users. Furthermore, since the factors predicting use of the writing centre include personal and organizational factors, it is important that strategies to raise awareness of the writing centre be tailored appropriately to the needs of the university community.

### INTRODUCTION

There is little doubt that undertaking university studies requires good skills in academic writing. This is because students entering into tertiary institutions like the selected University of Technology (UoT) in South Africa find themselves in a new culture that has its own needs, traditions, practices, norms and conventions. This new culture is strange to most university students who have to assimilate new literacy skills that usually involve interaction with both human and non-human components of the university environment. Most aspects of this interaction require good academic literacy skills.

Enhancement of students' academic writing is thus important for success in higher education. Bräuer (2003) suggests that institutional facilities such as writing (and reading) centres can significantly assist the development of good writing and literacy skills. Several studies (Casanave 2009; Duijnhouwer et al. 2010; Basturkmen and One 2012) have confirmed the importance of academic writing as a key facilitator of good throughput rates in higher education. To meet the mission statement of promoting excellence in learning and teaching, in 2013 the UoT where the present study was carried out established

writing centres in support of academic literacy needs for its students.

Writing centres are regarded as providing key academic support to students from different walks of life. Gordon (2014) describes the writing centre as a place where students can meet with peer tutors and receive direct feedback on their writing. In addition, writing centres provide a platform where students can ask questions that the lecture environment, with large classes, might discourage them from asking. According to McHarg (2014), the primary aim of a writing centre is thus to minimize gaps in educational achievement between students from different social and economic backgrounds, thereby helping to promote overall institutional objectives of academic excellence and student success.

Writing centres begin to appear in South African universities in the 1990s (McKinley 2011). According to Thompson (2011), writing centres throughout the world face similar challenges to their continuation. At the selected UoT in this study, writing centres were established to help in balancing operational constraints such as budget and space in addition to meeting divergent student needs. The UoT has five writing centres, located on five campuses in the cities of Durban and Pietermaritzburg.

University education in South Africa faces particular challenges which stem from the history of educational inequality in the apartheid era (Ministry of Education (MOE) 2001). The Education White Paper (1997) calls for redress of past inequalities through transformation of the South African higher education system to serve a new social order responding to new realities and opportunities. This requires concerted action to make university education more accessible to disadvantaged students (MOE 2001) which led in turn to an influx of a significantly diverse set of students at the selected UoT.

Linguists (Paxton et al. 2008; Archer 2010) have noted a number of challenges that face writing centres in South African higher education, where basic needs include access to academic communication and mastery of academic writing skills and practices. The existing literature on academic writing and writing centres seems to focus on the challenges (Archer 2010; Pineteh 2013) rather than the behavioural and other factors that predict use of academic writing centres. With resources allocated to institutional support programs such as the writing centre needing to be justified in terms of relevance and ability to meet set objectives, writing centre managements at the selected UoT must be able to show how this literacy initiative contributes to the overall academic improvement of students.

### Study Objective

The objective of the present study was to explore and analyse the factors that predict students' use of the writing centres at two campuses of the selected university.

### Review of Literature

There is extensive literature on research into academic writing support for second language (L2) English speakers.

McCulloch (2013) investigated reading-to-write processes and source use of L2 students in a UK university and found that students engaged with source materials in qualitatively different ways when they responded to intertextual awareness, when they responded to what they read, and when they drew inferences and elaborated on their knowledge. This suggests that there will be diversity in students' motivation to attend writing centres tutorials and in how they rate their satisfaction with their services.

Similarly, Dunham (2012) used tutoring to facilitate students' engagement with academic literacy in an institute of learning in New Zealand. The study found that students' agency was reinforced once they realised that learning takes place in many different forms. A study by Marshall et al. (2012) on academic literacy interventions for first-year students in a Canadian university found on the other hand that students did not feel accepted as legitimate members of the university because these interventions set them aside in the course of trying to make them meet the university's language and literacy requirements. Remediating strategies that most institutions (including the writing centres at the selected UoT) adopt in introducing L2 students (including students on the ECP stream) to academic literacy have led to feelings of inadequacy, incompetency and discrimination among these categories of student (McHarg 2014; Thompson 2014). However, these drawbacks are not likely to be a problem in the present study because the teaching mode of the academic literacy programme for the particular set of students has been embedded into their curriculum and use of the writing centre is mandatory for them before assignments can be submitted for assessment.

