





2023

Impact Analysis of Academic Literacy Provision



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Executive Summary

Introduction

This impact study was completed using both qualitative and quantitative data, and shows the effectiveness of UFS's academic literacy provision in assisting students to develop key academic reading and writing skills.

Main Findings

The main findings of this impact study are:

- The large majority of UFS students, from both the extended and mainstream programmes, require additional developmental academic literacy support in their first year.
- Statistics from the National Benchmark Test show that, on average, less than 25% of first-time entering students are proficient in academic literacy.
- Isolated statistics from the National Benchmark Test of first-time entering *mainstream* students show that, of those who wrote, approximately 30% are proficient in academic literacy.
- For those first-time entering mainstream students who did not write the National Benchmark Test, the NBT algorithm shows that less than 7% are proficient in academic literacy.
- Write Site individual consultations correlate up to 15.3% with graduation.
- A correlation study on 61 020 students from 2015 to 2022 shows a 14.9% correlation between students' average final marks in non-developmental modules and successful completion of an EAL course.
- A mainstream student's average final marks without an EAL module is 59%, while it is 64% with an EAL module.
- An extended programme student's average final mark without an EAL module is 52%, while it is 63% with an EAL module.

Introduction

In a climate where primary and secondary schooling systems are plagued by under-funded and under-capacitated schools that do not afford many students the opportunity to achieve higher levels of education, the need for academic literacy development at a tertiary level is self-evident (Spaull, 2015; van Rooy & Coetzee-van Rooy, 2015; du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Moeletsi & Mlachila, 2019; Bipath & Nkabinde, 2020). However, questions are still raised about the validity and necessity of academic literacy development (ALD) for students, especially those on a mainstream programme, entering higher education. The aim of this document is thus to clarify four key points about the ALD support at the University of the Free State (UFS) which takes the form of faculty-specific English Academic Literacy (EAL) modules and Writing Centre support (Write Site).

- As a starting point, this document will clarify what academic literacy development (ALD) is and what the English Academic Literacy (EAL) modules aim to accomplish.
- Connected to the first point, this document will correct the misconception that academic literacy support at a developmental level is only required for first-time entering extended programme students and is not necessary for some mainstream programme students.
- To evidence the point above, this document provides data-driven evidence of the need for ALD support for *both* mainstream and extended programme students. There is thus a social justice imperative in maintaining the modules, especially since the UFS would like to focus on decreasing the achievement gap.
- Fourthly, this document provides both quantitative and qualitative data to evidence the impact of the EAL modules on the development of students' academic literacy practices. This document will also evidence the positive impact that these courses have on overall student success.

This document makes three additional points.

- The maintenance of these courses is imperative to the social justice and transformation agendas of the UFS especially since their focus is on developing students' foundational *academic literacy* skills (writing, reading and critical thinking). Skills such as these enhance student success (as will be evidenced).

- These courses assist students in developing foundational academic literacy skills upon which more complex academic literacies build. The development of such practices and skills is key to building a strong postgraduate cohort which is one of the key foci of Vision 130.
- These courses play a central role in promoting the fourth driver of multilingualism at the UFS: improving English as a language of instruction.

What is Academic Literacy Development?

ALD work is often misunderstood as being a series of interventions aimed only at students who struggle with a ‘language barrier’, specifically English. This misconception has a strong link to deficit ways of thinking about students and students’ abilities which often feeds into the conceptualisation of ALD interventions as being appropriate primarily for second-language English-speaking students needing augmented and remedial support. This misperception does not recognise the centrality of ALD work in making higher order skills and academic practices explicit to students; ALD work focuses on teaching students about the different ways of reading, writing, producing and thinking about academic knowledge within higher education (Boughey & Niven, 2012: 647; Scott, 2009: 25; Boughey, 2013: 27, Boughey, 2000; Quinn, 2012). In other words, different disciplines within the higher education space value multiple discourses. As such, there are various ways to receive and to make meaning (Boughey & McKenna, 2016: 3; Lea & Street, 1998: 159). This is especially true in a socio-historically and socio-politically contested space (such as South African higher education) where literacies are ‘numerous, varied, and socially/institutionally situated’ (Lillis, 2001: 31). There is thus no single academic discourse that works across multiple disciplines.

