



# The Influence of Writing Centre Support in Developing Academic Literacies among Public Relations Students: A South African Perspective

Shona L.P. Joseph <sup>1</sup>  & Nereshnee Govender <sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Public Relations Management Department, Durban University of Technology, Durban, South Africa.

<sup>2</sup> Writing Centre, Durban University of Technology, Durban, South Africa.

## ABSTRACT

Within the Public Relations (PR) discipline, the ability to read analytically and write persuasively is not merely an academic requirement but a cornerstone of professional practice. PR students must interpret complex case studies, craft media releases, and engage with evolving industry standards, all of which demand nuanced genre-specific competencies and critical thinking. University Writing Centres that understand the conventions of PR discourse can play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between academic learning and real-world application in the workplace. This study, therefore, examined how writing centre interventions support the development of academic literacies among undergraduate PR students. An interpretative, qualitative case-study research design was used to collect data through interviews and focus-group discussions with first-year students, lecturers, and writing centre staff from a selected university in South Africa. Grounded in the Academic Literacies Model, which conceptualises literacy as a socially situated practice, this research examined how writing centre reading and writing interventions mediate access to the ‘hidden curriculum’ of PR discourse. Thematic analysis highlighted that writing centres not only operate as collaborative spaces for students’ learning, but also cultivate critical thinking essential for evaluating real-world PR scenarios and develop students’ critical agency to transfer literacy practices into academic and industry contexts. Recommendations include deepening collaboration with PR lecturers to embed writing centre workshops directly into core modules such as campaign planning and media relations, and implementing sustained and contextualised engagement, ultimately contributing to student success in higher education.

## Correspondence

Nereshnee Govender

Email:

[NereshneeG@dut.ac.za](mailto:NereshneeG@dut.ac.za)

## Publication History

Received: 18<sup>th</sup> May, 2025

Accepted: 28<sup>th</sup> October, 2025

Published online:  
30<sup>th</sup> December, 2025

## To Cite this Article:

Joseph, Shona L.P., and Nereshnee Govender. “The Influence of Writing Centre Support in Developing Academic Literacies among Public Relations Students: A South African Perspective.” *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences* 6, no. 14 (2025): 3698 - 3714, <https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.202561424>.

*Keywords: Public Relations Students, Writing Centre, Reading And Writing, Academic Literacies.*

## INTRODUCTION

South African higher education is marked by profound disparities in students’ prior schooling experiences, language of instruction, and levels of academic preparedness. Many entrants to universities arrive with uneven mastery of the reading and writing conventions expected in higher education.<sup>1</sup> While universities assume that disciplinary induction alone will suffice for students to ‘find their voice,’ research shows that without explicit support, first-year undergraduates frequently struggle to negotiate complex texts,

<sup>1</sup> Chrissie Boughey and Sioux McKenna, *Understanding Higher Education: Alternative Perspectives* (African Minds, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.47622/9781928502210>.

critically engage with scholarly arguments, and produce writing that meets disciplinary norms. These challenges are compounded for the growing number of first-generation and multilingual students, who must reconcile home-language literacies with English-dominant academic discourses. First-generation students are those who are the first in their families to study at university. The 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 first-year students as they enter the university with several barriers, including cultural, social, and linguistic. Recognising the uneven educational backgrounds from which many first-year students come, 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. This study explored the influence of a university writing centre on the development of academic literacies, specifically reading and writing, among first-year PR students.

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.<sup>2</sup> The report on transformation in higher education calls for “epistemological changes and decolonisation of the curriculum.”<sup>3</sup> This emphasises the need for curricular and co-curricular support, particularly for first-year students who are being inducted into their respective disciplines. Furthermore, researchers emphasise 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.<sup>4</sup>

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 pressing task of supporting a diverse and multilingual student body. Writing centres play a pivotal role in this context as collaborative, student-centred environments that foster academic literacy, empower student voice, and challenge traditional notions of academic writing. This research aims to offer insight into how collaborative academic support approaches between discipline-specific lecturers (PR department) and the Writing Centre at DUT can enhance academic reading and writing, student learning, and ultimately success in higher education.<sup>5</sup> Drawing on semi-structured interviews with PR lecturers and writing centre staff and focus-group discussions with first-year PR students, this research analyses students’ perceptions of their own growth in analytical reading and writing; lecturers’ views on the impact of writing centre collaborations; and writing practitioners’ strategies for tailoring support to PR conventions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Collaborative Learning at University: Writing Centres and Public Relations**