With L2 students identified as being at a greater disadvantage than native speakers, studies conducted in South Africa and Hong Kong found that although most L2 students had the capacity to acquire academic literacy knowledge sufficient for their higher education learning, teachers of these ESL students were also deficient in their academic literacy knowledge. Nel and Muller (2010) found that teachers' limited academic literacy was an impediment to learning by the students in South Africa. Gan (2012) also noted that L2 students were not given sufficient opportunities to speak and write in English, and that this contributed to a range of problems closely related to the sociocultural, institutional and interpersonal contexts in which individual ESL students found themselves. This suggests that the teaching and tutoring environment in which students find themselves can determine their overall experience of using the writing centre

### METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative descriptive design to explore the factors influencing student use of one writing centre, henceforth re-

ferred to as “XYZ Centre”, at the selected UoT. Qualitative description was chosen as the most appropriate strategy for the study because it is especially amenable to obtaining straight and largely unadorned answers to questions of special relevance to practitioners and policy makers (Sandelowski 2000).

The study was conducted at a selected UoT which is a publicly funded tertiary institution in KwaZulu-Natal province, South Africa. The XYZ Centre was selected as study setting for the research reported in this paper out for pragmatic reasons, including how recently it was established in comparison with other writing centres at the UoT, and the fact it services very educationally disadvantaged learners whose use of English (written and oral) is very limited.

Data for this study were obtained from responses of students who attended the XYZ Centre. The data from the responses were triangulated with completed student consultation and feedback forms. To be eligible as a participant, each student had to be a registered student at the campus where the XYZ Centre is located, have used the writing centre for consultation more than three times, have been more than 18 years of age, and have given consent to be interviewed. In compliance with ethical considerations, all participants consented to study participation, which indicated that they participated in the study voluntarily. Confidentiality of the participants was ensured through the use of pseudonyms, and participants were assured that refusal to participate or withdrawal from the study would not disadvantage them then or in the future.

The recruitment process began with selection of completed consultation and feedback forms. The researchers carefully went through the completed forms to identify those that had been satisfactorily completed by students who were users of the writing centre. This process gave rise to 50 forms which a consensus of the researchers regarded as adequately completed to answer the research questions. The identifying information on the consultation forms was then used to invite students for interviews. Interviews were stopped after 15 participants had been interviewed when recurrence of responses indicated data saturation. The process of recruiting the 15 participants followed purposive sampling procedure (Cohen and Crabtree 2006) de-

termining that they possessed attributes which permitted answering of the research questions.

The small sample size and the fact that the study was conducted among a purposively sampled homogenous participants on one campus of the UoT meant that the generalizability of findings is limited and might not reflect what is happening on other campuses of UoT or at South African university writing centres overall. The study did however triangulate the in-depth semi-structured interviews with the consultations forms, which meant that the study used a variety of data to arrive at the findings and the conclusions drawn from the study.

In addition, data were collected through the use of interviews guided by the semi-structured questions already outlined in the consultation forms. The questions included both open and close-ended questions, which were expanded using probes to get a rich description of responses from the participants. In addition to providing the basis for a loose structure form of data generation (Boyce and Neale 2006), the semi-structured interview approach allowed both interviewer and participants to digress in several instances to ensure that the recollections of participants' experiences were vividly captured in detail. The interviews were all conducted by a single interviewer (author 2) to ensure consistency. The consultations forms served as an additional source of data as the researchers searched and sorted participants' responses for information that shed further light on their answers to the research questions.

In analysis of the data the researchers used inductive content analysis strategy. This means that both the oral interviews and the documents (consultation and feedback forms) were analysed using inductive content analysis, following Miles and Huberman (1994) who advocate that the strength of a qualitative data be judged on the competence with which the analysis is carried out. Content analysis provided a systematic and objective means of describing and quantifying phenomena (Elo and Kyngas 2008). All the documents and the transcribed interviews were organized and read through several times to achieve immersion in the data, after which open coding, creation of categories and abstraction was applied to arrive at categories.

Rigour and trustworthiness were ensured by application of the guidelines set by Lincoln and Guba (1985). An audit trail (Lincoln and Guba

1985) of the complete research process, including data analysis and decisions taken, was described, justified and recorded. This strategy assisted the authors to peer debrief the analysed data and ensure identification of commonalities and differences that warranted further analysis.

## RESULTS

The results presented here reflect the factors that influenced participants' use of the writing centre and serve as a marker for its role in the overall academic development of its users. The content analysis approach used in the analysis gave rise to three themes: academic and writing needs of the participants, factors influencing use of the writing centre, and participants' evaluation of its relevance. Eight sub-themes are discussed below under the themes from which they emerged.