What this means is that ALD work and academic literacy courses, such as the EAL, AGA and GENL courses, are not English language courses aimed at improving students’ general communicative skills in English. Rather, ALD courses are aimed at making explicit to students the often opaque institutional structures, systems, specialised forms of writing, reading, and knowledge production which are foreign to the large majority of first-time entering students. From a student point of view,

[A] dominant feature of academic literacy practices is the requirement to switch practices between one setting and another, to deploy a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriate to each setting, and to handle the social meanings and identities that each evokes (Lea & Street, 1998: 159).

In other words, reading a chapter from *Introductory Psychology* (Malim & Birch, 1998), for example, requires the enactment of vastly different reading practices, than reading a technical peer-reviewed article about the effect of climate change on ground water published in *Nature*. Similarly, the writing practices needed to produce a well-written reflective essay in Education are different to those needed to produce a well-written and accurate laboratory report for Chemistry. Teaching these specialised reading, writing and critical thinking practices *through the medium of English* is thus the focus of the EAL courses. Some example specialised practices include:

- Reading for meaning;
- Identifying key points in a text;
- Analysing information and making decisions about the relevance and applicability of information to the task at hand;
- Logical reasoning;
- Ordering information (in thinking and writing) in a logical and structured way;
- Reading and thinking critically;
- Asking questions about texts and sources of information;
- Synthesising information from a wide variety of sources;
- Undertaking independent research;
- Finding academic texts;
- Writing in a formal, clear and accurate way;
- Writing and reading different academic genres;
- Listening and taking notes during class;
- Taking notes while reading;
- Using notes to write assignments, and
- Referencing.

With this sample list of academic practices in mind, Lillis and Turner (2001) have argued that the institutional and disciplinary ways of reading, writing, speaking and learning are *opaque to the large majority of newcomers to tertiary study*. Cottrell (2019: 43) thus talks about ‘at risk’ *environments* rather than ‘at risk’ *students*. She highlights the fact that all people have learning needs and by taking a developmental approach to ALD, institutions acknowledge that support needs to be *multifaceted*. Of course, academic *English* is part and parcel of academic literacy development at the UFS, since English is the medium of instruction. Thus, part of the aim of the EAL modules is also to assist students with developing their *academic* reading and writing skills *in English*. It is important to note at this point that this kind of support is not only applicable to second-language English speakers. Even first-language speakers of English need to develop their academic writing and reading practices in English. Research from the United Kingdom, for example, shows that some British students who follow the traditional A-level route do not have the requisite academic literacies or language skills for higher education (Wingate, 2006; Hathaway, 2015). Focusing specifically on the UFS context, the above information serves to clarify why it is not only the extended programme students who enrol for the EAL courses. Many mainstream students registering at the UFS also need ALD support and as such are required to enrol for the EAL modules. Further evidence of this will be provided in the next section.

The need for ALD support

The academic literacy and English language levels of students at South African tertiary institutions show a sobering reality. Research consistently shows that a large majority of South African students are in desperate need of ALD and language support, specifically in reading and writing (see for example, Fleisch, 2008; van Wyk, 2014; Pretorius and Spaull, 2016; McKay, 2018; Baker *et al.*, 2018; Millin & Millin, 2019; Prince *et al.*, 2021; Sebolai, 2022;). As recently as February of this year, Nic Spaull released the *2023 Reading Panel Background Report*, which evidenced ‘...a country going backwards in the fundamental unit of education: literacy’ (Stent, 2023). The report reveals shocking statistics about the reading abilities of primary school children, which is made even more concerning due to the fact that these are crucial years in a child’s basic literacy development. If development is negatively affected during these formative years, a child’s ability to learn and develop both basic and more complex literacy during their high school careers is also negatively impacted. Some of the statistics to note are:

- 82% of Grade 4 learners cannot read for meaning;
- 60% of learners have not learnt the entire alphabet by the end of Grade 1;
- The ‘COVID generation’ are at least a full year behind same-aged children from 2019, and
- ‘The delayed decoders only reach the Grade 3 benchmark in Grade 5 and the Alphabetically illiterate reach it in Grade 7, meaning they are 2 – 4 years behind the minimum grade-level reading benchmark’ (Spaull, 2023: 10).

These statistics evidence the sobering reality of the education system in South Africa. Yet, this information is not new: Data from the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) in 2006, for example, revealed that 87% of Grade 4 students and 78% of Grade 5 students were scoring below the ‘low international benchmark’ (Smuts, 2014). Students who score this low at a Grade 4 level risk not learning how to read at all (Smuts, 2014). The pre-PIRLS study completed in 2011, is another example. It shows that only 50% of children who completed the pre-PIRLS test and who spoke Xitsonga, Tshivenda or Sepedi as a first language, could read or write by the end of Grade 4 (Spaull, 2015).

