The impact of an academic literacy intervention on the academic literacy levels of first year students: The NWU (Vaal Triangle Campus) experience

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to the memory of my late grandparents: Jester and Jacob Mhlongo who have always supported my academic endeavours – and continue to do so beyond this world.

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OPSOMMING

Daar is groeiende kommer in Suid-Afrika se hoëronderwyssektor oor die groot aantal studente met lae vlakke van akademiese geletterdheid (AG) wat toegelaat word tot dié sektor. Hierdie toestroming noop die instelling van intervensies wat daarop gemik is om sulke studente te ondersteun in die vereistes wat aan hulle gestel word met betrekking tot akademiese geletterdheid. Gevolglik was daar ŉ toename in AG-intervensies in die tersiêre sektor wat vir verskillende kontekste ontwerp is. Tog word daar weinig bewyse vir die werklike impak of effektiwiteit van sulke intervensies in die literatuur gevind met betrekking tot die doel waarvoor dit ontwerp is.

Die Vaaldriehoekkampus (VDK) van Noordwes-Universiteit het gevind dat die meerderheid eerstejaarstudente wat by dié kampus registreer met die uiteindelike doel om ŉ tersiêre kwalifikasie te verwerf, ongenoegsame vlakke van akademiese geletterdheid in Engels vertoon. Tog is die AG-intervensie wat tans op hierdie kampus gevolg word, nog nooit voorheen formeel assesseer in terme van die effektiwiteit daarvan om studente se AG-vlakke te verbeter nie. Die doel van die hierdie studie was dus om die impak wat die AG-intervensie op die AG-vlakke van die studente het, te ondersoek. Die intervensie, wat bestaan uit twee komplementêre semestermodules, word oor die strekking van ŉ jaar aan nuwe eerstejaarstudente aangebied.

As vertrekpunt is ŉ omvattende literatuuroorsig gegee oor belangrike veranderinge wat in die tersiêre onderwyssektor sedert 1994 plaasgevind het. Regverdiging vir so ŉ ondersoek is gebaseer op die feit dat baie van hierdie veranderinge, soos byvoorbeeld die ‘toestroming’ van tersiêre onderwys, verreikende gevolge vir die tersiêre sektor ingehou het: meer studente wat onvoldoende voorbereid is, ontvang toegang tot universiteitsopleiding. Vervolgens word die beskikbare literatuur oor die verskillende tipes AG-intervensies in Suid-Afrika krities bespreek, insluitend spesifieke kursusse wat ook die impak van die intervensies rapporteer.

Die empiriese gedeelte van die studie het gebruik gemaak van beide ŉ kwalitatiewe as ŉ kwantitatiewe navorsingsparadigma om die impak van die AG-intervensie by die Vaaldriehoekkampus te ondersoek. ŉ Uiters betroubare AG-toets (die TALL: Test of Academic Literacy Levels) is gebruik om te bepaal of studente enige beduidende verbetering in hulle AG-vlakke toon as gevolg van die AG-intervensie. Die studie rapporteer positiewe resultate in hierdie verband. Die ondersoek het verder ook opinie-gebaseerde data ingesamel

met behulp van drie vraelyste wat daarop gemik was om sowel studente as dosente se persepsies oor die impak van die AG-intervensie te bepaal. Die hoofbevindinge van die twee vraelyste aan die studente (een vraelys per module), is dat studente oor die algemeen waarde heg daaraan om die AG-module by te woon, aangesien hulle voel dat hulle voordeel daaruit trek. Die bevindinge van die vraelys aan die dosente wys dat, alhoewel hoofstroomdosente deeglik bewus is van studente se lae vlakke van akademiese geletterdheid, hulle nie die impak van die AG-intervensie sien om sodanige swak vlakke te verbeter nie. Dit het verder ook geblyk dat die dosente nie baie kennis het oor wat die fokus van die AG-intervensie op kampus behels nie.

Die hoofgevolgtrekking van hierdie studie kom in kort daarop neer dat die AG-intervensie ŉ definitiewe effek op die verbetering van studente se AG-vlakke het. Tog is daar geen onweerlegbare bewyse in die data gevind om te kan sê dat die verbetering uitsluitlik toegeskryf kan word aan die invloed van die AG-intervensie nie.

Sleutelterme: geletterdheid; akademiese geletterdheid; akademiese taalvaardigheid; hoër onderwys; tersiêre onderwys; akademiese leesvaardighede; akademiese skryfvaardighede; Engels as ŉ tweede taal; Engels as ŉ addisionele taal; Engels vir akademiese doeleindes.

ABSTRACT

There has been growing concern in the higher education sector in South Africa about the high number of students with low academic literacy (AL) levels who are gaining entry into the sector. This influx necessitated the introduction of academic literacy interventions which are aimed at supporting these students in meeting the academic literacy requirements of university education. As a result, the tertiary sector has seen a growing number of AL interventions, each catering for a different context. However, the available literature reports very little substantial evidence on the impact/effectiveness of such interventions regarding the purpose for which they have been designed.

The Vaal Triangle Campus (VTC) of the North-West University has also found that the majority of first year students who register at this Campus in order to attain a tertiary qualification, show inadequate levels of academic literacy in English. However, the academic literacy intervention that is currently used at this campus has never been formally assessed for its effectiveness in improving students' academic literacy levels. The purpose of the current study was therefore to investigate the impact of the academic literacy intervention on students' academic literacy levels. This intervention, which consists of two complementary semester modules, is offered over a one-year period to new first year students.

As a first step, a comprehensive literature survey was conducted on important changes that took place in the tertiary education sector after 1994. The reason for this enquiry is based on the fact that many of these changes, such as the 'massification' of tertiary education, had far-reaching consequences for the tertiary sector in terms of more underprepared students who gained access to university education. Furthermore, available literature on the types of academic literacy interventions in South Africa, as well as specific sources on the reported impact of such interventions, were critiqued.

The empirical part of the study made use of both a qualitative and quantitative research paradigm in order to investigate the impact of the AL intervention at the VTC. A highly reliable academic literacy test (the TALL – Test of Academic Literacy Levels) was used to determine whether students showed any significant improvement in their levels of academic literacy as a result of the intervention. This study reports positive findings in this regard. The investigation further gathered opinion-based data through the administration of three questionnaires aimed at determining student and lecturer perceptions of the impact of the

intervention. The main findings of the two student questionnaires (one administered for each AL module) show that students generally see the value in attending the academic literacy modules because they feel that they derive benefit from them. The findings of the lecturer survey indicate that although mainstream lecturers are acutely aware of the low academic literacy levels of their students, they do not see the impact of the intervention on improving such levels. They are further not very knowledgeable about what the focus of the intervention entails.

The main conclusion of this study is, in brief, that the academic literacy intervention has a definite effect on the improvement of students' academic literacy levels. However, no conclusive data was found to support the idea that the improvement was due only to the influence of the intervention.

Keywords: Literacy, academic literacy, academic language proficiency, higher education, tertiary education, academic reading, academic writing, English as a second language; English as an additional language; English for Academic Purposes.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Towards the end of the 2009 academic year, Higher Education South Africa (HESA) released what many in higher education in South Africa considered a damning report on the inadequate levels of academic literacy amongst students entering universities (HESA, 2009:33). This report, which was aimed at highlighting the need for a more coherent and integrated approach to all levels of schooling in South Africa, brought to the fore the deteriorating levels of schooling at both primary and secondary schools in the country. It also highlighted how these levels unavoidably get transferred to the tertiary level of schooling. This report helped many universities in the country to reconsider their students' achievement levels and in particular their academic literacy levels critically.

The investigation into academic literacy levels carried out at universities identified student unpreparedness as one problem that could be related directly to the failure of the school system to provide sufficiently high levels of education to enable a smooth transition to university. The Outcomes Based Education system as applied by the South African Government at these levels of study was identified as a leading culprit in this regard. With all the good intentions that the OBE system had, its implementation in the country failed dismally (Van der Horst & McDonald, 2003:16-17).

In more particular commentary that focused on language learning in primary and secondary school education in South Africa, Van der Walt (2010) criticises language curricula, and more specifically the First Additional Language (FAL) Curriculum (which takes the English additional language curriculum as a structural point of departure for all first additional languages) for its failure in preparing students for the abstract cognitive academic language skills required for thinking and learning (Van der Walt, 2010). According to her, an analysis of tasks and texts contained in this curriculum contains "little evidence of the primary importance of using language for abstract cognitive academic purposes" (Van der Walt, 2010:327).

Another reason for the ill-preparedness of students entering universities is the discord between academic discourse and "other literacy events" that form part of students' lives but which are largely ignored by formal learning systems (Street,1984; 1997; 2001). Heath (1983:68) defines the term "literacy events" as being the practices that surround any event in which literacy is used. This essentially means that literacy is usually connected and interpreted with regard to the specific social contexts within which it takes place. The social context referred to here is what Gee (1990:9) calls a "social reality" of those involved in the learning/literacy process.

One such social context or reality is that of tertiary or higher education. Within the context of higher education, it is generally expected of students to function effectively within its wider discourse community, but also within its discipline-specific discourse communities (Van Schalkwyk, Bitzer & Van der Walt, 2009:189). One cannot, however, in all fairness expect of students new to the university environment to already know about the discourses in specific disciplines without having had any exposure to university education. What one can expect, though, is that students should be at an academic literacy level that would enable them to become 'apprentices' in the different disciplinary discourses of their studies. Various recent studies indicate, however, that many students are underprepared for university study with regard to their academic literacy levels (see Barry, 2002; Van Dyk & Weideman, 2004, Van Schalkwyk, *et al*., 2009; McCabe, 2011). As Van Schalkwyk, *et al*. (2009:190) note:

> Lecturers often assume that students, simply by virtue of being immersed in the subject discipline, will become familiar with its discourse and thereby enhance their academic literacy competence. But students, particularly weaker students, often miss these discipline-specific codes, making the process of acquiring academic literacy more difficult.

Universities have very specific requirements and expectations of their new entrants with regard to academic literacy abilities. Inadequate academic literacy levels may lead, in many cases, to high dropout rates among first year students in South Africa.

This study will look into this phenomenon with a view to contextualising the challenges regarding low levels of academic literacy faced by universities on the one hand, and, on the other, the reported effectiveness of the interventions put in place by universities in the country, in particular by the Vaal Triangle Campus (VTC) of the North-West University (NWU) in addressing such challenges.

Given such challenges, it would be simple for Universities to turn such students away on the basis of their "unreadinesss" for that level of study. However, the letter and the spirit of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (South Africa, 1996) might not necessarily support such actions. This is a point that is being advocated by proponents of the Equal Education campaign who feel that education is a fundamental/enshrined human right, together with other such rights in the Bill of Rights of the Constitution of South Africa (Conyngham, Isaacs, Dwane, Makofane, Erhiawarien & Holzman, 2010:4). They might therefore feel that exclusion of students on the grounds of "unreadiness for university education" might not be fair and just (Grant-Lewis & Motala, 2004:58). The view that universities should "be more accessible to all" despite the challenges mentioned earlier will be entertained in this study. Part of the focus of this study is therefore to explore what mechanisms universities have in place in order to address the academic literacy problems of an influx of students into universities who are not necessarily adequately prepared for the academic rigours of such a context.

This is also the point the Education Ministry has been emphasising in recent times. Addressing the Education Summit in April 2010, the Higher Education and Training minister, Dr Blade Nzimande, stated unequivocally that universities should make do with the current crop of students they are receiving "warts and all as they are not likely to get a radically different type of student any time soon" (Sowetan, 2010:4). The minister went on to say that universities should rather adapt their curricula and teaching strategies to suit the type of student they are receiving (Citizen, 2010:8).

It is in light of the above that universities have been seen developing, implementing and intensifying academic literacy programmes as a way and means of identifying students at risk of failure and of supporting such students in their pursuit of academic success.

