



Bridging the gap: Academic literacy among first-year students in rural South African universities

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigated the role of academic literacy in shaping first-year students' academic engagement and success at three rural South African universities. Guided by the interpretivist paradigm and informed by the Academic Literacies Framework and social constructivist theory, the study employed a multiple case study design. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with academic literacy practitioners and disciplinary lecturers, focus group discussions with first-year students, and analysis of institutional documents. Thematic analysis revealed that academic literacy plays a critical role in facilitating epistemic access by enabling students to engage with academic texts, disciplinary discourses, and assessment practices more effectively. The findings further demonstrated that academic literacy contributes significantly to the academic identity formation, confidence, sense of belonging, and participation in disciplinary knowledge communities of students. However, the transformative potential of academic literacy was constrained by the weak integration of literacy programmes into disciplinary curricula, institutional marginalisation of literacy support, limited resources, and dominant monolingual academic practices that disadvantage multilingual students. The study concludes that academic literacy should be repositioned as an institution-wide pedagogical and transformative project rather than a peripheral remedial intervention. The study recommends the integration of discipline-specific literacy practices into curricula, stronger collaboration between literacy practitioners and disciplinary lecturers, and the adoption of inclusive multilingual pedagogies that advance epistemic justice. The study contributes to scholarship on academic literacy by foregrounding the experiences of first-year students in rural South African universities, a context that remains underexplored in higher education research.

Keywords: Academic Literacy, First-year Students, Rural Universities, Epistemic Access, South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Despite having opened its doors to all, South African higher education still struggles to strike a balance between increasing the numbers and producing a higher percentage of graduates, a challenge that is even more difficult for first-year students from rural and previously disadvantaged backgrounds. Since the democratic transition, policy reforms in the sector have leaned heavily towards equity, redress, and massification, with the result that student enrolments across the sector have increased

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significantly.¹ However, although access to university has been extended, students' retention, progression, and completion rates have not shown corresponding improvement. Various student success indicators clearly show that a significant number of students, especially freshmen, do not graduate within the expected time or drop out during or after the first year.² These patterns require a reconsideration of what constitutes meaningful access to higher education and the conditions required for student success.

Some studies have pointed to the continuation of the long-standing gap between school education and university as the main reason behind the high attrition rate of first-year students in South Africa.³ Although many students fulfil all the requirements for university entry, they lack what Morrow calls 'epistemic access' the capability to participate in the academic culture characterized by the forms of knowledge, meaning-making practices and modes of argumentation at the higher education level.⁴ This challenge is particularly severe among students from rural schools and under-resourced communities, where structural inequalities such as poverty, inadequate schooling, limited infrastructure, and insufficient exposure to advanced literacy practices constrain academic preparedness.⁵ Consequently, many first-year students encounter difficulties in interpreting academic texts, understanding assessment expectations, and engaging confidently in disciplinary discussions. For this reason, academic literacy has become one of the major topics when it comes to success in higher education and the transformation of the curriculum. In fact, academic literacy refers to more than just understanding of language or having technical study skills; it includes a complex set of sometimes socially oriented practices such as reading, writing, critical thinking and being a member of disciplinary knowledge communities.⁶ These practices are deeply embedded within institutional norms, power relations, and historically constituted epistemologies, making them neither neutral nor universally accessible. For first-year students unfamiliar with these conventions, academic literacy often functions as a hidden curriculum, implicitly shaping academic expectations while remaining insufficiently articulated by lecturers and institutions.⁷

Rural universities occupy a distinctive yet under-researched position within the South African higher education landscape. Historically established to serve geographically marginalised and socio-economically disadvantaged communities, these institutions continue to enrol large numbers of first-generation students, many of whom are English Additional Language speakers with limited access to academic, cultural, and social capital.⁸ Although rural universities play an important role in promoting social mobility and regional development, they continue to face significant structural constraints, including underfunding, inadequate infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, and limited student support resources. Under such conditions, academic literacy programmes are frequently positioned at the periphery of the curriculum and offered through stand-alone modules or support units that remain weakly integrated into disciplinary teaching and learning.⁹

¹ Council on Higher Education, *VitalStats: Public Higher Education 2011–2012* (CHE., 2013) ; Department of Higher Education and Training, *South African Higher Education in the 20th Year of Democracy: Context, Challenges and Key Trends* (DHET, 2014).

