

Assessing the Writing Efficacy of Post-graduate Students at a University of Technology in South Africa

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ABSTRACT The study assessed the writing efficacy of students enrolled for the post-graduate studies at a University of Technology. It sought to answer the following questions: (a) What is the level of writing efficacy of post-graduate students enrolled in the three programmes, namely, B.Ed.(Hons), PGCE and ACE programmes?; (b) Are there differences in the writing efficacy of these students?; (c) To what contextual variables can the differences in the writing efficacy (if any) of these students be attributed?; and (d) What intervention strategies can be employed to help students in these programmes? This is an exploratory and descriptive survey. Eighty- four students participated in the study. The study found that students lack understanding of concepts and terminology related to the discipline such as spelling, grammar, referencing, punctuation, and writing coherently and logically. It can be concluded that students enrolled for the post-graduate studies have a low level of writing efficacy.

INTRODUCTION

Studies have shown that higher education students have serious problems in approaching reading, cannot read properly and have difficulties when performing a critical evaluation of what they have to read and write (Barker 2000; Wong 2000).

Writing problems that have been identified include grammar, spelling, punctuation, expression and the ability to explain, structure and interpret facts as well as vocabulary and referencing (Hartley 1998; Rabab'ah 2003; Al-Khasawneh 2010). Lack of the necessary vocabulary impedes the ability of the students to express their ideas freely and accurately. Likewise, grammar is seen as extremely important in conveying accurate messages (Al-Khasawneh 2010). To help students overcome their vocabulary problems many interventions have been proposed. These include offering more discipline-specific reading courses in order to improve the students' vocabulary size and depth that will help them in academic writing (Rabab'ah 2003). Writing development programmes have also been recommended in this regard.

Context for the Study

It is necessary at this stage to provide a context for the study. The School of Teacher Education of the Central University of Technology, Free State offers both undergraduate and post-graduate courses. Post-graduate courses include B.Ed. (Hons) which leads to a Masters degree and eventually to a doctorate. The students who got admitted to the programme come from different educational backgrounds including a bachelor's degree plus a teaching qualification, the four-year B.Ed, the Post-graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) and other teaching qualifications. As lecturers in this course, we are confronted with a mixture of different experiences, expectations and academic abilities. One of the problems that were identified in this group was a lack of both communication and writing skills. This observation supports the study by Al-Khasawneh (2010) who identified teachers' low proficiency in English as one of causes of problems in writing. These students are practising teachers and one of their tasks is to cultivate communication and writing skills to the learners that have been entrusted to their care. As early as in 1985, Herrington noted that the transition between functioning as student writers and future writers in a discipline can be an awkward one. Students may be unsure about the shift from "being receivers of teaching knowledge to being constructors of such knowledge" (Meyer et al. 2000:18).

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Hence, the researchers decided to undertake this study to assess the students' writing skills in an attempt to come up with strategies that can assist them. The study is grounded on self-efficacy which is an important construct in Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory.

Self-efficacy

According to Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory, self-efficacy is defined as humans' beliefs about their capabilities, and such beliefs play a crucial role in motivating human behaviors. Self-efficacy is also defined as *the levels of confidence individuals have in their ability to execute a course of action or attain specific performance outcomes* (Bandura in Devonport and Lane 2006). According to Bandura (1997), one's self-efficacy has a greater predicting power over the way they behave than their actual capabilities. In other words, self-efficacy exerts its influence in ways that determine how individuals would make use of their knowledge and skills, eventually affecting the degree of their engagement in the completion of certain tasks. Self-efficacy belief is task-specific (Zimmerman 1995), and is formed through individuals' interpretation of four sources: mastery experience, vicarious experience, verbal and social persuasions, physiological and affective state. Of the four sources of self-efficacy the first and the most influential one is mastery experience, or one's experiences of performing similar tasks in the past. Mastery experience that yields successful outcomes enhances one's personal efficacy, while experience that results in failure diminishes one's self-efficacy belief. Vicarious experience which contributes to one's sense of personal efficacy is gained as people observe others performing tasks and compare others' performance against theirs. Their self-efficacy increases when they evaluate their performance as better than those of others. The third source is the verbal messages and social persuasions individuals receive from others. Persuasions conveying positive attitudes may encourage and strengthen self-efficacy, whereas those sending negative information may defeat and weaken self-beliefs. Physiological and affective state serves as the fourth source, which means when individuals feel less anxious or tense, they are more likely to anticipate and foresee success for their tasks (Bandura 1997).

