

DURBAN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

**AN ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS READING AND WRITING
SUPPORT PRACTICES IN CONTRIBUTING TO STUDENT SUCCESS
AT THE DUT**

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APRIL 2025



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**Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the
degree of Master of Management Sciences**

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ABSTRACT

South African higher education is marked by profound disparities in students' prior schooling experiences, languages of instruction, and levels of academic preparedness and many entrants to universities arrive with uneven mastery of the reading and writing conventions expected in higher education. This study explored the influence of a university-based Writing Centre on the development of academic literacies, specifically reading and writing, among first-year Public Relations (PR) students. Recognising the uneven educational backgrounds from which many first-year students come from, and the discipline-specific demands for clear, strategic communication, this research examined how targeted writing support can bridge gaps in preparedness and foster both academic success while at university and professional competence when students enter industry. Grounded in the Academic Literacies Model, situated within the broader New Literacy Studies (NLS) paradigm, which conceptualises literacy as a socially situated practice, this research examined how writing centre interventions mediate access to the 'hidden curriculum' of public relations discourse (Lea & Street 1998; Lillis & Scott 2007). Employing an interpretative, qualitative case-study design, data was collected through semi-structured interviews with public relations lecturers and writing centre staff, and focus-group discussions with first-year public relations students from a selected University of Technology (UoT) in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. This research analysed students' perceptions and experiences of reading and writing at the writing centre; and lecturers' and writing centre practitioners' views on the impact of collaborative practice. Thematic analysis highlighted key themes underscoring the value of integrated, discipline-responsive literacy initiatives in improving critical reading and writing strategies and strengthening professional writing competencies. Findings revealed that writing centres not only operate as collaborative spaces that enhance students' ability to compose reports, strategic proposals and case analyses with clarity and confidence, but also cultivate critical thinking essential for evaluating real-world public relations scenarios and develop the critical agency to transfer literacy practices into academic and industry contexts. This study demonstrated how Academic Literacies praxis in writing centres can contribute to redressing educational inequities and enhance both academic performance and professional readiness for public relations graduates. Recommendations include deepening collaboration with public relations lecturers to embed writing centre workshops directly into core modules such as campaign planning and media relations, ensuring sustained and contextualised engagement rather than one-off sessions. Other recommendations include providing specialised training for writing centre tutors to expose tutors to public relations genres and to create collaborative communities of practice where writing centre

staff, public relations academics and students can share emerging genre trends and pedagogical approaches. These initiatives can create empowering learning environments that not only address gaps but actively enhance both the academic success and professional readiness of public relations graduates, ultimately contributing to more equitable, practice-informed higher education.

DECLARATION

I, Shonalee Prenisha Joseph, do hereby declare that the work presented in this dissertation is my own work. All sources used have been duly acknowledged and referenced.

Shonalee Prenisha Joseph

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my late mother-in-law, Mrs. Salome Sarojini Joseph, who passed away peacefully on the 14th of March 2025. An educator by profession and a beacon of unwavering support, she was a guiding light in my life. Her constant encouragement, wisdom, and belief in my potential pushed me to strive for more, even in the most challenging moments. It was her inspiring spirit that continually reminded me to persevere and complete this work.

Though she is no longer with us, her legacy of dedication, hard work, and the pursuit of knowledge will forever be a part of me. I am eternally grateful for the love and guidance she provided, and I hope to honour her memory through every step I take in my academic journey.

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ACRONYMS

ALM	-	Academic Literacies Model
CHE	-	Council on Higher Education
DOE	-	Department of Education
DUT	-	Durban University of Technology
ESL	-	English as a Second Language
HELTASA	-	Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa
HESA	-	Higher Education of South Africa
NGO	-	Non-governmental organistaion
NLS	-	New Literacies Studies
PR	-	Public Relations
PRISA	-	Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa
UK	-	United Kingdom
UoT	-	University of Technology
WCONLINE	-	Writing Centre Booking System

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In the dynamic landscape of South African higher education, writing centres have emerged as critical spaces for academic support, equity, and transformation. Historically shaped by the legacies of apartheid and ongoing challenges of linguistic and educational inequality, South African universities face the demanding task of supporting a diverse and multilingual student body. Writing centres play a pivotal role in this context - as collaborative, student-centred learning environments that empower student voice and cultivate a culture of reading and writing in the university.

Writing centres across South African universities have sought to respond to the complex demands of access and success. These centres function at the intersection of pedagogy and social justice, often bridging gaps between home languages and the English medium of instruction at universities. They support students, many of whom are first-generation university students in navigating the expectations of academic discourse. University students are required to have good academic practices and many researchers and academics maintain that students' success in higher education is intrinsically linked to academic literacy (Archer 2010; Boughey 2010). In South Africa, majority of students, particularly in universities of technologies (UoTs) experience significant challenges with academic reading and writing practices expected of them (Pineteh 2014).

University students require academic writing support to contribute to their holistic development while at university, and to prepare them for when they enter industry - this is even more so for Public Relations students as their core work includes a significant amount of writing and reading and being able to communicate efficiently and confidently with key stakeholders in the communications and public relations sector. In a university context, academic departments and support structures such as writing centres can provide collaborative, safe and flexible learning spaces for the development of well-rounded, successful graduates who can leave the university with real world skills and capabilities that will prepare them for the workplace.

There is increased pressure for South African universities to engage in transformative teaching and learning practices and to enable first-year students to acquire epistemological access at university (Leibowitz & Bozalek 2015; Du Preez, Simmonds & Verhoef 2016). Soudien (2010: 876) maintains that the report on transformation in higher education calls for “epistemological changes and decolonisation of the curriculum”. This emphasises the need for curricular and co-curricular support particularly for first-year students who are being inducted into their respective disciplines (Young 2016; Clarence 2014).

Academic reading and writing are important tools that traverse various spaces in higher education, however, at most universities, academic teachers assume that students will find their academic ‘voice’ once they are inducted into their discipline. Of particular concern in South African higher education institutions are the varied levels of preparedness of students coming from educationally disparate backgrounds, as they may experience significant challenges in asserting their academic voice, which is paramount to success at university and equally important when they enter industry. Moreover, public relations students are expected to be proficient in their verbal and written communication. Academic reading and writing are fundamental for many reasons for public relations students. Public relations students are expected to analyse and critique real-world developments, scenarios and case studies and require strong analytical and writing ability to evaluate and manage situations in their field (Cameron & Reber 2015; Wilcox 2015; Smith 2020). These students engage in professional writing and need to be proficient at writing media releases, reports and project proposals and academic writing support can assist students in writing clearly and concisely and achieving their outcomes. Additionally, public relations students need to be critical, analytical thinkers and reading and writing academic texts can assist students in developing their critical thinking to analyse public relations strategies and approaches (Wright & Kotcher 2020; Krishna et al. 2020; Luttrell, Wallace, McCollough & Lee 2021; Zerfass, Verčič, Nothhaft, & Werder (2020). Public relations students must also engage in research, reading of current academic journals and books, industry case studies and reports to understand the trends in the field and inform their practice.

The academic literacy capabilities of undergraduate public relations students are crucial to their success in academic studies and future careers as public relations professionals. Skinner, Von Essen, Mersham and Motau (2016) maintains that public relations students require strong written ability while at university and when they enter the industry as public relations

professionals as they are responsible for communicating with key audiences and putting together communication materials which are intended to influence the attitudes and behaviours of key groups in the public. This research focuses on academic literacy support approaches by examining the experiences and perceptions of students who engaged in writing centre support at the Durban University of Technology (DUT) in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. It further analyses the perceptions of discipline-specific lecturers (public relations) and the writing centre practitioners who work collaboratively to enable a more responsive approach to the academic reading and writing needs of public relations students.

As a result of the arguments above, research in the field of academic literacy and student development as this study intends, can be justified. This study explores the Department of Public Relations' reading and writing support practices in contributing to student success. The study analyses the Public Relations Department and Writing Centre's collaborative academic literacy support approaches to student learning by focusing on first-year students' experiences and by analysing the pedagogical approaches involved in building discipline-specific academic literacy capabilities through writing-intensive learning support that is integral and aligned to the practice of public relations. This study examines the influence of collaborative pedagogical approaches of academic lecturers and the writing centre, through understanding the experiences of students, lecturers and writing centre practitioners and tutors. The researcher intends to use the findings from this study to provide recommendations on ways to enhance academic support practices such as the writing centre in universities.

There is a clear link between students' ability to exercise their academic voice and their achievement levels at university (Glennrich & Dison 2018). Many students lack a sense of agency, confidence in their capabilities and have poor self-efficacy beliefs (Woods et al. 2017). This calls for academic support interventions to address these problems and assist in guiding and supporting students with the required academic support (Jacobs 2007; Fernsten & Reda 2011).

DUT straddles both inner city and peri-urban locations, the cities of Durban and Pietermaritzburg which are approximately 100 kilometres apart. DUT is a medium sized multi-campus university, with six (6) faculties that spreads across seven (7) campuses, in Durban - the Steve Biko Campus; ML Sultan Campus, City Campus, Brickfield Campus and Ritson Campus and in Pietermaritzburg the Indumiso Campus and Riverside Campus. The DUT

Writing Centre, established in 2013 aims to develop students' academic reading and writing abilities and confidence through modelling inquiry and negotiation which enables students to critically reflect on their writing processes in conversation with an attentive tutor (Archer & Richards 2011; Govender & Alcock 2018; Richards, Lackay & Delport 2019; Carstens & Rambiritch 2021). This establishment of the writing centre was in line with a national trend towards writing centres in the context of persistent and high student drop-out and failure rates (Kadenge et al. 2019). With the call for widening student participation in South African higher education, there has been growing concern on student preparedness for study at university and the sector acknowledged that measures needed to be taken to address the school system's inability to prepare students (Gee 2008; Scott 2017), and universities needed to focus on sustained development of academic literacies for success in higher education. Often, students' struggles at university are not understood fully, particularly their preparedness in finding and asserting their academic voice, which is necessary for success in higher education. In addition, students in the public relations field need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to be able to confidently and proficiently communicate their messages to key audiences, in written form and verbally. Furthermore, there remains a scarcity of research into academic support programmes that effectively address the issue of academic reading and writing, particularly in the vast field of Management Sciences at UoTs.

In this study, the researcher examines DUT first-year Public Relations students' experiences of integrated writing centre support. This study draws on New Literacies Studies (NLS) and more specifically the Academic Literacies Approach (Lea & Street 2006; Lea 2017) for a broader understanding of students' writing practices in the South African higher education landscape. It is further aligned to the views of Leibowitz and Bozalek (2015) who argue for transformation in the South African higher education context, embedded in institutional praxes that support teaching and learning. This study is underpinned by the tenets of the Academic Literacies Model (Lea & Street 2006), which fosters a social view of academic writing and advocates for integrated support to the teaching and learning of academic writing. The Academic Literacies approach will be unpacked in detail in chapter two as the guiding theoretical framework for this study. Academic literacies advocate for a more contextualised socio-cultural approach to writing and underscores the value of the relationship between language and learning in the higher education context (Lea 2017). Thus, this research explores the role of collaborative relationships between the DUT Writing Centre's academic literacies approach and disciplinary specialists in the Public Relations Department.

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Majority of university students grapple with academic reading and writing and the need for quality academic support is an area of much debate in higher education in South Africa. Students' academic literacy practices have been reported to not effectively prepare them for the required ways of thinking, learning and practicing in their selected discipline. The Council on Higher Education (CHE) has reported that approximately 55% of first-year students in South African universities do not graduate (CHE 2013). Student success in higher education has been intrinsically linked to academic literacy, hence there is a need for academic support programmes to assist in developing students' academic practices such as reading and writing. Moreover, South African universities face increasing pressure to transform teaching and learning with a particular focus on first-year students' epistemological access to higher education. Many academics and researchers have called for a focus on practices such as those supporting learning and teaching strategies and academic writing. Therefore, this study foregrounds working with students in the disciplines and draws on Lillis and Scott's (2007) notion of transformative writing spaces to engage critically with disciplinary culture, norms and practices. This study explores the influence of integrated and collaborative academic support practices on students' reading and writing development. It does so by analysing the Department of Public Relations' reading and writing support practices in contributing to student success at the DUT. The Public Relations programme is used to explore students' experiences of engaging in academic writing at the writing centre. Public relations students are expected to have strong written ability while at university and more so when they enter the workplace as public relations professionals as written communication is a core part of their work. This research focuses on contributing to being responsive to university students' academic literacies support particularly reading and writing which is often overwhelming and challenging for students. This research aims to provide insight into how integrated approaches to supporting students' learning can contribute to student success and developing globally portable students.

1.3 RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

Student throughput and retention rates remain a contentious challenge in universities nationally and globally (Young 2016). Additionally, the challenges faced by first-year students in higher education is well documented (Akerlind 2005; Kift 2009; Jacobs & Jacobs 2014). When students transition from school to university, they are expected to quickly adapt to a new culture, values and norms (Leibowitz 2009) and acquire the necessary academic literacies

needed to succeed at university. However, this is a complex attainment as academic literacy practices is not innate and easily grasped. Majority of students in this study unit of analysis (Durban University of Technology) speak English as a second language. This poses a huge challenge particularly for a first-year student as they enter the university with several barriers including cultural, social, and linguistic. Jaffer and Garraway (2016) explain that students in South Africa are gaining access to universities however the transition is challenging as they try to adapt to university demands and standards. Fataar (2012) further affirms that students that come from disadvantaged academic backgrounds such as inadequately resourced schools struggle with connecting their life experiences with university and curriculum demands.

Universities globally are experiencing challenges with students bridging the gap between school and university expectations (Van Schalkwyk 2008; Archer 2010; Pineteh 2012) and many researchers report on how universities are faced with the challenge of under-preparedness of first-year students (Underhill & McDonald 2010; Musgrave 2014). This is compounded by massification in the South African higher education system where according to the Council on Higher Education (2013) universities are trying to grapple with throughput rates of underprepared students. First-year student challenges include academic support for “academic literacy, students’ language needs, teaching and learning practices, [and] student engagement” (Hutchings 2006: 247). Students grapple with the demands of their selected academic disciplines and the nature of the university (Wilson-Strydom 2012). As a result, it is imperative that university lecturers and other stakeholders offer academic support opportunities that is responsive to the needs of students to enable them to acquire the literacies needed to thrive and succeed at university. In this study, students from DUT are in a challenging situation – English is not their first language and is the mode of instruction at university and they have to cope with the cognitive demands of discipline curriculum and simultaneously acquire academic writing proficiency (Torgesen et al. 2007). They are required to be able to critically read and write texts in the discipline. Thus, the establishment of DUT Writing Centre serves to positively influence students’ writing development through structured writing support. Through different pedagogic strategies including one-on-one consultations, group consultations, discipline specific workshops and class presentations the writing centre aims to offer writing companionship and support to students. Given present-day deliberations on first-year students’ academic achievement and student throughput, this study argues that understanding students’ experiences of academic support practices through collaborative engagements with the writing centre will enable a deeper understanding of students’ needs, open-up opportunities for the

Public Relations Department to support students in their writing development and contribute to nurturing the next generation of public relations professionals.

Since inception, the writing centre has been collaborating with the Department of Public Relations on the development of academic writing practices of students, however no research has been conducted to explore the value of such initiatives. This study specifically aims to contribute to academic literacies discourse that informs writing centre pedagogy at DUT and to offer recommendations on ways to enhance academic support practices that are responsive to students' needs.

1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

UoTs have traditionally focused on producing graduates that are holistically prepared for the workplace. This study will provide practical strategies through which public relations lecturers can integrate academic writing; critical thinking and development of student voice into discipline teaching and learning. The findings from this research will provide valuable insights on the value of collaborative approaches to support student learning. This study provides a deep understanding on writing centre pedagogy and frameworks that can enhance the teaching and learning approaches to academic writing. It further aims to understand how collaborative approaches to learning and teaching contribute to the development of public relations students and to the body of knowledge on the role of writing centres in South African higher education.

1.5 RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of this research is to determine the influence of Public Relations' reading and writing support practices in contributing to student success at a UoT in South Africa.

1.5.1 Objectives

This study aims to:

- Analyse first-year public relations students' experiences of reading and writing at the writing centre.
- Determine the value of collaborative approaches to learning and teaching in the discipline of public relations.
- Provide recommendations on ways to enhance academic support practices such as the writing centre that are responsive to students' needs.

1.6 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses an interpretive (also known as constructivist) research paradigm to understand the relationship between the research participants, the academic literacies approaches and the contexts in which learning and teaching in higher education occurs. Phenomenography was used as the research methodology to analyse and understand the relationship between students' and academics' conceptions of teaching and learning with the goal of enhancing students' learning (Prosser 2000) and to analyse how students experience a phenomenon and how they acquire knowledge as they experience it. This research aims to offer insights into how collaborative academic support approaches between discipline-specific educators (Public Relations department) and the Writing Centre at DUT can enhance academic reading and writing, student learning and ultimately success in higher education. The phenomenographic research approach was appropriate for this study as it enabled the researcher to understand the different ways students acquire knowledge as they experience a phenomena (learning). In this study, the researcher aimed to gather in-depth knowledge of the experiences of the first year student participants (Bryman 2017). Waghid (2002: 47) expresses that "education research involves human practices, which are so difficult to quantify". As a result, this study used a qualitative approach with the focus on spoken words by participants through interviews and focus groups, to capture the lived experiences of participants. Key themes emerged from the data and are used to unpack the findings from the data. Thematic analysis enabled the researcher to identify specific areas relating to first-year students' experiences of reading and writing at the writing centre and how collaborative approaches to learning and teaching contribute to the development of public relations students.

1.7 ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER

The researcher is a postgraduate student at the Durban University of Technology and has an undergraduate degree in the field of Public Relations Management. The researcher also works at a higher education institution and has a keen interest in student support and development. As a postgraduate student the researcher made use of the Writing Centre at the DUT and was supported in her reading and writing development as she worked on her masters. As a result, the researcher experienced the value of writing support and wanted to explore further if students were aware of the support available to them as they navigate the challenges of higher education studies. The researcher encountered challenges during the initial stage of her proposal writing and made use of the DUT Writing Centre and tutors to understand the expectations of a research proposal and gain confidence in academic writing. The experiences

and learning that took place motivated the researcher to further explore how the Writing Centre can influence Public Relations' reading and writing support practices in contributing to student success. The researcher was interested in understanding the current experiences of public relations students in terms of reading and writing and to explore how the two units could collectively work on approaches to enhance academic support practices that meet the needs of students.

The DUT Writing Centre has had a profound influence on the researcher's academic journey, particularly in shaping her thoughts on her research topic and highlighting the importance of academic reading and writing within the public relations discipline. The environment at the DUT Writing Centre was not only calm and relaxing but also friendly, which created a supportive space to think more clearly about her research topic. The researcher found that tutors' assistance was engaging and it was through discussion and probing questions that she was able to view her topic from various perspectives and deepen her understanding. These sessions helped the researcher to organise and articulate her thoughts in an academic manner, which significantly improved her academic writing. As a result, the researcher believes that public relations students will significantly benefit from collaborating with Writing Centre tutors. The researcher maintains that the relationship between the Public Relations Department and the Writing Centre should continue to develop into a long-term, mutually beneficial partnership. This collaboration will ensure that students not only grasp academic writing expectations but also acquire the skills necessary to transition smoothly into industry.