² Council on Higher Education, *VitalStats: Public Higher Education 2011–2012*; Ian Scott, Nanette Yeld, and Jane Hendry, *Higher Education Monitor: A Case for Improving Teaching and Learning in South African Higher Education*, vol. 6 (Council on Higher Education Pretoria, 2007).

³ Wally E Morrow, "Bounds of Democracy: Epistemological Access in Higher Education," 2009; Chrissie Boughey, "Analysing Teaching and Learning at the Universities of Technology: A Tribute to Terry Volbrecht," in *Cape Town: RITAL Conference*, 2010.

⁴ Morrow, "Bounds of Democracy: Epistemological Access in Higher Education."

⁵ Nicholas Spaull, "South Africa's Education Crisis," *Johannesburg: Center for Development and Enterprise (CDE)*, 2013; Savo Heleta, "Decolonisation of Higher Education: Dismantling Epistemic Violence and Eurocentrism in South Africa," *Transformation in Higher Education* 1, no. 1 (October 25, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.4102/the.v1i1.9>.

⁶ 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>; Theresa Lillis and Mary Scott, "Defining Academic Literacies Research," *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Professional Practice*, September 14, 2015, 5–32, <https://doi.org/10.1558/japl.v4i1.5>.

⁷ C. Boughey and S. McKenna, *Academic Literacy in South Africa: Contexts, Policies and Practices* (Sun Media, 2016).

⁸ Council on Higher Education, *VitalStats: Public Higher Education 2011–2012*; B. Leibowitz, "Academic Literacy in South African Universities: Understanding Contexts and Challenges," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 30, no. 1 (2016): 1–17..

⁹ Ursula Wingate, *Academic Literacy and Student Diversity: The Case for Inclusive Practice*, vol. 42 (Multilingual Matters, 2015); Boughey and McKenna, *Academic Literacy in South Africa: Contexts, Policies and Practices*.

Deficit-oriented perspectives on academic literacy have been intensely challenged because: attributing students' lack of skills or inadequacy does not only generate a kind of self-blame among them but also covers up the exclusionary role of institutional practices.¹⁰ There is a growing plea in scholarly literature that, in place of deficit views, academic literacy should be seen as a medium of transformation that is so deeply embedded in the institutional culture that it makes recognition of students' varied linguistic repertoires and sociocultural backgrounds the basis of its modes of operation instead of lack and hurdle.¹¹ In the South African context, these discussions intersect with broader issues of curriculum transformation, decolonisation and epistemic justice, which entails unseating the hegemonic Eurocentric forms of knowledge and monolingual norms in higher education.

Although scholarship on academic literacy in South African higher education has expanded considerably, limited attention has been devoted to the experiences of first-year students in rural universities. Much of the existing research has focused predominantly on urban or research-intensive institutions, thereby overlooking the distinctive institutional and socio-economic conditions shaping literacy practices in rural contexts. Therefore, this study investigates the contribution of academic literacy to academic engagement and success of first-year students at three rural South African universities. Drawing on the perspectives of students, academic literacy practitioners, and disciplinary lecturers, the study seeks to generate contextually grounded understandings of academic literacy as a mechanism to promote epistemic access, academic participation, and student success. The central research question guiding the study is the following: What contribution does academic literacy make to the academic engagement and success of first-year students in selected rural South African universities?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualising Academic Literacy in Higher Education

