

DISSERTATION SUBMISSION

Title: Connecting to collaborate: an examination of academic staff members' expectations of an undergraduate writing centre

Full names and surname: Annalene Nell

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Supervisor: Prof Susan Brokensha

Co-supervisor: Dr Michelle Joubert

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I , Annalene Nell, declare that the Master's Degree research dissertation or interrelated, publishable manuscripts/published articles, or coursework Master's Degree mini-dissertation that I herewith submit for the Master's Degree qualification Applied Linguistics in English¹ at the University of the Free State is my independent work, and that I have not previously submitted it for a qualification at another institution of higher education.



11/11/2025

Student's Signature

Date

(Department of English)

¹ Master of Arts with Specialisation in English (ENGM8900)

Dedication

To my wonderful husband Marius, without whom I would not have had the courage to start this, nor the determination to finish.

Abstract

Writing centres have established themselves as impactful support spaces at universities worldwide. However, their mandates and services are often misunderstood by academic staff and, by extension, misunderstood and therefore underutilised by students. This study examines the perceptions and expectations of academic staff regarding the services of an undergraduate writing centre at a South African university. The study aims to determine staff awareness and expectations in order to identify potential future collaborations between writing centres and content specialists. A sequential mixed-methods approach to data collection was employed, consisting of digital questionnaires followed by focus group discussions. Transcripts from the focus group discussions were analysed using Atlas.ti software. Based on the codes assigned in the Atlas.ti analysis, three major themes relevant to the research questions were identified: *Action*, *Communication*, and *Value*. Aspects concerning academic staff perceptions sourced from both the questionnaires and focus groups are discussed within these three themes. Based on the discussion, it is clear that many academic staff members highly value the writing centre, and are open to collaborative endeavours. They also exhibit an impressive level of familiarity with the writing centre and what it offers. However, staff also harbour some misperceptions around what the writing centre does and does not do, and identified aspects of communication that could be clearer and more streamlined. It is therefore recommended that the writing centre continue to invest in accurate communication with academic departments to ensure that lecturers and students make optimal use of its services.

Keywords: writing centre research, perception study, writing centre communication, action, communication, value



The UFS undergraduate writing centre (Write Site) entrance (top) and inside view (bottom). Photo credit: Annalene Nell.



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List of abbreviations

A_STEP	Academic Student Tutorial and Excellence Programme
AI	Artificial Intelligence
ALLD	Academic Language and Literacy Development
BFN	Bloemfontein
BUSSE	Beginning University Survey of Student Engagement
CC	Composition Condition
CGS	Centre for Graduate Support
CRP	Curriculum Renewal Programme
CTL	Centre for Teaching and Learning
DIRAP	Directorate for Institutional Research and Academic Planning
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ESL	English as a Second Language
F2F	Face-to-face
GHREC	General/Human Research Ethics Committee
HELTASA	Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa
L2	Second language
LMS	Learning Management System
NSFAS	National Student Financial Aid Scheme
NWU	North-West University
OWL	Online Writing Lab
QQ	QwaQwa
SASSE	South African Survey of Student Engagement
SQ3R	Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and Review
UCT	University of Cape Town
UFS	University of the Free State
UWC	University of the Western Cape
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

1: Introduction

Educators have always been concerned about the quality of their students' writing. In the prologue to his book: *The sense of style: the thinking person's guide to writing in the 21st century*, cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker (2014) provides a series of quotes from people complaining about the degradation and decline of the English language. He provides six examples stretching from 1785 to 1978, and then proceeds to explain that William Caxton, who set up the first printing press in England, complained in 1478 that the language of his day was far from what it was when he was born. Pinker also observes that even some ancient Sumerian clay tablets are thought to contain complaints about the young having substandard writing skills. It is oddly comforting to know that our generation of educators is not the first to agonise over students' ability to understand, interpret, research, plan, synthesise, and bring something coherent to the page using decent grammar and syntax. However, the problem persists, and is as relevant as ever in the age of the internet and artificial intelligence. The field of writing centre research, in particular, is concerned with growing the next generation of academic writers and equipping them to handle the challenges that accompany writing.

1.1 Background / rationale

Writing centres at tertiary education institutions worldwide have grown in number, size, institutional status, popularity with students, and overall influence over the last few decades (Boquet, 1999; Chang, 2013; Clarence, 2023). The International Writing Centers Association (IWCA), established in 1983, focuses on enhancing knowledge sharing among educational institutions, as well as promoting professional development and research, thereby improving the professional landscape of writing centres and writing centre research (IWCA, 2022). In addition, a number of peer-reviewed journals such as *The Writing Center Journal (WCJ)*, *WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship*, *The Peer Review*, and *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal* operate specifically in the field of writing centre research. In South Africa, the first writing centres were established in the mid-1990s, with a specific focus on academic literacy assistance for students who had been disadvantaged by the pre-democratic political system (Trimbur 2011:1-2; Drennan, 2017a:3). Although access to tertiary

education has significantly improved in the country, the majority of first-time entering South African university students are under-prepared for the challenges of acquiring discipline-specific discourses in a language that is not their home language. They also face a myriad of other challenges (including finances and food insecurity), resulting in an estimated 55% of registered students never graduating, with only a quarter of students graduating within the expected time frame (Council on Higher Education, 2013:15; Rambiritch & Drennan, 2023).

Despite the many challenges faced by students, culminating in a lack of academic preparedness, writing centres reject the deficiency or remedial view of students, instead meeting them where they are and working with the skills they have (Nichols, 2017a:39). Stephen North (1984: 438) is often cited for his claim that writing centres should be student-centred and focus on producing “better writers, not better writing”. The current approach for many writing centres involves focusing on academic literacy development while emphasising the sociocultural aspects of academic writing (Clarence & Dison, 2017). This reflects an awareness of the research done by Lea and Street (1998) who claim that the study skills and academic socialisation approaches are not sufficient. They propose instead an academic literacies approach which acknowledges that students are required to produce diverse types of writing for different subject areas and even for different tutors. According to Lea and Street (1998), students are often uncertain about the nuances of the type of writing expected from them, and lecturers regularly struggle to communicate to students what they really expect from them, leaving important aspects of writing conventions in the disciplines being implied rather than being explicitly taught. Writing centre tutors or consultants, therefore, are often seen as collaborative partners or even “critical friends” (Carlse, 2019:183), assisting the student in working towards their goal and in making explicit some of the implied conventions of writing in the disciplines. Writing centres are often focused on the idea of writing as a process, which according to Drennan (2017a:3) involves multiples drafts that grow students’ critical thinking while aiding them in growing their understanding of course content. Since the current neoliberal university institution places much emphasis on profit and product (Hlatshwayo, 2022), writing centres challenge these neoliberal and patriarchal systems with their focus on nurturing the individual (Miley, 2016) rather than merely producing perfect papers. As such, writing centres are frequently described as liminal

spaces, operating between parts of the institution and therefore able to challenge certain power structures while balancing this with collaborative endeavours (Archer & Richards, 2011). Nichols (2017b) as well as Daniels and Richards (2011) describe the writing centre as a “contact zone”, since this is a space where different languages and cultures come into contact, often under asymmetrical power relations.

The University of the Free State (UFS) undergraduate writing centre, also known as the Write Site, was established in 2012 with the mandate of providing academic literacy support. Institutionally, it is located within the unit for Academic Language and Literacy Development (ALLD) as part of the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL). This writing centre assists thousands of students every year with a variety of services. These services include writing interventions such as custom-designed workshops presented synchronously to smaller groups or asynchronously (online) to student cohorts of varying numbers. The workshops are carefully designed in consultation with the content lecturer and include a focus on discipline-specific examples to address skill gaps identified for those particular students. The interventions are often combined with various draft submissions and incentivised individual consultations, to provide students with scaffolded assistance throughout different aspects of the writing process. The writing centre also offers some foundational (generic) workshops providing information on general academic writing concepts.

Another major service provided to students is the individual consultation service, which is available face-to-face or online in a synchronous meeting space. The approach taken during consultations at the Write Site is for consultants to use Socratic questioning in order to guide the student towards an understanding of their own argument, and any improvements that can be made thereto, within the specific text type required of the student. Consultants mainly employ non-directive tutoring strategies, such as “building rapport, actively listening, asking open-ended questions, talking about the writing process, and addressing global writing concerns before sentence-level concerns” (Appleby-Ostroff, 2017:73). Similar to many other writing centres, consultations typically involve gauging a student writer’s strengths and weaknesses, responding to what the student has written as a reader of the text, discussing options for revising, and providing advice on argument formulation, writing style, and clarity (Appleby-Ostroff, 2017:70). Since this is a face-to-face writing centre

also offering some online services, the focus of this research study is on face-to-face writing centres rather than purely online centres.

Other services provided by the writing centre include information sessions to students, some instances of staff training (for example, training tutors on completing their reflective portfolios), and individual instances of advice and support to academic staff regarding academic writing in their courses. Developing and possible future projects include an Online Writing Lab (OWL) project where videos on academic writing concepts are created and made available to students, as well as the creation and implementation of reading-oriented workshops. Writing centre staff are also involved in running an asynchronous online grammar course available to selected groups of students, as well as in other institutional projects, committees and conferences.

There have been various studies that show a clear link between writing centre attendance and academic performance. Archer (2008) found improved marks across courses for more than half of students who had visited the University of Cape Town's (UCT) writing centre. At the United Arab Emirates University, Tiruchittampalam, Ross, Whitehouse and Nicholson (2018) saw higher scores for second-language essay writers who made use of the writing centre, and in the United Kingdom, Yeats, Reddy, Wheeler, Senior and Murray (2010: 499) found "a highly significant association between writing centre attendance and achievement". At the UFS, a 2019 institutional report compiled by the Unit for Language Development (now referred to as the ALLD) documented an intervention where students who participated in a workshop and attended individual consultations at the Write Site, showed an average improvement of 32% between their first drafts and final drafts (Centre for Teaching and Learning [CTL], 2019). Another study at the ALLD found that black students are up to 15.3% more likely to graduate, and pass 8.1% more credits when they participate in at least one individual Write Site consultation (Joubert, 2023).

Although there is ample evidence that writing centres can contribute to academic success, students can only make use of these services if they are informed of them, and are more likely to do so when they are encouraged or incentivised² by their lecturers. In addition, formal collaborations such as workshops presented to specific

² For example, with bonus marks being assigned for Write Site consultation attendance

student cohorts will not be possible if academic staff are not aware of the writing centre services and their documented benefits for developing student writers.

Existing writing centre research reflects many references to the importance of collaboration (Archer & Richards, 2011; Dison et al., 2023) as well as examples of collaborations with academic faculty (Moore, 2023). In fact, a key aspect of the purpose of a writing centre is for the writing expert and content expert to collaborate in equipping students with discipline-specific writing skills. There is also published research that focuses on the perception of the writing centre by students and by staff (North, 1984; Hayward, 1983; Giaimo, 2017). While much attention is given to ensuring that students understand the purpose of a writing centre consultation, writing centre practitioners writing about academic staff often mention them either in passing, as part of an administrative system to be managed, or as obstacles leading to frustration and misunderstanding (Sefalane-Nkohla & Mtonjeni, 2019; Miley, 2016). Most writing centre research rightly takes a student-centred approach (Dison, Oware & Kgomo, 2023), but this may lead to a lack of in-depth information with respect to academic staff perspectives as well as staff needs and expectations of the writing centre.

1.2 Research problem

In my role as an Academic Writing Specialist and former consultant at the UFS writing centre, I have often experienced how students that seek out our services exhibit pre-conceived ideas and misperceptions³. This was also the focus of my Honours research essay, completed at the UFS in 2019. This study, although quite limited in scope, did find some erroneous expectations among the student population, most notably an expectation that the writing centre would “fix” their grammar mistakes for them, and the perception that writing centre consultants could assist in fact-checking assignments (Nell, 2019). These findings were similar to those of Giaimo (2017), who attributed student misperceptions at the Bristol Community College Writing Center to the institutional culture at the college, among other things. Locally, Arlene Archer (2012: 360) from the UCT Writing Centre wrote that lecturers often send students to the writing centre to improve their grammar, but in practice, grammar is rarely

³ Since this study focuses on perceptions of the writing centre, the word “misperception” is given preference over the word “misconception”.

discussed during a consultation. There are many published articles and studies that refer to the perception or expectation problem (see North, 1984; Giaimo, 2017; Leary, 2017).

While UFS students may learn about the writing centre from different sources (Blackboard notifications⁴, posters, word of mouth, information sessions), they are often informed about the services offered by their content lecturers. These lecturers themselves may have various levels of knowledge and understanding regarding the writing centre, and intentionally or unintentionally set a certain expectation for these students. For example, one lecturer recently (2025) emailed a student and copied the writing centre email address, asking the student to seek out the writing centre for “comprehensive advice and assistance with improving your writing (including syntax, grammar, spelling, tone, academic conventions, etc.).” If this student were to approach the writing centre, any consultant would tell them that we focus on higher order concerns first, with grammar, tone, etc. only discussed once these concerns had been addressed. Common examples of erroneous expectations lecturers may have relate to the grammar issue as discussed above, but Write Site consultants have also reported that students expect their work to be “marked” during the sessions or to have their written work edited. Some students also expect to sit back and receive passive feedback on their writing, instead of actively engaging in the session (as perhaps modelled by staff in classroom settings focused on delivering content to large groups of students).

Furthermore, I have experienced various instances where academic staff members who do contact the writing centre exhibit misguided expectations. One of my main responsibilities includes meeting with staff to plan and schedule Write Site interventions. As a result, I am familiar with most of the inside workings of the writing centre, and have access to internal communication, documents and records. Multiple lecturers have contacted the Write Site to request a workshop for the very next week, and frequently, they request that this workshop address practically all elements relating to academic writing, often within one hour. In one specific instance, a staff member gave the Write Site two hours with their students, with only a few weeks’ notice, requesting that we cover “summarising/paraphrasing, structuring an argument,

⁴ Blackboard is the LMS (Learning Management System) in use at the UFS.

general essay structure and tips for structuring individual sentences more academically. If you can, covering writing a literature review would also be great.” The implied belief that complicated writing conventions can be “taught” within a few hours is concerning. For context, a writing centre workshop is usually custom-designed around a specific assignment for a select group of students, making use of discipline-specific text examples to illustrate a few key concepts and start building foundational skills as well as modelling academic practices the students will require for that text type in that department. This takes time, planning and communication. Another perturbing trend evident among some academic staff members relates to assessing student writing challenges (and expected Write Site assistance) as concerning mainly lower order concerns. For example, the staff member may share a student-submitted writing task, and point out that they are frustrated by the grammar and lack of attention to proofreading, whereas a deeper examination of the text may reveal a distinct lack of clear argumentation and structure (higher-order concerns), which is considered by many writing centres to be a more pertinent problem than the sentence-level issues or lower-order concerns (Cross & Catchings, 2018). In a recent paper, Drennan (2022) makes mention of concerns among lecturers regarding students’ academic writing skills, as well as misconceptions about the timelines required for students to improve their writing and increase fluency. She explains the complexity of what students are required to do in order to produce senior-level academic texts: they must “engage critically with texts; analyse, synthesise, extrapolate and interpret information from multiple sources; engage in research and work with a plethora of data sets; as well as formulate and develop sound academic arguments” (Drennan, 2022:3). These complexities are not always verbalised or acknowledged when academic staff approach the writing centre.

The research problem, therefore, stems from the fact that UFS lecturer expectations of the writing centre are varied and sometimes inaccurate, and may lead to misperceptions from the students. In order to align lecturers’ future expectations of the writing centre, as well as adapt the centre’s approach to working with academic staff, it is important to understand not only what the staff members currently perceive or expect the centre to address, but also what type of support they would ideally want from a writing centre. Insight into the needs and perceptions of this population could

provide valuable new understanding not only for this university but potentially for writing centre practitioners more broadly.

1.3 Research questions and methodology

This study therefore aims to answer the following questions:

1. Are academic staff aware of the writing centre?
2. What do they perceive the goal of the writing centre to be?
3. What would they ideally want the writing centre to do?
4. How does this compare with the current writing centre services on offer?

It should be noted here that in attempting to answer these questions, the expectation is not that the writing centre should aim to adapt its behaviour and services in a sense of “anxious reactivity” (Grimm, 1996:534) to satisfy the desires of the academic staff and the institution. Instead, it should keep a sense of ownership and purpose, even if this purpose is sometimes misunderstood by parts of the institution. However, there may be some small aspects of writing centre services and communication that can be adapted to facilitate better collaboration with academic staff, without compromising on writing centre practice.

Details on how this research was approached are discussed in full in Chapter 3. Suffice it to say here that the study is aligned with the interpretivist and pragmatic paradigms, and followed a mixed-methods approach to data collection and analysis. The sequential mixed-methods approach consisted of quantitative data collection in the form of questionnaires, followed by qualitative data collected via focus groups. The questionnaires were analysed by employing descriptive statistics, and the focus group transcripts were analysed using Atlas.ti software. Participants consisted of academic staff members at the UFS, and were invited from the faculties of the Humanities, Education, and Natural and Agricultural Sciences. Ethical clearance was obtained, and all ethical considerations were followed throughout the study.

1.4 Aim / purpose of study

The first objective of this research study is to examine the perceptions and expectations of UFS academic staff regarding the undergraduate writing centre. The second objective is to compare these to the current services and mandate of the

writing centre, with the aim of identifying potential future collaborations between the writing centre and academic staff, in order to ultimately benefit the students.

1.5 Significance of the research

This study adds to the growing field of writing centre research globally by investigating an aspect crucial to the success and continued existence of many writing centres: without buy-in and support from academic staff, the writing centre will remain peripheral and will continue to be seen as a potentially remedial space or emergency grammar hospital. In South Africa in particular, such research is relevant since writing centres became widely established some years later than in other parts of the world (Trimbur, 2011:1-2), and early writing centre research therefore did not incorporate South African examples and perspectives. The South African student context, where most do not have English as a first or home language and hail from often under-resourced schooling backgrounds, provides an environment where writing centre work can make a difference between a student dropping out or obtaining their degree. By focusing on the UFS writing centre and academic staff, this study contributes some much-needed South African perspectives. The pragmatist aspect of the research is envisioned to assist in paving the way for better understanding between the writing centre and academic staff, leading to strategies for better communication and collaboration, with the ultimate goal of increasing student success and equipping them with key 21st-century skills.

1.6 Limitations

Although every effort was made to conduct this study at a scope that would lead to meaningful results, there are some limitations. Only staff members from three faculties at one university were included here; more faculties and the inclusion of additional South African universities would be ideal for future research. Questionnaire responses and focus group participation were also limited to staff who voluntarily participated. The research instruments, too, have inherent limitations: questionnaires can only elicit certain types of information, potentially lacking depth, and focus groups are at risk of unexpected group dynamics resulting in biased data. The limitations of the data collection instruments (Appendix 5 and 6) are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. Despite these inherent limitations, the study results are envisioned to contribute meaningfully to the field of writing centre research.

The next chapter focuses on providing an overview of relevant literature around writing centres, academic literacy, academic staff, and writing centre collaborations. This provides the necessary context for the rest of the study.

2: Literature review

This chapter presents an overview of writing centres historically and currently, with special emphasis on the theoretical underpinnings of the modern writing centre as well as evidence that writing centre work has a positive impact on students' academic performance. After presenting some insights into what makes the South African writing centre context unique, the chapter discusses the roles of consultants,⁵ students, and staff, moving to a specific focus on the importance of collaboration between the writing centre and the academic staff member or content expert. The chapter includes an explanation of the collaborations between the UFS writing centre and different faculties, as well as the challenges and opportunities presented within these collaborative interventions. The chapter also includes information on staff misperceptions of the writing centre as examined in other studies, emphasising the importance of research such as this in bridging the gap between the writing centre and the content lecturer.

2.1 The history and impact of writing centres

In keeping with the shift away from the anecdotal and “lore-based”⁶ (Denny, 2014:3; Nordlof, 2014) studies of early writing centre scholarship, this section critically reviews the impact of writing centres, drawing from research to support the continued existence of these centres within higher education.

2.1.1 History

The official origin and history of the writing centre differ slightly depending on the source. Gillespie and Lerner (2008) argue that the essence of writing centre work started around 140 years ago, drawing from an 1895 argument by Newton Scott that the best way to teach composition was for the instructor to provide individual critique and consultation to the student. Samuel Chandler Earle wrote in 1913 that individual conferences were crucial in making development personal and motivating the student (Gillespie & Lerner, 2008). Gillespie and Lerner (2008) also reference a 1929 survey

⁵ Different writing centres employ different terms for those who meet with students: consultants, tutors, peer tutors, coaches, mentors, etc. (Clarence, 2013). In keeping with the terminology used at the UFS Write Site, the term consultant will be given preference.

⁶ According to Nordlof (2014:46), lore is described as “ungeneralizable local knowledge”. This is not considered rigorous research according to current writing centre theorists.

of 225 educational institutions, which found that 66% of these institutions required individual conferencing. According to Chang (2013), the first writing centres were established in the United States around the 1930s, when they were known as “writing labs”, and later as “writing clinics”. Boquet (1999) traces the writing centre from an early 20th century method of instruction through to the 1940s when “writing labs” became sites that assisted students with the technicalities of composition, the emphasis being on a remedial, top-down method of instruction. Writing centres were essentially unmentioned in publications during the 1950s and 1960s, but became more prevalent again in the 1970s, with some centres championing the idea of peer tutoring and the importance of the social context in which students learn (Boquet, 1999). It is at this stage, according to Chang (2013:4), that the field of writing centre scholarship also started receiving academic recognition.

Writing centres are no longer associated only with English departments and composition courses, having undergone an evolution with respect to their theoretical underpinnings and models (discussed later in this chapter). Their presence is now felt across academic programmes in Europe, Africa, North America, Asia, and Australia (Sefalane-Nkohla, 2019), as well as Latin America (Molina-Natera, 2017). According to Clarence (2023), the most widely-employed writing centre model involves a director or coordinator, as well as tutors/consultants made up of professionals or postgraduate students.

In South Africa, the first writing centres were founded in the mid-1990s, during a time when the shift from apartheid to a democratic government provided access to higher education to students previously denied (Clarence & Dison, 2017). These centres were usually located within central units specialising in academic development, such as the Academic Support Programme at Wits University, and were mainly focused on providing support to black students who were considered disadvantaged and underprepared for tertiary education (Clarence & Dison, 2017). Therefore, these early South African writing centres (or at least the institutions in which they were situated) operated from a deficit perspective, and they were decidedly remedial in nature. In keeping with global trends, writing centres in South Africa have grown in number and evolved in their approach, as discussed later in this chapter.

2.1.2 Impact

It can be assumed that writing centres would not demonstrate the global growth they have, had they not been to some degree successful in assisting students. The question is whether and to what extent this success or impact can be proven or measured. In keeping with further attempts to move away from lore-based writing centre research and towards more scientific and evidence-based studies, a growing number of writing centre practitioners are attempting to measure the impact of various writing centre services and interventions.

A number of studies show a clear link between students' use of writing centre services and academic performance. To summarise what was discussed in the previous chapter, academics from the University of Cape Town (UCT) in South Africa, the United Arab Emirates University, and from the United Kingdom all reported improved marks for students who visited the writing centre (Archer, 2008; Tiruchittampalam et al., 2018; Yeats et al., 2010). At the UFS Write Site, one intervention resulted in students showing a 32% average improvement in marks between their first and final drafts (Centre for Teaching and Learning [CTL], 2019). A more recent study at the CTL found that black students who make use of the writing centre consultation service on average pass 8% more credits and are over 15% more likely to graduate than students who did not use the writing centre (Joubert, 2023).

It is important to keep in mind that not all writing centre impact can be measured in numbers, percentages, and direct improvements in student marks. Much can be written about the invisible impact of a writing centre consultation — for example, a student may be more confident in their own academic voice and may learn writing strategies that they apply in future work. Their immediate marks may not even improve, but they may have learnt new strategies for accessing academic texts or be more likely to ask for assistance in the future. Numerous narratives from the UFS Write Site reference students writing heartfelt letters of thanks to the writing centre, not for improving their marks, but for making them feel heard and for explaining some aspect of writing that made them feel empowered. One such student sent in a testimonial letter in 2023, with the main themes of how the writing centre assisted her in understanding herself better as a scholar, developing confidence in her own abilities, and in cultivating a love for writing. Another student who made regular use of writing

centre services and was invited to submit a video testimonial, outlined in particular how the writing centre consultants raised her confidence by pointing out what she had done well (in addition to asking questions about unclear aspects of her work), and how she felt inspired to start reading more. Writing centre research is littered with examples of such positive but incalculable impact. A further example is by Tan (2009), who references two studies that both found a marked reduction in writing anxiety among students who had attended writing centre consultations. More recently, at the UFS writing centre, Coetzer (2024) found a positive correlation between students who indicated that they felt listened to during a consultation and indicating an increased sense of confidence in their writing. This kind of impact may be difficult to measure or quantify, but cannot be ignored. Writing centres may also equip students with skills that they can use in their future careers as employed professionals (Manjeya, 2021).

Whether they are associated with an immediately noticeable improvement in marks or with a long-term increase in writing confidence, it is clear that writing centres do impact student writers positively, based on the documented impact of writing centres discussed here.

2.2 The South African context

Since this study is situated within a South African institution of higher education, it is useful to expound on the unique South African context. Although academic literacy issues are common globally, South African students exhibit some unique strengths and challenges.

2.2.1 A legacy of unequal access

As a result of the inequality enabled and legislated by apartheid, the majority of the South African population did not have access to quality primary and secondary education or opportunities to access higher education. The Bantu Education Act of 1953 made it compulsory for black children to attend government-funded schools that focused on a watered-down education designed to maintain the ideology of black people as subservient to whites and destined for menial jobs (Khumalo, 2022). These schools were also severely under-resourced, with major infrastructural challenges. A few years after this Act was promulgated, the Extension of University Education Act of 1959 was enacted. This Act segregated South African universities by race, making it a criminal offence for any non-white student to register at a “white” university

(Thompson, 2020). Formerly “open” universities (that allowed students from various races to register) were drastically limited in their intake options, and predictably, the so-called “black” universities showed a decline in quality, as their education had to conform to the inferior Bantu education principles. This Act was only replaced in 1988 by the Tertiary Education Act (Thompson, 2020), which promulgated the establishment of tertiary education colleges.

The education access situation began to change for the better, particularly after 1994, but major social, financial, and geographical inequalities remain, and the current South African schooling system still leaves much to be desired. Piliso (2024) points out, for example, that spatial inequalities remain a significant challenge: in rural and township areas populated by black and coloured people, quality educational options are significantly limited, due in part to overcrowding and a lack of resources and funding. However, gatekeeping policies in parts of the country prevent parents from enrolling their children in better-performing schools. One such example is the Gauteng provincial legislation around “feeder zones”, which dictates that a school must enrol pupils from within its own geographical area (Piliso, 2024). According to a report by Amnesty International (2020:7), “a child’s experience of education in South Africa still very much depends on where they are born, how wealthy they are, and the colour of their skin”. This report also refers to the South African education system as one of the most unequal in the world, listing various factors and statistics that contribute to this status (Amnesty International, 2020). Although most of these factors can in some way be traced back to the orchestrated disparity brought about through apartheid, the South African government has also been missing its own targets regarding school infrastructure upgrades, resulting in a grim future for those pupils who most need quality education to have an opportunity to move themselves and their families out of poverty.

2.2.2 Current challenges

South African students are certainly not alone in facing various challenges in their pursuit of higher education. For example, Lea and Street (1998), often cited in academic literacy research, were concerned about underprepared students in the UK in the late 1990s already, and Kunde, Sequeira and Patil (2015) write about the challenges faced by higher education students in India. However, South African

students are faced with a formidable combination of hurdles. As discussed in the previous section, much of the pre-apartheid inequality remains, with students in less developed areas not having access to resources and information that would empower them to prepare and apply for tertiary education with a reasonable chance of success. Many schools, particularly those located in rural areas, are under-resourced, with the teachers themselves often not equipped to prepare their learners for university admission and expectations. According to Fraser (2023), only 41% of South African maths teachers are considered to be sufficiently proficient at teaching, with the country exhibiting the largest percentage of teacher absenteeism of all the Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries. In public schools, approximately 80% of teachers do not have the content knowledge required to teach their subjects, with 79% of Grade 6 maths teachers scoring below 60% on a maths test designed for Grade 6 (BusinessTech, 2023). According to Amnesty International (2020), teachers completing a simple mathematics and English test in 2018 struggled to pass, with some scoring a low 10% for English first additional language and 5% for mathematics.

The COVID-19 pandemic also wreaked havoc on the education sector. According to the Spaul (2023) reading report, there was an estimated increase of 4% in Grade 4 children who could not read for meaning: from a pre-pandemic 78% to a post-pandemic 82%. This means that in 2023, school-age children were estimated to be a full year behind children who were the same age in 2019 (Spaul, 2023). The report describes a bleak picture for the future of education in South Africa: if the education system remains on its current path, the country will reach a target of 95% of children being able to read for meaning only by 2108 (Spaul, 2023). This surely has dire implications for tertiary education and for the economic growth of the country.

All the discussed predicaments lead to a primary and secondary school education that does not equip learners with a solid foundation for higher education. According to recent reports, over half of Grade 1 learners could not identify all the letters in the alphabet; the percentage of Grade 4 learners who could not read for meaning was at almost 80 percent; and South African Grade 9 learners completing an international test designed for Grade 8 collectively scored last (39th) in science and second-last (38th) in mathematical proficiency (BusinessTech, 2023; Spaul, 2023). Given these realities, it is unfortunate but not surprising that so many learners drop out of school before they complete Matric (Grade 12). Between 2019 and 2021, about 30% of

learners from Grades 9 to 11 dropped out of school, and only 57.9% of the learners who had started their schooling made it to Matric (Fraser, 2023). To put this into stark perspective, according to a report by Amnesty International (2020), out of the average 100 South African learners, about 55 will reach Matric; approximately 45 will pass Matric; and only 14 will go on to attend university.

Regarding drop-out rates, learners have given various reasons for exiting school prematurely. The top five reasons given reflect financial challenges (23.5%); lack of academic performance (17.7%); family commitments clashing with schooling (11.6%); illness and/or disability (10.4%); and the belief that education is pointless (9.4%) (BusinessTech, 2015). There are also various infrastructural challenges: millions of South African learners walk to school every day, some for more than an hour each way. School sanitation is generally poor, with water and electricity access issues, while the much-reviled pit toilets remain the only option at some schools. Furthermore, many schools lack basic resources such as furniture, books, and even buildings created from safe materials (Amnesty International, 2020). These challenges are certainly not unique to South Africa, but it is concerning that, although the country spends approximately 13% of its revenue on basic education, it is still outperformed in the education sector by much poorer countries such as Egypt, Morocco, Georgia, and Albania (Fraser, 2023).

In addition to the challenges faced within the schooling system, most South African learners do not grow up in homes where there is a parent or authority figure with any university experience (UFS, 2023). Therefore, the learners are not necessarily aware of available career options, how to gain access to higher education, what to expect from university, or how to prepare for it. This lack of a support system, coupled with the widely-held social narrative that a university degree is the best option to aim for in order to ensure success, sets students up for a great deal of pressure and often failure. Another aspect of sociocultural pressure raised by O'Shea, McKenna and Thomson (2019) involves a deep-seated resistance to reading present among certain groups of black students. According to a series of focus groups at Fort Hare University, a large percentage of the participants grew up with a cultural resistance to reading, believing that identifying as a reader would make them come across as trying to be superior to their peers, and that reading and even doing homework were "white" practices (O'Shea et al., 2019). One must be careful not to generalise something as complex as

cultural identities, but it is clear that the legacy of apartheid left some deeply rooted ideas on when, where, and for whom the pursuit of education is acceptable.

Although there has been an increase in the percentage of first-generation students at universities in South Africa, the failure rate has been high for this group (Motsabi, Diale & Van Zyl, 2020). According to the 2022 SASSE (South African Survey of Student Engagement) results for the UFS Bloemfontein campus cohort, 80% of students reported that they were first-generation students, compared to an overall average of about 76% claiming first-generation status at all universities who participated in the SASSE (University of the Free State, 2023). This is indicative of a definite increase in higher education access for previously disadvantaged youth in the country. However, throughput rates across the country are lower than hoped for. The Council on Higher Education (2023) reports that across public and private higher education institutions in South Africa, for students who enrolled in three-year degrees in 2016, 62% had graduated by 2021, with 38% dropping out. Only 31% had graduated within the expected three years. This also varied significantly by faculty and field; for example, for the same cohort who enrolled for three-year degrees in 2016, 80% of environmental studies and geography students had graduated within six years, while only 30% of education students graduated within the same time frame (CHE, 2023). These statistics are an unfortunate confirmation of the problematic state of basic education and of future teachers in the country.

One major factor negatively impacting South African students and contributing to their dropping out is finances. According to a 2018 report by the World Bank, South Africa, one of the most unequal countries in the world, has disproportionately high poverty levels, with around half the population classified as chronically poor and 76% facing poverty as a constant threat. Higher education tuition fees are often out of reach for the average South African, leading to a large number of students relying on the government-funded National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) for tuition, food, and accommodation (UFS, 2023). At the University of the Free State (Bloemfontein campus), 80% of students claimed to be NSFAS beneficiaries in the 2022 SASSE questionnaires (compared to a national average of 70% of senior students across participating SASSE universities) (University of the Free State, 2023). The same survey found that 31% of UFS respondents ran out of food “most days”, while 52% sometimes ran out of food without being able to afford more. At the University of

KwaZulu-Natal, 55% of low-income students were found to be food insecure (Wegerif & Adeniyi, 2019). Almost two-thirds of UFS students cited financial difficulties as one of the factors negatively impacting their academic performance (SASSE, 2022). It is clear, therefore, that finances are a major challenge for students.

There are a multitude of other potential reasons for students dropping out of South African universities. According to the 2022 SASSE, 39% of students on the UFS Bloemfontein campus had considered dropping out, with their reasons including food insecurity (54%), tuition fee costs (34%), cost of academic materials (33%), living costs (61%), family problems (62%), poor academic performance (40%) and feeling that they did not fit in (46%)⁷. With respect to academic performance, there was a marked discrepancy between the marks students expected they would achieve at university and the marks they obtained. The 2023 Beginning University Survey of Student Engagement (BUSSE) at the UFS found that 45% of first-year students expected their marks to be in the range of 70-79%, while 28% of these students expected to receive marks of 80-89%. However, in the 2022 SASSE, which included senior students, only 32% claimed to receive marks in the 70-79 percent range, and a low 6% seemed to have obtained marks in the 80-89 percent range. This once again speaks to the lack of academic preparedness of South African students, whether this stems from an under-resourced education system or from the absence of the cultural and social capital needed to be successful at university. The next section discusses another characteristic of South African students: that of multilingualism.

2.2.3 Multilingualism

South Africa is a uniquely multilingual and multicultural country. With the addition of South African Sign Language in 2023, the country now has 12 official languages (Parliament of the RSA, 2023) and many unofficial languages that are spoken throughout. This multilingual position has led to comparisons between South Africa and India, which is another country that embraces multilingualism (Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2016). According to data from a 2018 survey, the most spoken languages in South African homes were isiZulu (25.3%), isiXhosa (14.8%), Afrikaans (12.2%), Sepedi (10.1%), Setswana (9.1%), English (8.1%), and Sesotho (7.9%) (Statista, 2019). At

⁷ This is not unique to UFS or even South African students: according to Le (2021), various student groups in the United States struggle with a sense of belonging, especially first-generation students.

the UFS, there is some local variation in these home language percentages, with first-year students in 2023 divided almost equally between Sesotho (24%), isiZulu (23%), and isiXhosa (21%) (BUSSE, 2023). Other languages feature in much smaller percentages (BUSSE, 2023). Educational institutions cannot practically and logistically provide quality tertiary education in all of these languages, and some of these languages have not yet been sufficiently developed for academic discourse, which is why most higher education institutions in South Africa (including the UFS) use English as the medium of instruction. Most students at the UFS are therefore English as a second language (ESL) students. Although many of these students technically learned English as a third, fourth, fifth, etc. language, they can be considered ESL learners, according to Anderssen et al. (2019), since they are educated in English.

It can be argued that this multilingual reality is both a challenge for and a strength of South African students. The traditional Western view of multilingualism is that it threatens social cohesion, disrupting the “natural” order of “one-nation-one-language” (Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2016). According to these kinds of theorists, a society cannot progress together if they cannot all understand each other. African and Indian scholars, however, disagree: they are often of the opinion that linguistic diversity is key to social cohesion, contributing to the beauty of multilingual nations (Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2016). In a longitudinal study of multilingual urban African students in the Vaal Triangle area, Coetzee-Van Rooy (2016) found that these students strongly believed in multilingualism facilitating communication and a respect for diversity, helping them learn about and interact with others, thus facilitating understanding. At the UFS, Joubert and Sibanda (2022) utilised focus groups to ascertain students’ views on English as Medium of Instruction (EMI), specifically regarding identity and access. Student responses yielded many different points, including the idea that English can be a useful tool, but that home languages also had an important part to play. Although their home languages were closely linked to their sense of identity and belonging, the students in this study preferred English for academic activities (Joubert & Sibanda, 2022). In another article focused on student perspectives regarding multilingualism, Sibanda and Joubert (2024) conclude that although students viewed both English and their home languages as having value in different contexts, what they really wanted was choice. In practice, this choice is unfortunately not yet available to most South African students.

In an educational setting, these challenges and strengths are also evident. The challenging aspects include most students being compelled to learn, read and write in a language that is not their first (and in many cases, not even their second) language. Classroom communication can also be problematic. In societies where bilingual students are common, lecturers can ask students to switch to their shared home language for discussion or can translate a concept into the communal secondary language. However, this is not practical in a South African classroom where home languages are so varied. This is also a challenge in the writing centre context: consultants cannot be expected to be fluent in all likely student home languages. Therefore, they cannot always code-switch to assist all students at the same level. Students may not be paired with consultants who speak their home language or preferred language.

Regarding the benefits of multilingualism in education, it is certainly true that varied linguistic and cultural perspectives on the part of both the instructor and student open the door to many creative examples, explanations and illustrations in the classroom, drawing from the multiple backgrounds present. Writing from a Kenyan perspective, Okal (2014) points out several educational benefits of multilingualism, including an appreciation of local languages, cultural awareness, and increased creativity. In addition, Coetzee-Van Rooy (2023) writes that, based on a language portrait study of North-West University (NWU) students, it was evident that although the students used different languages for different purposes, they had strong connections to different languages. For example, they equated home language strongly with identity, and additional languages with communication. Based on these results, Coetzee-Van Rooy (2023) argues that language policy in education should take cognisance of the different roles and purposes that students assign to different languages. This perspective has interesting implications for the South African writing centre, which operates within and between the linguistics backgrounds of many diverse students. Writing about accommodating multilingual writers in the writing centre, Alshreif (2017), cautions consultants to be sensitive to the emotional dimensions that these writers carry into their consultations, and to avoid the temptation to quell these writers' individuality by fixating on language assimilation. She suggests employing invitational rhetoric and politeness strategies to create an atmosphere of respect in writing centre sessions involving multilingual participants (Alshreif, 2017). Daniels and Richards

(2017) explored how the Stellenbosch University Writing Laboratory approached issues of multilingualism by taking an inclusive approach, using code switching, focusing on collaboration, and making their consultants aware of multilingualism implications and challenges. Although they claim to have taken a very flexible approach, the article glosses over some of the challenges and complexities of multilingualism in the writing centre, and it is not clear whether students are always matched with consultants who understand their language of choice. There is certainly more room for research on how the writing centre can embrace the benefits of multilingualism. For the purpose of this study, it is sufficient to note the existence of the complex multilingual context of the average South African student, and its potential implication for writing centres in South Africa.

2.3 Theoretical foundations of writing centres

Although there is variation among writing centre approaches and services not only at South African universities, but also those abroad, there are many common threads that unite writing centres and their practitioners. This section traces the development of theoretical approaches underpinning writing centres, culminating in a description of the theoretical foundations of the UFS Write Site.

2.3.1 The current-traditional paradigm

As briefly mentioned in the section on writing centre history, early writing centres were largely remedial in approach, and focussed on the technicalities of “fixing” language composition. According to Boquet (1999), early 1900s writing centres were a method rather than a place: students wrote while being corrected by an instructor as they wrote. This method evolved into the current-traditional paradigm, popular in the early decades of the 20th century (Appleby-Ostroff, 2017). This period of writing centre history has also been referred to as the Text-centred period, the Product approach, and Skills Discourse (Carstens & Rambiritch, 2020). Carstens and Rambiritch (2020) describe the current-traditional approach as rule-bound and scientific, with lower-order concerns (grammar, spelling) taking precedence. These writing centres were aimed at underprepared students, with a distinctly remedial approach, characterised as “labs” and “clinics” (Carstens & Rambiritch, 2020). The current-traditional paradigm was rooted in positivist pedagogy, with the assumption that an objective truth could be found, understood and taught (Hobson, 1992). This paradigm shares some similarities

with the study skills model of student literacy acquisition as explained by Lea and Street (2006), which is discussed in more detail in the next section of this chapter.

Boquet (1999) shared an example that encapsulates the remedial focus of the writing lab as fix-it shop during this era: at the University of Carolina, instructors would place a “CC” on student papers if they felt that the student had to improve on their writing. The “CC” stood for “composition condition” (Boquet, 1999:468), and indicated that the student should go to the writing lab to be tested and have their deficiencies rectified. Diagnosing students with a “condition” is far removed from the approach most writing centres tend to follow today, which rejects the view that students suffer from some kind of deficiency, but aims instead to meet them where they are and work with the skills they have (Nichols, 2017a)⁸.

Boquet (1999) also mentions that during the 1970s, as writing centres globally were undergoing some changes and experimenting with different approaches, the auto-tutorial method was used at some centres. This “writing lab as a technology” (Boquet, 1999:473) approach provided students with workbooks, headsets, and audio tapes, championing individual pacing and student responsibility. This approach has been criticised, and many students did not make use of this kind of programme, since students wanted, according to Bruffee (1978, cited in Boquet, 1999:474), “not an extension but an alternative to the traditional classroom”. The auto-tutorial method can be compared to a modern-day asynchronous grammar course, and seems far removed from what the writing centre came to be known for. The current-traditional paradigm, then, characterised an era of grammar-focused, top-down instruction, where students were viewed as “lacking” and instructors provided the “right” answers.