### Study Participants

Table 1 shows that the writing centre catered for all categories of students who were registered at that particular campus of the selected UoT. Nine of the participants' were from the Nursing department, four from Education and one each from Human Resources Management and Civil Engineering. The home language of all 15 users of the writing centre was isiZulu and the majority of them attended the writing centre on the instruction of their lecturers. Three were first-year students, five were second-year stu-

dents, two were in third year and five were in fourth year. Refer to Table 1.

### Theme One: Academic and Writing Needs of the Participants

To assess the impact of the writing centre on the academic and writing needs at the selected UoT's XYZ campus and to plan relevant responses, the participants were asked about their needs. It is important to note that all participants had attended the writing centre for consultations at least three times before data collection. This seems to have allowed them to gain insights about their academic literacy needs.

#### *Sub-theme 1: Sentence Construction Needs*

Construction of meaningful English sentences is important in academic writing. Failure to construct meaningful English sentences led participants 7 and 14 to participate in writing centre sessions. Participants acknowledge the need for grammatical improvement in their writing in the following responses:

*it is like I do not know where to stop or take a break when writing. Most of the comments of the tutors are mostly that I write long sentences and when I go through it myself, I can see that I am not clear (Participant 7)*

*I am always confusing comma and semicolon. Sometimes I used 'and' when I supposed to bring the sentence to a stop and this is where I need the greatest help (Participant 14).*

**Table 1: Demography of participants**

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Reason for writing centre attendance</i>	<i>Year of study</i>	<i>Course</i>	<i>Home language</i>
Participant 1	Requested by lecturer	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	Nursing	isiZulu
Participant 2	Requested by lecturer	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	Nursing	isiZulu
Participant 3	Requested by lecturer	4 <sup>th</sup> year	Nursing	isiZulu
Participant 4	Requested by lecturer	4 <sup>th</sup> year	Nursing	isiZulu
Participant 5	Self	4 <sup>th</sup> year	Civil engineering	isiZulu
Participant 6	Requested by lecturer	4 <sup>th</sup> year	Nursing	isiZulu
Participant 7	Requested by lecturer	1 <sup>st</sup> year	Nursing	isiZulu
Participant 8	Self	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	Education	isiZulu
Participant 9	Requested by lecturer	1 <sup>st</sup> year	Education	isiZulu
Participant 10	Requested by lecturer	3 <sup>rd</sup> year	Education	isiZulu
Participant 11	Requested by lecturer	3 <sup>rd</sup> year	Human resource	isiZulu
Participant 12	Self	4 <sup>th</sup> year	Nursing	isiZulu
Participant 13	Requested by lecturer	1 <sup>st</sup> year	Education	isiZulu
Participant 14	Requested by lecturer	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	Nursing	isiZulu
Participant 15	Requested by lecturer	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	Nursing	isiZulu



### Sub-theme 2: Pronunciation Needs

Oral pronunciation deficiency was a predominant concern for some of the participants and this was also reflected in the completed feedback forms. Participant 8 commented, for instance, that *“friends laugh at my English and this makes me feel bad. That’s what I need the assistance of the centre for and that’s why I am here.”* Participant 5, on the other hand, pointed out that s/he was scared of speaking English because s/he felt people would laugh at him/her; accordingly, *“To avoid being embarrassed, the writing centre was recommended by my lecturer”*. Participants 5 and 8 were attending writing centre sessions to get assistance with pronunciation, their mother tongue being isiZulu.

### Sub-theme 3: Public Speaking Needs

Some participants sought a combination of grammatical and oral speaking assistance, indicating that improvement of public speaking skills was a particular priority for them. Speaking to the writing centre tutor, participant 10 put it in these terms: *“if only you can assist me to have the confidence to face my colleagues. It feels like I am being crushed when it gets to my turn to present”*. Another response was *“I prefer doing the background work for the group work because I want to avoid presenting to the whole class. I just can’t handle it”* (Participant 1). These remarks highlight the particular challenge that some students at the UoT had in using English for public speaking purposes. Need for assistance in this regard led to their participation in writing centre sessions.

## Theme Two: Factors Influencing the Use of the Writing Centre

To encourage students to make more use of the writing centre facilities (which give them access to tutors and to various academic software programs such as Whitesmoke and Turnitin) it is important to identify the factors that influence students’ use of the writing centre.