1.8 STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

Chapter One: Introduction and background

The general outline of the thesis is introduced in this chapter. The problem statement, rationale and research objectives of the study is also outlined. This chapter provides an overview of the significance of the study, the research methods used and the role of the researcher.

Chapter Two: Literature review

This chapter presents an analysis of existing literature in the field of public relations and the need for public relations students to be able to communicate effectively with key stakeholders. It will further provide a discussion on the role of collaborative partnerships between academic departments and academic support departments (Writing Centre) at universities and its influence on students' learning and the development of globally portable graduates. This

chapter also unpacks the Academic Literacies Approach as the key framework to explore first-year students' experiences of reading and writing at the writing centre and how collaborative approaches to learning and teaching contribute to the development of public relations students. Within South African contexts, where multilingual and first-generation students contend with legacies of educational inequality, the academic literacies lens provides a critical tool for understanding how writing centres can mediate access to academic discourse communities.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter presents the research methodology employed in this study, specifically the research approach and paradigm. It also discusses the target population, sample size and selection, sampling technique, and the procedures for data collection and analysis. In addition, the ethical considerations and the limitations of the study are provided.

Chapter Four: Findings and analysis

Results and analysis of the data from the interviews and focus group discussions will be presented and analysed in this chapter.

Chapter Five: Conclusion and recommendations

Upon reflecting on the findings and analysis, this chapter provides conclusions and offers recommendations on enhancing discipline-responsive writing support in South African universities. The recommendations outline practical strategies for embedding Academic Literacies praxis and strengthening Writing Centre–Public Relations collaborations.

CHAPTER TWO – LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter presented an introduction and background to the study. It introduced the main research problem and provided the study objectives. It further offered a brief outline of the integrated writing support offered by the Writing Centre at DUT. In this chapter, the researcher explores the role of universities in South Africa and literature on students' higher education experiences with a focus on first-year students. Moreover, it discusses the practice of public relations and the role of writing centres in higher education. Additionally, the Academic Literacies Approach situated within the New Literacy Studies (NLS) paradigm is discussed as it serves as the sole theoretical lens for this study.

2.2 THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

The current low pass rate of students in the South African higher education sector has spurred those working in the academia to rethink ways in which to ensure greater success for the diverse student body. One of the ways to achieve greater success is through effective academic development initiatives, including student reading and writing development. Clegg (2008: 3) maintains that “Universities and academic life are becoming more complex and differentiated spaces.” This is as a result of massification and managerialism in universities globally. An important question that one needs to ask is whether the permeation of neoliberalism in higher education has compromised the interconnected and collaborative space of academia. The democratic dispensation in South Africa in 1994 paved the way for an increase in participation in higher education for more black students, including epistemological access, (Morrow 1993) changes in staffing and in university qualifications. The 1997 White Paper 3 was established to address transformation in higher education to reflect the changes in our society under the new constitutional dispensation in South Africa. One of the goals of the National Plan for Higher Education was to outline the framework for implementing and realising the policy goals of the Education White Paper 3 (DoE 1997). It further sought to “promote equity of access and fair chances for success, to all who are seeking to realize their potential through higher education, simultaneously eradicating all forms of unfair discrimination and advancing redress for past inequalities” (Department for Higher Education and Training 2013: 27). Despite this move, curricular changes that were meant to be part of the changes in the National Qualifications Framework did not take place as expected (Quinn & Vorster 2017). Quinn and Vorster (2017:

36) affirm that historically “little attention has been paid to the transformation of highly problematic institutional cultures”. This is affirmed by the CHE report that states that integrated institutional cultures is still a concern that needs addressing (CHE 2016). Higher education has an important role in furthering social democracy, and “a transformed higher education system would play a critical role in an emerging, non-racial, progressive democracy, in producing critical, independent citizens as well as skilled and socially committed graduates who would be capable of contributing to social and economic development” (CHE 2016: 22).

Post 1994, higher education transformation focused on equity and the representation of diverse students, staff, curricula, teaching and learning, and funding structures (Boughey 2019). “Equity without quality is meaningless, while quality cannot be pursued in isolation from the goal of equity in higher education” (CHE 2004: 241). What is required is engagement at national level and it is imperative to practice both social equity and redress, and quality simultaneously (Badat 2009). Badat further proposes collaborative approaches to teaching and learning and deep discussions relating to “research, scholarship, learning and teaching, curriculum, pedagogy” (Badat 2015: 2) and ensuring justice and human rights. It is however challenging to develop curricula that prepares students for life after university and with appropriate competencies. This is expressed by Amin (2016: 163) who maintains that it is a difficult ask to prepare students “with attitudes that are appropriate, with sensitivities that are responsive to work and society’s needs, and...people who can embrace uncertainty in a world that is glocal, polyvalent, unpredictable and undecidable.”

South Africa’s National Development Plan (2011) maintains that the functions of universities in modern society are to train and educate individuals for the various sectors of the economy, to produce new knowledge and equip individuals to navigate through challenges and social change, while strengthening social justice, equity, and democracy (Badsha & Cloete 2011). This statement emphasises the significant role higher education plays in the development of a modern economy (CHE 2016: 17). As expressed by Boughey (2019), we are experiencing a ‘new conjuncture’ in higher education in our country - she points specifically to the efficiency agenda that has drawn on globalisation - the need for knowledge workers, and neo liberalism; Africanistaion and decolonisation; and #Feesmustfall - objections to neoliberalism. Her analysis urges us to understand our students as social beings and understand that learning and teaching is not neutral - it is culturally, socially, and politically motivated. Against this backdrop, the researcher situates her inquiry in students’ writing centre experiences,

particularly how they negotiate discipline-specific reading and writing conventions to inform and reshape academic support interventions that are truly responsive to students' needs.

2.3 STUDENTS' HIGHER EDUCATION EXPERIENCES

The importance of socialising students, particularly first-year entrants into higher education institutions and inducting them into the conventions of writing and reading cannot be overstated. The public relations field in particular is a multi-faceted discipline that requires effective two-way communication between an organisation and its various publics and students in this discipline are expected to engage in many writing intensive tasks and assessments. Public relations students and future practitioners need to be equipped with various competences such as writing, reading, speaking, research and establishing relationships, all of which contribute to graduating with real-world skills. In the South African context, literature shows that undergraduate students' academic under-preparedness is a contributing factor to academic writing challenges (Leibowitz 2009; Archer 2010; Pineteh 2014). Researchers have expressed that poor academic writing practices are because of the lack of literacy support for students to access their discipline discourse. Effective academic writing is said to be the foundation of student success and performance at university (Canagarajah 2011; Wilkes, Godwin & Gurney 2015). Furthermore, throughput rates in South Africa are alarming, with the Council on Higher Education (CHE 2013: 15) reporting that "only about one in four students in contact institutions graduate in regulation time; only 35 per cent of the total intake, and 48 percent of contact students graduate within five years for a three-year programme and that it is estimated that some 55 per cent of the intake will never graduate." As a result, students in higher education, particularly first-year entrants need to be supported as they navigate the challenges in meeting expected academic standards. Several studies have pointed to the under-preparedness of first-year students and how the entry year is key as it should serve as a foundation for students long term success (Muraskin & Lee 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini 2005; Woods et al. 2017).

Reading and writing is a vital component in higher education, with many researchers asserting that sound academic writing underpins progress and success of students (Kalpakjian & Meade 2008; Canagarajah 2011; Rai & Lillis 2013). As a result, academics and researchers around the world have researched the nexus between academic writing and students' success in higher education (Lea & Street 1998; Lea 2004; Munro 2003; Ivanic & Lea 2006; Lillis & Scott 2007). Academic writing can be defined in many ways with Winch et al (2001: 158) suggesting that that academic writing "is not merely a tool for learning, writing is or can be learning itself."

This view is supported by Street (2010) who describes academic writing as formal, well-structured and coherent arguments. Additionally, Burke (2010) and Wilkes, Godwin and Gurney (2015) maintain that academic writing is an essential instrument for learning in all disciplines. These definitions emphasise the importance of writing as a social practice and one that students need support in, regardless of their discipline, to be able to succeed in their studies at university.

Over time education researchers globally have explored first-year student transition to university, their challenges in gaining access and success, and the critical issue of dropout and retention rates at universities (Breier & Mabizela 2008; Scott et al. 2008; Leibowitz 2009; Tinto 2014; Ramrathan & Pillay 2015). Tinto asserts that universities need to do more to address their significant student challenges instead of simply employing ineffectual initiatives that do not focus on the core problems. Ramrathan and Pillay (2015) in their study on students in South Africa express how interventions initiated by universities do not adequately address issues of under-preparedness and throughput rates. Consequently, students need to be supported as they become part of the academic community. Writing centres at universities can offer supportive ways to acculturate students to the new ways of being and doing in higher education (Carlse 2019; Richards, Lackay & Delport 2019; Carstens & Rambiritch 2021). First-year students particularly, come to university feeling vulnerable and with limited understanding of discipline discourse (Armstrong & Sanson 2012). What these views highlight is that support and well-planned scaffolding is needed to effectively acculturate and immerse first-year students into university culture, norms as well as discipline discourse.

Universities globally are grappling with students' challenges in understanding and mastering academic writing standards and practices (Lea 2004; Ivanic & Lea 2006; Lillis & Scott 2007). The challenges of academic writing and the academic literacies needed at university is a worldwide phenomenon with the American Institute of Research reporting that students lack the required basic literacies such as reading and writing in an academic sound way (Baer et al. 2007). In the South African higher education context, research reveals that under-preparedness particularly with new entrants in the system contributes to the wide-ranging academic reading and writing challenges (Leibowitz 2004; Archer 2010; Pineteh 2014). Additionally, students need literacy support to access discipline discourse. This is affirmed by Mckenna (2010) who affirms that undergraduate students need to be supported in order to understand disciplinary ways of knowing and being. The views explicate the complex challenge of academic writing

and literacy levels of students in South African universities. This study therefore seeks to explore the collaborative approaches to learning and teaching in the discipline of public relations and to enhance academic support practices such as the writing centre. Such practices will contribute to being responsive to students' needs, to throughout rates and the quality of students entering local and global workspaces. This intent is aligned to Mutwarasibo's (2013) study which points out that support and development of academic writing is a key part of students' success, development and growth while they are at university and post university.

According to Short and Fitzsimmons (2007: 8) academic literacy "includes reading, writing, and oral discourse for school; varies from subject to subject; requires knowledge of multiple genres of text, purposes for text use, and multimedia; is influenced by students' literacies in contexts outside of school; and is influenced by students' personal, social, and cultural practices." Yeld (2003) maintains that academic literacy refers to one's ability to understand information presented in different modes, summarise information, build an academic argument, and develop academic voice. These views infer that academic literacy is a complex but a vital factor related to student success. The impact of reliable and sound verbal and written communication capacities in the field of public relations cannot be undervalued. In the public relations sector, communication is a key element of the work of a practitioner. Anecdotal evidence from interactions with lecturers of the Public Relations Department (the participants of this study) reveal that writing is an intimidating task for public relations students as they lack understanding of discipline threshold concepts and discipline discourse and as a result require guidance, mentorship and extensive support.

Furthermore, students' educational background is a contributing factor to difficulties in academic reading and writing (Scott, Yeld & Hendry 2007; Pineteh 2014). Several researchers support this view and affirm that first-year is a critical stage of transition from school to university and the South African schooling system does not adequately prepare students for university (Dall'Alba & Barnacle 2007, Scott et al. 2008). The first year is vital as it also contributes to students retention (Scott et al. 2008). Hence, students need to be supported as they transition from school to university. Higher education institutions have a responsibility to offer the required support to enhance meaningful teaching and learning experience for students to succeed while at university and when they enter the workplace. South African studies indicate that there is poor literacy levels particularly with English as a Second Language (ESL) students and those with disadvantaged linguistic backgrounds and call for the integration of

writing practices and support into the curriculum (Barrie 2007; Pineteh 2014). This affirms the need to reconfigure curricular and first-year student initiatives that are responsive to students' academic needs (Biggs 2012).

Academic literacies researchers have found that students struggle to meet the academic writing standards and produce good quality written texts and this severely impacts on their success (Lillis & Turner 2001; Lea & Street 2006). This calls for academic support programmes such as writing centres to socialise students into the writing practices needed to succeed at university (Jacobs 2007). Barrie (2006) and Du Preez and Fossey's (2012) study suggests that there needs to be a focus on developing academic writing in undergraduate curricula and that transferability of quality writing practices will contribute to preparing students for industry. These debates gave rise to the establishment of writing centres where students are guided, mentored and inducted into disciplinary communities and are supported as they face the complexities of academic standards (Shabanza 2014).

Northedge (2003) states that students continue to be positioned peripherally in the knowledge construction discourse as an apprentice but not as a central participant. Of significance to student development in higher education, authors Lea and Street (1998), Chimbanga (2011), Wingate (2012), and Shabanza (2014) discourage practices and positions to academic literacy that considers students as having writing deficiencies that need fixing and suggest that a practice-based approach must be considered. Russel et al. (2009) affirm that knowledge is socially constructed and context-related and as such students need friendly, supportive spaces to develop knowledge and strengthen their academic reading and writing practices. Relatedly, this study supports these views and positions that academic literacy should be seen as practices which encompass writing and reading within disciplines. This type of approach will enable students to learn and develop knowledge needed to successfully complete their studies and for life-long learning.

Higher Education of South Africa (HESA 2014) reports that undergraduate success and graduation rates are dismal for black students. Ministerial reports call for curriculum transformation that is responsive to black students' needs stating that "at the centre of epistemological transformation is curriculum reform – a reorientation away from the apartheid knowledge system, in which curriculum was used as a tool of exclusion, to a democratic curriculum that is inclusive of all human thought" (Department of Education (DOE) 2008: 90).

South Africa is a distinctive case, where as a result of apartheid, it has inherited structural challenges that hinder growth and development on many fronts including the education sector. Despite economic growth in South Africa, the education sector continues to face inequalities with black South Africans experiencing alarming inequities (Chibba & Luiz 2011).

2.4 ACADEMIC WRITING AT UNIVERSITY – A SOCIAL PRACTICE

Aligned to international practices, South African universities instituted Writing Centres in the 90s to support the academic literacy needs of students (Archer 2008; McKinley 2011). Writing Centres can be understood as safe, flexible learning spaces where students consult with an attentive tutor on their writing. Writing centres serve as a collaborative environment where students receive feedback on their writing, can engage in dialogue, and exchange ideas as they work on their written tasks (Govender & Alcock 2018). Writing centres in South Africa face several constraints that threaten its existence. These include funding and resources, staff not having a clear understanding of the role of writing centres and the misconception of writing centres being ‘fix it’ shops for students’ writing. Correspondingly, South African higher education researchers express concern of the lack of collaboration between discipline experts and writing practitioners to fully support students with disciplinary writing demands (Jacobs 2005; Mckenna 2010; Govender & Alcock 2018; Govender & Ndadziyira 2023).

Despite these challenges, writing centres contribute significantly to developing students’ academic literacies and collaborating with various departments and disciplines to scaffold and induct students into the academic standards required at university (McKinley 2011; Archer 2012; Shabanza 2014; Ntekere & Ramoroka 2015; Govender & Alcock 2018). Additionally, the pedagogy of the Writing Centre at the DUT includes problem-solving, reflection, creative writing and feedback that enables students to hone and strengthen their writing while working with an attentive tutor. The writing centre further works with lecturers to offer support in the development of their programme content including assignments and tasks set for students. These tasks sometimes include formal and informal tasks or assessments where students are also encouraged to employ writing strategies learned through collaborative writing centre workshops and discussions. In the DUT context, concerns on students’ reading and writing ability is an ongoing discussion and is documented in research (Govender and Alcock 2018). The UoT acknowledges that the transition from school to university is complex and that its students require tailored interventions and support. As such, writing centres were established across all the five campuses of the university to offer collegial support and writing

companionship as students navigate their higher education studies. As mentioned earlier, writing is a social practice and when students work with tutors, they get to experience an alternate type of learning to that experienced in their lecture rooms. In the writing centre, students engage with tutors in a friendly, relaxed environment and learn together as they engage in the various stages of the writing process. Lea and Street (1998: 158) explain that “learning in higher education involves adapting to new ways of knowing: new ways of understanding, interpreting and organizing knowledge”. This adaptation can be difficult especially for first year students. As a result, teaching and learning across disciplines at university calls for a social practices approach (Street 2010).

Ntekere and Ramoroka (2015) in their exploration of academic writing initiatives at the University of Botswana report that partnerships between support departments and discipline lecturers enabled students to experience enriching dialogical learning. Further to this view, Gee (2005) aptly terms the social and cultural shift of the literacy of reading and writing into its particular constructs at the university level and within specific disciplines as the ‘social turn’. Several researchers support this standpoint (Baynham & Prinsloo 2009; Coiro et al. 2014) affirming that writing involves a consolidation of students’ prior knowledge and newly assimilated knowledge and understanding while also demonstrating understanding of discipline-specific writing standards.

2.4.1 Academic Writing and Feedback

Feedback is a critical element in academic writing at university. A study by Hamer et al. (2015) propose that students require effective feedback during the various stages of the writing process and should be informed of the significance of feedback and how to work with the feedback in their writing tasks. In higher education, the issues of feedback to writing is quite contentious given that some students are not able to understand what is expected of them from the feedback received. Researchers such as Dysthe (2011) and Sutton (2012) underline that tutor feedback should be understood as developmental and not punitive. Feedback to students’ writing should support and challenge students’ learning and writing goals. A study in the United Kingdom and Scotland on the impact of feedback in developing students’ academic literacies found that in as much as feedback can be used to enhance writing, students find it complex as they often do not know how to work with feedback (Sutton 2012).

A study by Dunham (2012) reports on how tutoring assisted in facilitating academic literacies to students in New Zealand. The study shows that the tutor-student engagement developed students' agency and affirms the value of peer feedback in student learning. In this research on first-year public relations students' experiences of reading and writing at the DUT Writing Centre, writing centre tutor feedback affords students the opportunity to engage with the tutor on the feedback, ask questions on how to approach the feedback and be guided in the process. This enables students to critically engage in a feedback dialogue which will enable them to become critical of their own writing practice. Moreover, public relations students are required to develop critical thinking and writing abilities and this engagement at university will be beneficial for students when they enter the workplace.