There is much criticism of this paradigm, and this is justified. According to Appleby-Ostroff (2017), learners in this approach are encouraged to be passive, and the focus is on improving the mechanics of the document rather than growing the student as a writer. Boquet (1999) explains that this paradigm resulted in a widely accepted view of the writing centre as a remedial space, a view that many writing centres are still struggling to shed. Based on Boquet’s (1999) observations, this remedial space was

⁸ This remedial attitude is rare but still present among some lecturers today: during my time at the Write Site, I have encountered lecturers who seem to wield the writing centre as a punishment for “bad” writing, instilling in students a sense that the consultant’s role is to point out all their mistakes. This strongly contrasts with the collaborative, question-based tutoring that the writing centre aims for.

strongly tied to the institutional expectations of students and to serving the curriculum. The first priority was therefore not to develop the individual writer. Hobson (1992) criticises the positivist pedagogy underlying the current-traditional approach: in the writing centre, positivism is too rigid a system to adequately explain what transpires between consultants and students. It “ignores the contextual nature of discourse and the malleability of language” (Hobson, 1992), which makes a positivist epistemology unfit for the multitude of themes, styles and writers that move through the writing centre. However, there may still be a place for certain aspects of the current-traditional paradigm in the writing centre, which is an idea developed in section 2.3.4 Selecting the best approach.

2.3.2 Expressivist approaches

The current-traditional paradigm eventually started giving way to expressivism, or neo-Romanticism (Appleby-Ostroff, 2017) in the 1960s (Carstens & Rambiritch, 2020). Hobson (1992) describes the expressionist epistemology as viewing truth or knowledge as residing within the individual; the role of the tutor, therefore, was to guide the student in accessing this source of internal knowledge. According to Appleby-Ostroff (2017), in this approach, knowledge was viewed as subjective and internally situated, and the focus in the writing centre was on the writer and on how writing and thinking were connected. Since the focus moved from producing near-perfect texts to developing individual writers, writing centre tutors shifted their focus away from proofreading and editing, and the technique of using open-ended or Socratic questioning became more prevalent (Appleby-Ostroff, 2017). The purpose of the Socratic method in the writing centre was to bring to light the knowledge already residing within the student (Carstens & Rambiritch, 2020). This method was paired with a non-directive approach, where tutors were not permitted to provide answers or suggest phrasing, or even comment on specific errors, focusing instead on listening to what the individual student had to say. According to Carstens and Rambiritch (2020), two important variants of expressivism are creative self-expression and process. They describe creative self-expression as led by discovery which is inner-directed, with writers pulling from their individual experiences. The process version of expressivism places emphasis on the cognitive and metacognitive processes that the writer experiences while writing, including pre-writing, writing, and post-writing (Carstens & Rambiritch, 2020). Since feedback and revision are essential aspects of

the writing process (Carstens & Rambiritch, 2020), the writing centre can play an important role in this process, with tutors providing feedback and guiding revision. In an article on writing centre practices, Drennan (2017a) describes the writing process as involving multiple drafting sessions with the purpose of stimulating students' critical thinking while growing their knowledge of course content. In addition, Lea and Street (1998) reference the writing process throughout their seminal article on an academic literacies approach to student writing.

Hobson (1992) argues that expressivism comes quite naturally to the writing centre practitioner:

We see ourselves as coaches, facilitators, those who help less experienced writers see that they can write successfully. We strive to make these writers see that they do have something to say that is worth hearing. We believe in the worth of the individual (Hobson, 1992:68).

This sentiment is echoed by Castens and Rambiritch (2020) who point out that expressivist approaches allow the consultant to treat the student as a person with something to say.

As encouraging — or romantic — as the expressivist approach may be, it is not perfect. Hobson (1992) levels some criticism at it, since this approach situates truth within the individual, glossing over the impact of the social group on the actions of an individual within society. Within the writing centre, it can be problematic to focus exclusively on the individual writer's beliefs and ideas, ignoring the demands and institutional rules of the academic community wherein the writer is situated (Hobson, 1992). Creating a sense of primacy or autonomy from the larger social group (Hobson, 1992) may lead the student writer to believe that their (untested, uninformed) opinions should be treated with the same respect as those of established scholars. Carstens and Rambiritch (2020) point out that expressivism does not provide any foundation for evaluating what is written well and what is not: if all that matters is the individual's internal knowledge, how can an external force (the consultant) provide advice on improving? In addition, Socratic or non-directive questioning is not suited for every situation: according to Blau, Hall and Sparks (2002), the collaborative learning theory underlying this style of questioning assumes an ideal situation where the consultant and student create knowledge together. However, in the case where the learner is a

non-native or non-proficient speaker of the academic language, the “collaboration” is more unequal: the tutor or consultant has access to knowledge which the student does not have, and questioning the student on this may lead to frustration or even a guessing game for a student who cannot answer these guiding questions (Blau et al., 2002). Some students also visit the writing centre specifically for input regarding grammar or academic conventions with which they are completely unfamiliar. As a result, in certain instances, it may do more harm than good to assume a hidden fount of knowledge residing within the individual.

2.3.3 Social constructionist approaches

A third theoretical approach to writing centre practice, is that of social constructivism. This approach sees knowledge and writing as essentially social, arising from interactions between the individual and society (Appleby-Ostroff, 2017). Since different communities and groups all have their own practices and conventions, writing, according to the social constructionist, is “shaped by the social and rhetorical contexts within which it occurs” (Appleby-Ostroff, 2017:72). Hobson (1992) mentions that some academics view this approach as the most suitable for writing centre practices, since the idea of a community collaborating to agree on recognised truth resonates with what happens in practice in collaborative writing centre consultations.

Carstens and Rambiritch (2020) draw from Hyland’s (2016) book on teaching and researching writing to discuss three aspects of this approach: writing as social construction, social interaction, and power/ideology. The understanding of writing as *social construction* draws heavily from the work of psychologist Lev Vygotsky, specifically his Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Carstens & Rambiritch, 2020). Nordlof (2014) explains Vygotsky’s idea as “a developmental process in which concepts are internalised through social interaction” (Nordlof, 2014:56). The ZPD refers to potential learning that can take place when a learner’s current level of skill is exposed to guided growth in collaboration with a more capable peer or expert (Nordlof, 2014). Linked closely with Vygotsky’s ideas is the concept of scaffolding, made prominent by Jerome Bruner (1983), and understood as the practice of providing support for learners to grow, then gradually removing this scaffolding to enable the student to keep learning independently (Carstens & Rambiritch, 2020). This view of writing as social construction can clearly be linked to writing centre practices, where

the consultant assists in activating a student's ZPD and in providing scaffolded learning. Writing as *social interaction* also fits well with writing centre practice: in this approach, dialogue is foregrounded. Writing centres often use the word "collaboration" to refer to this kind of dialogue, which may involve making meaning of writing task instructions, interpreting lecturer feedback, discussing readings, and working on improving student writing (Carstens & Rambiritch, 2020). According to Carstens and Rambiritch (2020), the writing centre consultant assumes the role of "coach" in these social interactions, providing input without doing the work themselves.

The final aspect of a constructionist approach to writing centre pedagogy is that of writing as *power and ideology*. According to Ivanič (2004), writing is significantly influenced by power relations and social forces. The socially constructed resources that writers draw from are all socio-politically structured with preference usually given to discourses and genres that further the interests of the most powerful groups in society (Ivanič, 2004). Although this can limit the writer's choices, Ivanič (2004) suggests that the writer can be viewed as a social agent mixing resources and drawing on suppressed discourse and genres, thereby producing texts that challenge existing norms and conventions. Carstens and Rambiritch (2020:242) compare the writing centre that places emphasis on the sociopolitical aspect of socio-constructivism to a "safe space" where students are encouraged to challenge existing structures and assist in bringing about social change. However, Clarence (2023) takes this a step further and challenges writing centres to move from being safe spaces (linked with comfort for the majority, but not all students) to becoming brave spaces, to fulfil the deeply transformative role that higher education is designed to have, which comes with some risks and challenges to established patterns of thinking. Similarly, Nichols (2017b) draws from the writing of Grimm (1999) to advocate moving away from the idea of a safe space towards the idea of a transitional space, foregrounding listening and connectedness.

As with the previously discussed approaches, Hobson (1992) levels some critique at the social constructionist position. His main criticism is that this focus on the way communities negotiate truth and meaning downplays the role of the individual within their social group. Individuals are seen as having little autonomy within the larger societal system, and therefore, this way of thinking may struggle to explain individual acts that conflict with the expected way of doing, thinking and writing (Hobson, 1992).

The writing centre deals to a large extent with individual writers operating from within a complex web of societal expectations and conventions, and the collaborative nature of consultations certainly seems suited to the idea of constructivism. However, the individual student is still expected to bring in their unique authorial voice and life experience, and ultimately, it is the student whose individual academic achievement is impacted by the quality of their writing. Concerning the idea of writing as challenging power structures and ideologies, the writing centre consultant should also be careful not to sway the consultation towards political stances that may negatively impact a student's academic performance, since not all academic staff may be appreciative of power structures and established ways of thinking in their fields being challenged, particularly by undergraduate students.

2.3.4 Selecting the best approach

It is clear that both writing centre pedagogy and theory have undergone some development over the past decades, and continue to evolve and grow, whilst being critiqued. A question that may arise from an overview of theoretical approaches revolves around which approach would be best suited to the modern writing centre. It is tempting to view the different theoretical underpinnings as a chronological development of best practices and to discard the current-traditional and expressivist paradigms as outdated. However, Hobson (1992) argues that it is impossible to fit all that a writing centre does into one of these approaches. There are too many forces acting upon a writing centre — foundational philosophies, departmental agendas, instructional methods, political movements, and even the physical shape and location of the centre (Hobson, 1992). Instead, the writing centre should find a balance between aspects of all these epistemologies. Carstens and Rambiritch (2020) provide examples of how a consultant might draw from all of these in practice: for a second-language English writer, it may be necessary to employ a current-traditional approach to teach a specific rule of grammar. In addition, an expressivist paradigm may be utilised to make a student aware of their own writing process and strategies. Finally, collaborative strategies such as encouragement and active listening, often incorporated during a writing centre consultation, fall within the realm of socio-constructivism (Carstens & Rambiritch, 2020). Appleby-Ostroff (2017) also points out that a combination of these approaches may work best, and that writing centre consultants should be trained to pull from the strengths of each approach. This flexible

approach allows consultants to tailor their sessions to the needs of their students in order to maximise the effectiveness of these consultations.

Regarding the idea of “best” practice, there is one more aspect that warrants discussion here. Much of writing centre theory places emphasis on using non-directive tutor strategies: the writer should do most of the talking, while the tutor guides the discussion towards shared meaning-making (Appleby-Ostroff, 2017). This aligns with the social constructionist and expressivist paradigms discussed in the previous section, and is often viewed as a sort of “rule” in the writing centre⁹. We are, after all, not here as grammar teachers or proofreaders, but as writers talking to other writers about their writing, to loosely paraphrase North (1984). However, Blau et al. (2002) point out that in certain cases, directive tutoring strategies may work better than non-directive strategies. For example, if the student is a non-native speaker of the language in question, a strategy such as Socratic questioning may lead to frustration and even guessing on the side of the student, instead of the desired outcome of guiding the student to find their own answer to language problems (Blau et al., 2002). Non-directive strategies may be a waste of time and effort in cases where the student is simply unaware of something, and therefore unable to engage in meaningful collaboration. This once again supports the idea that writing centre tutors should be careful in the strategies they employ, and that a “one-size-fits-all” approach will not work for every consultation.

2.3.5 Theoretical underpinnings of the UFS Write Site

This section of the literature review has provided an overview of the main theoretical approaches present in writing centres globally. It has also argued for a combination of these paradigms in writing centre practice. Given the focus of this study, it is appropriate to briefly discuss the stance of the UFS Write Site within these paradigms and practices.

As with the majority of modern writing centres, the Write Site does not adhere to the current-traditional paradigm. Consultants are trained to focus on higher order concerns (argument, logic, cohesion) first, using non-directive collaborative strategies. However,

⁹ See, for example, *The Longman Guide to Peer Tutoring* (Gillespie & Lerner, 2008), which takes a decidedly directive approach in informing writing centre tutors that they should take a non-directive approach. This guide urges tutors to focus on higher order concerns first, even in cases where the student may be a non-native English speaker.

once higher order concerns have been sufficiently addressed, lower order concerns such as sentence-level grammar and punctuation may be addressed. This mirrors the approach described by Tiruchittampalam et al. (2018), where the writer starts with more abstract big-picture goals and then moves to more concrete aspects such as editing. Although this does seem to indicate the use of the current-traditional paradigm in the Write Site, a focus on grammar correction is rarely seen in practice, perhaps because most students do not attend multiple sessions allowing for a logical transition from higher to lower order concerns.

Write Site consultants do source various consultation practices from the expressivist and socio-constructivist approaches. Regarding expressivism, Write Site practices include using Socratic questioning to draw existing knowledge from the student; non-directive tutoring strategies; and a clear focus on process writing. Many experienced Write Site consultants go to great lengths to make each student feel that they have something to contribute to their field, and that their authorial voice matters. With respect to socio-constructivism, the collaborative tutoring sessions clearly embody writing as social construction and social interaction, with the consultant coaching the student on improving their writing through dialogue and questioning. The view of writing as power and ideology is perhaps not as overtly present in the Write Site: most sessions focus on clarifying the basics of the student's argument with them, and in practice, consultations do not often culminate in challenging existing authority structures. This is perhaps something better left for postgraduate students who are more confident in their writing.

While UFS writing centre consultations mainly fall within the approaches mentioned above, another key service provided by this writing centre is that of discipline-specific workshops. These take a slightly different approach, since they involve larger groups of students than the consultations (for face-to-face workshops) or even asynchronous instruction (for online workshops). Therefore, although the expressivist and socio-constructivist paradigms may be present, the workshops are perhaps more directly based on an academic literacies approach, as explained by Lea and Street (1998) and Archer (2010). The next section of this chapter focuses on this approach, specifically the aspect of discipline-specific writing instruction.

2.4 Academic literacies and discipline-specific writing

Some aspects that cannot be ignored when writing about what happens in writing centres are those that relate to an academic literacies approach, discipline-specific writing, and the collaborative efforts that underpin initiatives that assist students in growing their academic literacies within relevant contexts. This section briefly discusses the importance of and challenges to academic literacy before describing the efficacy of embedding literacies in discipline-specific contexts. It concludes by elucidating the importance of collaboration between the subject expert and the academic literacy or writing centre practitioner.

2.4.1 An academic literacies approach

Current views on student writing revolve around an academic literacies approach. According to Lillis and Scott (2007), the field of academic literacies is rooted in fields such as applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, sociocultural learning theories, anthropology, discourse studies and New Literacy Studies. Evans-Tokaryk and Shabanza (2022) provide a brief overview of the history and origins of academic literacies, specifically from a South African point of view. According to this article, the academic literacies approach has origins in the New Literacy Studies movement, which differentiates the autonomous from the ideological understandings of literacy (Evans-Tokaryk & Shabanza, 2022). The autonomous view considers reading and writing to be a neutral, widely applicable skill set, able to be transferred between various contexts. However, Evans-Tokaryk and Shabanza (2022) point out that any supposition of neutrality is most likely an imperialistic imposition of western values on other cultures rather than a truly universally applicable skill. They explain that the New Literacy Studies movement prefers the ideological understanding of literacy, which sees literacy as a social practice which is “ideological in the sense that it is necessarily conceptualised, taught, and learned by a group of people who might share a unique history, job market, social values, educational system, and so forth” (Evans-Tokaryk & Shabanza, 2022:106). This view draws from and is very similar to that of Lea and Street (1998), who differentiate between a study skills, deficit approach (similar to the autonomous view explained by Evans-Tokaryk and Shabanza), an academic socialisation approach, and an academic literacies approach. Study skills, according to Lea and Street (1998), is the idea that academic literacy can be seen as a set of

decontextualised, transferable skills, while an academic socialisation approach aims to orient the student into the academic culture. The socialisation approach unfortunately does not allow for a deeper understanding of discourse and literacy, and assumes that institution-wide, academic culture is relatively consistent, leaving little room for variations between faculties, departments and even individual lecturers or tutors (Lea & Street, 1998). Finally, the academic literacies approach centres around social practices, guiding students into knowing when and how to switch practices as required by differing contexts, with a specific focus on academic institutions as places of discourse and power (Lea & Street, 1998). Lea and Street (1998) point out that these three models do not replace each other. Instead, they view the approaches as encapsulating each other, with the academic literacies approach including and building on the other models. Since literacy is a complex phenomenon, the term “academic literacy” is often replaced by the idea of multiple literacies, reflecting the fact that it does not encompass a generic set of practices (Boughey, 2013). Archer (2008:250) also makes special mention of the fact that at their writing centre, they use the term “practices” rather than “skills”, since skills can refer to neutral techniques, as well as represent a deficit view of students. Practices, on the other hand, is closer to an academic literacies approach in that it takes into consideration context and social situations (Archer, 2008) and thus reflects the nuance of what students are expected to do instead of branding them as “unskilled” when they are not yet aware of the requirements of certain academic contexts.

Other researchers in the fields of literacy, language learning, writing centres and related areas, take a very similar view to that of Lea and Street (1998), and expand on this approach. Wingate (2006), for example, discusses the inadequacies of a “bolt-on” or generic study skills approach as opposed to a “built-in” or embedded model where the skills are an integral part of a course. She laments the fact that most academic institutions still make use of the bolt-on approach, for reasons including coordination challenges throughout academic programmes, staff reluctance to be involved with student learning, and lack of understanding regarding the complexity of literacy skills and their relevance to students beyond their time at university (Wingate, 2006). This results in writing support often being relegated to surface-level or technical issues, rather than the complex levels of learning that should be taught within specific subject

contexts (Wingate, 2006). While Wingate is based in the United Kingdom, these ideas are applicable to many university contexts worldwide, including those in South Africa.

Chrissie Boughey (2000), associated with various South African and international universities, has written at length on the topics of academic literacy in the higher education context. She references Gee's (1990) metaphor of discourse as a "bar" (where a person has to speak, look and act a certain way in order to fit in) and extends this metaphor to the university:

The regular drinkers at the university bar are the academics: the professors, the lecturers and the postgraduate students. New students come and stand at the bar and drink there but, unless they can show themselves to be 'the same' as the regular drinkers, they will not be accepted. In order to be 'the same', they have to speak in the same way as the regular drinkers, act in the same way as the regular drinkers and, importantly, share the same feelings and values as the regular drinkers. It is important that they share the same feelings and values as the regular drinkers because, unless they do, they will not really be able to speak and act in the same way as they do. They might be able to pretend to speak and act in the same way but, sooner or later, their pretence will be exposed (Boughey, 2000:281).

According to Boughey (2000), academic literacy can be described as knowing the correct way to speak and act in the context of academic discourses. She further extends the metaphor above to explain that owing to the massification of tertiary education, students drinking at the university "bar" are now no longer from the same "neighbourhood", but carry with them ways of being and systems of thinking that seem more suited to bars "across town" (Boughey, 2000:281). Examples of these ways of thinking include students viewing learning as a commodity to be acquired and reproduced, struggling to differentiate between different "voices" (i.e. the lecturer, theorists, experts in the field), seeing writing as a simple reproduction of what they know (following oral rules, with no need for contextualisation), believing "common" knowledge at the same level as "academic" knowledge, and potentially underestimating the importance of employing good grammar in their writing (Boughey, 2000; Boughey, 2005). It is therefore clear that students do not simply have a "language" problem, but that academic literacy is very much related to the ideological,

in the way that people view their relationships to texts and how they regard the texts they interact with (Boughey, 2002). Nel and Janse van Rensburg (2022) describe academic discourse as a foreign language to students, explaining that students are out of step with the invisible rules and ways of being at higher education institutions, and struggle to navigate the power relations. A focus on grammar or skills in many cases will not address the root of the problem that students may experience at university. In fact, using the term “language problem” places the issue squarely upon the student (as having some sort of deficit), ignoring how the university institution itself may be complicit in reinforcing unequal social structures (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). According to Boughey (2005), certain academic rules and conventions need to be clearly explained to students. These rules and conventions may be so ingrained into the thinking of those who have spent some time in academia, that they do not realise the need for budding academics to be made aware of this. This type of ideological and contextual awareness and way of being can be described as the “hidden curriculum” (Boughey & McKenna, 2021).

It is clear that physical and financial access to university is not enough; in order to succeed, students need to be equipped with epistemological access to understand the ways knowledge is constructed in academia (Morrow, 1994 in Boughey, 2007; Leibowitz, Goodman, Hannon, & Parkerson, 1997). However, Boughey (2016) wrote that South African universities are unfortunately still largely focused on teaching language use as neutral skills to be applied, instead of recognising the ideological and socially embedded aspects. An overview of Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA) conference submissions of 2012 also revealed that even within academic literacy practitioner circles, there was a strong focus on literacy as a neutral skill (Boughey, 2013), rather than on taking an embedded approach within specific disciplines. More recently, Julius, McKenna and Mgwashu (2024) conducted a case study at three Namibian universities and found that academic support courses at all these universities diminished academic literacy into autonomous language skills. No emphasis was placed on inducting students into disciplinary communities; instead, the success of these courses was measured by assessing technical English proficiency using generic instead of discipline-specific texts (Julius et al., 2024). Julius et al. (2024) make it clear that this is not unique to Namibia, Africa,

or even to the Global South; these universities are simply following practices that have been established in the Global North.

In South Africa, Archer (2010) links discipline-specific writing to writing centres, explaining that while the writing centre can be viewed as decontextualised owing to being situated outside of any specific faculty, it presents a prime opportunity for embodying a discipline-specific academic literacies approach. In another study, Archer (2012) shows how a writing centre consultant can take an academic literacies approach:

They [Writing Centre consultants] can, for example, critically highlight conventions around disciplines, genres, and academic discourse (such as the use of the third person, nominalizations, the passive). These conventions can be discussed in order to understand how and why they operate, and what “rules” would be the most appropriate for the students to apply in a particular context (Archer, 2012:356).

More broadly, Archer (2010, 2012) illustrates several ways in which the University of Cape Town (UCT) writing centre embraces this type of approach: it employs consultants from a variety of different faculties and disciplines; it embeds writing workshops within specific modules and courses; it works alongside lecturers who want to integrate writing in their curricula; and it facilitates interdisciplinary postgraduate writer’s circles. Archer’s (2010, 2012) articles serve as a reminder that writing centre work encompasses so much more than one-on-one consulting; ideally, a writing centre is involved in many writing-related workshops, projects and endeavours across faculties.

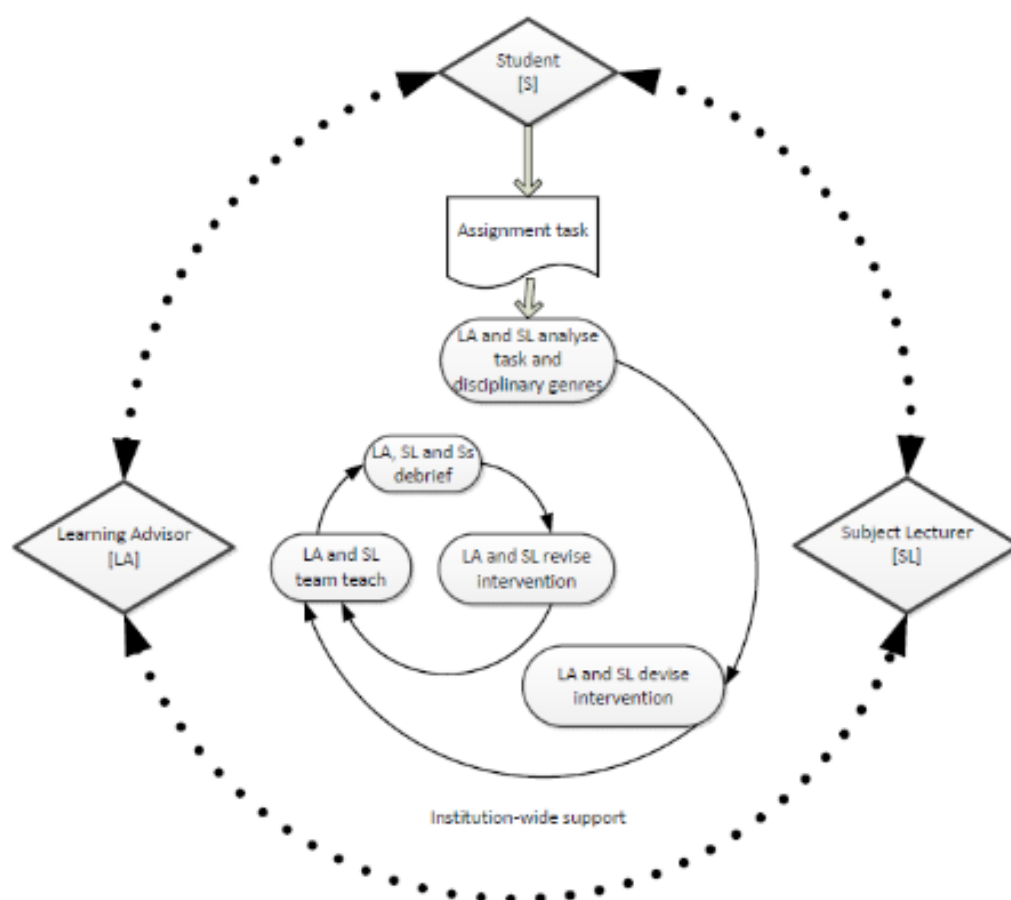
Dison and Moore (2019) also discuss a contextual or discipline-specific approach situated within a South African writing centre, claiming that academic skills are intrinsically linked to disciplinary knowledge, but that many institutions do not take such an approach to writing development. They come to the conclusion that the disciplinary specialist and the academic literacies practitioner should work together to create discipline-embedded approaches, challenging deficit or remedial practices and empowering students (Dison & Moore, 2019). This type of collaboration is mentioned by various authors, and since collaboration is a key aspect of this study, it is the focus of the next section.

2.4.2 Collaborations between content and literacy experts

A perusal of writing centre literature and research leads one to the conclusion that collaborations are key to the functioning of a writing centre. Robust dialogue between the consultant and student is essential to a productive writing centre consultation, and most other writing centre services (workshops, writing practices or skills embedded in courses, writing-related resources) require buy-in and input from academic staff in order to be effective. Jacobs (2007) proposes a collaborative pedagogy where academic literacies specialists collaborate with disciplinary specialists in insider-outsider collaborations. Dison and Moore (2019) draw from this pedagogy, and extend it to discipline-specific writing development within the writing centre. They point out that in Jacobs' (2007) ideal proposed collaborations, subject and writing specialists plan, facilitate, teach and assess writing-related tasks together (Dison & Moore, 2019). However, what often happens in practice is that the writing practitioner creates developmental writing activities on their own, while using content-specific texts that may be provided by the subject specialist. This, according to Dison and Moore (2019), can be considered cooperation, but not true collaboration.

Page (2020) also discusses the practical possibilities of content and literacy specialist collaborations in embedding discipline-specific academic literacy strategies for students. She contextualises her research in a Vygotskian constructivist framework, as well as within Lea and Street's (1998) academic literacies model, and explains that, according to research, students are more motivated to attend discipline-specific writing sessions than generic ones (Page, 2020). In addition to motivating and supporting students, a collaborative discipline-specific approach also supports staff: the content expert may not be aware of the exact nature of writing conventions, while the writing centre practitioner may have the academic writing knowledge but not the needed in-depth knowledge of the subject. Collaboration or partnership between the content expert and the writing centre practitioner can therefore bring together the best from both sides (Page, 2020). In addition, Page (2020) frames this collaboration as dialogic and boundary-shifting, with one role of the writing expert being to ask "naïve" questions that allow the content expert to become aware of and critically examine writing conventions in their discipline. In a genuine partnership, both would retain their unique roles, but would function as equals to create a shared identity, ultimately resulting in more directed student support (Page, 2020).

Similar to Page (2020) and also aligned with a Vygotskian constructivist approach, the best-practice model (see Figure 1) designed by McWilliams and Allan (2014) underpins much of the work at the UFS writing centre, and informs this study.



This model places the student (S) in a prominent position, symbolically positioned between learning advisor (LA) and subject lecturer (SL).

Figure 1: Best-practice Model (McWilliams & Allen, 2014:11)

McWilliams and Allan (2014) write about embedding academic literacies in faculty courses at the Auckland University of Technology (AUT) in New Zealand, paying special attention to how the leaning advisor or literacy practitioner works in tandem with the subject lecturer to design an appropriate intervention around an assignment task, while involving the student as a central figure, as illustrated in Figure 1. Nine years after the publication of this initial model, Allan, McWilliams and Raleigh (2023) announced that they had been inspired by the success of ongoing collaboration within specific interventions to rework their original model. The updated model (Raleigh, McWilliams & Allan, 2024) replaced “LA and SL analyse task and disciplinary genres” with “Analysis of student exemplar”, and “LA and SL devise intervention” with

“Annotated exemplar”. This foregrounding of exemplar texts is also a strategy employed at the UFS writing centre, and is particularly effective when used as part of a discipline-specific intervention co-created by the writing specialist and the content lecturer.

McWilliams and Allan (2014) provide some examples of embedded literacy interventions at AUT, all of which required collaboration between the writing specialist and the content specialist. Similarly, Einfalt and Turley (2009) describe a three-way collaborative model employed at an Australian university that involved a faculty teacher, skills advisor and librarian. Here, the writing specialist and content specialist employed cooperation (knowledge sharing), collaboration (creating support materials together) and team teaching (the librarian and skills advisor co-taught) (Einfalt & Turley, 2009). Pocock (2010) also writes about the benefits of student support services staff collaborating with other university staff, explaining that it benefits both the staff and the students’ learning experience, creating a professional learning community. She specifically mentions academic writing skills embedded into academic lectures as one example of collaboration at her university (Pocock, 2010). These examples were all shared by academics who experienced positive results regarding collaborative endeavours. Eodice (2003:114;129) encapsulates these positive sentiments well by describing collaboration as the “air we breathe” and exhorting writing centre scholars to “demand” collaboration.

Although writing centre researchers regularly extol the virtues of collaboration, very few seem satisfied with the levels of collaboration they manage to achieve in practice. Page (2020) acknowledges that small-scale collaborative initiatives have a positive impact and increase the quality of learning support, but refers to institution-wide academic literacies programme implementation as the ideal, lamenting that these are not yet the norm at most institutions. Pocock (2010) mentions that building relationships with faculty takes time, and collaborative efforts may be met with some resistance from academic staff. In addition, McWilliams and Allan (2014) explain that institutional support for collaborative literacy support is often lacking, in many cases due to lack of understanding regarding the importance of such support, or due to financial constraints. Similar to McWilliams and Allan’s (2014) view on institutions lacking understanding, Wingate (2006) believes that most universities still operate from a deficit model, where support is believed to be relevant only as an add-on for

struggling students, and therefore institutional practices are resistant to change. In lieu of enjoying institution-wide support, writing centres are often compelled to work on smaller-scale initiatives with individual staff members who see the value of collaborating in projects that embed writing within academic disciplines. The UFS writing centre often finds itself collaborating in such smaller-scale initiatives with individual lecturers instead of enjoying the support of an entire department.

It should also be noted here that while an embedded approach to academic literacy (a built-in approach) is generally considered to have positive results, it is not without criticism. Sebolai (2022), for example, cautions that an effective way to assess discipline-specific teaching has yet to be developed. According to Sebolai (2022), literacy teachers should consider assessment implications when designing their courses, instead of focusing purely on creating theories of academic literacy teaching.

Collaboration between the writing centre and content lecturer is also not without criticism: Miley (2016) cautions that collaboration may result in one entity overtaking or absorbing the other, with the writing centre, in this case, taking the role of “service provider” or “saviour”. This is not an ideal situation, and care should be taken that any partnerships are truly shared, with both entities doing their part (Miley, 2016).

2.4.3 Collaboration at the UFS writing centre

Regarding the UFS writing centre, it is worth noting here that an embedded, discipline-specific literacies approach is a fundamental aspect underlying almost everything that the Write Site does (Drennan, 2017b). A central service of the writing centre is discipline-specific workshops, tailor-made for specific student cohorts and usually designed around a specific writing assignment submission. These workshops are designed in collaboration with the content lecturer, and care is taken where possible to present the workshops as part of the curriculum instead of as an optional add-on. Students who attend such embedded workshops are often encouraged or required to attend individual consultations at the writing centre. In these consultations, collaboration is also key, and since the consultations revolve around specific assignments within various modules and not around decontextualised writing skills, it can be argued that these consultations are part of an embedded literacies approach. Writing centre consultations can be considered a type of individualised feedback within the writing process. Drennan (2017b) reports on a description of two collaborative

endeavours (in the Law and Health Sciences faculties at the UFS), where the writing centre designed and presented workshops, after which students were encouraged to attend individual consultations. Although one often thinks of consultations when picturing the writing centre, it is interesting to note that at the UFS writing centre, the discipline-specific workshops reach more students than the consultations do. For example, in the first semester of 2025, a total of 3556 students attended writing centre workshops, while 862 students attended individual or group consultations. A similar trend can be seen in the 2024 numbers: for that year, a total of 4353 students participated in workshops, while 1706 participated in consultations. During the 2024/2025 period, writing centre staff consisted of six permanent team members (involved in designing face-to-face and online workshops, as well as administrative aspects surrounding workshops and consultations) as well as roughly 30 part-time consultants who assisted with individual consultations as well as presenting some of the workshops. While the consultations are invaluable in that they provide students with individual feedback on their work, the workshops have a wider impact. Principles of collaboration, as well as an embedded academic literacies approach, are thus crucial to the core functioning of the centre.

It should be noted here that some lecturers at the UFS are committed to true collaboration, while others lean more towards what Dison and Moore (2019) would most likely consider cooperation without full collaboration. Some lecturers set aside time to meet with the writing centre workshop designer, share resources, remind students to attend workshops and bookings, and even embed the writing centre interventions in their schedules or rubrics. Others (potentially because of time and workload constraints) are more likely to provide minimal resources and information, and expect the writing centre to carry the burden of reminding students of the interventions. There have even been isolated instances where a lecturer has asked the writing centre to just present “something” for their students while they are unavailable for teaching due to attending a conference or something similar. Whatever the level of staff involvement, the writing centre strives to provide an intervention containing important literacies embedded in discipline-specific examples (or, if time does not allow a new workshop design, a foundational workshop may be presented with students urged to attend individual consultations for more targeted feedback). The general consensus among the writing centre staff (designers, consultants, and

workshop presenters) is that an intervention is more successful and that students are more committed to making use of the services when the lecturer is also more involved. It should be noted here that the overall approach of the UFS writing centre when working with academic staff is to follow and support the lecturer's approach; we do not aim to tell lecturers what to do within their content modules. This links back to the best-practice model (McWilliams & Allan, 2014) where the subject lecturer and literacy practitioner work together, drawing on their respective strengths, in order to benefit the student.

This section has described the importance of fruitful collaborations with academic staff in facilitating writing skills embedded in the disciplines. This need for cooperation leading to collaboration has informed the current study, since academic staff buy-in is essential to writing centre success. The next section briefly considers current characteristics of academic staff, and specifically their often complicated relationships with the writing centre.

2.5 The academic and the writing centre

Writing centres frequently operate in the liminal spaces between university faculties, and therefore enjoy a certain sense of independence as the place students can choose to visit to have the constraints of academic writing demystified. Writing centre workshops, although not as much of a student-led decision to attend as the consultations are, still carry the experience of a specialist from outside the faculty visiting the students to show them what is expected from their writing tasks. However, despite this semblance of independence, writing centre success does depend largely on institutional support, as well as on academic staff understanding and support. Staff perceptions, beliefs, and expectations of the writing centre may shape how students see the writing centre, as well as whether or not academic staff will be likely to make use of the writing centre's services. This section looks at academics, both staff and students, especially regarding their perceptions and expectations of the writing centre.

2.5.1 The 21st-century academic

Modern times bring with them a slew of challenges, and academia is no exception. Academics in the 21st century must contend with a digital information age constantly beset by new technologies. Some technologies allow for leaps in quality teaching and research, such as blended learning, remote teaching, and software capable of high-

level statistical analyses. Other technologies have had a more mixed reception, with artificial intelligence and especially large language models being both lauded and lambasted for their potential impact on student learning (Crawford, Cowling & Allen, 2023).

In order to thrive in the 21st century, very specific skills are needed. Drawing on work by Metz (2011), Geisinger (2016) identifies a list of 21st century skills as including the following: “core subject matter knowledge, especially in science; flexibility, adaptability, and innovation; critical thinking, creativity, and non-routine problem solving; complex communication, collaboration, social and cross-cultural skills; self-direction, productivity, and accountability; and systems thinking” (Geisinger, 2016:247). Academics and lecturers need to balance these higher order skills with institutional demands such as research output, teaching portfolios, curriculum redesign, and embedding graduate attributes within their modules. The progressively greater influence of neoliberalism at universities has also necessitated a shift in thinking for the academic: in this worldview, universities are no longer seen primarily as spaces of free thinking or role players in their communities, but portrayed in market-oriented discourses (Hlatshwayo, 2022). According to Hlatshwayo (2022), this discourse presents academics as “knowledge producers” selling education to their “clients” (students). Dison et al. (2023) contend that the understanding of what an academic should be is shifting: a few decades ago, an academic was seen as an expert in their field and therefore perfectly capable of transferring their knowledge to students. Now, however, teaching has become more complex, and academics are required to multitask between administrative duties, supervision, research, teaching, managing funding, and other duties in order to be considered successful in academia (Dison et al., 2023).

Boughey and McKenna (2021) discuss the current challenges in higher education, identifying, among other things, how globalisation, neoliberalism, and the massification of the student body have resulted in more pressure on academic staff than in the past. Universities operate with increasing funding cuts, and are expected to generate third stream income, often competing in ranking systems which prioritise aspects such as research publication over other aspects such as widening student participation (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). At many universities, the tenure track is no longer a reality, with precarious employment becoming the norm. An astounding 66%

of South African academics are employed on a temporary or contract basis (CHE 2020, in Boughey & McKenna, 2021). Student numbers have increased exponentially, with the number of staff often remaining largely the same (Castle & Keane, 2016). This, in turn, has resulted in a steady increase in teaching, supervision, and marking workloads. In addition to the financial and administrative pressure, academics are still required to excel in research and qualifications: the South African National Development Plan requires that 75% of all academic staff must have obtained a doctorate by 2030 (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). On the topic of publishing research, Castle and Keane (2016) point out that academic staff members do not automatically flourish at writing; many of them feel unsupported, isolated, and intimidated when it comes to writing. Clearly, it is a challenging time to be in academia.

The average 21st-century academic no longer conforms to the mostly-male, conservatively dressed, inapproachable stereotype of the past, owing to widening access to education and an appreciation of more diverse backgrounds and perspectives. However, one aspect that many academics do have in common is the cognitive bias known as the “curse of knowledge”. This is explained by Wieman (2007:1) as the idea that “when you *know* something, it is extremely difficult to think about it from the perspective of someone who does *not* know it”. Froyd and Layne (2008) explain that this applies to most experts in any field, but they specifically focus on the impact for academics involved in teaching students. The reason why this cognitive bias deserves mention here is that it may influence how academics perceive their students’ struggles, as well as how they perceive the necessity of support services such as a writing centre. Academic staff may not always have a clear picture of the level of support required to assist students in attaining the level of understanding and competence that the lecturer believes necessary.

2.5.2 Misperceptions and expectations of the writing centre

Much has already been written about the primacy of collaboration for writing centre success. However, cooperation and collaboration are often hampered by misinformation or misguided expectations from either party. Writing centre research abounds with examples of practitioners lamenting how content lecturers misrepresent the writing centre, or are simply unaware of what it offers. Eodice (2003) shares an example of a lecturer who approached a writing centre for assistance with a particular

student. In this scenario, the writing centre director became excited at the prospect of inviting the lecturer and student to collaborate with the writing centre, only to realise that the lecturer was not interested in collaborating, but simply wanted to hand off the student to the writing centre. Eodice (2003) also mentions an unfortunate perception among university staff that when faculty work together on a project, they collaborate, but when students work together, it is considered cheating. This could be one reason why staff might harbour some mistrust towards the writing centre, considering the kind of collaboration present during consultations as crossing an ethical line.

While some academic staff members might be concerned about the writing centre going too far and editing students' papers for them, others are concerned that not enough editing is happening, and that consultants are simply talking to students about their "feelings" regarding writing (Miley, 2016). Grimm (1996) also mentions that lecturers may expect and want the writing centre to provide an editing service: in her example, academic staff were appalled at the fact that student texts that had been the subject of writing centre consultations still contained technical errors. Boquet (1999:464) criticises this expectation by quoting Marian Regan, at that time employed as the director of the writing centre at Fairfield University, who explained that students cannot just drop off their papers at the writing centre, since "we're not a laundry". This "fix-it-shop" view of writing centres is often observed: Janse van Rensburg (2023) mentions that writing centres are regularly misunderstood in this way and therefore undervalued. One explanation for this misperception is that while many aspects of universities are product-orientated, writing centres are largely process-orientated. Since it is difficult to measure whether students have truly improved in their writing, success is often measured by student attendance numbers and satisfaction in surveys, which may not quite align with lecturer expectations (Janse van Rensburg, 2023).

Academic employee perceptions of writing centre staff can also vary. Howard and Carrick (2006) believe that there is a common perception of writing centre staff occupying low status positions within the institutional hierarchy and, therefore, not receiving much intellectual respect. They go as far as to say that other university staff may see writing centre staff as the "disposable literate" (Howard & Carrick, 2006:251), who work at the writing centre because they do not have better options. This is perhaps unduly harsh towards the average academic staff member. Other writing centre

researchers, such as Clarence (2023), believe that disciplinary lecturers are simply resistant to taking on more work and changing how they teach, and are therefore unwilling to engage in meaningful relationship building with the writing centre. However, as discussed in the section on collaboration (2.4.2 Collaborations between content and literacy experts), there are also many examples of content lecturers and writing centre staff working together in mutual understanding and to mutual benefit. Therefore, it is evident that not all academic staff are misinformed and resistant to change to the point where they do not want to work with the writing centre.