These programmes are currently wide-spread across higher education institutions in South Africa and some of these are reported in the literature (cf. Goodier & Parkinson, 2005; Jacobs, 2005; Parkinson, Jackson, Kirkwood & Padayachee, 2008; Van Schalkwyk, *et al*., 2009; Van Dyk, Zybrands, Cillie & Coetzee, 2010). Some of these universities have also formalised working relationships to address specific issues in academic literacy, for example, the North-West University is in partnership with the Universities of Pretoria, Stellenbosch and Free State in their offering of a single academic literacy test (the Test of Academic Literacy Levels [TALL] and its Afrikaans counterpart - *Toets van Akademiese*

Geletterdheidsvlakke) which determines the levels of academic literacy of their first year students. Those students who do not pass these tests are then required to register for an academic literacy programme modelled around the focus areas of the said tests. The University of Kwa-Zulu Natal (Parkinson, *et al.*, 2008), the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (Deyi, Garraway, Thole, Morris, Simone & John, 2008) and the Vaal University of Technology (Fouche', Vosloo, Els & Corthing, 2011), among others, have their own versions of academic literacy programmes ranging from English for Academic Purposes (EAP) to English communication modules.

As stated above, the Ministry supports such programmes as it feels they are a "dire necessity" (Sowetan, 2010:4). The introduction of these programmes by universities and their purported effectiveness in dealing with students' inadequate academic literacy levels have become an area of interest for a variety of scholars.

A central question of this interest has been to ascertain the effectiveness of these programmes in terms of their *raison d'etre.* Among the scholars who have raised this question is Van Dyk (2005), who asked how effective these programmes are in terms of what they set out to achieve.

In an attempt to answer the above question some universities have conducted once-off studies on the effectiveness of their academic literacy programmes, whilst some do so at regular intervals.

Among the universities that have conducted such studies are the University of Pretoria (Van Dyk, 2005), the University of Stellenbosch (Van Dyk, *et al*., 2010) and the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal (Parkinson, *et al.*, 2008).

These studies and their findings are reported and critiqued in the current study, and relevant aspects are identified that could be employed as part of this investigation on the effectiveness of the academic literacy programme offered by the VTC. It is important to note, however, that each tertiary institution faces unique challenges with regard to the specific needs of its students, which makes it essential that specific academic literacy interventions such as the one currently implemented at the VTC be assessed within the context of addressing such needs on this campus.

1.2 Primary research question

As stated in the introduction, there has been a proliferation of academic literacy courses at South African universities over the past few years. Such courses have been promoted as a 'dire necessity' in terms of helping students entering universities fresh from school meet universities' academic requirements, and are often promoted as being able to reduce the risk of failure and dropping out among university students. According to Butler (2013), however, little substantial evidence is reported in the literature about the impact of such courses. As a case in point, the impact of the academic literacy intervention at the Vaal Triangle Campus of North-West University has never been formally determined. This study therefore aims to assess an existing application of this intervention at the VTC. Fundamentally, in this study the researcher attempts to answer the primary research question: "What is the impact of the academic literacy intervention at the North-West University's Vaal Triangle Campus?"

In attempting to answer this primary research question, a number of surface assumptions about AL interventions will have to be dealt with. Firstly, it appears as if there is general acceptance, especially for those who work in the field of AL, that AL interventions are necessary to improve the AL levels of students. Therefore, are such interventions really necessary, or do students anyway acquire the necessary AL abilities by being immersed in university education? The next assumption is that AL interventions have a positive effect on how students perform in the rest of their studies. The third assumption is that students who are subjected to such interventions find them valuable for their studies and the last, that lecturers who teach students who have gone through the AL intervention can see the effects of the intervention on their students.

1.3 Secondary research questions

Although the most reliable answer to the primary research question posed above should be provided by making use of testing data, AL interventions do not happen in a vacuum and often their success is partly determined by people's beliefs about whether they can (and do) have a positive effect on students' academic literacy levels. Part of this investigation should therefore also determine the opinions and perceptions of those affected most by their impact, viz. the students and academic staff members who teach these students. Therefore, the following secondary questions will be addressed by the study:

- What evidence is available in the literature regarding the impact of academic literacy courses that may inform the current study?
- Can the impact of the AL intervention at the VTC be determined conclusively by making use of AL ability testing?
- What are the perceptions of the students who are exposed to the AL intervention about the impact thereof?
- What are the perceptions of academic members of staff who teach first year modules about the impact of the AL intervention?

1.4 Specific objectives of the study

In order to answer the secondary research questions, the study aims to:

- Conduct an investigation on the context of tertiary education in South Africa in order to contextualize the AL difficulties experienced by students in this context. The available literature on AL interventions will also be surveyed in order to determine what evidence is reported on the impact of these interventions;
- Make use of a reliable testing instrument (the TALL) to determine statistically whether there is any improvement in the AL levels of students who were exposed to the AL intervention;
- Determine statistically whether there exists any significant correlation between students' overall academic achievement and that of the academic literacy intervention;
- Determine student perceptions about the impact of the academic literacy intervention;
- Establish the perceptions of academic staff members about the impact of the academic literacy intervention; and
- Based on the results of the investigations above, provide guidelines for lecturers, course developers and policy makers in order to maximize students' academic potential through the use of effective academic literacy programmes.

1.5 Research methodology

1.5.1 Research design

As a result of the nature of the questions posed by the study, research instruments will be drawn from a combination of a quantitative and, to a lesser extent, qualitative research paradigm. This issue will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3 of the study.

In order to address the research objectives of this study sufficiently, and by doing so provide answers to the secondary and primary research questions, the study will be structured in the following way:

1.5.1.1 Review of the literature

As stated above, a comprehensive literature survey will be conducted on academic literacy programmes and their effectiveness.

1.5.1.2 Empirical research

a. The results of the TALL which was administered to all first year students at the beginning of the academic year (2012) will be compared to the results of the same test administered as a post-test to the students at the beginning of the second semester. A third test (TALL 2011) would also be written at the end of the second semester. The different data sets for these tests will be compared with the aim of determining whether there is any significant improvement in the AL abilities tested by the TALL of students who: (i) did not 'pass' the AL test at the beginning of the year and consequently attended the academic literacy intervention (AGLE 111) during the first semester, and (ii) the students who scored 40% and higher for AGLE 111 (these students were admitted to AGLE 121 module) as well as those students who 'passed' the test at the beginning of the year – all these students were required to complete a compulsory, advanced AL module (AGLE 121) in the second semester.
b. The performance of students in their other modules will also be analysed with a view to determining whether any correlation exists between the results of those modules and the academic literacy modules taken by the same students.

c. In order to account for the possible influence of other variables (e.g. students developing some AL abilities due to their exposure to other academic subjects), a further analysis will be conducted on two specific sub-groups of students. In one sub-group (the experimental group), the results of the students who scored between 40% and 49% for the TALL written at the beginning of the year (and who all needed to complete the first semester AL course) will be compared to the same students' post-test results at the beginning of the second semester. The same will be done for those students in the second sub-group (the control group). This sub-group consists of students who scored between 50% and 59% for the initial TALL and who are therefore not required to complete AGLE 111 during the first semester. The results of these two groups will then be compared to see whether any improvement took place.
d. Two separate questionnaires were developed by the researcher which will be distributed to students registered for both academic literacy modules (AGLE 111 and AGLE 121) at the end of each semester to determine their perceptions about the academic literacy modules.
e. A third questionnaire was developed and will be distributed to academic staff members in various departments and schools to ascertain their perceptions about the effectiveness of the academic literacy modules offered to students.

1.5.2 Data analysis

In order to compare the test result data of the three different administrations of the TALL, statistical analysis will be done by making use of *t*-tests to determine any significant differences between the different administrations. In addition, effect sizes will be calculated for all significant differences.

The data collected through the administration of the three questionnaires will be coded and analysed with regard to frequency counts and averages calculated. The responses to open-ended questions will be categorised in order to see whether any important patterns emerge from such data. Important relationships between different sections of the data will also be highlighted.

The statistical methods used by this study are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

1.5.3 Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for this study has been obtained under ethical clearance project number 0003107S1, of which Prof. S. Coetzee-Van Rooy is the project leader. Important ethical considerations observed include the principle of voluntary participation. Participants will also be assured that their participation in the project (or decision to not participate in the project) would in no way affect their academic results for any module taken at the NWU. All participants will be informed of the nature of the study and those who agree to participate will sign a consent form which will be archived by the researcher for 5 years after the completion of the study. Furthermore, participants will be assured of the confidential treatment of the data and that data would be reported anonymously in the form of aggregated data in the dissertation, conference papers and academic articles.

1.6 Limitations of the study

This study seeks to assess the degree to which the specific academic literacy intervention at the VTC is effective as an intervention strategy in the development of students' academic literacy levels in English. Given that this research focuses on the very specific context of the VTC, the results obtained may therefore be relevant only to campuses with similar characteristics, for example, campuses offering similar academic literacy interventions in the manner and scope in which the selected campus does. The profile of the students enrolling at the VTC should, therefore, be taken into account when one determines the applicability of findings to other contexts.

1.7 Chapter division and outline

1.7.1 Chapter 1

This introductory chapter firstly presents a general background to the study. It then poses the primary and the secondary research questions, as well as the specific research objectives through which the secondary questions, and eventually the primary research question, would be answered. It further elaborates on the research design, the different research methods, as well as important issues relating to ethics, data analysis and specific limitations of the study.

1.7.2 Chapter 2

Chapter 2 commences with a review of the literature on important changes in South African higher education that took place after 1994 and how these changes impacted on tertiary education in general. A brief account of the interventionary measures employed by higher education institutions to deal with some of the challenges presented by these changes, particularly the notion of massification, is also provided. The chapter further presents a critique of existing studies on the effectiveness/impact of the interventionary programmes put in place by South African universities to address the specific challenge of the inadequate AL levels of students. The chapter concludes by giving an outline of the conceptualisation and application of the AL intervention offered by the Vaal Triangle Campus of North-West University.

1.7.3 Chapter 3

In Chapter 3, the research design used in the study is discussed. The description of the research methodology firstly focuses on the assessment and survey instruments employed in the study. It further describes the study population and explains how the data was collected in terms of the specific sampling methods used. It concludes by offering a description of the data analysis procedures employed in the study.

1.7.4 Chapter 4

Chapter 4 presents the empirical findings of this study. It firstly discusses significant findings related to various administrations of the TALL that were used to determine possible improvement in the academic literacy levels of students who were exposed to the AGLE 111 and AGLE 121 academic literacy modules. This is followed by a correlation between student scores for the two academic literacy modules and those of other modules for which students were registered in 2012. The second part of this chapter highlights important findings with regard to the survey instruments used to determine both student and lecturer perceptions of the AL intervention at the VTC.

1.7.5 Chapter 5

Chapter 5 presents conclusions of the study in the form of a synthesis of the prominent issues that emerged from the data. It also makes resultant recommendations as to how the current AL intervention may be altered to make it more effective, if necessary. It concludes with recommendations for future studies.

1.8 Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of the academic literacy intervention offered by the North-West University's Vaal Triangle Campus. This intervention was introduced to support students in developing their academic literacy abilities in order to minimize their risk of failure. The issue of determining the impact of such an intervention is crucial in the sense that considerable resources are involved in developing and offering such an intervention. The ultimate question in this regard is therefore: Are these interventions worth the time and money spent on them? Attempting to answer the primary research question of this study should also provide an answer to the very practical question posed above. The following chapter provides an overview of the relevant literature surveyed in this regard.

CHAPTER 2
ACADEMIC LITERACY AS AN INTERVENTION MECHANISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

2.1 Introduction

This literature survey serves the purpose of positioning the study within the larger framework of higher education and, more specifically, academic literacy development in higher education. As Mouton (1996:119) observes, it is essential to relate one's work to an existing body of theoretical and empirical knowledge in order to create a relevant context for the research. This literature review would therefore serve as a map or a compass setting the parameters within which the research problem of the study would be contextualised.

Mouton (2002:173) asserts that "a literature survey should not simply comprise a mechanical description of existing theories". He further argues that theory should function as "a conceptual framework underpinning the logic of the research objective" (Mouton, 2002:174). The literature reviewed in the course of conducting this current study presents varying perspectives on the topic under investigation. These will be compared, contrasted and then integrated with the main strand of the research argument.