It must be noted that students struggle to meet the academic requirements of university and their level of engagement in teaching and learning and aspects such as feedback is largely influenced by how they see themselves as academic writers, their sense of belonging in the university, and their level of motivation. As a result, spaces such as writing centres has a significant role in developing and nurturing students so that they can become more confident in their abilities as writers. This is supported by Wingate (2010) and Marshall et al. (2012) whose research reveals that often students feel vulnerable and university environments must intentionally and with care work towards enhancing students' self-perception as writers. This is affirmed by Tinto who suggests that students are most likely to persevere at universities that treat "them as valued members of the institution" (Tinto 1999: 5). Feedback to students' writing whether from peers, tutors, lecturers are significant in developing one's writing and achieving academic success. This research focuses on public relations students and how collaborative initiatives with the department and the writing centre can contribute to the development of public relations students' academic success and competencies when they enter the workplace. Students often lack the ability to critically understand and respond to lecturer or tutor feedback accurately. Further, students often perceive themselves as inadequate and hence that identity shapes their reaction towards feedback. Effective feedback is therefore crucial in the teaching and learning of academic writing and socialising students to new discipline discourse.

Students face overwhelming challenges when they transition to university; one such difficulty is developing academic and discipline specific capabilities. Discipline specific writing proficiency is a practice that needs to be developed, with care, over time. Several authors (Hewings 2004; Lewis 2007; Bazerman 2011) emphasise the importance of students being

socialised and inducted to participate in discourse communities of practice (CoPs) to effectively gain access and succeed in higher education and acquire exposure to discipline specific discourse. These authors affirm that when students are exposed to discipline-specific language and writing they will gain confidence in their academic writing. This further highlights the importance of integrating writing support initiatives into discipline teaching, particularly for first-year students. Additionally, the views from these researchers affirm how writing development should be embedded in collaborative teaching and learning initiatives with discipline specialists and specialist-writing developers. In the case of this current research, the researcher aims to determine the value of collaborative practices between the Public Relations Department and the Writing Centre at DUT in developing student's academic writing.

As with all disciplines in higher education, public relations students are required to become proficient in academic writing to succeed in the discipline (Lea & Street 1998; Lillis & Turner 2001). Writing is undeniably an integral part of academia as it is the main form of assessment thereby contributing to academic performance and success (Xudong 2009; Lillis and Scott 2007; Govender & Alcock 2018). There are several valuable benefits to academic writing and researchers attest to how other important characteristics are developed by writing such as cohesion, structure, organisation, and clarity (Bennet 2009). Disciplines such as public relations have writing intensive programmes with the aim and objective to prepare public relations students to be proficient communicators, which is a key element of the field. Thus, research is needed to understand how public relations students navigate the complexities and standards of academic writing that is required for the discipline. It must be noted that academic writing is even more challenging for public relations students where English is their second language and participants in this study are ESL students.

Considering that the focus of this study is on public relations students' experiences of writing centre support, the following section discusses the public relations profession and practice to understanding the capabilities and attributes required in the field.

2.5 PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE

The field of public relations requires excellence in communication, of which written communication is a core function. The public relations curriculum incorporates structured, writing-intensive academic writing to prepare students for industry where they are expected to be efficient in reading and writing and communicating with targeted audiences. Academic

support initiatives such as the writing centre has been introduced at many universities in South Africa to provide collegial writing support to students to enable them to develop their reading and writing and access their chosen discipline. At the writing Centre, learning does not take place as an isolated individualised activity but as a socially mediated process and students that work with writing centre tutors learn together while engaging in writing tasks such as drafting their writing, brainstorming ideas, or discussing concepts. These delivery methods encourage learning from each other and producing their own forms of knowledge. It is through this respectful, responsive, and supportive engagement that students come to understand not only their writing strengths and challenges but also develop their identities, a sense of belonging in the university and confidence in writing. This is important in the field of public relations where practitioners are expected to be confident in their communication roles.

Public relations can be defined as a multi-faceted discipline where practitioners are expected to build and maintain effective two-way communication with key stakeholders. The public relations process is one of continuous change as well as the maintaining of old relationships and building new ones. The definition adopted by the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA) states that public relations is the management through communication of perceptions and strategic relationships between an organisation and its internal and external stakeholders (PRISA 2025).

Grunig (1992) and Grunig and Gruning (2000), one of the most influential figures in public relations research engaged in research focusing on how organisations can build mutually beneficial relationships with their publics and his work emphasises the importance of two-way communication and the role of public relations in strategic management of an organisation. Effective communication is a vital element of public relations. As a result, it is essential for future practitioners to be equipped with the necessary tools, studies, theories, and methods to perform their jobs successfully. This preparation will help ensure that both the internal and external publics they cater to are well informed.

Reading and writing skills are essential components of successful public relations practitioners (Gregory 2000). Practitioners must be able to craft compelling messages, communicate complex information and engage with various stakeholders through written and verbal communication. According to Grunig “reading is essential for public relations practitioners to understand the media, the public and the organisation” (Grunig 1992: 23). Writing is a

fundamental skill as it enables practitioners to communicate effectively with various stakeholders. Grunig (1992: 23) emphasises the importance of writing in public relations stating, “writing is the most common form of communication in public relations.” These two important competences enable public relations professionals to analyse complex information, identify trends and communicate findings effectively. Dozier affirms these views stating, “research is the foundation of public relations practice and reading and writing are essential skills for conducting and communicating research” (1992: 23). Furthermore, in “Theories of Public Relations,” Botan and Hazleton (2006) emphasise that public relations professionals need to have strong writing ability for crafting messages, as well as reading skills for interpreting public reactions. They argue that these two competencies are fundamental to strategic communication, enabling public relations professionals to create plans and strategies that effectively connect with stakeholders.

Public relations students often face challenges during their studies, particularly with reading and writing, which are essential to their professional development. The public relations curriculum typically aims to address these needs and one way is through engaging in academic support in these areas. In the field of public relations, reading and writing are foundational abilities and public relations students need to use these capabilities to engage in critical reading to understand theories, case studies, and current industry practices. Similarly, writing is crucial in the field as it encompasses the creation of media releases, speeches, social media content, and other important communication practices.

Public relations programmes have a multidisciplinary approach integrating communication theories and practical skills. In terms of reading and writing, key areas of the curriculum include writing for public relations, media relations and communication, communication theory, research in public relations, public relations campaigns and ethics in public relations. Writing for public relations is one of the foundational and common courses and covers media relations, writing media releases, crisis communication plans and social media content. Here, students learn the various writing genres to be able to communicate clearly and concisely with key audiences. These abilities are key to professional public relations practice and assignments in this area are aimed at preparing students to develop their writing using real-world examples. In terms of media relations, public relations students engage with media reports, case studies and journal articles. Students are expected to engage in critical reading of these texts to be able to write responses to media enquiries. Public relations students are also expected to develop media

strategies and this requires the ability to effectively engage in analysis and synthesising of material; and reading and writing sharpens this ability (Zerfass, Verčič, Nothhaft & Werder 2020). With communication theory and research courses, public relations students need to engage in substantial reading and writing and critically evaluate theories, existing research such as journal articles and apply them to real-world situations.

An important element of the curriculum is public relation campaigns and students need to have strong academic writing capabilities. For this aspect of the course students engage in a considerable amount of reading to be able to design well-structured campaigns for organisations. Students engage in reading on target markets for campaigns, the media environment and the background of the organisation and are expected to write-up campaign plans, strategic proposals and reports. Additionally, as in most professions, understanding ethics in the field is crucial. Public relations students are required to engage in extensive reading to understand laws and ethics in the field. Furthermore, assignments often focus on responding to case studies and writing analytical responses showing the ability to integrate theory and practice.

Public relations students experience challenges with reading and writing and require academic support, particularly in the areas such as academic writing, critical reading and managing their time. Public relations writing requires a unique style characterised by conciseness and persuasiveness. Considering that most students come from educational backgrounds that may not have provided them with opportunities to engage in academic writing that includes the unique style of the public relations practice, students need support in developing high-quality assignments aligned to the field of public relations. In addition, public relations students need support in engaging in critical reading. Students need to be able to evaluate sources and case studies and be able to apply academic texts with practical applications in the field. Another challenge experienced by most university students is time management. Public relations students are required to read and analyse large amounts of material including journal articles, books, reports, and policy documents and need to manage their time effectively to meet the requirements of all their written tasks. Writing support in this area can assist students in understanding the writing process and how they need to plan, and book writing centre consultations in advance so that they can work on many drafts before submitting their work for assessment. This balancing of multiple deadlines while reading and consulting with tutors can

further prepare students for the profession. The challenges mentioned indicate that support through initiatives such as the writing centre can be valuable in ensuring that students meet their programme outcomes and can be better prepared when they are in professional practice.

2.6 WRITING CENTRES AT UNIVERSITIES

Writing centre work enables students to build on their prior knowledge and use their experiences to learn and grow during their academic journeys. The writing centre “affords students the constancy of a nurturing rehearsal space as they face the contestation of their identity in the academic environment, develop criticality and start to feel confident in their roles as life-long learners” (Govender and Alcock 2018: 5). This contextualised collaboration and interaction is centred on humanisation, social justice, and social and academic transformation. This is aligned with Boughey and McKenna’s (2015) view of understanding university students as ‘social beings’.

The DUT Writing Centre was established with the aim of supporting students, staff and alumni with their reading and writing projects. Writing centres exist in majority of universities in South Africa and at DUT it was set-up on all campuses to serve the diverse student and staff body. Majority of students are from disadvantaged backgrounds and rely on government funding to pursue their studies. In addition, students come from multilingual language and cultural backgrounds which impede their ability to adjust to the academic demands and conventions that they are expected to master while at university. Writing centres function as friendly, supportive learning environments where students are assisted by friendly, attentive tutors. Tutors at the DUT Writing Centre are postgraduate students from various disciplines and are trained in working with writers in various writing genres including academic writing and creative writing. Tutors embody the role of a writing companion and work with student writers in a developmental way so that students become more confident in their writing (Nichols 2017). Tutors employ reading and writing strategies to induct students into academic writing and how to become more proficient as a writer. Tutors’ role is to further guide and mentor student writers in understanding that writing is a process and a social practice and not something that can be developed overnight (Carlse 2019; Richards, Lackay & Delport 2019; Carstens & Rambiritch 2021). The mantra at the DUT Writing Centre is ‘the more drafts you work on, the stronger your writing will be’ (Govender and Ndadziyira 2023). This understanding of writing as a process is meant to prepare students to recognise the value of making time to work on their written tasks, to plan for their writing and to book sessions with writing centre tutors so that

they can be guided in their assignments or projects. The writing centre practitioners and tutors emphasise the value of booking writing consultations in advance so that student writers have the opportunity to work on a few drafts before submitting assignments for assessment. Student writers and lecturers are often reminded to share their written tasks and assignment rubrics with tutors via the writing centre booking system WCONLINE to enable tutors to be well prepared for their writing consultation.

Writing centre practitioners often engage with students and lecturers during academic workshops. These workshops are requested by discipline lecturers. Writing Centre practitioners plan workshops based on the specific writing needs of students. Workshops range from academic writing that focus on research, essay writing, reflective writing, and report writing. Key aspects that form part of academic writing workshops include paraphrasing, understanding how to write introductions and conclusions, integrating sources, structuring paragraphs and understanding the writing process.

The Writing Centre at DUT is staffed by a writing centre co-ordinator that oversees writing centres across the Durban and Midlands campuses. There are five (5) Writing Centre practitioners and a secretary. Tutors are appointed yearly for a period of nine months in a year. There are five (5) Writing Centre sites in Durban and two (2) in Pietermaritzburg. A significant challenge for writing centres is that the dominant culture at most universities in South Africa, is that writing centres are viewed as ‘fix-it-shops’ for academic writing. This is affirmed by Clarence (2014: 1) who explains that university lecturers often portray writing centres as a place that can fix students’ grammar. Furthermore, students are made to be deficient or lacking with regards to writing. This deficit discourse is harmful and constrains teaching, learning and assessment practices in higher education and is evident in many university contexts. Clarence (2014: 1) asserts that writing centre practitioners and academic alike need to push back at these dominant cultures and “be vigilant in looking out for, and in critiquing it”.

The above section provided an overview on the role of writing centres at universities and the ways in which it provides support to students. The next section discusses the Academic Literacies Model which emphasises a social view of academic writing and advocates for integrated support to the teaching and learning of academic reading and writing.

2.7 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK - ACADEMIC LITERACIES

This research adopts the Academic Literacies Model (Lea and Street 2006), which fosters a social view of academic writing and advocates for integrated support to the teaching and learning of academic reading and writing. Academic literacies which emanated from the UK is positioned broadly within research called New Literacy Studies (NLS), which advocates for a more contextualised socio-cultural approach to writing (Lea 2017). Academic literacies offers a way of understanding student writing, which highlights the “relationship between language and learning in higher education. It draws upon applied linguistics and social anthropology for its theoretical framing and its orientation toward the social, cultural, and contextualized nature of writing in the university” (Lea 2017: 1). Many researchers have investigated language learning strategies that can be used to enhance students’ academic writing in higher education (Casanave 2003; Sasaki 2007; Fenghua and Hongxin 2010). Research in this area has further stimulated the thinking and understanding that academic teachers and students need to engage in transformative ways of inculcating reading, writing and discipline knowledge in higher education practice. Furthermore, many researchers have also focused specifically on the challenges of academic reading and writing (Lillis 2001; Elton 2010; Wingate 2012). Nonetheless, new approaches and models have been developed in terms of understanding ways in which to support students writing and enhance academic success (Maher 2013).

In their study on the academic literacies model, theory and application, Lea and Street (2006) and Lillis and Turner (2001) explain that teachers often express their frustration that students struggle to attain academic writing standards and produce acceptable written work required at university and this subsequently impacts on performance and success. These views resonate throughout the higher education sector globally and as a response to these challenges, academic support programmes and initiatives have been established to intensify academic writing practices at universities. Furthermore, many researchers argue that the teaching of academic writing and reading should be embedded within disciplines as academic literacy is not a general practice and students should be socialised into writing practices for them to succeed in higher education (Bharuthram & Clarence 2015; Boughey & McKenna 2021).

Drawing on NLS, this research explores the role of collaborative partnerships between academic literacies and disciplinary specialists in the Public Relations Department and Writing Centre at DUT. The Academic Literacies approach (Lea & Street 1998; 2000; Lillis & Scott 2007) underpins writing centre work that aims to provide students with epistemological access

by offering support in enhancing their verbal and written communication. The academic literacies approach is a conceptual framework used by writing practitioners as writing support is seen as an important part of widening participation and developing students to become successful, globally portable graduates. Writing centre work is guided by the view that writing is a social interaction, with the aim of developing students' understanding of "writing as a social activity that allows readers and writers to negotiate meaning and their social identities" (Gee 2008: 13). During writing centre consultations, tutors engage in deep listening and open up spaces for students to share their lived experiences and realities and to generate learning. The creation of safe spaces is essential, and the responsibility should be "on academics 'hegemonic ear' to listen and respond to black students' evaluations and moral reasoning about the regulative discourse of the curriculum and how it affects their sense of agency and becoming" (Luckett, Moirreira & Baijnath 2019: 38). Such understandings, when made explicit, provide valuable opportunities for teaching and learning and to examine how such literacy practices relate to epistemological concerns (Lea & Street 1998; Lea & Stierer 2000). This study focuses on understanding first-year public relations students' experiences of writing through the integrated writing interventions and discipline practices at the DUT Writing Centre.

The Academic Literacies Model is based on the New Literacy Studies supported by many researchers including (Barton 1994; Street 2003; Gee 2005; Lea & Street 2006). Below are the key features of the NLS. For the purpose of this study, the researcher uses the Academic Literacies Approach.

Model Key features

Approach	Main Premises
Study Skills Approach	Can be bolt-on or embedded and subject specific or generic
Academic Socialisation Approach	Teaching or practising of scholarship skills using the language of the subject discipline with some subject content
Academic Literacies Approach	Totally embedded approach in which academic writing is explicitly developed within the programme

Table 2.1: Models for developing academic writing (Lea & Street 1998)

The Academic Literacies approach takes into consideration identity, power, and experiences of students as what counts as knowledge in an academic environment. The ALM theoretical framework incorporates the concerns and areas that this study aims to explore. The ALM assists in creating a lens through which academic literacy in the public relations profession is conceptualised. Central to this research was first-year public relations students' experiences of

academic writing practices. The ALM conceptualises literacies as social practices and is a framework that focuses on how students engage with academic writing and literacy in university.

According to Lea and Street (2006) academic literacies involves not just the technical writing skills set but is about ways of thinking and communicating in disciplinary communities. In their model, Lea and Street propose that academic writing at university calls for an understanding of academic expectations and of students' experiences, values, and cultures. The model moves away from traditional understandings of literacy as a set of technical skills and views it as a social practice influenced by contexts, disciplines, and students' identities. Additionally, ALM is especially pertinent for first-year university students as it addresses the challenges in adapting to the expectations of writing at university, which often require traversing complex academic standards. It is a valuable lens for understanding the factors that contribute to students' struggle with academic writing and the type of support needed for them to succeed. As a result, the ALM is well suited for this study as it was developed with the intention to support students with writing (Lillis & Scott 2007).

This model is particularly relevant to this study as it advocates for understanding that literacy should be recognised as not just the proficiency of writing skills such as grammar and spelling but also as a social practice. In this study the researcher suggests that students support in academic writing should involve the social practices and discursive norms of academic communities. The study further suggests that writing at university is part of a larger social process where students should be adequately supported as they negotiate and acquire disciplinary norms and academic discourses. Also, literature on academic literacies advocate for embedded curriculum approaches for teaching and learning of academic reading and writing and enabling students to construct discipline knowledge (Somerville & Creme 2005; Wingate 2006; 2012)

A significant component of the model is that it enables the development of multiple literacies which is required for public relations students while at university and when they enter the workplace. The field of public relations requires that practitioners are adept in reading, writing and communicating and the development of various literacies including reading critically, synthesising literature sources, and writing within particular academic categories will prepare them for meeting the university and workplace standards. In terms of writing centres supporting

public relations students, tutors have a significant role in guiding and inducting students in understanding the social and contextual nature of writing. This theoretical model highlights how writing is shaped by various contexts and writing centre tutors can work with public relations students to understand various target audiences and how to adjust writing styles based on the purpose. Writing centre tutors work with public relations students on how to adjust to different writing expectations such as writing for a professor versus a public relations client. Tutors work collaboratively with public relations students to adapt writing and level of formality depending on whether the writing is for assessment or a public relations task or campaign. Similarly, public relations students need to be able to think critically not only in academic tasks, but in the practice of public relations. Tutors support and guide students in evaluating academic sources, building arguments and synthesising information for academic assessments. Additionally, tutors work with public relations students in analysing case studies in preparation for real-world events related to the practice of public relations.

A focal tenet of the Academic Literacies Model is that writing is a process. This is also a key element of writing centre tutoring and tutors work with students in understanding that academic writing requires ‘time on task’ and is not something that can be learned overnight. In relation to this study, tutors work with public relations students in understanding the stages of writing including the planning and pre-writing stage, the drafting, revision and editing stage. This engagement on the writing process is further valuable for public relations students, who, as part of their studies and when in industry, will have to draft documents such as media releases and can use the stages of writing to revise and refine documents for clients. These writing techniques shared by tutors are useful for understanding the iterative process that public relation practitioners need to engage in to provide concise and clear materials for clients.

