Variables Impacting Academic Writing: An Investigation of First-year TVET Students' Writing Performance

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the variables affecting first-year TVET students' academic writing performance in South African Higher Education. The study was quantitative in nature and a purposive sampling technique was used to select participants. The study was targeted at first-year students in Technical and Vocational Education and Technology (TVET) College in the Western Cape. The sample size of the study was 185 students. The results clearly indicated that students' motivation for academic writing was the most important, with the highest mean. In addition, learning styles and strategies, study behaviour or study habits, difficulty managing time, and inadequate and poor-quality learning materials exert an influence on academic writing performance. It emerged from the study's findings that motivation is an essential attribute first-year students must possess to enhance their academic writing at the tertiary level. Lack of motivation to develop academic writing skills can hinder them from acquiring the necessary skills. Most of the students asserted that academic writing posed challenges. The study concluded that there is a need for first-year students in colleges to devote time and be committed to academic writing to develop and improve student writing skills. It was revealed that attention paid to academic writing can facilitate overcoming many barriers apparent to students' writing performance.

Keywords: First-Year Students, Academic Writing, English Second Language, Student Engagement, Apprehension.

INTRODUCTION

Language acquisition has many components, notably listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. These skills are related to one another but are also unique. One may be proficient in one and not proficient in others. Some people speak well but do not write well. There are also people who write well but do not speak well. Also, owing to these concerns, some people may have challenges with many of the skills. The acquisition of each of the skills may require entirely different processes. Little attention has been paid to variables impacting freshmen in Higher Institutions of learning who are transitioning from secondary school to university. It has been established that students who have trouble with early literacy often continue to experience failure at later levels and even later in life.[1]

Urgent measures are required to establish and develop students' intellectual and writing abilities. This is the bedrock and the foundation upon which their academic performances rest in the later part of their academic journey. First-year students in South African institutions of higher learning often find academic writing a daunting task.[2] This is because they lack the intellectual abilities saddled with the rigor of academic writing and

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[1] Jeanne Sternlicht Chall, *The Academic Achievement Challenge: What Really Works in the Classroom?* (Guilford Press, 2002).
[2] Fio Dolly Gaebeng Dlavane, "Reading Literacy in the Content Areas: The Development of an Instructional Support Framework" (North-West University (South Africa), 2019); Tobie Van Dyk et al., "Ondersoek Na Die Impak van'n Akademiese Geletterdheidsintervensie Op Eerstejaarstudente Se Akademiese Taalvermoë," *Litnet Akademies* 8, no. 3 (2011): 487–506.

their writing skills are not developed leading to lower academic achievement.[3] There is little support that guides them toward enhancing their writing skills. As such, they performed poorly in academic writing courses. Research shows that the writing needs between native English speakers (L1) and non-native English speakers (L2) differ between the user groups. Though most studies concerning academic writing focus on L2 learners only single-letter misspellings are anticipated for L1 users.[4]

Arguably, the level of students' writing skills differs from one to another. Engaging students with different instructional models may yield different outcomes. This depends on the issues and factors impacting their learning and academic performance.[5] Earlier research recognised three models for investigating academic writing. They include the study skills model, the academic socialisation model; and the academic literacies model. These models have guided the expansion of the curriculum, and instructional practice in academic writing and research.[6] However, there is scant research attention to ESL writing at the TVET level, globally and especially within the Southern African educational context.[7] This points to the urgent need for empirical investigation of the writing development of L2 students in this context. These include early reading and writing problems associated with expressive/receptive, phonological, syntactical, and lexical factors.

Research showed that writing and vocabulary competence are interrelated, as the amount of vocabulary knowledge also affects reading comprehension and writing skills. It is argued that the English Language teacher plays "the most important role in the process of teaching/learning" in Saudi Arabia.[8] Pretorius distinguishes between comprehension and academic performance.[9] Good academic performance does not necessarily imply good academic writing ability. However, students with poor academic achievement also exhibit weak writing ability. Such students read and write far below their expectations. They will continue to underperform academically unless their writing problems are treated.

Furthermore, there is a growing interest in the value of literacy intervention among monolingual students who are mostly at risk of failure in academic writing.[10] The world has become a global village. Limiting one's linguistic knowledge to only one's mother tongue is counterproductive. It is becoming increasingly mandatory to master one of the international languages if one will be relevant in the world of business and politics, among others. One of these international languages is English, which is the official language of many African countries. It is against this background this study investigates the issues and factors impacting first-year students' academic writing skills in a bid to enhance and improve the writing abilities of freshmen. Drawing from the above-mentioned discussion the aim was to answer the research question: What are the variables impacting academic writing performance of first-year TVET students?