This section provides an overview of writing centres in the South African context and PR education in terms of disciplinary conventions and literacy demands. Writing centres are dedicated support units offering one-on-one consultations and workshops, and have emerged as key institutional responses to reading and writing challenges experienced by university students. Grounded in principles of collaboration and student autonomy, writing centres position writing not as an innate skill but as a socially situated practice that can be cultivated through guided dialogue and feedback.<sup>6</sup> In South Africa, writing centres have proliferated since the late 1990s, aligning with the broader transformation agenda of higher education that seeks to democratise knowledge production and foster equitable access to academic

<sup>2</sup> Brenda Leibowitz and Vivienne Bozalek, “Foundation Provision-a Social Justice Perspective,” *South African Journal of Higher Education* 29, no. 1 (2015): 8–25.

<sup>3</sup> Shireen Motala, Yusuf Sayed, and Tarryn De Kock, “Epistemic Decolonisation in Reconstituting Higher Education Pedagogy in South Africa: The Student Perspective,” *Teaching in Higher Education* 26, no. 7–8 (2021): 1002–18.

<sup>4</sup> Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, “Decoloniality as the Future of Africa,” *History Compass* 13, no. 10 (October 21, 2015): 485–96, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12264>.

<sup>5</sup> Mary R. Lea and Brian V. Street, “Student Writing in Higher Education: An Academic Literacies Approach,” *Studies in Higher Education* 23, no. 2 (January 1998): 157–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079812331380364>.

<sup>6</sup> Theresa Lillis and Mary Scott, “Defining Academic Literacies Research,” *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Professional Practice* 4, no. 1 (September 14, 2015): 5–32, <https://doi.org/10.1558/japl.v4i1.5>.

success.<sup>7</sup> By creating supportive spaces outside the formal classroom, these centres help students deconstruct academic genres, develop critical reading strategies, and gain confidence in articulating their ideas.

Within the PR discipline, the ability to read analytically and write persuasively is not merely an academic requirement but a cornerstone of professional practice. PR students must be able to interpret complex case studies and engage in writing media releases and proposals, all of which demand strong writing competencies and critical thinking.<sup>8</sup> Writing centres that understand the conventions of PR 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. Building on this context, this study examined how writing centre interventions support the development of academic literacies among undergraduate PR students. By exploring the experiences of students, lecturers, and writing practitioners, this research illuminates the collaborative practices that foster discipline-responsive literacy development and contribute to both academic achievement and professional readiness.

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 PR 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 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 that will prepare them for the workplace.

The academic literacy capabilities of undergraduate PR students are crucial to their success in academic studies and future careers as PR professionals. PR students require strong written ability while at university and when they enter the industry, as they are responsible for communicating with key audiences and putting together communication materials which are intended to influence key publics.<sup>9</sup>

### Academic Literacies

Grounded in the Academic Literacies Model, situated within the broader New Literacy Studies (NLS) paradigm, which conceptualises literacy as a socially situated practice embedded in power relations, this research examined how writing centre interventions mediate access to the 'hidden curriculum' of PR discourse.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> In South Africa, the majority of university students, particularly in universities of technology (UoTs), experience significant challenges with academic writing practices expected of them.<sup>12</sup> The academic literacies paradigm reconceptualises writing as a socially situated practice rather than a decontextualised set of skills. Originating in the work of Lea and Street, this approach foregrounds how power relations, student identities, and disciplinary contexts shape literacy practices. This framework was further extended by emphasising the dialogic nature of writing development.<sup>13</sup> They explain how 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.

---

<sup>7</sup> Nereshnee Govender and Andrea Alcock, "Humanising Writing Centre Practice: Peer Tutor Reflections at a University of Technology," *Africa Education Review* 17, no. 1 (January 2, 2020): 18–34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/18146627.2018.1467735>.