Academic literacy has been widely conceptualised as a key factor in student learning and academic success in higher education. Initially, academic literacy was conceived in line with skills-based models, which considered literacy as a neutral set of reading and writing skills that students either had or did not have (Lea & Street, 1998). In this view, students who had academic difficulties were seen as having deficiencies, and literacy programs were designed as remedial tools separate from subject matter. Scholars have criticised this approach for its neglect of the political and contextual nature of academic work.¹² Today, academic literacy is considered one of the cultural practices deeply rooted in specific institutional and disciplinary contexts. The academic literacies perspective recognises that there are a variety of literacies and that each discipline favours different genres, rhetorical strategies, and ways of constructing knowledge.¹³ Thus, the problem of the student is not just about lacking skills but about the difficulty of using academic discourses which are newly learnt, implicit and not agreed upon. This idea has helped to focus on the institution's responsibility and pedagogical support rather than on the student's deficit.

Academic Literacy and First-Year Transition

There is broad consensus that the first year of university study significantly shapes students' academic success, sense of belonging, and persistence in higher education.¹⁴ Research has consistently shown that academic literacy proficiency strongly influences students' academic performance and retention during this transitional phase.¹⁵ First-year students are expected to engage extensively in academic reading,

¹⁰ Mary R. Lea and Brian V. Street, "The 'Academic Literacies' Model: Theory and Applications," *Theory Into Practice* 45, no. 4 (November 2006): 368–77, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15430421tip4504_11; Kathy Luckett and Suellen Shay, "Reframing the Curriculum: A Transformative Approach," *Critical Studies in Education* 61, no. 1 (2020): 50–65.

¹¹ B. Leibowitz, "Power, Knowledge and Learning: A Decolonial Perspective on Academic Literacy," *Perspectives in Education*, 2017, 1–10; Heleta, "Decolonisation of Higher Education: Dismantling Epistemic Violence and Eurocentrism in South Africa."

¹² Lillis and Scott, "Defining Academic Literacies Research"; Wingate, *Academic Literacy and Student Diversity: The Case for Inclusive Practice*.

¹³ Lea and Street, "The 'Academic Literacies' Model: Theory and Applications."

¹⁴ Vincent Tinto, *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (University of Chicago press, 2012).

¹⁵ Boughey, "Analysing Teaching and Learning at the Universities of Technology: A Tribute to Terry Volbrecht"; Scott, Yeld, and Hendry, *Higher Education Monitor: A Case for Improving Teaching and Learning in South African Higher Education*.

interpret complex disciplinary texts, and produce academically appropriate written work, often with limited explicit guidance. For many students, particularly first-generation university students, these expectations differ substantially from their previous schooling experiences. In South Africa, scholars have identified a persistent articulation gap between secondary schooling and higher education.¹⁶ Research further indicates that many students enter university without sufficient exposure to academic reading, writing, argumentation, and critical thinking practices, thereby limiting their ability to engage effectively with university curricula.¹⁷ Academic literacy is therefore widely regarded as central to supporting first-year transition and academic integration. However, scholars caution against generic and decontextualised literacy interventions that remain disconnected from disciplinary learning contexts.¹⁸

Rurality, Inequality, and Student Preparedness

Rurality remains a significant, yet underexplored, dimension of inequality within South African higher education. Students in rural communities frequently encounter intersecting challenges, including poverty, under-resourced schooling, linguistic marginalisation, and limited access to academic support structures.¹⁹ These structural inequalities significantly influence students' academic self-concept and literacy practices in university contexts. Studies have shown that many rural students enter academic environments that are culturally, linguistically, and ideologically distant from their lived experiences, thereby contributing to feelings of alienation and reduced academic confidence.²⁰ Rural universities themselves operate under structurally constrained conditions characterised by high student-to-staff ratios, inadequate funding, and insufficient infrastructure. Although these institutions play an important role in advancing social justice and expanding participation, they often lack the institutional capacity to implement comprehensive academic literacy programmes effectively.²¹ Consequently, academic literacy is often positioned as supplementary support rather than as an integral component of knowledge production and disciplinary engagement.