LITERATURE REVIEW
Fundamentals Relating to Academic Writing

Matsuda and Silva aver that writing includes the reflection of the elements of writing (a rational aspect of writing), the use of different strategies or techniques for developing and communicating ideas (a strategic aspect of writing) and creating meaning that helps the reader to understand the text while reading (a textual aspect of writing).[11] Academic writing requires consistent practice, as there is no easily learned set of rules followed, especially for those who are in the process of learning English as a second language. Writing consistently makes the learner master the art of writing and stimulates interest in writing. People naturally become experts in what they do repeatedly and consistently. A student who waits for only the time of examination before getting involved in writing will not likely do well. When the medium of writing is a second language, the learner has

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[3] Dlavane, "Reading Literacy in the Content Areas: The Development of an Instructional Support Framework."

[4] Yumei Fan and Jinfen Xu, "Exploring Student Engagement with Peer Feedback on L2 Writing," *Journal of Second Language Writing* 50 (December 2020): 100775, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2020.100775; Heather B. Finn, "Articulating Struggle: ESL Students' Perceived Obstacles to Success in a Community College Writing Class," *Journal of Second Language Writing* 42 (December 2018): 101–6, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2018.09.001.

[5] Dlavane, "Reading Literacy in the Content Areas: The Development of an Instructional Support Framework."

[6] Kirstin Wilmot, "Providing 'Auxiliary' Academic Writing Support to Postgraduate Students: A Socio-Cultural Approach," *Journal for Language Teaching* 49, no. 2 (September 22, 2016): 129, https://doi.org/10.4314/jlt.v49i2.6.

[7] Amy Grant, Alexandra Gottardo, and Esther Geva, "Reading in English as a First or Second Language: The Case of Grade 3 Spanish, Portuguese, and English Speakers," *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice* 26, no. 2 (2011): 67–83.

[8] Intakhab Alam Khan, "The Teacher of English: Pedagogic Relevance in Saudi Arabia.," *English Language Teaching* 4, no. 2 (2011): 112–20.

[9] Gregory Breetzke, Sanet Eksteen, and Erika Pretorius, "Based GIS: A Practical Answer to the Implementation of GIS Education into Resource-Poor Schools in South Africa," *Journal of Geography* 110, no. 4 (2011): 148–57.

[10] Scott G Paris and James V Hoffman, "Reading Assessments in Kindergarten through Third Grade: Findings from the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement," *The Elementary School Journal* 105, no. 2 (2004): 199–217.

[11] Norbert Schmitt, *An Introduction to Applied Linguistics* (Routledge, 2013).

much to do to be familiar with the basic requirements of using the language. With continuous writing in the second language, the learner will gradually overcome some of the challenges in writing. Students must communicate their ideas, thoughts, concepts, knowledge and experience in their writing using appropriate resources and structures of language. It is through this that readers will understand the message being communicated. Therefore, writing is a critical thinking process in which the learners make decisions on lexical choices, grammar and possible organisation of information and ideas to get the message across.[12] Writing, or "written literacy", in its most basic form, required the use of error-free standard language. Writing well also centres on good spelling ability and knowledge of appropriate register.[13]

Nosidlak examined the language learning strategies deployed by 102 advanced students of English philosophy at the Pedagogical University of Cracow, Poland. The aim was to ascertain the vocabulary learning strategies the students preferred most and that can be linked with their proficiency. The study indicated that the students used a combination of strategies to learn new words, write and read texts. In addition, academic writing is an inseparable part of the learning process experienced by students during their studies at college.[14] Learning writing skills for students also requires much writing practice and exposure to different modes of the learning process. For example, blended learning initiatives include numerous forms of learning tools. Some of these are collaboration software and online web-based programs. Also included are electronics which support performance systems in learning environments and system management knowledge.[15]

Influences Affecting student's academic Writing

New students need assistance in certain areas of academic writing. The critical areas are grammar, cohesion, style and register.[16] Silva, Cary and Thaiss discuss some deficiencies in the academic writing of students in higher institutions. These and how to combat them. The first issue is students' *self-confidence*. At the commencement of the writing module, many students have been found to apologise for their writing weaknesses and would not want to submit their written tasks. Secondly, students also struggle to o*rganise* their writing. They lack knowledge of how to write an outline and use topic sentences. Many of them do not even know what a topic sentence is. They also do not know how to move from one idea to another and how to construct paragraphs. Thirdly, students lack knowledge of their target *audiences.* They fail to contextualise their writing, forgetting that there is the need to vary their styles depending on the writing *assignments*. They also do not have many drafts and fail to thoroughly revise and rewrite their assignments. Students also have difficulty with *grammar and sentence structure*; they often rely on computer spell-check software. Another area of difficulty for students is *referencing*. Even after being properly instructed, many students hardly master the use of direct quotations and paraphrases.[17]