The educational situation has a direct effect on the literacy and linguistic readiness of many students coming to the UFS. The above statistics are staggering when one considers the fact that from Grade 4 onwards, the school curriculum moves from focusing on ‘learning to read’ to ‘reading to learn’. Low reading levels such as this severely affect a child’s ability to engage with the curriculum in their senior years (Spaull, 2015: 34). Evidence of this comes from *The Economist* (2017) which reported on the 2015 OECD rankings; the South African education system was ranked as 75th out of 76 countries. It also reported that 27% of students still could not read or write after *six years of schooling*; only 37% of children starting school go on to pass the final year examination (their matric exams) and only about 4% successfully complete a tertiary degree.

The problems associated with a deficient foundation in reading and writing skills are only compounded as students progress to higher levels of study. Butler (2013: 73), for example, argues that it would be dangerous to ‘assume adequate levels of academic literacy on the part of students new to [tertiary level] education’. Statistics from the University of the Free State (UFS), also show that it is dangerous to assume that students have an adequate understanding of the literacy requirements for successful study at a tertiary level given that 70% of its students are first-generation students.

With the above issues in mind, it is no wonder then that a large majority of South African students begin their university careers without having attained the required literacy levels upon leaving school. To illustrate this issue more clearly, I refer to the UFS National Benchmark Test (NBT) statistics. Based on their performance in the NBT, students are classified into one of four groups:

Basic: Serious learning challenges identified: it is predicted that students will not cope with degree level study without extensive & long-term support, perhaps best provided through bridging programmes or FET colleges. Institutions registering students performing at this level would need to provide such support.

Intermediate-Lower: Students need to be placed in an extended programme.

Intermediate-Upper: Students are likely to need complementary support (additional tutorials, workshops, augmented courses, language-intensive work).

Proficient: Performance in domain areas suggests that academic performance will not be adversely affected. If admitted, students should be placed on regular programme of study.

The UFS NBT statistics (Table 1) show that over the past 3 years, less than 25% of students entering the UFS performed to a proficient level. This means that out of those students who wrote the NBT, 75% are not yet sufficiently academically literate for their first year of study.

TABLE 1: NBT score distribution from 2020 – 2022.

Year	Basic (0 – 38)	Int. lower (39 – 53)	Int. Upper (54 – 64)	Proficient	Total
2020	385	1063	724	711	2883
%	13%	37%	25%	25%	
2021	253	1016	842	599	2710
%	9%	37%	31%	22%	
2022					
%					

The NBT statistics above are only reflective of those students who wrote the NBT test (which averages at around 2000 students per year). The above statistics may also reflect a mix of mainstream and extended programme students, since students do not specify their chosen programmes when writing the NBT. To determine the performance of mainstream students on the NBT, Table 2 (below) has been provided.

TABLE 2: NBT results of mainstream students (excluding Health Sciences students).

Year NBT written	Wrote proficient	Wrote not proficient	Total
2020	216	221	437
%	49%	51%	
2021	382	910	1292
%	30%	70%	
2022	456	1092	1548
%	29%	71%	

Table 2 reveals that during the last two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, only 30% of mainstream students entering the UFS performed to a proficient level according to the NBT. In 2020, although 49% of mainstream students were deemed proficient, it is important to note that less than 450 mainstream students wrote the NBT. Again, we acknowledge that the NBT data only reflects a small percentage of the total student population. Thus, we also present data (Table 3) from the predictive NBT algorithm which *only* runs on mainstream students (extended programme students are excluded from the NBT algorithm since they are *required* to complete the developmental modules). Before providing the statistics, however, it is important to clarify what the predictive NBT algorithm is.

In 2020, CTL anticipated that the COVID-19 pandemic would impact upon the running of the NBT. To mitigate the effect of this impact, and to enable the ALLD team to make informed decisions about students' need for ALD support, it was decided that a machine-learning algorithm would be developed. The role of the NBT-algorithm is to predict the academic literacy score of students who could not write the NBT during the pandemic. The NBT-algorithm works by firstly, taking the matriculation results of students who had

previously studied at the UFS or who were current UFS students (as an example, the algorithm includes admission point score and language marks). Based on the performance of these UFS students, the NBT-algorithm then identifies patterns can be used to predict how these students scored on the academic literacy portion of their NBT test. The algorithm memorised these patterns and uses it to predict new applicants' NBT scores.