Models of Academic Literacy Provision

Universities have adopted various models for academic literacy provision, including stand-alone modules, extended curriculum programmes, writing centres, and embedded disciplinary approaches. Stand-alone literacy modules remain the dominant model within many historically disadvantaged South African universities.²² Although such modules may provide students with foundational literacy support, scholars argue that their separation from disciplinary curricula limits students' ability to apply literacy practices meaningfully within subject-specific contexts.²³ Embedded approaches, which involve collaboration between academic literacy practitioners and disciplinary lecturers, are increasingly regarded as more inclusive and pedagogically effective.²⁴ These approaches conceptualise literacy as inseparable from disciplinary learning and make academic expectations more explicit to students. However, successful implementation of embedded literacy models requires institutional commitment, curriculum restructuring, and sustained staff development, conditions that are not always available in rural universities.

¹⁶ Morrow, "Bounds of Democracy: Epistemological Access in Higher Education"; Spaull, "South Africa's Education Crisis."

¹⁷ Boughey and McKenna, *Academic Literacy in South Africa: Contexts, Policies and Practices*.

¹⁸ Wingate, *Academic Literacy and Student Diversity: The Case for Inclusive Practice*; Sherran Clarence and Sioux McKenna, "Developing Academic Literacies through Understanding the Nature of Disciplinary Knowledge," *London Review of Education* 15, no. 1 (2017): 38–49.

¹⁹ Council on Higher Education, *VitalStats: Public Higher Education 2011–2012*; Leibowitz, "Academic Literacy in South African Universities: Understanding Contexts and Challenges."

²⁰ Heleta, "Decolonisation of Higher Education: Dismantling Epistemic Violence and Eurocentrism in South Africa."

²¹ Boughey and McKenna, *Academic Literacy in South Africa: Contexts, Policies and Practices*.

²² Council on Higher Education, *VitalStats: Public Higher Education 2011–2012*.

²³ Wingate, *Academic Literacy and Student Diversity: The Case for Inclusive Practice*.

²⁴ Clarence and McKenna, "Developing Academic Literacies through Understanding the Nature of Disciplinary Knowledge."

Academic Literacy, Transformation, and Epistemic Justice

Recent scholarship increasingly links academic literacy with broader debates on transformation, decolonisation, and epistemic justice in South African higher education. Scholars argue that dominant academic literacy norms frequently privilege Eurocentric epistemologies and monolingual English practices while marginalising local knowledge and linguistic diversity. Accordingly, academic literacy development should not only socialise students into existing academic conventions but also critically interrogate whose knowledge is legitimised within higher education institutions. Approaches grounded in epistemic justice advocate dialogic pedagogies, recognition of students' linguistic repertoires, and institutional reflexivity concerning academic norms and power relations.²⁵ Such approaches are particularly significant within rural universities, where students lived experiences and community knowledge are often adequately acknowledged within mainstream curricula.

METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm and Design

This study was located within the interpretivist research paradigm, which seeks to understand social phenomena through the meanings individuals assign to their lived experiences. An interpretivist approach was considered appropriate because academic literacy practices are socially situated, context-dependent, and shaped by institutional cultures and power relations.²⁶ Guided by this paradigm, the study employed a qualitative multiple case study design to investigate how academic literacy is conceptualised, enacted, and experienced in three rural South African universities. The case study approach provided an opportunity for an in-depth and contextually grounded exploration of academic literacy practices while also allowing cross-case comparison across institutional settings.²⁷

Research Sites and Case Selection

The purposive selection of the three universities was based on their rural location, being historically disadvantaged, and having a high enrolment of first-generation students from rural and working-class backgrounds. These institutions have parallel common structural challenges such as limited resources, large undergraduate classes, and diverse language student populations; thus, they represent suitable sites for investigating the role of academic literacy for first-year student success. To maintain the anonymity of the institutions, they shall be referred to as University A, University B, and University C.