With respect to *reading,* some students have problems with their reading strategies. Some of them spend little time reading. Some of them do not read widely. Besides they do not get involved in critical reading and do not know how to apply what they have read. Regarding *content*, many students do not define and clarify key academic concepts. This makes them have problems with contextualisation and argumentation.[18] According to Nevile, many students do not see their writing as "academic". Some see their written assignments as just what lecturers use to assess their development and learning.[19] The attention of some students is just on content, not *argument and structure*, which lecturers often rate high. Although while in secondary school, students engaged in research assignments, academic *research* is relatively new to fresh undergraduates. If the curriculum is a bit technical, some students have problems researching it.[20]

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[12] Christiana Sidupa and F X Rahyono, "Lexical Quality of English Language Writing of Undergraduate Students in Indonesia," *Asian EFL Journal* 26, no. 62 (2019): 5–21.

[13] Louisa C Moats, "Teaching Reading" Is" Rocket Science: What Expert Teachers of Reading Should Know and Be Able to Do.," *American Educator* 44, no. 2 (2020): 4.

[14] Katarzyna Maria Nosidlak, "Vocabulary Learning Strategies of the Advanced Students.," *Journal of Language Teaching & Research* 4, no. 4 (2013).

[15] Dodi Mulyadi and Testiana Deni Wijayatiningsih, "The Role Of Blended Learning In Enhancing Students'writing Paragraph," *JALL (Journal of Applied Linguistics and Literacy)* 4, no. 1 (2020): 13–19.

[16] Stephen Evans and Bruce Morrison, "The First Term at University: Implications for EAP," *ELT Journal* 65, no. 4 (2011): 387–97.

[17] Mary Cipriano Silva, Ann H Cary, and Christopher Thaiss, "When Students Can't Write," *Nursing and Health Care Perspectives* 20, no. 3 (1999): 142.

[18] Maurice Nevile, "Literacy Culture Shock: Developing Academic Literacy at University.," *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy* 19, no. 1 (1996): 38–51.

[19] Nevile, "Literacy Culture Shock: Developing Academic Literacy at University."

[20] Nevile, "Literacy Culture Shock: Developing Academic Literacy at University."

Tshotsho and Cekiso discuss the variables that can affect the writing skills of first-year students.[21] These are poor infrastructure, untrained and poorly trained educators, lack of resources, and poor quality of education in rural schools. They also offer solutions to the problem of the falling standards of academic writing amongst Black students in South Africa. Amongst others, training educators on how to teach academic writing is deemed crucial. Equally important is revising the curriculum to address learners' academic writing needs. Resources should also be provided for schools in rural areas, besides the introduction of an academic writing model. In the English as a Second Language (ESL) setting, some technologies can be used for teaching and learning academic writing. However, these technologies may, for some reason, not be fully utilised.[22] The use of technology for teaching and learning is productive, but the incorporation thereof in education remains a challenge. The blended approach is commonly viewed as using certain tools for enhancing learning in the classroom or online. However, it is more appropriately conceived as online facilitation to enhance learning outside the classroom.[23]

Students with writing apprehension should be supported by lecturers as mentors have a dual responsibility of increasing students' competence and confidence.[24] The authors also note that it is important not to indoctrinate students with false beliefs about their writing abilities. However, the focus should not only be on the mistakes that students make but rather that their positive qualities should be highlighted in the feedback they receive. If students receive negative comments in their early years of writing their writing anxiety could be affected. Lecturers should be "honest but tactful" to promote students' "confidence in the act of writing and a healthy acceptance of its subsequent evaluation". Huwari, and Aziz support this view and contend that lecturers should not only impart knowledge and skills but should help students believe in their abilities and help them develop "a strong sense of self-efficacy".[25] To help students with writing apprehension, lecturers could also work student-specifically and make use of differentiation, where different instructional methods and materials are used for highly apprehensive writers.[26]

Therefore, it is important to identify factors that affect the academic performance of students and proffer appropriate ways of dealing with them.[27] In the view of, Townsend, many first-year students in tertiary institutions in South Africa are not literate enough for university studies. They are "often marginalised by the institutional practices in their lack of familiarity with the literacy."[28] This affects their coping level. They may not be able to operate at the level expected of students at HEIs, despite the level of their intelligence and other skills they possess. The autonomous model claims that many students have literacy "shortages" that need to be addressed through remediation.