### Sub-theme 1: Role of Lecturers and Course Instructors

As indicated in Table 1, 12 of the 15 participants attended the writing centre because it was mandated or recommended by their lecturers.

The following responses indicate that lecturers identified students’ needs and urged them to consult writing centre tutors before handing in their assignments. In the words of one student, *“my lecturer will not accept assignments without the stamp of the writing centre on it”* (Participant 2). Other participants had had their papers rejected or had obtained low marks because their assignments had not gone through a peer assessor before the final submission. In this category was participant 8, who reported that:

*I was just singled out by my lecturer unexpectedly and on getting to her office, she pointed out that there was no logical connection between my introduction, body and conclusion. I don’t have any choice than to seek help, which she recommended that I will get in the Writing Centre.*

The points made by participants 2 and 8 highlight the importance of lecturers diagnosing their students’ writing problems and recognising the role writing centres could play in addressing the identified need. This stands in sharp contrast to reports from some students that there are lecturers who discourage them from using writing centres – an attitude that staff development at the UoT always seeks to combat.

### Sub-theme 2: Participants’ Self-appraisal and the Role of Peers

Another factor that significantly influenced participants’ use of the writing centre was self-appraisal of their challenges which led them to seek assistance. A response from participant 11 highlights this point:

*I have never attended an English-medium school and I just know I needed help because everything I do in this school is related to English language* (Participant 11).

Further engagement with participant 11 showed that the student felt desperately in need of writing centre help for advancement of English language skills. Whereas the majority of his classmates had attended English-medium schools, at his school even English was taught in isiZulu. This highlights the discrepancy between the endorsement of multilingualism in the South African Constitution and the shortcomings in its practical implementation; constitutionally, all eleven official languages are regarded as equal yet in tertiary institutions English,

followed by Afrikaans, enjoys unparalleled hegemony as language of instruction. The selected UoT uses English as the medium of instruction.

Related to self-appraisal is the influence of peers, who in some cases encouraged participants to seek assistance from the writing centre. Participant 5 gives an example of the role peers can play in the decision to use writing centre services.

*My best friend told me that the secret of her improving grades is that she attends the Writing Centre and since my goal is to also excel in my school work, I make sure I get comments and clarity about most things in the Writing Centre (Participant 5).*

In this study it emerged that students who benefited from the writing centre became its ambassadors. As word spread of the good work of the writing centre in raising the level of academic writing and of eventual academic success, increasing numbers of students made use of its services.

### **Sub-theme 3: Attitude of the Writing Centre Staff**

Participants also mentioned how the attitude of the writing centre staff had influenced the use they made of the centre. Participants' accounts suggest that friendly and warm attitudes of the staff are predictive of greater willingness to use the writing centre. Participants 3 and 10 commented as follows on the impact of writing centre staff attitudes:

*You can't ignore how the tutors make you feel at home any time you come for assistance; it is like courtesy is part of their job (Participant 10).*

*You know when people make you feel wanted; there is no way you would not want to use the services again. The approach of the staff is highly commendable because they come to your level so that you can understand their message (Participant 3).*

The writing centre staff are trained to convey a friendly and welcoming disposition as a way of making their clients feel valued. The clients are students and lecturers and the writing centre staff need to know how to treat their clients professionally. This is aided also by the fact that most of the writing centre staff are senior students from a range of academic disci-

plines and familiar with a diversity of student expectations. Participants 3 and 10 speak to the fundamentals of professional treatment of clients, which includes observance of confidentiality.

### **Theme Three: Participants' Evaluation of the Relevance of the Writing Centre**

Themes that emerged from this question can be described as mixed because participants cited both negative and positive aspects of the writing centre in relation to their academic pursuit.

#### **Sub-theme 1: Positive Experiences**

Among the positive factors that participants cited in their evaluations of the writing centre were that it offered a flexible approach to learning, that it made them aware of a diversity of leaning methods, and that it gave them more appreciation of feedback mechanisms used by the tutors. In this regard, participants 4, 6 and 13 commented that:

*I like that I can relate with the tutors in order to gain knowledge about how I need to be a better writer and reader (Participant 13).*

*I did not know that the writing centre existed but since I came to realise how it works, my writing and grades has changed for the better (Participant 4).*

*To me, the greatest thing about the Writing Centre is that you are not treated as a dull head; your little ideas are valued and retained for the overall objectives that needed to be met. It is so empowering and encouraging (Participant 6).*

Participant 13 was impressed by the cordial relationships that the writing centre staff have with their clients, which enables engagement in the learning activities. For participant 4, the significance of the writing centre was measured in terms of its contribution towards improvement of writing skills and grades which, prior to the assistance given by the centre, had been poor due to failure to express ideas in academically appropriate ways. The understanding that writing centres do not do projects for their clients but instead help them to develop their ideas more effectively gives a fundamental reflection of the writing centre staff role. Notably appreciated, too, is how clients are probed to clarify their ideas in a way that respects their integrity.