The concept of self-efficacy has drawn attention from researchers of various fields. Past stud-

ies have investigated the relationship between self-efficacy and other motivational constructs, including self-concept, self-esteem, self-regulation, task goal, task value, and anxiety (Pajares and Cheong 2003; Lane et al. 2004; García and de Caso 2006; Lo and Hyland 2007). The results of these studies suggest a strong influence of self-efficacy on other constructs.

Writing Self-efficacy

As self-efficacy bears the attribute of task-specificity, different types of self-efficacy can be demonstrated for diverse tasks. Writing self-efficacy translates into a strong sense of confidence for the task of writing (Pajares and Valiante 1997). Having sufficient self-belief in their writing ability, individuals may have greater interest in writing, make more constant efforts, and show greater perseverance and resiliency in the face of difficulty when they are conducting a writing task (Pajares and Valiante 1997; Lavelle 2006). Writing self-efficacy though, does not directly increase individual's writing competence, but helps individuals generate greater attention and more efforts for writing (Pajares and Valiante 1997).

Other studies show that academic writing is an area where students' beliefs have a particularly strong influence (Young et al. 2001). Students' writing beliefs have been reported across various content areas (Pajares et al. 2000). Researchers in both fields of composition and self-efficacy have shown tremendous interest in writing self-efficacy, and they have examined the relationship between writing self-belief and writing outcomes in academic settings; their studies found a strong relationship between them (Rankin et al. 1994; Shell et al. 1995; Pajares and Valiante 1999; Bruning and Horn 2000; Pajares 2003).

Writing self-efficacy has also been found to be associated with other motivational variables including writing self-concept, writing anxiety, perceived value of writing, self-regulation as well as expected outcomes (Zimmerman and Bandura 1994; García and de Caso 2006; Dewaele et al. 2008; Andrade et al. 2009). Klassen (2003) argues that in the past perceived self-efficacy was usually found to have the strongest predicting power, among all the motivational constructs, over individuals' writing performance. Such find-

ings support the claim made by Bandura based on social cognitive theory that self-efficacy plays a primary role in predicting writing performance (Klassen 2003).

Knowledge of Writing and Composing Process

McCutchen (2000) suggests that writing proficiency is developed through fluent language generation processes as well as extensive knowledge that is relevant to writing, such as topic knowledge and genre knowledge. Theory-based evidences supported the fact that knowledge plays a central role in many major models of writing developed in the past decades, such as those proposed by Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) as well as Kellogg (1996). Thus, knowledge is considered an important element in the development of individual writing, as individual writers have access to different kinds of knowledge (for example, knowledge about the writing topic, intended audience, genre, task, and linguistic elements) during their composing process (Saddler and Graham 2007).

Moreover, it is important to understand the development of writing knowledge, as a strong relationship was proved to exist between writing process knowledge and writing performance (Lin et al. 2007; Saddler and Graham 2007). Many of the past studies supported this argument. For example, Schoonen and de Glopper (1996) investigated the writing knowledge and performance of students of different proficiency levels, and indicated that writers of higher proficiency level tended to pay attention to global aspects of writing such as the overall organization and structure, while writers of lower proficiency level focused on superficial aspects such as spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Graham (2006) proposed that skilled writers have more knowledge about the composing process than their less skilled counterparts.

Writing is an essential component of thinking and learning in school contexts, and writing tasks are a “critical tool for intellectual and social development” (Bruning and Horn 2000:30). Academic writing may be assigned for a variety of educational goals including: assessing knowledge, promoting critical thinking, stimulating creativity, encouraging discourse as part of a professional community, and supporting cognition (Johannessen 2001; Langer 2001).

Since the classroom context plays a prominent role in writing, the role of the teacher is therefore very important because the teachers are responsible for classroom learning activities, including writing tasks such as tests, exams, reports and journals. Classroom contexts can influence students’ beliefs about writing both positively and negatively (Langer 2001 in Hamman 2005). Teachers’ practices can encourage or discourage students’ self-regulated behaviours in writing, including sustained effort and mastery orientation (Langer 2000; Pajares et al. 2000). For example, students who received instruction to plan and organise in various genres displayed a better understanding of the importance of planning in their writing (Hamman 2005) as opposed to teachers who rely on drill and rote approaches to writing (Draper et al. 2000). Personal epistemological theories are seen as precursors to various outcomes (Pintrich 2002:406). Students’ beliefs in the nature of learning may also differ across different content areas (Hofer 2000).