As stated in the previous chapter, the problem investigated in this study arises from students who enter university education with low levels of academic literacy that place them at risk with regard to the successful completion of their studies. In response to this serious problem, universities developed specialised support programmes or they strengthened existing ones to assist these students in dealing with the challenges presented by higher education. This study seeks to conduct a comprehensive investigation on the effectiveness of such programmes at the Vaal Triangle Campus of North-West University.

The issues at the heart of the poor levels of university readiness on the part of school leavers in South Africa will also be probed. According to Modisoatsile (2012:4), among the numerous issues plaguing the education system in South Africa are the persistent racial and class inequalities, the poor policy choices made by the Education Ministry in the last 10 years as well as the resulting poor state of the Grade 12 throughput. Mabokela (1998:1) further asserts that the poor performance of students from historically disadvantaged schools at

higher education institutions calls into question the standards of education at these schools. He further emphasises that such performance "raises questions about the validity of matriculation results" (Mabokela, 1998:1). Therefore, although these students' grade 12 results were adequate for them to be accepted at universities in South Africa, they tend to struggle with university education.

In this chapter, academic literacy development used as an intervention mechanism to address the challenges faced by universities regarding poor performance of their students will be discussed. In order to facilitate a clearer understanding of the challenges and the intervention sought by universities in this regard, the higher education system and its historical metamorphosis will first be explained in detail.

2.2 South African higher education in context

Since the first university was built in South Africa in the late 1800s the higher education system has undergone numerous changes in its quest for excellence and relevance. The radical changes to the system which happened after 1994 were part of this on-going quest for excellence and relevance. Notably, these changes sought to achieve two major goals – "massification and mergers" (Jansen, 2008:5).

These goals and the quest to achieve them should be seen in the context of the political changes that came about following the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 and the negotiations between the African National Congress (ANC) and the Nationalist Party Government which led to the first democratic elections in 1994. The socio-political and economic lives of South Africans underwent radical changes following the changes cited above.

The first democratically elected government's Education Ministry started addressing the issue of "deracialising" the highly racialised education system it inherited from its Apartheid predecessor. In the case of higher education, the Ministry inherited a very fragmented system that consisted of 21 universities and 15 technikons (Department of Education, 2002:44). These institutions were unevenly spread throughout the country, with more situated in certain areas and none in others. To compound the matter, these institutions were functioning on a racial and linguistic basis. For example, in the Western Cape there was a well-resourced university for the white English speaking students (the University of Cape Town), a well-

resourced university for the Afrikaans speaking students (Stellenbosch University) and an under-resourced university for the so-called coloured students (the University of the Western Cape). Notably, no university was built for the black minority students in the same area.

The concentration of higher education institutions in certain parts of the country, particularly in big cities was also the order of the day. For example, in Johannesburg there were two universities built opposite each other. One of these was created for the white Afrikaans speaking students (the Randse Afrikaanse Universiteit, now the University of Johannesburg) while the other was created for the white English speaking students (the University of the Witwatersrand). According to Seepe (2001:43) these two universities "are separated by just a fence".

Regarding the Bantustan system, a system used by the Apartheid government at the time to keep black people in areas designated as their homelands on the basis of their languages and origin, each Bantustan (a Bantustan is defined by Molteno [1977:18] as a "designated 'native area' established as part of the Nationalist Party Government's policy of separate development) had its own institution of higher learning. For example, the University of Zululand was built for the Kwa-Zulu homeland, the University of Venda for the Venda homeland, the University of Bophuthatswana for the Bophuthatswana homeland, the University of the North (Turfloop) for the Lebowa homeland (with a satellite campus in the Qwaqwa homeland) while the Universities of Fort Hare and Transkei were built for the vast Eastern Cape homelands of the Ciskei and Transkei respectively. Technikons were also built on the same logic in these homelands. Notably, the homelands of Kangwane and Gazankulu had no university or technikon.

Due to the fact that these homeland universities and technikons were built in semi-autonomous single language and almost single cultural areas of the country, their nature and character reflected those of their respective homelands. Although these institutions were mainly English speaking or used English as their only language of learning, they had a tendency of reflecting the character of the people residing in these homelands. For example, the University of Bophuthatswana reflected the culture of the Batswana people which included their language and heritage while the University of Zululand reflected the culture (language and heritage) of the Ama-Zulu people. These would be visible at such universities when observing the celebration of homeland-specific cultural events, in the appointment of staff (particularly at top management level) and in the general campus-specific culture. This

system worked well for the Apartheid government whose intentions were to keep black people in these homelands and to keep them separated along tribal lines.

Although black people residing in townships were encouraged to study at these homeland universities, those who either refused or had no money to travel to faraway places posed a serious challenge to the Apartheid government. According to Seepe (2004:7), in an attempt to avoid a serious crisis, the Apartheid government established a commission in 1978, which later became known as the Retief Commission, to investigate the possibility of building universities and technikons for the black students residing in townships, particularly those residing in big townships such as Soweto.

This Commission, which comprised many of the rectors of the already existing Bantustan universities, one rector from an English-speaking university and one from an Afrikaans-speaking university, among others (Seepe, 2004:7), recommended the establishment of Vista University, a university whose aim would be to cater for the educational interests of black students in townships. This University was to be a multi-campus institution, with a campus in virtually every major township in the country but with its headquarters in the capital city, Pretoria. The creation of Vista University added to the already fragmented higher education system in the country.

The picture above reflects the complexities of the higher education system inherited by the first democratically elected government's Education Ministry in 1994. Inevitably, the first task of the Ministry became the streamlining and the "deracialising" of the system. Bringing the racial and language groups together while striving to create a world class higher education system became immediate tasks of the Ministry. In taking up this task, the Ministry, after a series of discussions with relevant stakeholders and after producing a series of discussion documents, produced what came to be known as the White Paper 3 in 1997**.** This Paper detailed the clear intentions of the Ministry to integrate the system. This can be seen in the following key aims:

- Equity and redress: The allocation of the Ministry's resources to universities and technikons should be done in favour of historically disadvantaged ones. This should be done with the sole aim of putting these institutions on par with their historically advantaged counterparts.
- Curriculum changes: The curriculum to be streamlined according to the needs of the country at any given stage.

- Massification: The number of previously disadvantaged individuals should be increased dramatically on each campus in the country. Such increases should include students who come from within the Southern African Development Community (SADC), who should be treated as home students.
- Financial constraints: The Ministry has to increase the allocation of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) to all institutions to ensure that more needy and deserving students have adequate financial assistance. All matters relating to the payment of fees are to be negotiated among all stakeholders on campus, including with students.

(Department of Education, 1997a:12-13)

It is worth noting that the aims and objectives mentioned above elicited a lot of criticism, particularly from the beneficiaries of the racially and linguistically divided system. They labelled the proposed changes as "going to lower standards" (Barnes *et al.*, 2002:28). The argument put forward in this regard was that including other racial groups, in particular, the African majority that had been excluded for decades, was going to cause a drop in standards of education at tertiary institutions.

This kind of thinking flows directly from the segregation laws of the Apartheid system which saw indigenous Africans as inferior and as being destined to servitude. It is important to note that, despite these attitudes and their accompanying resistance, the proposals cited above aimed at changing the education landscape of South Africa were expanded upon and crafted into the Higher Education Bill in 1996 which was promulgated a year later as the Higher Education Act. This Act sought to achieve the following objectives as set out in its preamble:

- To establish a single co-ordinated higher education system which promotes co-operative governance and provides for programme-based higher education;
- To restructure and transform programmes and institutions to respond to the human resource, economic and development needs of the Republic;
- To redress past discrimination and ensure representivity and equal access;
- To create optimal opportunities for learning and the creation of knowledge;
- To promote the values which underlie an open and democratic society based on human dignity, equality and freedom;
- To respect freedom of religion, belief and opinion;
- To respect and encourage democracy, academic freedom, freedom of speech and expression, creativity, scholarship and research;

- To pursue excellence, promote the full realisation of the potential of every student and employee, tolerance of ideas and appreciation of diversity; and
- To respond to the advancement of all forms of knowledge and scholarship, in keeping with international standards of academic quality.

(South Africa, 1997:2)

The Act cited above ushered in a single non-racial higher education system for the first time in the history of the country. Although the system was centrally and administratively united, in reality it remained as divided as it was pre-1994. Universities and technikons which were established mainly for black students remained so and universities and technikons which accommodated mainly white English and Afrikaans speaking students respectively remained the same.

According to Daniel *et al*. (2003:303), mergers of institutions of higher learning in South Africa brought about no tangible changes in so far as racial integration is concerned but instead they created a climate for conflict. In some of the 'new' universities, black and white students as well as staff members found it increasingly difficult to work together. An example of this difficulty is the Free State University's infamous 'Reitz incident' wherein white students, in the quest to indicate their opposition to racial integration at the said residence put elderly black members of staff through some inhuman 'induction' exercises which included being made to eat food that was urinated upon by these students. As Pityana (2004:18) observes, despite the mergers and incorporation, issues of access versus quality, among others, remained one of the hotly debated issues in the sector, particularly at the historically white institutions. Although most of the historically white institutions continue to equate and attach access to quality in their admission policies more emphasis is placed on supporting struggling students. These institutions ensure that all their new entrants are properly screened and placed in appropriate fields of study. This is done in order to ensure that adequate academic support is given to these students as and when it is required.They set out to get the best qualifying post Grade 12 learners, and still screen them for proper placements within their faculties.

The issue of physical integration and standardisation became the next crucial focus in the higher education sector. This focus, among other things, led to the creation of a quality assurance body, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). Through its National Qualification Framework (NQF) this body aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To create an integrated framework for the learning environment;
- To facilitate access to, and mobility and progression within education, training and career paths;
- To enhance the equity of education and training; and
- To accelerate the redress of past unfair discrimination in education, training and employment opportunities (SAQA, 1998:9).

As a result of the creation of SAQA, the content of programmes offered by various higher education institutions in the country was streamlined and harmonised. This, however, did not close the gap between the racially and linguistically divided institutions. The divisions and the unhappiness, particularly from the African majority who continued to be excluded from white institutions on 'unclear' grounds, continued.

In 2000, the Education Ministry released far-reaching proposals aimed at ensuring greater integration and to deracialise the system. These proposals, which later came to be known as the National Plan on Higher Education (NPHE), set out to achieve, among others, a reduction of the number of tertiary institutions in the country through mergers and incorporations.

As mentioned previously, the aims of the National Plan on Higher Education (NPHE) sought to bring about two radical changes in the system – 'massification' and mergers.

With regard to massification, the plan intended ensuring that African students attended institutions of their choice alongside their white counterparts. It also intended to "open the doors of learning for all" regardless of race, creed, class, sexual orientation or religion (Department of Education, 1997a:34). The mergers, on the other hand, intended to physically bring historically white and black universities and technikons together. It also, as stated above, intended to reduce the number of higher education institutions. Despite numerous objections to the plan, the Ministry passed it into law in 2003. This Act, as stated above, radically changed the face of higher education in the country.

Following its passing into law, the 36 higher education institutions (universities and technikons) in the country were merged and incorporated and eventually reduced to 22 universities. This resulted in the formation of three broad types of universities, namely, traditional universities, universities of technology and comprehensive universities.

A traditional university was defined as a university that either stayed the same or merged with another university. A comprehensive university was defined as a university that merged with a technikon, and a university of technology was created from a merger of two technikons or just an upgrading of an existing technikon (Hall, Symes & Luescher, 2004:36). For many of the comprehensive universities, making sense of their newly acquired status is an ongoing struggle.

It is therefore not surprising that some of them still operate in similar ways as before the mergers. For example, they have separate registration dates and procedures for their former technikon programmes as they do for their former university ones. Graduation ceremonies are also held separately. A good example in this regard is that of the University of South Africa (UNISA) where requirements, application dates, graduation events, etc. for both diploma and degree qualifications are handled separately from each other.

This state of affairs, according to Cloete (2009:46), is a result of the Ministry's inability to "clarify the role that each of the three types of universities should have in higher education in the country and how they should differ from one another". The goal of bridging the racial divide in higher education in the country was, as a result of these mergers, partly attended to. Black and white students were brought together under one institutional banner.