<sup>8</sup> Chris Skinner, Liesl Von Essen, and Gary Mersham, *Handbook of Public Relations*, Oxford Southern Africa (Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Skinner, Von Essen, and Mersham, *Handbook of Public Relations*.

<sup>10</sup> Lea and Street, "Student Writing in Higher Education: An Academic Literacies Approach"; Lillis and Scott, "Defining Academic Literacies Research."

<sup>11</sup> Arlene Archer, "Challenges and Potentials for Writing Centres in South African Tertiary Institutions," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 24 (January 1, 2010): 495–510.

<sup>12</sup> Ernest A Pineteh, "The Academic Writing Challenges of Undergraduate Students: A South African Case Study," *International Journal of Higher Education* 3, no. 1 (September 25, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v3n1p12>.

<sup>13</sup> Lillis and Scott, "Defining Academic Literacies Research."

Within PR education, the genre-rich demands of the discipline underscore the need for specialised literacy support. Building on these foundations, the present study probes the collaborative practices through which writing centres and PR departments co-construct discipline-responsive interventions.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Employing an interpretative, case-study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with Writing Centre practitioners and PR lecturers and focus group discussions with students who participated in writing centre consultations. A case study approach was selected to enable an in-depth examination of writing centre practices within the situated context of a South African university's PR programme.<sup>14</sup> In this study, the researchers aimed to gather in-depth knowledge of the experiences of the first-year student participants using a qualitative approach with a focus on spoken words by participants to capture their lived experiences. Key themes emerged from the data and were used to unpack the findings.

### **Study Participants**

In this study, the sample size comprised two focus groups (6-10 participants each) of first-year PR students, three (3) PR lecturers, and four (4) writing centre practitioners. The criteria for participation were that students in the focus group discussions had to be first-year PR students. Additionally, only lecturers from the PR department who work with the writing centre were included in the study. In terms of the interviews with writing centre staff, only DUT Writing Centre staff were included in the study.

### **Data Collection Methods**

In-depth semi-structured interviews with teaching staff from the PR programme and writing centre staff enabled an understanding of how collaborative approaches between the PR department and writing centre impact teaching and learning, and particularly developing academic reading and writing in disciplinary spaces. In this study, data were generated through in-depth, open-ended interview questions to enable participants to describe their experiences in depth. The duration of the interviews was between 40 and 45 minutes. Recruitment of participants involved a direct personal approach from the researchers. The researchers made contact with the teaching staff from the PR Programme and the DUT Writing Centre staff via email to inform them of the research being conducted and request their participation.

Focus group discussions were facilitated with first-year PR students to understand their experiences and perceptions of the academic support practices in contributing to their learning and success in higher education. The focus group discussions were conducted at the institution (DUT) and took between 45 and 60 minutes. Recruitment of PR students was facilitated by the teaching staff in the department and the researchers. In all instances, participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

### **Data Analysis**

The data gathered was analysed using thematic content analysis. The researchers familiarised themselves with the data collected, generated codes, searched for themes, reviewed themes, defined and named themes, and produced the findings and recommendations. The interviews and focus group discussions enabled the researchers to draw conclusions and recommendations on collaborative, writing-intensive approaches undertaken within disciplines and how they 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 categorisation of data and offering of recommendations on how integrated approaches to supporting students' learning can contribute to student success at university.

### **Sampling Method**

Non-probability purposive sampling was used as it enabled the researchers to focus on specific characteristics of the population and thereby fulfil the study's aims and objectives. In a non-probability

---

<sup>14</sup> Robert K Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, vol. 5 (sage, 2009).

sample, subjects are usually selected based on their accessibility, or by the researcher's purposive personal judgement.<sup>15</sup>

### **Ethical Consideration**

Ethical clearance was granted by the Institutional Research and Ethics Committee (IREC) at Durban University of Technology (IREC155/23). Participants were briefed on the study, its aims and objectives, given a consent form stating that participation is voluntary, their identities would remain confidential, and no incentives would be provided. Participants were assigned a code name (an alphabet and a number) to ensure anonymity, and data was reported using these code names.