METHODOLOGY

This study is quantitative in nature. This study used simple random sampling. This sampling technique was appropriate because the study targeted first-year students in Technical and Vocational Education and Technology (TVET) College in the Western Cape. The Institution's Research Department provided the email addresses of students in their first year. A total number of 600 students' email addresses were provided. These were the total number of students in the first year of the institution. Because of the low response rate that characterise online survey, consent letters were sent to all the 600 emails made available by the Research Department. Only 185 students consented to participate in the survey. These students completed the survey and all the responses provided were valid and included for analysis. The duration of the online survey was 30 days. This implies that responses were received when the survey was opened. The online survey link was inactive when the timeline for the study elapsed.[29] The questionnaire used in collecting data was divided into four sections. The first section collected data on the demographic characteristics of the participants. These include

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[21] Baba Tshotsho and Mzwamadoda Cekiso, "Assessing Students' Academic Writing at Tertiary Institutions: Implications for Teaching Writing," *International Journal of Educational Sciences* 9, no. 1 (2015): 65–72.

[22] Solanki D Shyamlee and Muhammad Phil, "Use of Technology in English Language Teaching and Learning: An Analysis," in *International Conference on Language, Medias and Culture*, vol. 33, 2012, 150–56.

[23] D Randy Garrison and Norman D Vaughan, *Blended Learning in Higher Education: Framework, Principles, and Guidelines* (John Wiley & Sons, 2008).

[24] Kaitlin Cobourne and Teresa Shellenbarger, "Taming the Writing Demons: Overcoming Writing Apprehension," *Nurse Author & Editor* 29, no. 1 (2019): 1–8.

[25] Ibrahim Fathi Huwari and Noor Hashima Abd Aziz, "Writing Apprehension in English among Jordanian Postgraduate Students at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM)," *Academic Research International* 1, no. 2 (2011): 190.

[26] Huwari and Abd Aziz, "Writing Apprehension in English among Jordanian Postgraduate Students at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM)."

[27] Garrison and Vaughan, *Blended Learning in Higher Education: Framework, Principles, and Guidelines.*

[28] Rodwell Townsend, "The National Curriculum Statement on Writing Practice Design for Grades 11 and 12: Implications for Academic Writing in Higher Education" (2010).

[29] John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (California: Sage, 2014).

age, gender, school type and grade score in matric examination. The other sections collected data on academic writing. The effect of academic writing on student performance. Ten statements were used to solicit participants' views regarding academic writing. Also, apprehension about academic writing performance was the third section of the questionnaire. Ten statements were used to measure this construct. Lastly, data were also collected about the organisation and structure of academic writing on student writing performance. Eight statements were used to collect data about the construct. All the constructs of the questionnaire were measured using Likert scales ranging from very important to non-important.[30]

DATA ANALYSIS
The quantitative data were analysed through statistical consulting services, using the Social Science Statistical Package (SPSS, version 28) software, and applying descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics refers to the numerical techniques used to arrange and sum up data. It can be presented using tables, or charts.[31] To answer the research question: What are the variables 29 Tong to academic writing on the academic writing performance of first-year TVET students? The discussion will be based on participants' responses on the following topics: Academic writing, the effect of academic writing on student performance; apprehension in academic writing performance and the organisation and structure of academic writing on student writing performance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS
The demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 1. Table 2 presents academic writing -the effect of academic writing on student performance. Various factors motivate students' writing performance. Some of these have been identified and reported in Table 2. Table 2 below highlights, in descending order (with respect to the mean) the factors that best motivate students' academic writing performance for first-year students in TVET College.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of research participants

Characteristics	(%), N = 185
Gender	
Male	14.29%
Female	86%
Age	
18-19	23.57%
20-24	50%
25-30	17.86%
31-34	5%
More than 35	3.57%
Type of School	
Former Model C	19.29%
Private School	5%
Township School	61.45%
School in another country	-
Others	14.29%
Final grades in English for Grade 12	
0-29	1%
30-39	7%
40-59	32%
60-79	60%
80-100	-

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[30] Byron John Bunt, "Potential Benefits of a Puzzle Video Game-Cognitive Enrichment Programme for the Development of Critical Thinking among First Year BEd Students" (North-West University (South Africa)., 2019).
[31] Senzeni Sibanda, "The Implementation Of Formal Assessments In Intermediate Phase Mathematics As A Foundation Of Teaching And Learning Enhancement In The Lejweleputswa District," 2020.