In addition to understanding academic literacy as a social practice, a key feature of the ALM is a focus on identity and power where the model recognises that students’ ability to engage well in academic writing is shaped by their social and cultural contexts, identity and lived experiences. In relation to this study, first-year students come from different backgrounds and educational experiences and often feel overwhelmed and marginalised in these new academic settings (Krause 2001; McKenna 2004; Haggis 2006). A key strength of this model is the emphasis that students’ writing at university is influenced by their socioeconomic, cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds highlighting that students come to university with diverse experiences of language, communication, and writing. Their identity shapes the way in

which they approach writing at university. Additionally, students language background significantly influences their academic writing ability and expressing ideas and arguments in academic tone. As alluded to earlier, student participants in this study come to university as speakers of a language other than the one used in the university, intensifying their struggles with academic writing. Furthermore, in terms of language and identity, writing in a second language can create imposter syndrome for students from multilingual backgrounds.

The ALM pronounces that students should not be seen as ‘deficient’ in writing but unfamiliar and unversed in the academic discursive practices and standards required at university. As a result, supportive spaces such as writing centres can contribute to building students’ sense of belonging, confidence and self-efficacy at university and this can influence their academic writing outcomes. Students who have not had strong writing instruction or exposure, require academic support to achieve the expectations of academic discourse. In the past, learning models often focused on remedial approaches, however the ALM places emphasis on supportive approaches to teaching and learning which is aligned to this study. This model promotes supporting students by taking into consideration their individual strengths, needs, experiences and backgrounds. The ALM aligns seamlessly with writing centre work which aims to scaffold students to engage with academic writing through inclusive and collaborative writing practices. In this way, students engage with academic writing as a process. Inclusive and supportive approaches can lead to quality learning experiences, confidence in academic style, and a sense of belonging for university students. Students should be encouraged to value their voices and experiences as legitimate within the university space and writing centres can support students by fostering a sense of belonging through providing judgement-free spaces where students can feel safe to share, learn and develop their academic writing. This model affirms the importance of student agency and confidence and writing centre’s have a valuable role to play in empowering public relations students to be active participants in their learning and writing development. At the writing centre, tutors provide writing companionship and provide the tools to encourage students to take ownership, make independent decisions and direct their writing. Public relations students can develop confidence and agency through regularly working with writing centre tutors and this confidence can be transferred to workplace practice where public relations practitioners are expected to craft clear, coherent, and persuasive messages for clients.

Furthermore, writing centres support public relations students by bridging the gap between the components of the Academic Literacies Model and the needs of public relations students. For example writing centre consultations can build discipline awareness and academic writing practice by providing target support to assignments. If for example students are tasked with writing media releases or reports, writing centre tutors can help students to understand these specific conventions and adapt their writing style. Also, writing centre tutors can guide students in developing a research proposal in their field by taking them through the structure of the document and aligning it with academic writing conventions, while also discussing how these approaches to writing can be used in professional public relations writing tasks such as reports, proposals, memos, and event plans.

Added to students' struggles is the concept of cultural capital that impacts on students navigating academic writing expectations at university. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or first-generation university students may lack the "cultural capital" (knowledge of the unwritten rules and norms of academic culture) that other students acquire at school. ALM highlights the role of academic discourses and writing support for students who have not had prior exposure to academic conventions in adapting and learning discipline knowledge and ways of thinking.

The ALM holds that writing at university is a situated activity and a practice embedded in disciplinary contexts. In the university space academic writing expectations vary across disciplines and students, and first-year students in particular need support in understanding and navigating these discipline standards. The ALM suggests that literacy is interlinked with disciplinary knowledge and ways of thinking in a particular academic discipline. As a result, writing support embedded with disciplinary fields are valuable in inducting students into discipline writing conventions such as presenting evidence using authoritative sources and building structured arguments in one's writing. Higher education researchers affirm that effective learning and teaching of writing must be embedded with discipline content (Wingate & Dreiss 2009). In terms of this study that focuses on public relations students, the ALM points out the value of understanding the social nature of academic writing and how writing development should be embedded in social contexts and shaped by conventions of specific disciplines and communicative needs of audience and academic cultures.

The ALM advocates for academic writing support that recognises the diverse needs of students when they enter university. It suggests that as students transition to higher education, they need scaffolded, contextualised support. This study supports these understandings and affirms that students' needs to be supported based on their diverse needs and proposes structured and collaborative writing support together with discipline academics. The ALM is fittingly aligned to writing centre work which does not focus on 'fixing' or 'correcting' writing but aims to develop students' understanding of writing as a process of engagement. The writing centre acknowledges that first-year students are at different stages of understanding academic writing norms and discipline requirements. As a result, the writing support offered enables development, engagement, feedback, opportunities for revision and guidance on academic discourses.

The ALM offers a framework to understand that academic writing is a socially situated practice shaped by socio-economic contexts, identity and power. As a result, students find academic writing challenging and need scaffolded writing support. The ALM encourages academics in higher education to understand that students' writing challenges should not be seen as individual deficiencies but as a result of their prior educational experiences and backgrounds and the unknown academic norms they have to negotiate when they transition to university. Working with students with this in mind can offer a more inclusive, transformation academic support practices unique to students' identities and offer student quality learning and teaching experiences.

In this section the researcher discussed how the Academic Literacies Model can provide a valuable framework for discussing how public relations students can benefit from writing centre support to develop their academic reading and writing. The discussions in this section highlights that this model views writing as a complex, social practice. It further emphasises that academic writing requires structured, contextualised support practices that will enable students navigate disciplinary expectations and to engage and communicate effectively in academic and professional public relations contexts. Adopting the Academic Literacies approach as the singular theoretical framework provided both depth and coherence to this research. It situates writing centre interventions within broader struggles over language, identity, and power, while offering practical leverage for designing student-centred, discipline-responsive support that truly bridges academia and professional practice.

2.8 CONCLUSION

Chapter Two provided a detailed discussion on the role of universities in South Africa within a transformation agenda that seeks to redress apartheid-era inequities and democratise access to knowledge. It further examined student experiences in terms of reading and writing at university particularly the challenges first-generation and multilingual learners face in mastering the reading and writing conventions of their discipline. This chapter offered insight into the practice of public relations and the needs of public relations students. It further explained the role of the writing centre and its collaborative, inclusive approach to student support. This chapter highlights how the Academic Literacies Model from New Literacy Studies underpins the discussion, framing literacy as a socially situated practice shaped by power, identity, and context. ALM is appropriate and highly advantageous as the sole theoretical lens for this due to its alignment with writing centre practice. Academic Literacies foregrounds writing as a socially negotiated practice rather than a set of decontextualised skills. This perfectly mirrors the tutorial ethos of writing centres, which emphasise dialogue, co-construction of meaning, and genre awareness over mere ‘fixes’ or ‘error correction.’ By using this model exclusively, the researcher was able to conceptually unite all aspects of the research, from one-on-one consultations to collaborative curriculum design, under a single coherent framework that captures both process and power. In addition, ALM explicitly attends to the ways power, identity, and context shape who gets to “speak” and whose knowledge counts in academia and the workplace. In South Africa’s multilingual, post-apartheid environment, issues of language privilege and access are paramount. This lens enabled the researcher to interrogate not only *what* students learn in the writing centre but *how* that learning mediates access to the hidden curriculum of Public Relations discourse, and ultimately to professional legitimacy. While many models focus narrowly on writing skills, Academic Literacies encompasses the full spectrum of academic communication: critical reading, disciplinary discourse, multimodal practices, and reflexive identity work. This breadth is essential for the public relations discipline where reading scholarly research, interpreting case studies, and drafting persuasive media messages are inextricably linked.

CHAPTER THREE – RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter presented literature on the practice of public relations; the work of the DUT Writing Centre and role of tutors in providing academic support as well as the Academic Literacies Model which advocates for integrated support to the teaching and learning of academic reading and writing. This chapter provides details on the research design, paradigm, approach, data collection methods, sample size and the data analysis technique. It further explains the ethical considerations of the study, limitations and reliability of the research.

3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

This study is exploratory in nature and used an interpretive (constructivist) approach in understanding the influence of academic support practices on student learning in a first-year Public Relations programme at a UoT in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal. Khan (2014: 299) explains that “An interpretivist view of the world allows for subjective values, where individuals are understood to form their own reality of the world in different contexts through interactions with others.” Guided by the qualitative constructivist paradigm, phenomenography was adopted as a research approach. Phenomenography is often used in qualitative research to understand the experiences of a particular group of people. This approach enabled the researcher to understand the qualitatively different ways students’ and academics’ conceptualise and experience teaching and learning through engagements with the DUT Writing Centre (Marton 1986; Marton 1994; Marton 2000; Prosser 2000). Phenomenography further allowed the researcher to analyse how students experience a phenomenon and how they acquire knowledge as they experience learning in their discipline. Waghid (2002: 47) asserts that “education research involves human practices, which are so difficult to quantify”. Hence, a qualitative approach to this study is deemed appropriate as it enabled an understanding of how collaborative academic support approaches between discipline-specific lecturers (Public Relations department) and the DUT Writing Centre can enhance academic reading and writing, bridge gaps in preparedness and foster both academic success and professional competence for students. Qualitative research enables the researcher to garner in-depth information and experiences from participants (Creswell & Creswell 2018; Creswell & Poth 2018). Denzin and Lincoln (2008: 139) define qualitative research as “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible.” Similarly, Chohan (2010:

39) maintains that central to the interpretive paradigm is the understanding of “the subjective world of human experience”. Denzin and Lincoln (2008: 140) explain that “qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials - case study, personal experience, introspection, life- story, artefacts, cultural texts and productions - that describe the meaning of individual lives”. By probing and understanding participants’ lived experiences and meaning-making processes, the methodology foregrounds rich, contextualised insights into teaching and learning relationships. A case study was used with the Public Relations programme at DUT as the unit of analysis. In this study, the case study enabled data to be produced through personal experiences in focus groups and interviews as means to make meaning of lecturers’, students’ and writing centre staff experiences of learning in higher education. Cohen et al. (2007: 29-49) maintains that “case studies represent reality and give a sense of being there.” This kind of data production process is consistent within an interpretivist epistemology where participants’ experiences and subjective meanings and understandings form the foundation of analysis. An interpretative qualitative case study approach (Yin 2018) was selected to enable an in-depth examination of writing centre practices within the situated context of a South African university’s public relations programme. This design enabled the collection of data from multiple sources and gain multiple perspectives - students, lecturers, and writing centre practitioners, fostering a holistic understanding of how discipline-specific literacy support unfolds in practice.

The image below in Figure 3.1 highlights the interpretative, exploratory and qualitative nature of this study as well as the data collection methods employed.

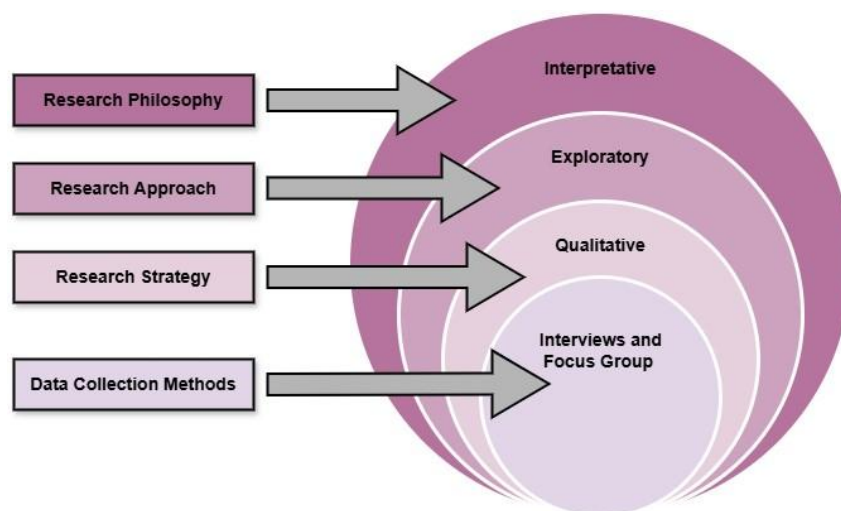


Figure 3.1: Research design

3.3 DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Three groups were purposively selected for this research study:

- **Public Relations Students:** First-year public relations students were recruited for this study.
- **Public Relations Lecturers:** Three (3) full-time academic staff members teaching core Public Relations courses were selected for their involvement in embedding academic literacies within the curriculum or collaborating with the writing centre. These were permanent employees at the case study university.
- **Writing Centre Practitioners:** Four writing centre practitioners responsible for designing and delivering discipline-responsive writing support were selected. These were permanent employees at the case study university.

3.3.1 Phenomenographic interviews

One set of data was gathered through interviews. In-depth semi-structured interviews with teaching staff from the Public Relations programme and Writing Centre staff (DUT) enabled an understanding of how collaborative approaches between the Public Relations Department and Writing Centre impact on teaching and learning and particularly developing academic reading and writing in disciplinary spaces. According to Yates et al. (2012), phenomenographic interviews enable research participants to reflect on the experience of a phenomenon. The aim of phenomenographic interviews is for the participant to reflect on their experiences and share those experiences with the interviewer or researcher. In this study, data was generated through in-depth, open-ended interview questions to enable participants to describe their experiences in depth (Reid and Petocz 2002). The duration of interviews were between 40 and 45 minutes per participant. Interviews were conducted at a venue convenient for the participants. Recruitment of participants involved a direct personal approach from the researcher. The researcher made contact with the teaching staff from the Public Relations Programme and Writing Centre staff via email to inform them of the research being conducted and request their participation. Appointments were made and all interviews were carried out within a month. In some instances appointments had to change and this was done so that the interview could take place at a time convenient to the research participant. The interviews with the public relations lecturers were aimed at exploring their experiences of writing centre partnerships, the perceived impacts on students' learning and gather their suggestions for improvement. Similarly, the

interviews with writing centre practitioners probed their approaches to public relations specific support, perceptions of student needs, and collaborative practices with academic departments.

3.3.2 Focus Groups

Focus group discussions were facilitated with DUT first-year Public Relations students to understand their experiences and perceptions on the academic support practices in contributing to their learning and success in higher education. There are several definitions of focus groups. It can be understood as a planned interview with a group of people with similar interest to gain insight on the perceptions and experiences of a particular topic (Cohen et al. 2007). In focus group discussions, data is generated through participants interacting with the researcher and each other and can be valuable in gathering attitudes, ideas and views on the research topic. The focus group discussions were conducted on the same day at the institution (DUT) and took approximately 60 minutes each. The focus group discussions elicited students' experiences of writing centre tutorials and workshops, perceived gains in reading and writing competencies, and reflections on the transferability of skills.

Recruitment of the public relations students was facilitated by the teaching staff in the Public Relations department and the researcher. In all instances, participation was voluntary and participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

3.3.3 Pre-testing

A pre-test was facilitated with a sample that was as close to the actual sample and was used to uncover problems before the instruments were administered in the main study. This was done by conducting a pilot interview which enabled the researcher to refine the interview and focus group questions.

3.4 DATA ANALYSIS

The data gathered was analysed using thematic analysis. Punch (2013) maintains that selecting the data analysis approach for qualitative data is based on the purpose of the study and should be systematic. Additionally, Khan (2014) explains that there is no suggested technique for analysing data in a phenomenographic study as the research questions often guide the type of analysis. The researcher familiarised herself with the data collected, generated codes, searched

for themes, reviewed themes, defined and name themes, and produced the findings and recommendations. The data analysis process was aligned to Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis technique of collecting data, grouping and analysing. The researcher firstly familiarised herself with the verbatim transcriptions from the interviews and the focus groups and read and reviewed the data for clear understanding after which data was condensed into units of central ideas. Here, the researcher, through the use of codes, was able to group common and shared perspectives as well as differences in expressions of understandings. The researcher captured the key meanings and descriptions of each category, labelled categories and contrasting categories to determine the differences and similarities from each other.

The interviews and focus group discussions enabled the researcher to draw conclusions and recommendations on collaborative, writing- intensive approaches undertaken within the public relations discipline and how it can contribute to enhancing academic reading and writing, student learning and ultimately success in higher education. The NVivo software was used to aid in the analysis and categorisation of the data and in the offering of recommendations on how integrated approaches to supporting students' learning can contribute to developing globally portable students and student success at university.

3.5 STUDY PARTICIPANTS

3.5.1 Population/target group

Population refers to the entire group of people the researcher is investigating (Sekaran & Bougie 2016: 262) and in this study, the population consisted of students and staff at DUT.

3.5.2 Sample Size

The number of units chosen from a target population is referred to as a sample size. Sample size is generally used in research as it is difficult to study the entire target group. In this study, the sample size comprised of two focus groups (5 participants in each group) of first-year Public Relations students, three (3) Public Relations lecturers and four (4) Writing Centre representatives (writing centre practitioners).

3.5.3 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The criteria for student participation was that students in the focus group discussions had to be first-year Public Relations students. Additionally, only permanent lecturers from the Public

Relations department that work with the writing centre were included in the study. In terms of the interviews with Writing Centre staff; only DUT Writing Centre permanently employed practitioners were included in the study.

3.5.4 Sampling method

Non-probability purposive sampling was used to meet the objectives of the research. This sampling method enabled the researcher to focus on specific characteristics of the population and thereby fulfil the study's aims and objectives. In a non-probability sample, "subjects are usually selected based on their accessibility, or by the researcher's purposive personal judgement" (Mugera 2013: 1). Purposive sampling also known as selective, subjective, or judgmental sampling method was applied in this study as it enabled the researcher to have judgment on selecting participants that will be able to contribute to the study. Purposive sampling is a non-probability method for obtaining a sample where the researcher selects specific participants that will help the study meet its goals. Moreover, an important aspect of a phenomenographic study is that the outcome of a phenomenographic analysis is the variation in the ways of experiencing a phenomenon (Reed 2006). As a result, purposive sampling has been mostly used by phenomenographers as it enables the selection of 'critical cases' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2007) based on the researcher's judgement.

3.5.5 Ethical considerations

Prior to the commencement of this research, an application for ethical clearance was made and granted by the Institutional Research and Ethics Committee (IREC) at the DUT (IREC155/23). Participants in this study were briefed on the purpose of the study, its aims and objectives, given a consent form stating that participation is voluntary, and that they could withdraw at any stage.

Participants were assured that their identities would remain confidential throughout the research process and in the analysis and discussion of the findings. No incentives were provided for participation in the study. Participants were assured of transparency in how the data collected will be used and of protection to their dignity, rights and welfare during the interview and focus group process. In addition, only the researcher and the supervisor had access to data.

Participants were assigned a code name, number or pseudonym to ensure anonymity and that data was reported using these alternate names. It is a common practice, especially in qualitative

research, to ensure anonymity and confidentiality of participants. Pseudonyms also assist in creating a more personal and relatable experience for readers, as they can better connect with participants' experiences. For example student focus groups participants were named given a letter of the alphabet followed by a number and interview participants were given pseudonyms. For example public relations lecturer participants were given the pseudonyms Evelyn, Anneline and Aaliyah; and writing centre practitioners were given the pseudonyms Alison, Anneline, Thando and Yende to maintain their anonymity.