Bandura in Zimmerman (2000) defines perceived self-efficacy as personal judgements of one’s capabilities to organise and execute courses of action to attain designated goals. Bandura sought to assess its level, generality, and strength across activities and contexts. The level of self-efficacy refers to its dependence on the difficulty of a particular task, such as spelling words of increasing difficulty; generality pertains to the transferability of self-efficacy beliefs across activities; strength of perceived efficacy is measured by the amount of one’s certainty about performing a given task (Zimmerman 2000).

While some studies looked into the relationship between self-efficacy and student academic performance others concentrated on teacher self-efficacy and teacher competence (Goddard et al. 2000). Lavelle (2006) extended the relationship of self-efficacy to teacher competence to include the relationship between teachers’ writing self-efficacy and writing performance.

While teaching efficacy is critical to teaching performance, Lavelle (2006) argues that it is also important to know about teachers’ efficacy beliefs for successfully engaging and negotiating professional and academic tasks that are directly related to instruction, such as writing. Beliefs in one’s own task competence, as well as actual skill, play an important role in teaching effectiveness (Wilson and Floden 2003).

Some studies have addressed teachers’ beliefs about teaching writing (Moore 2000) at the ex-

pense of considering teachers' beliefs about their own writing. It is Frank (2003) who examined how teachers who were low in writing self-efficacy, became engaged when writing their own stories. She argued that writing self-efficacy is raised as teachers explore the "inscape" of their own cultural and personal stories, and as they connect to the experiences of other teachers.

The medium of instruction also affects the writing efficacy of students. Mojica (2010) examined the writing difficulties of Turkish students where vocabulary and grammar were found to be the main writing difficulties for these students. This finding is similar to that of Chen (2002) conducted in Taiwan. Other writing difficulties identified by Mojica (2010) were spelling, prepositions, verb tense, word order, low level of English proficiency and punctuation.

It is against this background that this study sought to assess the writing efficacy of students enrolled for the post-graduate studies in the School of Teacher Education at a University of Technology in South Africa. The study sought to answer the following research questions: (a) What is the level of writing efficacy of post-graduate students enrolled in the three programmes, namely, B.Ed.(Hons), PGCE and ACE programmes?; (b) Are there differences in the writing efficacy of students enrolled in these three programmes?; (c) To what contextual variables can the differences in the writing efficacy (if any) of students in the three programmes be attributed?; and (d) What intervention strategies can be employed to help students in the two programmes?

METHOD

Research Design

This is a comparative survey of the writing efficacy of the students in three post-graduate programmes offered by the School of Teacher Education at a University of Technology. The study is both exploratory and descriptive. The researchers decided on the comparative study firstly, because of movement of students among these programmes and secondly, to determine whether or not students in the three programmes experienced similar or unique problems. It is also important to note that as part of their course component students in all programmes have to write a research paper.

Participants

The target population for the study were all students registered in the three programmes. Purposive sampling was used in this study. The sample consisted of 84 students as follows: Bachelor of Education Honours, B.Ed (Hons), (39); Post-graduate Certificate in Education, PGCE (32); and the Advanced Certificate in Education, ACE (13). The latter is a re-skilling programme. The questionnaires were administered to all the students who were present in class and collected immediately upon completion.

Instruments

An already existing *Writing Scale Inventory* for teachers was used to collect data from respondents. The Scale is referred to by its developers as a Low Self-efficacy Scale. It is a Likert-type instrument which is made up of 11 items to which the students have to respond (Lavelle 2006). This scale had been tested for reliability by its developers and was adopted for use in this study. The questions were slightly modified to suit the South African context. An open ended question was also included in the scale to enable respondents an opportunity to write freely about the problems they experience in writing. The questionnaires were administered in three different classes and all the students who were present in class answered the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse the quantitative data. Qualitative data were presented in themes that emerged from the data. The latter included reference techniques, sentence construction, grammar, spelling and time management.

RESULTS

Biographical Data

Table 1 shows the gender of respondents per programme. The participants in the study were 84, with the larger portions coming from the B.Ed. (Hons) and PGCE respectively.

The majority 58.3% of respondents in the sample were females. With the exception of two students who come from Lesotho, all the students were South Africans.