Table 2: Academic writing -The effect of academic writing on student performance

Likert item	Response (%)						Rank
	Very important	Important	Moderately Important	Slightly Important	Not Important	Mean	
1. Self-motivation	3%	10%	13%	43%	30%	3.88	1
2. Learning styles and strategies	2%	11%	18%	41%	29%	3.85	2
3. Study behaviour or study habits	3%	13%	14%	51%	18%	3.68	3
4. Difficulty managing time	2%	21%	18%	39%	20%	3.55	4
5. Quality of learning materials	6%	36%	17%	29%	11%	3.02	5
6. Teaching methods	8%	38%	18%	23%	13%	2.95	6
7. Ability to understand course material	6%	47%	13%	22%	13%	2.88	7
8. Class attendance	22%	26%	10%	29%	13%	2.87	8
9. Submission of assignments	15%	35%	8%	33%	11%	2.86	9
10. Satisfaction with teaching skills of lecturers (lecturers' competencies)	12%	36%	18%	26%	12 %	2.80	10

Item 1, in Table 2, indicates that self-motivation received a vote of 70% and a mean score of 3.88; it surfaced as the aspect that received the highest score. Self-motivation is viewed as an incentive when it comes to learning. Motivation is regarded by Sheerah as central to learning to write, and it can enhance students' participation in learning either through conventional or blended learning applications.[32] Previous studies for example by Hughes found that self-motivation can increase students' participation and make them active in learning. It can influence students' attitudes toward adapting to any form of learning strategies available.[33] Nevertheless, the respondents were not satisfied with the lecturer's competencies regarding enhancing their academic writing performances.

One cannot rule out that writing is a skill developed over time, and this can only be achieved by constant reading and continuous academic writing practice. There is a need for first-year students in colleges to devote time and be committed to academic writing to develop and improve their writing skills irrespective of the lecturers' competencies. It has been confirmed in previous studies that self-motivation makes students committed to learning, which is pivotal to success. It can overcome any other barrier apparent to the student's writing performance.

In general, 71% of the respondents with a mean score of 3.85 held that learning styles writing and strategies, item 2 in Table 4.1, impacted on their academic writing, while 29% of the respondents had opposing views. Eight (8%) of the respondents reported it as very important, 38% said that it was important, 18% stated that it was slightly important, 23% reported it as moderately important, and 13% of the respondents did not see the importance of why teaching methods would affect students' poor academic writing. Interestingly, the respondents with a mean score of 2.80 said that lecturers' competencies and teaching skills impacted their academic writing and 36% regarded this as important, while 12% of the respondents regarded this as very important.

Concerning item 3 on viewing study habits as important or not, it was revealed that 3% viewed it as very important, 13 %, viewed it as important, and 14% voted for moderately important. 51% viewed it as slightly important and 18% as not important. This item was ranked third with a mean of 3.68. This item was also unexpected since study habits can be linked with academic writing and academic success. Maraya

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[32] Hebah Asaad Hamza Sheerah, "Using Blended Learning to Support the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language," *Arab World English Journal* 6 (July 15, 2020): 191–211, https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/call6.13.

[33] Arthur Hughes, *Testing for Language Teachers* (Cambridge university press, 2020).

researched the relationship between students' study habits and their academic writing and found that students had a perception that study habits are critical to obtaining good results but, their practices do not reflect their indicated perceptions of study habits.[34] Because of a level of bias, a link could not be positively established between study habits and academic writing performance.

As for item 4 on time management 2% said it was very important, 21% said it was important, and 18% said it was moderately important. Furthermore, thirty-nine percent (39%) said it was slightly important and 20% said it was not important. It can be deduced that the number of students who viewed it as unimportant is large. Time management is thus not regarded as so crucial in blended learning according to the respondents. Chaudhari, conducted research on the impact of time management on academic success and found that learners who fail to manage time or regard time as a critical aspect, fail in most of their activities as they miss deadlines. Their performance is also influenced, since some tasks are thus rushed to complete, and others receive more attention.[35]

As for item 5 on the quality of learning materials, it was surprising to see that only 36% regarded it as important and 28% viewed teaching methods as important (item 6). Another item that surfaced as critical item 8 on class attendance. Class attendance online is also crucial, even though recordings can help students to access materials. Class attendance allows students to communicate with the presenter. Twenty-two percent viewed it as important and 26% as important. Ten percent (10%) viewed it as moderately important and 29% as slightly important. Class attendance is thus not deemed as such an important aspect by the respondents.

Respondents also did not all regard submission of assignments (item 9) as that important in accordance with their scores, as 15% deemed it as very important, 35% as important, 33% as moderately important 33% as slightly important and 11% thought it was not important.

Another salient item, item 10 that delineates the satisfaction with the lecturers' teaching skills was ranked tenth with a mean score of 2.80. Thirty-six percent (36%) of the respondents did not deem this as so important. This is surprising since lecturers' teaching skills can be linked with student performance. Prasetio et al. maintain that lecturers' presentation, knowledge and teaching skills impact academic performance.[36] The view of the students thus does not correspond with what was found by other researchers. It indicates that students are biased in their views.