3.6 VALIDITY OF CONCERN/ RELIABILITY

Reliability in this study was enhanced by taking detailed field notes, recording interviews and by transcribing, reading and checking data. In qualitative research, validity is often referred to as 'trustworthiness' (Lincoln and Guba 1985) of a study. The trustworthy approach is often used in qualitative research and relates to the researcher ensuring that the study will be conducted in a fair and ethical manner and that the findings attained in the study depict the accurate experiences of the research participants. The trustworthiness of qualitative data and its analysis can be discussed by using constructs such as credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability which ensures the rigor in qualitative research (Shenton 2004; Elo et al. 2014). To ensure credibility and dependability in this study, the researcher employed a few strategies. The researcher engaged in member checking where a draft summary of the emergent themes were shared with a sub-set of the participants for clarification and validation. The researcher also had discussions with independent qualitative researchers and this peer debriefing provided critical feedback on the coding technique and the development of themes. Additionally, an audit trail was maintained with a comprehensive record of the research process, documenting decisions, coding plans, procedures, thematic maps and interpretations. This ensured transparency and allowed for the for verification of the findings. The audit trail was a way to make the researcher's thinking and planning processes visible and traceable, promoting the credibility and dependability of this research study.

Yin (1994: 68) advocates that "certain issues need to be planned for the data collection protocol to ensure reliability." Table 3.1 provides an overview on how reliability protocol was implemented in this study.

ENSURING RELIABILITY IN RESEARCH	
Protocol	Protocol status in relation to the study
Gaining access to interviewees	The researcher contacted interviewees via email to set up appointments for interviews and focus groups.
Developing appropriate data collection methods and ensuring clear and concise time frames	The researcher developed appropriate data collection methods and used an interview schedule for the interviews with public relations lecturers and writing centre practitioners as well as the focus group discussions with first-year public relations students. All data collection was carried out within a specific time frame.
Provisions for unexpected situations such as interviews needing to change in terms of appointment dates and times.	In such instances, the researcher liaised with participants to reschedule appointments at a time suitable for both.

Table 3.1: Ensuring reliability in research

Source: Adapted from Yin (1994: 68)

3.7 LIMITATIONS

The sample used in the study was limited to one department, the Public Relations department (academic unit). Only one public UoT that offers Public Relations was part of the sample - as a single-institution case study, findings may not be fully generalisable to other universities or disciplines. Furthermore, only first-year Public Relations students were included in this study.

3.8 CONCLUSION

This chapter explained the research methodology employed in this study. It provided a detailed description on the interpretivist/constructivist paradigm, the qualitative research approach and how these were suitable for this study on public relations reading and writing support practices in contributing to student success at the DUT. The methodology employed positions the study to yield nuanced insights into the collaborative processes that underpin effective, discipline-responsive academic literacy support for public relations students. The next chapter, Chapter Four, provides an analysis and discussion on the findings from the data collected.

CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter explained the research methods used in this study. This chapter provides a detailed discussion and analysis of the data gathered from the interviews and focus groups discussions. The aim of this study was to determine the influence of Public Relations' reading and writing support practices in contributing to student success at a UoT in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. In order to achieve the study's goals, interviews and focus groups were facilitated to meet the study objectives which were to:

- Analyse first-year public relations students' experiences of reading and writing at the writing centre.
- Determine the value of collaborative approaches to learning and teaching in the discipline of public relations.
- Provide recommendations on ways to enhance academic support practices such as the writing centre that are responsive to students' needs.

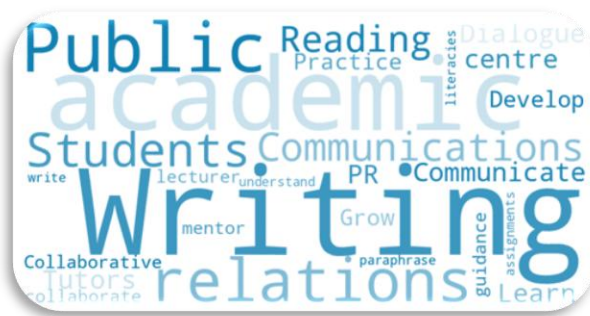
This study implemented specific techniques, most notably open-ended questioning to align data gathering and analysis with its core objectives. It focussed on first-year students' experiences of reading and writing support at the DUT Writing Centre, as well as on the ways in which collaborative teaching and learning practices foster the development of first-year public relations students. Consistency between the different data sources were explored to identify patterns of meaning and to describe the emerging themes to explain and discuss specific patterns and phenomena within the research context.

4.2 DATA ANALYSIS – SECTION A – BIBLIOGRAPHICAL DATA

This section provides an overview of study participant's biographical characteristics. It further presents a word cloud as illustrated in Figure 4.1, highlighting the key trends and patterns in this research that explores Public Relations' reading and writing support practices in contributing to student success. The study analyses the perceptions and experiences of DUT Public Relations lecturers, first-year students and the views of Writing Centre practitioners to gain insight on how collaborative approaches to learning and teaching in the discipline of

public relations can contribute to student success while they are at university and when they enter the workplace. In section 4.3.2 (Data Analysis - Section B), interviews with three (3) lecturers who are permanent employees at the Public Relations Department at DUT; interviews with four (4) writing centre practitioners and focus group discussions with ten (10) first-year public relations students will be presented in the form of discussions and inserting excerpts of their responses.

Figure 4.1: Word Cloud



The Word Cloud in Figure 4.1 incorporates the key areas across this study. The key words that emerged from participants include: writing; public relations; students; communications; academic; reading; collaborative; learn; develop, among many others. The word cloud provides a visual summary of the most frequently occurring terms in participants' responses. Prominent terms such as *writing*, *reading*, *public relations/communications*, *students*, and *academic* confirm the study's disciplinary focus, while clusters of words like *collaborative*, *learn*, *develop*, *guidance*, *mentor*, *tutors*, and *grow* point to an emphasis on developmental and support-oriented practices. The word cloud aids in pattern recognition and is useful to orienting the reader to possible dominant themes at a glance. It further helps justify why the subsequent thematic analysis focuses on reading and writing development and collaborative support practices. Based on the fact that frequency alone does not fully capture context, the word cloud is intentionally used alongside richer qualitative excerpts and thematic coding to ensure accurate interpretation which is offered later in this chapter.

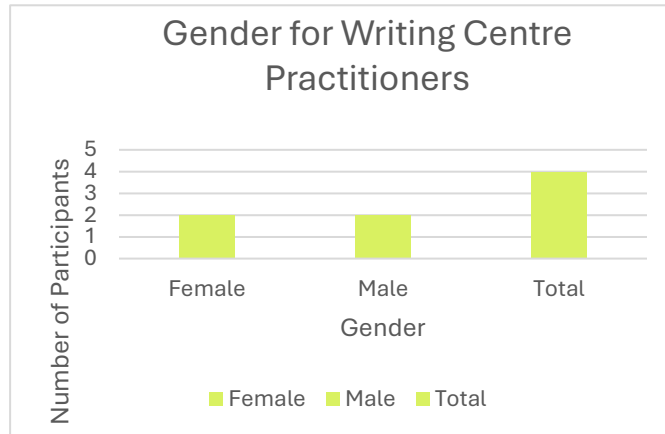


Figure 4.2: Writing Centre practitioner interviews - Number of participants and gender characteristics

Figure 4.2 describes the gender distribution of interviewees from the one-on-one interviews with DUT Writing Centre practitioners. It further shows that four (4) Writing Centre Practitioners were interviewed of which two (2) were female and two (2) were male.

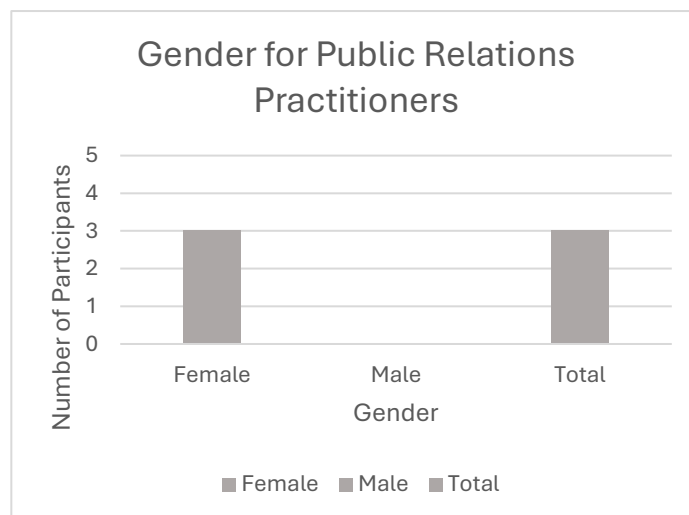


Figure 4.3: Public Relations practitioner interviews - Number of participants and gender characteristics

Figure 4.3 indicates that three (3) in-depth interviews were facilitated with lecturers from the DUT Public Relations Department. All participants were female.

The following section provides an overview of the focus group discussion participants in terms of number of participants, gender characteristics, race and home language.

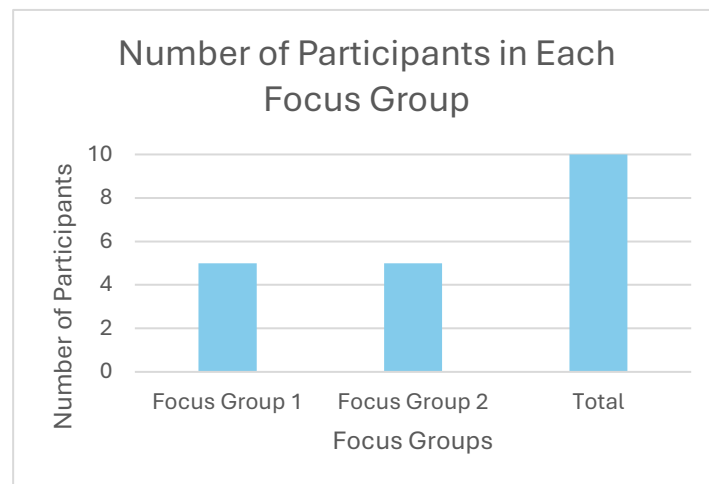


Figure 4.4: Number of participants in Focus Groups

Figure 4.4 indicates that this study had two (2) focus group discussions with firstyear Public Relations students from DUT. Both focus group discussions had five (5) participants.

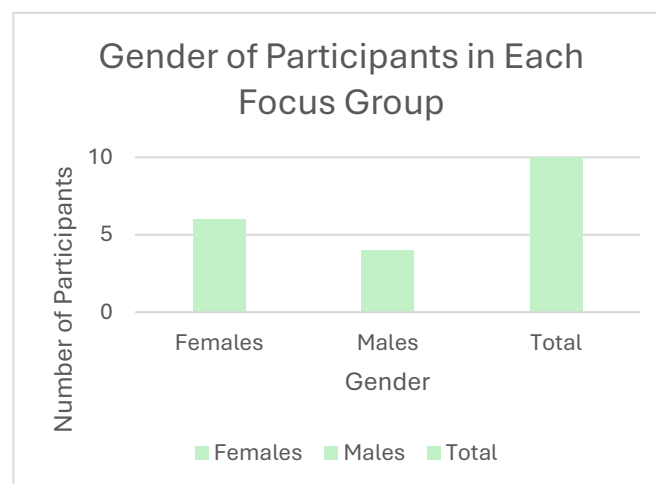


Figure 4.5: Gender distribution of focus group participants

The above figure indicates that there were a total of ten (10) student participants of which six (6) were female students and four (4) were male students.

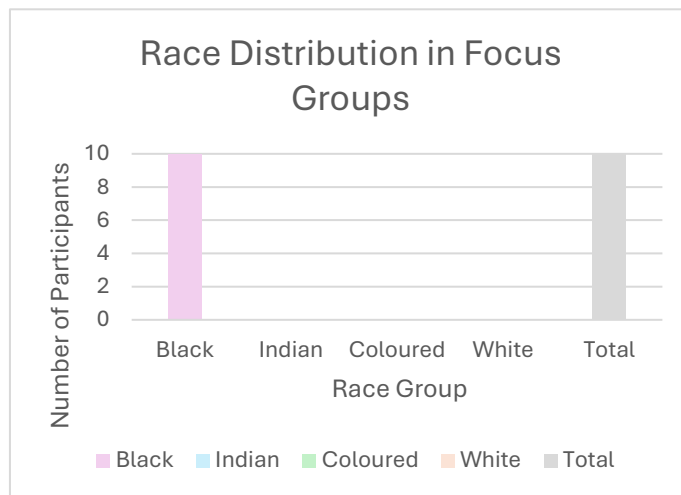


Figure 4.6: Race Distribution in Focus Groups

In terms of race distribution, Figure 4.6 indicates that all ten (10) DUT Public Relations first-year students that formed the focus group discussion participants were Black.

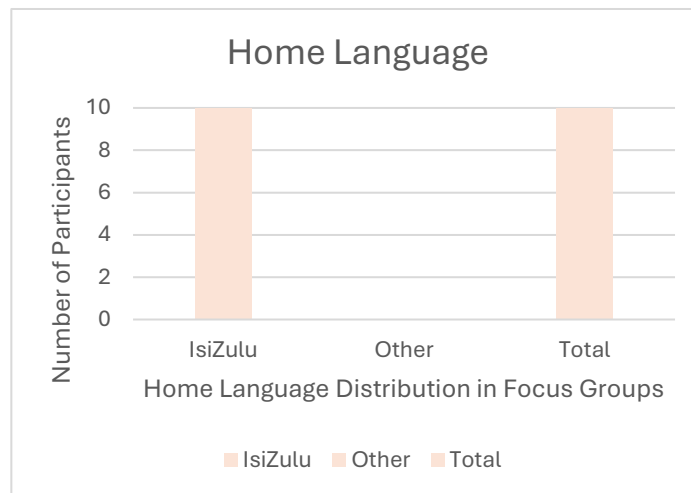


Figure 4.7: Home Language of Focus Group Participants

The above figure shows that all focus group discussion participants were isiZulu speakers.

The above section provided a brief overview of the biographical characteristics of the study participants and an illustrative word cloud. The gender profile graphs and the demographic detail on home language and social practices are presented to provide the necessary contextualisation of the research sample. Gender, home language and the everyday literacy practices students bring to university are known to shape reading fluency, writing confidence,

access to support and therefore these demographic variables are not merely descriptive but are valuable and relevant to understanding how Public Relations Reading and Writing Support Practices contribute to first-year student success. The inclusion of demographic profiles, specifically gender and home language, and student social practices serves 3 interrelated purposes. Firstly the transparency about the composition of the sample selected for the study, secondly to contextualise the analysis of the outcomes and thirdly to serve as a grounding for practical recommendations on student support practices. Section 4.3 unpacks the themes that emerged from the data and provides a detailed discussion on each theme.

4.3 SECTION B – DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section provides the interpretation and analysis of data collected from the data set. The analysis presents data from the focus group discussions with first-year public relations students and interviews with public relations lecturers and writing centre staff.

The following three themes emanated from the collected data:

Theme 1: Students' experiences and challenges of reading and writing

Theme 2: Collaborative approaches in Public Relations education

Theme 3: Discipline-specific writing support

It is important to note that while the three themes are discussed separately, there are many areas in which they interconnect in the discussion and analysis. This research explored the role of Public Relations' reading and writing support practices, particularly within the Writing Centre, in enhancing student success at a UoT in South Africa. The study focused on first-year students' experiences, the value of collaborative learning approaches, and potential strategies for improving academic support services.

4.3.1 Theme 1: Students' experiences and challenges of reading and writing

The higher education sector in South Africa is marked by significant disparities in students' prior schooling experiences, languages of instruction, and levels of academic preparedness, and as a result, many first-year students arrive at university with uneven mastery of reading and writing conventions expected of them. This theme explores the challenges faced by students as they navigate disciplinary standards.

This study found that many first-year public relations students enter university with limited academic writing and reading capabilities. There is a significant gap between high school and university-level expectations, particularly in reading for understanding, critical thinking, and structured academic writing. Students often have significant challenges with referencing, paraphrasing, and developing coherent academic arguments. Lecturer participant, Evelynnn expresses: *“Academic writing is a challenge especially when it comes to first years. They do battle. These students are coming in from school. We also have different students from different learning backgrounds that's coming to higher education where they are expected to know how to read and write and interpret written literature. But unfortunately, it's not the case.”* Evelynnn’s views highlight how South African higher education is marked by profound disparities in students’ schooling experiences, languages of instruction, and academic preparedness and how many entrants to universities arrive with uneven mastery of the reading and writing ability.

Focus group participant S5 explains that one of the biggest challenges is mastering academic writing style as a public relations student: *“...the challenges I face is being critical, analysing and engaging in texts and PR case studies, paraphrasing and putting information in my own words and referencing. It's been really tricky for me.”* Meanwhile, Writing Centre participant, Yende explains: *“Students struggle with referencing, they struggle with understanding their assignment questions, they struggle with paraphrasing, and they are unable to put together sentences in a coherent way.”* These views show that students, particularly first-year entrants require support and guidance to become more confident in academic writing and understand the standards required at university and specific to their disciplines. Many researchers have highlight how the entry year into university is often most challenging for students in terms of adjusting to university academic expectations and feeling a sense of belonging (Marshall et al. 2012; Woods et al. 2017). This is supported by Fataar (2012) who affirms that students that come from disadvantaged academic backgrounds such as poorly resourced schools, struggle with connecting their life experience with university and curriculum demands. Focus group participant S5 describes her need for support: *“I need someone to explain in much more detail the assignment topics we get, because some words I don't know and they are new to me. I need someone to express those words a little bit better so I can understand them and know what to do... a challenge which I'm still facing when I'm writing an essay is that it is difficult to reference taking something from a journal and referencing it in my essay. So I need support.”*

This students' views are aligned to writing centre practitioners views above affirming the challenges experienced by students right from when they receive their assignment questions.

Participant S8 affirms that fear often takes over when assignments are given to them: *"I feel very scared when I get my assignment and they tell us read, read, read....we know we need to read but it's so hard to know what to add in our assignments and how to."* University students often lack confidence in their capabilities and have poor self-efficacy beliefs which calls for academic support interventions to assist in guiding and supporting students with the required academic support (Fernsten and Reda 2011; Glennrich & Dison 2018; Boughey & McKenna 2021). This perspective is echoed by Wingate (2010) and Marshall et al. (2012), whose research shows that students often experience feelings of vulnerability in academic settings. Their findings suggest that universities need to take deliberate and thoughtful steps to strengthen students' confidence and identity as writers. Similarly, Tinto (1999:5) emphasises that students are more likely to persist in their studies when they feel recognised and supported as integral members of the university community.

Another challenge for public relations students is where English is their second language. This presents additional barriers, as some students have difficulty articulating their ideas in English. Writing centre participant Thando affirms this: *"As a writing centre, we have observed that students have English as their second language, and we try to assist them. We try to meet them at their point of need. These obviously require extra support because we can't obviously compare a student who, who is coming from a well-off background, who has maybe English as their first language."* Torgesen et al. (2007) express that when English is not students' first language and is the mode of instruction, they have to find ways to adopt the cognitive demands of discipline curriculum and simultaneously acquire academic writing proficiency. Moreover, students need teaching and learning environments that are able to meet them at their point of need.

