

Guideline Document for Academic Literacy at SU

1. Background

1.1 Internationally and in South Africa, academic literacy is increasingly viewed as an essential component of the formal academic higher education curriculum, for undergraduate as well as postgraduate students. The reasons for this are multiple:

- there is a growing view that students in higher education should be taught not only content knowledge, but in addition, how to learn and to acquire knowledge, and how to communicate knowledge in academic, social and professional settings;
- there is a strong focus on graduate attributes, which promote qualities such as curiosity, creativity and critical approaches to knowledge;
- schools in South Africa and elsewhere prepare students unequally (and in most cases, inadequately) with regard to academic literacy;
- modern modes of communication are changing at an accelerating pace, and are becoming ubiquitous, with varied modalities and levels of complexity; and
- multilingualism and the ability to learn and communicate in more than one language is an important characteristic of a South African graduate.

1.2 In the past one-and-a-half decades significant attention has been paid to academic literacy at SU. With regard to policy this has included:

- the SU Teaching and Learning Strategy 2002 – 2004, with reference to what were called “generic skills” at the time, implying skills necessary for all disciplines, for example, writing skills or information literacy skills;
- the Language Policy, the Language Plan and the language plans of faculties which indicate how language is being used in the undergraduate curriculum, and how financial support for this is provided; and
- the Consultative Colloquium on Academic Literacy held on 13 May 2010.

1.3 Much support for the acquisition of academic literacy has been provided for students in the undergraduate curriculum, less so in postgraduate programmes. Some of this is targeted for specific students, such as international students or students on the Extended Degree Programmes. However, this provision is not sufficiently comprehensive, nor offered within a systematic approach, such that the University can feel confident that all its students, whether academically well-prepared or under-prepared on entry, enjoy the opportunity to develop the graduate attributes that its programmes intend them to develop.

2. Purposes of this document

Given the good work that has already been conducted on academic literacy at the University, the time has come to develop a guideline, which will:

- provide an inclusive working definition of academic literacy which will aid the University and programme designers to plan for the realization of this aspect of the SU Graduate Attributes;
- suggest guidelines for how academic literacy could be fostered in the University's teaching and learning programmes; and
- indicate where and how this approach should be supported.

3. Point of departure

Academic literacy is acquired *informally*, in other words, individuals learn it naturally by doing it, in the home, at school, and at university. It is also learnt *formally*, in other words the rules and conventions are taught overtly, usually at school. It is argued in the literature that students acquire academic literacy most effectively when it is contextualized within the settings and methods of inquiry of their chosen disciplines.

4. Definitions

4.1 A working definition of academic literacy developed by the task team for the purpose of this guideline is the following:

The use of language and visual symbols in various modes (textual, oral, digital), involving production and reception, for acquiring and communicating knowledge at university. It includes values and attitudes associated with learning, and approaches to learning.

4.2 When people talk about academic literacy at university, they may be thinking of different aspects of this broad domain. When students engage in academic literacy practices, some or all of these elements are involved:

Critical literacy emphasizes the value of academic literacy in facilitating critical thinking, which is necessary for academic practices, to foster successful functioning in the workplace, and to facilitate the emergence of citizenship in a democratic society.

Information literacy is defined as "To be information literate, a person must be able to recognise when information is needed and have the capacity to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information."¹

Numeric literacy is described as "a 'habit of mind,' competency, and comfort in working with numerical data... the ability to reason and solve quantitative problems from a wide array of authentic contexts and everyday life situations" and to understand and create "sophisticated arguments supported by quantitative evidence" and to "communicate those arguments in a variety of formats (using words, tables, graphs, mathematical equations, etc., as appropriate)."²

Text literacy refers to the use of "the written word" in hard copy or electronic texts, whereas *visual literacy* refers to the use of a wider source of signs, including pictures and other visual conventions.

¹ Definition according to the *American Library Association*

² Definition according to the *American Association of Colleges and Universities*

Distinctions are also made between *print literacy* (where the mode of communication is paper-based) and *digital literacy* (where the mode of communication is electronic, and increasingly web-based) (Mehlenbacher, 2010).