Despite these drastic changes in the higher education system in South Africa, issues of access and quality remained. Fewer institutions meant fewer numbers of admissions and as such the massification goal of the Ministry took a new turn as the smaller number of institutions were then expected to accept more students, particularly from African communities, "as Africans constitute over 70% of the population yet account for less than 50% of total enrolments in higher education in the country" (Bunting, 2006:4).

Many of the new universities continued to view new students coming from Grade 12, particularly those who come from township schools, as being 'underprepared' for university education (Nel, Dreyer & Klopper, 2004:98). The level of underpreparedness of these students is discussed in detail in point 2.2.1.2 below.

In response to the apparent underpreparedness of students, many universities created specially designed programmes while others strengthened existing ones to deal with the

underprepared students who continued to flood universities as part of the Education Ministry's massification goal.

Due to the fact that many of the problems of underpreparedness were linked to the use of English as a language of learning and teaching at many tertiary institutions, many of these programmes were English language-based. The intentions of these programmes were either to supplement students' language skills or to make them cope better with the linguistic demands of higher education.

The focus of many of the universities in South Africa, particularly in the era before the changes described above, was on grammar teaching as key to English language learning. Students were expected to be proficient in their use of grammar, particularly in writing. In a study conducted by Dippenaar (2004:97), it was found that the language proficiency programmes offered by the Universities of Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, Witwatersrand, the North, Pretoria and Vista focused mainly on grammar teaching. Dippenaar (2004:145) further emphasises that students, particularly those who used English as their second language, appear to have benefitted from the language proficiency courses offered by institutions cited above. However, the decontextualized teaching of grammar has come to be challenged more recently, particularly by those who believe that the teaching of grammar with no due regard to the desired end product, viz. the development of contextual academic literacy abilities, is meaningless. This is supported by, among others, Pretorius (2002b:189) who asserts that the transition from "learning to read to reading to learn" is not an automatic exercise. She is of the view that the focus should be on the functional ability of reading (including strategies to read) as opposed to the general teaching of grammar.

Therefore, the mere knowledge of English grammar and grammar rules was generally considered inadequate as university students were expected to do more than just 'know' the rules of grammar. Knowledge is generally viewed as the gaining of understanding through experience. Students are thus expected to apply English grammar correctly and appropriately in writing, listening, speaking and reading. This focus and emphasis is generally known as a 'skills-based' approach to language learning.

This specific focus was welcomed by many scholars and by the Ministry as it was seen to be crucial in equipping students with what they saw as "crucial skills required by university students" (Sowetan, 2010:4). It is in the context of providing relevant support to

underprepared students that the establishment of academic literacy programmes became a crucial initiative of many institutions of higher learning in the country. A particular focus of these programmes was to ensure that the massification project of the Ministry did not result in failure within the sector. Some of the challenges posed by this massification are discussed in detail below.

2.2.1 Challenges brought about by the massification of tertiary education

The massification of higher education project of the Education Ministry discussed above, with all its arguably positive intentions created a number of challenges in the sector. Firstly, given the Apartheid-engineered poverty in black communities, the 'opening of the doors of learning' also gave students from poor backgrounds opportunities to further their studies.

This meant that more funding had to be provided on the part of the Ministry. Meeting this challenge remains a substantial difficulty for the Ministry given the multitude of other challenges faced by government. As a consequence of this, many students continue to drop out of universities due to a lack of funding. According to the Council on Higher Education (2012:16), a lack of funding is one of the primary reasons for the dropout rates seen in the system over the last decade (2002 to 2012). Secondly, and most important for the purposes of this study, many of the students coming from poor working-class backgrounds also attended dysfunctional secondary schools.

Not having had the opportunity to receive their schooling at well-functioning schools puts such students at a serious disadvantage. Many such students gain access to higher education without having sufficiently developed some crucial learning abilities (more specifically academic literacy abilities) necessary for successful tertiary study. These students therefore need to work twice as hard compared to their counterparts from higher social classes, particularly those who come from private or suburban schools. Apart from these students' own responsibility to ensure that they are successful with tertiary education, failure by institutions to offer relevant, appropriate support programmes to such students will inevitably lead to them failing courses and dropping out of university. 'At risk' students' first encounter with higher education may prove very daunting as they get to realise that they do not fully control all the abilities required for them to succeed at this level of learning.

The state of secondary school education in South Africa, with a specific focus on poor working class settlements (townships and farms), as well as its contribution to the high dropout rates of universities, is discussed below.

2.2.1.1 The state of secondary schooling in South Africa

The functionality of the secondary school education system or lack thereof in South Africa has its roots in the Apartheid system. No major changes are visible in the geographical legacy of the Apartheid system regarding the schooling system in the country after 1994. The affluent classes have access to well-built and better equipped schools while the poor and the working classes continue to have the opposite. According to Masitsa (2010:46) nothing much has changed in this regard since the 1994 political milestone in South Africa. He further asserts that the town and city schools had (and continue to have) access to better motivated teachers and well-resourced libraries and laboratories.

It is therefore not surprising that many black parents have attempted to send their children to the 'better' schools since the dawn of democracy in 1994. The availability of the resources mentioned above, especially well-resourced libraries, contributes considerably in preparing students for the level of education after secondary school.

This is reflected in the Grade 12 performance of the affluent schools compared to the less affluent schools, which are mainly in the townships and rural areas of the country (Department of Education, 2011:6-302). Masitsa (2010:92) observes that students who attend the more affluent schools have a greater chance of accessing higher education institutions in the country, given their Grade 12 results, and arguably have better coping skills to overcome higher education challenges.

In sharp contrast, township and farm schools are generally neglected centres of learning. Most of these schools are "built from mud and corrugated iron, have no sanitation or running water, and functional libraries and laboratories" (Mabasa, 2009:44). This observation is supported by the study conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2008:365) which found that the majority of these schools have no access to the Internet, electricity and, in some instances, no adequate textbooks.

Masitsa (1995:76) asserts that most teachers working in township and rural schools are not motivated and as such show very little interest in the education of the students put in their care. This, according to him, is largely due to the fact that most of these teachers lack interest in the profession. Masitsa (2010:97) blames this lack of motivation on the part of most of these teachers on a lack of resources, a poor working environment as well as on the negative influence of the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) in these schools.

Inevitably, these factors contribute to the low levels of preparedness for tertiary education of students attending these schools as shown not only by their Grade 12 results, but also in how these students struggle to cope with tertiary education.

As stated earlier, the contrast drawn above mirrors that of the general South African society after 1994. The former whites-only areas are still inhabited by mainly whites and a few emerging rich and middle class black families. Schools in these areas are often too expensive for working class and poor families.

On the other hand, townships and rural areas of the country remain 'blacks-only' areas and are largely plagued by issues of poverty. Schools in these areas are often dilapidated and dysfunctional. Citizens residing in these areas constitute the majority of the citizenry of the country (OECD, 2008:366).

The schooling system in South Africa, as argued earlier, reflects the inequalities outlined above. The greatest of these inequalities, for purposes of relevance to the current study, is the lack of libraries and motivated teachers, particularly in township and rural schools.

The lack of functional libraries in these schools impacts directly on the lack of interest to read on the part of students attending these schools and, inevitably in the inability of many of them to read well. According to Meyer (2000:12), this situation has been exacerbated by the Ministry's curriculum choice regarding the implementation of the Outcomes-Based Education policy. This policy was introduced to Grade 1 pupils in 1998 and to other grades in subsequent years. The Grade 12 pupils of the 2008 cohort became the first to take final examinations based on this new curriculum that got introduced in secondary schools just three years before. Mgibisa (2009:6) observes that the results for these examinations were dismal, as only 62% of the learners who wrote them met the requirements for the new OBE National Senior Certificate, the equivalent of a high school diploma.

Many of the pupils who qualified to go to university based on the 2008 results could, according to Ramphela (2009:32), "... still not read, write and do maths – all-important keys that are critical to unlocking the door in acquiring knowledge". According to Pretorius (2002b:190) reading is a major challenge facing the South African schooling system. She observes that the problem of an inability to read at school has its roots in the oral tradition of many of the students whose mother tongue is not English. According to her, these students find it difficult to make the shift from oral storytelling to book reading. As a result, their ability to read never develops to the expected (and required) levels. The inability of teachers and the schooling authorities to provide textbooks, support and guidance in this regard exacerbate this problem in pre-tertiary schooling in the country.

Taking note of relationships between a lack of libraries and a lack of interest in reading, as well as low reading levels particularly of the youth in township and rural schools, some concerned education activists came together to challenge this *status quo*. They sought to emphasise the importance of functional libraries for successful learning. This group of activists established what came to be known as Equal Education (EE) in 2008 in Khayelitsha. They launched the "One library, one school, one librarian" campaign in early 2003, whose aims and objectives were to ensure that every school in the country has fully resourced and fully functional libraries.

This campaign singled out school libraries for the following reasons:

- They are beneficial to the progress and academic development of learners;
- They offer social advantages to learners as they provide places and spaces where learners would do homework and study for exams; and
- They not only assist in the development of basic reading skills but also instil a love for reading in our youth (Equal Education, 2003:1).

The importance of a library to learning in general and to reading in particular cannot be over-emphasised. A library and a student cannot functionally exist without each other. This means that for a student to succeed academically, he or she should read regularly and have an interest in printed reading material. Libraries should provide access to these much-needed materials. This view is supported by Pretorius (2002b:191) who also argues that the schooling system's strong preoccupation with oral modes of information transmission is partly responsible for this sad state of affairs. Too little initiative seems to be taken on the part of

the education authorities to promote reading and to provide textbooks, as argued earlier in this subsection. The success rate of former whites-only schools is largely due to them having functional libraries, among other resources.

Encouraging reading in schools with functional libraries is supposedly much easier than in schools without libraries. This is exactly what the community of Khayelitsha seeks to achieve through the "one library, one school, one librarian" campaign.

As stated earlier, students who enter university without a functional ability to read tend to struggle with their studies. Such inability contributes to the alarming failure and dropout rates experienced by universities as will be shown in the discussion below.

2.2.1.2 South African universities' failure and dropout rates

As a direct result of the massification project of the Ministry of Education and its resultant challenges outlined above, universities in South Africa find themselves having to welcome more students into their fold, the majority of whom are at risk students.

Addressing a seminar hosted by the then Vista University's Central Campus in April 2003 on the subject of the transformation of higher education, Ramose (2003), deliberating on the subject of poor performance by students at universities, gave an analogy of a man sitting in a lounge of his home at night engulfed by scorching temperatures and deciding to open a window to let in cool and fresh air, but to his dismay other unpleasantries flew in as well (Ramose, 2003:8). He argued that this is what happened with the opening of the doors of learning at universities for all deserving students regardless of race, class, creed, religion, etc. Those who were not adequately prepared for university education and literally scraped through the secondary school system also gained access to higher education. He used this analogy to expose and to mock the "dysfuctionality of the schooling system in South Africa" (Ramose, 2003:12). Extending this analogy, one could argue that it is incumbent upon the affected homeowner to devise ways and means of dealing with the invading unpleasantries without compromising himself or his property. In the context of a university this means that all the students who find entry into those universities inevitably become the responsibility of those universities.

As mentioned previously, in response to the challenge posed by underprepared students wanting to study at universities, these institutions have since developed or strengthened their existing support programmes aimed at assisting ‘at risk’ students to cope with the demands of higher education. These programmes have proven in many regards to offer genuine support to these students, many of whom continue to complete their degrees and diplomas when ordinarily speaking without the backing of the support programmes mentioned above they probably would not have (Amos, 1999: 180).

Despite the support extended to entering students, universities continue to suffer high failure and dropout rates. A study conducted on this subject by two commissioned researchers on behalf of the Human Science Research Council (HSRC) between 2000 and 2004, revealed alarming results. According to Letseka and Maile (2008:5), one in three university students and one in two technikon students dropped out between 2000 and 2004. This study was further vindicated by the Ministry’s Annual Report (Department of Education, 2005:58) which indicated that “of the 120 000 students who enrolled in higher education in 2000, 36 000 (30%) dropped out in their first year”.