Another common misperception that the academic staff member may harbour is that of misjudging the complexities of understanding and teaching specific aspects of academic writing. Janse van Rensburg (2023) postulates that academics may not fully understand how important academic writing is, or how difficult the process of developing writing can be. Similarly, Lamberti and Archer (2023) explain that many lecturers seem to believe that students need very little explicit instruction in order to obtain the necessary discursive resources they need for academic success in their disciplines (partly owing, perhaps, to the “curse of knowledge” cognitive bias). These lecturers often think that students should be able to grow their writing skills in a decontextualised environment, such as a generic writing course (Lamberti & Archer, 2023). However, as discussed earlier in this chapter, embedded literacy skills are found to be more effective than a generic approach. When questioned about what exactly constitutes good writing, many academics struggle to articulate their understanding and therefore cannot provide clear guidelines for their students (Lamberti & Archer, 2023; Drennan, 2017b). Lecturers may also believe that students need language skills, not realising the complexities of literacy practices that students should learn (Leibowitz et al., 1997). Moore (2023) links this problem all the way back to the necessity of writing centre collaboration:

Part of the rationale for a collaborative pedagogy is that experts in a discipline tend to struggle to make their deep, tacit knowledge explicit and visible to novices and that an “outsider” to the discourse is able to assist in developing ways of teaching and explicating valued thinking and writing practices (Moore, 2023:167-168).

Academic staff expectations of the writing centre, writing centre staff, and writing itself shape not only their own likelihood of making use of the writing centre, but also, to a certain extent, the attitudes and expectations of their students. In a study among first-year students at a South African university, in which they explored how the writing centre can enhance their writing skills, Mdoana-Zide and Mukuna (2023) found that 52% of the respondents believed that their lecturer's involvement motivated them to go to the writing centre. This is a good example of how lecturer motivation can influence student perceptions of the writing centre. Leibowitz et al. (1997) provide a word of caution, though: they are of the opinion that some lecturers were too eager to accept the writing centre as being able to provide discipline-specific skills (handing over the responsibility, so to speak), and that they may have also set unrealistic expectations for their students. Student expectations can have a significant influence on whether or not students make use of the writing centre, and whether or not they are satisfied with the services there. The next section provides a brief focus on some common student misconceptions of the writing centre, and how this can have a negative impact both on the centre and the student.

2.5.3 Student misconceptions of the writing centre

Although this section of the literature review falls under the heading of the academic and the writing centre, student misconceptions are included here since students can be seen as emergent academics, and since their misconceptions can often be linked to faculty or lecturer impressions of the writing centre. Student misperceptions are often written about in writing centre research. For example, Giaimo (2017) researched student perspectives at a community college in the United Kingdom and found that many students believed they could drop off a paper for editing at the writing centre (although this was not something the writing centre offered). Giaimo (2017) attributed these misguided student expectations to, among others, inconsistent staff training as well as the institutional culture at the college. Leary (2017) took a less traditional approach to his research and analysed student Tweets¹⁰ about the writing centre. Although some students expressed gratitude for writing centre assistance, a troubling number seemed to mock other students who consulted the writing centre, painting them as weak writers (Leary, 2017). It is possible that in some of these cases, the

¹⁰ This study took place before Twitter rebranded to X.

students were influenced by content lecturers who believed that writing centre consultations aim to help weaker students, perpetuating the much-maligned deficit view of students. Dison and Mendelowitz (2017) also identified some stigmatisation of the writing centre among students at the Wits School of Education Writing Centre, with students in a focus group strongly suggesting that these negative perceptions were perpetuated by lecturers. In a student perception study conducted at the UFS as part of my BA Honours research, one subtheme that arose from the focus group discussion was that students wanted their lecturers and faculties to provide more specific and accurate information about what they can expect from the writing centre (Nell, 2019). It is therefore apparent that students are influenced by their lecturers regarding writing centre use and expectations.

In a recent study at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Sefalane-Nkohla and Mtonjeni (2019) found that some students had a negative initial reaction to being sent to the writing centre, owing to lecturers going so far as to embarrass them in front of their peers by proclaiming that they have writing difficulties and must therefore visit the writing centre. Words used by the participants in this study to describe their initial attitudes towards the writing centre include “scared”, “sceptical”, and “waste of time” (Sefalane-Nkohla & Mtonjeni, 2019). Although most of the participants in the aforementioned study were positive about the writing centre after having received assistance, it can be inferred that the writing centre consultant first had to deal with misperceptions and negative expectations from the students, and had this not been the case, the consultations might have been even more productive. Such negative expectations might also easily keep students away from the writing centre and from the academic benefits that writing centre consultations are likely to have.

In order to combat student misperceptions and reluctance to participate in writing centre interventions, writing centres and the staff with which they collaborate often resort to some form of incentivisation. Some of the most common incentives include assigning bonus marks for writing centre attendance, making attendance compulsory, highlighting the benefits of writing centre attendance, and even applying penalties to those who do not make use of the writing centre (Arbee, 2020). Some writing centres use more creative incentives within specific collaborations with lecturers, such as offering an extension on the due date of an assignment for those students who used the writing centre (Arbee, 2020), or allowing students who went to a writing centre

consultation to rewrite and resubmit a text if they were unhappy with their original grade (Dansereau, Carmichael & Hotson, 2020). Both Arbee (2020) and Dansereau et al. (2020) also mentioned the importance of introducing students to the writing centre tutors in class, which made the students more inclined to seek help from the writing centre. Other researchers forego mention of direct incentivisation in favour of encouraging intrinsic motivation by, for example, creating a non-judgmental, safe space¹¹ in the writing centre rooted in a pedagogy of care (Namakula, 2024). The reasoning behind this is that students will seek out such spaces without having to be incentivised by bonus marks. Although incentivisation may be necessary in order to encourage students to make use of the writing centre for the first time, their experiences at the centre should ideally motivate them to return of their own accord. In a lab report writing collaboration with a science department at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, Dansereau et al. (2020) found that a number of students who had completed the mandatory writing centre visits continued to make use of the writing centre afterwards, presumably after realising the value of these visits.

2.6 The role of the consultant

Writing centres may have varying mandates and target clients: some centres cater to all students on a campus; others to specific disciplines or faculties; still others may support graduate students only. Some writing centres operate face-to-face, others online; some provide asynchronous feedback, while others promote conferencing with the student in real time. One element that most writing centres have in common is the presence of the writing centre tutor or consultant. Some writing centres employ postgraduate students; some employ professional consultants; some employ academic staff members in a part-time capacity. Whatever the case may be, most writing centres cannot function without these dedicated staff members spending time with the students. This section reviews the role of the consultant, in relation to the writing centre, the student, and the academic staff member.

2.6.1 Why consultants?

As mentioned before, the term “consultant” is given preference in this study, since it is the preferred term at the UFS Write Site. However, many writing centre practitioners

¹¹ Or as safe as such a space can be; see Clarence (2023) on the writing centre as a brave space instead of a safe space.

and researchers seem to prefer the term “tutor”. Writing about the University of the Western Cape (UWC) writing centre, Clarence (2013) explains that their tutors, who are all postgraduate students, were first called consultants, then writing coaches. However, their team felt that the best fit for the writing centre was “peer writing tutors”, which emphasised students collaboratively helping other students by drawing from their own writing experience. At the UFS Write Site, professional consultants are employed to consult with students. Some of these consultants are completing their postgraduate studies, and some are employed in other academic capacities, but these are not requirements for hiring. The Write Site does not make use of undergraduate peer tutors. Therefore, the term “consultant” was deemed most appropriate, with its connotations of professionalism and expertise.

Within writing centre research, some camps argue for employing peer tutors, and others argue for professional tutors. Gillespie and Kail (2006), in support of peer tutoring, mention some advantages associated with this approach: both the tutor and the student are actively learning and growing their critical thinking skills; tutors have useful institutional knowledge and share a discourse with their students that they can use to explain writing concepts; and students can turn the solitary struggle of learning to write into a mutually beneficial collaborative effort. However, some challenges come with peer tutoring: Gillespie and Kail (2006) acknowledge that peer tutors do not have specialised disciplinary knowledge and may in some cases mislead their students. They may also have complicated study schedules that interfere with their writing centre availability, and employing peer tutors usually results in high staff turnover as tutors graduate and new ones are employed and trained (Gillespie & Kail, 2006). It is clear from an examination of Gillespie and Kail’s (2006) argument that the benefits of peer tutoring are equally aimed at the peer tutor and the student, as both are still learning and growing, to a great extent. Published in the same book as Gillespie and Kail (2006), Strang (2006) lists 15 advantages of employing professional tutors, including the following: professional tutors can be experts in certain fields; students may be more likely to heed the advice of a professional than a peer; these tutors have advanced insights into the writing process, audience, and institutional requirements; professional tutors can pilot new ideas and approaches in the writing centre; and tutoring quality tends to be more consistent with professional tutors than peer tutors. Importantly, a writing centre that employs professional tutors may improve faculty

perceptions and expectations of the writing centre (Strang, 2006). Strang (2006) also identifies some challenges specific to professional tutors: they may slip into authoritative roles more easily, acting as teachers instead of consultants, and students may be more likely to ask these consultants for grades (something that writing centres tend to avoid, since they do not assign grades). Based on personal observation, another challenge of using professional tutors in a writing centre is that students may be too intimidated to attend consultations, since they view the consultants as authority figures and not as more knowledgeable fellow writers. However, the stance of the UFS writing centre is that the benefits of professionalism and expertise outweigh the disadvantages of an increased distance between the student and professional consultant.

2.6.2 The scope of the consultant role

Whether professional or peer, writing centre consultants do not simply advise on writing. A writing centre consultation may involve recognising the student's strengths and weaknesses; responding to the writer as a reader; providing revision and stylistic advice; and discussing argumentation, clarity, and style (Appleby-Ostroff, 2017). The focus of the consultant will vary slightly in different writing centres, depending on which theoretical approaches are foregrounded (see section 2.3 Theoretical foundations of writing centres), the writing centre mandate, audience, and institutional constraints. Appleby-Ostroff (2017) contends that, whatever the underlying theoretical approach may be, consultants should mostly employ non-directive strategies such as listening actively, creating rapport with the student, asking open-ended questions, focusing on the process of writing, and dealing with global (higher order) concerns before sentence-level (lower order) concerns. Rambiritch and Drennan (2023) also mention how writing centre lore (based on assumptions rather than evidence-based research) and tutor guides have encouraged non-directive, student-centred, minimalist tutoring with a Socratic approach. However, research has revealed that in practice, writing centre tutoring is often more tutor-led and directive, with a strong power dynamic present between consultant and student (Rambiritch and Drennan, 2023). Reflecting on tutor training and practice, Bell (2001) elucidates that while student-centred consultations are encouraged in consultant training, tutor-centred sessions are in fact

common, with 71% of the sessions he analysed being classified as tutor-centred¹². However, this is not necessarily a failure on the part of writing centres: directive tutoring may have its merits. Shamoan and Burns (1995) draw from the experiences of postgraduates, staff, music and art students, and students learning academic writing to postulate that directive tutoring has many benefits, and may result in better learning opportunities than non-directive tutoring, if applied wisely.

Appleby-Ostroff (2017) draws on a variety of other researchers' work to list qualities that should be present in a good consultant: they should be truly interested in helping students become better writers and be able to establish rapport. They should be patient and have excellent listening skills. Further, they should excel at clearly explaining complex ideas. At the UFS writing centre, these skills result in consultants being utilised not only in writing centre consultations, but often also as workshop presenters in various faculties and at various levels, depending on their background and individual expertise.

Various writing centre researchers have attempted to describe the roles inhabited by consultants. In a book on one-to-one conferencing for teachers and writing centre tutors, Muriel Harris (1986) describes five roles: the teacher can be a coach, a commentator, a counsellor, a listener, or a diagnostician. Thonus (2001) refers to different authors who choose to describe the consultant in various ways: as "not an editor"; as a peer to the tutee; and also as taking a teaching role by evaluating student work, teaching disciplinary conventions, indirectly teaching content, and commenting on others' pedagogy. The role of tutor is therefore not one, but a spectrum of roles between teacher and peer. More recently, Carlse (2019) applied the term "critical friend" (drawn from the fields of professional development, teacher education, and evaluation) to the writing centre consultant. According to Carlse (2019), a critical friend straddles the line between challenging the student's ideas and supporting them, with a strong focus on building trust to facilitate dialogue. In their discussion on different theoretical approaches in writing centres, Carstens and Rambiritch (2020) mention various consultant roles: within the current-traditional paradigm, the roles of remedial teacher, expert, rule-giver, diagnostician and evaluator; within the expressivist

¹² These were for conferences where students had already written drafts; interestingly enough, in cases where the student had only brought an outline or assignment instructions, only 10% of the sessions were tutor-centred (Bell, 2001).

approach, the roles of listener, counsellor and lawyer; within the socio-constructivist approach, the roles of coach, more experienced peer, commentator and activist. Rambiritch and Drennan (2023) acknowledge that the role of a peer-tutor can be contradictory; the consultant attempts at once to act as a co-learner with the student, and as a figure of authority appointed by the institution. In a study where they analysed tutor talk, Rambiritch and Drennan (2023) coded samples taken from consultations according to Vogler's mentor roles, and found that the three roles most represented were, in order of frequency, teacher (directive explanation), motivator (reassuring and encouraging), and planter (providing strategies for later use). It is clear that the role of a consultant is complex and dynamic, and may differ depending on the perspective of the consultant, academic staff member, or student.

Regarding these different viewpoints on the role of the consultant, Thonus (2001) conducted a perception study at Indiana University to determine different views on writing centre tutors. The students in this study saw the tutors as having higher academic status than themselves, but slightly less authoritative than their course instructors. The tutors themselves were of the view that they were "colleague pedagogues" (Thonus, 2001:68) and therefore closer in rank to the instructors than to the students (Thonus, 2001:68). Finally, most of the instructors or academic staff saw writing centre tutors as their surrogates, fulfilling an auxiliary role when the academic staff were too busy to assist (Thonus, 2001). Similarly, Lee, Hong and Choi (2017) found that instructors, students and tutors¹³ see the tutor role differently: while students and tutors viewed the role as academic and managerial, connecting the student and instructor as an alternative source of support, the instructors expected a more technical and less academic role from tutors¹⁴. Lerner (2003:66) also considers the opinions of faculty on the writing centre: although not specifically commenting on the role of the consultant, the staff members who completed Lerner's (2003) survey indicated a 4.9 out of 5 mean rating on a Likert scale question reading "I feel comfortable referring my students to the MCPHS Writing Center." This does seem to indicate a certain sense of trust in the writing centre tutors. It is evident that different

¹³ In this study, the focus was on tutors in the traditional (teaching assistant) sense, and not specifically on writing centre tutors.

¹⁴ Anecdotally, an experienced Write Site consultant once verbalised the sentiment that they sometimes felt like an "academic waiter", serving up writing structure on a neat plate, instead of being considered a knowledgeable and respected professional in their own right. This could stem from institutional / faculty expectations of the tutor role as technical rather than academic.

stakeholders have different views and expectations of the writing centre consultant. An important question to consider would be how well these expectations match up to the writing centre's mandate and to the way tutors are trained to see their own roles. This falls outside the scope of this literature review and research study, but may be interesting to explore in future.

2.7 Conclusion

This literature review has provided an important overview of why writing centres matter, touching specifically on the South African context. An overview of theoretical paradigms and approaches was provided and linked to the UFS Write Site in particular. The chapter then briefly illustrated the importance of an academic literacies approach before discussing collaboration and the challenges faced by academics, students, and consultants. This provides a framework from which the rest of this study will draw. The next chapter provides a detailed overview of the research design and methodology, after which the findings are discussed with reference to concepts and theories drawn from this literature review.

3: Research design and methodology

This chapter provides an overview of the research design and research paradigms. Thereafter, the participants and research instruments are discussed, including aspects such as validity and reliability, as well as limitations. The process followed to collect and analyse the data is explained in detail, and key ethical considerations are also included.

3.1 Research objectives

As mentioned in the introductory chapter of this study, the objectives are:

1. to examine staff perceptions and expectations,
2. to compare these to the current services provided by the writing centre, and
3. to identify a potential way forward for the writing centre and academic staff to collaborate in ways that benefit and grow students as academic writers.

In order to fulfil these objectives, a specific research design and paradigms were identified.

3.2 Research paradigms

This study falls predominantly within the interpretivist paradigm, explained by Kivunja and Kuyini (2017:33) as focused on “understanding the individual and their interpretation of the world around them” using a constructivist approach. However, it also falls within a secondary paradigm: the pragmatic paradigm. This paradigm is described as a way to understand participant behaviour, beliefs and possible consequences of these behaviours, and is often associated with mixed-methods methodology and value-laden axiology, or research meant to benefit people (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017:35). According to Kivunja and Kuyini (2017:35-36), the pragmatist paradigm was conceptualised specifically to end the mono-paradigmatic orientation of either a positivist or interpretivist stance, by choosing a pluralistic approach best suited to studying a specific topic. Hampson and McKinley (2023), however, caution that pragmatism as a paradigm may create problems in mixed research, particularly if the researcher is unclear on their understanding of a paradigm or applies pragmatism purely for convenience and without clear guidelines for research evaluation.

Pragmatism should therefore not be viewed as a license to conduct research according to the whims of the researcher.

Although it is still not common practice to combine interpretivism and pragmatism in the same study, there is growing precedent for this, with Goldkuhl (2012) providing an in-depth justification for and example of this within the field of information technology. McChesney and Aldridge (2019) explain the viability of employing a dual-paradigm or dialectical stance in mixed-methods research, and conclude that although not limitless, a flexible approach towards paradigms in a mixed-methods study can be recommended, as long as the researcher clearly states the paradigmatic underpinnings and demonstrates how these apply to the aims and objectives of that study. This particular study is especially suited to the pragmatic paradigm, since it aims to understand participant beliefs and behaviours, with the aim of turning this knowledge towards practical interventions. It is also suited to the interpretivist worldview, which focuses on lived experiences, strongly linked to the context of a specific study and to the participants therein (McChesney & Aldridge, 2019). As previously stated, this study is predominantly an interpretivist one, and is exploratory in nature.

3.3 A mixed-methods approach

Aligned with the interpretivist and pragmatic paradigms, as well as the research questions and objectives, a mixed-methods approach to data collection was selected. Such an approach “provides researchers with a greater scope to investigate educational issues using both words and numbers, to the benefit of educational establishments and society as a whole” (Almalki, 2016:288). This type of approach is best suited to providing data that can be analysed in various ways, opening the possibility for a wider range of discussions. McChesney and Aldridge (2019:226) explain that:

using a mixed method design can be superior to using a single-method design as it can: provide a better understanding of the phenomenon under investigation; overcome weaknesses inherent in either qualitative or quantitative approaches alone; allow triangulation of information; provide information that cannot be answered using one method alone; address different

aspects of a research topic (for example, both confirmatory and exploratory questions) simultaneously; and allow stronger inferences to be drawn.

They also contend that mixed-methods research is well suited to educational research, since it allows teaching and learning to be understood as complex processes (McChesney & Aldridge, 2019).

In light of the research aims and type of data required to answer the research questions in this study, a mixed-methods approach to data collection and interpretation is fitting. The quantitative aspect allows for data to be separated into measurable parts that can be analysed for average responses and percentages. This can yield helpful results that show trends and general attitudes among participants. The qualitative aspect of data collection can illuminate specific examples and instances of writing centre expectations. In addition, qualitative data in this study are well suited to thematic analysis, which can show overarching ideas present among different participants. The mixed-methods approach here is similar to that taken by Giaimo (2017) in his writing centre student perception study. Giaimo (2017) believed that while quantitative data provided short and generalisable conclusions, the qualitative aspect provided a much-needed narrative structure for his study.

This present study makes use of a sequential strategy of mixed-methods data collection, which, according to Holloway and Wheeler (2002) is the most often-used strategy¹⁵. In this sequential strategy, quantitative data (questionnaires) is collected first, followed by qualitative data in the form of focus groups. The two types of data are discussed together and related to each other in Chapter 4.

3.4 Participants

Since this study aimed to investigate the perceptions and expectations of academic staff at the UFS, the selected participants were academic staff members. The study was limited to academic staff members from the faculties of the Humanities, Education, and Natural and Agricultural Sciences (NAS), across all three UFS campuses (Bloemfontein campus, South campus, and QwaQwa campus). It was decided to limit the participants to three faculties to match the scope of the study and in order to facilitate timely ethical clearance. The faculties of Humanities and NAS were

¹⁵ Parallel and nested strategies can also be used, but are not relevant to this study.

chosen since there are already several academic staff members from these faculties who collaborate with the writing centre. Hence, input from this cohort could be valuable, since it is anticipated that more staff members from these faculties could see value in collaborating with the writing centre. Students in these faculties are often tasked with producing types of texts that benefit greatly from writing centre intervention; reports, essays, case studies, and so forth. The writing centre also collaborates in a more limited capacity with the faculties of Law, Health Sciences, and Economic and Management Sciences, but these faculties often require very technical and specialised texts from their students, and thus tend to make less use of the writing centre. These potential participants were therefore excluded from the study. At the time of completing this study, the writing centre had no active workshop collaborations with Theology. In addition, very few students from Theology were voluntarily making use of the consultation service, and so this faculty was also excluded. Finally, although no staff members in the Education faculty were actively collaborating with the writing centre at the time of this study¹⁶, there is much potential for future collaboration with this faculty. This cohort was therefore included, in the hope that their perspectives would shed light on the lack of current collaboration and the possibility of future partnership with this faculty. Sampling for this study was therefore purposive in that participants were intentionally selected.

For the questionnaire (quantitative aspect of the data collection), all academic staff members from the selected faculties were invited to participate in this aspect of the study by clicking on a link sent via email. Those who completed the questionnaire had the option to indicate whether they would be willing to participate in a focus group discussion, and to provide their preferred email address. For the focus group discussions (qualitative aspect of the data collection), an effort was made to invite participants from different faculties and departments, in order to have as wide a variety of perspectives as possible in each focus group. This aspect of data collection was slightly challenged by participant willingness and availability on the specified dates, but the focus groups still maintained suitable levels of diversity. Focus group sampling was therefore a combination of purposive and convenience sampling.

¹⁶ One or two workshops had been designed and presented for this faculty in the past, but these had fallen away.

A total of 209 respondents completed the questionnaire, and a total of 26 participants attended the six focus groups. More information on these participants is shared in the next chapter.

3.5 Data collection instruments

This mixed-methods study made use of a questionnaire, followed by focus groups, in keeping with the research approach. Morgan (1996) explains that surveys and focus groups are often used together to collect qualitative and quantitative data.

3.5.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire was developed specifically with the current study's research questions in mind. It was designed to collect data that could be used as a basis from which to interpret the qualitative data collected in the focus groups. The questionnaire made use of multiple choice, multiple answer, Likert scale, and the occasional open-ended question. The first section of the questionnaire related to respondent demographics. This section aimed to ascertain, among other aspects, a respondent's level of experience as an academic staff member and current employment details. The next section focused on student writing needs, including the text types and number of texts students are required to produce, as well as how challenging students find specific aspects of writing. The third section of the questionnaire related to the writing centre. It gauged respondents' familiarity with the writing centre, what they expect a writing centre to do, and whether they had made use of the UFS writing centre before. It also asked for respondents' level of agreement with several statements around the purpose, function, and effectiveness of the writing centre. The fourth and final section asked whether respondents would be willing to participate in a focus group, giving the option to provide an email address where they could be contacted.

The questionnaire went through several rounds of refinement, in order to promote reliability and validity, with input from both of the researcher's supervisors. A professional research analyst at the UFS Centre for Teaching and Learning also reviewed the questionnaire and provided feedback on removing redundancy and clarifying the wording of certain questions. This contributed to creating a single questionnaire that could be used for all participants across the study, increasing reliability (Wagner, 2010). A pilot version of the questionnaire was then built on the online survey software program EvaSys, where the researcher and some colleagues

completed it to ensure that everything worked at a technical level and that the questions were clearly stated and not open to misinterpretation. Both Wagner (2010) and Moll and Nielsen (2017) emphasise the importance of piloting a survey and reworking it based on pilot feedback to ensure validity of the research instrument. During the piloting, attention was also paid to how long the questionnaire took to complete, since extremely long questionnaires can lead to fatigue on the side of the respondent, negatively influencing validity (Wagner, 2010). After piloting, the final version of the questionnaire was built on EvaSys. EvaSys was selected as the platform for this research instrument since it is a trusted data platform at the UFS, and offers opportunities for data analysis that suited the needs of this study. The researcher also had some level of familiarity with collecting and analysing EvaSys data, since the Write Site regularly makes use of this programme for attendance, evaluation and feedback questionnaires.

3.5.2 Focus groups

The focus groups were hosted online on Class Collaborate Ultra, which is the same platform used by the writing centre for online consultations, and ran between November 2024 and March 2025. It was initially envisioned that the focus groups would be a mixture of face-to-face (F2F) and online discussions; however, logistical and practical issues necessitated a move to fully online discussions. Participants seemed more amenable to joining focus groups that they could attend by logging in from the comfort of their office or home. In addition, those who had other commitments directly after the focus group time slot could simply log out and leave. Since some participants were not situated on the Bloemfontein campus, this also made it easier to combine participants from the QwaQwa campus with those from the Bloemfontein campus.¹⁷

Stewart and Shamdasani (2017) listed similar benefits in their article on online focus groups: participants do not have to be in the same physical location and can participate from their home or office. The article explains that the benefits and social interaction in online focus groups are fairly similar to those of face-to-face focus groups (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017). Stewart and Shamdasani (2017) cite several research studies

¹⁷ The number of potential participants from the South Campus was very small, and none of these volunteered for focus groups.

to explain that technology has advanced to the point where social interaction and participant behaviour in an online environment can replicate what would happen in a face-to-face environment. The researchers even argue that cooperation / participation may be higher than for face-to-face focus groups, given the increased convenience it affords (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017).

The online platform not only assisted in catering to participants' preferences, but also aided data collection. Conversations could easily be recorded and downloaded, and the chat box features meant that participants could comment while another participant was speaking. The online format also enabled the researcher to share some guiding questions on the screen with a view to keeping the conversation flowing.

An online platform does, however, have some disadvantages: body language and facial expressions are lost, and conversation does not always flow as naturally and easily. Stewart and Shamdasani (2017) mention that the lower presence of nonverbal communication in online focus groups can limit the spontaneity of the discussion. However, for this study it was deemed the more pragmatic solution to host the focus groups online.

For each focus group, the researcher aimed to have around six participants attending, and invited multiple potential participants in order to find enough people who were willing and available in the suggested time slots. This proved a logistical challenge, and even when enough participants had signed up for a focus group, a few cancelled at the last minute or simply did not show up, as is often the case with such discussions. Most focus groups averaged about five participants, and the researcher ran a total of six focus groups to ensure the reliability of data collection. More details on the focus groups are available in Table 2, Chapter 4.

In the focus groups, the researcher led the discussions. In order to ensure that the focus group discussions revolved around topics relevant to the study at hand, the researcher used six guiding questions as key points for conversation. These questions were:

1. How would you describe the purpose/goal of an undergraduate writing centre within the broader institution / higher education in general?

2. What services should be offered by a writing centre? Do you think you or your students could benefit from any of these services?
3. How can the writing centre better facilitate collaboration and communication with your department?
4. What, if anything, has prevented you from making use of writing centre services in the past?
5. What would incentivise/motivate you to make use of the writing centre in the future? What could motivate your students to make use of the writing centre?
6. What should be the role of the content lecturer in a writing centre collaboration?

Using these questions to guide each focus group, ensured that similar topics were covered in all focus groups and that conversations generally remained relevant to the research questions.

3.5.3 Limitations of data collection instruments

Although effort was made to ensure validity and reliability in the data collection and to select research instruments that suited the type of data mandated by the specifics of the study, all data instruments have some limitations.

Despite all the input and piloting of the questionnaire, when the researcher started analysing the results, it became apparent that some questions had been phrased in a way that made them unclear to respondents. Most notable here were the questions that asked respondents to identify the average complexity, number, and length of writing tasks their students were required to produce. Since many respondents taught at different levels (from first-year to postgraduate), they found it challenging to select an average. In addition, the instructions for the Likert scale questions asked respondents to rate, for example, their level of agreement from 1 to 5. However, instead of containing the numbers 1 through 5, the answer options specified ratings from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. It is not anticipated that this would have caused significant confusion or incorrectly selected answers; however, small inconsistencies can result in frustration on the part of the respondents. Upon reflection, it would also have been useful to include an automatic disqualification if a respondent selected the “support staff” option, instead of allowing them to continue completing the

questionnaire. Finally, since this study was originally intended to cover the Bloemfontein campus only, the questionnaire did not ask respondents to identify the campus they are currently employed at, meaning that the data could not be split according to campus to see if respondents from different campuses displayed different opinions.¹⁸

With respect to the focus groups, the online platform reflected some limitations. As mentioned in the previous section, an online environment removes the aspects of communication that depend on body language, facial expressions and other nonverbal cues. It is also possible for participants to be less engaged in the conversation than they would have been were they in a face-to-face setting. Participants may be less likely to comment on each other's ideas if the other person is a name on a screen instead of a friendly face next to them. The focus groups were also limited in terms of time: they were scheduled for an hour each to accommodate academics' busy schedules.

Despite these limitations, the data collection instruments can be considered effective for the purposes of this study, and the limitations are not deemed to have negatively impacted the quality of data collected.

3.6 Procedures

In keeping with the sequential mixed-methods data collection approach, the first phase of data collection entailed the administering of the questionnaire. The researcher obtained a list of all academically employed UFS staff members in the selected faculties, from the Directorate for Institutional Research and Academic Planning (DIRAP).¹⁹ The first round of survey invites was sent to all these candidates in September 2024, via the UFS Research email platform. Despite over 500 potential respondents being emailed, only 11 people completed the questionnaire²⁰. Consequently, the researcher applied for an ethical clearance amendment that allowed direct recruitment and the inclusion of staff members from the QwaQwa and

¹⁸ Considering the small sample sizes, however, as well as the fact that different disciplines require different text genres, a comparison between the three campuses might not have yielded very useful results in any case.

¹⁹ This support service is responsible for, among other things, institutional information systems.

²⁰ It should be noted that staff receive many research survey invitations from this institutional mailbox, and may easily pick up a habit of ignoring these.

South campuses. The second invite was sent directly from the researcher's staff email to Bloemfontein campus academics in November 2024, and to QwaQwa and South Campus academics in January 2025, once all ethical clearance amendments had been granted. Unfortunately, this approach still resulted in only 42 responses by the end of January 2025. The researcher then emailed each potential participant individually, addressing them by name, and this resulted in a marked increase in questionnaire responses. The questionnaire link was closed in mid-March 2025, with 209 completed responses. Full questionnaire responses are available from the researcher upon request.

The last section of the questionnaire asked respondents whether they would be willing to participate in a small focus group discussion on academic staff expectations of the writing centre. Those who indicated yes were also given the opportunity to share their names and contact information (in the form of email addresses). A total of 89 respondents (43%) indicated that they were willing to participate in the focus group, while the remaining 57% (119 respondents) declined. Of those eventually invited to focus groups, not all responded to the invite emails, and some had schedule clashes that prevented them from attending any focus groups. As explained in the data collection instrument section of this chapter, focus group discussions were hosted and recorded in Class Collaborate Ultra. The recordings were uploaded to the researcher's Microsoft Office 365 account, where the dictate/transcribe function was used to automatically transcribe the focus group discussions. The researcher then carefully listened to all recordings again and corrected any mistakes in transcription. Following this, the resulting transcripts were uploaded to the Atlas.ti programme for coding and thematic analysis.

3.7 Data analysis

The completed questionnaires were analysed by employing descriptive statistics, in this case manually calculating the percentage of respondents that answered similarly for each question. The numbers and percentages were used to create various figures that visually showcase the relationships between different answers. These figures are included in the next chapter, which discusses the findings in detail. It should be noted that one of the 209 responses did not meet the sample population requirements of

being an academic employee, and was therefore excluded. The final calculations were thus all made working from the remaining 208 responses.

The focus group analysis followed a reflexive thematic analysis approach, as set out by Braun and Clarke in 2006 and revisited by Braun and Clarke in 2019. In their original article, Braun and Clarke (2006) described thematic analysis as a method in its own right, with the purpose of analysing, organising, describing and reporting patterns in data.²¹ They listed six phases that a researcher goes through in thematic analysis, shown in Table 1:

²¹ Thematic analysis is often misunderstood, or applied without sufficient attention paid to the process and assumptions underlying the analysis; however, it can be a solid analysis method that assists in providing deep insights if applied well (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

Table 1: Phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

As of 2019, Braun and Clarke preferred “generating” rather than “searching for” themes in Phase 3 (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This is part of their revisited approach to thematic analysis, which they updated to labelling “reflexive thematic analysis” in order to foreground reflexivity and creative scholarship over following the method “like a baking recipe” (Braun & Clarke, 2019:589).

In this study, the researcher applied Phase 1 (familiarisation with her data) during the transcription and careful checking of the recordings from the focus groups. Throughout the data analysis process, the researcher took notes of details that seemed meaningful or important. Phases 2 through 5 took place as the focus group transcripts were analysed using Atlas.ti v25, following a similar approach to that of Joubert and Clarence (2024) as well as Andrew, Schoeman and Botes (2024). The researcher went through multiple rounds of assigning codes to individual sections of text (Phase 2), refining the codes, combining redundant or related codes, and checking that all assigned codes made sense in the context of the discussions. The 75 final codes were then combined into 14 code groups. The same code could be assigned to different groups, which made it easier to show that some text chunks covered various ideas at the same time²². From the code groups, the researcher identified a number of overarching themes present in the transcripts (Phase 3), taking an inductive approach.

²² Individual codes as well as code groups are available from the researcher, upon request.

Three of these themes were considered relevant to the research questions and objectives, and are discussed and analysed in detail in the next chapter. These three themes are labelled as *Action*, *Communication*, and *Value* (Phase 5). The researcher looked at all relevant codes within these themes again, viewing them within the context of the conversations in which they were situated, to ensure that they do link to that specific theme (Phase 4). Braun and Clarke's (2006) phase 6 — producing the report — takes place in the next chapter of this study. In this chapter, the focus group transcript analysis also comments on what was described by Massey (2011) as *articulated data* (direct answers to questions), *attributional data* (data that can be interpreted to link to existing theories), and *emergent data* (new, potentially unanticipated information). This is accomplished by summarising, interpreting, and relating the data to various aspects relevant to the research questions and the dominant theories in the field of writing centre research.

3.8 Ethical considerations

All required ethical considerations were followed for this study. The researcher submitted a research proposal to the Scientific Committee: Languages, and after obtaining approval from this committee, obtained ethical clearance from the UFS General/Human Research Ethics Committee (GHREC). The ethical clearance number for this study is UFS-HSD2024/0606. Proof of ethical clearance can be found in Appendix 2. All amendments also received full ethical approval. The researcher also submitted a request for permission to conduct research to the UFS Authorities (see Appendix 3).

Email invitations to complete the questionnaire were accompanied by an information leaflet and consent form outlining the nature and details of the study, as well as information on withdrawing from the study, potential benefits, anticipated inconveniences, and confidentiality. Respondents were informed that by completing the questionnaire, they consented to participate in the study. An information leaflet/letter was also sent to the UFS Authorities (Gatekeepers), as part of the process of them granting permission to recruit UFS staff members for this study (see Appendix 4a).

For the focus group discussions, participants received a similar information sheet (see Appendix 4b) outlining various aspects of the study. All participants signed a consent

form as well as a non-disclosure agreement before participating in a focus group. Focus groups were hosted in a restricted organisation on BlackBoard, and participants received direct links to the focus groups they were invited to. They could therefore not accidentally access any other focus groups. The EvaSys subunit where the questionnaire answers are stored is also access-restricted.

All data collected and analysed is stored on the researcher's UFS computer, which is password-protected. Computer contents are regularly uploaded to a cloud backup storage. Respondent and participant details were anonymised and no participant can be identified based on information shared in this study. Where excerpts from focus groups are mentioned, the participant has been assigned a fake name. The researcher regularly kept in contact with her supervisors throughout data collection, to ensure that ethical standards were upheld throughout the process.

At this point, it is also appropriate to comment on my positionality as the researcher. As mentioned in the first chapter, I am a permanent staff member at the UFS, employed as an Academic Writing Specialist at the writing centre. In the interests of full disclosure, questionnaire respondents and focus group participants were made aware of this. Therefore, participants in this study most likely considered me to have an insider rather than an outsider position, giving me an emic viewpoint. This positionality may have been helpful in facilitating conversations with staff members, who could reference UFS-specific services and initiatives (Graduate Attributes, for example) without having to explain what they meant as they would when talking to an outside observer. I could also ask and answer questions from the perspective of understanding certain internal processes relevant to UFS staff. Conversely, this positionality may also have resulted in participants being reluctant to voice their full criticisms of either the writing centre or the institution, since they knew that I, as the researcher, also represented both of these. The emic viewpoint may also have led to subtle biases in my interpretation of data, since it is difficult to maintain an objective stance when one is directly involved in the subject under discussion. As mentioned above, the chapters in this dissertation were regularly shared with my supervisors for input on any such potential issues.

This chapter has discussed the research paradigms and data collection approach, linking this to the overall research objectives. Participant inclusion and exclusion

criteria were discussed, and an overview of the data collection instruments was provided. Finally, ethical considerations were included. This should give the reader a clear idea of the research design and methodology followed in this study. Now that the research design has been explained, the next chapter focuses on unpacking the results and findings as well as discussing various aspects that emerged from this.

4. Data analysis and discussion

At this point, a brief recap of the research questions may be in order. In line with the first objective of this study, as stated in the introductory chapter — to examine the perceptions and expectations of UFS academic staff regarding the undergraduate writing centre — the research questions were as follows:

1. Are academic staff aware of the writing centre?
2. What do they perceive the goal of the writing centre to be?
3. What would they ideally want the writing centre to do?
4. How does this compare with the current writing centre services on offer?

This chapter aims to link various aspects of the data analysis to these research questions. It commences with a description of participant and respondent demographics, as an indication of who the academics are in relation to this study and why the writing centre may be considered relevant to them. In keeping with a mixed-methods approach, the chapter then draws from the questionnaire data where applicable, but especially from the focus group analysis to discuss various aspects that emerged during data collection. These aspects are arranged around three key themes that were identified as relevant to this study, with a view to answering the research questions posed.

4.1 Demographics of the study population

In order to understand the participant and respondent viewpoints in this study, it is important first to establish the relevant characteristics of the study population. Regarding the faculties represented in the questionnaire responses (208 responses in total), staff from the faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences (NAS) saw the highest number of responses, at 98 (47.1% of total). The faculty of Humanities saw the second-greatest response rate, at 83 respondents, or 39.4 % of total, while the Education faculty provided 28 responses, or 13.5 % of the total respondents. This is visualised in Figure 2.

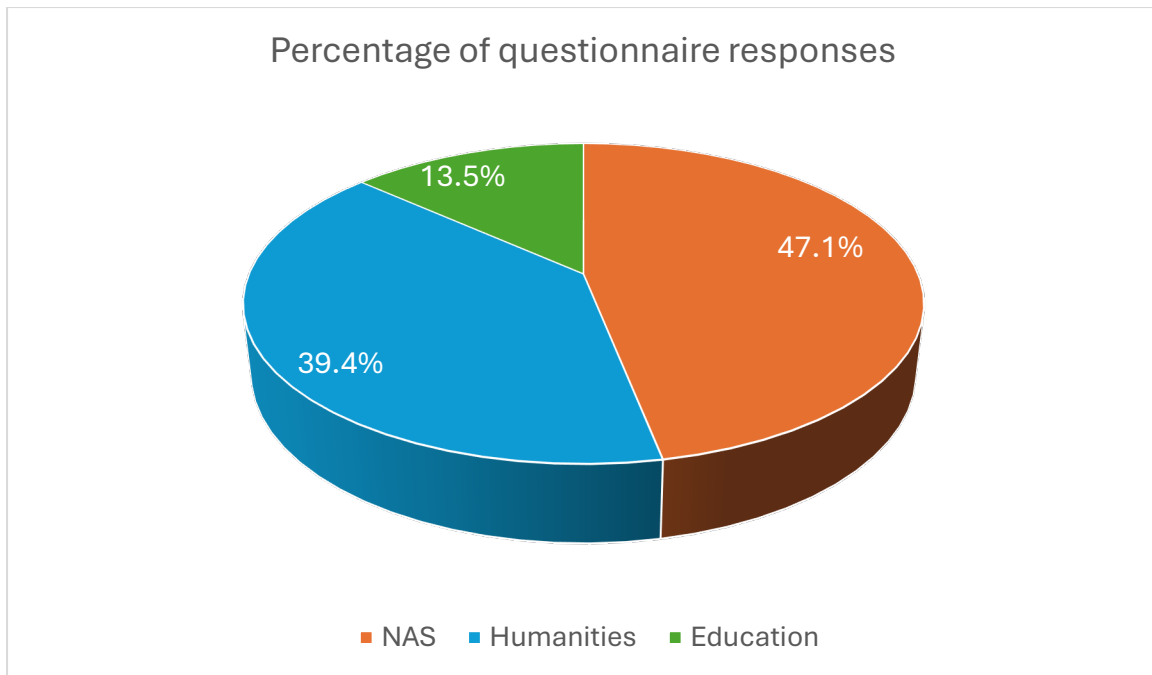


Figure 2: Questionnaire responses by faculty

These percentages are broadly in line with the demographics of the research population; out of the 586 staff members contacted, 13% were from the Education faculty, 33% from the Humanities, and 54% from NAS. Therefore, it seems that respondents from the Humanities were more willing than other faculties to complete the questionnaire, whereas NAS staff responded at the lowest rate. This is not surprising, since the title and description of the study, as set out in the participant recruitment email, does lean more towards the fields of Humanities and Education. It is very likely that staff from the NAS faculty were not as interested in or motivated to respond to a questionnaire so far outside their disciplines and fields of interest.

Various departments were represented by the respondents, with roughly 60 different departments named within the three faculties. It is difficult to gauge an exact number of departments, since this part of the questionnaire was open-ended, and some of the responses are open to interpretation. For example, it is unclear whether these four are the same department, or different departments: Mathematical Statistics and Actuarial Science / Mathematics / Mathematics and Applied Mathematics / Mathematics Natural Sciences and Technology Education. Another example would be Classical Music — practical / Music / Odeion School of Music. Some participants also refrained from sharing their departments, citing reasons such as anonymity. Be that as it may, the departments ranged from the natural/physical sciences, such as Physics and

Chemistry, to various branches of Education, to fields such as Art History and Sociology. This variety of respondent fields lends additional credibility to the data collected, providing a wide range of perspectives.