The NBT-algorithm essentially answers the question “how would someone with similar matric results score on their NBT?” and then assigns that score to the new student. The ALLD team can then decide whether a student should take one of the EAL modules or not, based on this assigned score. It is important to note at this point that the algorithm does not test academic literacy or language ability, but its sole purpose is to aid the ALLD in evidence-based decision making. To create this machine learning algorithm, historical NSC data from 2014 to 2020 was used as training data for the algorithm since the NBT scores of these students was available. Our dataset included 27 528 UFS students. Students who enrolled for the extended programmes as well as for Health Sciences were excluded from the predictions. The algorithm was tested and is 85% accurate. We consider 85% as sufficient evidence of the technical soundness of the NBT-algorithm.

TABLE 3: Prediction results for all mainstream students who did not write the NBT.

Year NBT written	Predicted proficient	Predicted not proficient	Total
2020	475	6482	6957
%	7%	93%	
2021	232	7448	7680
%	3%	97%	
2022	374	9441	9785
%	4%	96%	

Table 3 shows that with, 85% accuracy, we can predict that more than 93% of mainstream students over the last three years (who did not write the NBT) would have been classified by the NBT as not proficient. It is worth repeating that we used data from 27 528 matriculants to train the algorithm to determine “how would someone with similar matric results score on their NBT?”

The impact of the EAL courses

The response of most South African tertiary institutions to the issue of literacy has been to provide students, especially at a first-year level, with as much academic literacy support¹ as possible. This is with the further aim of ‘bridging the gap’ between secondary school and university and providing students with a foundational set of academic literacy practices which they then build on throughout their academic careers.

The UFS’s response to the need for ALD support was, like many other higher education institutions, to start ALD modules at a first-year level. These modules were first introduced in 1996, and by 2006 had gone through several years of research and development to become faculty-based. The EAL modules thus focus on faculty-based academic literacies practices and content. All the academic literacy modules have undergone extensive research and curriculum renewal since 2018. In 2018, a year-long impact report was done on all the modules. It showed that the EAL and GENL courses as well as the Write Site had a positive impact on students’ development of academic literacy skills. The main findings were as follows:

- When students fully engage with the interventions at the Write Site, a statistically significant improvement of 32% on average from pre- to post-submission was found.
- An emphasis on blended, discipline-specific writing support in the EAL course for Natural and Agricultural Sciences (EALN) had a positive impact on students’ ability to write lab reports. After three scaffolded activities, students on both Bloemfontein campus and South campus saw an improvement in their performance of 45% and 32% respectively.

- An emphasis on scaffolded academic writing in all four EAL courses (EALL, EALN, EALH, EALE) resulted in statistically significant increases in student performance. Scaffolded paragraph writing (in the first semester) resulted in an increase of 8.75% from first to final draft while scaffolded essay writing (in the second semester) resulted in an increase of 9.95% from first to final draft.
- An impact assessment of academic writing comprehension abilities in the General English Language (GENL) course showed a marked improvement of 20% in students' written output as a result of scaffolding during the year.
- An impact study of paragraph writing in the Afrikaans for Education (AGAE) course using the explicit instruction approach to scaffolding showed an improvement of 18% on average from students' first to second written output. It also showed an improvement of 15% in students' final paragraphs. The study furthermore explored the influence of the explicit instruction approach which involves gradually removing scaffolding in order to assist students in becoming more independent writers.
- Both students and facilitators commented that students' academic literacy abilities developed in terms of higher order skills, research skills, and language usage. More specifically, students commented that they are more confident in their writing abilities, that they have the ability to find suitable sources, and that they are able to produce well-constructed essays.

Since 2019 there has been continued development of all the academic literacy courses. The curriculum renewal work done by the ALLD team has been in constant collaboration with academic staff from the faculties as well as semesterly feedback from students and facilitators. The curriculum was thus updated to maintain its relevancy (keeping in mind the drive to decolonise education). The curricula are bespoke for UFS students and are structured in a way that scaffolds student learning.

In 2020 a correlation study was done with pre-COVID-19 data to demonstrate how high impact practices, such as the Write Site, influence the success of students. This correlation study specifically focussed on decreasing the achievement gap in the Siyaphumelela project. The following filters were used to select for the final sample size of 5830 students:

- Only African students;
- Only Bloemfontein campus students;
- Only contact students;
- Only degrees;
- 5 years of data from 2015 to 2019; and
- Students that either graduated or dropped out (students that are still studying, were excluded).