Table 1: Gender of respondents per programme (N=84)

Programme	Gender		Total	%
	Male	Female		
B.Ed (Hons)	16	23	39	46.4
PGCE	11	21	32	38.1
ACE	8	5	13	15.5
Total	35 (41.7%)	49 (58.3%)	84	100

Table 2 shows that 13 (33.3%) of the respondents in the study had a four-year B.Ed as the highest qualification, followed by B.Tech (20.5%) and ACE (17.9%) respectively. The four-year B.Ed and the B.Tech are normal admission requirements for the B.Ed.(Hons) qualification. The qualifications that are cause for concern in the B.Ed.(Hons) group are the Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) and the Further Diploma in Education (FDE). These qualifications were never meant to articulate vertically as these students have not gone through the main stream university route. The teachers who hold these qualifications in the study teach in primary schools, mainly in the Foundation phase, where the medium of instruction is mother-tongue (SeTswana and SeSotho in the Free State), and Intermediate phases. It then becomes difficult for the students to express themselves in English both verbally and in writing. For the PGCE group the majority of the student teachers (68.8%) had a National Diploma as the highest qualification,

Table 2: Current academic qualifications of respondents (N=84)

Qualification	B.Ed (Hons)	PGCE	ACE	Total
4-year B.Ed,	13	-	-	13
B.TECH	8	2	1	11
ACE	7	N/A	N/A	7
BSc	-	4	-	4
BA	3	3	-	6
N.Dip	-	22	-	22
Higher Diploma in ABET PGCE	6	-	-	6
FDE	2	-	-	2
SED	-	-	4	4
UDES	-	-	8	8
Total	39	32	13	84

while 9 (28.1%) had university degrees. With the ACE group only one teacher had a university qualification, the others had a Secondary Education Diploma (SED) and UDES, which are old Teacher Qualifications. The concern is that all the students who are currently in the ACE programme might fight their way through to the B.Ed (Hons) qualification. The next section presents data on the writing efficacy of the respondents.

Writing Efficacy of the Respondents

In analysing the responses of the participants to the statements in the Writing Efficacy Scale the following response mode was used: Agree

Table 3: Writing efficacy of teachers per programme (N=84)

No.	Statement	B.Ed (Hons)		PGCE		ACE	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1.	I worry so much about my writing ability such that it prevents me from getting started.	2.18	0.68	2.22	0.79	2.08	0.76
2.	I need special encouragement to do my best academic writing.	1.97	0.74	1.75	0.62	2.00	0.71
3.	I can write a research paper without any help or instruction.	2.59	0.64	2.50	0.57	2.69	0.63
4.	I do well on tests requiring essay answers.	2.23	0.58	2.00	0.57	2.15	0.38
5.	Having my writing (work) evaluated scares me.	1.97	0.67	2.03	0.69	2.15	0.69
6.	I cannot revise my written work because I cannot see my own mistakes.	2.41	0.79	2.31	0.74	2.38	0.77
7.	I like to work in small groups to discuss ideas or to do revision in writing.	1.64	0.74	1.53	0.72	1.08	0.28
8.	I expect good grades on academic papers.	1.59	0.64	1.53	0.62	1.38	0.51
9.	I am familiar with the components of a research paper or thesis.	2.10	0.68	2.44	0.67	2.31	0.63
10.	Writing an essay or paper is always a slow process.	1.90	0.68	1.91	0.59	1.92	0.64
11.	Studying grammar and punctuation would greatly improve my writing.	1.64	0.74	1.41	0.67	1.62	0.87
		2.02	0.26	1.97	0.66	1.98	0.62

Table 4: Summary table of writing efficacy of the three programmes (N=84)

Programme	N	Mean	SD	Min value	Max value	Range
B.Ed (Hons)	39	2.02	0.26	1.59	2.59	1.0
PGCE	30	1.97	0.66	1.41	2.44	1.03
ACE	13	1.98	0.62	1.08	2.69	1.61

fully =1; agree to some extent= 2; disagree = 3. A low mean value therefore, shows an inclination towards agreeing with the statements and hence a low efficacy in writing. The results are shown in Table 3.

Scatterplots were used to show the distribution of the writing efficacy mean scores of individual respondents to all the questions. The graph is skewed towards the right of the mean which is 1.5. The respondents tend to disagree with the statements in the scale. The most critical statements are 3, 4, 6, 9 and 11. This implies that the students cannot write a research paper without encouragement from others; they do not do well in essay tests; they cannot see their own mistakes; felt that studying grammar and punctuation would greatly improve their writing, and they are not familiar with the components of a research paper (Figs. 1, 2, 3).