More than half of the respondents were highly experienced in higher education; Figure 3 shows that 118 respondents, or 57%, have ten years or more experience lecturing in higher education. Only 7% of the respondents had two years or less of lecturing experience in higher education. A large proportion of respondents therefore likely had the opportunity to hear about or make use of writing centre services in the course of their employment, whether at the UFS or another university. Even for those who are not familiar with writing centres, their opinions on student writing needs and useful support services are valuable as they relate to this study.

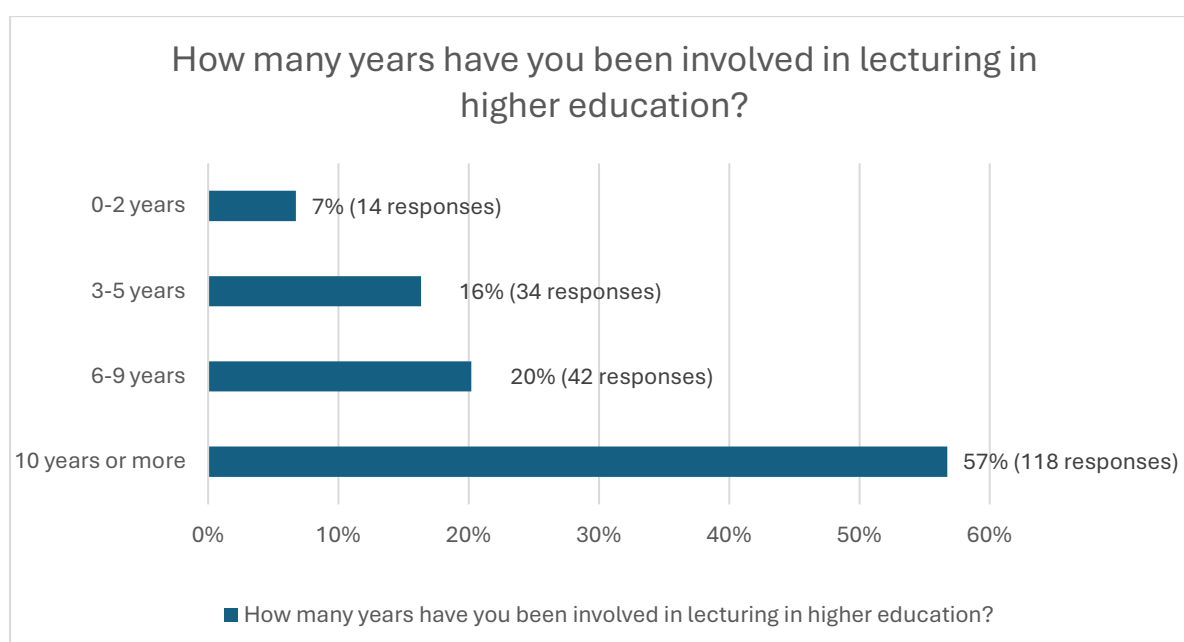


Figure 3: respondent experience in higher education.

Participants were also asked at which levels they had lectured within the past three years. In this question, respondents could select any number of relevant answers. While a fair number of participants were involved with undergraduate students (see Figure 4), the majority were involved with postgraduate students: 85% assisted Honours students, 80% assisted Master's students, and 56% assisted PhD students. Only a small number of respondents were involved with bridging and extended programmes. This may be important to keep in mind when analysing the respondents' attitudes towards the writing centre: the average participant may be more concerned

with senior and postgraduate student needs than with those of first-year or diploma students. Since this study in particular relates specifically to the undergraduate writing centre, some staff expectations may be more relevant to a postgraduate writing centre. However, most responses are likely to be applicable to both under- and postgraduate writing centre contexts. Many respondents have lectured at multiple levels, and not exclusively at postgraduate level.

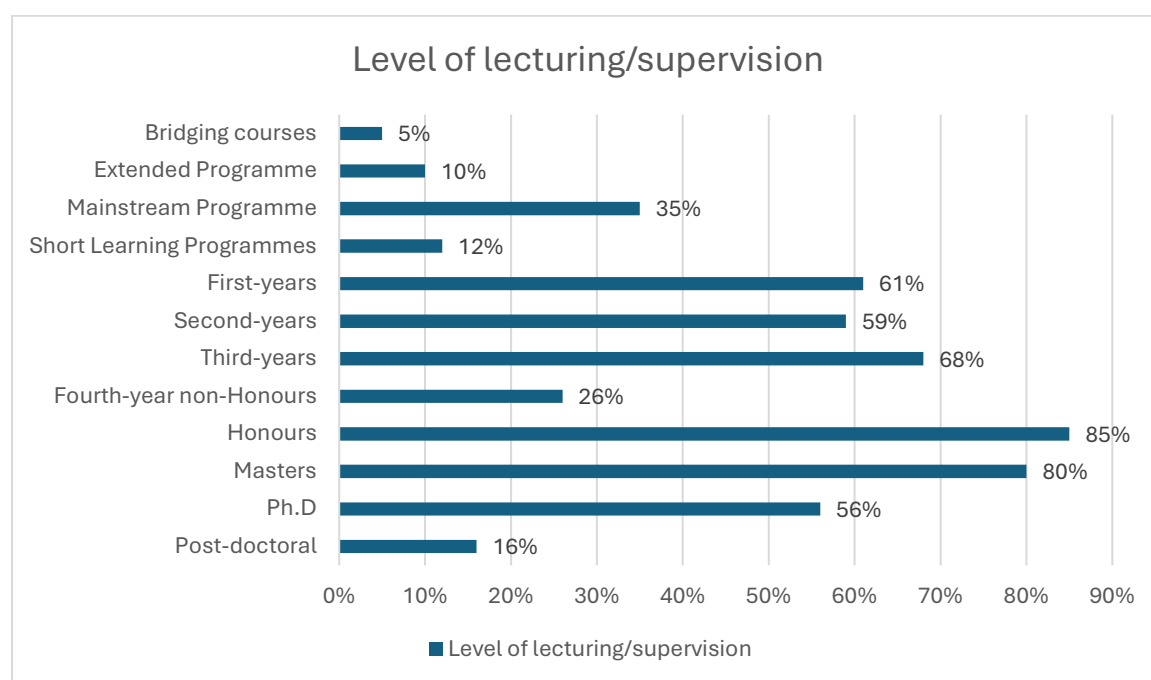


Figure 4: Percentages of respondents who lectured at various levels over the past three years:

One last aspect relating to participant demographics that was measured by the questionnaire was level of employment. According to the responses, 49% were employed as lecturers at the time of the questionnaire, while 20% were senior lecturers, 15% associate professors, and 11% full professors. The remaining 5% were made up of junior lecturers and one facilitator. These results match the high experience levels of the respondents; it can be concluded that the majority of respondents were experienced, senior academics having some contact with postgraduate students.

The focus groups featured similar participant demographics to the questionnaires. Twenty-six staff members participated in a total of six focus groups, with 11 participants from the Humanities, ten from Natural and Agricultural Sciences, and five from Education. The participants represented a total of 20 different departments, with 19 participants employed at the Bloemfontein (BFN) campus and seven located on the

QwaQwa (QQ) campus. Table 2 shows a detailed breakdown of the focus group participants.

Table 2: Detailed breakdown of focus group participants.

Focus group nr	HUM	NAS	EDU	Departments represented	From BFN campus	From QQ campus
1	4	1	0	English (3), Drama & Theatre Arts (1), Computer Science & Informatics (1)	4	1
2	0	1	1	Curriculum Studies (1), Geography (1)	2	0
3	4	1	0	Geography (1), Criminology (1), Philosophy & Classics (2), Political Studies (1)	4	1
4	1	2	2	Anthropology (1), Education Foundations (1), Agricultural Economics (1), Chemistry (1), Social Sciences and Commerce Education (1)	4	1
5	1	4	0	Urban & Regional Planning (2), Plant Sciences (1), History (1), Mathematical Statistics & Actuarial Science (1)	4	1
6	1	1	2	Education Foundations (1), Childhood Education (1), Zoology & Entomology (1), Communication Science (1)	1	3

When inviting staff to participate in focus groups, I endeavoured to have a diverse group present in each focus group, representing different faculties, campuses, and levels of experience. However, and as noted in the previous chapter, the logistical realities of getting groups of busy academics together proved a challenge to this intention; in most cases, the first round of invitees could not all attend, and others were asked to participate even if they represented the same faculty or department. Last-minute cancellations and no-shows also negatively impacted the intended diversity of some focus groups. Despite this, the groups were representative of academics with various backgrounds, providing a variety of perspectives and experiences in the conversations. Both the questionnaire respondents and focus group participants, therefore, can broadly be considered representative of a variety of perspectives, levels of experience, and perceptions from the three faculties represented.

4.2 Introduction to themes

As mentioned in the methodology chapter, the transcripts from the six focus groups were analysed using Atlas.ti software. After a few rounds of coding, codes were grouped into categories, and from there, various overall themes could be described. From the possible themes in which codes could be grouped, three were identified as being relevant to the objectives of this study, and these three themes guide the rest of this chapter. The three themes in question are illustrated in Figure 5.

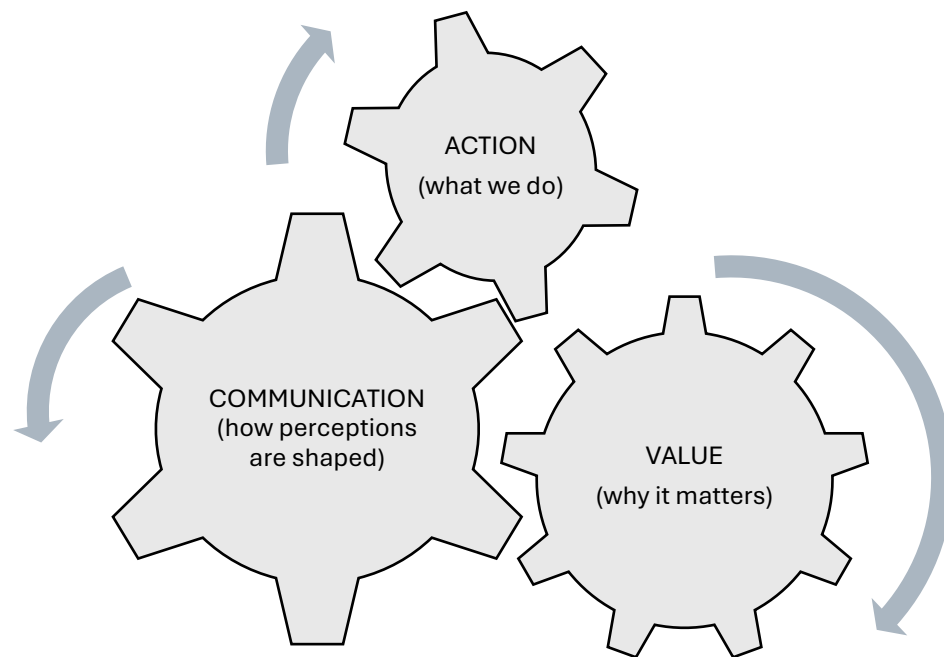


Figure 5: Three main themes regarding staff perceptions of the writing centre.

The first theme, *Action*, relates to what happens in the writing centre. This includes different aspects related to academic writing, as well as the application of theory and international writing centre practice. Theme two, *Communication*, encompasses different aspects of how writing centre perceptions are shaped, both intentionally and unintentionally. The third theme, *Value*, comprises aspects around the perceived worth of the writing centre.

It is important to note that while these themes were conceptualised based on a thematic analysis of the focus group transcripts, the discussion and analysis in this chapter draws from both the questionnaires and the focus groups, in keeping with the mixed-methods approach taken.

4.3 Theme 1: Action, or what we do

Chapter 2 of this study provided an overview of writing centre history, theory, and practices, as well as how these tie in with academic literacy practices. It was explained that the writing centre takes a discipline-specific approach in most instances (see Archer, 2010), with a focus on collaborating with academic staff. Consultants fulfil various roles, including that of teaching, motivating, and providing strategies for later use (Rambiritch & Drennan, 2023). The UFS writing centre's main services are individual/group student consultations, as well as various workshops (synchronous and asynchronous). The writing centre is also involved with a number of unique collaborations with different lecturers and departments. This theme explores aspects of what the writing centre is expected to be and do, specifically speaking to the research questions on whether academic staff are aware of the writing centre, what they perceive the goal of the centre to be, and what they ideally want the writing centre to do.

4.3.1 Basic awareness

Regarding awareness of the existence of the UFS Write Site, academic staff members seemed mostly to know that the centre existed, but were a little vague in their understanding of the core functions of the centre, apart from “helping” students with writing. The questionnaire established respondent awareness of the writing centre by asking, “Before completing this questionnaire, were you aware of the UFS undergraduate writing centre (Write Site)?” Of the 208 respondents, 174 (or 84%) indicated “yes”, with the remaining 34 (16%) indicating “no”. The general awareness among staff of a writing centre existing at the UFS, therefore, seems to be fairly high. This is especially significant if one considers the fact that many of the respondents are more involved with postgraduate students than undergraduates, and may be more aware of postgraduate-focused support services.

The core functions or perceived purpose of the writing centre were explored in the focus groups, where guiding questions included asking participants what they see as the purpose or goal of a writing centre, what services should be offered by the writing centre, and how they see the role of the content lecturer in a writing centre collaboration. The first answer given by many focus group participants, when asked what the writing centre does, is that it helps students with their writing. This answer is

almost obvious in its simplicity: by definition, a centre with “writing” in its title should focus on writing. In addition, most support services on campus are oriented towards assisting students, so it is not inherently meaningful that many participants assumed this. Either they genuinely had not given much thought to what the writing centre does, or they were uncertain how to explain their expectations of the writing centre.

What is interesting is how often the term “help” came up, as opposed to more formal pedagogic terms. To illustrate, the words *help*, *helped*, *helping*, and *helps* appeared a total of 93 times across the six focus groups, while *develop*, *developed*, *developing*, *development*, *developmental*, and *developments* appear 27 times, and *teach* and *teaching* appear 32 times. *Show*, *showed*, *showing* and *shows* appeared a total of 15 times, and *improve* (along with *improved*, *improvement*, *improves* and *improving*) appear 39 times. This study does not make use of in-depth word count analysis, and one cannot infer too much from this, but the overwhelming use of the word “help” does seem to indicate a perception that the writing centre exists to serve and assist. This reflects an extension of the unfortunate remedial view of students and of the writing centre (Dison & Moore, 2019), with staff doing the “real work” while the writing centre functions as the “help”. It is also reminiscent of the “fix-it shop” mentality (Janse van Rensburg, 2023) that sees the writing centre repairing broken grammar, in essence. The idea of the writing centre functioning as “the help” also carries the connotation that writing centre consultants equip students with skills that they can then go and apply to their writing in other contexts. While more writing skills appear to be a wonderful idea, the idea of decontextualised study skills is generally considered ineffective (Lea & Street, 1998). This reflects a lack of awareness of academic literacy practices that incorporate context, social situations and expectations (Archer, 2008) as well as the discipline-specific academic literacies approach taken at the writing centre (Archer, 2010).

Although the term “help” sets off some alarm bells, it could alternatively reflect a genuine appreciation for the writing centre as an important role player in explaining the “hidden curriculum” to students (Boughey & McKenna, 2021) by crossing disciplinary boundaries (McKay & Simpson, 2013). Lecturers are notoriously busy, so the word “help” could carry a positive and appreciative connotation. However, even if not meant in a patronising way, it nevertheless reflects a widely held sentiment that

the writing centre is an auxiliary or optional support service, providing “extras” not necessarily central to student writing development.

The fact that focus group participants struggled to articulate what the writing centre does is similar to what Lamberti and Archer (2023) found. They reported that although lecturers generally award high marks for good writing, they often struggle to explain what they see as good writing, and therefore struggle to clarify to their students what the expectations are of good writing, specifically good argumentation (Lamberti & Archer, 2023). Lamberti and Archer (2023:122) quote Lillis (1999) as referring to academic argument as “the institutional practice of mystery”. This general feeling among academic staff that good writing is important, while struggling to articulate what good writing entails, was evident in aspects of the conversations in the focus groups. It is concerning that writing, which is arguably such an important part of learning at university, is described in such vague terms by those responsible for student learning. This is once again a reminder that many academic staff members are also still in the process of growing as academic writers, and the role of the writing centre is therefore not only to assist students in growing as writers, but also to clarify staff understanding of their students’ writing challenges and how these can be addressed.

4.3.2 Students and text types

The writing centre is expected to help or assist students with writing, but which students should be assisted by the writing centre, and with what kinds of texts? UFS staff members in this study expect the writing centre to assist a wide variety of students with a wide variety of text types, speaking perhaps to the rather general expectation of “help” and decontextualised skills articulated in the previous section. When asked which target audience a writing centre should focus on, questionnaire respondents provided the answers shown in Figure 6. It is interesting to note that 60% of respondents indicated that a writing centre should be aimed at all students regardless of skill level, while only 17% indicated that a writing centre should focus on students who are failing. This could reflect an expectation that a writing centre can assist anyone in growing as an academic writer, instead of the remedial expectations that writing centre practitioners work so hard to cast off (see Carstens & Rambiritch, 2020; Nichols, 2017a). Such a view of the writing centre is an encouraging step towards understanding how the writing centre can work with students at any level to improve

their writing, taking a constructivist approach, instead of simply focusing on perceived deficiencies using something akin to the current-traditional paradigm explained by Appleby-Ostroff (2017). As explained by Janse van Rensburg (2023), the fix-it shop mentality is often applied to the writing centre by those outside of it. These questionnaire results partially seem to go against this attitude, which could reflect an improvement in staff understanding of a writing centre.

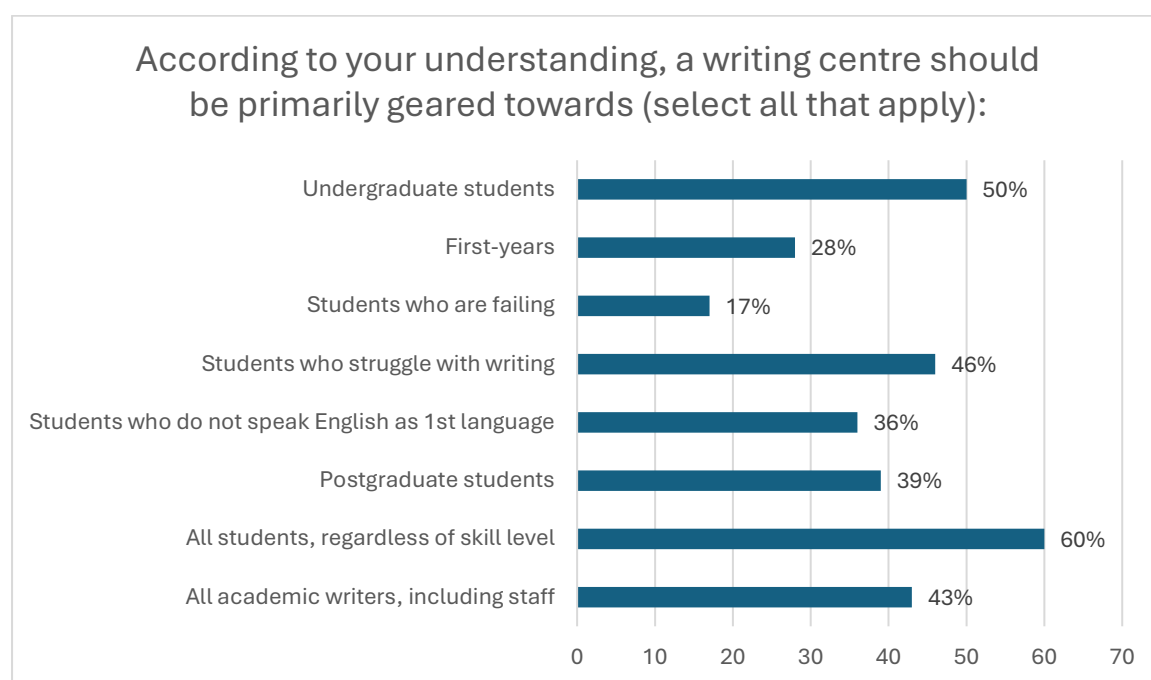


Figure 6: A writing centre should be geared towards...

Perceptions, however, are complex; there are parts of the data in this study that indicate a more remedial expectation of the writing centre. For example, 46% of respondents indicated that the writing centre should focus on students who struggle with writing, so there may still be an expectation of the writing centre being remedial in nature. Since this part of the questionnaire allowed respondents to select multiple answers, one person could select slightly contradictory answers, so one should be careful not to draw solid conclusions from this. Perception studies, by nature, deal with the personal views and interpretations of individuals, which may not even match the actions of those individuals (Struyven, Dochy & Janssens, 2005). It is therefore quite possible to obtain conflicting results that are difficult to unpack correctly.

Academic staff were divided around their expectations of whether the writing centre should help under- or postgraduates. In the focus group discussions, conversations did not really cover which students specifically counted as the target audience for the

writing centre. There were some differences of opinion around whether the writing centre assisted mostly undergraduate students, mostly postgraduate students, or both groups. This could be due in part to participants confusing the undergraduate Write Site with the postgraduate Write Space — a misunderstanding elaborated on in the discussion of the next theme, *Communication*. Questionnaire responses (see Figure 6) showed that 50% of respondents selected undergraduate students as the main target audience, with 39% selecting postgraduates. This could also reflect the respondents' own personal involvement with students at various levels of academia. The literature around writing centres and literacies does not generally differentiate between undergraduate and postgraduate students, but Boughey (2000) does specifically mention new students in particular as needing some extra socialisation into academic discourses. While undergraduate and especially first-year students arguably benefit the most from input around academic discourse and the hidden curriculum, postgraduate students are expected to produce texts and conduct research at a very different level, and can therefore benefit from another kind of input provided by a writing centre.

Still on the topic of under- and postgraduate students, another part of the questionnaire asked respondents to select Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, or Strongly Agree for certain statements. Some of these statements relate to the type of students that staff expect the writing centre to assist. A total of 195 respondents (almost 94%) agreed or strongly agreed that the writing centre is an important resource for undergraduate students. This is interesting when compared to the results shown in Figure 6, where only 50% of participants selected undergraduate students as the main target population for the writing centre. The difference in responses could be due to the phrasing of the question: respondents perhaps believe that even though the writing centre should not *primarily* focus on undergraduates, it was still an important resource for them. Another related comment asked respondents to rate their agreement with this statement: Students who are already competent writers should make use of the writing centre. This one received mixed responses: 109 (or 52%) selected Strongly Agree or Agree, 57 selected Neutral, and 42 selected Strongly Disagree or Disagree²³.

²³ These results are visualised later in this chapter, in Figure 9.

There is thus some disagreement on whether the writing centre truly caters to all students, as 60% of the answers in Figure 6 indicated.

These results provide insight into respondents' views on what the writing centre does, and who it is for. As expected, many respondents viewed the writing centre as important for undergraduate students. In addition, a fair number felt that students who are competent writers may not have need for the writing centre. However, more than half of the respondents believed that even competent writers could still make use of the writing centre, and half of the respondents indicated that the writing centre is not only aimed at undergraduate students. This perception goes against the much-maligned remedial or lower order expectations of a writing centre (Janse van Rensburg, 2023), showing that some staff do not only expect the writing centre to assist with more advanced writing issues, but also expect it to target students at varying levels of writing competence and academic degree levels. Much writing centre research and writing focuses on the undergraduate writing centre, perhaps because a postgraduate writing centre requires consultants to be familiar with the students' specific discipline and with more advanced knowledge around research (Drennan, 2022). It is thus interesting that the respondents indicated that the writing centre should assist postgraduate students as well. This is most likely due to the fact that many of the respondents worked directly with postgraduate students and were thus keenly aware of these students' writing struggles.

Regarding the kinds of texts that a writing centre can be expected to assist students with, the questionnaire responses once again provided an interesting range of results. The questions were structured more along the lines of which texts (and at which levels of complexity) students were required to produce, than with specifically asking which texts a writing centre should assist with. However, they provide an overview of the types of texts that the writing centre may be asked to assist with, either by students approaching the writing centre directly, or by staff collaborating with the writing centre in a more formal way.

One section of the questionnaire asked which types of texts the students are required to produce, with 14 options to select as well as space to add any text types not on the list. The results (see Figure 7) show that almost all participants selected

assignments²⁴, with literature reviews, research proposals, and theses/dissertations also well represented. This is in line with expectations, since many of the respondents indicated that they assisted postgraduate students.

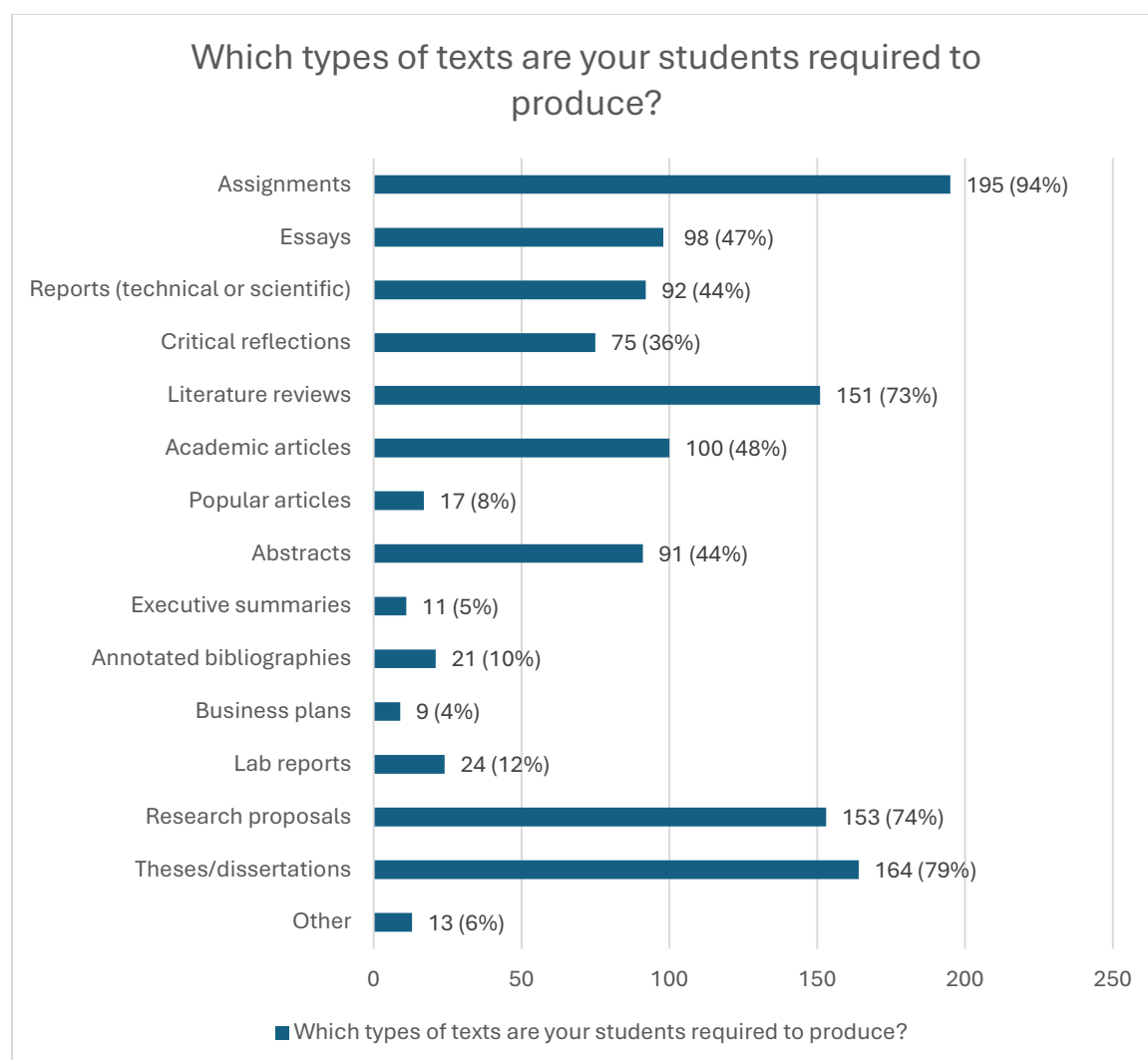


Figure 7: Text types produced by students.

The 13 respondents who selected “Other”, provided the following descriptions:

- Paraphrases and case notes based on legal texts.
- The Honours research reports. I am answering the questions that follow with reference to the Honours research reports.
- Scientific posters
- Project reports
- Practical work, like Theatre Productions and practical examinations like puppetry, monologues and dialogues etc.
- Music theory assignments in music notation
- Clinical reports

²⁴ It should be noted that the term “assignment” may hold different connotations for different lecturers. Some may use it as an umbrella term for almost any type of writing task, including a FIRAC summary or case study; others may take a more narrow view and see it as closely resembling an essay in structure.

- Weekly comprehension tests on undergraduate level; written summary of prescribed reading for each lecture on Honours level.
- Excel Farm Financial Model
- Marketing Plans
- Tests and other assessments required in order for a student to pass
- NRF Research Grant applications
- UFS Ethics Applications
- Practical Assignment, no text involved.

These “Other” descriptions demonstrate that there are definitely some task formats that do not lend themselves to writing centre input, including practical work, tests, and musical notation. These tasks are discipline-specific and technical to the point where the writing centre might not be the logical choice for assistance, or they make use of a format that does not benefit from writing assistance. Most of the text types selected or mentioned by respondents, however, are suited to writing centre assistance. Even scientific posters, although they contain a large visual element, still contain textual elements that need to be suited towards understanding by a specific audience.

This large variety of texts provides a glimpse into the complex and multidisciplinary environment within which the writing centre is expected to operate. The writing centre coordinators are required to collaborate with lecturers from different faculties, around vastly different types of texts, identifying elements specific to those texts and creating materials to assist students in decoding what is expected of them. Similarly, writing centre consultants need to be aware of the conventions of the most popular text types. They also need to have access to information on these text types in order to assist students in consultations. While the consultation approach remains the same for students from different faculties and with different text types to write, a consultant may ask slightly different questions and provide different advice based on the text type requirements. Consultants also need to be able to switch between text types from one consultation to the next. They take on this responsibility along with the many other roles described by Harris (1986), Thonus (2001), Carlse (2019), Carstens and Rambiritch (2020), and Rambiritch and Drennan (2023). Drawing specifically from Rambiritch and Drennan’s (2023) three most represented roles — teacher, motivator, and planter — one can easily conceive that it may be difficult to fulfil any of these roles without having a good idea of the genre requirements (and even the individual lecturer’s preferences within this text type) of that particular student. At the UFS Write Site, consultants regularly receive training and materials on various text type or genre

conventions, to prepare them as best as possible for the writing assignments that will come their way. Writing centre literature in general seems to focus more on the different approaches to a consultation than on the various types of textual conventions consultants need to switch between; this is something that could be addressed more regularly in the applicable academic publications. The literature does address the idea of writing centres operating in liminal spaces between different aspects of the institution (Archer & Richards, 2011); this understanding can include the various texts mentioned in respondent answers in this study.

In general, most of the participants required their students to complete moderately difficult to very complex tasks. Of course, the level of “moderate” to “complex” differs from degree level to degree level, discipline to discipline and even lecturer to lecturer. However complex the texts may truly be to a student or to an average observer, the fact remains that most questionnaire respondents considered their students’ assigned texts to be between moderately and very complex. Overall, this data tells us that academic staff expect the writing centre to assist students with writing complicated texts. In the questionnaire, when asked about text complexity, 57% of respondents selected moderately complex (e.g. essays, research reports), while 34% selected very complex (e.g. articles, dissertations). Only 6% selected not very complex (e.g. reflections, summaries, paragraphs), while 3% indicated that their students do not produce written texts. This adds to the conversation around what is expected of the writing centre: in addition to being aware of various text type conventions, writing centre workshop designers and consultants need to deal with complicated texts, often with very specific requirements. One of the best ways to assist students in developing writing practices specific to their course requirements, is to embed writing support in their subject areas (Drennan, 2022). Lea and Street (1998) explain that what constitutes good writing, may also vary not only by discipline, but even by individual lecturers. The writing centre practitioner can therefore not assume that the same text type requires the same components and level of complexity across different disciplines or even for different lecturers within the same discipline. While this can be considered something that makes the role of consultant or coordinator at the writing centre more challenging, it can also be seen as an advantage: operating from an “outsider” perspective requires the consultant to constantly ask questions around what is required (be it from the lecturer or from the student), instead of assuming that they

know what is required. This is similar to the collaborative pedagogy described by Moore (2023:167-168), who commented on how an “outsider to the discourse” can assist a disciplinary expert in making explicit certain ways of thinking and writing, which the expert may struggle to articulate otherwise.

The focus group discussions did not directly address complexity of student writing. There was, however, much discussion around the type of writing assistance that the writing centre could provide. Before discussing these expectations, it may be useful to consider the participant views around the specific writing challenges faced by students, since this may largely influence expectations on what the writing centre should address.

4.3.3 Student writing challenges

UFS academic staff in the present study seem keenly aware that their students face many writing-related challenges. In fact, they considered most aspects of writing to be challenging for their students. Since staff expect the writing centre to assist students with their writing, the specific writing challenges provide input on what staff expect the writing centre to do. The questionnaire provided insightful data on this topic. The relevant part of the questionnaire involved participants assigning Likert scale options to various aspects of writing, specifically to indicate how challenging students find these aspects. The five-point scale ranged from “Not challenging” to “Slightly challenging”, “Moderately challenging”, “Very challenging”, and “Extremely challenging”. Figure 8 provides an overview of participant ratings:

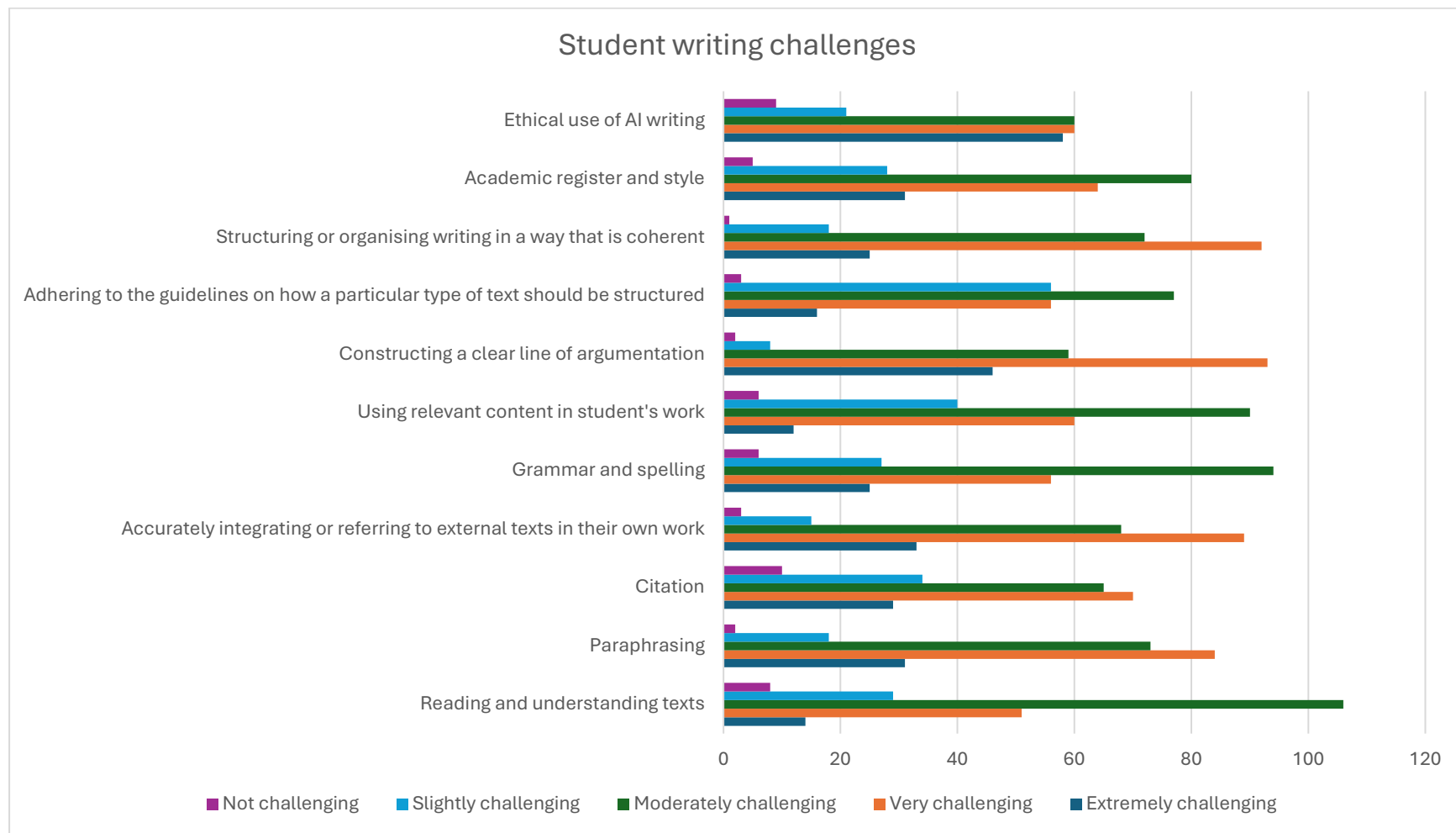


Figure 8: Student writing challenges ranked from "Not challenging" to "Extremely challenging".

Most of the writing aspects were rated as moderately or very challenging, with a few significant outliers. “Ethical use of AI writing” received the highest count of “Extremely challenging” ratings at 58 responses, reflecting perhaps the general sense of threat and uncertainty experienced by many academics regarding AI and large language models or generative software. “Constructing a clear line of argumentation” also received a relatively high number of “Extremely challenging” responses, at 46. Regarding “Very challenging”, the four sections that received the most of these responses were “Structuring or organising writing in a way that is coherent” (92 responses), “Constructing a clear line of argumentation” (93 responses), “Accurately integrating or referring to external texts in their own work” (89 responses), and “Paraphrasing” (84 responses). It is encouraging to see that most respondents focused on higher order writing concerns as the most challenging, potentially showing that they value these skills. This is similar to what was found by Drennan (2022) in a staff perception study, where academic staff members indicated various higher order concerns as crucial aspects that their students struggle with. However, lower order writing concerns are also judged challenging in the present study: “Grammar and spelling” received a total of 81 “Very challenging” and “Extremely challenging” labels, while “Paraphrasing” received 115 “Very challenging” and “Extremely challenging” answers.

The interesting point here is that most aspects of writing were judged to be challenging. This reflects an awareness that students really do struggle with writing, with implications that a support service such as the writing centre can play a significant role in assisting students with a broad range of writing concerns. Referring back to writing centre impact as discussed in earlier chapters, the writing centre has become known for improving students’ academic performance. Archer (2008), Tiruchittampalam et al. (2018), and Yeats et al. (2010) all found that writing centre input increased students’ marks for writing tasks. In addition, Joubert (2023) found that students at the UFS specifically have a much higher chance of graduating after writing centre consultation input. The writing centre, then, can be considered crucial to alleviating student writing challenges such as the ones outlined here. However, there seems to be a disconnect between UFS staff acknowledging the complexity of academic writing, and expecting the writing centre to address this in a limited time frame. This is similar to what was described by Drennan (2022) as lecturers misunderstanding the time and dedicated

interventions needed for students to gain fluency in academic writing, as well as what Janse van Rensburg (2023:103) refers to as a lack of understanding of the “laborious enterprise of academic writing development”. Although staff in this study label writing as challenging it can be questioned whether they truly understand the magnitude of writing challenges that students face. This is something that the writing centre practitioner will need to be mindful of when discussing writing interventions with lecturers, in order to manage expectations.

Continuing with the student writing challenges shown in Figure 8, the aspects that received the highest number of “Not challenging” responses were “Citation” (10 responses) and “Ethical use of AI writing” (9 responses). Although 10 is a low number considering the total number of respondents, it is interesting that citation was not considered to be challenging by some respondents, as citation is generally considered among academic staff to be challenging for undergraduate students. Respondents were potentially considering the citation skills of their postgraduate students, who may be more comfortable with this, or perhaps projecting their own citation skills here. Regarding ethical use of AI, it is telling that this category received both the highest count of “Extremely challenging” responses, and the highest count of “Not challenging” responses. This could reflect the range of different attitudes towards AI in academia²⁵.

Overall, the “Not challenging” responses were quite low for all categories. With Likert scale questions such as these, it is important to keep in mind that participants may not put too much thought into the responses, particularly with longer questionnaires that contain many questions. There may be a temptation to just keep clicking answers according to a rhythm or pattern, or to answer according to general feeling instead of careful consideration. However, the results should still shed some light on how staff perceive their students’ writing challenges. It is clear from the answers that respondents believe most aspects of writing to be quite difficult for their students, reflecting a potential awareness of and concernedness with their students’ writing challenges.

Some specific ideas around writing challenges did come through in the focus group discussions as well; the next subsections in this theme focus specifically on some of these, including higher order and lower order concerns, ESL challenges, reading, and

²⁵ The topic of AI in student writing is further developed later in this chapter.

AI. These are all framed within the understanding of what the writing centre can do to contribute to student writing, as expected by academic staff members.

4.3.4 Higher order and lower order concerns

UFS staff in this study displayed inconsistent views regarding the writing centre's role in assisting students with higher order and lower order concerns, as illustrated later in this section. While they showed much support for specific higher order assistance, there were also some unrealistic expectations around lower order concerns and editing. This also shapes the way these lecturers view writing centre consultants.

To briefly recap what was discussed in the literature review, the writing centre at the UFS follows an approach also mentioned by Appleby-Ostroff (2017) where consultants (and writing centre workshop designers) deal with higher order concerns (argument, logic, cohesion) before lower order (sentence-level, grammar, punctuation) concerns. This is a key feature in writing centre consultations; Gillespie and Lerner (2008) also strongly encourage this approach in their peer tutoring guide. Practically, this means that the writing centre practitioner often ignores obvious grammar issues and poor word choice in student writing, focusing first on the student's main argument and whether this is clearly supported to answer the writing prompt as best as possible. Once larger concerns have been resolved, the consultant can discuss lower order concerns with the student. Focusing on lower order concerns from the start may overwhelm the student, perhaps placing unnecessary emphasis on an aspect of writing that is not as crucial to understanding and communication as are logic and cohesion.