A further 24 000 (20%) dropped out during their second and third year of study. Of the remaining 60 000, only 22% graduated within the specified three year duration for a generic Bachelor’s degree (Department of Education, 2005:44). Table 2.1 below outlines the dropout rates over the last 10 years (2000 to 2010) in the South African higher education system:

Table 2.1 University dropout rates between 2000 and 2010 in South Africa

First-time students by intake group	**2000 to 2004 group**		**2005 to 2010 group**	
	Contact Institutions	Unisa*	Contact Institutions	Unisa*
All three and four year degrees	**38%**	**59%**	**46%**	**68%**
Three year diploma*	**58%**	**85%**	**56%**	**87%**
All three and four year qualifications at all institutions	**56%**		**58%**	

Adapted from the CHE Annual Report, 2012

*The three year diploma figure for the 2000 cohort comes from Technikon SA, which subsequently merged with Unisa.

NB: These figures include about 10% students nationally who moved from campus to campus within the sector during the period in question.

The statistics outlined above clearly indicate that despite the noble intentions contained in the massification project, there is definitely some risk involved having underprepared students enter tertiary education. Regarding these alarming failure and dropout rates, the Education Ministry issued a public statement in 2005 lamenting that the "dropout rate was costing the National Treasury R4.5 billion in grants and subsidies to higher education institutions without a commensurate return on this investment (Department of Education, 2005:7). These failure and dropout rates, as Letseka and Maile (2008:6) observe, "raised questions about the sector's ability to generate a viable throughput rate".

As a result of serious concerns about throughput rates at universities, the higher education sector, through its body of vice-chancellors (Higher Education South Africa [HESA]), commissioned a study in 2009 to establish the reasons behind the state of affairs outlined

above and to advise on solutions. This study, which was headed by Yeld, had the following terms of reference as its objectives:

- To assess entry-level academic and quantitative literacy and mathematics proficiency of students;
- To assess the relationship between higher education entry level requirements and school-level exit outcomes;
- To provide a service to HE institutions requiring additional information to assist in placement of students in appropriate curricular routes; and
- To assist with curriculum development, particularly in relation to foundation courses (HESA, 2009:44).

The results of this enquiry (focused on the development and administration of the National Benchmark Tests [NBTs]), that were first tabled before the Portfolio Committee on Higher Education in parliament in August 2009, revealed the disconcerting results shown in Figures 2.1 and 2.2 below:

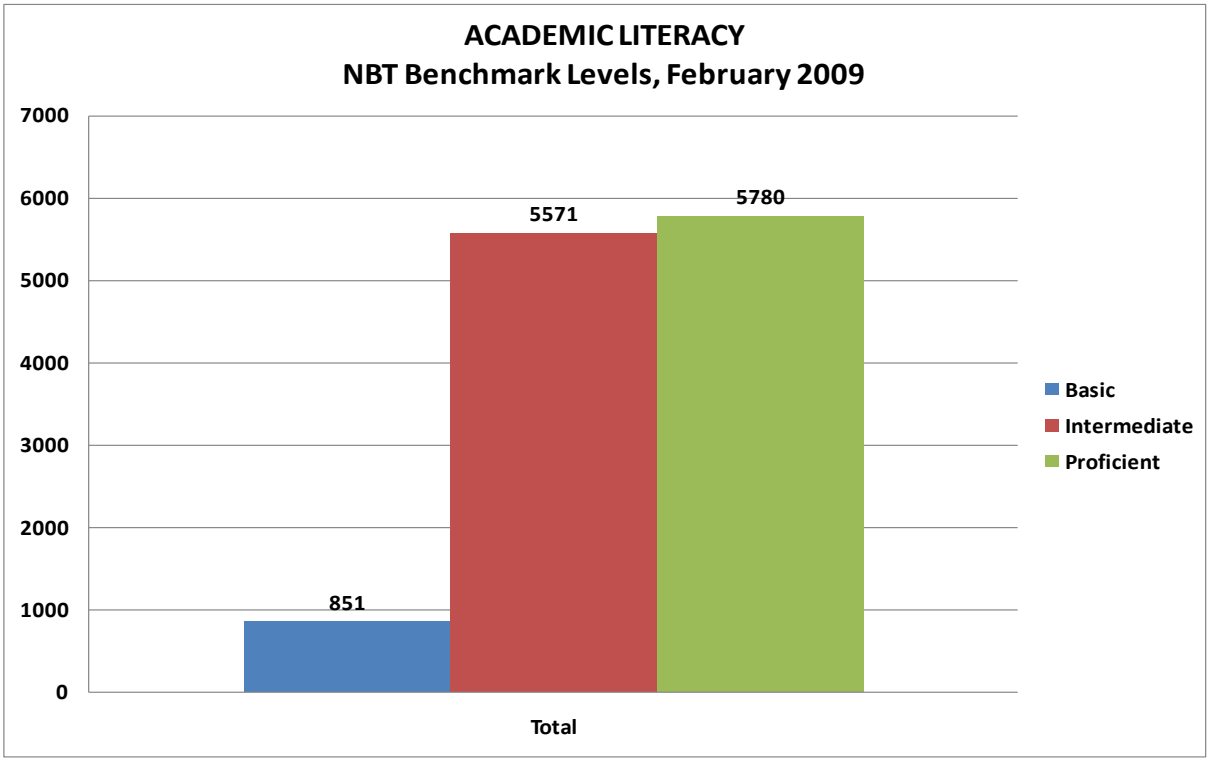

Figure 2.1 Academic literacy levels according to the National Benchmark Tests (NBT) results (HESA, 2009:9)

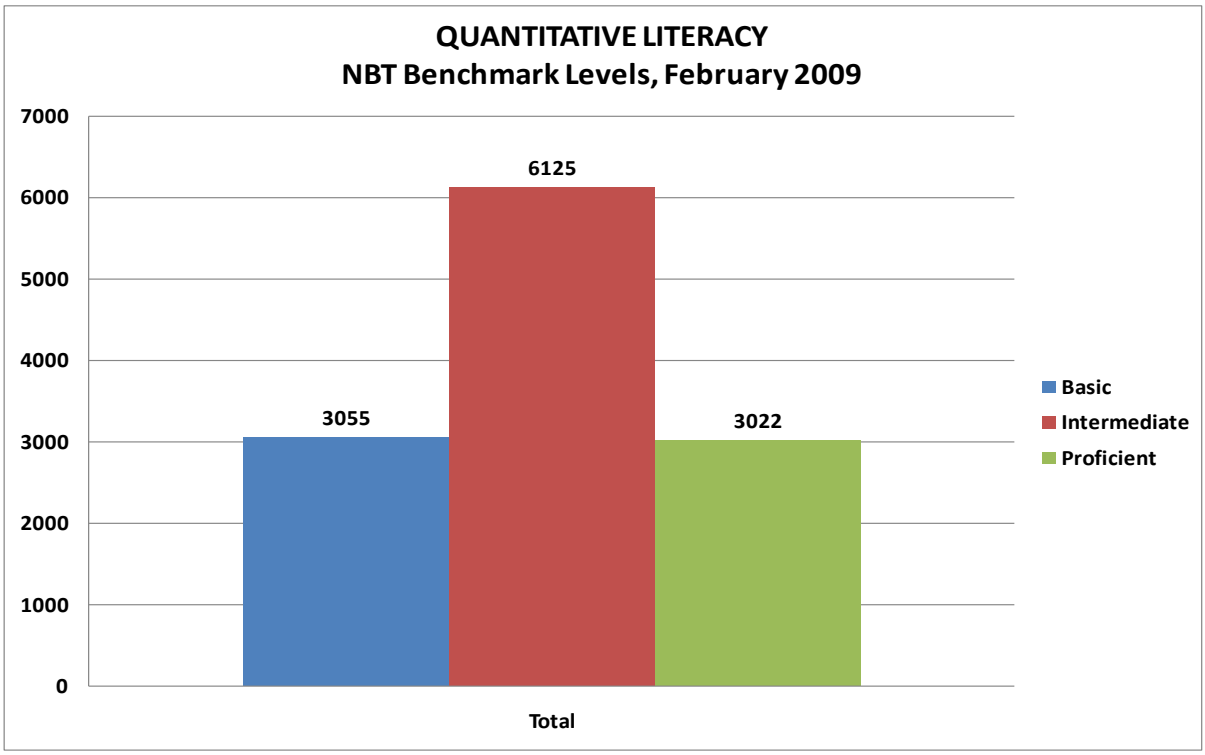

Figure 2.2 Quantitative literacy levels according to the National Benchmark Tests (NBT) results (HESA, 2009:9)

Figures 2.1 and 2.2 indicate that the majority of the 12 202 students who took part in the National Benchmark Tests initiative between 2008 and 2009 showed serious difficulties with key abilities required for success at tertiary institutions. These tests set out to determine students' capacity to engage successfully with the demands of academic study in English and to determine their ability to manage the pressure that accompanies the solving of problems in a real context that is relevant to studying at tertiary level, using basic quantitative information that may be presented verbally, graphically, in tabular or symbolic form.

Figure 2.1 above indicates the large proportion of students who fall in the 'intermediate' category with regard to their AL levels. Combined with the students in the 'basic' category, these are the students who are considered as being 'at risk' in the successful completion of their studies. The ultimate goal of academic literacy interventions should therefore be to move these 'at risk' students into the 'proficient' category.

In so far as quantitative literacy is concerned (Figure 2.2 above), the 'intermediate' level group includes over 50% of the students who sat for the NBTs. Combined with the 'basic' category, these students comprise more than 75% of the group tested who are considered to

be ‘at risk’. Burnett (2009:1) sees these results as ‘disastrous’ as a large number of these students end up dropping out, particularly if no support is offered.

It is worth noting that a number of universities in South Africa, namely, the University of Pretoria, North-West University, the University of the Free State and Stellenbosch University have (to a greater or lesser extent), been administering academic literacy assessments (e.g. the TALL and TAG) on an annual basis to determine which students need support and which ones come ready to engage productively with the tertiary world of academia. There are also some universities who seem to believe that these tests are not necessary since the Grade 12 results, according to them, are a sufficient measure of readiness. One such university is the University of the Witwatersrand which argues that the National Senior Certificate (NSC) results are a sufficient indicator of suitability for admission and readiness for post-school study (Wits News, 2012:8).

The results of the enquiry cited above do not necessarily mean that South African school leavers who took the NBTs cannot read and write *per se*, but rather that many of them cannot read and write in ways specific to the university. Reading at tertiary level is not necessarily the same as in other spheres of life. As Boughey (2009) observes, “this kind of reading (at university) is very different to the sort of reading involved in, say, following a set of instructions, finding a plumber in the Yellow Pages or in doing the types of comprehension passages taught at school level (Boughey, 2009:2).

Studying at tertiary level is surely more demanding than secondary school education. It would, therefore, not be bold to say that universities expect more from their students compared to what is expected at secondary school level. In an ideal situation, universities would accept only those students that have been adequately prepared for higher level study. This is, however, not realistic in the South African context (as it is in many parts of the world) where, as a result of the massification of tertiary education, increasingly more underprepared students gain access to higher education.

It is therefore paramount that appropriate interventionary measures are taken on order to address this situation. As stated earlier in this chapter, universities have responded to this call through the implementation of support programmes designed to assist underprepared students. These support programmes and their different forms and character over the years are discussed in detail in the section to follow.

2.3 English as a language of teaching and learning in South Africa

2.3.1 Introduction

In order to contextualise the current intervention strategies employed by universities in dealing with at-risk students, it is important to trace their not-so distant history.

This subsection retraces this history, with a view of showing how far universities have come in their quest to assist students to deal with the challenges presented by higher education, particularly with respect to their language (and academic literacy) ability in English.

2.3.2 The role of English in the South African education system

2.3.2.1 The historical context

According to Giliomee (2003:3), since the fateful day of 5 July 1822 which saw English being unilaterally declared the sole official language of South Africa (a British colony at the time), the role and influence of the language have grown significantly.

It is worth noting that, even at the point where the language was declared an official language of the colony, it was spoken by a very small minority. Giliomee (2003:3) laments the fact that the declaration mentioned above ignored the reality that almost 99% of indigenous Africans and more than 90% of the Europeans who were living in the country at the time, and who were mainly of Dutch origin, could not speak or comprehend the language.

Despite these realities, the English language formally became the dominant language of the courts, schools, universities, churches, etc. This remained the case until the 1950s when the Nationalist Party came into power and declared Afrikaans yet another official language of the republic.