### **Reliability and Trustworthiness**

Reliability in this study was enhanced by taking detailed field notes, recording interviews, and transcribing data. The trustworthy approach was also used, and the researchers ensured that the study was conducted in a fair and ethical manner and that the findings attained in the study depicted the accurate experiences of the research participants.

### **Limitations**

The sample used in the study was limited to the PR department (academic). Only one public university that offers PR was part of the sample. Furthermore, only first-year PR students were included in this study.

## **PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This section provides the findings from the study and offers an analysis of the findings. The main research aim of this study was to explore the influence of a university writing centre on the development of academic literacies, specifically reading and writing, among first-year PR students. The following themes emanated from the collected data:

Theme 1: Students' reading and writing challenges at university

Theme 2: Collaborative approaches to reading and writing

Theme 3: Discipline-specific writing support

### **Theme 1: Students' reading and writing challenges at university**

Many first-year PR students enter university with underdeveloped writing and reading abilities. They frequently struggle to meet the expectations of university study, particularly in terms of comprehension, critical analysis, and organising their work in a formal academic style. Common difficulties include rephrasing material in their own words and constructing well-reasoned arguments.

PR lecturer L1 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.*"

These views highlight the uneven mastery of the reading and writing abilities of university students. Focus group student participant S5 explains "*...the challenges I face are 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.*"

Writing Centre participant W1 explains: "*Students struggle with understanding their assignment questions, they struggle with paraphrasing, and they are unable to put together sentences in a coherent way.*"

The comments highlight the need for students to be supported and guided in their academic engagements. Researchers have emphasised the challenging nature of universities and how the entry year into university is often most daunting for students as they yearn for a sense of belonging.<sup>16</sup> These

<sup>15</sup> W. Mugera, "Non-Probability Sampling Methods," *Kenya: University of Nairobi*, 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Chenoa S. Woods et al., "Reading, Writing, and English Course Pathways When Developmental Education Is Optional: Course Enrollment and Success for Underprepared First-Time-in-College Students," *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* 43, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 5–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2017.1391144>.

researchers have expressed how first-year students often feel alienated and struggle to adjust to university academic expectations.

Student 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 something from a journal and reference it in my essay. So I need support.”*

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 at the assignment in detail, I just book an appointment to work with the tutor.”*

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. The data revealed that many PR 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. These findings underscore the need for more scaffolded support in academic literacy, particularly during the crucial first year of study.

## **Theme 2: Collaborative approaches to reading and writing**

University writing centres provide engaging and flexible learning environments for student users to develop confidence in their writing. Writing centres are safe, flexible learning spaces where students engage with an attentive tutor and work on their written tasks.<sup>17</sup> This is affirmed by Writing Centre participant W1, 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 approach to developing writing can be particularly useful for a fearful first-year student. Participant L2 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.”* In terms of promoting reading and writing at the university, W1 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.”*

Lecturer participant L3 affirms that practitioners in the field of PR need to have good writing and reading ability, expressing: *“Good reading and writing are fundamental to being 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.”* PR professionals are required to have strong writing and reading ability for crafting messages and interpreting public reactions to be able to respond effectively. These competencies are fundamental to strategic communication, enabling professionals to create strategies that effectively connect with stakeholders, analyse complex information, identify trends and communicate findings effectively.<sup>18</sup> A popular view is that “reading is essential for public relations practitioners to understand the media, the public and the organisation”, and writing is a fundamental skill as it enables effective communication with key publics.<sup>19</sup>

Student participant S4 explains how they understand the role of the writing centre in promoting reading and writing: *“Reading and writing are essential as we develop our academic writing. It also helps us develop key abilities needed in the PR field, which will be good for when we need to be employed.”* S4

<sup>17</sup> Govender and Alcock, “Humanising Writing Centre Practice: Peer Tutor Reflections at a University of Technology.”

<sup>18</sup> Regina Luttrell et al., “Public Relations Curriculum: A Systematic Examination of Curricular Offerings in Social Media, Digital Media, and Analytics in Accredited Programs,” *Public Relations Education* 7, no. 2 (2021): 7.

<sup>19</sup> James E Grunig, *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management* (Routledge, 2013).

suggests that these skills and capabilities not only develop students' academic competencies but also equip them with lifelong competencies that can be used when they enter the industry as PR practitioners. It highlights how targeted writing support can cultivate critical thinking essential for evaluating real-world PR scenarios and develop the critical agency to transfer literacy practices into academic and industry contexts.