Participants and Sampling Strategy

The participants included first-year undergraduate students, academic literacy practitioners, and disciplinary lecturers who teach first-year students. Purposive sampling was used to identify participants with direct experience of academic literacy teaching and learning.²⁸ In total, 36 participants were involved in all three institutions, including 24 first-year students, six academic literacy practitioners, and six disciplinary lecturers. Student participants were selected from diverse academic programmes to ensure representation of varied disciplinary literacy experiences.

Data Collection

Multiple qualitative methods were employed to ensure depth and triangulation of data. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with academic literacy practitioners and disciplinary lecturers to generate rich insights into their understanding of academic literacy, pedagogical approaches, and institutional challenges. Focus group discussions were conducted with first-year students to explore their transition experiences and engagement with academic literacy practices collectively. Institutional documents, including literacy policies, curriculum documents, and course outlines, were also analysed.

²⁵ Luckett and Shay, "Reframing the Curriculum: A Transformative Approach."

²⁶ J.W Creswell and C.N Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design Choosing among Five Approaches*, 4th Edition, 2018.

²⁷ Robert K Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications*, vol. 6 (Sage Thousand Oaks, CA, 2018).

²⁸ Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2015).

The use of multiple data sources strengthened the credibility of the findings through triangulation and cross-verification of emerging themes.

Data Analysis

All interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. Data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, namely familiarisation with the data, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition and naming, and report production.²⁹ An inductive coding approach was employed to allow themes to emerge naturally from the data while remaining theoretically informed by the study's conceptual framework. Cross-case analysis was further conducted to identify similarities and differences across the three institutional contexts.

Trustworthiness and Rigour

Methodological rigour was ensured through strategies aligned with Lincoln and Guba's criteria for trustworthiness.³⁰ Credibility was enhanced through data triangulation, prolonged engagement with the data, and member verification, during which participants were given opportunities to verify the accuracy of the interpretations. Dependability was strengthened through the maintenance of a detailed audit trail documenting methodological decisions and analytical processes. Confirmability was enhanced by reflexive journaling to minimise researcher bias. Transferability was supported by detailed descriptions of the research context and participants, enabling readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar contexts.

Ethical Considerations

The Turfloop Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval for this study. Participation was completely voluntary, and before data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed, and pseudonyms were used in the transcription and reporting. The data were stored in a safe place with limited access to only the researchers. Ethical values of respect, beneficence, and justice were at the core of all stages of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following section reports and discusses the findings from this study in relation to five major themes spotted from participants' accounts and which are consistent with the theoretical framework and relevant literature.

Academic Literacy as a Gateway to Epistemic Access

Participants unanimously noted that academic literacy is the main prerequisite for achieving epistemic access. Students said academic literacy sessions made the academic conventions clearer, assessment criteria less mysterious and deepened their understanding of disciplinary knowledge. One student said very emotionally:

"The workshops helped me understand how to approach academic texts. Before, I would just read but when asked, I wouldn't know what to focus on".

However, participants also reported that literacy instruction was often generic and insufficiently connected to disciplinary contexts. As a result, students experienced only partial epistemic access because literacy practices were not consistently integrated into subject-specific learning environments. This finding reinforces critiques of decontextualised literacy interventions that do not engage directly with disciplinary epistemologies and knowledge practices.³¹

²⁹ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.

³⁰ Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1985).

³¹ Wingate, *Academic Literacy and Student Diversity: The Case for Inclusive Practice*.

Negotiating Academic Identity and Confidence

Academic literacy emphatically contributed to students' conception of their academic selves and to the development of their academic confidence. Numerous freshmen admitted that at first, they felt incapable and these feelings were eventually removed once they received the helping hand regularly through literacy sessions. One student told the story:

"I was not sure if I was capable of writing at university level, but after the sessions, I felt part of the university. "

These findings demonstrate that academic literacy extends beyond technical competence to include processes of identity negotiation and social positioning within higher education. Students' growing confidence reflects their gradual movement towards fuller participation within disciplinary communities, consistent with situated learning theory.³² The findings therefore support academic literacies scholarship, which conceptualises literacy practices as closely linked to questions of authority, inclusion, legitimacy, and belonging within academic institutions.³³

Misalignment between Academic Literacy and Disciplinary Practices

The problem of misalignment of academic literacy with disciplinary contexts was raised more as a challenge. It is almost a routine that students complain about not being able to transfer the skills learnt in literacy modules to the subject-specific assessments. One student commented: Literacy teaches us the structure of essays, but in my module, the staff expects a totally different format and that makes it confusing.