Apprehension in academic writing performance

The respondents' apprehension about academic writing is affected by various concerns. To improve first-year students' academic writing performance, close attention must be paid to the challenges they face as they study. This is essential to activate strategies that can improve them in a bid to enhance their academic writing performances as they advance in their education.

Table .3: Apprehension in Academic Writing Performance

Likert item impacting academic writing	Response (%)					Mean	Rank
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree		
1. Pressure, stress, tension, and anxiety	1%	13%	17%	47%	23%	3.78	1
2. Financial difficulties	7%	18%	12%	36%	27%	3.58	2
3. Reading, interpretation and listening skills	8%	31%	11%	37%	13%	3.16	3

[34] S. Maraya, 'The Effect of Study Habits on the Academic Performance of English for Academic Writing (LE 4000) Students in International Islamic University Malaysi. Retrieved from: https://www.academia.edu/5283189/The_Effect_of_Study_Habits_on_the_Academic_Performance_of_English_for_Academic_Writing_LE_4000_Students_in_International_Islamic_University_Malaysia. Accessed: .2/.2/2023. 2013.

[35] Tushar Chaudhari, "Time Management Essentials and Importance," *International Journal of Commerce and Management Research* 8, no. 5 (2022): 6–8.

[36] A.P. Prasetio, E. Azis, D.P Fadhilah, and A. F. Fauziah, "Lecturers' Professional Competency and Students' Academic Performance in Indonesia Higher Education." *International Journal of Human Resource Studies*, 7(1) (2017): 86-93.

4. Participation in co-curricular activities	3%	31%	29%	30%	7%	3.07	4
5. Family conflict	5%	32%	25%	26%)	11%	3.06	5
6. Loneliness	25%	38%	14%	20%	3%	3.05	6
7. Conflict with institutional regulations	8%	33%	20%	29%	10%	3.00	7
8. Ethics and intercultural practices	7%	34%	22%	30%	8%	2.98	8
9. Physical illness, health problems, injury	13%	28%	16%	34%	8%	2.96	9
10. Relationship issues	19%	40%	14%	21%	6%	2.54	10

The impact of pressure, stress, and anxiety (Item 1 in Table 3) is devastating to students' academic performance. Item 1 was ranked first and received a mean of 3.78. It should be noted that in this study, however, pressure, stress and anxiety were reported to not exert such a great impact as it emerged that 47% disagreed with this statement. Interestingly, these first-year students did not want to admit to the influence of academic stress and tension. It can be suspected that they are not used to the academic rigour characterising tertiary education and academic writing, yet they did not want to admit to the impact of stress and anxiety. Brobbey found that the transition of high school students to tertiary institutions may be too challenging for them to bear even though they are self-conscious and do not wish to admit this.[37]

Furthermore, areas that need to be noted are that 36% disagreed that finances affect their academic writing, and 37% claimed that reading and writing skills influenced their writing performance. Moreover, 32% of the respondents admitted that family conflict had a severe negative impact on their writing abilities which underscores the importance of family relationships. It was surprising that loneliness received a score of 38% as impacting their writing and 34% claimed that ethics also interfered with their writing skills. As for the impact of health problems, 34% disagreed that health had such a severe influence.

Relationship issues surfaced as an aspect that affects first-year students' apprehension and academic writing very much, as it received a score of 40% from those who agreed that it had an influence, even though the rank for this item is tenth. This finding concurs with the finding by Alammar et al. who conducted research on the influence of relationships on academic performance and found that relationships among family members exert a powerful influence on students' academic performance. They also conclude that family members must be trained and educated regarding the role they play in affecting students' academic work.[38]

The Organisation and structure of academic Writing on Student Writing Performance
The organisation and structure of academic writing by gauging the students' knowledge concerning the organisation and layout of academic writing that can affect their writing performance are important.
Table 4: The organisation and structure of academic writing on student writing performance

Likert item in terms of importance as viewed by respondents	Response (%)					Mean	Rank
	Very important	Important	Moderately Important	Slightly Important	Not Important		
1. Avoiding plagiarism	28%	14%	25%	16%	17%	3.19	1
2. Referencing	11%	21%	29%	25%	14%	2.93	2
3. Organisation and structure	10%	12%	50%	17%	11%	2.92	3

[37] E. Brobbey, 'The impact of stress on academic performance of student's in the university of cape coast, school of business'. Department Of Management In Partial Fulfilment Of The Requirement For The Award Of Bachelor Of Commerce Degree In Management. Submitted to the University of Cape Coast. 2020.
[38] Muath A Alammar et al., "Level and Relationships of Academic Skills and Family Functions with Academic Performance during Covid 19 Pandemic," *The Egyptian Journal of Neurology, Psychiatry and Neurosurgery* 58, no. 1 (2022): 1–6.