In present day South Africa, English has retained its prominence in all spheres of life, despite the fact that it is used as an additional language by the majority of South Africans. The recently conducted census (Statistics South Africa, 2011) in the country reveals that English remains a key language of schooling, business and politics in the country. This is disregarding the fact that, just as it was in 1822, the language is not spoken as a home language by the majority of the population as shown in Table 2.2 below.

Table 2.2 – Breakdown of home language use in South Africa

Language	Number of speakers*	% of total
Afrikaans	6 855 082	13.5%
English	4 892 623	9.6%
isiNdebele	1 090 223	2.1%
isiXhosa	8 154 258	16%
isiZulu	11 587 374	22.7%
Sepedi	4 618 576	9.1%
Sesotho	3 849 563	7.6%
Setswana	4 067 248	8%
Sign language	234 655	0.5%
SiSwati	1 297 046	2.5%
Tshivenda	1 209 388	2.4%
Xitsonga	2 277 148	4.5%
Other	828 258	1.6%
TOTAL	50 961 443**	100%

** Spoken as a home language*

*** 'Unspecified' and 'not applicable' are excluded*

(Statistics South Africa, 2011:44)

As outlined in Table 2.2 above, English is used as a home language by only 9.6% of the population. According to the Census Report (Statistics South Africa, 2011:34), most South Africans are multilingual as they are able to speak more than two languages. This is mainly the case with most black urban citizens. However, people who are home language English and Afrikaans speakers tend not to have much ability in speaking and comprehending other South African languages (Desai, 2001). It is worth noting that the Language in Education Policy in South Africa promotes multilingualism as well as mother tongue education (Department of Education, 1997a:1). According to Barry (2002:105), this policy is only "a symbolic gesture" as it has failed dismally to promote indigenous African languages as languages of science, learning and teaching. It therefore remains a governmental ambition

that all eleven declared official languages of the country should enjoy equal status, but reality dictates otherwise.

Despite the realities of home language use outlined above, English is being established as the primary language of schooling in South Africa. Afrikaans seems to be losing ground in terms of influence and status, especially in the schooling system. According to Giliomee (2003:22), the number of Afrikaans medium schools has decreased dramatically over the last few years, from 1800 in the early 1990s to about 300 single Afrikaans medium schools remaining by 2002. He further asserts that this is the case with universities too as all formerly Afrikaans universities (Stellenbosch, Pretoria, Free State, Potchefstroom and the *Rand Afrikaanse Universiteit*) have been compelled to become dual medium institutions by the Ministry. This view is supported by Harms (2012:26) who argues that Afrikaans is not only losing ground in education but also in courts and generally in society. He further observes that this 'losing of ground' is to be attributed largely to the choice members of the Afrikaans speaking communities are making on a daily basis (and not to the law). According to Harms (2012:26-27), these communities choose to use English as a medium of communication in many cases (but also have to do so when others do not understand Afrikaans).

Kapp (2001:63) observes that the majority of the learners who prefer to study in English (most of whom are English additional language [EAL] users) are enthusiastic in doing so because they perceive English as an instrument to access higher education, power and economic resources. In a separate but related study, Bangeni (2001:44) asserts that, given a choice, the majority of these learners would still prefer to submit their academic work in English rather than in their home languages because, arguably, writing in their mother tongue would limit their ability to utilise all the academic resources available to them, including a wider audience.

Young (1995:66) observes that, as a result of the preference for English discussed above, as well as the language policy of the Department of Education (1997b), many students (the majority of whom are Africans) study English for up to 12 years in primary and secondary education, and use English as a language of learning for 8 of these years.

According to MacSwan and Rolstad (2005:13), while language majority children have the single objective of mastering the academic content of subjects such as mathematics, social studies, science, reading and writing at school, language minority children have **two**

objectives which they must meet in order to be academically successful: like language majority children, they must master academic content, but unlike children in the majority language, they must also learn the language of instruction at school at the same time. Although this study was conducted in an American setting, the challenges of learning in an additional language as articulated by MacSwan and Rolstad are largely similar in the South African schooling system. The majority of students in South African primary and secondary education study through English as an additional language for the better part of the time they spend in these educational phases.

The obvious dilemma faced by EAL students in South African schools and universities who 'choose' to pursue their studies in a language that is not their home language, is that they should also master the additional language to such an extent that it permits successful academic study. In this context, Pretorius (2002b:191) asserts that the challenges faced by EAL students are a result of their attempting to learn through English while they have not mastered comprehension in their own primary (home) languages yet.

According to her, although these students may have decoding abilities in their primary languages, they have limited reading comprehension skills to transfer to the dominant schooling language, English. This view is supported by Coetzee-Van Rooy and Verhoef (2000:167) who assert that proficiency in mother tongue languages is often a precursor for proficiency in a second language and that this can also influence academic performance where the second language is used as a language of learning and teaching.

The remainder of this section discusses some of the challenges associated with the preference of students to learn through English as an additional language, particularly as such challenges apply to higher education in South Africa. This discussion will also focus on mechanisms employed by universities in dealing with these challenges as well as the perceived effectiveness of these mechanisms, which is the primary focus of the current study.

As discussed above, the majority of learners in South African schools spend approximately 8 of the 12 years of their pre-tertiary education studying through English as an additional language, due to the fact that they are not home language users of the language. As Lacroix (2012:3) observes, even spending this long a period of time interacting with the English language does not seem to be adequate in developing an acceptable level of academic literacy in English that would enable them to study successfully at a university. This is clearly shown

by the results of the NBTs as discussed in section 2.2.1.2 above, as well as in the results of the Test of Academic Literacy Levels (TALL) administered over a number of years (cf. Higher Education South Africa, 2009; Weideman, 2006). The TALL has been used for a considerable time (from 2007-2014) at the VTC of NWU to determine new students' levels of academic literacy at the start of the academic year, and will be discussed in detail later in the study.

There are numerous studies that focus on the difficulties students experience with the specific AL abilities of listening, reading and writing at tertiary level. Although academic listening ability is the least researched ability in academic literacy (cf. Marais, 2008), Strauss (2004:92) observes that many students struggle to follow oral messages delivered during lectures at university. Oxford (1993:208) argues that only 50% of English second language students pay attention to the contents of lessons presented to them at any given time. This means that the other half is not focused at any given time on what is presented to them in class. Reasons for this could vary from poor language skills to generally poor listening abilities, both of which are abilities that could be developed further. Effective listening is essential both in the comprehension of what is presented in class and in the processing thereof. This observation is supported by Smit (2006:10) who argues that listening comprehension skills are essential in the achievement of academic success by students.

Another critical ability in the achievement of academic success is reading. In her research that focuses specifically on the reading ability of university students, Pretorius (2002a) points out that the poor reading levels of firstyear students at South African universities have a direct influence on their academic performance. In this study she found that "many additional language students have serious reading comprehension problems, which means that they have ineffective and limited access to the rich sources of declarative knowledge provided by print-based materials in the learning context" (Pretorius, 2002a:157). This view is also supported by Butler and Van Dyk (2004:1) who emphasise that many students find it difficult to comprehend reading material at the level that is required by universities.

One other important ability in this regard is academic writing – especially the type of academic writing that is required within the higher education context. Leibowitz (2000:94) asserts that many university students are not aware of the value and importance of academic writing and as such need "a specific awareness" in this regard. This lack of awareness is well researched and documented. To this end Butler (2007:9) observes that a substantial body of

literature exists in this regard, especially about the difficulties encountered by students in higher education when it comes to writing successfully.

He asserts that the specialised form of academic writing required at university level is a key requirement for students in order to be successful within the sector. One crucial reason why students should be able to write appropriate academic texts in this context is that most assessments in higher education take place through the medium of student writing. To this end students are expected to indicate their competence in various fields in a clear and concise manner through the medium of writing.

The preceding discussion focused on language perceived of as separate skills, since this is the way in which it is mostly presented in the literature. However, it is important to acknowledge the interplay and interdependence of these skills in real-life academic tasks students are to perform at university. In other words, it is important that when one wants to improve AL levels of students by means of interventionary measures, one acknowledges the integrated nature of listening, reading and writing in the design and teaching of such interventions. These skills should, therefore, not be seen and taught as "stand-alone" skills. Such a view could be misleading as it could create the impression that language functions as a "set of discrete skills" (Butler, 2007:18). Language functions within social settings and as such any associated skill should be seen and understood in this context. This point is further elaborated upon in the section on academic literacy later in this chapter.

Therefore, although the 8-12 years that EAL students spent in the schooling system seem to provide them with a basic communicative proficiency in English that enables them to cope with the language on the level of general social interaction, many of these students have difficulty to cope with the demands of accessing, processing and producing information in academic English at a tertiary level. A plausible explanation for this situation is offered by Cummins (1991:169-170) in his distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). He argues that there are lexical, grammatical and discourse differences between spoken and written forms of discourse. BICS refers to "the manifestation of language proficiency in everyday communicative contexts" and CALP to "the manipulation of language in decontextualized academic situations" (Cummins, 1984:137).

This means that BICS is more context-embedded in the sense that it advocates that meaning is established through interactional contexts whereas, on the other hand, CALP involves the usage of a more context-reduced discourse associated with written language. On a cautionary note, Coetzee-Van Rooy (2010:33) mentions that one should be careful in applying the Cummins framework directly to the context of higher education in South Africa, since it has not been investigated in this context. However, Cummins' basic distinction between BICS and CALP still provides a theoretically plausible explanation for the language difficulties students experience with academic discourse at university level.

Thus, although students may function relatively well on the level of basic interpersonal communication in English, they seem to lack the cognitive academic language proficiency that is essential to be successful in studying at a tertiary level.

Several studies show that there is a strong link between levels of academic literacy and academic performance (cf. Barry, 2002:105; Weideman & Van Rensburg, 2002:155; Butler & Van Dyk, 2004:1; and Van Dyk & Weideman, 2004:1). As a result, the generally low levels of academic literacy discussed earlier are of great concern across the higher education sector in South Africa.

2.3.2.2 The connection between academic literacy and academic performance

The situation described above presents numerous challenges to universities in the country as they are expected to produce what Moore, Paxton, Scott and Thesen (1998:8) refer to as graduates with the necessary knowledge, life-long learning and problem solving ability. It should be clear at this point that some form of AL intervention is necessary in order to support students to be successful with their studies. With appropriate support, especially through AL interventions that encourage academic reading, writing and argumentation, students could further develop those abilities that are essential for successful university study. This view is supported by Pretorius (2002b:188) who asserts that with constant exposure to written texts, cognitive-linguistic competence thrives. It should be noted that for such exposure to be meaningful it should be encouraged through formal intervention programmes. It would, therefore, be dangerous to assume that the mere exposure to written academic texts (without some form of AL intervention) would be adequate for students to develop the required AL abilities on their own. The intervention provided to students should therefore be formalised to ensure regular exposure and evaluation.

Over the past decade, universities in South Africa have attempted to provide the much needed support to their students through a variety of language proficiency and academic literacy courses. Butler (2007:4) observes that initially, such support took the form of language proficiency courses and often formed part of "bridging" programmes offered by universities and technikons to their students who have displayed "language inadequacies". According to McKenna (2003:43), these "language inadequacies" were considered to be at the heart of underperformance of students across the higher education sector in South Africa. She further states that language proficiency interventions were developed and delivered with a focus on the grammatical aspects of English (often as part of the academic development initiatives of student support services) and not as forming part of the mainstream curricula of universities and technikons. Such courses that focused primarily on grammar teaching have been criticized by, amongst others, Weideman (2013), who refers to such interventions as forming part of a 'deficit' or 'restricted' view of language. As Weideman (2013:15) notes, "we now know that language is much more than grammar. The functions of comparing and contrasting, classifying and inferring, or making claims and extrapolating … are one (functional) way in which we have gone beyond viewing language as grammar."

According to Parkinson, Jackson, Kirkwood and Padayachee (2008:12-13) AL interventions could be divided broadly into three categories, namely:

> what the intervention stresses (e.g. grammatical correctness, reading and writing, etc.), mode of delivery or nature of the intervention (whether mediated by consultants or accredited courses of various kinds), and thirdly, how discipline-specific the intervention is with regard to content and genre.