Two metrics were used to measure student performance. The amount of Full Time Equivalent (FTE) credits a student passed (i.e., short-term performance) as well as the students' graduation status (i.e., long-term performance). Table 4 shows that when African students participate in at least 1 individual Write Site session, they pass 8.1% more credits, and they are 15.3% more likely to graduate.

TABLE 4: Success metrics correlation with Write Site individual sessions:

Success metric	Correlation	p-value
Full Time Equivalent (FTE) credits passed	8.1 %	0.000
Graduation	15.3 %	0.000

To evaluate the impact of the EAL courses, a correlation study was done on 61 020 students from 2015 to 2022. The average final marks in the non-developmental modules were correlated with the successful completion of the EAL courses. Table 5 indicates that there is a 14.9% correlation between a student's average final marks and successful completion of an EAL course.

TABLE 5: Average final mark correlation with EAL course participation:

Success metric	Correlation	p-value
Average final marks	14.9 %	0.000

Breaking these correlations down by race indicates that Africans and Coloured students are the largest benefactors of the EAL courses (Table 6):

TABLE 6: Influence of EAL modules on average final marks per race:

Race	Average final marks (Without EAL)	Average final marks (With EAL)
African	56	64
Asian	65	65
Coloured	60	65
White	67	68

Grouping by school quintiles indicates that quintiles 1, 2 and 3 are the largest benefactors of the EAL courses (Table 7):

TABLE 7: Influence of EAL modules on average final marks per school quintile:

School quintile	Average final marks (Without EAL)	Average final marks (With EAL)
Q1	54	62
Q2	54	63
Q3	54	62
Q4	58	64
Q5	64	68

Grouping by pathways indicates that extended programme students are the largest benefactors of the EAL courses (Table 8). On average, however, mainstream students also perform 5% better if they have successfully completed one of the EAL modules:

TABLE 8: Influence of EAL modules on average final marks per pathway:

Pathway	Average final marks (Without EAL)	Average final marks (With EAL)
Mainstream	59	64
Extended	52	63

Grouping by faculty indicates that students from the Theology, Law and Economic and Management Sciences faculties are the largest benefactors of the EAL courses (Table 9).

TABLE 9: Influence of EAL modules on average final marks per faculty:

Faculty	Average final marks (Without EAL)	Average final marks (With EAL)
ECONOMIC AND MANAGEMENT SCIENCES	58	65
EDUCATION	57	64
HUMANITIES	57	62
LAW	54	63
NATURAL AND AGRICULTURAL SCIENCES	59	64
THEOLOGY	57	66

Additional qualitative feedback has been provided below. This feedback is from students who have taken one of the EAL module in previous years. Figures 1 – 4 show student feedback from students who were previously enrolled for the EAL and GENL modules (n = 16 830). Figure 5 shows feedback from current senior and postgraduate students (n = 5).