### ***Sub-theme 2: Negative Experiences***

Although positive experiences predominated, some of the participants questioned the relevance of academic literacy to the degree enrolled for:

*I already know these things, it does not increase the skills of my course and I don't see the reason why I should use the writing centre (Participant 2).*

*Do I need to know English, oh gosh, not at this stage anymore? I just want the degree to make money not to speak better English (Participant 12).*

There was also a suggestion that mandating use of the writing centre tended to alienate and discriminate against already disadvantaged students:

*I don't understand why my lecturer referred me to the writing centre, I write better English than my friends (Participants 8).*

Another participant was reluctant to give up time for writing centre consultations:

*The writing process and the need to come for many consultations is so time consuming and that's when I feel that it wastes my time because my mates are busy reading the content of other subjects (Participant 15).*

While these responses show that perceptions varied as to the importance of the writing centre it should also be noted that students came from different family and school backgrounds which meant that there was considerable variance in their levels of preparedness for use of English for academic purposes. Some students were well-equipped to tackle their university studies without much need of support from the writing centre while others had great need of its services. It is important nonetheless for perceptions and expectations to be taken into account so that students have a realistic understanding of their academic writing competence in relation to advice they may get from their lecturers and writing centre staff.

## **DISCUSSION**

This qualitative study was conducted with a homogenous, purposefully sampled group of participants older than 18 years who were registered at the selected UoT's XYZ Writing Centre and was undertaken as a contribution to the emerging literature on successes and challeng-

es in the establishment of writing centres. The study used a qualitative approach to explore the academic and writing needs of UoT students, factors influencing their use of the writing centre, and their evaluation of its relevance to their studies. The study provided insights into the above-mentioned factors through the generation of three major themes and eight sub-themes.

The study found that the UoT students had a diversity of academic literacy needs, including issues with sentence construction, public speaking and oral pronunciation, in line with studies by Mickenly (2011) and Hall (2013), who advise that university students who are non-native English speakers need writing centres to help them cope with poor or limited grammar skills. Moussu (2013) extends this recommendation by listing factors such as first language, age, motivation, educational levels and sociocultural influences as predictors for use of writing centres and acquisition of academic writing skills by students. Under-utilization of writing centres, and students' insistence on proof-reading of documents rather than readiness to engage in conversation with the tutors about their goals, styles and ideas, have also been cited in the literature as issues of concern (Hall 2013; LaClare and Franz 2013; Thompson 2011).

Table 1 indicates that most of the students in this study used the writing centre because they were advised to do so by their lecturers. This finding contrasts with what McHarg (2014) reported as reluctance of university lecturers to recommend a writing centre to their students because of poor perceptions of its function in the overall development of academic literacy. In addition, most of the students in this study acknowledged that improvement was needed in their writing and speaking needs. A viable strategy for improving use of the writing centre might be to raise awareness among students who, as non-native speakers of English, are likely, according to Bruce et al. (2009), to receive significant benefit from the assistance it can give them.

Questions about the relevance of the writing centre to the degree for which the student is enrolled and fears about alienation and discrimination because of use its services have been predictive of low usage of writing centres, as shown by McHarg (2014) and Thompson (2014). This finding suggests that for successful interventions by a writing centre it is important to

devise contextual strategies to increase enlightenment among its potential users.

### CONCLUSION

The diversity of the participants' needs means that writing centre tutors must themselves constantly engage in professional development so that they are best able to meet these needs. For productive functioning of the writing centre, students need to be made aware of its potential to assist them and staff needs to be encouraged to recommend its services.

### LIMITATIONS

The small sample size and the fact that the study was conducted among purposively sampled, homogenous participants on one of the campus of the UoT means that the generalizability of its findings is limited and might not reflect what is happening on other campuses of the UoT or with South African universities writing centres generally. The study did however triangulate the in-depth semi-structured interviews with the consultations forms, which means that the study used a variety of data to arrive at the findings and the conclusions drawn from them. These study findings also need to be viewed in relation to the objectives behind the establishment of the writing centre at the UoT's XYZ campus.

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