Butler (2013:7) observes that, although some institutions appear to prefer a curriculum perspective that focuses on generic AL intervention, there has recently been a strong move towards a more discipline-specific orientation. Also, it seems that the teaching of decontextualized grammatical structures is being replaced by the more contextualised teaching of academic literacy abilities necessary for success at higher education level. Interestingly, in more recent times universities have also increasingly experienced the need to integrate such AL support into their mainstream curricula (see Butler, 2013). This means that universities have come to realise that without such integration the success of the academic literacy programmes as intervention mechanisms will remain in doubt. This is being done in order to ensure greater success in terms of better throughput rates at universities. Having

academic literacy programmes forming part of core business was intended to ensure not only greater success in the overall throughput but also to put a greater deal of importance on such programmes as intervention mechanisms at university level.

2.4 Understanding the relationship between literacy, academic literacy and academic language proficiency

2.4.1 The concept 'literacy'

In order to understand *academic literacy*, it is necessary to understand what is meant by *literacy* itself. It should be noted from the outset that no commonly accepted definition of literacy exists. As Roberts (1995:412) observes, different scholars have different definitions and views on what constitutes literacy. In this subsection, a selection of these definitions and views is discussed.

In a very general sense, Foster (1995:2) maintains that, traditionally, the term literacy was used to mean "the ability to sign one's name". On a somewhat more specific note, Tedesco and Macleod (1993:237) state that, over a hundred years ago, the term literacy was used to refer to the ability to read and write. Ayonghe (2009:26) argues that, "instead of common ground being found on what constitutes *literacy* as a concept, many interpretations of the same concept have since emerged".

This can be seen clearly in the work of Roberts (1995:420), who mentions the existence of the following types of literacy:

a. survival literacy (the literacy skills necessary to survive in modern technological society);
b. social literacy (communication skills, and capacity for dialogue, critical reflection and informed action);
c. cultural literacy (possession of the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world);
d. functional literacy (the ability to interact with political, legal, commercial, occupational and social demands in daily life);
e. higher order literacy (being able to work out multi-step problems by oneself); and
f. critical literacy (transformation through reflection, action, and desocialisation).

Foster also (1995:89) maintains that:

> There is no one umbrella definition of literacy. Each definition that is arrived at provides us with important parameters for literacy but no consensus for an umbrella definition ... The controversy surrounding the definition of literacy is creating a continuing and shifting research challenge.

It is therefore apparent that, over time, and given human development, the term literacy has been diversified to mean more than just the basic abilities articulated by some of the scholars cited above. It is further clear that the focus in an understanding of the concept 'literacy' has shifted from an attempt to define literacy as a generic concept to how it is applied in specific contexts. In other words, this shift in focus has brought about a notion of **many different *contextual literacies***.

As indicated above, it is apparent that no one definition of the term 'literacy' exists and that any attempt to get closer to some common understanding of what constitutes literacy always breeds new definitions and understandings. For the purposes of this study, however, the contextual type of literacy that is under investigation is *academic literacy* as it applies to a higher education environment. The subsection below outlines various understandings of the term *'academic literacy'*.

2.4.2 Academic literacy

Similar to a definition of literacy, there does not appear to exist any universally accepted definition of academic literacy. The term is defined differently in different contexts, by different people and for different purposes.

In support of this observation, Parkinson, Jackson, Kirkwood and Padayachee (2008:12) state that:

> Even academic literacy, which is a more restricted notion than literacy as a whole, and might thus be expected to be clearly one thing, is … interpreted differently by different groups.

Butler (2013:5) asserts that a possible explanation for the numerous different definitions of AL is that the way in which it is defined is influenced by the definer's theoretical perspective and how people conceptualise the nature of AL. Therefore, if one, for example, perceives of

language as a discrete set of ‘skills’ that ignores the integrated nature of these skills, one would probably define AL in such a way. One’s intervention would then carry the same characteristics, viz. an intervention that is organised into the separate skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing.

The following subsection presents prominent definitions of academic literacy that appear in the literature and demarcate the concept as it is employed in this study.

In the broadest sense, Vanesky, Kaestle and Sum (1987:102) define AL as a continuum of skills that is required both in and outside of formal schooling and that relates directly to the ability to function in society. Situated more specifically in the context of higher education, AL is defined by Parkinson (2000:11) as an ability to read and write in expected discipline-specific ways. This view is supported by Amos (1999:178) who observes that academic literacy in its simplest form is about “students’ ability to read and write effectively in the university context”. Although the definitions by Parkinson and Amos are clearly skills-based in their emphasis on the skills of reading and writing, they do emphasise the contextual nature of both writing and reading at tertiary level. These definitions therefore stress the fact that effective reading and writing are an integral part of academic literacy ability at university level.

However, a ‘skills-based’ perspective of language has, in recent times, come under increasing scrutiny. Butler (2007), for example emphasises the fact that:

> A 'skills' perspective on language and language learning has the tendency to mislead one to believe that language can be perceived of as a set of discrete skills. Such a perspective is limiting with regard to the functionality of language within a specific social context and the complexity in the combination of a number of factors/abilities that lead to an appropriate language utterance in such a context.

Butler (2007) offers an alternative perspective on academic literacy in more functional terms. Therefore, according to Butler (2007:19), rather than focusing on the discrete skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, an approach that perceives of AL as seeking, processing and producing information (Weideman, 2007:xi) may be more appropriate with regard to the functional and contextual nature of academic discourse.

In his definition of AL as the seeking, processing, and producing of information, Weideman (2007) emphasises that a definition of AL should focus on the typical activities and tasks that students should perform in the tertiary education context. This view is supported by Carstens (2012:23) who asserts that being academically literate is indeed more than just being able to read and write. According to her it is also about being multiliterate and about combining a range of abilities that are conducive for making meaning as well as mediating and negotiating knowledge. Van Dyk and Van de Poel (2013:46) argue that different discourse communities have different communication patterns and as such being literate cannot be confined to one corner of the spectrum. According to them, becoming multiliterate enables students to understand and to transfer knowledge and skills from and to contexts and move between different discourse communities.To this end, Weideman (2007:xi) further distinguishes specific functional abilities that students should control in order to effectively seek, process and produce information (a comprehensive list of these abilities is provided in 2.7.1 below).
Following the discussion above it is clear that a working definition for the term academic literacy is necessary for the context of this study. Such a definition is provided later in this chapter.

The subsection below focuses on academic language proficiency. The reason for this is that, in the literature, the terms ‘academic literacy’ and ‘academic language proficiency’ are often used interchangeably, and it is therefore necessary to clarify the relationship between the two.

In addition, as argued above, universities often tended to conceptualise their interventions based on the ‘language problems’ faced by their students, and primarily made use of a language proficiency discourse when discussing such interventions in academic publications. Universities therefore designed and presented language proficiency-based courses as a way of dealing with their students’ seeming lack of proficiency in English.

2.4.3 Academic language proficiency

It cannot be disputed that, central to the mastery of course content at university, is the fact that students should be proficient in the language of teaching and learning through which they choose to study, in this case, English. The difficulty many of these students encounter at this level of study has its roots in their pre-university education. As pointed out in 2.3.2.1 above, the majority of learners in South African schools receive their schooling through the medium of English, while more than 90% of them have a home language other than English.

Just as it is necessary to make a distinction between literacy and academic literacy, for the purposes of this discussion it is important to distinguish between general language proficiency and academic language proficiency.

Smith (1994:4) observes that the answer to what constitutes language proficiency will depend on "why one asks the question, how one seeks to answer it, and what level of proficiency one might be concerned with". As is the case with definitions of literacy and academic literacy, we find the notion that specific types of language proficiency are regulated by specific contexts. Therefore, following Smith (1994), the contextualisation of language proficiency in a tertiary academic context clearly goes beyond the general kind of proficiency that is necessary to communicate in a language on a social level (see previous discussion on Cummins' distinction between BICS and CALP).

Bachmann (1990:69) offers a comprehensive description of the competencies that are necessary to be academically proficient in a language. Such competencies include "organisational, grammatical, textual, pragmatic/functional and sociolinguistic knowledge". These competencies are discussed below.

- Organisational knowledge

Organisational knowledge revolves around grammatical knowledge. According to Bachman (1990:67), organisational knowledge is key in language competence as it involves the "formal structure of language and organising grammatically acceptable utterances and sentences into text". For Bachman, therefore, organisational knowledge is an integral component of language competence.

- Textual knowledge

Bachman (1990:68) describes textual knowledge as the knowledge that is required in the production and interpretation of texts and as being inclusive of knowledge of key technical aspects of written texts and of spoken language, for example the value of cohesion in both written and spoken language. The mastery of these aspects can assist students to produce textually appropriate academic texts and to sustain appropriate academic discussions as required in higher education.

- Pragmatic/functional knowledge

Pragmatic knowledge entails the interpretation of discourse. According to Bachman (1990:69), this is done by relating sentences to their contextual meanings, the intentions and communicative goals of the user, and the features of the language use setting. It is very important for students to understand that disciplinary contexts and the target audience are crucial in the construction of meaning in a way that is appropriate for the specific audience.

- Sociolinguistic knowledge

According to Douglas (2000:28) sociolinguistic knowledge entails utterances and sentences related to features of the language use setting, including registers and cultural references. Bachman (1990:68) observes that sociolinguistic knowledge also includes knowledge of registers, dialects, natural or idiomatic expressions and cultural references and figures of speech.

In the end, a combination of all the aspects of language competence discussed above is central to the mastery of a language. It should further be clear that all these aspects are also central to an understanding of how academic language proficiency relates to academic literacy. Therefore, academic literacy cannot be discussed without reference to academic language proficiency and the different, interrelated competencies students need to apply appropriately in a tertiary academic context.

As mentioned previously, the development of academic literacy, an approach that increasingly highlights the interrelated nature of language being used for a specific purpose in the functional context of tertiary education, has more recently become the focus of many language related interventions at universities.

The next subsection focuses on the nature of AL interventions that are discussed in the literature. This discussion begins by offering a broad distinction between two types of AL intervention in South Africa and the debates associated with it. This is followed by a brief outline of existing interventions at South African universities that attempt to evaluate the impact of such interventions. The discussion will conclude with an outline of AL intervention at the VTC, which is the focus of the current study.

2.5 Types of academic literacy intervention in South Africa

As discussed in point 2.2 above, the massification of higher education in South Africa after 1994 compelled higher education institutions in the country to intensify their academic support programmes. This was necessitated by the fact that a majority of the students who were benefitting from government's massification project were underprepared for any post-school education. According to the Education White Paper 3 (Department of Education, 1997a:29) higher education institutions were expected to offer a comprehensive response to:

> … the articulation gap between learners' school attainment and the intellectual demands of higher education programmes. It will be necessary to accelerate the provision of bridging and access programmes within further education. It is of utmost importance that the political transformation of a university does not just result in the admission of unprepared students to the university without giving them a reasonable chance to succeed.

In response to this call universities designed and offered various student support courses and programmes to help support the students who came to them for study purposes. As Butler (2013:4) observes, the form and shape of the support programmes offered to students differed from institution to institution. Some universities and technikons offered bridging courses (that usually contained a language component) while others offered language support programmes. The design and management of these programmes in general resided with academic support units and, as such, were not usually part of the mainstream programmes offered by these universities. The key focus of many of these programmes was on what was considered as a 'critical lack' in the underprepared students at the time – that they did not know the language (grammar). As mentioned before, this form of support offered to students has since evolved into support that focuses on much more than the mere grammatical features of language.

Recent intervention programmes offered by universities have generally moved away from simply focusing on the mastery of grammar rules and correctness. One now tends to find interventions with a more functional focus in the application of language knowledge and ability to perform various authentic academic tasks through the abilities of writing, reading, listening and speaking. This shift in focus has intensified, especially in the last 10 years. As stated earlier, this was done by universities in order for them to be able to meet new challenges presented by the type of students they admit. According to Mckenna (2010:27)

these new challenges were brought about by students' inability to carry out academic tasks, especially as such tasks relate to students' understanding and production of academic texts.