"Speaking from the lecturer's point of view, they admitted that: We expect students to use what they learn in literacy but coordination between us to how it fits into our subject content is very rare".

These findings illustrate the limitations of isolated academic literacy programmes that remain disconnected from disciplinary curricula. The findings support arguments advanced by Wingate and Clarence and McKenna, who advocate embedded and discipline-specific approaches to academic literacy development.³⁴ Embedded literacy approaches allow students to engage directly with epistemological conventions, genres, and communicative practices specific to their disciplines.

Structural Constraints and Institutional Marginalisation

But for institutional constraints such as overcrowded classes, lack of sufficient resources, and the marginal place of the literacy program, academic literacy would be more active and effective. It was noted by a literacy practitioner that:

"We are supposed to be the ones to fix students literacy problems but we neither have time nor support from the institution".

These findings suggest that academic literacy programmes within rural universities often operate under constrained institutional conditions that undermine their transformative potential. The marginalisation of literacy support within institutional structures reinforces deficit-oriented assumptions that position literacy as remedial rather than as central to teaching and learning. This finding aligns with broader scholarship that shows how structural inequalities within historically disadvantaged institutions continue to shape educational outcomes and epistemic participation.³⁵

³² Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511815355>.

³³ Lea and Street, "The 'Academic Literacies' Model: Theory and Applications"; Lillis and Scott, "Defining Academic Literacies Research."

³⁴ Wingate, *Academic Literacy and Student Diversity: The Case for Inclusive Practice*; Clarence and McKenna, "Developing Academic Literacies through Understanding the Nature of Disciplinary Knowledge."

³⁵ Boughey and McKenna, *Academic Literacy in South Africa: Contexts, Policies and Practices*.

Academic Literacy, Language, and Epistemic Justice

Language was seen as the clearest obstacle to and facilitator of academic literacy. Students widely pointed out that since English is an additional language to them, they find it hard to put their knowledge into words.

"I get the concepts in my first language but have to do assignments in English and sometimes I can't fully express my ideas. "

These experiences illustrate how dominant monolingual academic practices may contribute to forms of epistemic injustice by privileging certain languages and modes of expression over others.³⁶ Participants argued that greater recognition of students' multilingual repertoires and sociocultural experiences could enhance participation and academic engagement.

The findings therefore highlight the importance of adopting inclusive and multilingual pedagogical approaches that recognise linguistic diversity as an academic resource rather than as a deficit. Such approaches are particularly important within rural South African universities, where many students navigate complex linguistic and cultural transitions upon entering higher education.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that academic literacy plays a critical role in shaping the academic engagement, identity formation, and epistemic participation of first-year students. However, the study also reveals that the transformative potential of academic literacy remains constrained by institutional structures, pedagogical fragmentation, and persistent language hierarchies within higher education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on the findings of this study, it is recommended that rural universities reposition academic literacy as a central institutional responsibility integrated into teaching, learning, and curriculum development rather than treating it as a peripheral or remedial support service. Academic literacy provision should be embedded within disciplinary curricula through sustained collaboration between academic literacy practitioners and disciplinary lecturers to ensure that literacy instruction is directly aligned with disciplinary knowledge practices, assessment expectations, and communicative conventions. Universities should further prioritise continuous professional development initiatives aimed at equipping lecturers with the pedagogical skills required to make disciplinary discourses, academic expectations, and assessment criteria more explicit and accessible to first-year students. In addition, academic literacy pedagogies should adopt inclusive and decolonial approaches that recognise students' diverse linguistic repertoires, cultural backgrounds, and lived experiences as valuable epistemic resources. Such approaches are essential to advance epistemic justice and foster meaningful participation among students from historically marginalised and rural communities. Institutional leadership should also ensure adequate resourcing of academic literacy programmes through improved staffing, reduced workloads, and enhanced infrastructural support to strengthen the sustainability and effectiveness of literacy interventions. Furthermore, institutional policies should explicitly acknowledge the role of academic literacy in promoting student retention, academic engagement, and student success. Finally, future research should undertake longitudinal and comparative investigations into the long-term impact of embedded and discipline-specific literacy interventions in diverse higher education contexts. Collectively, these recommendations aim to contribute to more equitable, inclusive, and transformative higher education practices within rural South African universities.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the contribution of academic literacy to the academic engagement and success of first-year students at three rural South African universities from the perspectives of students, academic literacy practitioners, and disciplinary lecturers. The findings revealed that academic literacy plays a