Academic staff have an unfortunate reputation among writing centre practitioners and researchers of ignoring higher order concerns entirely and telling students to improve their grammar in order to have better assignments. Grimm (1996), Boquet (1999) and Janse van Rensburg (2023) have all mentioned that many lecturers seem to expect the writing centre to function as an editing service, helping students produce papers free from technical errors. At the UFS, Write Site consultants are trained to avoid purely focusing on lower order concerns. Therefore, it is clear that lecturer expectations, student perceptions, and writing centre approaches do not always align. In the present study, this aspect of data collection yielded many points for discussion, from both the questionnaire responses and the focus group discussions.

The questionnaire data showed some meaningful trends. As illustrated in Figure 8 in the previous section, all the student writing challenges in this section of the questionnaire were deemed challenging, to some extent. However, it is interesting that constructing a clear line of argumentation was labelled mostly as “Very challenging”, while grammar and spelling were deemed mostly “Moderately challenging”. This could indicate an awareness of the importance and difficulty of higher order concerns among respondents.

A different section of the questionnaire potentially sheds more light on this. Figure 9 presents the results of arguably the most essential part of the questionnaire, where respondents were asked their views on writing and the writing centre. The questions were phrased as statements, with Likert scale answers indicating the level of agreement with the statements. The instructions read, “For the following section, please rate each statement from 1 to 5, with 1 being Strongly Disagree and 5 being Strongly Agree.” The options were as follows: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and Strongly Agree. For reasons of spacing and formatting, Figure 9 shows the full results from this section of the questionnaire, including questions that do not quite pertain to this part of the discussion. Later sections of this study refer back to other parts of Figure 9. It should also be noted that some of the questions from the questionnaire were slightly shortened for easier display in the figure below; full question wording can be seen in the questionnaire in Appendix 5.

Respondent views on writing and the writing centre



Respondent views on writing and the writing centre

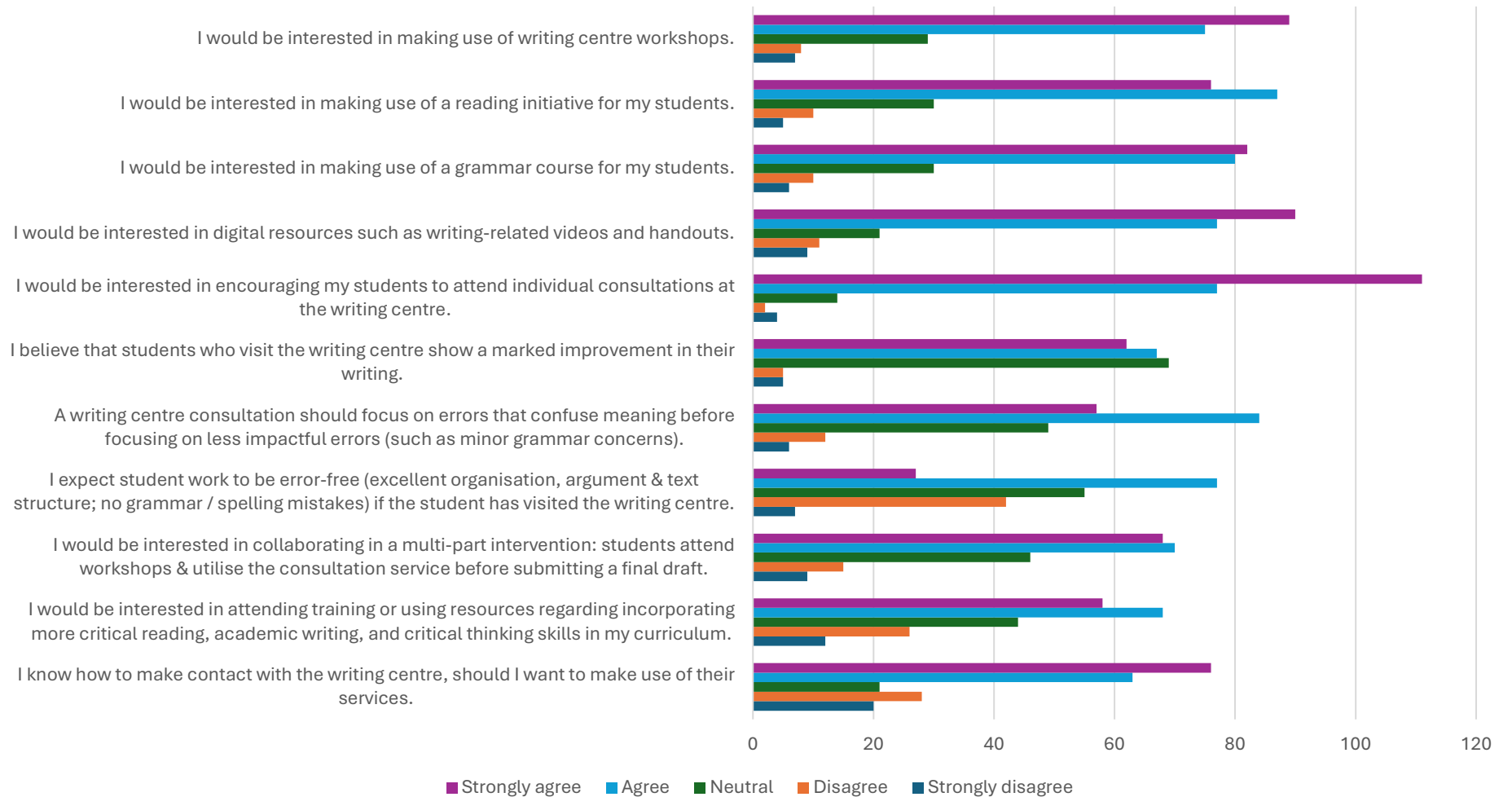


Figure 9: Respondent levels of agreement with statements regarding writing and the writing centre.

Overall, responses indicated that participants valued good writing skills and believed a writing centre to be a useful service. Responses were overwhelmingly situated in the “Strongly agree” and “Agree” categories for statements on a writing centre being an important resource, and that it could help students with both higher-order and lower-order writing concerns. Respondents also agreed that good writing (both higher order and lower order) is important for their students’ academic success, and a large majority (134 participants) strongly agreed that they want their students to learn through the writing process — researching, planning, drafting, editing, and so forth. Regarding their own students’ specific struggles, more respondents selected “Strongly agree” or “Agree” for higher order writing concerns than for lower order concerns. This shows an awareness of the importance of higher order concerns (argumentation, structure, synthesis), something that writing centres globally have been advocating for over many years. The lower response rates of “Strongly agree” or “Agree” when asked if their students struggle with lower order writing concerns may also relate to an increase among students in the use of AI writing assistants such as Grammarly, online paraphrasing tools, and the use of large language models to proofread and edit their writing. However, a total of 147 respondents did agree or strongly agreed that their students struggle with lower order concerns, so this is by no means ruled out as a key writing issue. Staff eagerness to indicate that higher order writing is important and challenging, and that the writing centre could assist with this, seem to contradict the concerns in literature that academics expect the writing centre to focus on proofreading and not much more (Grimm, 1996; Boquet, 1999; Janse van Rensburg, 2023). However, as mentioned before, perceptions are complicated and often contradictory. Perhaps when faced with a questionnaire that clearly indicates various higher and lower order writing challenges, staff can more easily articulate what their students find challenging, but when asked about writing concerns in a conversation, they default to “grammar” and other lower order issues for lack of academic literacy vocabulary.

Another statement that sheds some light on how academic staff think about the writing centre, is the following: “A writing centre consultation should focus on errors that confuse meaning before focusing on less impactful errors (such as minor grammar concerns).” As a writing centre practitioner, I expected this statement to receive overwhelming support — surely it makes no sense to focus on surface-level errors

before dealing with major errors. In fact, higher order issues often result in parts of the student text being rewritten, removing some of the lower order issues and potentially creating a whole new set of grammar concerns. A majority of respondents agreed: the “Strongly agree” and “Agree” options received 57 and 84 responses, respectively, which make up about 68% of the answers. However, the 49 “Neutral” responses, 12 “Disagree” and 6 “Strongly disagree” answers indicate that some lecturers may still expect a writing centre to focus more on proofreading/surface editing than on higher order concerns. This attitude was mentioned in the deficit model described by Wingate (2006), who explained that writing centre support is often viewed as an extra provided for struggling students. If lecturers are sending their students to the writing centre with an expectation that the consultant will ignore major argumentation issues in favour of spellchecking, both the lecturer and the student will likely be disappointed in the writing centre consultation, not to mention the fact that the student’s text will not be much better off than before the consultation.

Another significant statement was this one: “I expect student work to be error-free (excellent organisation, argument and text structure; no grammar or spelling mistakes) if the student has visited the writing centre.” Any writing centre practitioner (in fact, any academic writer with experience in growing others as writers) will know that error-free writing is almost unattainable, except perhaps after weeks of careful drafting, rewriting, input, and editing. Even peer-reviewed articles published in reputable journals contain the occasional typographical error or flaw. One certainly cannot expect an error-free product from an undergraduate student after one writing centre visit. However, 27 respondents strongly agreed with this statement, and 77 agreed. These two answers made up exactly half of the responses. Fifty-five respondents answered neutral here, while only 42 disagreed and 7 strongly disagreed. It is possible that respondents were used to clicking on “Strongly agree” or “Agree” for this section, and kept this up without thinking their answers through (this question was the 21st in this section of the questionnaire, leading to possible survey fatigue). But it is unlikely that a full 50% of respondents simply clicked without thinking. This has meaningful implications for the writing centre: staff may expect miracles if their students attend consultations, leading to disappointment if student texts still contain errors after writing centre input. This ties in with what Grimm (1996), Boquet (1999) and Janse van Rensburg (2023) have written regarding lecturers expecting the writing centre to function as an editing

service. Although there are certainly lecturers who understand what the writing centre aims to accomplish, there are still many with the unfortunate “fix-it shop” view (Janse van Rensburg, 2023). This alignment discrepancy has many implications for future writing centre collaborations and communication at the UFS.

The questionnaire answers provided an interesting baseline regarding participant views of higher order and lower order concerns. However, the focus group discussions provided much more depth and specific examples with regards to these perceptions. Regarding higher order writing concerns, focus group participants mentioned, among other things, the writing centre assisting students with argumentation, cohesion, coherence, structure, differentiating between text types, integrating sources, the writing process as a whole, understanding why they need to write, and critical reading of sources. Particular emphasis was placed on argumentation and cohesion, with participants being concerned about their students being able to express their own ideas clearly and coherently on paper.

I think what is needed or what I would expect the Write Site to do and what I do like the Write Site to do when I send my students there is to help with issues such as argumentation and cohesion and coherence, because those are the things that often I can't address in the classroom, so that is what I think help is needed with most. (Chipso, Focus group 1)²⁶

I think the purpose should be to help the students to be able to express their own understanding of phenomenon, issues, or to express their own idea in a way that is intelligible to their audience ... because sometimes when they write just like previous speakers have said you, you struggle to find meaning what they have written. Sometimes you may read the paragraph that is, that is about one page. And it will contain so many points, but it becomes a problem. So I believe a writing centre will be able to help them to put their own ideas together properly to shape it so that when others are looking at it, they'll be able to see that an intelligent person has really conveyed a message across to them. (Phumzile, Focus group 4)

²⁶ All participants provided informed consent, and were assigned randomised pseudonyms that bear no relationship to that participant's real name or to any other identifying characteristics. Gender-neutral pronouns are used to refer to all participants in this study, to maintain anonymity.

Chipo and Phumzile both expected the writing centre to assist by asking the important “big picture” questions. This part of the discussion took place very early in both focus groups, so these are expectations that they had before having the chance to be influenced by too many other perspectives. The guiding questions on-screen in the focus groups also did not specifically push the conversation towards higher order concerns.

Many participants also expressed the importance of students knowing what type of information should be conveyed in specific texts (for example, research reports or essays), and of students knowing what should be included, for example, in an introduction or a conclusion. Chipo mentioned the following:

... something like explaining what a problem statement is and why it needs to be part of an introduction and what a thesis statement is and why that needs to be part of an introduction and how the thesis statement needs to run through the essay, how it's kind of like the backbone of, well, essay or assignment, I mean it comes down to the same thing. (Chipo, Focus group 1)

Similarly, Faizel (Focus group 2) also mentioned when prompted about writing centre services that it is important for students “to simply know what to put in where, like what is an introduction”. Lerato from the third focus group shared how their students learned the difference in structure between a research paper and an essay by going to the writing centre. This made the lecturers in that department realise that they themselves had been asking for essays, while expecting research papers. This participant described this epiphany as “helpful” and “interesting” — something they did not expect from the writing centre, but appreciated. Text type conventions such as these can also be classified as higher order concerns.

A number of participants who expressed a desire for higher order assistance from the writing centre had made use of some of the services in the past, and may therefore already have known about the focus of the writing centre. However, it is nevertheless encouraging to see lecturers acknowledge the need for students to understand what they want to say and then link these ideas coherently on a page, using the appropriate academic structure, before focusing on their grammar and other lower order concerns. As discussed earlier, the questionnaire responses reflect similar sentiments:

respondents were in agreement that higher order concerns are important and that a writing centre can assist with this.

As noted in writing centre literature, academic staff have for many decades expected the writing centre to focus on lower order concerns such as grammar (Sefalane-Nkohla & Mtonjeni, 2019). Although not the only expectation in this study, the findings do indicate an expectation for lower order assistance. The focus groups provided input on this:

I agree with the fact that it should be on a an appointment basis and that the tutors or the assistants can guide students with with a like a grammar check and a basic proofreading. Just to help with sentence construction, with their grammar, and with spelling. Because I've noticed that spelling I think it's the new generation with all the WhatsApps and the acronyms for everything, and I think students and children don't know how to use a dictionary anymore. (Naledi, Focus group 4)

On my side, I actually echo everything that everyone has said has mentioned and to add I think the other purpose is also to improve their technical writing skills as well, like things how to use how to construct sentences like you know, like how you know a paragraph should look like, how to you make your your work neat and and it's basically to improve their writing skills, the skill itself and yeah, and everything that everyone else has mentioned in terms of, you know, language, writing and basically getting your voice across. (Quinton, Focus group 4)

It is concerning that these participants immediately defaulted to lower order issues when explaining their perceptions of what the writing centre should do. However, some of the other participants mentioned higher order concerns, so it is possible that those who specifically spoke about lower order concerns, were merely adding to a comprehensive discussion, believing that higher order issues had already been sufficiently mentioned. In addition, it is not inaccurate to expect the writing centre to deal with lower order and technical concerns; the danger lies in expecting this to be the main focus of a writing consultation or workshop. In most cases where lower order concerns were discussed, higher order and lower order concerns were verbalised together. This makes sense; writing is, after all, not neatly separated into various labels

and boxes, but is a complex and involved process. Specific lower order concerns that were mentioned, included grammar, spelling, vocabulary, ESL-specific challenges, formal vs informal language, editing, proofreading, formatting, paraphrasing, summarising, and technical aspects of referencing.

While most participants were in agreement on the importance of the writing centre addressing higher order concerns, they were slightly more divided on whether the writing centre should address lower order concerns:

I think, you know, a lot of people expect that they will send students to the Write Site and they will get instruction on grammar and spelling and and writing conventions and stuff like that. But I don't think we can expect the Write Site to do that. I think what is needed or what I would expect the Write Site to do and what I do like the Write Site to do when I send my students there is to help with issues such as argumentation and cohesion and coherence... (Chipo, Focus group 1)

But I also do not think that the writing centre's goal is to teach them how to fix grammar errors and and all of that type of thing because I think that's why language editors are there. (Anele, Focus group 1)

In Focus group 5, Vuyo explained that writing support should develop as the students develop: at the entry level, students may need assistance with “basic sentence construction”, but this may change to other critical skills as students progress in their studies. Those who mentioned lower order concerns were generally open to higher order concerns as well. For example, Rashieda in Focus group 5 believed the writing centre to help students across their academic writing journey, from structuring essays and reports to “assistance in language use”. In Focus group 3, Lerato’s expectations from the writing centre ranged from editing and formatting to helping students “understand why it is that they’re writing in the first place”. These varied expectations could indicate that staff are uncertain about what a writing centre should be doing. Alternatively, it could indicate that the respondents value the writing centre to the point of expecting many levels of writing support. It should also be noted that the nature of the focus group discussions was for participants to indicate their expectations of a writing centre in principle — their ideal expectations, not necessarily taking into

account real experience and institutional constraints. Therefore, participants were encouraged to share any ideas that came to mind.

Further on the topic of lower order concerns, a few lecturers did specifically mention the idea of the writing centre editing students' work. This is of course not the same as guiding students towards a better understanding of correcting their own lower order issues. This approach harks back to the unfortunate current-traditional paradigm (Appleby-Ostroff, 2017) which had a decidedly remedial focus (Boquet, 1999) and has been vehemently rejected by writing centres globally (Nichols, 2017a). Since the focus of a writing centre is generally on growing the individual as a writer (Miley, 2016) and not simply producing better texts (North, 1984), writing centres do not edit or proofread students' assignments for them. This is emphasised by Janse van Rensburg (2023) who decries the "fix-it shop" view, and by Boquet (1999) who compares this misperception rather scathingly to clients viewing the writing centre as a laundry where texts can be dropped off for cleaning. In the focus group discussions for this study, Gugu from Focus group 2 mentioned that the writing centre could perhaps provide editing services to postgraduate students. While this is certainly a need for some postgraduate students, the writing centre cannot be expected to fulfil this role. Quinton from Focus group 4 also verbalised a desire for editing assistance, mentioning "technical" issues and an expectation for assignments to be "looked over" at the writing centre. In the same focus group, Naledi explained that students should be able to make appointments for "a grammar check and a basic proofreading". The verbalised expectations for editing or proofreading from the writing centre were few in number, but combined with the 104 questionnaire respondents who agreed or strongly agreed that they expect student work to be error-free after a writing centre appointment, this does indicate that there are academic staff members (and by extension, students) who expect the writing centre to focus largely on cleaning up grammar, spelling, and formatting concerns.

The implications of this attitude among staff are that there is room for better communication between the writing centre and the academic campus community in order to manage expectations. Another interesting point brought up by this misaligned expectation is that there is a need for lower order and even editing assistance for students. This is especially relevant for the UFS student cohort, who are mostly ESL students. Whether or not the writing centre should be the place to provide this type of

lower order assistance is a potentially contested point. The proliferation of AI-powered grammar tools, as inefficient as they may be to the trained eye, is likely to satisfy this need to some extent, unfortunately at the cost of individual voice and student development as editors of their own work.

The way in which academic staff perceive the role of the writing centre, particularly as pertaining to higher order and lower order writing concerns, also impacts how they view the writing centre consultant. As explained in the literature review chapter, the writing centre consultant mainly employs non-directive strategies and asks open-ended questions to guide the student in discussing global or higher order concerns primarily (Appleby-Ostroff, 2017). Writing centre researchers have described various roles that the consultant takes: Harris (1986) lists coach, commentator, counsellor, listener, and diagnostician; Thonus (2001) lists a variety of roles ranging from teacher to peer. Carlse (2019) uses the rather endearing term of critical friend, both challenging and supporting the student. What all these descriptions have in common, is an acknowledgement of the complexity of the consultant role. However, those outside of the writing centre do not always share the same view. Lee et al. (2017) and Thonus (2001) point out that instructors or academic staff tend to view writing centre consultants as technical support, while the consultants see their own roles as more academic.

These conflicting viewpoints were also present in the focus group discussions around higher and lower order concerns: Quinton (Focus group 4) expects the consultant to “look over” the students’ assignments in a very technical manner (one can almost envision a human version of Grammarly), while Lerato in Focus group 3 wants the consultant to delve not only into higher order issues, but even to address the deeper philosophy behind writing, assisting students in understanding why they are required to write an assignment in the first place. This range of expectations from the writing centre and the consultants can result in varied kinds of communication between lecturers and the writing centre. For those lecturers who perhaps expect more of a technical grammar check, it may be necessary to adjust the way the writing centre communicates, or otherwise run the risk of the lecturer and students using the writing centre to “tick boxes” instead of seeing it as a potential collaboration between the writing expert and content lecturer. If lecturers are using the writing centre to tick boxes, they may be less likely to invest time in encouraging their students to make use

of these services. This can result in underutilisation of the writing centre, and in students missing out on the benefits of writing centre services. Lecturers such as Lerato, who expect the consultants to have deeper and more meaningful discussions with students, will most likely create student expectations that align more closely with what the writing centre aims to achieve, resulting in consultations where both parties are prepared to engage and participate.

The overview of findings relating to higher order and lower order concerns in this section, has shown that questionnaire respondents and focus group participants believe both these aspects to be important, and relevant to student success. They also generally believe that the writing centre can assist with higher order and lower order concerns. In some cases, the staff members expected too strong a focus on lower order issues or on editing. However, the overall expectations here were a far cry from the remedial view of writing centres in the past (Boquet, 1999). This shows some progress in the way writing centres are viewed, at least by those who were willing to participate in this study. One final takeaway from this section is that there is a great need for both higher and lower order writing support, speaking to the necessity of a writing centre from the perspectives of staff members.

4.3.5 ESL and multilingualism

Another topic that warrants discussion under the theme of Action, is that of ESL student concerns, coupled with the concept of multilingualism, since these are aspects that affect students at the UFS. Academic staff in this study mentioned these challenges and expected the writing centre to assist. Ideas concerning these topics came to the fore especially in the focus group discussions.

ESL-specific concerns were mentioned in five of the six focus groups. Lecturers seemed to be particularly aware of and concerned with the fact that most of their students did not grow up with English as a first or home language, and therefore the students may need more lower order writing support than may be expected for first-language speakers. For the focus group participants, ESL was often framed as a challenge negatively impacting student writing. Esmé from Focus Group 1 explained that their students are not first-language speakers, and therefore struggle with understanding concepts and stating their arguments on paper. They then specifically

asked if the Write Site provided ESL or EFL support. In the same focus group, Anele added:

I would actually agree with [Esmé] if there could be something because unfortunately, in our case, not as with a lot of other universities, I think 90% of the people that go here are not native English speakers, so it's very difficult for them and I see this in a lot of the assignments that they submit. And to my mind, I cannot penalise them on that because I mean, how can you penalise someone whose 4th or 5th language is English? So ja, something like to assist them to get that. (Anele, Focus Group 1)

Academic staff therefore seem to be acutely aware of the ESL-specific challenges, and open to considering the writing centre as part of the solution. Both Esmé in Focus group 1 and Gugu in Focus group 2 mentioned the cultural differences or nuances that ESL learners may struggle with when writing academically. This shows an awareness of what Nel and Janse van Rensburg (2022) explain as the invisible rules and ways of being, and what Boughey and McKenna (2021) call the “hidden curriculum”. In Focus group 4, Naledi mentioned that her ESL students specifically struggle with vocabulary, grammar and spelling. Zanele from the sixth focus group brought up the point that ESL students most likely use AI when they doubt their own ability to produce a good-looking assignment (with the unfortunate result of students not developing much-needed critical thinking and writing skills). Respondents therefore covered a variety of challenges faced by ESL students, ranging from higher order to lower order issues to academic literacy challenges. This shows an awareness of the complexity of the issue: ESL students do not simply face a “language problem” (Boughey, 2002).

As mentioned in Chapter 2, South Africa is an exceptionally multilingual country, and this can be considered a challenge as well as an advantage in the academic sphere (Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2016), with Joubert and Sibanda (2022) explaining that students see value for English as well as their home languages, but in different contexts. Regarding ESL students, there is some contention concerning the best approach in a writing centre. Cross and Catchings (2018:19) point out that the higher order before lower order, non-directive approach of most writing centres may “overlook the legitimate needs of students themselves” when it comes to second-language learners. Similarly, Williams and Severino (2004) point out that writing centres may need to be

more flexible with L2 writers, since these writers need more guidance especially concerning lower order issues. This reflects the same attitude as that of Blau et al. (2002), who explain that non-directive questioning may be very frustrating if the student does not yet have sufficient grasp of the language in order to arrive at their own answers. Another important point here is that lecturers often become frustrated by repeated grammar errors specifically in the writing of ESL students, and send them to the writing centre specifically to address this (Blau et al., 2002). In focusing on higher order concerns solely, the writing centre is, in essence, ignoring what the student came for in the first place. Blau et al. (2002:36) suggest that the consultant “interweave” higher and lower order concerns in their discussion with the student. There is no one correct way agreed upon to address ESL or L2 learners in the writing centre; the best that the consultant can do, is to assess the needs of the specific student in front of them, and assist accordingly.

The topic of multilingualism as an advantage (Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2016) did not emerge in the focus groups; participants seemed mostly focused on the challenges presented by multilingual ESL students and turned the conversation to writing centre assistance. As mentioned, Esmé and Anele asked whether the writing centre offered support specific to ESL or EFL students. The other participants also discussed ESL challenges specifically within the context of the writing centre assisting these students with writing. The fact that the participants also acknowledged the complexity of such assistance, can lead to the conclusion that they expect the writing centre to assist students at multiple levels, and believe the writing centre to be equipped for such assistance. This is a positive perception of the writing centre as a uniquely situated and well-prepared support service. The participants’ answers and opinions also align with the approach suggested by Blau et al. (2002), who encourage the writing centre to interweave global and local concerns as needed for the specific L2 student. South African writing centres should take cognisance of this and ensure that their approaches are in fact serving the students that visit, rather than upholding strategies that impair the efficacy of consultations with ESL students.

4.3.6 Unwritten rules of academia

As mentioned in the ESL section of this discussion, some focus group participants commented on the importance of students being informed about the cultural nuances at play in academic writing. See, for example, what Daniel had to say:

It would be very important to teach students about like the conventions of writing in like a certain field or discipline. You know, because there's every, every field has different, like, unwritten rules, pardon the pun about how they should and shouldn't convey information, so I think that would be very helpful because I even have like students in my Honours year who don't know that kind of stuff.
(Daniel, Focus group 1)

Esmé in the same focus group mentioned the “clash between cultural nuances in writing”. This awareness of the different and often unexplained ways of being in academia, is reminiscent of Boughey’s (2000) views on academic literacy as knowing the correct way to speak and act in academic discourses. It is also a reminder of Sioux McKenna’s (2010) tribal metaphor: academia can be seen as an exclusive tribe, with a well-guarded “tribal gate”, which often seems closed to students. In this scenario, writing centre tutors can decode the exclusive discourse, opening the gate for students (McKenna, 2010, as cited in Dison & Mendelowitz, 2017).

This topic did not directly emerge in any of the other focus groups, but this does not mean that staff are not aware of the hidden curriculum. It could be that the focus group participants did not consider the writing centre to be a place that deals with demystifying the hidden curriculum, or it could be that they couched this concept in different terms. Naledi from Focus group 4, for example, refers to soft skills that students can learn from the writing centre, without elaborating on exactly what this could entail. Many focus group participants used the term “skills” when referring to aspects of writing that students could be assisted with. This does not necessarily mean that they all believe in a decontextualised skills approach to writing, but could simply be a broad term used for lack of more specific vocabulary. However, it is telling that only one focus group discussed this crucial topic directly. This may indicate a need for the writing centre and even the institution at large to have more conversations with academic staff around the meaning of academic literacy, especially the ideological aspects (Boughey, 2002). Once staff are more aware of the invisible rules and ways

of being, as well as the power relations at play (Nel & Janse van Rensburg, 2022), it may be easier to see that academic literacy and good writing is more than a language problem on the side of the student. This may also affect staff members' expectations of the writing centre as more than a grammar hospital.

4.3.7 Discipline-specific and generic approaches

The unwritten rules or hidden curriculum discussed in the previous section ties in with the idea of taking a discipline-specific approach to teaching writing at the writing centre. UFS academic staff members in this study were divided on whether they expected the writing centre to take a discipline-specific approach.

In the questionnaire, 189 respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "Students' academic success is heavily reliant on their ability to produce coherent texts that follow the relevant academic text type conventions". This is a positive indication that academic staff value an embedded or contextualised approach, since they want their students to follow the applicable conventions. It does not quite speak to whether the writing centre should be involved in demonstrating these conventions, though. In the focus groups, there was some disagreement on whether the writing centre should take a discipline-specific approach or not. Some participants agreed, while others were unsure. Michael and Jade both liked the idea of the writing specialist working with the content lecturer to ensure that students receive instruction specific to their disciplinary conventions:

So I think a writing centre should be available for students to make appointments. With, you know, trained personnel who can assist students in expressing their ideas for various assignments or for, or even not for assignments, or looking for, you know, help with with various aspects of their of their writing. And I I think it's also helpful to have scope for lecturers to join forces with the writing centre and provide some more tailored projects whereby writing consultants are familiar with the intended outcomes of a module and can potentially help students to achieve them in their writing. I don't think that implies that the the consultants will know the content of the subjects because of course that that will be, you know, unreasonable to expect that. But I think there there are ways to, I think there should be some range between students just coming in at, you know, any around any writing issue for consultation and more targeted

projects whereby you know people in the writing centre are actually, you know, working with a lecturer to try to achieve specific outcomes, you know, creating effectively content together that could be used in tutorials or even in lecture to help achieve those outcomes etc. (Michael, Focus group 4)

... as you know especially like say for example the intervention for referencing. Now we have a specific type of referencing method. So definitely making you aware of it this you know instead of just doing like a generic thing. You know, making it module specific, so definitely the lecturer needs to be involved with the interventions that you offer. (Jade, Focus group 3)

Bridget, on the other hand, believed the writing centre was better suited to generic interventions:

I think because it's a an institution-wide centre where it has to cater for the institution generally, disciplinary specificity is something that perhaps should take a backseat to generic writing conventions. Whatever they may be, that's quite a massive extrapolation to generic principles, but the point is that. I imagine that, you know, 90% of the students, to give a random figure, of the students that come to you for help are outside your field. So it's probably safest to steer away from sort of making discipline-specific corrections or giving discipline-specific advice. Because this might actually not be within the wheelhouse of the specific facilitator. So I think the point is simply that it has to be kind of global in its approach and it looks at macro features of good writing across the board rather than discipline-specific elements. (Bridget, Focus group 1)

A few other respondents sided with this viewpoint: Anele and Chipso from Focus group 1 agreed with Bridget that the writing centre could focus on generic or macro-level writing principles instead of discipline-specific input. Naledi from Focus group 4 also wanted the writing centre to focus on basic writing skills, since this is what their students struggle with. Other focus group participants who had an opinion on discipline-specific writing seemed to agree with Jade and Michael in valuing at least some level of disciplinary collaboration between the writing centre and the content lecturer. For example, Faizel from Focus group 2 specifically mentioned appreciating

that the writing centre interventions can be “custom-made for each department and/or module”.

The focus group conversations did not really distinguish between different writing centre services, such as consultations and workshops, so it is possible that some of those who were concerned about discipline-specific approaches were concerned mostly about whether all writing centre consultants from diverse backgrounds would be able to provide quality disciplinary input. It is also quite possible that some participants conflated the idea of discipline-specific interventions with content teaching. If the writing centre were to attempt lectures on content within specific faculties that would be a matter of concern.

Aside from these possibilities, it still seems that some participants did not want discipline-specific assistance from the writing centre, which opens the question as to whether some lecturers still hold to the generic “skills” approach to teaching writing. Throughout the focus groups, participants regularly used the word “skills” to refer to what they wanted students to learn, in combination with very passive or remedial phrases revolving around the writing centre helping students to learn these skills. This reflects a lack of understanding of the difference between skills and practices (Archer, 2008). It can also be interpreted as a conflation of literacy skills development and language proficiency development, with staff members seeing language proficiency and academic literacy as the same thing. This is similar to what was found in a study by Julius et al. (2024), who reported that even academic support courses at universities tend to teach and assess autonomous language skills instead of the complexities of academic literacy.

As Boughey and McKenna (2021) explain, academic staff may be unaware of the extent to which certain academic rules and conventions should be clarified and explained to students, since these unwritten rules become second nature to those who have spent some time in academia. Students need this epistemological access in order to succeed at university (Boughey, 2007). One of the most successful ways to provide students with access to this type of academic knowledge, is through a discipline-specific literacies approach, as illustrated in the writing centre by Archer (2010). Wingate (2006) refers to this as a “built-in” or embedded model over a “bolt-

on” or generic approach. Much has been written about the importance of a discipline-specific approach in the field of academic literacy and writing centre research.

As explained in Chapter 2 of this study, the UFS Write Site takes an academic literacies approach, focusing on contextualised practices to guide students into the ways of being required from them. Therefore, consultations and workshops take a discipline-specific approach. There are, however, some instances where the Write Site does provide generic writing workshops. This is mainly in cases where there is not enough time to develop a discipline-specific intervention. For the most part, the focus is on developing good writing practices over decontextualised skills, which are not as transferable and universally applicable as some may think (see Evans-Tokaryk and Shabanza, 2022).

Based on the findings in this study, it is clear that academic staff are quite divided on the topic of discipline-specific approaches. Those who expect more generic assistance from the writing centre may be disappointed if they reach out for writing interventions. It is to be hoped that clear communication around the intricacies of students being inducted into disciplinary communities will encourage these lecturers to adapt their stance. On the positive side, some lecturers were favourably disposed towards the notion of tailor-made, discipline-specific interventions. This bodes well for the efficacy of future writing centre collaborations with these lecturers.

4.3.8 Reading

Another aspect that came to the fore during discussions relating to what staff expect the writing centre to assist with was the topic of reading. This was framed as an urgent and growing challenge for students. In the focus group discussions, participants seemed concerned that students could not be expected to write if they could not read critically and for understanding:

I think in many cases before we can get to the writing part, I think we also need to address the reading. Students don't know how to read. They don't understand what they're reading. And I don't know how to address that, and I don't even know if this is the correct forum to raise that issue. But we need to get students to read and to understand what they're reading. (Hannah, Focus group 3)

But I maintain the idea that if on the list of services that are offered by the writing centre if reading it can be one of the services, it can work. Allow me to stress why I'm of this idea, because now I do believe that students they don't know how to read with meaning, and then they don't know how to summarise what they are reading. And then they don't know how to pick important points as they are reading. Because I do believe that you cannot write if you did not read.
(Owen, Focus group 4)

Focus group participants agreed that reading was a problem, but were unsure as to whether the writing centre was the correct platform to address this. In Focus group 6, Willem asked whether the writing centre could provide reading workshops along with writing-focused sessions. In the same focus group, Xolani and Yasmin practically competed to explain how much their students struggle with reading for understanding, and how important they considered this skill. Rashieda from Focus group 5 also asked whether the writing centre could provide extensive reading services. In the third focus group, Jade lamented that students did not seem to have any desire or motivation to read, and Imraan agreed that there was not a strong reading culture among students. Imraan however verbalised that they did not expect the writing centre to necessarily have the solution to this, since it was a complex issue. Various other participants also mentioned the importance of reading as they discussed other aspects that their students find challenging.

This concern over students' [lack of] reading practices is a topic that often arises among academic staff not only at the UFS, but also at other universities, as evidenced by conversations at conferences and presentations. It also links back to the worrying state of reading for meaning in schools in South Africa, as explained in the Spaull (2023) reading report, as well as resistance to reading among certain groups of university students, as explained by O'Shea et al. (2019) in Chapter 2.

In the questionnaire for this study, 163 respondents selected "Agree" or "Strongly agree" when asked whether they would be interested in a reading initiative for their students (see Figure 9 in section 4.3.4). In the section on student writing challenges (see Figure 8 in section 4.3.3), "Reading and understanding texts" was rated by only 37 of the 208 respondents as "Not Challenging" or "Slightly Challenging". "Very Challenging" and "Extremely Challenging" was selected by 65 participants, while the

remaining 106 respondents indicated reading to be “Moderately Challenging” for their students. It can thus be surmised that academic staff are aware of and concerned about the state of their students’ reading.

There are varying perspectives among researchers and academic literacy practitioners regarding the relationship between reading and writing. Hodges, Feng, Kuo and McTigue (2016) draw from educational research to explain that reading and writing are complementary, and are often included together in classroom instruction. They list a variety of theories that can be applied to both reading and writing (for example, construction-integration theory), but also acknowledge that many theoretical perspectives still consider reading and writing as separate skillsets (Hodges et al., 2016). Hodges et al. (2016) strongly conclude that reading and writing should not be separated when instructing students or learners, since each can be used as a tool to inform the other. Writing from an academic literacy instruction perspective at the University of Zululand, Khumalo and Maphalala (2018) also view reading and writing as complex but important aspects that carry equal importance. Khumalo and Maphalala (2018) make reference to various theoretical perspectives around reading and writing, acknowledging that a number of researchers consider writing to be more important than reading, but reminding their readers that the two are both extremely important. This also seems to be the view of the participants in this study, who expressed an awareness of the importance of reading although they may not be familiar with all the educational theories surrounding reading and writing.

Writing centres, as can be surmised by considering their designations, generally focus on writing skills rather than reading instruction. The UFS writing centre is no exception, with only about 15% of workshops in the second semester of 2025 containing content relating to reading skills. In these workshops, the approach taken is to equip students with practical tips on reading; for example, making them aware of pre-, while- and post-reading strategies, explaining the SQ3R²⁷ strategy, etc. Write Site workshops also tend to make use of exemplar texts, which students read and analyse together under guidance from the presenter to see how these texts can be used as examples for structuring the students’ own writing. While these reading aspects of the workshops are not explicitly linked to any particular model, there are similarities between the

²⁷ Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and Review.

reading activities and Freebody and Luke's (1990) Four Resource Model. This model is explained by Enriquez, Jones and Clarke (2010) as equipping students with the skills of code breaking, meaning making, text using, and text analysing. Since the UFS writing centre aims to include more reading practices in future workshops, it is advisable that the workshop designers consider available reading models and theories and decide on a uniform, official approach in order to ensure clear and aligned future materials.

Reading is a complicated practice to acquire, and writing centre workshops unfortunately cannot provide in-depth instruction in the limited time allotted. In the writing centre consultations, reading is almost never addressed; consultants may spend a few minutes on unpacking assignment instructions with a student, but the conversations are structured around student writing specifically, with the expectation that students will do the required reading in their own time. Write Site consultants are not currently trained to provide reading assistance to students.

Academic staff in this study were inclined to turn to the writing centre to assist with reading as well as writing. As discussed, reading interventions have not been the main focus at the UFS writing centre. However, with the advent of generative AI, students' abilities to critically read and evaluate texts (including the results of their own prompts) are more important than ever. Therefore, the UFS writing centre should (and is planning to) invest in more reading-focused initiatives in future.²⁸

Apart from commenting on the dire state of reading skills among students, these comments and concerns from participants regarding student reading also illuminate once again how staff view the writing centre as an integral part of the institution and as a support service that can be expected to assist both lecturers and students with various aspects of academic support adjacent to writing.

4.3.9 Artificial Intelligence (AI)

The purpose of this study was to examine staff expectations of the writing centre. As such, the topic of artificial intelligence (AI) was not central to the questions asked. However, with AI becoming such a large part of the way knowledge and writing are

²⁸ The writing centre may have to consider whether there is another focus area or initiative at the institution that is better suited or mandated to provide reading support, and then collaborate with or refer students to this initiative if needed.

processed by staff, students, and industry alike, it was almost inevitable that the topic would arise in some form. This topic is included under the *Action* theme since staff discussed the topic with expectations that the writing centre take a stance and provide advice or support on this.

The questionnaire contained one question regarding AI. This was shown in Figure 8 earlier in this chapter. As previously mentioned, the statement on ethical use of AI received both the highest count of “Extremely challenging” responses, and the highest count of “Not challenging” responses in that section. Since unethical use of AI is a relatively new challenge to academia, this could reflect staff members’ uncertainty or own perceptions of AI as a challenge to student writing (or it could reflect that certain cohorts of students genuinely do struggle with this, while others do not, according to these lecturers’ perceptions).

While the questionnaire did not yield much information around ethical use of AI, this topic consistently and spontaneously came up in all six focus groups, being mentioned 15 different times across the focus group. Artificial intelligence was not mentioned at all in the guiding questions used to keep the focus groups on track, but in each focus group, at least one participant brought up the topic of their own accord. Participants generally seemed quite concerned about the negative impact that AI could have on student writing and thinking. This reflects a larger sense of concern among academia around the topic of AI:

So I believe that students who use I mean AI is because they just want to, you know, get a quick way of producing a very good-looking assignment, but I believe and because of our graduate — the university’s graduate attributes such as students should learn, you know, develop writing skills and critical thinking skills, and AI might actually, you know, hinder... students using AI might hinder them from learning or acquiring those skills. (Zanele, Focus Group 6)

So I think one of the things that I would probably think about reaching out the Write Site... reaching out to the Write Site for in the future is dealing with this issue of students using AI at different stages of their research and writing process, and how to best help students when it comes to that. (Thomas, Focus Group 5)

Bridget in Focus group 1 referred to AI²⁹ as “threatening decent writing and thinking”, and also believes that the writing centre can be a counter to this, since students would be more likely to write and bring their own work if they are required to consult with the writing centre. Hannah from the third focus group also wanted the writing centre to take an active role in explaining the dangers of AI overuse to students, and Xolani in Focus group 6 was very curious as to the writing centre’s approach to students who misuse AI. The fact that participants questioned whether the writing centre could assist with unethical use of AI among students is encouraging; this could indicate that the writing centre is viewed as a valuable service that can assist students and lecturers with complicated writing-related issues.

Participants’ misgivings about AI echo the current concerns mentioned in literature: Crawford et al. (2023) list the main concerns among academics as those of the authenticity of student texts, the reputation of educational institutions and, most importantly, the impact of AI misuse or overuse on student learning. Despite these concerns, Crawford et al. (2023) point out that cheating has always been a problem, and instead of completely banning AI use (if that were even remotely possible), they advocate for instilling moral character in students and encouraging students to use AI as an assistant instead of a cheating aid. In writing centre research, Leimgruber (2025) takes a similar approach, explaining how writing centres can adapt to teaching responsible AI use and guiding students away from cheating. Among writing centre researchers, there is a general sense of concern regarding generative AI. Moussu (2025) encourages writing centres to be at the forefront of policy discussions and to train their tutors and students in the technical possibilities and ethical implications of AI use. Mutsvairigwa, Mhlongo, Shabangu, Zwile, Nomxoko and Mbhele (2024) point out that while AI can have some benefits for the writing centre, including enhanced efficiency of feedback, it has many limitations and biases, and the human element in writing support should remain central. Coetzer and Van Aardt (2024) caution against students overly relying on [often biased and flawed] generative AI, pointing out that it can lead to the loss of student voice and of the students’ potential contributions to academic discourses. They advise that the writing centre practitioner use guiding

²⁹ When referring to AI as a threat or challenge, the focus here is on *generative* AI specifically.

questions to “reinvite students to explore their own ideas, present their own arguments and re-see the value of their voices” (Coetzer & Van Aardt, 2024:176).