4. Writing strategies:targeting an audience, using strong verbs, and engaging reading strategies.	8%	21%	36%	17%	18%	2.84	4
5. Knowledge of genres	8%	20%	33%	21%	17%	2.80	5
6. Academic discourses	8%	14%	40%	24%	13%	2.79	6
7. Grammar/language conventions/language proficiency	10%	14%	36%	25%	15%	2.78	7
8. Self-regulation strategies in academic writing	10%	10%	37%	24%	17%	2.72	8

Avoiding plagiarism, item 1, received a mean response of 3.19 and was ranked first of the items in Table 4. There is no doubt that first-year students may be tempted to want to plagiarise. The participants indicated that avoiding it often caused problems in academic writing. In terms of organising academic writing, students must be aware of plagiarism and be familiar with the credibility and integrity of published academic research. This can help them develop ideas that can improve their academic writing. Avoiding plagiarism emerged as a significant concern affecting first-year students' academic writing. Twenty-seven percent (28%) regarded the avoidance of plagiarism as extremely important. This finding corresponds with previous studies, suggesting that students are aware of plagiarism but may want to plagiarise to increase their efficiency and scholarly productivity.[39] Jereb et al. note that easy access to electronic information and methodological uncertainties drive plagiarism.[40] It might be difficult for students who are not yet familiar with academic writing principles and procedures to regulate their writing strategies. Even though they might think they do not struggle with plagiarism, it surfaced in the above-mentioned study that plagiarism was indeed a problem. It indicates the biased opinion of the respondents.

As for Item 2 concerning referencing which was ranked second with a mean of 2.93, 11% viewed it as very important, 21% regarded it as important and 29% said it was moderately important. It is thus noted that referencing which is a very important aspect of academic writing is not viewed as so important. Smith underscores the importance of sound referencing by stating that referencing is all about giving credit and linking authors with other similar topics of relevance that can help to expand knowledge about the subject.[41] It is thus lamentable that students did not prioritise referencing as can be seen in Table 4, Item 2.

In addition, the respondents provided their opinions on the organisation and structure of academic writing (Item 3), 10% regarded it as very important, 12% as important 50% as moderately important, 17% as slightly important and 11% as not important at all. Surprisingly, only 10% regarded structure as very important, as without structure an academic essay's content can be affected. Anon cautions that structure affects the content of the essay. This structure equips the reader to navigate the essay and interpret the text.[42] The structure of paragraphs and even sentences is critical in the sequence of the information shared.

Item 4 deals with the views on writing strategies such as targeting an audience, using strong verbs, and engaging reading strategies are regarded by the respondents as follows. Eight percent (8%) voted for the option of very important, 21% voted for important, and 36% viewed these as moderately important. Seventeen percent (17%) viewed it as slightly important and 18% regarded this as not important at all. Writing strategies are thus not viewed with the required amount of sincerity.

Item 5: As for this item on perceptions on the importance of knowledge of genres, 8% opted for very important, 20% as important, 33% as moderately important, 21% as slightly important and 17% as not important at all. Regarding whether the genres (i.e. whether academic or poetic or romantic) are important the responses were lamentable. The writer must determine the genre that has its characteristics. Smith found in his study that writers must conform to the conventions of a specific genre even when dealing with assignments.[41] Uzun also found that in Turkish Higher education there is a gap in student's knowledge of the relevance and importance

[39] Hanaa A Elshafei and Tamanna M Jahangir, "Factors Affecting Plagiarism among Students at Jazan University," *Bulletin of the National Research Centre* 44 (2020): 1–5.

[40] Eva Jereb et al., "Factors Influencing Plagiarism in Higher Education: A Comparison of German and Slovene Students," *PLOS ONE* 13, no. 8 (August 10, 2018): e0202252, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0202252.

[41]J. Smith, 'Know the Importance of Referencing in Academic Writing'. Retrieved from: https://www.assignmenthelppro.com/blog/importance-of-referencing-in-academic-writing/, Accessed: 18/06/2023. 2022.

[42]L. Anon, 'The Structure of Academic Texts'. Retrieved from: https://kib.ki.se/en/write-cite/academic-writing/structure-academic-texts. 2022. Accessed: 02/06/2023.

of genre.[43] The findings regarding knowledge of genre thus correspond with that of Uzun in that all students do not regard it as very important.