Minimum value is 1.45, while the maximum value is 2.73, giving a range of 1.28.

The minimum value is 1.45 and the maximum value is 2.64 giving a range of mean scores of 1.19.

The average means for the three groups are comparable, although the mean scores for the B.Ed.(Hons) group are widely distributed than the two groups (Table 5).

Responses to Open-ended Questions

In addition to the closed questions in the Writing Efficacy Instrument, respondents were requested to identify the actual problems that they experience in writing tasks.

Contextual Factors

(i) Educational Background

Students in the PGCE programme come from different fields of study and therefore find problems in grappling with the demands of the course. One student remarked:

Most of the students in PGCE, including myself, come from fields where writing is not done. For example in IT we use programming in all subjects which is done in the computer.

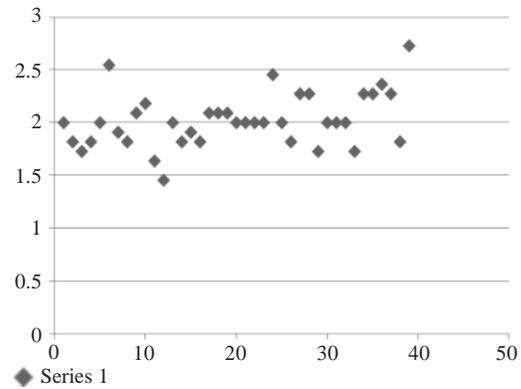


Fig. 1. Means of B.Ed (Hons) students' responses to the 15 questions

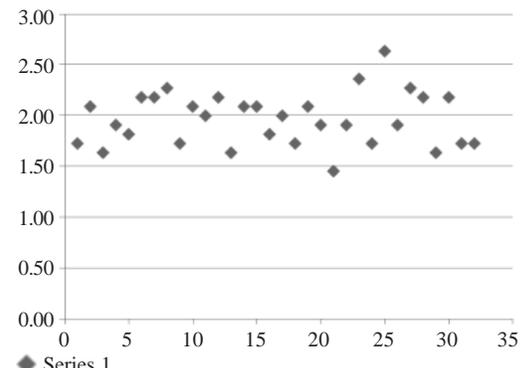


Fig. 2. PGCE students' mean responses

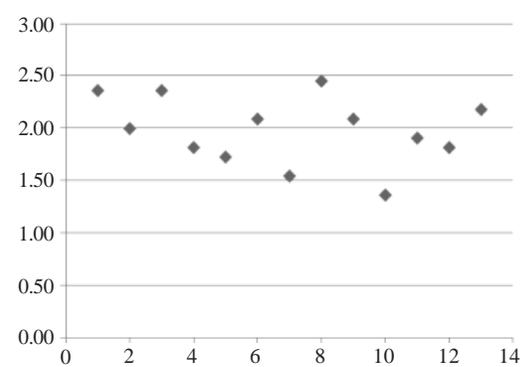


Fig. 3. ACE students' mean responses

Table 5: Summary table of descriptive statistics for the three scatterplots

<i>Programme</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>Range</i>
B.Ed (Hons)	2.02	0.26	1.45	2.73	1.28
PGCE	1.97	0.72	1.45	2.64	1.19
ACE	1.98	0.62	1.36	2.45	1.09

This includes assignments and tests. English proficiency can also be added to PGCE and it must be pitched to the level of academic writing in research.

Another student remarked: *I am still lost in writing a research proposal because I do not have a solid foundation in research methodology.*

(ii) Studying Part-time

Some students attributed their problems to the fact that they study on a part-time basis and do not have time to concentrate on extensive reading and that affects their writing performance in assignments and other written tasks.

(iii) Resources/Learning Material

Some students have expressed their inability to look for relevant information for an assignment.

(iv) Learning Environment

Students complained about a lack of proper guidance in writing assignments from the institution as well as the lecturers. They also complained about the different demands and expectations of lecturers.

The Writing Process

The following problems were identified across the three programmes:

- Sentence construction
- Lack of understanding of concepts and terminology related to the discipline
- Problems of interpreting questions
- Spelling
- Grammar
- Tenses
- Reference techniques, especially in-text referencing
- Punctuation
- Writing coherently and logically

- Synthesising information
- Writing an essay

These findings are consistent with the findings of other writers especially where the medium of instruction is not the students' home language (Al-Khasawneh 2010; Chen 2002; Mojica 2010). The following excerpts prove the point raised about the respondents' perceived writing problems.