The findings highlight the value of collaboration in higher education and call for academic departments to partner with support units such as writing centres in building discipline-specific reading and writing capabilities to improve student outcomes. Writing centre participant W3 maintains that the writing centre values working with lecturers and is open to collaborating: *"If a lecturer wants 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."* This is supported by participant W1, who endorses partnerships with lecturers: *"We in the writing centre, together with the lecturing staff, can sit down to craft pedagogies and strategies that would enhance and develop the 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 participants' views aligned with other authors' views that a transformative approach to higher education moves beyond individualistic-centred 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.<sup>20</sup>

The experiences from study participants reveal the value of collaboration in higher education spaces and how academic teachers and writing centre practitioners have a huge responsibility in creating safe and flexible environments, and developing coordinated strategies can contribute to students' success.

### **Theme 3: Discipline-specific writing support**

PR students are required to be adept at analysing and critiquing real-world developments and events, and require strong analytical and writing ability to evaluate and manage PR scenarios.<sup>21</sup> The academic literacy capabilities of undergraduate PR students are crucial to their success in academic studies and future careers as PR professionals. Additionally, they need to be critical, analytical thinkers, and reading and writing academic texts can assist students in developing their critical thinking to analyse PR strategies and approaches.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, students need to be socialised into discipline-specific writing and should be inducted into discourse communities of practice (CoPs)<sup>23</sup> to gain access and succeed in higher education. CoP helps cultivate a supportive and responsive environment for students.<sup>24</sup> These authors maintain that "communities of practice allow the mediation in learning to cultivate a flexible learning environment where roles are not static" and create spaces that encourage participation in learning. Additionally, Writing centre participant W2 asserts the importance of getting students to value reading as a practice that will build their identities as students and as PR 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 PR discourse.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Vivienne Bozalek, "Towards a Response-Able Pedagogy across Higher Education Institutions in Post-Apartheid South Africa: An Ethico-Political Analysis," *Education as Change* 21, no. 2 (2017): 62–85, <https://doi.org/10.17159/1947-9417/2017/2017>.

<sup>21</sup> Ronald D. Smith, *Strategic Planning for Public Relations*, 6th ed. (Routledge, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003024071>.

<sup>22</sup> Arunima Krishna, Donald K Wright, and Raymond L Kotcher, "Curriculum Rebuilding in Public Relations: Understanding What Early Career, Mid-Career, and Senior PR/Communications Professionals Expect from PR Graduates," *Journal of Public Relations Education* 6, no. 1 (2020): 33–57.

<sup>23</sup> Charles Bazerman, "Standpoints: The Disciplined Interdisciplinarity of Writing Studies," *Research in the Teaching of English* 46, no. 1 (2011): 8–21.

<sup>24</sup> Govender and Alcock, "Humanising Writing Centre Practice: Peer Tutor Reflections at a University of Technology."

<sup>25</sup> Lea and Street, "Student Writing in Higher Education: An Academic Literacies Approach"; Lillis and Scott, "Defining Academic Literacies Research."

Writing centre participant W2 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 indicate that more needs to be done to promote reading and writing at universities, and the writing centre's role in supporting students in developing their reading and writing.

Academic Literacies praxis in writing centres can contribute to redressing educational inequities and enhance both academic performance and professional readiness for PR graduates. 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. Student participant S9 states: *"It is good when the tutors allow us to speak in IsiZulu because sometimes we are more comfortable giving our ideas that way."* This student's views emphasise 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 underscore the value of the relationship between language and learning in the higher education context.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, student participant S10 mentions how tutors encourage writing in 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.<sup>27</sup> Writing centre participant W4 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."*

The view expressed in this theme underlines the role of the writing centre in acculturating PR students into their disciplinary community. Through one-on-one tutoring and genre-focused consultations, tutors enact the Academic Literacies approach, treating literacy as a socially situated practice by unpacking the implicit conventions of PR discourse and co-constructing meaning with students. This CoP approach not only scaffolds students' understanding of specialised genres but also cultivates their identities as emerging professionals. By positioning the writing centre as a space where students observe, participate, and gradually assume more complex writing tasks under expert guidance, universities can ensure that discipline-specific writing support extends beyond peripheral interventions to become an integral part of students' professional identity formation and development.