Item 6 was all about academic discourse. Academic discourse (communication above and beyond the sentence level) was not regarded as very important (8%) or even important (14%). Forty percent (40%) deemed it as of moderate importance. Knowledge about discourse is critical as meaning above the sentence level is critical in communication. Mohammed and Nyinondi found in their study that knowledge of discourse is critical especially the use of specific parts of speech such as conjunctions that affect the meaning beyond the text. They also found that materials on writing demands are inadequate. The study material was seen as central to teaching students to write meaningfully.[44]

Item 7 pertained to the use of correct grammar. Respondents opted for 10% for very important, 14% voted for 14% of importance and 36% viewed this aspect to be moderately important, which also proved that students were biased in their views on their correct use of grammar. In their view grammar did not pose a serious problem, yet research indicates that it is a problem indeed.

Fitrawati and Safitri state: "Students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) are expected to master the fundamentals of grammar so they can produce good essays. However, despite having learned English at the secondary or university level, they tend to make many grammatical errors in their writing."[45]

Intervention to address poor academic writing can be approached by allowing students to peer-assess assignments. Editing and immediate applications using online dictionaries can help to improve poor grammar. Challenges embrace the use of "verb forms, appropriate articles, prepositions, punctuation, countable and uncountable nouns, subject and verb agreement, and spelling."[46]

RECOMMENDATIONS

- An evaluation system should be designed to measure the level of compliance with the new form of teaching and learning;
- TVET colleges should have a Writing and Reading Centre to assist students with academic writing and disciplinary literacies;
- Student support divisions should extend their support services by including tutoring, academic peer mentoring, and supplemental instructions;
- Professional academic staff workshops and training should include blended learning and educational technologies; and
- The role of the lecturer as a friendly communicator sharing knowledge must not be underestimated.

CONCLUSION

The results clearly indicated that students' motivation for academic writing was the most important, with the highest mean. Next to self-motivation were learning styles and strategies, study behaviour or study habits, difficulty managing time, and inadequate and poor-quality learning materials. It can be seen from the study's findings that motivation is an essential attribute first-year students must possess to enhance their academic writing at the tertiary level. Lack of motivation to develop academic writing skills can hinder them from acquiring the necessary skills. Most of the students asserted that academic writing was difficult. They only coped with writing using online Google search tools, grammar tools in word processors, and lecturers' assistance. The reality is that most first-year students lack academic reading and writing skills, mainly because university/college-level academic writing significantly differs from high school writing. Overall, first-year students must develop communication and academic writing skills because they increase their chances of employability as graduates. Apprehension in academic writing can be affected by emotional issues impacting students. Students faced with these challenges find academic writing challenging. A common finding concerning this was reported in this study. The results indicated that pressure, stress, tension, and anxiety, and financial difficulties were the two most prevalent variables that affected the academic writings of first-year students in TVET College. These variables were ranked first and second with the highest mean scores (Table 3). Loneliness and relationships especially family issues also exerted an influence on their performance. Other

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[43] Kutay Uzun, "The Relationship between Genre Knowledge and Writing Performance," *Journal of Teaching English for Specific and Academic Purposes* 5, no. 2 (2017): 153–62.

[44] Dr Hashim Issa Mohamed and Onesmo Simon Nyinondi, "Academic Writing as Discourse of Practice: Genre Analysis of Students Writing in Higher Education in Tanzania," 2017.

[45] Fitrawati Fitrawati and Dian Safitri, "Students' Grammatical Errors in Essay Writing: A Pedagogical Grammar Reflection," *International Journal of Language Education* 5, no. 2 (2021): 74–88.

[46] Fitrawati and Safitri, "Students' Grammatical Errors in Essay Writing: A Pedagogical Grammar Reflection."

least common variables that could affect students' apprehension of academic writing as reported by the respondents included conflict with institution regulations, ethics and intercultural practices, physical illness, health problems, and injury.

The study results revealed that among the personal concerns affecting first-year students, academic writing pressure, stress, tension and anxiety, and financial difficulties were the prevalent variables, and the least common variable was relationship issues. Yet again, this relates to the finding of Tshotsho and Cekiso which discuss the factors that can affect the writing skills of first-year students. These include poor infrastructure, untrained and poorly trained educators, lack of resources, and poor quality of education in rural schools. They also offer solutions to the problem of the lower standards of academic writing amongst Black students in South Africa. A salient aspect is training educators on how to teach academic writing. Equally important is revising the curriculum to address the academic writing needs of learners. Resources should also be provided for schools in rural areas, besides the introduction of an academic writing model. Technology can enable first-year students to overcome the tension and anxiety of academic writing. Once they are digitally literate, they can leverage blended learning applications to support them in their writing. This study creates direction for future studies.

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