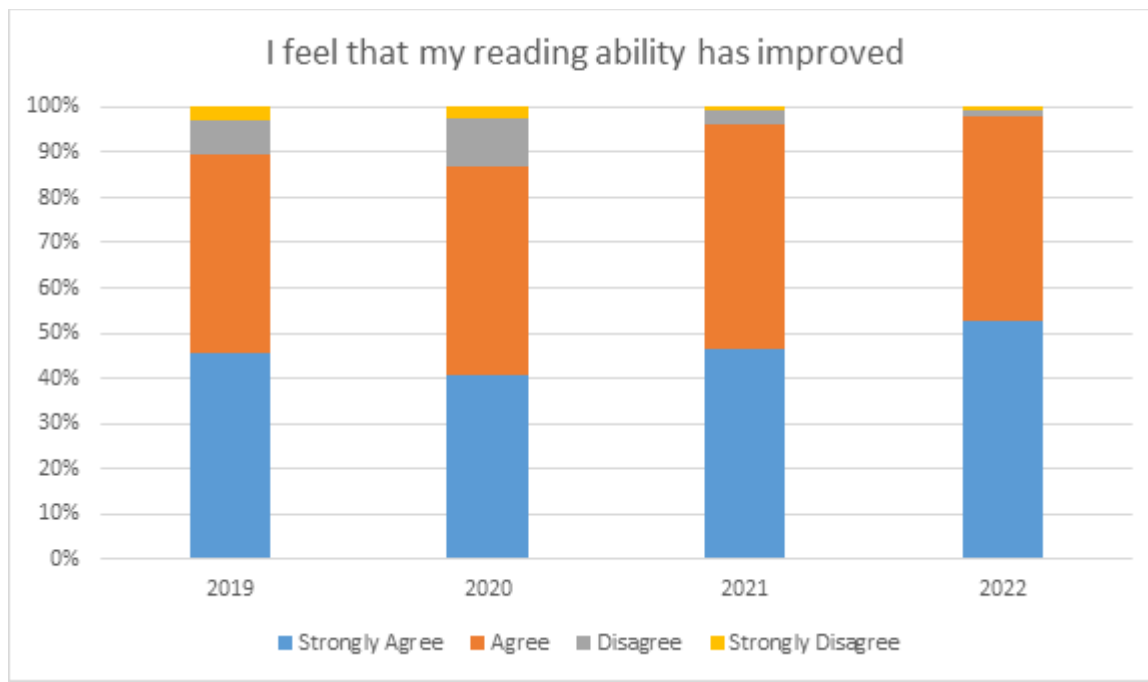


Figure 1: Student feedback on reading interventions

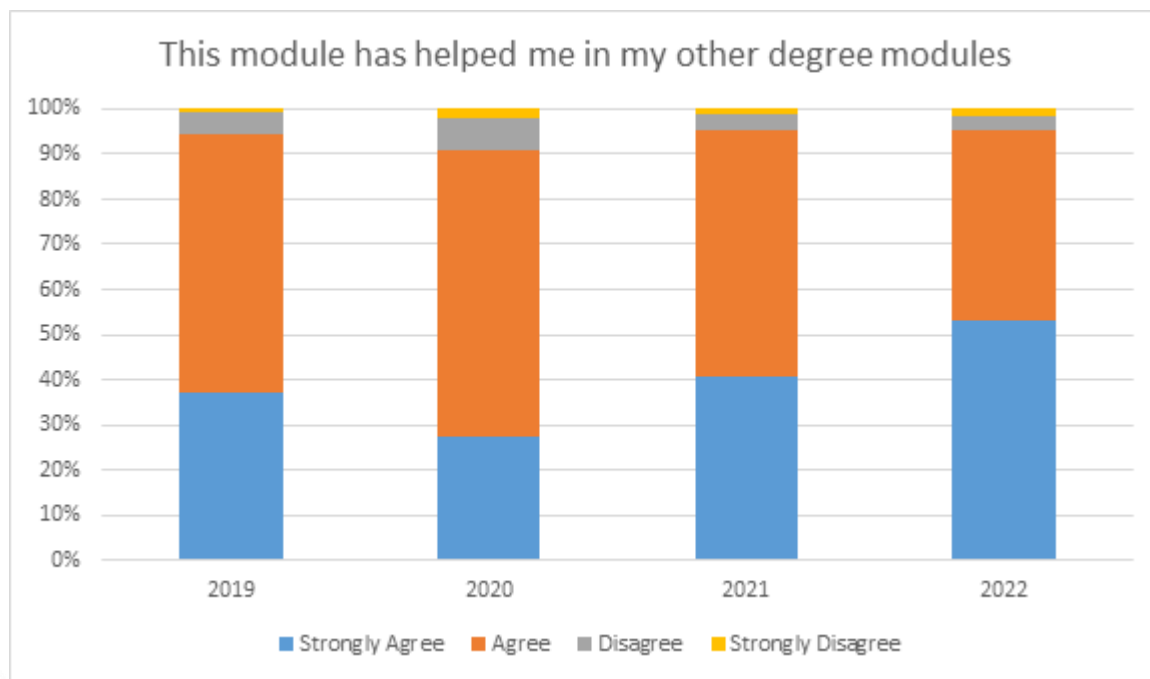