The thematic analysis has revealed that writing centre engagements not only enhance students' ability to compose reports and case analyses with clarity and confidence, but also cultivate critical thinking essential for evaluating real-world PR scenarios. The findings underscore the value of integrated, discipline-responsive literacy initiatives in higher education.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations provide practical strategies for embedding Academic Literacies praxis and strengthening Writing Centre–PR collaborations.

<sup>26</sup> Mary R. Lea, "Academic Literacies in Theory and Practice," in *Literacies and Language Education* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 147–58, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-02252-9\\_19](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-02252-9_19).

<sup>27</sup> Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "Decoloniality as the Future of Africa."

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

The Writing Centre and the PR Department can collaborate to jointly design the PR curriculum. Collaborating with PR lecturers to embed writing centre workshops directly into core PR modules (e.g., campaign planning, media relations) can ensure sustained and contextualised engagement with students rather than one-off writing centre consultations or workshops that are currently taking place. Embedding writing centre workshops as compulsory components of core PR courses will open up spaces for students to participate and develop through discipline-specific writing support. Making these workshops mandatory components of core PR classes would create dedicated opportunities for students to develop their discipline-specific writing.

### **Professional development for Writing Centre tutors**

Writing centres can facilitate specialised training in the form of discipline-specific professional development programmes for writing centre practitioners and tutors that cover key PR practices and conventions such as writing press releases, crisis-communication plans, and stakeholder-analysis reports. These developmental initiatives would deepen tutors' subject-matter expertise and enhance tutor expertise, thereby strengthening the support tutors provide to PR students.

### **Building Communities of Practice**

Regular forums can be convened with writing centre staff, PR academics, and industry professionals to share emerging genre trends and pedagogical approaches. 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 PR, and inclusive pedagogy. In addition, workshop series could be hosted quarterly, where writing centre practitioners, tutors, and PR lecturers partner on topics related to writing in the discipline. These colloquia and workshops will enable participants to share challenges and jointly design interventions tailored to PR contexts and foster a culture of continuous improvement. Students will benefit from more integrated support, blending critical reading and genre awareness across their modules, which will boost their confidence, engagement, and preparedness for both university and the workplace.

### **Mentor Pairing**

The Writing Centre and the PR Department could consider Mentor Pairing, where a writing centre tutor is paired with an experienced PR lecturer for co-tutoring sessions and ongoing mentorship. This collaborative co-tutoring offers benefits to both tutors and students. The close collaboration will ensure that writing support aligns seamlessly with PR course content, 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, well-informed tutors who can bridge academic conventions and real-world PR requirements, thereby strengthening the writing centre's role as a partner in discipline-responsive learning.

### **Policy advocacy and sustainability**

The research findings 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 and will help position writing centres as key spaces for student development and success.

### **Development of a toolkit**

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 PR and related fields.

Further research can focus on longitudinal tracking and follow a cohort of PR students from first year through graduation and quantitatively measure writing performance, confidence, and graduate outcomes to assess the sustained impact of writing-centre engagement.

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 PR education, ultimately promoting student agency, equity, and professional readiness. In summary, the recommendations outlined above offer a multifaceted strategy for strengthening the nexus between writing centres and PR education.

## CONCLUSION

This research affirms that when writing centres, academic departments, and industry stakeholders collaborate intentionally, they not only enhance students' academic performance but also equip them with the professional literacies essential for success in the dynamic field of PR. Furthermore, it is evident that writing centres, when conceived through the lens of the Academic Literacies Model, framing literacy as a socially situated practice, can transform first-year PR students' encounters with academic reading and writing into opportunities for meaningful development and critical agency.