Participant Yende states: *"Our approaches aim to understand the social environment and the cultural practices that the students brings to the writing centre and try to match who they are and how they are socialised, so that we come up with strategies that would be need dependent or strategies that would be culturally sensitive and then understand the social environment from where the students are coming from."* These comments reveal that the pedagogical

approach of the writing centre foregrounds a social-cultural approach where students' backgrounds and identities are acknowledged in learning strategies.

Meanwhile, Thando further expresses: *"One academic once said, no one is born with academic literacies. You have to be initiated into academic writing. So whether you have English as your first language or not, you still need support, because you have to be initiated into the many literacies that we work with or deal with at university level, because there is a huge gap between high school requirements and the writing expectations at university level."* Participant Anneline reiterated that many students come to university underprepared. Anneline highlights how students need to be taken through the basics: *"How do you structure and write a paragraph? What is reflective writing? How do you use effective language effectively? ...How do you write for your reader? How do you develop your own voice? For you to become a good writer, you need to practice."* This lecturer's observation aligns with the views of Alison who explains that writing centre work is aimed at getting students to understand what is expected of them and scaffolding them through the understanding of the task at hand: *"[We] start off with your higher-level concerns. Has the student understood the question? Are they answering? You know, are they in the right ballpark? You know, like a lecturer might just say, critically analyse and the student is completely flawed by that."*

Based on the above data, it is evident that students require reading and writing support and the literacies required to meet their discipline requirements and to be able to succeed at university. Student participant S4 proclaims that her visit to the writing centre strengthened her understanding of her assignment: *"The writing centre tutor was really helpful and she discussed and helped me read and analyse my work. She helped me break down the assignment and this enabled me to understand it more clearly. Ever since that consultation, when I get an assignment, even if I haven't looked the assignment in detail, I just book an appointment to work with the tutor."*

The data revealed that many Public Relations students experience academic reading and writing at university as both unfamiliar and intimidating. Their transition into higher education is marked by difficulty in engaging with academic texts and mastering the formal conventions required in discipline-specific writing. These challenges are often rooted in a lack of prior exposure to academic discourse, limited confidence in their abilities, and uncertainty about the expectations of university-level writing. Students expressed feeling overwhelmed by the

abstract nature of scholarly texts and frustrated by the demand for critical analysis and structured argumentation. These findings underscore the need for more scaffolded support in academic literacy, particularly during the crucial first year of study. They also highlight the importance of responsive, pedagogical approaches that recognise writing as a developmental, social practice - one that requires ongoing guidance, feedback, and opportunities for reflection.

4.3.2 Theme 2: Collaborative approaches in Public Relations education

Students who engage with the writing centre benefit from personalised guidance on reading strategies and academic writing structures. This is aligned to Govender and Alcock's (2020) view that writing centres are safe, flexible learning spaces where students consult with an attentive tutor in a collaborative environment and receive feedback on their writing, engage in dialogue, and exchange ideas as they work on their written tasks. This is supported by participant Yende who maintains: *"The writing centre creates a platform that is free from threats, that is free from fear, where students are allowed to make mistakes during discussions, at consultation."* This type of approach to writing can be encouraging and valuable especially for a first-year student who comes to university feeling vulnerable and in need of a friendly, engaging and inclusive learning environment.

One-on-one writing centre consultations provides tailored support that is not always available in large classroom settings. Concerns on students' reading and writing ability is an ongoing discussion and well documented in research (Govender and Alcock 2018) Additionally, students need tailored interventions and support particularly when they transition from school to university. Lecturer participant Anneline indicates: *"Students are actively encouraged to not only write, but read...people don't realise that to become a good writer you need to read and a reading culture at a university level....with our PR students, it's very low...We need to encourage or build a culture where reading and writing is prioritised."* This participant further suggests that the students should engage in weekly writing exercises and even reading rooms, encouraging students to read about the discipline and what is happening in the field. This is an activity that can be explored further and facilitated jointly with the academic department and the writing centre.

In terms of promoting reading and writing at the university, participant Yende illustrates how the writing centre aims to foster this culture among students: *"The writing centre promotes*

reading opportunities for students by sitting down with students and offering them materials to read, showing them how to source material that is relevant and responsive to the particular discipline task and assisting them to identify strategies of reading that would develop their knowledge.” In addition, participant Anneline suggests ways in which the writing centre can cultivate a reading culture: *“The writing centre needs to have some kind of a reading culture attached to it. Maybe like a mobile library. They could go to the different campuses and not only have writing competitions but promote reading as well and maybe even debating. Like, I think when you speak about writing, it's not the act of actual writing. There's so much more that's involved. And I would like to see the writing centre evolve in that direction where they don't only focus on the written text, but also look at, what is writing....So maybe let's have some debates...and stuff, talk about topical issues, what's happening, what are affecting student lives, things like that. Also, what's related to writing and reading.”* These reflections suggest the importance of working together to develop coordinated strategies that are informed by what the lecturer requires, what the writing centre can offer, and most importantly what the student needs. The importance of reading and writing in the Public Relations field is supported by many authors who highlight that “reading is essential for public relations practitioners to understand the media, the public and the organisation” (Grunig 1992: 23) and writing is a fundamental skill as it enables effective communication with stakeholders. Alison further highlights the value of reading stating, *“So in a sense, everything that you're doing is working with reading and writing because you're reading the assigned question, you're trying to get the student to a place where they understand that. And it's through discussion, through open ended questions, through encouraging criticality in the work...And I think that it's really powerful work because it's individuals one to one.”*

Lecturer participant Aaliyah affirms that practitioners in the field of public relations need to have good writing and reading ability. She expresses: *“Good reading and writing is fundamental to be a good leader. I think there's this quotation that I once read that says that if you want to be a good writer, you need to be reading because that is how you get inspiration and you get ideas and you get your creativity flowing.”* Many authors explain that Public Relations graduates and professionals need to have strong writing and reading ability for crafting messages and interpreting public reactions. These competencies are fundamental to strategic communication, enabling public relations professionals to create plans and strategies that effectively connect with stakeholders (Krishna, Wright & Kotcher 2020; Luttrell, Wallace, McColloug & Lee 2021). These fundamental competences enable public relations

professionals to analyse complex information, identify trends and communicate findings effectively.

This study reports that some students found the services of the Writing Centre useful, but indicated that more awareness is needed about its services and the role of the writing centre that challenges the once dominant culture of viewing writing centres as remedial spaces. Clarence (2014) bemoans that a substantial challenge for writing centres is that they are viewed as ‘fix-it-shops’ for academic writing. Many university lecturers often portray writing centres as a place that can fix students’ grammar and students are made to be deficient or lacking with regards to writing. This deficit discourse is harmful and constrains teaching, learning and assessment practices in higher education. Participant S5 suggests: *“For me, even though people come to our classes to tell us more about the writing centre many students may not attend classes and don’t know how useful the writing centre is especially for us first-year students. Maybe posters should be put up on DUT campuses to inform students about the centre and how tutors can assist students in improving their writing skills and their reading skills.”* These comments suggest that although students make use of university writing centres not all students are aware of the potential value of working with writing centre tutors.

Focus group participant S4 explains how they understand the role of the writing centre in promoting reading and writing: *“Reading and writing is essential as we develop our academic writing. It also helps us develop key abilities needed in the public relations field which will be good for when we need to be employed.”* S4’s comments further supports the value of writing centres in not just assisting students with academic needs but also equipping them with life-long competencies that can be used when they enter industry as public relations practitioners. It highlights how targeted writing support can bridge gaps in preparedness and foster both academic success and professional competence for public relations students. Writing centre engagements not only contribute to enhancing students’ ability to compose media releases, reports, and case analyses with clarity and confidence, but also cultivate critical thinking essential for evaluating real-world public relations scenarios.

The findings from the data collected revealed that it is imperative for academic departments to partner and collaborate with support departments such as writing centres as a strong integration of the writing centre into public relations courses can improve student outcomes. Writing centre participant Alison maintains that the writing centre values working with lecturers and is open

to collaborate: *“If a lecturer is wanting input in their classroom, then all of us will be responsive to that as well. And we try very hard to work with the material that the lecturers are working with as well.”*

The findings further show that department members who actively involve the writing centre in their curriculum, report better student engagement in academic writing, and research tasks. Dozier affirms these views stating that “research is the foundation of public relations practice and reading and writing are essential skills for conducting and communicating research” (1992: 23). Furthermore, Botan and Hazleton (2006) emphasise that public relations professionals need to have strong writing ability for crafting messages, as well as reading skills for interpreting public perceptions. Lecturer participant Anneline explains how she integrates the writing centre in her lesson: *“When the writing centre comes in and addresses our students I tell them, look, they are not here to edit your work. Working with a tutor will help you put your thoughts onto paper and into words. So, yeah, we share close relationship. They also come and do guest lectures and speak to our students. Also, as a lecturer, I encourage my students to visit the writing centre and I always include information about the writing centre in our learner guides.”*

Focus group participant S4 maintains: *“Academic writing is essential for effective research and communicating ideas as a public relations student and it helps in terms of researching, developing one's ideas, how to go about research and do the things [in the expected ways].”* Writing support is most effective when lecturers and writing tutors work together to align teaching methodologies. Participant Evelyn asserts: *“It is important for students to familiarise themselves with academic writing conventions. When we collaborate with the writing centre it helps because what happens is that we are all speaking the same language and giving students the same direction which ultimately leads to improved assignments and students’ success.”* This is supported by participant Yende who supports partnering with academics: *“We in the writing centre together with the lecturing staff can sit down to craft pedagogies and strategies that would enhance and develop reading and writing of students. For example, students need to be encouraged to read. And lecturers alone may not be able to achieve that. So they need a partner.”* These participant views aligned with Bozalek and Zembylas’ (2017) transformative approach to higher education that moves beyond individualistic-centered frameworks and the need for pedagogical practices that are cognizant of entanglement, that attend to justice, and cultivate new possibilities for collective learning in post-apartheid South African universities.

In terms of pedagogical approaches involved in building discipline specific writing literacy capabilities, participants expressed the value of collaboration. Thando emphasises the importance of collaboration in working with university students: *“We believe in a collaborative approach, because when it comes to academic literacies, the writing centre is headed by writing centre practitioners, and the writing centre manager. We are coming in as writing experts, but we do not have the disciplinary knowledge. So for us to be able to assist students better, we have to collaborate - work with the disciplinary experts who bring in their disciplinary knowledge to the table. And the writing centre practitioners bring knowledge of academic literacies. And that's where we meet.”* However, collaboration in students’ learning and development is dependent on the relationship that the writing centre has with a particular department or a particular lecturer in a module. Participant Yende affirms: *“Those that see the value of the writing centre, they would approach us to say can you please be of assistance, my students require help on understanding how to develop their reading and writing or would you come and support my students on understanding an essay instruction. So the relationship varies from one department to the other. There are departments that you are guaranteed that every year they would make an effort to ask us to reach out to their students.”* These views suggest that collaboration can be valuable in building discipline-specific reading and writing capabilities and academic teachers and writing centre practitioners have a huge responsibility in creating these open, flexible and inclusive learning environments for students.

Badat (2015: 2) further proposes collaborative approaches to teaching and learning and deep discussions relating to “research, scholarship, learning and teaching, curriculum, pedagogy” and ensuring justice and human rights. This is aligned to the work of Freire (1970) and Aloni (2014) who encourages educators to listen to their students and promote engagement in contextualised, dynamic, reflective, and personalised educational practices that is humanistic in nature and furthers the goals of social justice and social transformation.

Participant Alison comments on working with lecturers highlighting some of the challenges experienced: *“This is actually around lecturers and our links to them, our relationships. And I try and I feel like I succeed in some instances and others not and it's quite difficult... you can't just march up to any lecturer and say, hi, I'm coming to do a session on reading with the students. You have to be invited because it's their teaching space.”* These views indicate that in some instances academics resist support and collaboration and this requires that those in

support spaces at universities need to push back and work on establishing and nurturing these partnerships.

Adding to these concerns is participant Thando's standpoint that there is a lack of a shared understanding of the role of the Writing Centre with respect to supporting academic literacies. This participant expresses: *"Lecturers, for instance, request workshops in their disciplines and at the workshop, instead of the lecturers being there, they come with the idea of just leaving their students with you, you know, as if it's the writing centre's responsibility alone, whereas we should be collaborating. So this is what we are trying to work on, more collaboration."*

Drawing on NLS, this research explores the role of collaborative partnerships between academic literacies and disciplinary specialists in the Public Relations department and Writing Centre at DUT. The Academic Literacies approach (Lea and Street 1998; 2000; Lillis and Scott 2007) underpins writing centre work that aims to provide students with epistemological access by offering support in enhancing their verbal and written communication. Additionally, the views from these researchers affirm how writing development should be embedded in collaborative teaching and learning initiatives with discipline specialists and specialist-writing developers. In the case of this current research, the researcher aims to determine the value of collaborative practices between the Public Relations department and the Writing Centre in developing student's academic writing. As with all disciplines in higher education, public relations students are required to become proficient in academic writing to succeed in the discipline (Lea and Street 1998; Lillis and Turner 2001).

The findings illustrate that writing centres serve as vital collaborative hubs within Public Relations education, offering safe and flexible environments where students can engage in focused dialogue with attentive tutors. Through one-on-one consultations, learners receive personalised feedback and targeted guidance, support that large lecture theatres often cannot accommodate. Crucially, the effectiveness of these collaborative interactions hinges on the strength of partnerships between the writing centre and public relations departments or individual lecturers; where such relationships are well-established, writing support is seamlessly integrated into module content and aligned with course objectives. This underscores the imperative to move beyond ad hoc tutorials toward a model in which writing development is deliberately embedded within collaborative teaching and learning initiatives. By co-designing assignments, co-facilitating workshops, and maintaining ongoing dialogue between

discipline specialists and writing developers, institutions can cultivate a coherent, discipline-responsive literacy ecosystem that empowers public relations students to master both academic and professional genres. This leads to the next theme which explores how targeted, discipline-specific writing support is can bridge gaps in preparedness and foster both academic success and professional competence for public relations students.

4.3.3 Theme 3: Discipline-specific writing support

Public relations students have to engage in professional writing and need to be proficient at writing media releases, reports and strategic proposals and academic writing support can assist students in writing clearly and concisely and achieving their outcomes. Additionally, public relations students need to be critical, analytical thinkers and reading and writing academic texts can assist students in developing their critical thinking to analyse public relations strategies and approaches (Wright & Kotcher 2020; Krishna et al 2020; Luttrell, Wallace, McCollough & Lee 2021). Public relations students are further required to be adept at analysing and critiquing real-world developments and events and require strong analytical and writing ability to evaluate and manage situations in the field (Cameron & Reber 2015; Wilcox 2015; Smith 2020). The academic literacy capabilities of undergraduate public relations students are crucial to their success in academic studies and future careers as public relations professionals.

This study found that students face overwhelming challenges when they transition to university; one such difficulty is developing academic and discipline specific capabilities. Discipline specific writing proficiency is a practice that needs to be developed, with care, over time. Several authors (Hewings 2004; Lewis 2007; Bazerman 2011) emphasise the importance of students being socialised and inducted to participate in discourse communities of practice (CoPs) to effectively gain access and succeed in higher education and acquire exposure to discipline specific discourse. Additionally, Alison asserts the importance of getting students to value reading as a practice that will build their identities as students and as public relations practitioners: *“We try to get students to understand that they need to read and write as this will enable them to be part of their discipline and function as a member of that discipline. So it's broadly speaking, that's new literacy theory, where the idea is that you are developing a new identity as a reader and writer within a particular discipline.”* This highlights that writing centre work is grounded in the Academic Literacies Model, situated within the broader New Literacy Studies (NLS) paradigm, which conceptualises literacy as a socially situated practice.

Moreover, this theme highlights how writing centre interventions mediate access to the ‘hidden curriculum’ of public relations discourse (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis & Scott, 2007).

On the issue of the extent of writing happening in university classrooms, participant Alison bemoans that a lot more should be happening. This participant suggests that developing one’s writing comes with exposure and experience: *“So you’ve got to practice, for it to develop. So I really feel that writing and reading support needs to happen more in a very much more integrated way because writing centres and also other academic support people sit on the periphery and that’s not a healthy place to be because the students don’t see you as part of their journey.”* These views suggest that a lot more needs to be done to promote reading and writing at university. Communities of Practice (CoP) help cultivate a supportive and responsive environment for students (Govender and Alcock 2018). These authors maintain that “communities of practice allows the mediation in learning to cultivate a flexible learning environment where roles are not static” and creates spaces that encourage participation in learning. Aloni (2014: 5) further expresses how participation creates a “pedagogical atmosphere of care, trust, support, dialogue, respect, fairness, tolerance, inquiry, freedom, commitment, responsibility, multiculturalism and reciprocity.”

The findings indicate that academic support programmes such as writing centres have a key role in socialising students into the writing practices needed to succeed at university (Jacobs 2007). Barrie (2006) and Du Preez and Fossey’s (2012) study suggests that there needs to be a focus on developing academic writing in undergraduate curricula and that transferability of quality writing practices will contribute to preparing students for industry. Author, Shabanza (2014) maintains that it is these debates that gave rise to the establishment of writing centres where students are guided, mentored and inducted into disciplinary communities and are supported as they face the complexities of academic standards.

These views highlight how Academic Literacies praxis in writing centres can contribute to redressing educational inequities and enhance both academic performance and professional readiness for public relations graduates. Lillis and Scott (2007) further extend this framework by emphasising the dialogic nature of writing development: students negotiate meaning through interaction with peers, tutors, and texts, gradually gaining access to disciplinary “ways of knowing.” Within South African contexts, where multilingual and first-generation students contend with legacies of educational inequality, the academic literacies lens provides a critical

tool for understanding how writing centres can mediate access to academic discourse communities. Participant S9 states: *“It is good when the tutors allow us to speak in IsiZulu because sometimes we are more comfortable to give our ideas that way.”* This student’s views emphasises how multilingual support, such as students sharing their thoughts and ideas in their home languages, can encourage participation in learning. Academic literacies advocate for a more contextualised socio- cultural approach to writing and underscores the value of the relationship between language and learning in the higher education context (Lea 2017). Additionally participant S10 mentions how tutors encourage writing is one’s mother tongue when brainstorming and freewriting: *“My favourite thing is when I get to free write when I’m stuck. The tutor always says write in whatever language you are comfortable with...I write in IsiZulu and English and then when I am done, we relook at what I wrote and we talk about how that can be improved.”* This view underlines how writing centres embrace translanguaging - a decolonial approach in their work with students.