Figure 2: Student feedback on relevance of modules

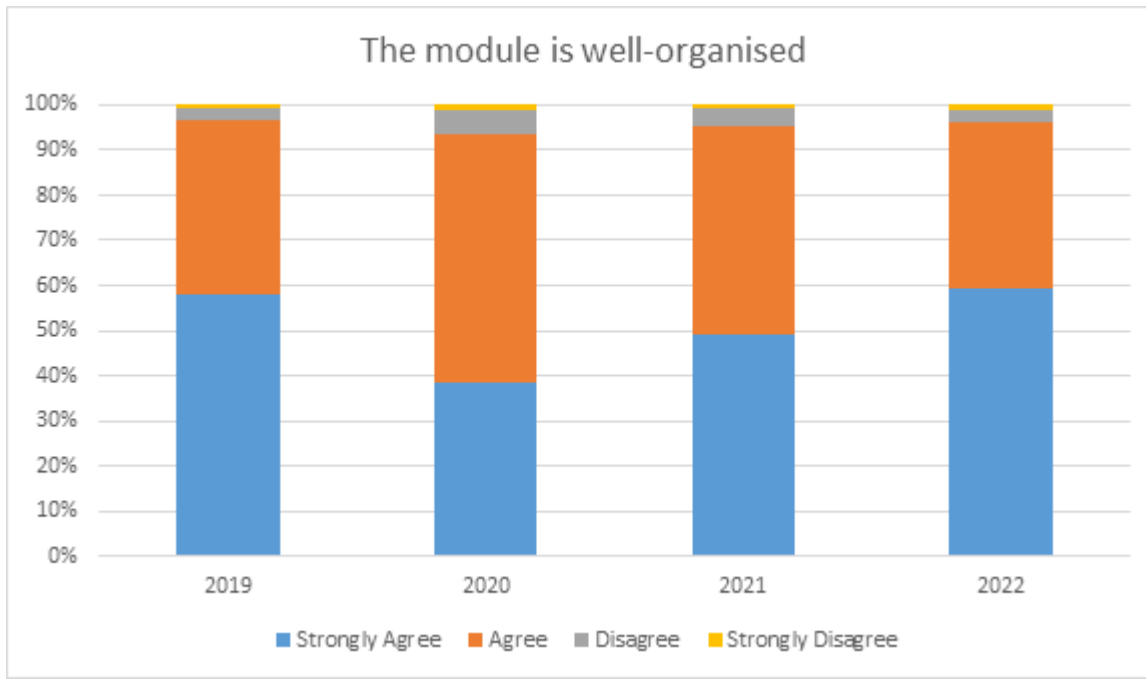


Figure 3: Student feedback on the organisation of the courses.