4.3 There are varied ways that academic literacy is referred to in the scholarly literature. Some of these are:

Language (for example, English and Afrikaans) for academic purposes, commonly referred to in the literature as EAP or English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The focus is on reading and writing and surviving the linguistic demands of education, where the emphasis is on acquiring language for academic study in general as well as for a specific discipline.

Academic discourse stresses the way that language is used, but includes values and attitudes, ideology, and the way that academic literacy is influenced by social class and biography (Gee, 1992).

4.4 The development or acquisition of academic literacy intersects with, but is not the same as, developing knowledge of a language. For example, a student can learn Afrikaans for communicative purposes. A student can learn about Afrikaans as a language. However, the student would need to learn Afrikaans, and possibly to learn about Afrikaans, as part of becoming academically literate in Afrikaans.

4.5 The definition of academic literacy in 4.1 stresses language and literacy for communicating knowledge in academic settings, as this is how the term has traditionally been used. However, in professional programmes such as Engineering, Health and Law, there is simultaneously a related emphasis on language and literacy for communicating knowledge in professional and community settings. The difference might be in terms of timing: the academic focus could be stronger at first-year level and the professional focus during the final year of study.

5. An approach for SU

Learner-centred:

- 5.1 Support for the acquisition of academic literacy is provided for all students in all programmes.
- 5.2 This support takes into account what students need in order to study successfully as well as what they need in order to become proficient graduates.
- 5.3 The university meets the specific needs of certain groups of students whom they have admitted, such as students on Extended Degree Programmes or international students.
- 5.4 The approach provides the opportunity for students to *learn about* the forms and conventions typical of the various aspects of academic literacy as well as multiple opportunities to *practice* academic literacy

Flexible:

- 5.5 The approach is flexible and context-sensitive, which implies that it will take different forms, depending upon various aspects of context.
- 5.6 Faculties or departments choose the design and focus best suited to their programmes, the disciplines and the level of study.

5.7 The provision builds on the potential strengths in the teaching and learning setting, including the strengths of the teaching corps and support units.

Collaborative:

5.8 Multidisciplinary collaboration between different role players is undertaken when new programmes are designed or existing programmes evaluated (academics/disciplinary specialists, Library, Language Centre, Centre for Teaching and Learning, ICT specialists).

Systematic:

5.9 When planning for the support of academic literacy occurs, this should be done on the basis of an assessment of what support for academic literacy already exists in a programme, and what additional support is required.

5.10 Support for academic literacy should be part of the architecture of a programme, programme design and regular review processes.

5.11 The approach sees value in discussion and consensus on academic literacy at programme, departmental and faculty level, with regard to

a) academic conventions;

b) how, when and where academic literacy is fostered; and

c) common issues such as originality/plagiarism and the use of Turnitin.

(Whilst it is advantageous to students to receive similar messages about academic literacy from various sources, this is not always feasible, as disciplinary conventions may differ.)

6. Support

Various divisions or departments provide support for the design or delivery of academic literacy interventions. It is considered best practice in many universities to provide this support in larger, multidisciplinary design teams. Units which provide support for academic literacy are:

The Language Centre

Library and Information Service

The Centre for Teaching and Learning

Department of Information Science

The African Doctoral Academy

7. Financial implications

7.1 While additional funding for innovation might be required to kick-start the provision of academic literacy, it should be seen as part of the regular programme offering, and not as an add-on.

7.2 Academic literacy modules are offered within the general service course format and funded accordingly. Other services, such as writing centre consultations, advice, collaborative research and evaluation, training and research support are free.

7.3 The University could provide financial support for development activities, for example an extension of FIRLT, which would also allow for academics to visit other universities in order to learn from best practice or to attend conferences on academic literacy.

8. Advocacy and coordination

- 8.1 The contents of this guideline document should be tabled at Senate and featured on the SU website under “teaching and learning”.
- 8.2 The guidelines and related issues, as part of a broader focus on academic literacy, should receive attention at the Committee for Teaching and Learning on an annual basis.
- 8.3 The contents of this guideline should inform the University Policy for Teaching and Learning which is currently under construction.

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