Decolonising the curriculum involves revising content and teaching practices to value and recognise the contributions of a broader range of epistemologies beyond traditional Eurocentric frameworks (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) emphasises the importance of incorporating inclusive practices that challenge the dominance of Western knowledge systems and creating curricula that resonate with students’ cultural contexts and historical experiences, making education more inclusive and representative. Heleta (2016, 2028) critiques the Eurocentric curriculum, which perpetuates Western dominance, while Hlatshwayo (2021; 2022) highlights that universities in the global South struggle to define their purposes and goals, remaining trapped in an ‘existential slumber’. In terms of pedagogical approaches and practices writing centre practitioners and public relations lecturers can integrating decolonial pedagogies such as multilingualism and translanguaging into their teaching to ensure that all students feel validated. Anneline further explains how the writing centre embraces multilingualism and is flexible in approach *“So at the writing centre, we are saying we want to offer a safe space, a decolonised space where we engage with students in IsiZulu and ask if there's a misunderstanding or we say can you please tell me in IsiZulu what exactly you want to say? We want students to be really comfortable and to be able to converse freely; that's really also part of the transformation that we aspire to offer, that we aspire in our writing centre space and that we aspire our tutors to really work towards.”*

Anneline maintains that discipline-specific engagements can enhance student competence in applied academic writing: *“Collaborative engagement has really been a crux of the pedagogical development within the PR department where all of us work together. The lecturer is there because they can really foreground the relationship between the discipline specific specialist and myself, who is an academic support”*. This is supported by a lecturer in this study who expresses how the writing centre engagements reinforce what academics are trying to achieve. Aaliyah affirms that *“the Writing Centre was called to help students with not just their assignments, but also how to prepare writing for the media and in some capacity, how to gather those details and compile it. So even though they were taught it in class, it was like they were getting a refresher course.”* Public relations students require strong written ability while at university and when they enter the industry as public relations professionals as they are responsible for communicating with key audiences and putting together communication materials which are intended to influence the attitudes and behaviours of key groups in the public (Skinner et al. 2016). These views highlight how the writing centre’s collaborative efforts with the Public Relations Department in offering discipline-specific workshops can enhance student competence in applied academic writing.

Furthermore, stronger integration of the writing centre into public relations courses can improve student outcomes. Burke (2010) and Wilkes, Godwin and Gurney (2015) maintain that academic writing is an essential instrument for learning in all disciplines. These definitions emphasise the importance of writing as a social practice and one that students need support in, regardless of their discipline, to be able to succeed in their studies at university. Anneline suggests, *“So we need to really make sure we socialise students to this environment so that they're able to access that discipline, you know, the curriculum and be able to succeed at the end of the day. We are trying to redefine our spaces to say you don't come to the writing centre because you don't know how to write. You come to the writing centre because you know how to write, but you want to be better in your writing, you know, everyone who comes to our space knows how to write but we aspire to be better writers than we were the day before. So that is our motto really.”* As previously discussed, writing is understood as a social practice, and when students engage with tutors, they encounter a form of learning that differs significantly from traditional classroom instruction. Within the writing centre, students collaborate with tutors in a supportive and informal setting, allowing them to co-construct knowledge as they navigate the various stages of the writing process. Lea and Street (1998: 158) highlight that “learning in higher education involves adapting to new ways of knowing: new ways of understanding,

interpreting and organizing knowledge.” For many students, particularly those in their first year, this transition can be challenging. Therefore, effective teaching and learning at university, especially across disciplines, necessitates an approach that recognises literacy as embedded in social practices (Street 2010).

In discussing the type of teaching and learning support needed, participant Alison asserts that more intentional reading and writing initiatives need to be established and maintained at university: *“I feel that academics don't always understand the role of writing and their teaching deeply enough and they can be using it so much more and it doesn't have to make more work for them necessarily.... But you try telling that to a lecturer, they freak out. I think they also get focused on this idea of providing proof that they've taught somehow. You know, everything revolves around marks at university and surely it should be more than that.”* These views highlight tensions experienced when writing centre staff engage with academics on getting students to engage more in writing tasks and understanding writing as a process. This participant also suggests that lecturers should create the time to be more creative in the use of writing in their classrooms. When students engage in writing more regularly in structured ways and with support this enhances their ability to process information, to discern if information is reliable, and to communicate effectively. Writing Centre participant Yende further affirms the value of working with lecturers on curricular as a means to establish mutually beneficial relationships that can contribute to student success: *“So what is important is that academic support that we do should also be informed by what staff and their curriculum needs. And we need to have ongoing interactions as staff at the Writing centre, as well as joint research or joint projects. That is also important..... We need to support students development. We need also to be seen to be doing something about developing staff. We also need to have ongoing interactions between ourselves and staff. And in that way, we need to have what we call reciprocity. There must be some form of a reciprocal outcome in the work that we do.”*

In summary, writing centres play a pivotal role in acculturating public relations students into their disciplinary community by offering tailored guidance that demystifies the rigorous standards of academic and professional writing. Through one-on-one mentoring and genre-focused tutorials, tutors enact the Academic Literacies approach, treating literacy as a socially situated practice by unpacking the implicit conventions of public relations discourse and co-constructing meaning with students. This community of practice approach not only scaffolds students' understanding of specialised genres (e.g., media releases, stakeholder analyses) but

also cultivates their identities as emerging public relations practitioners. By positioning the writing centre as a space where students observe, participate, and gradually assume more complex writing tasks under expert supervision, universities can ensure that discipline-specific writing support extends beyond peripheral interventions to become an integral part of students' professional formation and development.

4.4 CONCLUSION

The analysis and discussion of this study revealed three interrelated themes that illustrate the transformative potential of writing centre support for first-year public relations students. First, students' experiences of reading and writing at the writing centre highlighted both the depth of the challenges they face, navigating academic texts, mastering unfamiliar public relations genres, - and the power of targeted support to mitigate these barriers. Verbatim accounts emphasised how individualised tutorials offer valuable learning and developing of disciplinary conventions.

Moreover, the academic literacies approach underscores the importance of viewing writing as a social practice rather than a set of isolated skills. Second, collaborative approaches such as co-designing workshops, mentor pairings, and co-teaching emerged as catalysts for deeper engagement, aligning writing centre guidance and support with public relations course objectives and fostering a shared pedagogical responsibility between the writing centre and lecturers. Finally, discipline-specific writing support, anchored in genre analysis and communities of practice, demonstrated that writing centres serve as valuable, inclusive spaces where students develop the critical agency needed to transfer literacy practices seamlessly between academic assignments and professional public relations tasks.

Collectively, these findings substantiate a discipline-responsive model of writing support grounded in the Academic Literacies paradigm. Consideration of a context-aware learning environment, writing centres can address systemic inequities in South African higher education, empowering first-year public relations students to gain confidence, refine genre mastery, and engage critically with both scholarly and industry texts. This study thus contributes empirical evidence that well-integrated writing centre initiatives not only bolster academic performance but also enhance graduate readiness, equipping the next generation of public relations professionals with the literacies and agency essential for success in an ever-evolving communication landscape.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter provided a discussion and analysis on the data collected from interviews and focus group discussions. This chapter presents the study's conclusions by synthesising the key findings and interpreting them in relation to the three research objectives. Drawing directly on the analysed data, the following sections highlight how collaborative writing centre – public relations interventions can shape public relations students' academic literacies and foster both academic success and professional competence.

5.2 SUMMARY OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to *explore the influence of Public Relations' reading and writing support practices in contributing to student success at a UoT in South Africa.*

Chapter One presented an introduction and background to the study. It situated the study within South Africa's unequal higher-education landscape, where apartheid-era resource inequalities result in university entrants being underprepared for the reading and writing demands of their disciplines. This chapter highlighted how writing centres emerging since the late 1990s as collaborative, learner-centred spaces, address these gaps by guiding students through academic writing conventions, critical reading strategies, and confidence-building feedback. Focusing on the public relations field, the chapter underscores the profession's reliance on analytical reading and persuasive writing (e.g., media releases, proposals), and argues that writing centres with public relations-specific expertise can bridge academic and workplace literacies. Finally, this chapter introduced the study's aim: to explore, through the perspectives of students, lecturers, and writing centre practitioners, how writing-centre interventions foster discipline-responsive academic literacies and support public relations students' academic and professional success.

Chapter Two, the literature review, begins by situating South African universities within a transformation agenda that seeks to redress apartheid-era inequities and democratise access to knowledge, noting how institutional missions shape support for diverse student cohorts. It then examines students' varied higher-education experiences, especially the challenges first-

generation and multilingual learners face in mastering the reading and writing conventions of academia. Building on this, the chapter explores the centrality of academic literacy - critical reading and genre awareness to student success, before turning to the public relations discipline's specific communicative demands (media releases, strategic proposals, case analyses). Finally, it reviewed how writing centres have emerged as collaborative, inclusive, transformative student-centred spaces that foster student autonomy. Throughout, the Academic Literacies Model from New Literacy Studies underpinned the discussion, framing literacy as a socially situated practice shaped by power, identity, and context.

Chapter Three outlined the research design and methodological framework employed in this study. Anchored in a qualitative, interpretivist paradigm with an exploratory approach, the study aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of how writing centres support academic literacy development among public relations students. The chapter began by explaining the rationale for using a qualitative case study to explore participants' lived experiences and meaning-making processes on the influence of reading and writing support practices in contributing to student success. It then described the target population, which included first-year public relations students, discipline-specific lecturers, and writing centre practitioners. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with lecturers and writing centre staff, as well as focus group discussions with students, methods chosen for their ability to yield rich, descriptive insights. The chapter detailed the thematic analysis process used to interpret the data, along with the application of phenomenography to explore the different ways participants conceptualised their experiences with writing support. It also addressed the study's trustworthiness by discussing strategies to ensure validity, such as the trustworthiness approach. Finally, ethical considerations were clearly outlined, including informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and participants' right to withdraw from the study. Participants were fully briefed on the purpose of the study and their rights throughout the research process.

Chapter Four – This discussion and analysis chapter critically examined the data through the lenses of participant perspectives. The discussion centred on three overarching themes. First, students' experiences and challenges of reading and writing were unpacked via focus-group excerpts and thematic coding. The analysis showed that many first-year public relations students feel overwhelmed by academic texts and unfamiliar disciplinary standards, but that writing centre consultations assist in acculturating them to university conventions while fostering confidence and critical engagement in line with the Academic Literacies approach.

Second, the chapter explored collaborative approaches in Public Relations education, demonstrating how co-designed workshops, mentor pairings, and co-teaching initiatives can deepen student learning but also distribute responsibility for literacy development across the institution. Finally, discipline-specific writing support was shown to enhance students' self-efficacy in writing by developing their academic voice and confidence which will contribute to their success as students and when they enter industry as public relations practitioners. This section illustrated how writing centres work to cultivate professional agency and transferability of skills. Overall, Chapter Four substantiated a discipline-responsive approach of writing support grounded in the Academic Literacies approach. By weaving together participant voices and theoretical insights, the discussion highlighted how writing centres can redress academic inequities, enhance students' genre mastery, and prepare graduates for the complex literacy demands of the communication industry.

5.3 CONCLUSIONS AND ACHIEVEMENT OF THE OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Students' academic literacy practices often remain disconnected from the ways of thinking and practicing in their selected disciplines (Bouhey 2010; Wingate Tribble, 2012), creating what Bitzer (2009) terms an "articulation gap." As a result there has been significant n who should be responsible for this. This study adopted Lillis and Scott's (2007) concept of "transformative writing spaces" - environments in which students engage critically with disciplinary norms and practices. The researcher argues that deeper collaboration between writing centres and academic departments such as the public relations department can shift the focus from deficit-based remediation to socially situated, discipline-integrated writing development. This study further argues for embedding writing activities within core modules to promote epistemological access (Morrow 2007), enabling students to engage meaningfully with both disciplinary content and the writing conventions.

Within the public relations discipline, the ability to read analytically and write persuasively is not merely an academic requirement but a cornerstone of professional practice. Public relations students must interpret complex case studies, craft media releases and proposals, and engage with evolving industry standards, all of which demand nuanced genre-specific competencies and critical thinking. Writing centres that understand the conventions of public relations discourse can thus play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between academic learning and real-world application, enabling students to transfer literacy skills from university contexts into the workplace. This study examined how writing centre interventions support the development

of academic literacies among first-year public relations students. By exploring the experiences of students, lecturers, and writing centre practitioners, it highlights the collaborative practices that foster discipline-responsive literacy development and contribute to both academic achievement and professional readiness.

By highlighting the connection between academic writing and professional practice, writing centres not only help students succeed academically but also prepare them for the writing demands they will encounter as public relations practitioners. While academic writing might require a more formal tone and a structured argument, public relations writing often focuses on persuasive, concise communication aimed at specific audiences. Writing centres can guide students through both forms of writing, helping them understand the overlap and the distinctiveness of each. This study has shown how dialogic, innovative, and contextualised approaches to education will contribute to developing globally portable, critically conscious graduates that will use their values and knowledge to contribute to the societies in which they live and work. Those involved in the academic project in South Africa need to recognise the value of understanding students' knowledge, literacies, and identities. The writing centre is a community of practice and the ways of teaching and learning inherent in its work enables the holistic development of students.

The aim of this study was to: *Explore the influence of Public Relations' reading and writing support practices in contributing to student success at a UoT in South Africa*. The section below discusses how the three objectives of the study were met.

5.3.1 Objective one sought to analyse first-year public relations students' experiences of reading and writing at the writing centre.

This study's exploration of first-year public relations students' encounters in the writing centre revealed that students often arrive with limited exposure to the critical reading and genre-specific writing practices demanded by university and industry contexts. Through focus group discussions and thematic coding, the researcher uncovered students' feelings of vulnerability when confronted with academic texts and unfamiliar public relations conventions. Yet, when engaged in one-on-one tutorials and genre deconstruction exercises, students described gaining clarity alongside a marked boost in confidence. These findings demonstrate that the writing centre not only mitigates initial literacy gaps but also serves as a supportive environment where

students can actively negotiate meanings, ask clarifying questions, and build foundational capabilities crucial for both academic success and professional communication.

5.3.2 Objective two focused on determining the value of collaborative approaches to learning and teaching in the discipline of public relations.

The investigation into collaborative approaches between the DUT Writing Centre and the Public Relations Department underscored their transformative impact on student learning. Interviews with both writing centre practitioners and public relations lecturers, complemented by student focus group discussions, revealed that collaborative reading and writing support fostered a coherent pedagogical environment. Students reported that these collaborative initiatives in which tutors and lecturers jointly deconstructed public relations genres and aligned writing support with course objectives, enhanced their understanding of assignment expectations and increased their engagement. The findings also called for more regular and sustain collaborative support for students. Collectively, these findings affirm that purposeful partnerships not only bridge disciplinary and support silos but also cultivate a shared responsibility for literacy development, resulting in deeper learning and more disciplined, genre-aware writing among first-year public relations students.

5.3.3 Objective three was to provide recommendations on ways to enhance academic support practices such as the writing centre that are responsive to students' needs.

Building on insights from student, writing centre and lecturer perspectives, this study articulates a range of targeted recommendations to enhance writing centre based academic support in South African public relations programmes. Key strategies include co-designing modules, delivering discipline-specific professional development for tutors; and establishing a national Writing-Resource Hubs. Additionally, the research suggests that embedding technology-enhanced tools such as interactive videos and virtual writing groups, and nurturing communities of practice (CoP) can ensure ongoing alignment with evolving industry conventions. Finally, the study recommends getting support from university teaching and learning committees to secure the sustainability and scalability of these initiatives. Collectively, these recommendations offer a practical, equity-focused plan for universities to cultivate agile, student-centred support environments that bridge academic and professional literacies.

5.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on the findings of this study and cognizant of South Africa's unique higher-education landscape, the following section offers recommendations for enhancing discipline-responsive writing support in South African universities. These recommendations outline practical strategies for embedding Academic Literacies praxis and strengthening Writing Centre–Public Relations collaborations. Recommendations are accompanied by guidance on implementing these considerations within South African universities.

- **Institutionalising Writing Centre partnerships within Public Relations curricula**

The Writing Centre and the Public Relations Department should consider engaging in the co-designing of the public relations curriculum. Collaborating with public relations lecturers to embed writing centre workshops directly into core public relations modules (e.g., campaign planning, media relations), can ensure sustained and contextualised engagement with students rather than one-off sessions that are currently taking place. Embedding writing centre sessions as compulsory components of core public relations courses will open up spaces for public relations students to participate and develop through discipline specific writing support. Public relations lecturers and writing centre practitioners can establish joint working groups for the co-designing of modules to develop specific outcomes and aligned learning materials. This integrated approach to curricular can be piloted and launched in one or two public relations modules; student and staff feedback can be gathered after one semester; and the approach can be improved and refined and extended to additional public relations modules.

- **Developing discipline-specific professional development for Writing Centre tutors**

Writing centres can facilitate specialised training in the form of developing professional development programmes for writing centre practitioners and tutors that cover key public relations practices and conventions such as writing press releases, crisis-communication plans and stakeholder-analysis reports. These developmental initiatives will expose writing centre tutors to authentic industry case studies and enhance tutor expertise. It will further strengthen the support tutors provide to public relations students. By investing in discipline-specific professional development for writing centre tutors, universities can nurture deeper, trust-based relationships between the centre and public relations departments, enrich the learning experience for students, and ultimately produce graduates with both the academic literacies and professional writing fluency demanded by the dynamic field of public relations.

- **Fostering collaborative Communities of Practice (CoP)**

Regular practitioner-scholar forums can be convened with writing centre staff, public relations academics, and industry professionals to share emerging genre trends, pedagogical approaches, and student work samples. In addition, both units could consider hosting quarterly colloquia such as “Writing in the discipline (WID) Fridays” events featuring presentations on topics such as multilingual writing, digital public relations, and inclusive pedagogy. In addition, workshop series could be hosted quarterly where writing centre practitioners, tutors and public relations lecturers partner on topics related to writing in the discipline. By regularly convening in colloquia and workshops, writing centre staff and public relations academics can discuss recurring student challenges, and collaboratively design interventions tailored to disciplinary contexts. This sustained, practice-focused dialogue will not only deepens tutors’ and lecturers’ understanding of how public relations texts function in both academic and professional settings, but it will also foster a culture of continuous improvement. For students, the benefit is two-fold: They gain richer, more coherent support that integrates critical reading and genre awareness across modules, boosting their confidence, engagement, and ultimately their academic and workplace readiness.

- **Mentor Pairing**

The Writing Centre and the Public Relations Department could consider Mentor Pairing where a writing centre tutor is paired with an experienced public relations lecturer for co-tutoring sessions and ongoing mentorship. This co-tutoring offers benefits to both tutors and students. The close collaboration will ensure that writing support aligns seamlessly with public relations curricula, as mentors help tutors anticipate common student challenges and tailor their writing interventions accordingly. Moreover, mentorship fosters professional socialisation for tutors, encouraging reflective practice and continuous skill development, which in turn will enrich the quality of one-on-one consultations. Ultimately, students will benefit from more confident, knowledgeable tutors who can bridge academic conventions and real-world public relations demands, thereby strengthening the writing centre’s role as a partner in discipline-responsive learning.