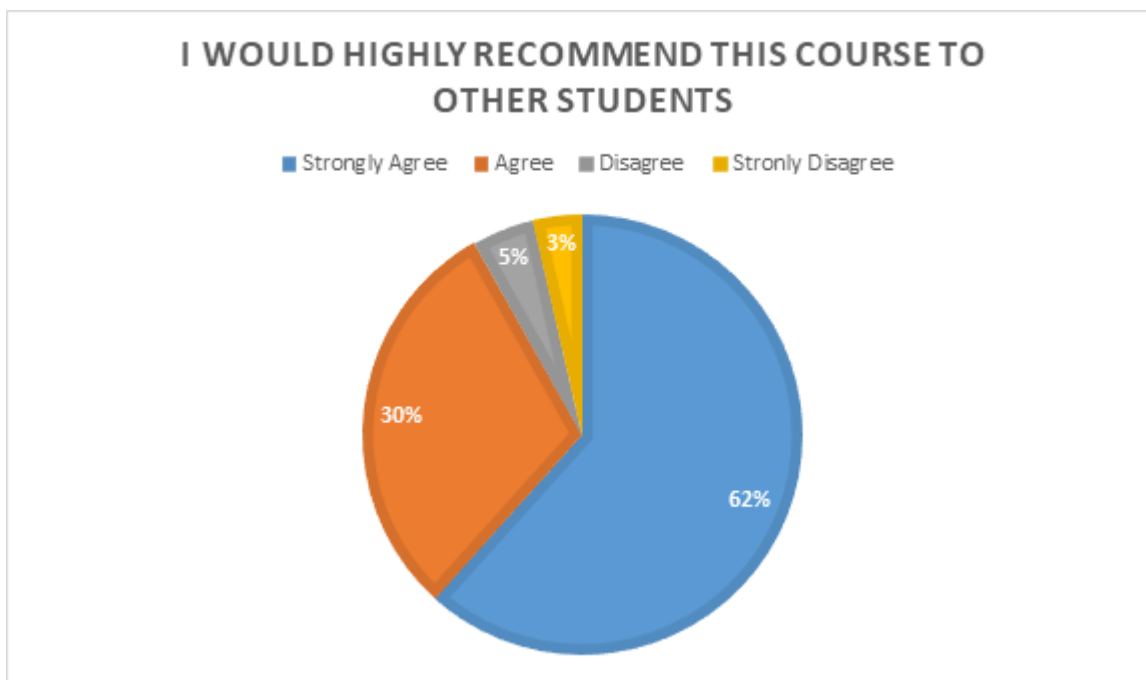


Figure 4: Student recommendation

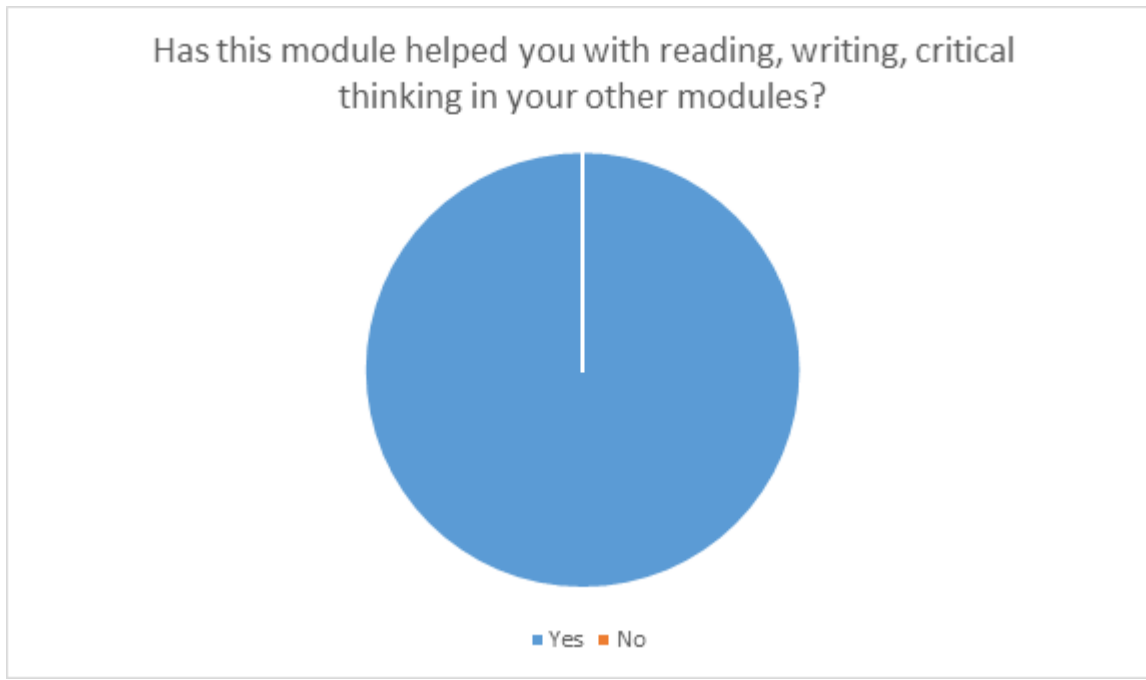


Figure 5: Senior and Postgraduate student feedback

The following is qualitative feedback from students who were enrolled on the EAL and GENL modules:

- *It encompasses and equips a student with imperative information that is applicable even in other modules and it is easy to implement in other tasks of the course. The module provides everlasting data that can be still of use in the future workplace.*
- *EALH is a great module. It has helped me to adjust to writing and reading at a university level.*
- *I enjoy EALT 1508 module so much, it's easy to understand if you attended all sessions and whatever you learn during the lessons you are going to find it useful when working on other modules work.*
- *EAL 1508 it is helpful to all my academics because I can apply what I learned in all my modules for example, how to reference to avoid plagiarism*
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- *Engaging with more than one kind of assessments, the variation of reading quizzes, activities completed online, grammar work and writing skills has allowed for me to think outside of the box.*

- *It teaches one how to write in university level and better understand the depth of literature writing and reading.*
- *It doesn't only teach you English and how to speak it, but it also make you to understand your modules instructions carefully and be able to answer according to what is asked. It also improves your levels of academic writings.*
- *What I liked about my academic literacy modules is that it allowed us to transition from English to Academic writing without any difficulties as there was guidance throughout the way.*
- *I like that it helped me improve my reading speed and skills. All I learnt on this module helped in making it easy for me to adapt to my other module. E.g the correct way to read and write English*

Conclusion

The above information serves to make 4 key points about the EAL courses at the UFS.

- The EAL courses are key developmental courses that assist in developing students' foundational academic literacy skills. Their focus is thus primarily on academic reading, writing, critical thinking and language skills.
- The EAL are appropriate for both the extended and mainstream programme students since their goal is to assist students in developing foundational academic literacy skills. Data from both the UFS and South African at large shows that the large majority of South African students require such support at a first-year level.
- The maintenance of these courses is imperative to the social justice agenda of the UFS.
- These courses assist students in developing foundational academic literacy skills upon which more complex academic literacies will build. The development of such practices and skills is key to building a strong postgraduate cohort which is one of the key foci of Vision 130.

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