"Putting my views on paper is quite difficult. I did Afrikaans at school as my first language therefore my English is not as good as expected to be. When constructing sentences I think first in Afrikaans and then code switch to English. This creates a lot of problems with grammar and tenses."

"Referencing is my greatest problem. Both in-text referencing and compiling the bibliography"

"Punctuation and grammar are my worst problems"

"My problem is how to plan an assignment, how to write the introduction and the conclusion".

"I have a problem organising my ideas and consequently cannot write logically and coherently."

There were other problems such as forgetting, getting started, looking for information on the internet, finding the relevant sources, and time management in writing essay examinations.

Some Solutions Recommended by Respondents

The respondents did not only identify problems but they also provided some solutions to their problems. These include introduction of English Proficiency Tests to Post-graduate studies as well. They also need constant reminder about the meaning of action verbs such as discuss, explain, describe, etc.

DISCUSSION

The study assessed the writing efficacy of post-graduate students enrolled in the three programmes, namely, B.Ed. (Hons), PGCE and ACE programmes. One research question sought to find out if there were differences in the writing efficacy of students in the three programmes. The writing efficacy of the students in the programmes were found to be (2.02; 1.97 and 1.98), respectively (Table 4). From the findings

it can be deduced that the writing efficacy of the three groups were more or less the same. The contextual factors that were identified as influencing the students' writing efficacy included their educational background, the level at which they teach, level of proficiency in English, and lack of vocabulary for the Research Methodology course, spelling, grammar and punctuation. The findings confirm the findings by other writers (Chen 2002; Rabab'ah 2003; Al-Khasawneh 2010; Mojica 2010). A lack of vocabulary continues to be a problem for students writing through a foreign language as was the case with Turkish College students (Rabab'ah 2003).

Hyland (2003), citing a comparative study made by Silva (1993), lists a variety of linguistic factors in writing. These are: (1) different linguistic proficiencies and institutions about language; (2) different learning experiences and classroom expectations; (3) different sense of audience and writer; (4) different preferences for ways of organising texts; (5) different writing processes; and (6) different understandings of text uses and the social value of different text types. Hyland (2003) argues that understanding these differences might indicate some implications for second language writing instruction and practice. For all the students in the study, English which is the medium of instruction, is the students' second or even third language in the South African context.

Writing problems that have been identified in the study, such as in-text referencing, paraphrasing, sentence construction, making paragraphs, spelling and grammar indicate that these post-graduate students have serious problems in academic writing. Since research methodology requires that they prepare an original research paper, this then becomes difficult for them to think about what to write and to organise their thoughts in order to produce, for example, a good research proposal. The above findings are consistent with other studies on this area (Pajares and Cheong 2003; Lane et al. 2004; García and de Caso 2006; Lo and Hyland 2007).

Other factors which affect students' writing included problems of balancing work demands and studying, lack of adequate resource material to research or inability to access internet libraries and internet facilities. These then require that they be advised on the number of subjects that they can do in one year. The transition from undergraduate to post-graduate studies is very

challenging and post-graduate students should be guided and supported. Writing of essays and research projects involve a lot of reading and through laziness students would rather hire people to do the work for them. As lecturers, therefore, we should be in a position to assess the writing efficacy level of students, identify the problems and help them accordingly. Hiring people to help them is an indication that they have problems.

CONCLUSION

Post-graduate students at the University of Technology used in this study have serious writing problems. This is evidenced by their responses in the Low Self-Efficacy Scale that was used. This is also supported by the writing problems that they gave such as problem with sentence construction, lack of understanding of concepts and terminology related to the discipline, problems of interpreting questions, spelling, grammar, tenses, reference techniques, especially in-text referencing, punctuation, inability to write coherently and logically, problems of synthesising information, and writing essays and research proposals. This shows clearly that these students cannot write as expected of them at the post-graduate level.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are made:

English for Academic purposes (EAP) should be introduced at all levels. Currently, this course is limited to first-year students at our institution. The writing problems that have been identified point to a dire need for such a programme to be introduced at all levels.

In addition to EAP, students should be exposed to writing tasks that require critical thinking, developing an argument and sustaining it throughout the essay, writing coherently and logically.

A culture of reading and writing among post-graduate students should be promoted by exposing students to public debates, seminars, and conferences. This kind of culture is likely to assist students improve their reading and writing skills.

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