Through thematic analyses of writing centre practitioners, lecturers, 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. The demonstrated value of disciplined, collaborative interventions, co-designed modules, mentor pairings, and building CoP underscores the potential of agile, student-centred support spaces to bridge the gap between university learning and professional practice.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Archer, Arlene. "Challenges and Potentials for Writing Centres in South African Tertiary Institutions." *South African Journal of Higher Education* 24 (January 1, 2010): 495–510.
- Bazerman, Charles. "Standpoints: The Disciplined Interdisciplinarity of Writing Studies." *Research in the Teaching of English* 46, no. 1 (2011): 8–21.
- Boughey, Chrissie, and Sioux McKenna. *Understanding Higher Education: Alternative Perspectives*. African Minds, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.47622/9781928502210>.
- Bozalek, Vivienne. "Towards a Response-Able Pedagogy across Higher Education Institutions in Post-Apartheid South Africa: An Ethico-Political Analysis." *Education as Change* 21, no. 2 (2017): 62–85. <https://doi.org/10.17159/1947-9417/2017/2017>.
- Govender, Nereshnee, and Andrea Alcock. "Humanising Writing Centre Practice: Peer Tutor Reflections at a University of Technology." *Africa Education Review* 17, no. 1 (January 2, 2020): 18–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18146627.2018.1467735>.
- Grunig, James E. *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management*. Routledge, 2013.
- Krishna, Arunima, Donald K Wright, and Raymond L Kotcher. "Curriculum Rebuilding in Public Relations: Understanding What Early Career, Mid-Career, and Senior PR/Communications Professionals Expect from PR Graduates." *Journal of Public Relations Education* 6, no. 1 (2020): 33–57.
- Lea, Mary R. "Academic Literacies in Theory and Practice." In *Literacies and Language Education*, 147–58. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-02252-9\\_19](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-02252-9_19).
- Lea, Mary R., and Brian V. Street. "Student Writing in Higher Education: An Academic Literacies Approach." *Studies in Higher Education* 23, no. 2 (January 1998): 157–72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079812331380364>.
- Leibowitz, Brenda, and Vivienne Bozalek. "Foundation Provision-a Social Justice Perspective." *South African Journal of Higher Education* 29, no. 1 (2015): 8–25.
- Lillis, Theresa, and Mary Scott. "Defining Academic Literacies Research." *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Professional Practice* 4, no. 1 (September 14, 2015): 5–32. <https://doi.org/10.1558/japl.v4i1.5>.
- Luttrell, Regina, Adrienne Wallace, Christopher McCollough, and Jiyoung Lee. "Public Relations

- Curriculum: A Systematic Examination of Curricular Offerings in Social Media, Digital Media, and Analytics in Accredited Programs.” *Public Relations Education* 7, no. 2 (2021): 7.
- Motala, Shireen, Yusuf Sayed, and Tarryn De Kock. “Epistemic Decolonisation in Reconstituting Higher Education Pedagogy in South Africa: The Student Perspective.” *Teaching in Higher Education* 26, no. 7–8 (2021): 1002–18.
- Mugera, W. “Non-Probability Sampling Methods.” *Kenya: University of Nairobi*, 2013.
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Sabelo J. “Decoloniality as the Future of Africa.” *History Compass* 13, no. 10 (October 21, 2015): 485–96. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12264>.
- Pineteh, Ernest A. “The Academic Writing Challenges of Undergraduate Students: A South African Case Study.” *International Journal of Higher Education* 3, no. 1 (September 25, 2013). <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v3n1p12>.
- Skinner, Chris, Liesl Von Essen, and Gary Mersham. *Handbook of Public Relations*. Oxford Southern Africa. Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Smith, Ronald D. *Strategic Planning for Public Relations*. 6th ed. Routledge, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003024071>.
- Woods, Chenoa S., Toby Park, Shouping Hu, and Tamara Bertrand Jones. “Reading, Writing, and English Course Pathways When Developmental Education Is Optional: Course Enrollment and Success for Underprepared First-Time-in-College Students.” *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* 43, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 5–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2017.1391144>.
- Yin, Robert K. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. Vol. 5. Sage, 2009.

#### **ABOUT AUTHOR(S)**

Shona L.P Joseph is a Masters student in the Public Relations & Communication programme at the DUT.

Dr Nereshnee Govender is a Writing Centre Practitioner at DUT and is widely published in the education and social sciences field and has presented her research at many national and international conferences.