³⁶ Leibowitz, "Power, Knowledge and Learning: A Decolonial Perspective on Academic Literacy"; Heleta, "Decolonisation of Higher Education: Dismantling Epistemic Violence and Eurocentrism in South Africa."

central role in facilitating epistemic access by enabling students to engage more effectively with academic texts, disciplinary discourses, and assessment practices. The study further demonstrated that academic literacy contributes significantly to students' academic identity formation, confidence development, sense of belonging, and participation within disciplinary knowledge communities. The findings also confirmed that academic literacy extends beyond the acquisition of technical reading and writing skills. Rather, academic literacy constitutes a socially situated practice through which students negotiate knowledge, identity, authority, and participation within higher education contexts. Academic literacy therefore functions as an important mechanism to mediate the integration into disciplinary communities and to support the development of students as critically engaged and independent learners. However, the study further revealed that several structural, pedagogical, and institutional challenges hinder the transformative potential of academic literacy. These include weak alignment between literacy programmes and disciplinary curricula, the marginal institutional positioning of literacy support initiatives, insufficient resources, and dominant monolingual academic practices that disadvantage multilingual students. Such challenges limit students' opportunities for meaningful epistemic participation and reinforce broader inequalities within higher education. By framing academic literacy through the lenses of epistemic access and academic literacies theory, the study highlights the intersections between literacy practices, institutional power relations, inclusion, and curriculum transformation. The findings suggest that academic literacy should not be approached as a remedial intervention aimed solely at addressing student deficits, but rather as a transformative institutional and pedagogical project central to equity, decolonisation, and epistemic justice within South African higher education. Therefore, incorporating academic literacy into curriculum design, pedagogy, and institutional culture is essential to promote meaningful student success, particularly within historically disadvantaged and rural university contexts. Ultimately, the study argues that meaningful access to higher education cannot be separated from students' ability to participate fully in disciplinary knowledge practices. Therefore, academic literacy remains a critical foundation for promoting epistemic access, academic participation, student confidence, and the development of critically conscious graduates capable of meaningful participation within higher education and broader society.

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Mohammed Xolile Ntshangase holds a PhD (Philosophy) from the University of KwaZulu-Natal. As he always believed that sharing his knowledge and perspectives with others brings more pleasure, Mohammed enjoys sharing his views with fellow academics from different fields. He is currently affiliated with the University of Limpopo in the Department of Education Studies, wherein he serves as a senior lecturer of Philosophy & Psychology of Education. His areas of research interest are: African philosophy, philosophy of education, psychology of education, and gender studies. He has attended and presented papers in 14 academic conferences, including national and international ones, and he has more than 80 publications in DHET-accredited journals. Among his ambitions, Mohammed wishes and works towards being a global scholar renowned in different areas/ disciplines with his polymathic approach to research, which has attracted researchers to collaborate with him nationally and abroad. Mohammed believes that the interconnectedness of knowledge and the cry for interdisciplinarity and

multidisciplinary in research nowadays cannot be ignored. His scholarly awards include the VC's 2023 best teacher award and 2024 best researcher award in the SoE (UL).

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