At the UFS Write Site, the stance on AI³⁰ is to follow a specific lecturer’s approach to AI when participating in a collaboration with that lecturer. The writing centre does not prescribe any specific stance to UFS staff members, but does emphasise the potential pitfalls of AI overuse. One of the coordinators at the Write Site regularly presents information sessions to students upon request by their lecturers, encouraging students to use their own ideas instead of outsourcing their thinking to the algorithm. The core writing centre services remain unaffected by AI for now, but workshops are constantly adapted as lecturers change their writing instructions to combat easy AI misuse.

The issue of generative AI misuse is constantly developing, as the technology itself grows and as educational institutions develop policies and responses to this. Based on participant comments in this study, as well as published literature, it is clear that there is an expectation for the writing centre to be involved in understanding, responding to, and utilising AI in an ethical manner that encourages students to maintain their own humanity and critical thinking and to grow as writers, and not just as prompters. At the UFS, the writing centre should continue to generate clear communication lines regarding this, as well as develop collaborations with lecturers to ascertain effective ways of handling this complex issue, without overstepping its boundaries and prescribing what others should do. The writing centre should also continue to keep abreast of the latest developments regarding AI, both globally and regarding UFS policies adopted. In this way, it can act in the advising and assisting capacity expected by lecturers.

This section on the theme of *Action* has covered a multitude of aspects around what academic staff expect the UFS writing centre to do. It has also covered what students are expected to produce and what they struggle with, as well as how staff expect the centre to handle higher order and lower order concerns. This section also touched on specific perceptions around ESL struggles, the unwritten rules of academia, reading, AI, and discipline-specific approaches. Regarding most of these aspects, there were expectations from UFS staff members that the writing centre could assist students, not only with surface-level issues but sometimes with complex and challenging concerns.

³⁰ At the time of writing this.

This speaks to the value and trust that academic staff place in the writing centre. The discussion in this theme also spoke to some of the research questions, elaborating on staff awareness of the writing centre, the perceived goal of the centre, what sort of assistance staff ideally want from the writing centre, and how these perceptions align with existing writing centre support.

In many cases, questionnaire and focus group answers were similar to writing centre research and approaches. In other cases, there were discrepancies between what the lecturers mentioned and what the writing centre offers. These discrepancies and misperceptions are elaborated on in the next theme, which will cover aspects relevant to communication between the writing centre and the various stakeholders in the institution.

4.4 Theme 2: Communication, or how perceptions are shaped

The theme of *Communication* is quite closely related to that of *Action*, since both deal, in a sense, with expectations of what the Write Site is assumed to do. However, whereas the action theme focuses specifically on how the writing centre approaches certain key aspects related to writing, the communication theme centres on how writing centre marketing and other factors have led to these perceptions, be they accurate or inaccurate, positive or negative. This theme also speaks to most of the research questions around awareness and expectations of the writing centre.

4.4.1 Contacting the writing centre

The most obvious aspect of communication is, of course, whether staff are aware of the undergraduate writing centre at the UFS, and whether they know how to contact the writing centre. The data from this study indicated that most staff members are aware of the writing centre, having heard about it either from colleagues or through some form of institutional communication. As discussed under Theme 1, 84% of the questionnaire respondents indicated that they had been aware of the writing centre before participating in the survey. This is a fairly good level of awareness for an institution with so many initiatives, units, and support services.

Questionnaire respondents also had to indicate how they heard about the writing centre. Here, they could select multiple answers. More than half (61%) selected “from colleagues”; 51% indicated “institutional advertisement, announcement or poster”;

28% selected “through the Curriculum Renewal Programme”³¹; 19% clicked on “from students”; 6% selected “I cannot recall”; and another 6% indicated “Other” as an option. Those who elaborated on “Other” shared the following open-ended responses:

- Social media, facilitators, friends
- The CGS visited the department and shared all their offerings
- We have made use of the Write Site services to guide one of our 3rd year groups through an essay assignment for several years
- I was an employee of CTL before obtaining my current lecturer position.
- Our department has been working with the CTL since 2012 on the recommendation of the then TL [Teaching and Learning] manager of the faculty.
- I worked at the writing centre
- Mentioned at faculty board meetings
- My Wife worked for them.
- I have known about the write centre since my undergrad. I studied at UFS.

The general gist of these open-ended responses seems to be personal in nature: respondents either worked for the writing centre, worked closely with someone from the writing centre, or knew someone involved there. Some of these responses could arguably fall within the response options provided. For example, “Mentioned at faculty board meetings” could be considered to fall under the “from colleagues” category. One slightly concerning answer can be seen in the second bullet point, which mentions the CGS (Centre for Graduate Support). As explained earlier, the CGS is responsible for the postgraduate writing centre, but not for the undergraduate writing centre administrated by the CTL. However, even if some staff members confuse the undergraduate and postgraduate writing centres, the fact remains that they are aware of at least one writing centre on campus. In addition, should they endeavour to contact either writing centre, any confusion would likely be cleared up by the writing centre staff.

It is also telling that 61% had heard about the writing centre from colleagues, and 19% from students; this is a strong indicator of the power of word of mouth as a marketing tool. In practice, I have often observed that lecturers who collaborate with the UFS writing centre enthusiastically recommend it to their colleagues. In fact, most new

³¹ The Curriculum Renewal Programme (CRP), presented by the Centre for Teaching and Learning at the UFS, is an intensive, practical course aimed at empowering academic staff to consider good curriculum design principles in redesigning their module(s). CRP presenters often mention the writing centre as an institutional resource / support service.

collaborations arise from lecturers approaching the writing centre after hearing about it from someone else.

There is a lack of published studies looking specifically at writing centre marketing. Rueywei and Fu-Sheng (2016) posit that word of mouth is an important part of university marketing strategy, along with signalling and customer relationships management. Lala-Sonora (2020), however, cautions that when a writing centre relies heavily on word-of-mouth marketing, the narrative being passed on is no longer controlled by the writing centre, leading to the potential of a remedial stigma or other inaccuracies being passed along. The UFS Write Site has always relied on word of mouth as happening organically, but perhaps it may be wise to take some more initiative in encouraging current collaborators to share their experiences in a certain way, or to share specific kinds of information. It may also be advisable to include more types of marketing: the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent social distancing / working from home initiatives were a good example of how the opportunity for word-of-mouth marketing among staff and students can suddenly be removed. Despite these concerns, word of mouth has been very effective at the UFS.

Apart from determining how people had heard about the writing centre, the questionnaire also assessed whether respondents knew how to contact the writing centre. As shown in Figure 9 in the discussion of the previous theme, in responding to the statement “I know how to make contact with the writing centre, should I want to make use of their services”, 76 respondents strongly agreed, 63 agreed, 21 were neutral, and a total of 48 (or 23%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed. Most respondents therefore seemed to have a good idea of how to initiate contact, should they wish to. Even those who disagreed with the statement, should be able to find the writing centre if they needed to: the Write Site has a presence on the UFS website, and contact details can also be found on the institutional Skype for Business programme that all staff can access³².

Extrapolating from the answers provided in this study, it can be assumed that most UFS staff members know about the writing centre, know or can find out how to contact the writing centre, and in many instances, became aware of the writing centre through

³² These platforms provide contact details for the Bloemfontein Campus, South Campus, and QwaQwa Campus writing centres.

word-of-mouth communication. The discussion now moves to various types of marketing employed by the writing centre.

4.4.2 Marketing

According to data collected in this study, UFS staff are aware of writing centre communication, but also wish for more communication. As established in the previous section, marketing from the writing centre at the UFS relies heavily on word of mouth. In addition, communication regarding the writing centre aimed at staff consists of information available on the CTL web page, information shared during sessions such as the Curriculum Renewal Programme (CRP), information sessions or meetings with specific departments attended by invitation, and the occasional poster put up around campus. It is quite likely that information regarding the writing centre is also shared in spaces such as departmental meetings, new staff onboarding in specific faculties, and emails sent to lecturers by CTL management or other persons involved in promoting support services on the various UFS campuses. Capacity constraints do not allow for unlimited new workshop designs and massive new student cohorts making use of the writing centre each semester, and the centre therefore avoids mass marketing campaigns in general. So in summary, information regarding the writing centre is available for those interested and looking for it, but is not regularly included in communication sent out to staff.

Communication between the writing centre and students is slightly more proactive: Blackboard emails and notifications are sent out regularly; there are Write Site posters/flyers; and writing centre representatives regularly feature at student support events, information sessions and webinars. The UFS website also contains writing centre information aimed at students, and of course word of mouth is also a factor here. While the writing centre does not need to employ intensive marketing strategies to get more staff on board, there is room for more students to make use of the individual consultation service, so more marketing aimed at students may be useful. This falls outside the scope of this discussion; however, it should be noted that students sometimes make their lecturers aware of the writing centre, and therefore student-centred communication also indirectly impacts staff.

As mentioned in the literature review chapter, academics are placed in a variety of roles, including administrative duties, supervision, research, teaching, managing

funding, and other duties (Dison et al., 2023). They also face challenges such as funding cuts, publication ranking systems, the massification of the student body, precarious employment, and pressure to generate third stream income (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). Although many lecturers do care deeply about their students' success, including aspects such as writing support, they are generally bombarded with so many institutional emails and face so many responsibilities that they do not always have the time or capacity to seek out writing support services. Jade in Focus group 3, for example, mentioned that they get "flooded with emails", and various other focus group participants referred to their workload and staff's resistance to take on extra responsibilities.

Despite these challenges, findings from the questionnaires and focus groups in this study indicate that academic staff do wish to know more about the writing centre, and potentially make use of its services. As shown in Figure 9, an overwhelming majority of questionnaire respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they would be interested in various services, including workshops, a reading initiative, a grammar course, digital resources, consultations, multi-part interventions, and even resources for staff to help them incorporate more academic literacy skills in their curriculum. In addition, various focus group participants verbalised an interest in more communication from the writing centre. For example, Daniel in the first focus group wanted "more channels of communication and more involvement between the department itself and the writing centre", while Gugu from the second group suggested more general awareness that the writing centre exists.

Focus group participants were also quick to suggest various practical ways in which the writing centre could increase the quality of communication with faculties and departments. Among their suggestions, were the following:

- A regular newsletter (or presence in existing institutional newsletters)
- A designated representative from each department, who is responsible for liaising with the writing centre and communicating with the rest of the department
- Regular information sessions to staff in individual departments (at faculty board meetings, etc.)
- Follow-up on these information sessions, so staff know how to make contact
- Regular information sessions for students in various departments
- Presence in departmental planning documents regarding student writing development
- Contact list and overview of services, regularly distributed to departments / leaflets or flyers made available in departments
- QR codes leading to digital information on the writing centre (both for staff and students)

- Information on the writing centre sent out to staff before study guide compilation deadlines, so they can include this in the study guide for their students
- Including information on the writing centre in compulsory first-year modules

Some of these suggestions are quite easy and practical to implement — the writing centre can definitely consider implementing newsletter emails, flyers, or QR codes. Other suggestions would make sense upon invitation; a writing centre representative cannot simply show up to every departmental meeting to present information sessions. What can be extrapolated from these suggestions is that staff are interested in more information and marketing from the writing centre. These are also good alternatives to word-of-mouth communication, which Lala-Sonora (2020) noted to be inadequate on its own.

It also bears repeating that the Write Site prefers to market to targeted groups of staff members, instead of aggressively marketing to the entire campus community. This is both for capacity and quality reasons. Collaborations with staff members who seek out the writing centre for specific writing assistance have historically been more successful than last-minute collaborations with staff members who have an open time slot and want the writing centre to fill this with anything writing-related. It is anticipated that mass marketing to staff may lead to requests from academic staff members who do not fully understand what the writing centre does, and who may not be willing to put in the effort to negotiate a meaningful collaboration for their students. To conclude this section, it can be surmised that Write Site communication and marketing is effective, but there is a desire for more communication with staff. The fact that staff members are interested in more communication as well as making use of more writing centre services, speaks to the value of the centre within the institution. This is elaborated on in the next theme. The next part of this theme discusses how the lecturers envision themselves as participating in writing centre collaborative interventions.

4.4.3 The role of the lecturer in a writing centre collaboration

The focus group participants' willingness to contribute to discussions around better communication or marketing from the writing centre indicates a positive attitude towards collaborating with the writing centre. Participants also shed light on what they see as the role of the lecturer in such collaborations. This is included under the theme of *Communication* since these expectations indicate what sort of perceptions have been communicated to and by lecturers.

Participant comments included the ideas of the lecturer approaching and meeting with the writing centre representative to explain what is required from the students as well as what the lecturer expects from the writing intervention. In addition, the lecturer role could include encouraging and reminding students to attend consultations and workshops at the writing centre. Faizel from the second focus group, for example, mentioned putting Write Site instructions in the study guide, as well as reminding students of deadlines to participate in writing centre activities. Some participants also mentioned the idea of the content lecturer providing rubrics, instructions, etc. to assist the writing centre staff in designing workshops or facilitating consultations, as well as the lecturer meeting directly with consultants to explain what is required from students in specific writing tasks. The lecturer should also, according to Rashieda in Focus group 5, provide feedback to the writing centre after a workshop or similar event regarding what can be improved in future interventions. In Focus group 1, Esmé mentioned that the lecturer's role could include "clarifying the discipline-specific expectations". Rashieda summarised the lecturer role quite well:

I guess my role would be to identify the needs of my students and then communicate with the Write Site on the sort of interventions that I'm seeking from them. And also like, I'll use an example with my essay writing, I would always have to send my essay question and also the instructions to the Write Site so that they are aware of my expectations, whether it's length or you know the referencing format or things like that. So my role is in in summary to identify my students' needs and then communicate with the Write Space [sic] to understand their services and the type of interventions that I require from them.
(Rashieda, Focus group 5)

On the topic of lecturers being too busy to seek out support interventions, Imraan had a slightly different perspective from most of the other participants:

I think I think I sort of see the Write Site slightly differently. As you mentioned, like as a support role. So for me, I kind of knew you guys as being able to take work away from me, not to add work to my load... There's — as I mentioned at the beginning — there's things that we don't have time for to be able to cover in and amongst all the contents as well, and I think the Write Site can maybe play a useful role in that. So as a lecturer if I want somebody to help me, I must

empower them as well. So if that means a meeting or opening up my lectures for you to come and visit and you can make my students — or assist my students, not make them — you can assist them to write a bit better and to have better skills. It makes my marking easier because then I can read and don't have to reread sentences five times. Then yeah, I think there can be something beneficial if it's done correctly and if it's done well. (Imraan, Focus group 3)

Imraan was of the opinion that the writing centre can, in the grand scheme of things, save the lecturer time instead of adding to the workload. In the sixth focus group, Willem agreed, stating that “by helping students, it [the writing centre] is also helping lecturers”. This type of positive view regarding the content lecturer collaborating with the writing specialist, is reminiscent of Jacobs’ (2007) collaborative pedagogy of insider-outsider collaborations, which Dison and Moore (2019) extend to discipline-specific writing within a writing centre context. As explained in the literature review chapter, Page (2020) discussed how discipline-specific writing sessions lead to more student motivation than do generic writing sessions. The type of collaboration verbalised by the focus group participants also reflects the best-practice model by McWilliams and Allen (2014), shown in Figure 1, Chapter 2. In this model, the subject lecturer and learning advisor (or writing specialist, in our case) analyse the student task or exemplar, devise an intervention, and then teach together. Many other researchers have underlined the importance of writing centre and content lecturer collaborations (see Einfalt & Turley, 2009; Pocock, 2010; Eodice, 2003).

It is reassuring to see participants’ desires or expectations align with writing centre principles. However, true collaboration is more than just sharing notes and expecting the other person to create and present something from them. As cautioned by Dison and Moore (2019), many attempts at collaboration result in the writing practitioner using content-specific texts to develop writing activities in their own capacity, without the rigorous planning, creating, and team teaching with the content specialist, which is what true collaboration entails. Page (2020) agrees, pointing out that genuine collaborations involve the writing expert and subject specialist functioning as equals while maintaining their unique roles. Wingate (2006) mentions that staff at universities may still operate from a deficit model, using writing support as something meant to help struggling students. Similarly, Miley (2016) is concerned about the writing centre taking a service provider role instead of the role of true partner. Unfortunately, some

of these attitudes did seem to be present among the focus group participants. There is a general sentiment of the writing centre “helping” the struggling students, and the idea that the content lecturer can meet with and provide information to the writing centre representative, who will then design and present the appropriate intervention. Imraan even makes the following remarks: “So I need to give you all the information you need in order for you guys to do what you need to do. And then obviously you just got to do what you need to do on the other end. So yeah, I think open lines of communication, clear expectations, clear guidelines and then just allowing everyone to sort of quote unquote, do their jobs, so to speak.” It is evident that Imraan frames their ideal writing centre collaboration as being transactional, which is not in keeping with ideal collaborations as described by Jacobs (2007), Dison and Moore (2019) and other writing centre researchers.

The type of collaborations described by some of these participants reflects how the writing centre often does collaborate with lecturers at the UFS. The writing centre coordinator will meet with a lecturer, the lecturer then shares some materials, and the writing centre designer creates a workshop, which is presented by a trained workshop presenter. With some encouragement from the subject lecturer, students may even attend individual consultations before they submit their final drafts for assessment. There is communication between the writing centre and the subject specialist, but not to the extent that this communication mirrors that as reflected in McWilliams and Allen’s (2014) model, where the writing specialist and content lecturer plan and teach interventions together.³³ This then poses the question of whether this writing centre, as a rule, really *collaborates* with academic staff, or whether the centre and the lecturers simply, as Dison and Moore (2019) would say, *cooperate*. If, in Eodice’s (2003) words, collaboration is truly the “air we breathe” (as writing centres), the implication here is that the UFS writing centre may have to reevaluate how to go about attaining true collaboration with academic staff members. Based on participant statements in the focus groups, this will be no easy task: some participants directly stated that they were too busy to seek writing centre assistance, and those who were open to collaboration seemed amenable to meeting with the writing centre, but not

³³ There are exceptions to this; occasionally, a writing centre team member will partner with a lecturer who is truly committed to working together and being involved in the entire process. These collaborations, although very rewarding, are unfortunately time-consuming and therefore rare.

necessarily to seeking in-depth intervention design involving them in deeper ways. The academics who participated in the focus groups located themselves as decidedly separate from the writing centre, with the writing centre as an extra or add-on to their courses. If the writing centre team wants academic staff to consider themselves as forming part of the writing centre, the communication between the writing centre and lecturers will need to change.

4.4.4 Miscommunication and misperceptions

Up to this point, the focus group discussions have revealed that lecturer expectations of the writing centre often align with what the writing centre aims to provide, with some noted differences. Some misperceptions have already been discussed under Theme 1; for example, expectations of a skills or remedial focus. There were a few other misperceptions that stood out or were repeated often enough to warrant discussion. This section discusses three common misperceptions as well as the communication lapses that may have led to these.

The first misperception that has also been hinted at before, in this chapter, is the fact that staff members sometimes confuse the undergraduate Write Site located within the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL), with the postgraduate Write Space located within the Centre for Graduate Support (CGS). Confusion ranged between mixing up the names, to not realising that these were separate entities, to not understanding why they were separate. Some focus group participants mentioned the Write Space while acknowledging that it was separate from the Write Site. Quinton in the fourth focus group, for example, shared an anecdote about attending a writing centre workshop, immediately clarifying that this was hosted by the postgraduate school, and not by the undergraduate writing centre under discussion. Others perhaps misspoke, or used the names interchangeably: Rashieda in Focus group 5 indicated the difference between the two writing centres, but then went on to refer to the Write Space assisting second-years. In the same focus group, Thomas confidently (and incorrectly) referred to all the postgraduate assistance provided by the Write Site. Yasmin from the last focus group was aware of the difference between the two, but uncertain why this was necessary, asking, "...just one point that I don't know why you have an undergraduate and postgraduate, because aren't you teaching the same skills? So it's maybe the writing, the messaging should be one writing centre, even

though it has different levels. I don't know why there's a need to divide it between undergraduate and postgraduate.” Michael from the fourth focus group had a similar question, asking whether there was an incorrect assumption about the Write Site assisting only undergraduate students. None of the comments about the Write Space were prompted by the researcher; all such comments arose naturally from the focus group discussions.

It is easy to see why the campus community may confuse the two writing centres, since they share very similar names. Every academic can hardly be expected to have an in-depth understanding of the full institutional mandates of the CTL and the CGS. However, this type of misunderstanding can lead to frustration when lecturers contact the incorrect writing centre for assistance, or refer their postgraduate students, for example, to the undergraduate writing centre. This may also have affected the way in which respondents completed the questionnaire in this study. An easy solution to this misperception would be to rename either or both writing centres to more accurately reflect their purpose. For example, the names “Undergraduate Writing Centre” and “Postgraduate Writing Centre” would certainly be clearer than Write Site and Write Space. Renaming would have some logistical (and financial) implications regarding branding and existing marketing materials, especially since these writing centres have a presence on all three UFS campuses. However, the confusion between the two (coupled with the constant necessity of explaining to students that the spelling in the email address is “Write Site” and not “Right Site”) justifies a rebranding.

Another question that arises from this staff confusion or conflation of the undergraduate and postgraduate writing centres is whether the participants believed that undergraduate and postgraduate writing are similar at the core, differing mostly in length but not in substance. Michael mentioned that the two writing centres “are offering effectively the same kind of service”, and Yasmin, as mentioned, thought that the two centres taught the same skills. The use of terms such as “service” and “skills” are an unfortunate reminder of the fact that many lecturers believe students need generic language skills (Leibowitz et al., 1997) without truly understanding the intricacies of writing development (Janse van Rensburg, 2023) and without being able to even describe what they mean by good writing (Lamberti & Archer, 2023). This fix-it-shop attitude has been mentioned before in this study as something that writing centres strive to cast off. Regarding the conflation of postgraduate and undergraduate

writing, there is certainly some overlap in what good academic writing entails. However, the level of input required in order to effectively assist students at various levels of study differs significantly. That is why the postgraduate Write Space exclusively links students up with consultants who have at least a doctorate in the same field of study, and requires students to send their chapters well ahead of time for the consultant to prepare, whereas the undergraduate Write Site allows consultants to assist students from various backgrounds, often with very little advance preparation, as long as they follow good consulting practices such as Socratic questioning and a student-centred approach.

The expectation by staff in this study that postgraduate students should be able to visit the Write Site shows a lack of understanding of the depth at which a writing centre can assist a student. This is corroborated by the occasional email from a lecturer referring their postgraduate student to the Write Site specifically for lower order language issues. It is therefore also possible that some staff members subconsciously view the Write Space as the higher order writing centre, and the Write Site as the lower order (or proofreading) centre. Whatever the nuances of beliefs around the writing centres, incorrect assumptions are to the detriment of the entire campus community. Both writing centres can clearly invest more time and resources to clearly delineate their functions and target audiences.

The second misperception worth considering here is that of the consultant role. Although not directly the focus of this study, the consultant role does speak to the perceived goal and services of the writing centre. In this study, the perceived role of the writing centre consultant included some highly valued and positive perceptions, as well as some lower order and remedial misperceptions. On the positive side, focus group participants mentioned the consultant giving valuable feedback to individual students (Chipo & Bridget, Focus group 1), despite not being disciplinary experts. Michael in Focus group 4 mentioned that the consultants could even meet with the lecturer to ensure that their feedback to students aligns with what is happening in the course itself. Bridget provided another very interesting viewpoint on the value of the consultant role: that of outsider perspective.

... the Write Site gives an outsider's perspective on a student's writing and that's particularly useful, particularly if the person reading the work isn't, you know,

familiar with the subject or the content. They still have a skill set that enables them to say where the things hang together, where there is coherence. So I think that outsider perspective is particularly important because if you can convince someone on the outside who might not know the details, that's sort of half the battle won, because that means you've communicated it in an intelligible way. (Bridget, Focus group 1)

The value of an outsider perspective is also mentioned by Jacobs (2007) in a discussion on academic literacy practitioners working with lecturers. According to Jacobs (2007), lecturers can become more aware of the discourse patterns in their disciplines by collaborating with a literacy practitioner who brings an outsider perspective to the conversation. The same principle can be applied to students and writing centre consultants, where an outsider perspective may help the student understand what they are doing and how their writing is perceived by someone else. This role goes far beyond the simple “language checking” or assistive/remedial role sometimes applied to the writing centre staff.

These positive views of the writing centre consultant as fulfilling a complex role were also described by Appleby-Ostroff (2017), who listed various aspects of a writing centre consultation, including an awareness of the student's strengths and weaknesses, viewing the text from the perspective of a reader, giving non-directive advice, and a focus on clarity, argumentation, and writing style. Harris (1986), Thonus (2001), and Carstens and Rambiritch (2020) all described various roles inhabited by the writing centre consultant, emphasising the fact that a consultant functions as so much more than a grammar advisor. Carlse (2019) even used the term “critical friend”, explaining that the consultant both supports the student's ideas and challenges the aspects that can be improved. Focus group participants did not spend a great deal of time discussing the consultant role in detail, and these discussions did not quite reach the level of seeing the consultant as a critical friend, although the consultant was seen as providing valuable feedback. There is certainly some room for improvement in the way consultants are perceived.

Some focus group participants had more remedial (and by extension, inaccurate) expectations of writing centre consultants. Gugu, in the second focus group, mentioned that editing services would be useful, especially to postgraduate students.

This participant is not wrong: editing services do play an important role in readying academic texts for submission or publication. However, this is not something that falls within the scope of the writing centre, and reflects the fix-it shop view of the centre. Naledi in the fourth focus group also expected the writing centre to offer “a grammar check and a basic proofreading”, assisting with sentence construction, grammar, and spelling. To clarify, the writing centre consultant can and does assist students with improving their sentence-level writing issues, but does not proofread on behalf of the student, and usually only assists with such concerns once the higher order concerns have been addressed. So the expectation that the writing centre addresses grammar is not incorrect, but reducing writing centre services to purely a grammar check service is incorrect. Such views are similar to what Howard and Carrick (2006) have noticed, where writing centre staff are awarded low status in the institutional hierarchy as the “disposable literate”. Lee et al. (2017) also noticed that while students and consultants themselves see the writing centre consultant role as academic, content lecturers view it as technical rather than academic. This perception from academic staff members potentially stems not only from a misunderstanding of the writing centre but also from a misunderstanding of what good writing and academic literacy entail, as explained previously. So if the writing centre wants to address such perceptions, it needs to start by explaining to lecturers the concepts surrounding literacy principles and discipline-specific writing as opposed to generic, transferable writing skills. Simply listing what the writing centre does may not convince lecturers of the importance of these services and approaches.

A final interesting point around the consultant role that arose from the focus group discussions was that of the non-academic aspect of consultant training. In the first focus group, Daniel asked whether consultants received any training in interpersonal communication or emotional intelligence training. This participant mentioned that visiting the writing centre can be very stressful for students, with the implication that consultants need to have an awareness beyond purely the academic needs of the student. In practice, Write Site consultants do receive some training in setting a student at ease, dealing with difficult students, or whom to contact regarding students who seem to be in distress. However, the majority of training focuses on academic-related consulting practices. It is notable that this staff member in the focus group was interested in whether the writing centre essentially functioned as a safe space to send

students. This sense of trust was also explored by Lerner (2003), who received very positive results regarding a Likert scale statement around whether staff feel comfortable sending students to the writing centre. While the psychological aspects of consultation practice fall outside the scope of this study, the fact that this question arose does indicate an expectation that the writing centre functions as more than simply a collection of proofreaders.

A third area where misperceptions became evident was around the topic of specific writing centre services on offer. Participants seemed to confuse other focus areas with the writing centre, or expected the writing centre to provide different services than they do. Those lecturers who were more familiar with the writing centre, however, were very positive about the existing services, and expressed the desire for more staff members to be aware of and make use of the writing centre. These perceptions also speak specifically to the research questions centred around what staff ideally want the writing centre to do, and how this compares with current available services.

The questionnaire provided some relevant insights into respondents' familiarity with specific services. One section of the questionnaire asked whether respondents had personally made use of any writing centre services. As can be seen in Figure 10, 40% of respondents admitted to not making use of any of the indicated writing centre services. A total of 34% had made use of the individual consultation service for students, although it is unclear whether they strongly encouraged students to make use of this, or simply mentioned it in passing, or even incentivised this in some way. While 30% indicated that they had made use of information sessions for students, the nature of these information sessions was not specified in the questionnaire, and could refer to any number of CTL-related sessions or even other information sessions unrelated to the writing centre.³⁴

³⁴ The undergraduate writing centre does not directly present information sessions to vast numbers of students every year; it thus seems likely that some of the lecturers who answered this question positively, were thinking of other institutional information sessions.

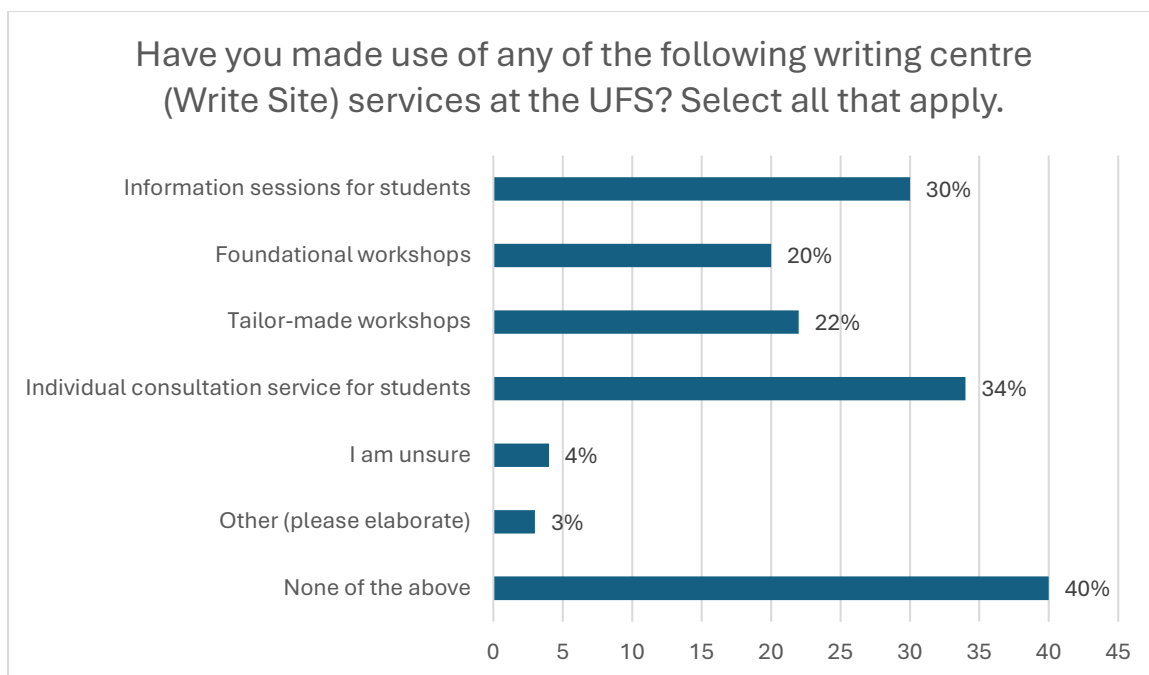


Figure 10: respondents' use of writing centre services.

Regarding the foundational and tailor-made workshops in Figure 10, the full options in the questionnaire read as follows: “Foundational workshops (generic 1-hour sessions that cover basic writing aspects)” / “Tailor-made workshops designed for your specific student cohort and writing task (Face-to-face, on Blackboard Collaborate, or in online asynchronous format)”. It is indeed possible that 22% of respondents had made use of tailor-made workshops (especially since those familiar with the writing centre and with the researcher’s name and email address may have been more likely to complete the questionnaire). However, the 20% (42 participants) response rate for the foundational workshops seems unlikely, since the foundational workshops are a fairly recent addition to the Bloemfontein Campus writing centre’s services, commencing in mid-2023. It is of course possible that the QwaQwa writing centre had been running similar workshops as well, and that some of the respondents could be from that campus. It is also possible that some respondents could be referring to the generic postgraduate workshops presented by the CGS. Whether or not respondents were entirely correct in their understanding of which writing centre services they had utilised, it can be seen as a positive response that so many indicated that they had utilised some services. This shows a willingness to engage with the writing centre. The possible misconceptions around some of these services, however, also indicates a lapse in communication.

Regarding the 'Other' responses, participant elaborations included the following:

- A_STEP tutors give weekly tutorials to second year students
- Unpacking how to write a proposal for postgraduate successfully
- Specific generic sessions for Honours students from 2025 as the writing and reading skills of students at this level have decreased significantly.
- Every year, I invite [a representative] from the Write Site-Qwaqwa campus to present a 1 hour lecture to my [NAS] students on the "how to write and structure an academic essay, cite references in-text and present a reference list, and on how to avoid plagiarism".
I do this in preparation for my class's essay assignments during the semester.
- As a student yes

The first answer confuses the A_STEP tutorial programme³⁵ with the writing centre. The Write Site office staff team have often observed that UFS staff in the faculties seem to view all CTL services as provided by basically the same group of people. This is harmless enough as part of the "big picture" — the CTL is viewed as a uniform centre serving the institution. Unfortunately, for those within the CTL, it can lead to some miscommunication, as the CTL comprises various units and subdivisions with very different services and foci. The CTL also employs a large number of people, many of whom cannot be expected to know the exact details of each of their colleagues' job descriptions. Such a conflation of CTL services can also hinder data collection in research such as this.

The second and third bullet points above both refer to services provided to postgraduate students which, as discussed previously, may reflect a confusion between the Write Site and Write Space. The comment of "unpacking how to write a proposal for postgraduate successfully" is possibly an accurate observation. The next bullet point, mentioning "generic sessions for Honours students", is possible but unlikely. It is also unclear why the respondent did not simply select "Foundational workshops" in the question. The next answer seems to describe a workshop on the QwaQwa campus, and it is once again unclear why the respondent did not select "Information sessions for students" or "Foundational workshops". Perhaps they were uncertain regarding which option would be most fitting. Finally, the last option — "As a student yes" — falls outside the scope of this research study, but it is assumed that the respondent wanted to indicate that they used the writing centre in some capacity,

³⁵ This tutorial programme, available as a support service to content lecturers who request it, falls under the CTL (Centre for Teaching and Learning) at the UFS, but is located within a different focus area than the writing centre. The writing centre and A_Step tutorial programme function completely independently from each other.

although not as a staff member. Overall, the responses indicate a lack of clarity regarding writing centre services, as well as uncertainty regarding which services staff members had made use of.

The focus group discussions shed more light on what staff correctly and incorrectly perceived as services offered by the writing centre. Despite directly being asked which services they think should be provided by the writing centre, focus group participants were reluctant to list specific services, opting instead to discuss more vague ideas around what the writing centre should accomplish (i.e. helping students with writing, along with various higher and lower order concerns). Some participants mentioned the idea of consultants seeing students, as well as the idea of group sessions (or workshops), which are the main ways in which the writing centre currently reaches students with targeted writing assistance.

Most of the participants mentioned individual or one-on-one appointments, with Chipu in the first focus group calling them “very very helpful”. This seemed to be the main writing centre service that staff were aware of. Communication around this service therefore seems to be quite effective on the UFS campuses. Only one participant (Faizel from Focus group 2) felt that one-on-one appointments were unnecessary, explaining that workshops are more effective and that students can obtain the same information in a group that they get individually. This reflects a lack of awareness of the importance of individual input on that individual student’s own writing, but this attitude did not seem to be present among any other participants, and is thus hopefully not widely held among staff. Some participants did lament the fact that a lack of capacity from the writing centre means that larger classes containing hundreds of students cannot all be sent to the writing centre for individual consultations. This is a constraint that the writing centre staff are all too aware of, with no feasible solution to provide individual input to larger groups of students without greatly compromising the quality for which the writing centre is known. Participants in this study also differentiated between these individual consultations being available whenever a student takes the initiative to make a booking, and between more formalised interventions where specific groups of students are encouraged or even incentivised to make appointments. Michael, for example, mentioned the following:

So I think a writing centre should be available for students to make appointments. With, you know, trained personnel who can assist students in expressing their ideas for various assignments... And I I think it's also helpful to have scope for lecturers to join forces with the writing centre and provide some more tailored projects whereby writing consultants are familiar with the intended outcomes of a module and can potentially help students to achieve them in their writing. ... I think there should be some range between students just coming in at, you know, any around any writing issue for consultation and more targeted projects whereby you know people in the writing centre are actually, you know, working with a lecturer to try to achieve specific outcomes.
(Michael, Focus group 2)

It should be noted that the participant dubbed Michael in this study had been participating in multifaceted writing centre interventions for many years, and was an enthusiastic proponent of these kinds of collaborative endeavours. In general, participant expectations around the individual consultation service were accurate (apart from the previously discussed expectations of lower order assistance happening in these consultations).

The accuracy of expectations and awareness around the writing centre workshops was more varied. Firstly, fewer participants were aware of this service than were aware of the consultation service. Thomas explained that “last year I wasn't too sure what the Write Site was doing other than providing students with individual consultation sessions and by communicating with the Write Site, I became aware that you guys also offer various like courses to departments ... that have been quite helpful so far” (Focus group 5). Both Thomas and Michael verbalised that they wished more departments were aware of the workshops. In addition, participants had slightly different expectations of the workshops (which they often referred to as group sessions, classes, courses, or coaching sessions). Many expected the workshops to be generic, dealing with specific writing aspects that could be applicable to students from various backgrounds. This could once again be the result of marketing from the postgraduate Write Space, since the CGS does present a large number of generic writing workshops relevant to postgraduate writing. Chipso specifically mentioned that the workshops should not be “too discipline-specific” (Focus group 1). Those who had some experience in working with the Write Site, however, emphasised the importance

of the workshops being tailored to the specific students' needs. For example, Faizel in Focus group 2 felt that the workshops that can be "custom-made for each department and/or module" were difficult to improve on, and felt that these addressed "basic and more advanced needs" of the students. Quinton from the fourth focus group also praised the soft skills that students received from such workshops, explaining from personal experience how such sessions can equip and empower students and increase their confidence.

Some workshop expectations were further removed from what the writing centre aims to achieve. Bridget from Focus group 1 believed that the writing centre should focus exclusively on individual feedback instead of group services, justifying this by saying that structural writing issues should be addressed in first-year modules, no matter the discipline, whether provided through university-mandated Critical Academic Literacy courses or trained in-house in various faculties. This reflects a concerningly simplistic view of how writing skills can be "taught" in a few first-year courses, with very little writing input needed in later years as students progress in their studies (apart from individual consultation input, should students seek this out). There is clearly a need for academic staff members to be more aware of the complexities of academic literacy as Boughey (2000) describes it, which involves students having to learn entirely new ways of thinking about knowledge.

Participants also had varying ideas around timing for writing centre interventions. In the fifth focus group, Rashieda mentioned making use of a "one-hour lecture on essay writing, structuring, referencing, you know, things like that" in addition to optional individual consultations. While this participant mentioned better essay performance for students who attended the "lecture", it is concerning that they believe one hour to be sufficient to cover so many writing aspects. A concept such as essay structure is best developed with more available time, using example texts from the students' own discipline, in what Wingate (2006) would refer to as the "built-in" approach. It can be argued that one hour is better than nothing, but it is also important that lecturers understand the complexities and time needed to teach writing skills, especially using a discipline-specific or embedded approach, which Archer (2010) considers crucial for the writing centre to do. Rashieda's attitude unfortunately reflects a similar set of beliefs present among academic staff, who often contact the writing centre with very unrealistic expectations of what can be addressed in very limited time slots.

Another significant comment relating to the timing of writing centre interventions, arose in Focus group 1, where Daniel commented on the lecturer role being comparable to when a lecturer approaches the A_Step tutorial programme for assistance. Although Daniel's comment was meant to illustrate the importance of the lecturer clarifying their learning objectives and the aim of the module so that everyone is on the same page, it was an interesting choice to use this as an example. A_Step tutorial assistance requires advance planning as well as commitment from the lecturer's side to incorporate tutorials into their module for at least a full semester. This kind of planning and commitment from lecturers in a writing centre context usually leads to very fruitful collaborations. This attitude is preferable to a last-minute "what can you do in an hour" request that is often a reality for the writing centre.

A further idea worth discussing around writing centre workshops was the concept of workshops involving practical writing sessions with students from different backgrounds. In the second focus group, Gugu mentioned, "I would expect the writing centre to bring in students from different disciplines, from different faculties or departments, and exchange writing pieces, discuss how to improve their writing skills." This sounds like a description of peer-to-peer learning in writing groups. Similarly, when asked about writing centre services, Yasmin from Focus group 6 mentioned the following:

I think that practice will help them a lot, so I'm designing for my students basically a writing course that's more of a group — almost like group therapy. I don't know, helping them to practise and use skills such as free writing which really helps to unblock that left side of us, just writing on blank paper and learning to, learning to write, practising. So practical group-based sessions.

Both Yasmin and Gugu referred to getting students together into practical writing groups, not necessarily involving students from the same module, and not necessarily very structured sessions. Such writing circles or writing support groups are currently offered by writing centres in a number of South African universities, mainly to support postgraduate students (Vivian & Fourie, 2016). Focusing on writing for academic staff rather than students, Castle and Keane (2016) also explain that writing groups can be very useful to participants, particularly as a follow-up to a writing workshop. This type of service is not something the UFS undergraduate writing centre currently offers. It

may also be more suited for senior or postgraduate students. However, if there is a need for this kind of writing support, it is something the writing centre can explore in the future.