- **Policy advocacy and sustainability**

Findings from research studies such as this research that focuses on the influence of Public Relations’ reading and writing support practices in contributing to student success at university,

should be presented to university governing bodies such as teaching and learning units and committees to secure dedicated funding for writing centre staffing, tutor training, and discipline-specific resource development. Policy advocacy efforts, such as presenting evidence of improved retention and graduate readiness to teaching and learning units and budget committees, will help position writing centres not as peripheral services but as core academic support units. Furthermore, building evaluation mechanisms into policy frameworks will ensure accountability and continuous improvement, thereby safeguarding the long-term sustainability of writing centre programmes within the university's broader mission of equity, transformation and excellence.

- **Dissemination and capacity building**

Findings of research on collaboration between the writing centre and academic units should be shared in the form of peer-reviewed publications and workshops at national forums (e.g., Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA) conference; Siyaphumelela conference, Council on Higher Education conference (CHE) and international conferences to foster cross-institutional learning. This is valuable for scaling and sustaining discipline-responsive writing support and raising the profile of Academic Literacies praxis. Dissemination and capacity building engagements not only share best practices but also cultivate a broader community of stakeholders committed to enhancing student reading and writing success across the South African higher education sector.

Additionally, a toolkit could be developed as a practical guide, complete with templates, workshop outlines, and assessment rubrics for universities seeking to implement or enhance discipline-responsive writing centre collaborations in public relations and related fields.

- **Creating a South African Public Relations Writing-Resource Hub**

The Writing Centre can support the Public Relations Department in establishing a centralised, online repository of annotated public relations texts, exemplar assignments, and toolkits tailored to the South Africa context (e.g., guidelines for multilingual audiences, case studies from local non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Content can be created collectively through collaborating with public relations departments, writing centres, and industry bodies (e.g., Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA) to source and annotate materials. Furthermore, the university's Learning Management System (e.g., Blackboard, Moodle) can

be used to host a dedicated “Public Relations Writing Hub.” Students can be involved in this initiative as resource ambassadors and upload new case studies and moderate discussion forums. Establishing a centralised South African Public Relations Writing-Resource Hub will provide public relations students and practitioners with a one-stop repository of contextually relevant, discipline-specific materials that reflect the nation’s linguistic diversity and industry landscape. This shared resource can foster peer-to-peer learning, support self-directed practice, and bridge the gap between theory and real-world public relations communication, ultimately strengthening students’ confidence and competence in both academic and professional writing.

- **Embedding technology-enhanced literacy support**

The Writing Centre and Public Relations Department can collectively develop asynchronous micro-learning activities on critical reading and writing strategies. Writing centre staff can produce 3-5-minute interactive videos on topics like “structuring a public relations case analysis,” “crafting a compelling media release” or “crafting key messages.” The Writing Centre can facilitate regular Virtual “writing groups” via MS Teams or Zoom, staffed by central writing centre tutors and practitioners. Students can join online breakout rooms to draft, peer-review, and discuss public relations texts under tutor guidance. Integrating technology-enhanced literacy support can transform how public relations students engage with the writing centre by providing both on-demand resources and ongoing peer collaboration. By linking these resources and sessions through the LMS, tutors can monitor engagement analytics, identify students who may need additional support, and iteratively refine both digital offerings and workshops to align with emerging industry conventions.

- **Future research**

Further research can focus on longitudinal tracking and follow a cohort of public relations students from first year through graduation and quantitatively measure writing performance, confidence, and graduate outcomes to assess the sustained impact of writing-centre engagement. In addition, a mixed-methods methodology can be used incorporating surveys and writing-sample analyses alongside qualitative interviews and focus groups to triangulate findings and quantify shifts in genre mastery and critical reading.

These recommendations, when pursued collectively, will not only strengthen the current research project’s validity and reach but also offer a guide for embedding Academic Literacies

praxis within Public Relations education, ultimately promoting student agency, equity, and professional readiness. In summary, the recommendations outlined above offers a multifaceted strategy for strengthening the nexus between writing centres and public relations education. By embedding discipline-responsive literacy support into curricula, deepening tutor expertise, leveraging technology, and fostering sustained collaboration among academics, practitioners, and industry stakeholders, institutions can create empowering learning environments that not only addresses gaps but actively cultivate students' critical agency. Coupled with robust research designs and institutional advocacy, these strategies promise to enhance both the academic success and professional readiness of public relations graduates, ultimately contributing to more equitable, practice-informed higher education.

5.5 CONCLUSION

Looking ahead, the recommendations advanced in this project chart a clear path for South African universities to sustain and scale discipline-responsive literacy support. These initiatives promise to institutionalise equity-driven, pedagogically aligned support that resonates with students' lived experiences. By coupling rigorous monitoring and evaluation with strategic policy advocacy, institutions can secure dedicated funding and continuous innovation. Ultimately, this research affirms that when writing centres, academic departments, and industry stakeholders collaborate intentionally, they not only elevate students' academic performance but also equip them with the professional literacies essential for success in the dynamic field of Public Relations. In bringing this study to a close, it is evident that writing centres, when conceived through the lens of the Academic Literacies Model, serve far more than remedial functions. By framing literacy as a socially situated practice, this research has shown how disciplined, collaborative interventions can transform first-year Public Relations students' encounters with academic reading and writing into opportunities for meaningful development and critical agency. Through thematic analyses of writing centre practitioner, lecturer, and student voices, this research mapped the diverse ways in which writing centre consultations scaffold critical reading strategies and build the confidence necessary to navigate both academic and industry writing demands. Moreover, the demonstrated value of co-designed modules, mentor pairings, and technology-enhanced resources underscores the potential of agile, student-centred support space to bridge the gap between university learning and professional practice.

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APPENDIX A: LETTER OF INFORMATION AND CONSENT



LETTER OF INFORMATION

Title of the Research Study: An analysis of Public Relations' reading and writing support practices in contributing to student success at the DUT.

Principal Investigator/s/researcher: Shonalee Joseph (BTech)

Co-Investigator/s/supervisor/s: Dr Nereshnee Govender (PhD)

Brief Introduction and Purpose of the Study: The aim of this research is to determine the influence of Public Relations' reading and writing support practices in contributing to student success at a UoT in South Africa. The purpose of this study is to provide insight into how integrated approaches to supporting students' learning can contribute to developing globally portable students and student success at university.

Greeting: Good Day, I trust you are well.

Introduce yourself to the participant: I am an MTech student at DUT conducting research for my Masters degree in Public Relations Management.

Invitation to the potential participant: I would appreciate your participation in my research.

What is Research:

Research involves a systematic investigation for generalized new knowledge.

University students require academic writing support engagements to contribute to their holistic development while at university and to prepare them for when they enter industry - this is even more so for Public Relations students as their core work entails a significant amount of writing and reading and being able to communicate efficiently. The academic literacy capabilities of undergraduate PR students are crucial to their success in academic studies and future careers as Public Relations professionals. This research aims to offer insights into how collaborative academic support approaches between discipline specific teachers and the writing centre can enhance academic reading and writing, student learning and success in higher education.

To ensure the integrity and validity of this study, you are welcome to ask as many questions as you like. It is important that you fully understand the study and its associated questions. You may discuss the study with others so that you make an informed decision whether or not to participate as you are under no obligation whatsoever.

Outline of the Procedures: The study will analyse the PR department's and writing centre's collaborative academic literacy support approaches to student learning by focusing on first-year students and by analysing the pedagogical approaches involved in building discipline-specific academic literacy capabilities through writing-intensive learning support that is integral and aligned to the field and practice of public relations. The academic literacy capabilities of undergraduate PR students are crucial to their success in academic studies and future careers as PR professionals. This research aims to offer insights into how collaborative academic support approaches between discipline specific teachers and the writing centre can enhance academic reading and writing, student learning and success in higher education.

You will be requested to complete a questionnaire and participate in a focused group discussion. The interview and/or focus group discussion will take approximately 20 minutes. Participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving reasons and without prejudice or any adverse consequences. The information you provide will only be used for research purposes. Your identity and individual answers will be kept confidential. Should you wish to discuss this further please feel free to contact me.

Thanking you in advance for your participation and cooperation.

Risks or Discomforts to the Participant:

There is no risk or discomfort to you in this study.

Explain to the participant the reasons he/she may be withdrawn from the Study:

Research may be terminated early in certain instances, viz. Non-Compliance, illness etc. You are permitted to withdraw from the research at any time. The researcher, may, in her capacity terminate the study early should circumstances dictate such a decision. Should you wish to withdraw from the study, you may provide a letter informing the researcher of your decision to withdraw and provide a reason for your decision.

Benefits: Findings will be useful to academics and students in higher education institutions. It will also result in a deeper understanding of collaborative approaches to teaching and learning in higher education.

Remuneration: There will be no monetary reward to you for your participation in this research.

Costs of the Study: There will be no costs to you as a result of taking part in this research study.

Confidentiality: The records from this study will be kept confidential and no individual identities will be used in any reports or publications resulting from this study. All transcripts and summaries will be coded and stored separately from any names or other direct identification of participants. Research information will be kept in locked files at all times. Only research personnel will have access to the files and only those with an essential need to see names will have access. All data will be kept with the Supervisor for five (5) years after which it will be destroyed. Hard copies will be shredded and electronic copies will be safely deleted.

Results: Participants will have access to their own transcripts. They will have access if they wish to read the final thesis. Publications or Public proceedings resulting from this thesis will be made public.

Research-related Injury: The research is qualitative in nature and therefore poses no risk to the participants. No research-related injury is envisaged during data collection.

Storage of all electronic and hard copies including tape recordings : Raw data will only be accessible to me and my Supervisor. Electronic data will be password protected and hard data kept under lock and key. All data will be kept with my Supervisor for five (5) years after which it will be destroyed. Hard copies will be shredded and electronic copies will be safely deleted.

Persons to contact in the Event of Any Problems or Queries:(Supervisor and details) Please contact the researcher **Shonalee Joseph (0848888855)**, my supervisor **Dr Nereshnee Govender (0847022553)** or the DUT-Institutional Research Ethics Administrator on 031 373 2375. Complaints can be reported to the Acting Director: Research and Postgraduate Support on researchdirector@dut.ac.za

CONSENT

Full Title of the Study: An analysis of Public Relations reading and writing support practices in contributing to student success at the DUT

Names of Researcher/s: SP Joseph

Statement of Agreement to Participate in the Research Study:

- I hereby confirm that I have been informed by the researcher, _____ (name of researcher), about the nature, conduct, benefits and risks of this study - Research Ethics Clearance Number: _____,
- I have also received, read and understood the above written information (Participant Letter of Information) regarding the study.
- I am aware that the results of the study, including personal details regarding my sex, age, date of birth, initials and diagnosis will be anonymously processed into a study report.
- In view of the requirements of research, I agree that the data collected during this study can be processed in a computerised system by the researcher.
- I may, at any stage, without prejudice, withdraw my consent and participation in the study.
- I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and (of my own free will) declare myself prepared to participate in the study.
- I understand that significant new findings developed during the course of this research which may relate to my participation will be made available to me.

_____	_____	_____	_____
Full Name of Participant	Date	Time	Signature / Right
Thumbprint			

I, _____ (name of researcher) herewith confirm that the above participant has been fully informed about the nature, conduct and risks of the above study.

_____	_____	_____
Full Name of Researcher	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Full Name of Witness (If applicable)	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Full Name of Legal Guardian (If applicable)	Date	Signature

APPENDIX B: GATEKEEPER'S PERMISSION

The Research Office

Durban University of Technology (DUT)

Durban KwaZulu-Natal South Africa

GATEKEEPER PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT DUT

To Whom It May Concern

My name is **Shona P Joseph** student number **20252597** and I am conducting research at the Durban University of Technology. The title of my research is: *An analysis of Public Relations' reading and writing support practices in contributing to student success at the DUT*. The research I wish to conduct for my study requires the interviewing of DUT academics and first year students. This study assesses the collaborative academic literacy support approaches on student learning, through focusing on one undergraduate Public Relations (PR) programme with first year students from diverse educational, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It does so by analysing the pedagogical approaches involved in building discipline specific academic literacy and language capabilities through writing intensive learning support that is integral and aligned to the field of public relations.

My research examines the influence of collaborative, pedagogical approaches of academic teachers and the Writing Centre, through understanding the experiences of students, teachers and writing centre staff. The academic literacy capabilities of undergraduate PR students are crucial to their success in academic studies and future careers as PR professionals. This research aims to offer insights into how collaborative academic support approaches between discipline-specific teachers and the writing centre can enhance academic reading and writing, student learning and success in higher education (HE).

I hereby seek consent to interview members of the university community.

If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me: shonalee.joseph@gmail.com or my supervisor Dr Nereshnee Govender – nereshneeg@dut.ac.za. Thank you for your time and consideration in this matter.

Yours sincerely,

Shonalee P. Joseph

Student number: 20252597

APPENDIX C: ETHICS APPROVAL



Institutional Research Ethics Committee
Research and Postgraduate Support Directorate
2nd Floor, Benwyn Court
Gate 1, Steve Biko Campus
Durban University of Technology
P O Box 1334, Durban, South Africa, 4001
Tel: 031 373 2375
Email: lavishadi@dut.ac.za
http://www.dut.ac.za/research/institutional_research_ethics
www.dut.ac.za

25 March 2024

Mrs S P Joseph
25 Brewers Avenue
5 Central Park
Bulwer
Durban
4001

Dear Mrs Joseph

An analysis of Public Relations' reading and writing support practices in contributing to student success at the DUT
Ethics Clearance Number: IREC 155/23

The DUT-Institutional Research Ethics Committee acknowledges receipt of your notification regarding the piloting of your data collection tool.

Kindly ensure that participants used for the pilot study are not part of the main study.

In addition, the DUT-IREC acknowledges receipt of your gatekeeper permission letter.

Please note that **FULL APPROVAL** is granted to your research proposal. You may proceed with data collection.

Any adverse events [serious or minor] which occur in connection with this study and/or which may alter its ethical consideration must be reported to the DUT-IREC according to the DUT-IREC SOP's.

Please note that any deviations from the approved proposal require the approval of the DUT-IREC as outlined in the DUT-IREC SOP's.

It is compulsory for a student or researcher to apply for recertification on an annual basis. The failure to do so will result in withdrawal of ethics clearance. It is the responsibility of the researcher and the supervisor to apply for recertification.

Please note that you are required to submit a Notification of Completion of Study form together with an abstract to the DUT-IREC office on completion of your study.

Yours Sincerely

Prof J K Adam
Chairperson: DUT-IREC

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW GUIDE: ACADEMIC TEACHERS – PUBLIC RELATIONS MANAGEMENT – DUT

1. Describe your role in teaching and learning in the Public Relations Programme?
2. What are the fundamental elements that form the basis of Public Relations?
communication
3. Academic literacy capabilities of undergraduate Public Relations students are crucial to their success in academic studies and their future careers as Public Relations Professionals. How would you describe Public Relations students' academic reading and writing capabilities?
4. Is there an articulation gap in terms of students' ways of thinking and practicing within the Public Relations discipline and if so, in your view who is responsible for responding to this?
5. In your view, what type of teaching and learning support is needed to assist in the development of Public Relations students' academic writing?
6. What is the relationship between the Public Relations programme and the Writing Centre?
7. Describe some of the collaborative approaches you employed that involved the Writing Centre
8. In your view, has the use of the Writing Centre have a positive impact on students' performance of specific writing tasks, as well as their overall academic achievement and progression. Please explain.
9. How would you describe the effectiveness of the Writing Centre's approach to developing students' reading and writing capabilities?
10. Based on your experience in your role as an Academic in the Public Relations Programme, how can Academic support be enhanced at the Institution in a way that is responsive to Public Relations students' needs.

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW GUIDE: INTERVIEWS WITH WRITING CENTRE MEMBERS – DUT

1. Describe your role as a Writing Centre Member in teaching and learning in higher Education?
2. How does the Writing Centre support students in Academic reading and writing? Explain
3. How would you describe first year students' reading and writing capabilities?
4. In your view, what type of teaching and learning support is needed to assist in the development of first year academic writing? How is this achieved at the Writing Centre?
5. What is the relationship between the Public Relations programme and the Writing Centre. Explain
6. Describe some of the pedagogical approaches involved in building discipline in specific academic literacy capabilities in the Public Relations Programme?
7. In your view how can discipline experts such as Public Relations Academics and Academic Support such as the Writing Centre work towards students improving their reading and writing abilities.
8. Based on your experience in your role as a Member of the Writing Centre Team, how can Academic support be enhanced at the institution in a way that is transformative and responsive to Public Relations needs?

APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW GUIDE: FOCUS GROUPS WITH STUDENTS

1. Describe as detailed as possible your view on academic writing in the Public Relations Programme.
2. Do you experience any challenges with academic reading and writing in your discipline? Explain
3. Is there support available to assist you with academic reading and writing? Explain
4. Are you familiar with the Writing Centre, its role and services? Elaborate
5. Could you please share your individual and collective experiences with the use of the Writing Centre?
6. Based on your experience of the Writing Centre, can you recommend ways in which it can enhance its support to students in terms of developing academic reading and writing?

APPENDIX G: TURNITIN REPORT

AN ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS READING AND WRITING SUPPORT PRACTICES IN CONTRIBUTING TO STUDENT SUCCESS AT THE DUT

ORIGINALITY REPORT

13%	9%	8%	4%
SIMILARITY INDEX	INTERNET SOURCES	PUBLICATIONS	STUDENT PAPERS

PRIMARY SOURCES

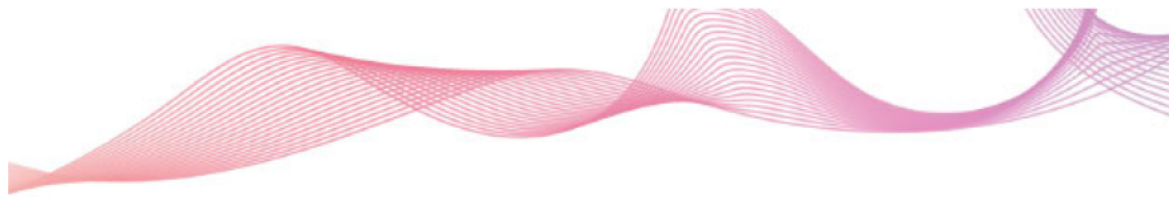
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Dr N Govender

09 June2025

APPENDIX H: EDITING CERTIFICATE



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* Copyediting * Data Analysis * Market/Social Research * Digital Marketing

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10 April 2025

Ms Shonalee P Joseph/
Dr Nereshnee Govender
Durban University of Technology
Durban,
South Africa

Editing Certificate

We hereby certify that the Masters thesis titled 'An analysis of Public Relations' reading and writing support practices in contributing to student success at the DUT' was thoroughly proofread and edited for grammar, spelling, punctuation, structure, and overall style. The editors ensured that the author's original intended meanings were preserved throughout the review process. All suggestions and amendments were tracked using the Microsoft Word "Track Changes" feature, allowing the author to review and decide on each modification.

Thank you for the opportunity to assist with this work.

Sincerely,

Joseph Olusegun Adebayo, PhD.

