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# ***GETTING YOUR STUDENTS TO BE MORE ACADEMICALLY LITERATE***

**An intervention in Psychology 348:  
Lessons learnt from 2013 - 2015**

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## Background: general

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- Worldwide experience in recent years: poor writing ability of learners/students
- Students at Stellenbosch University certainly no exception
- Certain responsibility to send out articulate and well-rounded individuals into the labour market
- The SU's Strategy for Teaching and Learning sets out certain *Graduate Attributes* that give voice to this responsibility:
  - *An Enquiring Mind*
  - *An Engaged Citizen*
  - *A Dynamic Professional*
  - *A Well-rounded Individual*
- All of these attributes require the ability to communicate well in an academic and professional environment
- Academic literacy = Ability to communicate



# Background: module

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- Poor academic writing: Psychology 348 - 2012
- Underlying issue? Deficit in academic literacy skills
- Psychology 348 module aim: Critical discussion of principles behind psychologists' contributions to human health, development and individual and collective well-being, specifically in health and mental health context in contemporary SA
- Psychology 348 is more writing intensive than many of the other psychology undergraduate modules - essay-type questions in tests and exams and a comprehensive assignment as part of the assessment
- Intervention aim: Prepare students better for assignment by improving their academic writing in order to, ultimately, increase proportion of students who pass Psychology 348
- The objective was to provide module specific support, as opposed to generic writing support available through other avenues
- Supported by Teaching Development Grant administered by our Vice-Dean



# Method

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- Academic literacy = Thinking + Reading + Writing
- Module specific content
- Experiential learning – class and homework exercises, i.e. “learning through doing”
- Integrated approach: IT supported & traditional assessment methods
- Continuous evaluation
- Tutors: 2013 & 2014/2015
- Smaller groups: 2014/2015
- Weekly feedback on exercises
- Consultation outside lectures / tutorials
- Compulsory
- Followed a step-by-step approach to the assignment over 7 weeks:
  - Information literacy (2)
  - Planning (1)
  - Writing (2)
  - Referencing (1)

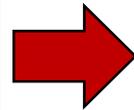


## Comparison: 2013 - 2015



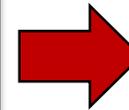
### 2013:

- ✓ 3<sup>rd</sup> & 4<sup>th</sup> term
- ✓ Stellenbosch & Tygerberg campuses
- Academic literacy skills (ALS) test: marks & individual feedback
- ✓ Assignment mark 30% of class mark
- ✓ Compare ALS test results with final assignment results
- ✓ All lectures in large groups, once a week with tutor support
- ✓ Faculty librarian - training in information literacy



### 2014:

- ✓ 3<sup>rd</sup> term only
- ✓ Stellenbosch & Tygerberg campuses
- ALS test: only general feedback given
- ✓ Assignment mark 50% (20% ↑) of class mark
- ✓ Compared assignment results with previous year
- ✓ 3 weekly lectures in large groups, thereafter 4 weekly tut groups
- ✓ Faculty librarian - training in information literacy



### 2015:

- ✓ 3<sup>rd</sup> term only
- ✓ Stellenbosch campus only
- ✓ Academic Writing Competence exercise: general feedback given
- ✓ Assignment mark 50% of class mark
- ✓ Compared assignment results with previous year
- ✓ 3 weekly lectures in large groups, thereafter 4 weekly tut groups
- ✓ Faculty librarian - training in information literacy



# Results

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- 2013:
  - The marks for the main assignment was significantly affected by the literacy skills test marks:
    - $F(1,458) = 120.458, p < .001$
- 2014:
  - There was a significant difference between the means of the two class groups for the assignment. The mean for the 2014 class ( $M = 57.93$ ;  $SD = 19.65$ ) was significantly higher than the mean for the 2013 class ( $M = 54.13$ ;  $SD = 12.92$ ), with  $t(932) = 3.59, p < .001$ .
  - Cohen's  $d$  was calculated, because of the large sample sizes and found to be .23, which indicated a small to medium effect size.
- 2015:
  - The 8 % increase in the pass rate for the assignment indicated a significant positive difference between the assignment marks for 2014 and 2015 with  $p < .001$ .
  - Cohen's  $d$  was once again calculated, because of the large sample sizes. Cohen's  $d$  was .24, which again indicated a small to medium effect size.



- Tutor feedback - 2013:

- *I think the Academic literacy course was useful to a number of students. Even though some of them were not interested in the beginning I think towards the end of the semester they had found the classes useful. There were a number of students who were attentive and interested in the class who were committed to achieving high marks. I think the class would be **more beneficial** if it were **split up into smaller groups**. The students could then be more interactive and the class would be more like a workshop than a lecture. I think students find it easier to ask questions and give comments when there are fewer people in the class. A smaller class will also make space for less interruptions.*

- Tutor feedback - 2014:

- *The class setup (**small groups with a tutor**) compared to last year (one large class) was **more beneficial** in terms of the students learning the skills needed for writing. The students were **more positive** about the module and there were quite a few who were actually **interested** in the module.*

[Emphasis added]



# Lessons learnt

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- Insights:
  - Department:
    - Need for intervention
    - Concurrent intervention in first year (in 2014 & 2015)
    - Experiential nature crucial
    - Tutors all psychology postgraduates
    - Multidisciplinary approach (librarian/IT – knowledge transfer, assessment & Turnitin)
    - Discipline / Module specific support (as opposed to purely generic support) necessary
    - Is it solely the lack of literacy skills that affects the literacy of students?
  - Quotes from students:
    - “It **encouraged me** to start my essay ahead of time and I received **useful info** with regards to what not to do in my essay.”
    - “The Academic Writing Competence programme was **very helpful** for Psychology 348, especially since it **ran parallel with** our **specific projects** for the module.”
    - “Prep for class **helped me prepare** for the assignment and class on **references was helpful** with how to use APA.”



# Lessons learnt

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- Challenges:
  - Resources
  - Timing
  - More feedback
  - Level of content / Level of complexity of assignment compared to earlier modules
  - Students' attitudes
  - Academic literacy as an add-on
  - Drive towards literacy in the Faculty
  - Improvement: statistically – enough?
- Quotes from students:
  - “...**very bad time** – 4 on a Friday!”
  - “It is definitely something that every university student should do at some point in the course. I, however, feel it **should have been covered in first or second year**, rather than just before our very last undergrad assignment.”

[Emphasis added]



# Future

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- Approach going forward
- Funding for future interventions
- Explore more blended learning options
- Extend to other undergraduate Psychology modules
- More widespread:
  - Emphasis on,
  - Support for,
  - Responsibility for, and
  - Commitment toLiteracy within departments and faculties needed