Another misguided expectation around writing centre services involved the idea of the writing centre providing students with various levels of digital skills:

We are increasingly becoming reliant on technology. And if students come here and they don't know how to use the basic means to their disposal that that should be an important thing to focus on. Having said that, I think from your point of view as a writing centre there should be the combination.... And it should go over a wide spectrum, not just being able to type and construct a sentence on a computer or a laptop somewhere, but also to make use of the online sources, the Google Scholars, the library, et cetera. So a combination of face-to-face and ongoing online support to which access is initially facilitated by means of the face-to-face sessions. (Sibongile, Focus group 5)

Sibongile hoped that the writing centre could assist with technical digital skills as well as more advanced practices that involve technology, such as finding trustworthy academic sources online. Ursula, another participant in the same focus group, agreed with this, and even suggested attaching writing centre services to the compulsory first-year computer literacy module. Although this idea was not clearly developed in the discussion, Ursula seemed to feel that the writing centre should be assisting students with how to use word processors to write assignments, among other things. This indicates an expectation for the writing centre to assist at a technical level that goes beyond the substance of writing and down to the tools used to access and create texts. This type of assistance falls outside the mandate of the UFS writing centre, and of most writing centres, with little published research available on writing centres teaching computer skills. Clark (2024) mentions the writing centre assisting students with navigating digital formats such as blog posts, paying attention to the language requirements of writing in those spaces, but not teaching the technicalities of, for example, setting up a blog page. Breines (2025), on the other hand, believes that writing centre consultations may involve aspects of teaching digital literacy. At the UFS writing centre, consultants may assist students with technical aspects, such as where to click to insert a footnote in MS Word, but the focus is on the writing, not the digital

skills. Various institutional services do provide students with digital skills, such as the aforementioned first-year computer module, a Digital Skills and Competencies course available on Blackboard to staff and students, various library initiatives, and faculty- or lecturer-specific resources and input. Digital skills such as the ins and outs of MS Word thus fall firmly outside the scope of the writing centre; however, it is interesting to note that some staff members expect writing assistance to overlap with digital skills. With the exponential growth of technologies such as AI and large language models, and the impact this may have on student writing, the future of writing centres may very well involve a shift towards digital skills. For now, however, this is a misperception that should be noted by those at the writing centre regarding any future communication.

To conclude this section on perceptions and misperceptions of writing centre services, it is interesting to note that most expectations around writing centre services related to synchronous assistance from a person — i.e., consultations and workshops. Participants generally did not mention the need for asynchronous, self-study resources such as handouts or videos on writing. In one focus group discussion, there was a participant who mentioned QR codes leading to online handouts on writing, but for the most part, participants valued consultations and workshops presented by qualified writing centre tutors in real time. This speaks to the perceived importance of tutor input. It could be that participants also felt that the internet provided easy access to handouts, videos, and lessons on writing, and therefore, this was not something the local writing centre was expected to provide.³⁶ However, it is interesting to note that as shown in Figure 9 discussed under Theme 1, 162 questionnaire respondents (78%) agreed or strongly agreed that they would be interested in making use of a grammar course for their students, and 167 (80%) agreed or strongly agreed that they would be interested in digital resources such as writing-related videos and handouts. It is therefore also possible that focus group participants were interested in writing-related asynchronous or digital resources, but that the guiding questions in the focus groups did not open the conversation to including such materials under the discussion of writing centre services.

³⁶ This poses some questions for future investigation: online writing materials often feature speakers and examples from various countries and cultures, using terminology and measurement systems that may be unfamiliar and irrelevant to South African students. A blind acceptance of these materials raises the question of whether UFS staff truly value the idea of decolonising the curriculum by using local examples and voices, or whether they are content sourcing materials from elsewhere.

This also raises the question of whether staff are aware that writing centre workshops can run synchronously (either F2F or in an online classroom) or asynchronously, with the asynchronous workshops recommended for larger groups or where the timetable does not allow for in-class teaching time being allocated to the writing centre. These asynchronous online workshops are also tailored to specific module content. It is clear that there is room for better communication between the writing centre and academic staff around the possibilities for workshops and other writing centre services.

4.4.5 Negative perceptions

An important yet unfortunate aspect of how perceptions around the writing centre are shaped is the examination of negative perceptions around the centre. Some of these are based on misperceptions and miscommunication; others on experiences with the writing centre that were less than ideal. The UFS writing centre strives to provide quality services, but the occasional blunder does happen, as with any unit that works with so many lecturers and students. While negative experiences and attitudes towards the UFS writing centre seem to be few and far between, some examples did arise in the focus group discussions. Such negative attitudes have the potential to spread via word of mouth just as positive opinions do, and it is therefore important to consider how such perspectives came to be and how they can be avoided in the future.

In the focus group discussions, three participants shared negative experiences they had had with the writing centre. The first participant, Chipso, from Focus group 1, mentioned their students having trouble with the consultation booking system, and bookings being cancelled last-minute, which made them reluctant to make use of writing centre consultations again. Since this is not a current or recurring issue at the Write Site, it can be assumed that this was a unique situation. In Focus group 3, Lerato mentioned a situation some years back where writing centre consultants gave questionable writing advice to students, resulting in what the participant described as “atrocious” student essays. According to this lecturer, students were told “to copy a piece of text into some or another language translator and to replace, you know, some of the words with synonyms or to translate it into their home language and then back into English”. This left Lerato in a difficult situation where they disagreed with the advice given at the writing centre, but telling the students not to follow this advice would have been confusing to the students. This lecturer is still, understandably so,

wary of referring students to the writing centre again. This specific incident did not happen on the campus where I am involved, but this kind of advice is certainly not something that the Write Site on any campus endorses. However, despite this not likely being repeated in future, the damage to the writing centre reputation had been done.

In the same focus group as Lerato, Kgosi shared a situation where their students were so reluctant to learn to write better, that the students set up a petition against being sent to the writing centre. Kgosi mentioned that the students' sentiments were, "We are here to learn how to think and not to write". The lecturers involved in this situation believed that the writing centre could provide useful writing assistance, but their students were not convinced.

All three of these examples can be considered as once-off events, and not persistent ones. However, it is clear from these conversations that even once-off situations can be damaging to the writing centre's reputation. It is also uncertain how many more such episodes on the various campuses have resulted in lecturers choosing not to collaborate with the writing centre again, and not recommending it to their colleagues (or even actively discouraging writing centre collaboration). As Giaimo (2017) found, misunderstandings at staff level can also result in students having inaccurate expectations of a writing centre. Fortunately, the writing centre generally enjoys a positive reputation. These accounts are, however, a reminder that the writing centre should continue to strive for transparency and excellence, and own up to and address any mistakes, as this impacts long-term perceptions.

The theme of *Communication* has addressed aspects around staff awareness of the writing centre, as well as the effectiveness of writing centre communication and marketing. It also addressed the results of ineffective communication, specifically around confusion between the undergraduate and postgraduate writing centres, the roles of both writing centre consultants and content lecturers, and specific services offered (or not offered) by the writing centre. Another aspect that influences the shaping of perceptions, is negative experiences of the writing centre and how these experiences are handled. A key insight from this section is that although many staff members are aware and have accurate and positive expectations of the writing centre, there are also a few concerning or inaccurate expectations, not only of the writing

centre, but also of the complexity, input, and time required to adequately equip students with academic literacy and writing skills. It is clear that communication between the writing centre and academic staff should involve not only a discussion of what the writing centre can do, but also *why* this is necessary in the first place (the challenges students face and how these are best addressed in a dedicated, discipline-specific approach). This kind of communication is more likely to lead to true collaboration instead of surface-level cooperation, for those lecturers who are willing to play an active role in growing their students as academic writers. The next theme, *Value*, builds on this idea of why writing centre services matter, and delves into the perceptions of the writing centre as a valued and integral part of the institution.

4.5 Theme 3: Value, or why it matters

Theme 1 provided a discussion of what the writing centre is expected to do, with Theme 2 adding to this discussion with the focus on how information or expectations of the writing centre are communicated, shaped, and shared. Theme 3 focuses on the perceived value of the writing centre. This theme is crucial in understanding how staff expectations align with the skills they want their students to acquire, and why they may see value in future collaborations with the writing centre. Without value, what the writing centre does and how it communicates are pointless. This section addresses several topics pertaining to what makes the writing centre useful and therefore valued, based on academic staff responses in the focus groups and questionnaires.

4.5.1 Value of research

The first aspect of perceived value stems from the eagerness with which UFS staff members provided feedback for this research study. Various staff members showed that they considered studies such as this one to have value. In Focus group 6, Yasmin mentioned that the questionnaire for this study caught their attention, in between many other regular requests to complete research surveys. It is telling that a number of senior lecturers and professors, most likely with very busy schedules, took the time to complete the questionnaires and attend the focus groups. Some participants were already familiar with the writing centre and actively collaborating with it, while others were not very knowledgeable about it; however, both groups saw enough value in the conversation to participate in this study, despite not standing to gain anything directly from it.

The general sentiment in the focus group discussions seemed to be that more writing centre collaborations would benefit most departments. Participants were eager to suggest ways in which writing centre communication to staff (and students) could be improved. Some of these ideas have been discussed under “Marketing” in Theme 2. While making these suggestions, participants made it clear that they desired to know more about the writing centre, and believed that their departments could benefit from more such communication. In the thematic analysis of the focus group discussions on Atlas.ti, the code labelled “Desire for more communication/awareness” was assigned to various quotes from the transcripts 22 times, across all six focus groups. A surprisingly large number of participants, therefore, indicated wanting more from the writing centre. In focus group 6, Willem mentioned wanting to visit the writing centre to learn more about it; in Focus group 5, Thomas suggested leaflets or flyers for departments to be informed as to how the writing centre can help their students. In the fourth focus group, Owen wanted the writing centre to visit their department directly, so that lecturers are more aware and could share the details with their students as well. In the same focus group, Naledi and Quinton both asked whether they could get information on the writing centre to include in their study guides for their students. Furthermore, Hannah from Focus group 3 wanted more information sessions, as did Gugu in the second focus group. Bridget from the first focus group had the same idea: “it would be really nice, maybe, if we had someone come into the department at the beginning of the semester to say this is the type of stuff we do...” Generally, the tone was very positive when participants mentioned more communication from the writing centre. Considering the average academic workload and potential information overload, it is significant that staff wanted more information about this support service.

This eagerness for more information about the writing centre, coupled with a willingness to personally invite a writing centre representative to departmental meetings, contradicts the literature that positions the writing centre as an editing service (Grimm, 1996), a “laundry” (Boquet, 1999), or a fix-it shop (Janse van Rensburg, 2023), when relating to staff expectations. If participants viewed the writing centre simply as a place to send students and their texts for “fixing”, they would hardly see the need for detailed communication and information sessions. This does not mean that academic staff see the writing centre staff as “colleague pedagogues” (Thonus, 2001:68) tasked with demystifying the complexities of academic writing; the

academics may still, as Thonus (2001) found, see writing centre staff as their surrogates, helping out when the content lecturers are very busy. However, it is a positive development to see that staff place value in learning more about the writing centre, and also directly value participating in writing centre research.

4.5.2 Value to lecturers

The idea of the writing centre as valuable to lecturers came to the fore quite strongly in this study. The main aspects of this idea include not only the writing centre directly assisting lecturers with, for example, scaffolding assignment instructions, but also the notion that by helping students, the writing centre helps lecturers. Key aspects to consider here are adaptability, availability, and changing positionality.

In practice, the writing centre core team at the UFS do assist lecturers with aspects related to student writing, such as making assignment instructions clear, providing input on which writing tasks best assess specific learning outcomes, brainstorming more creative assessments that encourage student-written responses instead of generative AI use, and so forth. This type of collaborative brainstorming and advising usually happens with lecturers who are already working with the writing centre and have established relationships with writing centre staff members. The writing centre does not seek to advise unless approached by a lecturer who specifically requests this. In the focus groups, some participants also verbalised the value of the writing centre helping in this way. In the first focus group, for example, Esmé suggested “building assessment practices together with the writing centre so that maybe how I’m structuring my questions or my assignments is not maybe encouraging the student to reach the level that I would want them to reach, so maybe having that collaboration between the writing centre and myself.” With a request such as this, the writing centre could either assist the lecturer or point them towards someone better qualified to help. Other participants wanted more hands-on assistance, with Imraan in Focus group 3 wondering whether there was any chance of the writing centre providing marking support (either through providing markers, funding markers, or recommending technologies that can assist in marking). This is unfortunately not something the writing centre can provide, but it is significant that lecturers such as Imraan see the writing centre as a place where staff can request assistance. This may in part be attributed to writing centres functioning as liminal spaces, operating in between departments and

faculties (Archer & Richards, 2011). Archer and Richards (2011) also situate South African writing centres in particular as having a strong sense of community while assigning value to the individual as well. This sense of community and value may contribute to lecturers feeling that they can approach the writing centre with queries beyond simply assisting with student writing, knowing that the writing centre will help where they can or otherwise suggest someone else who can help.

Other focus group participants had slightly different ideas on how the writing centre can support lecturers. In the second focus group, Gugu wondered if the writing centre could provide staff with opportunities to improve their academic writing. This is an interesting point, since it shows that staff are also aware of their own limitations in academic writing and may be looking for more support. Although this sentiment did not manifest often in the focus groups, it seems that Gugu saw the writing centre as catering to students as well as staff. Similarly, Willem in Focus group 6 also mentioned the writing centre helping both students and lecturers with their academic writing skills. Gugu and Willem both acknowledged being fairly new to the university and therefore unfamiliar with the writing centre, so it is possible that other participants were aware of department-specific existing initiatives to support staff in their own writing and publishing. However, they raised an important concern: academic staff often feel inadequately supported in their own writing needs (Castle & Keane, 2016). At the UFS, staff writing support is provided by the CGS (Centre for Graduate Support), that runs workshops for postgraduate students as well as staff members. The CGS also provides individual consultations both to students and staff, as well as initiatives such as an article refinement programme. Gugu and Willem were therefore correct in considering the writing centre a useful aid, although they did seem to conflate the services of the undergraduate and postgraduate writing centres — a misperception already discussed. In general, published writing centre research reflects that writing centres are focused on student writing rather than staff writing (unless, of course, staff members are also registered as postgraduate students). More research on writing centres (especially postgraduate writing centres) assisting staff members with their own writing, would be informative.

Another aspect of the writing centre being of value to lecturers was seen in conversations around writing centre collaborations aimed at helping students. This was already discussed under the theme of Communication. Suffice it to say here that

staff felt the writing centre could bring a much-needed perspective to such collaborations, assisting lecturers in equipping their students and departments with necessary skills. For example, Gugu from Focus group 3 shared:

I think this is where they [the writing centre] need to liaise with the departments on the state of things in a department, say in the Education Department, they need to kind of do some homework about what do students or staff in the department require, what kind of help could best serve them that is in line with their career prospects, with their current studies, whatever it may be, or in education, we also talk about some attributes that we think our students, when they leave this university, they should have. So when the lecturer looks at that, they may be in a better way to now design and implement their programme at the centre, because they are aware about the needs and the limitations and so it may enhance their ability to really assist and to make an impact in the students and in, in staff as well. So it's a careful study about the needs or the gaps that are existent in that department in terms of what the writing skills centre can do, and then carry out that plan and carry out that plan to fruition.

Based on what Gugu shared, it is clear they viewed the writing centre as being in the unique position to look at a department from an objective perspective, taking into consideration student needs, staff needs, and the curriculum, and then to advise on this and create collaborative programmes along with staff. This may not be completely accurate: the UFS writing centre mostly works with lecturers regarding writing tasks in individual modules, or regarding specific courses (making sure the first-, second-, and third-years receive consistent writing support across their undergraduate studies). The writing centre is not mandated with addressing graduate attributes across entire departments (although departments occasionally invite writing centre staff to provide input and perspective on such initiatives, from a writing perspective). However, Gugu's view that the writing centre can help staff and students as well as a department as a whole, indicates a very high value placed upon the writing centre as a service. It could also once again indicate a conflation of other CTL services with the writing centre; in this case, the graduate attribute development team, or even the curriculum renewal team. The writing centre is involved institutionally to some extent, beyond providing consultations and workshops to students; for example, the head of the writing centre serves on the UFS language committee, and writing centre staff are sometimes called

upon to assist in fielding entries for initiatives such as the UFS Learning and Teaching Conference and the Khothatsa project (which aims to give recognition to staff and students by sharing stories of inspiration). Therefore, Gugu's expectations of the writing centre as being involved in more than individual writing assistance, is not inaccurate in principle.

Another aspect of writing centre collaborations assisting lecturers was also discussed under Theme 2, and involved the idea of the writing centre literally saving lecturers time in class by providing writing input and assistance to students. This was mentioned by both Imraan and Hannah in Focus group 3, with Hannah feeling thankful that the writing centre can help teach the students reading and writing, so that the lecturer can focus on content teaching. This reflects an opinion of the writing centre as a co-teacher within the academic space, taking a different role than the content lecturer but on the same side, with the mutual goal of benefiting students. The writing centre in this view "complements, clarifies and extends classroom learning" (Drennan & Keyser, 2022), as explained to new consultants at the Write Site in their first training session. This is similar to the views expressed by Thonus (2001) and Carstens and Rambiritch (2020) who described the writing centre consultant as taking a teacher role. Thonus (2001) further elaborated on this as staff seeing the writing centre as their surrogates or assisting when they are too busy, and Lerner (2003) commented on how staff trusted the writing centre.

Apart from the relatively direct benefits to academic staff discussed thus far, the writing centre also indirectly benefits staff by helping students. Since one of the main goals of academic staff members who teach is to guide students towards learning, being successful and passing their modules, anyone who helps in this goal can be said to assist the lecturer. This point was explicitly made by Willem in Focus group 6: "I think the goal is to help students as well as the lecturers because I think it can also help lecturers by helping students, it is also helping lecturers... So we benefit as lecturers because it enhance our teaching experience through what students are doing." This once again reflects a sense of the writing centre being of value to lecturers, and of the writing centre and the academic staff member being part of the same "team" on the side of student success.

A final aspect to consider in how the writing centre adds value to lecturers' experiences is that of the writing centre empowering and impacting academic staff members by employing them as writing centre consultants. In the questionnaires, two respondents mentioned knowing about the writing centre owing to working there, and another mentioned their spouse working at the writing centre. Focus group respondents were chosen specifically for their outsider perspective, so no former writing centre consultants were included in the focus groups. However, there are a number of ex-consultants on the various UFS campuses who at some point worked at the undergraduate writing centre before focusing solely on lecturing responsibilities. Although data collection for this study did not include information specifically from this cohort, many current and former writing centre consultants have verbalised in informal conversations how working at the writing centre had helped them in their own studies and in relating to their students. This group of staff members is relatively small compared to all academic staff on campus, and the writing centre does not employ consultants with the main goal of empowering them to be better lecturers, but it is worth mentioning here as another way in which the centre has impacted lecturers. Writing centre research, although often focused on student impact, has found that consultants or tutors often benefit greatly from the process of tutoring; Clarence (2016), for example, looked at reflective reports written by University of the Western Cape writing centre tutors, who mentioned developing as writers and as academics. Trimbur (1987:28) believed in tutors being developed to the point of considering the writing centre at university as a recruiting ground for future colleagues, and Ntando, Ndamase and Matenda (2024) found increased future employability for students who were employed as writing centre consultants. This is therefore another small but significant way in which the writing centre has been of value to academic staff.

It is worth reflecting here on certain features of the writing centre that position it uniquely to be an approachable and valuable support service to academic staff. The first of these is its *adaptability*. The writing centre is always ready to try something new and to find creative solutions to reaching specific student cohorts. In the past, for example, the UFS writing centre used a system for asynchronous online workshops where students had to submit a first draft in order to access the online workshop, and could only submit their final draft for submission if they had completed the online workshop. This encouraged students to engage with writing as a process, instead of

just ticking boxes or ignoring the writing centre workshop completely. More recently, acting on the fact that a certain cohort of students simply never came to the writing centre, despite being encouraged by their lecturers every year, the writing centre created an initiative where selected consultants went to these students at set times in their departments, effectively taking the consultations to the students. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the UFS writing centre went fully online within the span of a few months, creating new protocols and training all consultants for this, despite not offering any online consultations previously. It is not only the UFS writing centre that displays such a sense of creativity and adaptability; Archer (2017) mentions using role-play and multimodal resources in consultant training at the UCT writing centre, and refers to the writing centre as a transformative space. In another article, Archer (2010) mentioned the writing centre creating writing workshops, assisting staff in embedding writing in their curricula, and running interdisciplinary writer's circles, among other projects and endeavours. Staff members are more likely to want to work with support services who are willing to consider their unique positions and challenges, and spend time come up with interventions that work for that cohort specifically.

A second feature of the writing centre is its *availability*. This is closely linked to adaptability, but slightly different in that the writing centre is not only willing to change its approaches as needed, but also willing to “show up” both for long-term collaborations planned a year in advance, and for last-minute requests. For example, at the UFS, the writing centre usually suggests a foundational workshop where there is no time to design a tailor-made, discipline-specific intervention (with the understanding that a more targeted intervention will be attempted in the future). The writing centre has often organised sending a representative to various faculty events and information sessions, as well as to student-led events usually located within hostels or residences on campus. A writing centre core team member even participated in an Amazing Race-style event where students from the Economic and Management Sciences faculty had to race across campus and stop at various points where representatives from different support services asked them questions. In very rare cases (usually if asked for something extremely last-minute) the writing centre would refuse to assist or to participate in something. The core office team tries to assist even if lecturer queries may be unusual or unclear. Similarly, the writing centre consultants, for their part, show up for their students not only by being present when

scheduled, but by preparing for the sessions and showing genuine care for their students. This genuine care was discussed by Miley (2016), who wrote about the writing centre in the context of feminist mothering in the sense of it being a nurturing space, using this care to resist the neoliberalism in the institution which often sees students as mere numbers. Namakula (2024) also believes that the writing centre's strength lies in a pedagogy of care, since much of what happens in consultations relate to support beyond the purely academic, such as personal, emotional, and social support. This availability rooted in care sets the writing centre apart as a unit that will do its best to support and show up.

A final feature that speaks to the value of the writing centre is its *changing positionality*. The understanding of the writing centre conceptualised by North (1984) galvanised decades of writing centre practitioners into proclaiming the goal of these centres as producing “better writers, not better writing” (North, 1984:438), and as being “here to talk to writers” (North, 1984:440). However, Carlse (2019) pointed out that these original pedagogies and approaches should be reconsidered, before introducing the idea of the writing centre consultant as critical friend. The writing centre has historically been at the forefront of responding to changes in pedagogical approaches (consider the movement from the current-traditional paradigm to expressivism and social constructivism, explained in Chapter 2, especially by Appleby-Ostroff, [2017]). Another example of the writing centre changing its positionality is described by Clarence (2023) who challenges the traditional view of the writing centre as a safe space by instead advocating to reimagine it as a brave space. These centres have weathered institutional changes (one of the most recent being the advent of neoliberalism, as explained by Hlatshwayo, [2022]), new generations of students with different approaches to technology and communication, as well as a global pandemic (Govender, 2023). Writing centres (along with all others in higher education) are now faced with the challenges and opportunities presented by the rise of generative AI, which according to Mutsvairigwa et al. (2024) may necessitate some adaptations in the way that the writing centre operates. As much as writing centres have had to adapt, reimagine and provide more nuance to the way tutoring and tutors are understood, the core of empowering students to become better academic writers still remains. This changing positionality can be considered a strength; writing centres are not the vestigial remains of an antiquated system of learning, but are vibrant, evolving spaces

that continue to be student-centred, adapting where needed but refusing to compromise on their core principles.

4.5.3 Value to students

In addition to staff displaying how they believed the writing centre was of value to them, much of the focus group discussions also revolved around the writing centre being of value to students. Because of this, the conversations also included ideas around how students can be incentivised to make use of the writing centre more regularly. This section looks at the writing centre's significance to students, considered through the eyes of the staff members.

Throughout the focus group discussions, one aspect that became clear was that most of the staff members in the discussions genuinely cared about student success. They were keenly aware of some of the shortcomings in their students' writing, and shared examples of how they had tried or wanted to try to help their students. Focus group participants often expressed frustration with their students, especially when the students did not make use of support services and opportunities, but it can be argued that this frustration is also born from caring about students and knowing that students would benefit from assistance they often choose to ignore. Some participants viewed students as a problem to be solved; Kgosi from the third focus group, for example, was frustrated by students from their department not wanting to go to the Write Site. Others viewed their students as future academics to be nurtured; Yasmin from Focus group 4, as mentioned previously, was in the process of developing group-based writing sessions for their students to practice writing and overcome mental writing blocks. However they chose to express this, the participants all wanted their students to succeed, and felt this strongly enough to participate in this writing centre study. These perspectives align with the concept of care in pedagogy, as explained by Namakula (2024) who draws from scholars including Nel Noddings, bell hooks and Paulo Freire to discuss the importance of student empowerment and holistic development. According to Namakula (2024), this pedagogy of care is also a key tenet of writing centre pedagogy.

For the most part, UFS staff can be considered to believe that the writing centre can genuinely help students. Although the questionnaires did not by design focus on value as a theme, some of the questions shown in Figure 9 (under Theme 1) do speak to

value. For the statement “The writing centre’s services are relevant to the needs of students in my department”, 95 respondents strongly agreed, and 77 agreed. That is a total of almost 83% of respondents agreeing that the writing centre is relevant (or valuable, if you will) to *their* students. In addition, a staggering 201 (or 97%) of questionnaire respondents agreed or strongly agreed that “Good higher order writing skills are important to my students’ success.” Higher order writing skills are a key area of writing addressed by the writing centre, whether or not all academic staff are aware of this. Therefore, with some good communication between the writing centre and staff members, it is possible that most academic staff at the UFS would agree that the writing centre can provide valuable input.

Slightly further along in the questionnaire and also shown in Figure 9, respondents were asked to rate their interest in specific writing centre initiatives. Responses were once again largely in favour of making use of the writing centre. Three of these responses are illustrated in Figure 11.

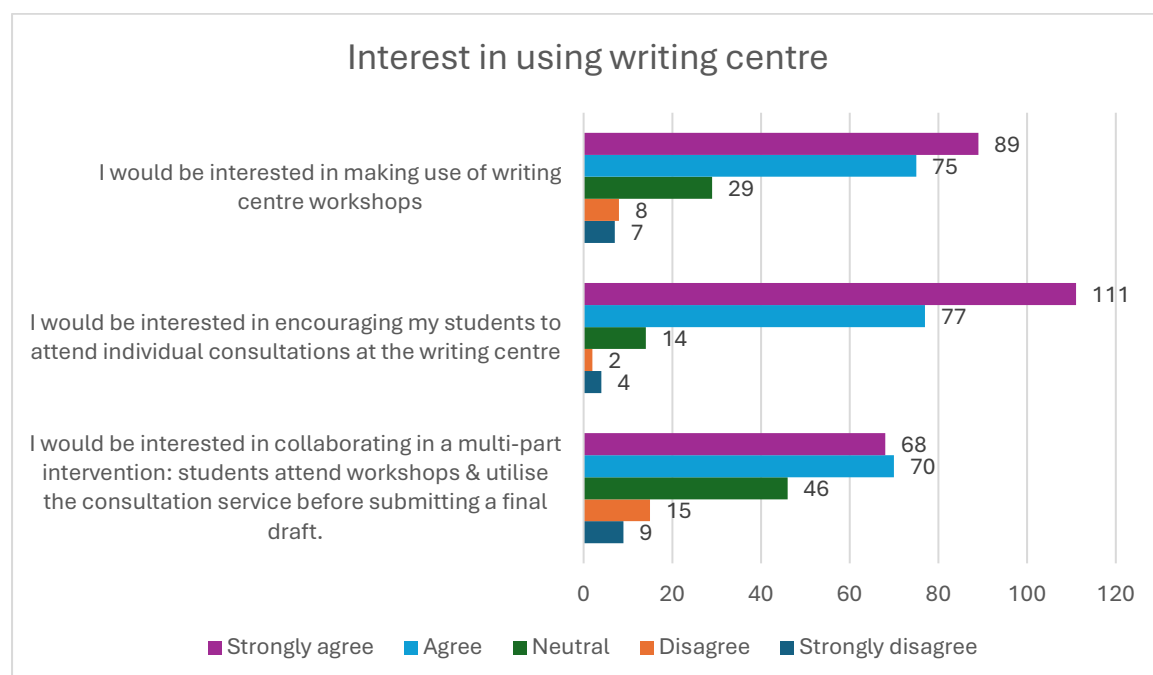


Figure 11: staff interest in using the writing centre.

It should be noted that some questionnaire respondents were largely responsible for postgraduate students, which may have skewed their answers towards a neutral or negative response. However, there is still much interest in using all of the services mentioned. As can be expected, the individual consultations received the highest number of affirmative responses, potentially because this requires very little extra work

from the lecturer. Motivations for this hopefully also included the belief that one-on-one feedback on an individual student's work is a valuable experience for that student. In second place regarding "Agree" or "Strongly agree" responses, was the topic of workshops, with multi-part interventions ranking last, but still receiving 138 responses (or 66% of respondents) in the affirmative. It is understandable that this one received the lowest amount of interest, since lecturers may not want to commit to interventions that will most likely require them to communicate and collaborate with the writing centre intensively. However, all these responses indicate an interest in the writing centre that is born from seeing potential value in the services.

The focus group discussions shed more light on specific aspects of student development that lecturers expect the writing centre to contribute to. Much has already been discussed regarding what lecturers expect the writing centre to do. The concepts of helping students with higher and lower order writing concerns, multilingual or ESL concerns, unethical AI use, clarifying unwritten rules, reading, and various aspects of academic literacy discussed under Theme 1 will not all be repeated here, although expected writing centre input on all of these speaks to the perceived value of a writing centre. Some aspects do warrant discussion or revisiting in how they contribute to the sense of the writing centre being of value to students.

One recurring idea was that of the writing centre helping students to produce good writing, to improve on their writing, and thereby to produce tangible results. Comments from the focus groups included students using the writing centre when they see that it "helps them to improve the quality of their work," as well as students writing "good essays" with the help of the writing centre (both quotes from Willem, Focus group 6). Quinton from Focus group 4 believed the writing centre could assist in getting students to "improve their writing skills and to actually submit work that is of a high standard and of a higher quality", and Phumzile from the same focus group wanted students to be able to express their own ideas in "a way that is intelligible to their audience". Similarly, Anele from the first focus group hoped that the writing centre could assist students in improving the "overall general quality" of their writing. Focus group participants, therefore, displayed high hopes for the writing centre making measurable positive differences in student writing. As mentioned in the literature review chapter of this study, a writing centre can make a measurable impact on student marks (Archer, 2008; Tiruchittampalam et al., 2018; Yeats et al., 2010; CTL, 2019; Joubert, 2023). It

can also reduce anxiety and improve confidence in students (Tan, 2009; Coetzer, 2024), as well as explain the “hidden curriculum” to students (Boughey & McKenna, 2021), all of which is also likely to result in better student work. Although focus group participants in this study may not be completely aware of *how* the writing centre helps students improve their writing, they are aware that the students’ writing *can improve* as a result of visiting the writing centre.

A few of the participants also commented that in order for this improvement to realise, students would of course have to act on feedback they received at the writing centre. In the first focus group, Chipso mentioned that “it’s always up to the students; if they don’t take to heart the feedback and the comments that the consultants give them, then their writing won’t improve. But I have found that the students who do take the feedback to heart — you can really see the improvement in their writing.” On a similar note, Bridget from the same focus group described the writing centre as rewarding “people who take initiative to seek out help”. The writing centre, according to these staff members, is thus only of value to students if those students are also willing to put in the work. This understanding reflects a viewpoint similar to that described by Carstens and Rambiritch (2020), who highlight writing within the writing centre as including both social construction and social interaction. In the social construction approach, students grow in collaboration with a more knowledgeable peer (Nordlof, 2014), and in the social interaction approach, students learn by meaning-making through dialogue (Carstens & Rambiritch, 2020). The writing centre consultant can take the role of coach or commentator (Carstens & Rambiritch, 2020), or active listener (Appleby-Ostroff, 2017), among other roles, many of which require the student to take an active role and put in the work of participating in the consultation, and then act on the input. Focus group participants were thus in agreement with much existing literature that the writing centre should not teach or do students’ work for them, but should encourage and equip students to improve their own writing.

A further aspect that speaks to the value of the writing centre for student development, is the idea that writing centre support can indirectly help students develop their graduate attributes. The Graduate Attributes project at the UFS, introduced in 2023, aims to enhance student employability by intentionally integrating specifically identified attributes into all students’ degree programmes (UFS, 2025). The nine graduate attributes identified at the UFS are academic competence, critical thinking, problem

solving, oral communication, written communication, ethical reasoning, community engagement, entrepreneurial mindset, and digital skills and competencies (UFS, 2025). This project has been highly prioritised by the institution, with multiple staff and student awareness events, since it forms part of the UFS institutional plan, known as Vision 130. UFS academic staff are thus keenly aware of the importance of developing these attributes. Four of the focus group participants mentioned these attributes, without any prompting from the researcher. In Focus group 2, Gugu felt that an awareness of graduate attribute requirements in a specific department, could feature in discussions between the lecturer and the writing centre. Xolani from the sixth focus group mentioned the importance of lecturers aligning their curricula with graduate attributes and ensuring that any writing centre collaborations are also aligned with this, and Zanele from that same group also mentioned the graduate attributes, specifically in the context of how AI might prevent students from acquiring those attributes and how the writing centre could combat that. Finally, Sibongile from Focus group 5, while not mentioning the attributes by name, did mention that their department placed great emphasis on producing employable students. Sibongile then went on to explain that an important part of employability is good written and verbal communication; hence the importance of the writing centre.

Closely linked to graduate attributes was the idea of the writing centre having impact on students beyond their studies, equipping them for future employment. Focus group participants placed great emphasis on the transferable skills students could learn from the writing centre:

I think a good motivation for the students will be if we emphasise that you will actually be- or have a disadvantage by not using the writing centre. So if we can maybe give them a list of advantages and soft skills they will be able to learn from the writing centre. That would encourage them to increase their marks, increase their development and they will know that they are actually investing in their future by seeking help from the writing centre. (Naledi, Focus group 4)

Gugu from the second focus group also mentioned that writing centre services could help students in their studies as well as in their future careers. It is interesting that the lecturers are so concerned not only with equipping their students to pass their modules

(arguably the role of the lecturer), but also with equipping them for future employment. This attitude can perhaps be attributed to the current focus on graduate attributes at the UFS. Future employment can also be used as a motivating factor or incentive when attempting to get students to “buy in” to an initiative. Regarding the writing centre directly contributing to future employability, not many published studies are available. Ntando et al. (2024) linked the writing centre with student employability, but their study focused on the increased employability of the students employed as writing centre consultants. Manjeya (2021) linked academic literacy skills to students’ professional careers, and elaborated on these skills in the context of the writing centre as including the creation of “solutions for academic writing through practice”, (Manjeya, 2021:154). This solution-oriented approach can certainly be useful for students in their future careers. More research on employability and the writing centre would certainly add to the body of literature around the impact of writing centres. For now, it is sufficient to note that academic staff members generally believe the writing centre to equip students with skills that are useful both in their studies and in their future professions.

It is clear from the previous discussion that academic staff members consider the writing centre to have value for students. This is an excellent development, since lecturer involvement was cited as an important factor in whether or not students chose to make use of the writing centre in a study by Mdoana-Zide and Mukuna (2023). However, students still have their own misperceptions of the writing centre (Giaino, 2017; Leary, 2017; Dison & Mendelowitz, 2017), and may be reluctant to attend for various reasons. They may also mean to attend, but lack of time management often results in them not having adequate time between writing a draft and submitting that draft to also book and attend a consultation. Lecturers are keenly aware of this, with Jade and Kgosi from Focus group 4 explaining that students are just generally reluctant to make use of the writing centre, and Gugu from the second focus group mourning the fact that unethical shortcuts such as misuse of generative AI could lead to students seeing even less need to seek out the writing centre.

In order to combat this reluctance, focus group participants suggested various ways to incentivise students. One solution that regularly emerged involved more information sessions presented to students, so they were aware of the writing centre and how to contact it. Hannah in Focus group 4 pointed out that students are only likely to participate in something if it is linked to marks, and Michael in the same group

mentioned assigning up to 15% of the course mark for a specific module to whether students had made use of the writing centre. Faizel from the second focus group agreed with this idea, and added that it also worked well if students had to follow certain formalised steps such as submitting a first draft before gaining access to an online workshop. In the third focus group, Lerato mentioned that it had worked well for them in the past to require proof of writing centre attendance before the students' final drafts would be accepted for marking. These suggestions are similar to writing centre incentivisation suggestions made by Arbee (2020) and Dansereau et al. (2020). Other staff members suggested that intrinsic motivation would work best: in the last focus group, Willem mentioned that students would make use of the writing centre if they saw the improvement in their work, with Bridget in the first focus group mentioning that while students may not be very motivated at first, they will become more motivated to keep using the writing centre once they realise its value (similar to what was found by Dansereau et al. [2020], whose students continued utilising the writing centre when external incentivisation was no longer a factor). Anele from Focus group 1 also believed that students who wanted to do well would seek out support services like the writing centre, basically incentivising themselves.³⁷ This is close to the approach of Namakula (2024), who believes in making the writing centre a caring, non-judgemental space that students would want to make use of.

Incentivisation is a necessary part of encouraging students to participate in something. However, with incentivisation comes the risk of turning writing centre services into a mandatory, box-ticking exercise for students. An example of this at the UFS Write Site would be that a lecturer wants students to learn from the writing process, and therefore asks them to attend a writing centre workshop created just for them, and thereafter to attend at least two writing centre consultations, with plenty of time to do this. The purpose of these consultations, as discussed by the lecturer and the writing centre coordinator, is that the students write a first draft, attend a consultation, receive feedback on this draft, implement the feedback, attend a second consultation, and so forth. However, in practice, what often happens in such a scenario is that students either do not understand the purpose of the two consultations, or just do not plan for

³⁷ This focus group participant also jokingly suggested free coffee as an incentive, but since I could not find any peer-reviewed research on the correlation between caffeine intake and writing centre attendance, this idea is not discussed further.

them, and then attempt to have both consultations in the final week or even on the final day before submission, just to get the bonus marks. This of course defies the purpose of the two consultations. There are also multiple examples of Write Site consultants complaining that when they ask a student why the student made a booking at the writing centre, the student answers along the lines of “my lecturer gives bonus marks if we come” instead of seeing this as a learning opportunity and explaining what questions they have about their own writing. Arbee (2020) draws from various writing centre researchers to explain that mandatory writing centre usage is not considered ideal. The main reasons for this include the fact that students are not always motivated to extract the most out of mandatory sessions, and may resent the remedial stigma that comes with being forced to seek out this kind of service (Arbee, 2020). However, as mentioned regarding the Dansereau et al. (2020) example, mandatory writing centre collaborations can result in students seeing the value of the centre and making the choice for voluntary participation in future.

The box-ticking mentality was also evident among some staff members in this study. In Focus group 5, for example, Sibongile suggested incorporating the writing centre into a mandatory credit-bearing module, to be assigned to all students who fail a writing test. This in principle is not too far removed from the Critical Academic Literacy modules at the UFS, assigned to students who were identified as requiring extra assistance with growing their academic literacy. However, it does exhibit a lack of understanding of how a writing centre operates, as well as a belief that a generic course should sufficiently “fix” basic writing issues. This again confirms that many lecturers may not be aware of the complexity, time, and individual input required to successfully socialise students into the required academic discourse at university.

The theme of value has provided valuable insight into how academic staff members in this study view the writing centre at the UFS. It is clear that they consider it to have much potential in helping students develop as writers, and do not just see it as another meaningless institutional hurdle. They also see value in the writing centre as helping staff, whether directly or through assisting their students. This suggests that staff at this university are open to the idea of many future collaborations with the writing centre, at the right time and after having the right conversations.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an in-depth discussion of the findings obtained in this study. As related in the sections discussing the three main themes identified, academic staff at the UFS are generally aware of the writing centre, and their expectations are mostly accurate and aligned with services offered by the writing centre. There were some misperceptions, especially concerning a remedial or editing approach instead of the discipline-specific, higher-order-before-lower-order approach favoured by the writing centre. Academic staff believe that the writing centre can or should provide writing assistance especially to ESL or multilingual students, making them aware of the discourses favoured in academia, assisting with reading where possible, and in the process having a measurable impact on student marks and performance. The main ways in which the writing centre provides this assistance, should be through the consultation service as well as group classes (workshops). The writing centre is also expected to assist lecturers, whether directly or indirectly. To facilitate this, many lecturers would like more information and more regular communication from the writing centre, and they are generally quite positive about future collaborations. The next and final chapter of this study discusses these findings in the context of theoretical implications, implications for practice, and recommendations for the way forward, specifically at the UFS writing centre.

5. Recommendations and conclusions

This concluding chapter relates the findings back to the research objectives, and comments on key findings that stood out. It also provides an overview of theoretical and practical implications and recommendations for the writing centre within the larger UFS community. The chapter closes with suggestions for further research, and a reflection on the researcher's journey throughout this study.

5.1 Reflecting on the principal findings

At this point, it may be useful to look back at the research problem as stated in the first chapter. The research problem was formulated around the idea that UFS lecturer misperceptions and misaligned expectations may lead to students acquiring these misperceptions as well. It also affects if and how the lecturers approach the writing centre, impacting the amount and quality of work done by the writing centre across the institution. In order to align both staff and student expectations from the writing centre, and to facilitate productive future collaborations, it is important for writing centre decision-makers to understand staff expectations of current and potential additional support from the writing centre. This, in essence, was the purpose of this study. The research objectives were stated as follows: firstly, to examine the perceptions and expectations of UFS academic staff regarding the undergraduate writing centre, and secondly, to compare these to the current services and mandate of the writing centre, with the aim of identifying potential future collaborations between the writing centre and academic staff, in order to ultimately benefit the students. The first part of these objectives was fulfilled in Chapter 4, which examined staff perceptions in relation to current writing centre services. The last part — identifying future collaborations — is addressed in this chapter.

The principal findings provided some positive and some mixed results, and illuminated a great deal of expectations that staff hold towards the writing centre. On the positive side, a large number of academic staff members are aware of the writing centre. They also consider it useful and valuable to them as lecturers, to the institution, to departments, and to students. Participants appreciated specifically the perspective the writing centre could bring to writing support, and hoped that the writing centre could assist in writing-adjacent areas such as reading and AI use. Because of this, there is

a good amount of interest from lecturers (at least based on the current study's participants) in making use of various writing centre services, as well as interest in knowing more about the writing centre, and in more communication from the writing centre going forward.

Other perceptions were more mixed regarding their alignment with writing centre practice. Participants were divided in their opinions on whether the writing centre was aimed at all students, students who struggle, or even students and staff members. There were also some differences of opinion on whether the writing centre should focus primarily on higher order or lower order concerns, as well as whether the writing centre should take a generic or discipline-specific approach. It also seemed that some participants contradicted themselves, or contradicted the findings from the questionnaires³⁸, serving as a reminder that perceptions are complex and difficult to measure clearly (Struyven et al., 2005). Another aspect of writing centre expectations that provided mixed answers was that of the difference between the undergraduate and postgraduate writing centres. While many academics seemed to be aware of the writing centre, there were a number of instances where the two writing centres were conflated or confused for one another, or where participants were uncertain of the differences between the two and the reasons behind having two writing centres at the same institution.

Some of the findings indicated more serious misperceptions on the side of the academic staff members. These included a remedial view of the writing centre, as well as a lack of understanding of the complexities of academic writing (Janse van Rensburg, 2023; Lamberti & Archer, 2023; Drennan, 2017b), especially for students who are writing in a language that is not their first or preferred language. This perception also involved seeing the students as having a "language problem" (remedial view of students) instead of being aware of the need for students to be inducted into the academic community (Julius et al., 2024; Appleby-Ostroff, 2017; Boughey & McKenna, 2021).

Since a large part of this study is related to the idea of the writing centre and the content expert collaborating to grow students as academic writers, findings around

³⁸ The questionnaires, for example, showed great respondent interest in higher order assistance from the writing centre, while some conversations in the focus groups sketched the writing centre as focusing primarily on lower order concerns or proofreading.

collaboration are pertinent to the discussion. The proverbial “good news” from the findings in this study, is that collaboration is possible, and that some academic staff members are interested in continued and future collaboration. The “bad news” is that true collaboration, as defined by Dison and Moore (2019), is rare; what usually happens is what these authors would label as cooperation, but not collaboration. This raises the question of whether true collaboration is really possible in most cases. Academic staff members (and Write Site staff, for that matter) usually will not have the time for collaborative endeavours involving planning, co-creation of materials, co-teaching, co-assessing, etc. This level of collaboration is perhaps best left for select situations — especially for modules where the lecturer is truly committed to investing time and effort into the intervention. The title of this study — *Connecting to Collaborate* — therefore, is perhaps slightly ignorant (or overly hopeful) of the commitment and investment required from all participants in order to run a truly collaborative intervention. Practical difficulties aside, collaboration does remain important, and writing centre interventions must maintain a level of collaboration in order to be successful. It may be useful to think of cooperation and collaboration as points on a scale instead of mutually exclusive situations, and to aim for as much collaboration as is possible in any given intervention.

5.2 Theoretical and practical implications

This study has referred to a number of key theories in the field of writing centre research. The findings in this study have implications for theory as well as practice (and since theory often informs practice, the two are discussed together here). A first important implication derives from academic staff specifically expressing the need for the writing centre to assist ESL students, closely linked to the expectation that the writing centre assist with proofreading or lower order editing. The traditional response from the writing centre globally to expectations such as these has been to emphasise to staff and students that the writing centre deals with higher order concerns (Boquet, 1999). However, the UFS writing centre may need to consider the fact that there is a genuine need for lower order or grammar-focused assistance, especially since such a large percentage of students at this university are not first-language English speakers. This is similar to the approach suggested by Blau et al. (2002), who argued that a directive approach may have its merits, especially when involving second-language speakers who are sometimes simply unaware of certain language conventions, and

need to be informed. Whether or not lower order writing support is possible and how it can be provided without compromising on the main services of the writing centre, is up to the Write Site to decide, but it is at least worth considering. In this way, the writing centre can act on an expressed expectation instead of simply telling the students and lecturers that they are incorrect to expect this.

A second implication relates to the finding that staff seem generally unaware of the time required and the complexities of teaching students academic writing (Drennan, 2022; Lamberti & Archer, 2023), as well as the fact that many lecturers still seem to reduce academic literacy to transferable, neutral language skills instead of seeing them as literacy practices situated within specific contexts (Archer, 2008). Academics from fields unrelated to language studies may know what good writing looks like, but may be unable to verbalise to students what they need to do to produce good writing. Staff need a clearer understanding of what their students really struggle with and how to put this into words for the literacy practitioner to design a feasible intervention. One solution to this challenge could be to provide training that sensitises academics to what good writing truly entails and how to communicate this to students in their field. To supplement this official training approach (or as an alternative), the writing centre can also ensure that these topics are included in the discussions when lecturers who have not worked with the writing centre before become involved with writing interventions at the centre.

Another implication relates to a slight discrepancy between existing literature and the findings in this study. Although there was an expectation from participants/respondents in this study that the writing centre assist with lower order concerns, these academics were also quick to indicate their appreciation for higher order assistance when provided with different options. Questionnaire respondents selected various higher order aspects as important, and in the focus groups, participants mentioned a variety of higher order concerns they expected the writing centre to assist with. This opens up the question of whether academic staff truly expect remedial or lower order assistance (as mentioned by, among others, Janse van Rensburg, 2023; Leibowitz et al., 1997; Dison & Mendelowitz, 2017; Boquet, 1999; Dison & Moore, 2019; Sefalane-Nkohla & Mtonjeni, 2019), or whether they simply do not always have the vocabulary to explain the type of writing assistance their students need. The fact that the participants in this study were so enthusiastic about higher order assistance, seems to contradict

established writing centre research, which indicates that lecturers want a grammar hospital or fix-it shop, and only that (see citations in previous sentence). There may be more nuance to staff expectations, either due to academic staff in general becoming more informed in recent years, or due to some other reasons that have not been fully explored in the literature yet. In either case, more research is needed to determine whether this finding was an outlier or whether staff perceptions of the writing centre and the complexities of student writing have shifted in recent years.

A final implication that can be derived from the findings in this study is that good communication between the writing centre and various academic staff members in different faculties will be key for future collaborative endeavours to take place. The writing centre will need to find a balance between mass communication to all faculties that can easily get lost in the bulk of institutional emails, and targeted communication with interested parties only, which runs the risk of excluding potential future collaborators. In this communication, especially to staff members who are not currently involved with writing centre interventions, the writing centre can draw on some of the expressed expectations in this study to identify collaborations that will assist lecturers and their students as best as possible. Workshops (in-person, online, or asynchronous) still seem to be the most practical solution for interventions, especially when combined with the writing centre consultation service. The writing centre can also consider working with lecturers who are agreeable to embedding more writing support directly in their courses, perhaps in the form of lessons in their study guides, or online sessions built into the lecturer's module on BlackBoard. Another avenue to pursue is that of general or foundational writing support; for example, the existing one-hour generic face-to-face workshops can be adapted to be available as asynchronous online sessions; the OWL (Online Writing Lab) project can be made available through more channels; and the grammar course can be expanded to provide access to more students both within the institution and perhaps even outside of the UFS.³⁹ As suggested in some of the focus group discussions in this study, the writing centre can consider initiatives such as writing groups where students from various backgrounds can get together to grow as writers. In addition, the writing centre can explore the possibility of using carefully screened and trained AI tools (not generative AI, but

³⁹ The expansion and increased availability of both the OWL project and the grammar course are currently under development at the time of completing this study.

assistive tools such as Grammarly) to support students where appropriate. The undergraduate writing centre can also consider working more closely with the postgraduate writing centre where possible, or at least consider making it clearer to the university community that there are two writing centres with different focal points. Renaming both writing centres could provide some clarity. There are truly many possibilities for future collaborations; all that is needed is for the writing centre to connect with academic staff members who are willing to put in a little extra effort to commit to the process of involving the writing centre in growing their students as writers.

5.3 Recommendations for future research

As is usually the case with research, this study exposed some areas where more rigorous, recent research would be helpful to both researchers and practitioners in writing centre studies. In the first place, it would be informative to run a similar study to this one, but including more lecturers and involving more South African universities, since this study was limited in scope. A larger sample size and staff perspectives from institutions with different student demographics may provide some interesting results. Secondly, it would be enlightening to run a study that collects student perspectives on the writing centre⁴⁰, and then compare how student and staff expectations match or differ. This could be especially interesting if the student perspectives were to be compared to those of the lecturers in whose modules those particular students were enrolled. Furthermore, since the data collection instruments in this study had some limitations, it would be informative to see results from similar studies that perhaps employed face-to-face focus groups with more time for discussion, or used questionnaires that underwent more rigorous testing. Finally, there is a great deal of uncertainty around the future of universities, especially regarding writing and assessment, in light of generative AI programmes such as large language models. There is definitely room for more research around the writing centre responding to the challenges of unethical AI use among students, and on how the writing centre can provide guidance to academic staff. Linked to this concept is the idea of how the writing centre can evolve to meet the changing student cohort where they are, be it in relation

⁴⁰ In this section, “writing centre” is used to refer to writing centres globally, and not just the UFS Write Site.

to using AI and other technology, or in the increasingly perceived resistance of students to attending writing centre consultations. As discussed in Chapter 4, the writing centre finds strength in its adaptability, availability, and changing positionality; it is therefore in a good position to weather these changes and adapt as needed, without losing its core values. These changes and adaptations will continue to provide many research opportunities.

5.4 Personal reflection and conclusion

At this final point in the study, I want to take a moment to reflect on my research journey. Writing centre studies is not only a field of interest for me, but also the field in which I am employed, and therefore where I invest much of my time, energy, and passion. Therefore, this study was quite meaningful to me as it once again solidified the importance of what writing centre practitioners such as myself do. The writing centre is not only a nice-to-have among a long list of support services, but has been and continues to provide meaningful support to large cohorts of staff and students, in some cases even acting as the difference between a student obtaining their degree or not. For good reason, many studies related to writing centre theory and practice focus on the students' learning and writing needs. However, it is important to remember that as much as the writing centre supports students, we also assist, advise, and support educators, and without academic staff buy-in, it would be very difficult to reach the students that we, as the writing centre, aim to assist. It has been encouraging for me to see how many staff members are interested in and open to future cooperation and collaboration, be it large-scale interventions or simply advice on scaffolding assignment instructions. Although not everyone who expresses interest in a survey is likely to go on to work with the writing centre, the underlying sentiment has been that the writing centre is useful and valuable, and that has cemented in me a sense of purpose in what we do.

To close, I'd like to refer back to Steven Pinker's (2014) comments on educators and language experts across the centuries being concerned about the declining use of "proper" language among the next generation (mentioned at the very start of Chapter 1 in this study). Educators will always worry about students "losing" something, about language changing for the worse, and about new technologies interfering with learning and thinking. It is tempting to think that our generation must be facing the worst

challenges yet, but in the same way that previous generations of educators and learners survived the printing press, telegrams, and the internet, we will overcome the challenges that come with generative AI and neoliberalism in educational institutions. Those who care will keep showing up. There is no telling what the writing centre will look like in the future, exactly, but hopefully it can continue being a space where students are treated like writers with something to say, and where lecturers can find quality advice and support.

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Appendix 1: Turnitin report⁴¹



Digital Receipt

This receipt acknowledges that Turnitin received your paper. Below you will find the receipt information regarding your submission.

The first page of your submissions is displayed below.

Submission author:	Annalene Nell
Assignment title:	FINAL Submissions
Submission title:	Annalene MA dissertation.docx
File name:	Annalene_MA_dissertation.docx
File size:	2M
Page count:	187
Word count:	63,766
Character count:	355,643
Submission date:	14-Nov-2025 03:20PM (UTC+0200)
Submission ID:	2814588974



The thumbnail shows the first page of the dissertation submission. It features a red header with the text 'inspiring excellence, transforming lives through quality, impact, and care.' Below the header, the title 'DISSERTATION SUBMISSION' is displayed. The main text includes the title 'Connecting to collaborate: an examination of academic staff members' expectations of an undergraduate writing centre', the author's name 'Annalene Nell', the submission date 'November 2025', and the supervisor 'Prof Susan Brokensha'. The UFS logo is visible at the bottom right of the thumbnail.

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⁴¹ Full Turnitin report with detailed similarity score available upon request.

Appendix 2: Ethical clearance



GENERAL/HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (GHREC)

Registration Number: REC-112922-058

11-Aug-2024

Dear Mrs Annalene Nell

Application Approved

Research Project Title:

Connecting to collaborate: an examination of academic staff members' expectations of an undergraduate writing centre

Ethical Clearance number:

UFS-HSD2024/0606

We are pleased to inform you that your application for ethical clearance has been approved. Your ethical clearance is valid for twelve (12) months from the date of issue. We request that any changes that may take place during the course of your study/research project be submitted via an Amendment on RIMS to the ethics office to ensure ethical transparency. Furthermore, you are requested to submit a Final Report on RIMS for your study/research project to the ethics office once the project has concluded. Should you require more time than the allotted 12 months to complete this research, please apply for an extension by submitting a Continuation/Report on RIMS. Thank you for submitting your proposal for ethical clearance. We wish you success with your research.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Adri Du Plessis

Chairperson: General/Human Research Ethics Committee

Dr Adri
du
Plessis

Digitally
signed by Dr
Adri du Plessis
Date:
2024.08.12
17:51:57
+02'00'

205 Nelson Mandela P.O. Box 339
Drive Bloemfontein 9300
Park West Tel: +27(0)514019337
Bloemfontein 9301 duplessisA@ufs.ac.za
South Africa www.ufs.ac.za



UNIVERSITY OF THE
FREE STATE
UNIVERSITEIT VAN DIE
VRYSTAAT
YUNIVESITHI YA
FREISTATA



GENERAL/HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (GHREC)

05-Dec-2024

Dear Mrs Annalene A Nell

Amendment Approved

Research Project Title:

Connecting to collaborate: an examination of academic staff members' expectations of an undergraduate writing centre

Ethical Clearance number:

UFS-HSD2024/0606

We are pleased to inform you that your amendment application for ethical clearance has been approved. Your ethical clearance is valid for twelve (12) months from the date of issue. you are requested to submit the final report of your study/research project to the ethics office. Should you require more time to complete this research, please apply for an extension. Thank you for notifying the ethics committee of the changes/amendments that have been made to your study; we wish you the best of luck and success with your research.

Yours sincerely

Dr Adri Du Plessis

Chairperson: General/Human Research Ethics Committee

Dr
Adri
du
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signed by Dr
Adri du
Plessis
Date:
2024.12.05
19:27:09
+02'00'

205 Nelson Mandela Drive
Park West
Bloemfontein 9301
South Africa

P.O. Box 339
Bloemfontein 9300
Tel: +27 (0)51 401 9337
duplessisA@ufs.ac.za
www.ufs.ac.za



Appendix 3: Request for permission to conduct research



REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

To: **University of the Free State Authorities**

As a Master's student enrolled in the Department of English at the University of the Free State (UFS), I would like to request permission to conduct research at the institution. I (Annalene Nell) am the principal investigator and my supervisor is Dr Susan Brokensha (Department of English, UFS). My co-supervisor is Dr Michelle Joubert (Centre for Teaching and Learning, UFS).

DATE

Time-scale of the research

July-December 2024

[I aim to send out a questionnaire to academic staff at the faculties of Humanities, Education, and Natural and Agricultural Science. This will be followed by two or three focus group discussions with selected participants who completed the questionnaires.]

TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

'Connecting to collaborate: an examination of academic staff members' expectations of an undergraduate writing centre'

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR'S NAME AND CONTACT DETAILS:

Annalene Nell

Email: schoemana@ufs.ac.za

Contact: +27514019240

FACULTY AND DEPARTMENT:

Humanities

Department of English, UFS

SUPERVISOR'S NAME AND CONTACT DETAILS:

Susan Brokensha

Email: broksha@ufs.ac.za

Contact: +27514013571

CO-SUPERVISOR'S NAME AND CONTACT DETAILS:

Michelle Joubert

Email: JoubertMA@ufs.ac.za

Contact: +27514012273

WHAT IS THE AIM / PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

The aim of the study is to determine what academic staff members at the UFS expect and require from an undergraduate writing centre with the purpose of improving future communication and collaboration between the writing centre and the content specialists in the faculties. To facilitate this, a mixed-methods study will be conducted with questionnaires sent to staff members from three faculties (Humanities, Education and Natural and Agricultural Sciences), followed by focus-group discussions with selected participants. Data analysis will consist of statistical analysis of quantitative aspects and reflexive thematic analysis for the qualitative aspects.



WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

Annalene Nell (Department of English, UFS) is conducting the research as part of the requirements to obtain an MA degree at the UFS. She obtained her Bachelor's and Honours degrees at the UFS, and is also permanently employed as a staff member at the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL).

HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICAL APPROVAL?

No, this document forms part of the formal process to apply for ethical clearance.

WHY IS YOUR INSTITUTION/ORGANISATION/COMPANY INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?

Given that the study relates specifically to the expectations of UFS academic staff members regarding the UFS undergraduate writing centre, it was decided to make use of data obtained from UFS staff members only. Although the findings may be applicable to other universities, a multi-university study falls outside the scope of the current research project.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

Potential participants will receive an email invitation to complete the questionnaire (please see relevant data collection instrument document). They will receive a short explanation of the nature and goal of the study, along with the option to click to provide consent for their answers to be collected and used (anonymously) as part of the study. As part of the questionnaire, they will be presented with the option to click yes or no to indicate their willingness to be contacted for a focus group. Those who are invited to the focus group discussions, will be provided with an information letter detailing the objectives of the study, along with a consent form that they are required to complete and sign if they accept the focus group invitation. Participants who agree to participate will also fill in and sign a non-disclosure agreement form (described later). Focus group participants will be divided into at least two focus groups, depending on their level of familiarity with the writing centre. Focus group discussions may take place face-to-face or online (on Class Collaborate Ultra), depending on the preferences and availability of the participants. The discussions will be recorded and then transcribed. For details on the open-ended questions to be asked in the focus groups, please see the relevant data collection instrument document.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

One potential benefit to the research participants is the opportunity to learn more about the services that the writing centre offers to academic staff and their students; services which they may not be aware of prior to the study. Another benefit is the opportunity to clarify any misunderstandings regarding the writing centre, and to provide feedback regarding their expectations and needs of a writing centre. This may open the door for future collaborations between the participants and the writing centre, which is likely to have a positive academic impact on the students involved and, by extension, on the academic staff member's portfolio.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL RISKS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

The questionnaires and focus-group discussions are not designed to elicit any personal, sensitive or compromising information from the participants. They are instead aimed at obtaining an overview of the participants' professional understanding of and expectations from the undergraduate writing centre regarding services available to assist students in their academic writing. The questionnaires have been designed to employ inclusive and bias-free language, and all responses will be anonymised. Participants are expected to complete these in their own time without input from the researcher or other research participants. Focus groups carry more of a potential risk than questionnaires, since the questions are open-ended and the researcher therefore has less control over the types of responses. Other potential risks include a lack of confidentiality and anonymity, as well as the possibility of unexpected power dynamics within the focus group influencing participants' responses or willingness to participate. To mitigate these potential risks, all participants will be required to sign a non-disclosure agreement form in which they undertake not to disclose any personally sensitive information that may be shared by any other participants. The following additional strategies will also be employed: (1) Any research participant may withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty. (2) The principal investigator will act as moderator in the focus groups to keep the discussions on topic and to encourage equal participation. (3) Each participant will be deidentified, eradicating all personally identifiable information. (4) Any audio recordings and subsequent transcripts of the discussions will be stored on a laptop that is password protected. Any hard copies of transcripts will be locked in a cabinet in the principal investigator's office. (5) All audio recordings and transcripts will be destroyed after a period of five years from the date of data collection.

WILL THE INFORMATION BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

Please refer to the paragraph just above this one. Participants' names and other personally identifiable information will not be disclosed. In other words, confidentiality of information will be maintained, since personal information such as a name or affiliation to the institution will not be recorded and no one will be able to connect participants to the responses they generate. Responses will be given a fictitious code number and participants will be referred to in this way in the data, MA thesis, any publications, or other research reporting methods such as conference proceedings. Only the researcher, supervisors and members of the UFS Research Committee (who act as gatekeepers) will have access to the data (i.e., the questionnaire results, audio recording of the discussions and accompanying transcripts). In the information letter that accompanies the consent form, participants will be informed about these measures as well as about the fact that their anonymous data may be used for research reports, journal articles, conference presentations, and book chapters, for example. Participants will be informed in the information letter about the ethical risks attached to the use of focus-group discussions and to the strategies that will be put in place to mitigate the risks (discussed in the previous paragraph).

HOW WILL THE INFORMATION BE STORED AND ULTIMATELY DESTROYED?

The questionnaire results, audio recordings and subsequent transcripts of the focus-group discussions will be stored on the principal investigator's laptop that is username and password protected. If hard copies of the transcripts are made, they will be placed in a locked cabinet in the principal investigator's office. After a period of five years, the audio recordings and transcripts of the recordings will be

destroyed. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics Review and approval if applicable.

WILL THERE BE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?

No.

HOW WILL THE INSTITUTION / ORGANISATION / COMPANY BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS / RESULTS OF THE STUDY?

Should anyone wish to be informed of the final research findings, they may contact me, Annalene Nell at +27514019240 or schoemana@ufs.a.za. Should you require any further information or want to contact me about any aspect of this study, please do not hesitate to do so.

Sincerest regards,



Annalene Nell, principal investigator

Appendix 4a: Information sheet questionnaire



RESEARCH STUDY INFORMATION LEAFLET AND CONSENT FORM: WRITING CENTRE QUESTIONNAIRE

DATE:

Time-scale of research

September 2024 - February 2025

TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT:

'Connecting to collaborate: an examination of academic staff members' expectations of an undergraduate writing centre'

PRINCIPLE INVESTIGATOR'S NAMES AND CONTACT DETAILS:

Annalene Nell

Email: schoemana@ufs.ac.za

Contact: +27514019240

FACULTY AND DEPARTMENT:

Humanities

Department of English, UFS

WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

Annalene Nell (Department of English, UFS) is conducting the research as part of the requirements to obtain an MA degree at the UFS. She obtained her Bachelor's and Honours degrees at the UFS, and is also permanently employed as a staff member at the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL).

HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICAL APPROVAL?

This study has received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the UFS. A copy of the approval letter can be obtained from the principal investigator.

Approval number: UFS-HSD2024/0606

WHY ARE YOU INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?

You have been invited to complete the questionnaire aspect of this research study as an academic staff member at the UFS in one of the selected faculties (Humanities, Education, and Natural and Agricultural Sciences). I am interested in exploring: the views of academic staff regarding the purpose of an undergraduate writing centre; what staff would ideally want from a writing centre; if and how they would like to collaborate. It is hoped that this information can result in more effective future collaborations and communication between the writing centre and the academic faculties and departments at the UFS.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

If you consent to participating in the study, you will be asked to complete a 15-minute questionnaire centred around your expectations of the undergraduate writing centre, and the writing needs of your



students. If you consent to providing your email address at the end of the questionnaire (optional), you may be invited to participate in a focus group discussion at a later date.

CAN I WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY?

Participation is voluntary and there is no penalty or loss of benefit for non-participation. As this study is voluntary, and you are under no obligation to consent to participation. You are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

One potential benefit to you as a research participant is the opportunity to reflect on your own views of a writing centre. You will also be assisting the principal investigator in collecting data for a study that could ultimately result in better future collaborations between faculty and the writing centre, benefiting both staff and students.

WHAT IS THE ANTICIPATED INCONVENIENCE OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

The questionnaire requires about 15 minutes of your time. In addition, although the questions are not designed to elicit any personal, sensitive or compromising information from the participants, some participants may be concerned about the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. To mitigate this, the following strategies will be employed: (1) Any research participant may withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty. (2) Each participant will be deidentified, eradicating all personally identifiable information. (3) Any data from the questionnaires will be stored on a laptop that is password protected. Any hard copies of the data will be locked in a cabinet in the principal investigator's office. (4) All data will be destroyed after a period of five years from the date of collection.

WILL MY ANSWERS BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

Please refer to the paragraph just above this one. Your name and other personally identifiable information will not be disclosed. In other words, confidentiality of information will be maintained, since personal information such as your name or affiliation to your institution will not be recorded. No one will be able to connect you to the responses you generate. Responses will be given a fictitious code number and you will be referred to in this way in the data, MA thesis, any publications, or other research reporting methods such as conference proceedings. Only the researcher, her supervisors and members of the UFS Research Committee (who act as gatekeepers to see that the research is carried out ethically) will have access to the data (i.e., the answers to the questionnaires).

HOW WILL THE INFORMATION BE STORED AND ULTIMATELY DESTROYED?

The answers to the questions in the questionnaires will be stored on the principal investigator's laptop that is username and password protected. If hard copies of the data are made, they will be placed in a locked cabinet in the principal investigator's office. After a period of five years, the data will be destroyed. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics Review and approval if applicable.

WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?

There is no payment or physical reward for participating in the study.

HOW WILL THE PARTICIPANT BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS / RESULTS OF THE STUDY?

If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please contact me, Annalene Nell, at +27514019240 or schoemana@ufs.ac.za. Should you require any further information or want to contact me about any aspect of this study, please do not hesitate to do so.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.

By completing the questionnaire, you consent to participate in this study. Please see details below.

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

I confirm that I voluntarily agree to participate in the research study by Annalene Nell referred to as 'Writing Centre' (the "Study") in relation to completing a 15-minute questionnaire.

I further confirm that –

1. I have read and understood the Study as explained in the attached information [sheet](#);
2. I am prepared to participate in the [Study](#);
3. I understand that my participation in the Study is entirely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable);
4. I voluntarily provide the UFS and the Researcher with my personal information and consent to the UFS and the Researcher collecting, disclosing and processing my personal information [in order to](#) conduct the Study and any related activities in relation [thereto](#);
5. I hereby acknowledge and confirm that I understand the purpose for which the UFS and the Researcher may collect, store, use, delete, destroy, outsource, transfer or otherwise process, as the context and circumstances may require and as contemplated in terms of POPIA, my personal information as set out [herein](#);
6. I am aware that the findings of the Study will be anonymously processed into an MA [thesis research](#) report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings and that my personal information will be aggregated and deidentified at such [stage](#);
7. I also give the UFS permission to share, without notification, the [collected data](#) with other researchers at the UFS or other Higher Education Institutions. This permission is dependent on the same principles of ethical research practices, anonymity/confidentiality, safekeeping of information, and other issues listed above applying.

Link to questionnaire (please click): [TO BE ADDED]

Appendix 4b: Information sheet focus groups



RESEARCH STUDY INFORMATION LEAFLET, CONSENT FORM, AND NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT FORM

DATE:

Time-scale of research

July-December 2024

TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT:

'Connecting to collaborate: an examination of academic staff members' expectations of an undergraduate writing centre'

PRINCIPLE INVESTIGATOR'S NAMES AND CONTACT DETAILS:

Annalene Nell

Email: schoemana@ufs.ac.za

Contact: +27514019240

FACULTY AND DEPARTMENT:

Humanities

Department of English, UFS

WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

Annalene Nell (Department of English, UFS) is conducting the research as part of the requirements to obtain an MA degree at the UFS. She obtained her Bachelor's and Honours degrees at the UFS, and is also permanently employed as a staff member at the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL).

HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICAL APPROVAL?

This study has received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the UFS. A copy of the approval letter can be obtained from the principal investigator. [TO BE CONFIRMED]

Approval number: TBC

WHY ARE YOU INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?

I have invited you as a potential participant in the focus group aspect of the research, based on your responses to the questionnaire you completed at a previous stage of the study. I am interested in exploring the views of academic staff regarding the purpose of an undergraduate writing centre, as well as what staff would ideally want from a writing centre and if and how they would like to collaborate. It is hoped that this kind of insight can result in more effective future collaborations and communication between the writing centre and the academic faculties and departments at the UFS.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

If you formally consent to participating in the study, you will participate in a 1-hour focus-group discussion centred around your experience and expectations of the undergraduate writing centre. You will be placed in a group with between two and four fellow academic staff members. To encourage



rich discussion, the principal investigator will ask a few open-ended questions. You do not need to prepare anything in advance, but a willingness to participate will be welcome.

CAN I WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY?

Participation is voluntary and there is no penalty or loss of benefit for non-participation. As this study is voluntary, and you are under no obligation to consent to participation. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent form. You will also be asked to sign a non-disclosure agreement form (see information about this later). You are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

One potential benefit to you as a research participant is the opportunity to learn more about the services that the writing centre offers to academic staff and their students. Another benefit is the opportunity to clarify any misunderstandings regarding the writing centre, and to provide feedback regarding your expectations and needs of a writing centre, opening the door for possible future improvement in collaborations between the writing centre and academic faculties.

WHAT IS THE ANTICIPATED INCONVENIENCE OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

The focus-group discussions are not designed to elicit any personal, sensitive or compromising information from the participants. They are instead aimed at obtaining an overview of your professional understanding of and expectations from the undergraduate writing centre regarding services available to assist students in their academic writing. The focus groups do carry a small potential risk since the questions are more open-ended than in the questionnaires, and the researcher therefore has less control over the types of responses. Other potential risks include a lack of confidentiality and anonymity, as well as the possibility of unexpected power dynamics within the focus group influencing participants' responses or willingness to participate. To mitigate these potential risks, all participants will be required to sign a non-disclosure agreement form in which they undertake not to disclose any personally sensitive information that may be shared by any other participants. The following additional strategies will also be employed: (1) Any research participant may withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty. (2) The principal investigator will act as moderator in the focus groups to keep the discussions on topic and to encourage equal participation. (3) Each participant will be deidentified, eradicating all personally identifiable information. (4) Any audio recordings and subsequent transcripts of the discussions will be stored on a laptop that is password protected. Any hard copies of transcripts will be locked in a cabinet in the principal investigator's office. (5) All audio recordings and transcripts will be destroyed after a period of five years from the date of data collection.

WILL WHAT I SAY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

Please refer to the paragraph just above this one. Your name and other personally identifiable information will not be disclosed. In other words, confidentiality of information will be maintained, since personal information such as your name or affiliation to your institution will not be recorded. No one will be able to connect you to the responses you generate. Responses will be given a fictitious code number and you will be referred to in this way in the data, MA thesis, any publications, or other

research reporting methods such as conference proceedings. Only the researcher, her supervisors and members of the UFS Research Committee (who act as gatekeepers to see that the research is carried out ethically) will have access to the data (i.e., the audio recording of each discussion and accompanying transcript). You and all other participants will be asked to sign a non-disclosure agreement form. The measures discussed in the previous section will also be employed to keep your responses confidential.

HOW WILL THE INFORMATION BE STORED AND ULTIMATELY DESTROYED?

The audio recordings (and subsequent transcripts) of the focus-group discussions will be stored on the principal investigator's laptop that is username and password protected. If hard copies of the transcripts are made, they will be placed in a locked cabinet in the principal investigator's office. After a period of five years, the audio recordings and transcripts of the recordings will be destroyed. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics Review and approval if applicable.

WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?

There is no payment or physical reward for participating in the study. I do hope that you will enjoy participating in the discussion and furthering research at the institution.

HOW WILL THE PARTICIPANT BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS / RESULTS OF THE STUDY?

If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please contact me, Annalene Nell at +27514019240 or schoemana@ufs.a.za. Should you require any further information or want to contact me about any aspect of this study, please do not hesitate to do so.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

I, the undersigned,

_____ (participant's full names to be included), (the "Participant") confirm that I voluntarily agree to participate in the research study by Annalene Nell referred to as 'Writing Centre' (the "Study") in relation to taking part in a 1-hour focus-group discussion.

I, the undersigned Participant, further confirm that –

1. the Researcher has explained the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of my participation in the Study;
2. I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the Study as explained in the attached information sheet;
3. I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the Study;
4. I understand that my participation in the Study is entirely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable);
5. I voluntarily provide the UFS and the Researcher with my personal information and consent to the UFS and the Researcher collecting, disclosing and processing my personal information in order to conduct the Study and any related activities in relation thereto;
6. I hereby acknowledge and confirm that I understand the purpose for which the UFS and the Researcher may collect, store, use, delete, destroy, outsource, transfer or otherwise process, as the context and circumstances may require and as contemplated in terms of POPIA, my personal information as set out herein;
7. I am aware that the findings of the Study will be anonymously processed into an MA thesis research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings and that my personal information will be aggregated and deidentified at such stage;
8. I also give the UFS permission to share, without notification, the collected data with other researchers at the UFS or other Higher Education Institutions. This permission is dependent on the same principles of ethical research practices, anonymity/confidentiality, safekeeping of information, and other issues listed above applying.
9. I understand that I am required to sign a non-disclosure agreement related to the focus-group discussion I am part of.

Please sign the forms below (one for consent and one for non-disclosure):

I, the **Participant**, agree to taking part in a 1-hour focus-group discussion (the details of which will be communicated to me) on the writing ~~centre~~.

Full Name of Participant: _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Full Name(s) of Researcher: Annalene Nell

Signature of Principal Investigator (Researcher):



Date: _____

Please sign the non-disclosure agreement form that follows.

Non-disclosure agreement before participating in the focus-group discussion

I, _____ hereby agree to maintain the confidentiality of information disclosed during the focus-group discussion.

Respondent / Participant signature:

Date: _____

Signature of Principal Investigator (Researcher):



Date: _____

Thank you!

Appendix 5: Data collection instrument: questionnaire

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evasys	Writing centre collaboration survey [Copy]	
Mark as shown: ☐ ☒ ☐ ☐ Please use a ball-point pen or a thin felt tip. This form will be processed automatically. Correction: ☐ ☒ ☐ ☐ Please follow the examples shown on the left hand side to help optimize the reading results.		
1. Demographics / Background		
<i>Instructions: Please answer all questions as honestly as possible. Your participation is appreciated. This questionnaire should take no longer than 15 minutes to complete.</i>		
1.1	Are you employed at the UFS as: ☐ Academic staff ☐ Support staff	
1.2	Under which faculty does your main employment fall? ☐ Education ☐ Humanities ☐ Natural and Agricultural Sciences ☐ Theology and Religion ☐ Law ☐ Health Sciences ☐ Economic and Management Sciences ☐ Other	
1.3	If you selected 'Other' in the previous question, please elaborate: 	
1.4	In which department or subdivision does your main employment fall (for example, Anthropology, Plant Sciences)? 	
1.5	How many years have you been involved in lecturing in higher education? ☐ 0-2 years ☐ 3-5 years ☐ 6-9 years ☐ 10 years or more	
1.6	At which levels have you facilitated, lectured or supervised within the past three years? Select all that apply. ☐ Bridging courses (e.g. Higher Certificate or University Access Programme) ☐ Extended Programme ☐ Mainstream Programme ☐ Short Learning Programmes ☐ First-years ☐ Second-years ☐ Third-years ☐ Fourth-year (undergraduate, non-Honours) ☐ Honours ☐ Masters ☐ Ph.D ☐ Post-doctoral ☐ None of the above	
1.7	What is your current level of employment? ☐ Tutor ☐ Facilitator ☐ Junior Lecturer ☐ Lecturer ☐ Senior Lecturer ☐ Associate Professor ☐ Professor ☐ Other	
1.8	If you selected 'Other' in the previous question, please elaborate: 	
2. Student writing needs		

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2. Student writing needs [Continue]

2.1 Which types of texts are your students required to produce? Select all that apply.

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| ☐ Assignments | ☐ Essays | ☐ Reports (technical or scientific) |
| ☐ Critical reflections | ☐ Literature reviews | ☐ Academic articles |
| ☐ Popular articles | ☐ Abstracts | ☐ Executive summaries |
| ☐ Annotated bibliographies | ☐ Business plans | ☐ Lab reports |
| ☐ Research proposals | ☐ Theses / dissertations | ☐ Other |

2.2 If you selected 'Other' in the previous question, please elaborate:

2.3 How much writing should your students produce, on average?

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| ☐ None | ☐ About one writing task per year | ☐ About one writing task per semester |
| ☐ Two to five writing tasks throughout the year | ☐ Two to five writing tasks per semester | ☐ More than five writing tasks throughout the year |
| ☐ More than five writing tasks per semester | | |

2.4 What is the average length of the writing task (s) your students are required to produce?

- | | | |
|---|--|---|
| ☐ One page or less | ☐ Two pages | ☐ Three to five pages |
| ☐ Six to ten pages | ☐ More than ten pages | ☐ My students do not produce written texts |
| ☐ I am unsure | | |

2.5 If you answered 'unsure' to the previous question, please elaborate:

2.6 What is the average level of complexity required in the texts your students are asked to produce?

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| ☐ Not very complex (e.g. reflections, summaries, paragraphs) | ☐ Moderately complex (e.g. essays, research reports) | ☐ Very complex (e.g. articles, dissertations) |
| ☐ My students do not produce written texts | | |

Which of the following aspects related to writing do your students find the most challenging? Rate each of them by assigning a number out of 5 to each aspect, with 1 being not challenging and 5 being extremely challenging.

	Not challenging	Slightly challenging	Moderately challenging	Very challenging	Extremely challenging
2.7 Reading and understanding texts	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2.8 Paraphrasing	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2.9 Citation	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

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Writing centre collaboration survey [Copy]



2. Student writing needs [Continue]

2.10	Accurately integrating or referring to external texts in their own work	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2.11	Grammar and spelling	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2.12	Using relevant content in student's work	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2.13	Constructing a clear line of argumentation	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2.14	Adhering to the guidelines on how a particular type of text should be structured	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2.15	Structuring or organising writing in a way that is coherent	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2.16	Academic register and style	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2.17	Ethical use of AI writing	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

3. The writing centre

3.1 Before completing this questionnaire, were you aware of the UFS undergraduate writing centre (Write Site)? ☐ yes ☐ no

3.2 If you answered yes to the previous question, how did you hear about the writing centre? Select all options that apply.

☐ From colleagues ☐ From students ☐ Institutional advertisement, announcement or poster

☐ Through the Curriculum Renewal Programme ☐ I was not aware of the writing centre ☐ I cannot recall

☐ Other

3.3 If you answered 'Other' to the previous question, please elaborate:

3.4 According to your understanding, a writing centre should be primarily geared towards (select all that apply):

- ☐ Undergraduate students ☐ First-years ☐ Students who are failing
- ☐ Students who struggle with writing ☐ Students who do not speak English as their first language ☐ Postgraduate students
- ☐ All students, regardless of skill level ☐ All academic writers, including staff

3.5 Have you made use of any of the following writing centre (Write Site) services at the UFS? Select all that apply.

- ☐ Information sessions for students ☐ Foundational workshops (generic 1-hour sessions that cover basic writing aspects) ☐ Tailor-made workshops designed for your specific student cohort and writing task (Face-to-face, on Blackboard Collaborate, or in online asynchronous format)
- ☐ Individual consultation service for students ☐ I am unsure ☐ Other (please elaborate)
- ☐ None of the above

3.6 If you answered 'Other' to the previous question, please elaborate:

For the following section, please rate each statement from 1 to 5, with 1 being Strongly Disagree and 5 being Strongly Agree.

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Writing centre collaboration survey [Copy]



3. The writing centre [Continue]

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
3.7 A writing centre is an important resource for undergraduate students.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.8 Students who struggle with higher order writing concerns (argumentation, logic, structure), should make use of the writing centre.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.9 Students who struggle with lower order writing concerns (grammar, spelling, punctuation) should make use of the writing centre.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.10 Any student who wants to improve their higher order writing skills, should make use of the writing centre.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.11 Any student who wants to improve their lower order writing skills, should make use of the writing centre.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.12 Students who are already competent writers should make use of the writing centre.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.13 Students' academic success is heavily reliant on their ability to produce coherent texts that follow the relevant academic text type conventions.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.14 Good higher order writing skills are important to my students' success.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.15 Good lower order writing skills are important to my students' success.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.16 I want my students to learn through the writing process – doing research, planning, drafting, meaning-making, editing, rewriting, etc.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.17 My students struggle with higher order writing concerns: providing a clear argument, supporting their argument, structuring their writing correctly, synthesising sources, etc.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.18 My students struggle with lower order writing concerns: grammar, spelling, and punctuation.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.19 The writing centre's services are relevant to the needs of students in my department.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.20 I would be interested in making use of writing centre workshops.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.21 I would be interested in making use of a reading initiative for my students.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.22 I would be interested in making use of a grammar course for my students.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.23 I would be interested in digital resources such as writing-related videos and handouts.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.24 I would be interested in encouraging my students to attend individual consultations at the writing centre.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.25 I believe that students who visit the writing centre show a marked improvement in their writing.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.26 A writing centre consultation should focus on errors that confuse meaning before focusing on less impactful errors (such as minor grammar concerns).	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.27 I expect student work to be error-free (excellent organisation, argument and text structure; no grammar or spelling mistakes) if the student has visited the writing centre.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

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Writing centre collaboration survey [Copy]



3. The writing centre [Continue]

- | | | | | | | |
|------|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 3.28 | I would be interested in collaborating with the writing centre in a multi-part intervention that involves aspects such as students completing one or more workshops, visiting the Write Site for individual consultations on their first drafts, and then submitting a final draft for assessment. | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| 3.29 | I would be interested in attending training or using resources that can assist me in incorporating more critical reading, academic writing, and critical thinking skills in my curriculum. | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| 3.30 | I know how to make contact with the writing centre, should I want to make use of their services. | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |

4. Future research

- 4.1 If invited, would you be willing to participate in a small focus group discussion (on academic staff expectations of the writing centre) as part of the second phase of this research study? ☐ yes ☐ no

If you answered yes to the above, please provide your contact details below. You will not be contacted for anything unrelated to the focus group, your details will not be shared with anyone else, and all responses in the questionnaire will remain anonymous. You will not be under any obligation to participate in the focus group and may withdraw at any time.

- 4.2 Name and surname:

- 4.3 Email address:

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Appendix 6: Data collection instrument: focus group questions

1. How would you describe the purpose/goal of an undergraduate writing centre within the broader institution / higher education in general?
2. What services should be offered by a writing centre? Do you think you or your students could benefit from any of these services?
3. How can the writing centre better facilitate collaboration and communication with your department?
4. What, if anything, has prevented you from making use of writing centre services in the past?
5. What would incentivise/motivate you to make use of the writing centre in the future? What could motivate your students to make use of the writing centre?
6. What should be the role of the content lecturer in a writing centre collaboration?