In a recent publication, Butler (2013) mentions that currently, AL interventions in South Africa could be broadly divided into those that have generic characteristics and those that have a more discipline-specific focus. Many of the current debates about AL intervention seem to revolve around the form such interventions should take in order to provide adequate support to students. Therefore, should AL interventions be generic or should they be tailor-made to suit the AL requirements of various disciplines? To this end, Weideman (2013:8) argues that subject-specific AL interventions are often unrealistic, unworkable, and illogical. He argues that because of the large number of subjects and departments in the different faculties within a university, designing subject-specific interventions may not be possible from a practical point of view.

On the other hand, among the ever growing array of supporters of discipline-specific interventions, Goodier and Parkinson (2005:66) argue that teaching irrelevant content (content not grounded in a given discipline) could be demotivating for students studying in those disciplines, and that the skills learned in generic AL intervention programmes are not transferrable to the discipline in which such students are studying. This view also enjoys support from Jiya (1993) who, in his criticism of an intervention offered by the University of Fort Hare in the early 1990s to its science students, argued that the generic nature of that course rendered it meaningless and unhelpful to the students it intended helping. He argued that science had its own knowledge parameters, scientific vocabulary and logic which were not adequately addressed by a generic English proficiency course. Based on a study conducted at the University of KwaZulu Natal, Parkinson (2000) asserts that for an AL intervention to be relevant, its content has to be relevant to the students it is offered to. She further argues that an intervention designed for science students, for example, should "familiarise students with a wide range of literacies in science, focusing in particular on genres which are important in science" (Parkinson, 2000:382-383).

Butler (2013) presents a balanced assessment of academic literacy interventions in the South African tertiary sector. Although this assessment is largely impartial with regard to passing judgment on either generic or discipline-specific AL interventions, one does get a sense that Butler supports the notion of the discipline-specific nature of AL ability. Butler (2013:83), for example, states that:

> Based on largely uncontested notions on the specificity of academic literacy practices, it is understandable that the idea of specificity (in whatever guise) seems to have found widespread appeal in AL interventions.

Butler's main argument, however, focuses on the fact that neither generic nor discipline-specific AL interventions at South African universities that are reported in the literature offer conclusive evidence of the impact of such interventions.

As discussed above, it is clear that universities in South Africa have, for a considerable time, been grappling with the nature and form of the academic literacy support necessary for their students to succeed. It must, however, be emphasised that the debates, as reflected above, focus on the nature of the intervention and not on its necessity as an intervention. Academic literacy intervention remains a dire necessity in higher education in South Africa, but evidence of the effectiveness of academic literacy programmes should be provided.

The next sub-section discusses the documented effectiveness of AL intervention programmes offered within the higher education sector in South Africa.

2.6 The reported effectiveness of academic literacy interventions

Although academic literacy programmes as intervention mechanisms in higher education have grown in popularity in recent years, such interventions have not been without criticism. The central focus of scepticism and criticisms levelled against such interventions has been on the effectiveness and impact of these programmes (Van Dyk, 2005).

In this regard, a small number of studies attempt to ascertain the effectiveness of academic literacy programmes offered by universities. In a study conducted at the University of Pretoria (Van Dyk, 2005), the aim was to determine the effectiveness of an academic literacy course offered by the university. Overall, this programme was found to be effective in terms of student improvement on a generic assessment of AL abilities. However, since this study assessed generic AL ability, one should be careful in assuming that such abilities would be automatically transferred to disciplinary contexts. Van Dyk (2005:46) also emphasises that "only cautious conclusions are possible" and that a longitudinal study was necessary in terms of establishing evidence for the long-term effects of the said intervention.

Another study that attempted to determine the impact of an AL intervention was conducted between 2005 and 2006 at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal by Parkinson *et al.* (2008). This study, which focused on Communication in Science, an academic literacy course designed for science students, sought to determine whether the programme was effective in assisting the targeted students to improve their reading and writing in Science. Two themed standardised tests (not identical) were used to assess students before and after taking the course. The tests also contained a section that required of students to complete a substantial writing task. Furthermore, questionnaires were used to gather students' perceptions on the effectiveness of the course (Parkinson *et al.*, 2008:17).

The outcomes of this study were encouraging as they confirmed the effectiveness of the programme. The study reports student improvement for both academic reading and writing ability (Parkinson *et al.*, 2008:18-21). However, the reported success of this programme should be also treated with caution as the authors themselves observe that "it is hard to assess the Communication in Science course directly" (Parkinson *et al*., 2008:17). Butler (2013:11) further observes that the authors, seeing that they had difficulties in assessing the course directly, chose to also use an assessment instrument that evaluates generic AL ability. It is, therefore, not clear whether the improvement claimed by this study could be transferred to the context of science specifically.

Carstens and Fletcher (2009) found positive results for a writing intervention in which history students took part. This empirical study compared student writing using a pre-test and a post-test. Although this comparison showed an improvement that was statistically significant, only a small sample of history students was involved in the study. Students were also asked for their opinions about the intervention and these were generally positive with regard to how the intervention affected their writing abilities. Carstens and Fletcher (2009:328), however, state that "a larger sample is necessary to establish whether the improvement after intervention is indeed statistically significant". Also, the small-scale nature of the study makes it difficult to apply the findings to larger student groups.

Van Dyk, *et al.*, (2010) conducted a study on the effectiveness of a writing intervention offered by the University of Stellenbosch to students in Health Sciences in 2010. This programme too was found to be effective, in that it showed improvement of students' discipline-specific writing (Van Dyk, *et al.*, 2010:342). The study also found that students found the intervention valuable in developing their writing ability. The authors mention,

however, that with regard to the extent and impact of the course, conclusions should be seen as preliminary since the research forms part of a longitudinal study that measures writing performance, and, in the end, throughput of students.

Boakye (2012) conducted an extensive study at the University of Pretoria on the role played by both cognitive and socio-effective factors such as motivation and interest in achieving academic success among first year students. The study by Boakye (2012:28-29) revealed that academic success was dependent not only on external factors such the provision of intervention programmes but that it also depended on internal factors such as students' intrinsic motivation and interest. Students who were more motivated and driven were more successful than those who were not. It is therefore important to ensure that students' level of motivation and interests are taken into account when intervention programmes are designed and offered to students. This view is supported by Pretorius (2002:295) who asserts that long-term effects of reading instruction are intimately tied to attitudinal and motivational factors. Butler (2013:11) emphasises that although some success is reported for AL interventions such as the ones mentioned above, one cannot just assume that improvement measured by generic tests would be transferred to students' other subjects. He concludes that the evidence produced by the small number of studies on the impact of both generic and discipline-specific AL interventions is not substantial enough to provide a strong argument of the positive impact of either kind of intervention, and that more research is necessary in this regard.

As mentioned before, no study on the impact of its AL intervention has ever been conducted on any of the three campuses of the North-West University. It is in this context that the current study is seen to be of great significance to the university in general and to the Vaal Triangle Campus in particular.

2.7 Academic literacy intervention at the Vaal Triangle Campus of North-West University

The VTC has its own share of the challenges plaguing the higher education sector in South Africa that were discussed earlier in this study. According to Maake (2012:34), the Vaal Triangle campus experienced a considerable influx of African students following the incorporation of the former Vista University's Sebokeng Campus in January 2004, as per the directive of the Education Ministry (following the merger of the former University of the

North West and the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education to create the North-West University).

Maake (2012:34) argues that the acceptance of increasingly more African students at the Vaal Triangle Campus of North-West University meant that its previous status in using Afrikaans primarily as a language of teaching and learning changed considerably. Notably, although Afrikaans and English are still the recognised languages of teaching and learning at the VTC, the majority of learners on the campus study through English as an additional language at present. As mentioned previously, almost 90% of students on this campus did not speak English as a mother tongue in 2007 (Verhoef, 2009:2). Most of the students pursuing their studies at this campus are, therefore, EAL students. In the same study referred to above (conducted by the University's Institutional Language Directorate in 2009), it was established that the levels of English academic literacy of the group of students who chose to pursue their studies at the VTC were, in the majority of cases, not adequate for university study. According to the 2009 status report compiled by this Directorate (Verhoef, 2009:1), more than 50% of the students who gained access to study at the VTC were considered to be 'at risk' of not completing their studies as a result of low academic literacy levels in English, based on the results of the TALL.

Similar to many other South African universities, the VTC saw it as imperative to address the situation described above by providing additional AL support to its students. The following two sections provide an account of the nature of the intervention put in place by the VTC.

Section 2.7.2 below provides a description of the two AL modules that are used as an interventionary measure. However, it is important first to present a working definition of *academic literacy* in order to clarify the basis on which the AL intervention was designed and implemented.

2.7.1 A working definition for academic literacy in the NWU context

The working definition for this study is based on Weideman's (2007:xi) functional definition of academic literacy mentioned in Section 2.4.2. Therefore, in order to **access, process and produce** information appropriately in a tertiary academic context, students should be able to:

- understand a range of academic vocabulary in context;
- interpret the use of metaphor and idiom in academic usage, and perceive connotation, word play and ambiguity;
- understand relations between different parts of a text, via introductions to conclusions, and know how to use language that serves to make the different parts of a text hang together;
- interpret different kinds of text type (genre), and have a sensitivity for the meaning they convey, as well as the audience they are aimed at;
- interpret, use and produce information presented in graphic or visual format;
- distinguish between essential and non-essential information, fact and opinion, propositions and arguments, cause and effect, and classify, categorise and handle data that make comparisons;
- see sequence and order, and do simple numerical estimations and computations that are relevant to academic information, that allow comparisons to be made, and can be applied for the purposes of an argument;
- know what counts as evidence for an argument, extrapolate from information by making inferences, and apply the information or its implications to other cases than the one at hand;
- understand the communicative function of various ways of expression in academic language (such as defining, providing examples, arguing); and
- make meaning (e.g. of an academic text) beyond the level of the sentence.

This definition is functional to the extent that it defines academic literacy as an ability that is directly related to what students can and should practically do with academic texts, both in understanding and producing such texts. It is further important to note that this definition was used in the conceptualisation of the two academic literacy modules being investigated as part of this study, but also in the development of a blueprint for the TALL currently used by the NWU.

The next subsection discusses the specific academic literacy intervention as conceptualised by the NWU

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2.7.2 Academic literacy intervention at the VTC

The administration of the TALL to new first year students forms part of the campus' annual academic calendar. All the students who are considered to be 'at risk' regarding their academic literacy levels (as identified by the TALL) need to register for the compulsory, semester-long AL module (AGLE 111 – Basic skills in academic literacy). A second academic literacy module, AGLE 121 (Advanced skills in academic literacy) is compulsory for all first year students in the second semester of the first year, irrespective of whether they had to complete AGLE 111 or not (students who are considered to have little or no risk according to their TALL results do not have to complete AGLE 111). At the VTC, no student can graduate without having completed the academic literacy modules successfully. These modules are usually presented over a period of 14 weeks per semester. Lectures take the form of one weekly, 90 minute session (usually a double period on the university time table) per group. Although an attempt is made to divide students into manageable groups of approximately 50 students per group, reality dictates that lecturers often have groups of 100 students and more.

Each AL lecturer usually gets allocated a maximum of 6 groups per semester (in total, the Subject Group: Academic Literacy has to deal with 24 groups in the first semester and 34 groups in the second semester). Both modules are credit bearing to the value of 12 credits. Below is a breakdown of what each module entails.

2.7.2.1 Composition of AGLE 111 (Basic skills in academic literacy)

The AGLE 111 module is a generic AL module presented during the first semester and is offered to all the 'at-risk' students who are identified through the Test of Academic Literacy Levels (TALL). The module also bears 12 credits. The generic nature of this module means that the course content is the same for all students, irrespective of what qualifications they pursue. According to Louw, Potgieter and Zeeman (2013:v-vi), AGLE 111 sets out to achieve the following broad outcomes in order to assist students in functioning effectively within the AL requirements of a tertiary academic environment. After completion of the module students should be able to:

- ❖ Apply learning, listening, reading and writing strategies, use academic language register and read and write academic texts, in order to function effectively in the academic environment;
- ❖ Communicate effectively orally and in writing in an ethically responsible and acceptable manner in an academic environment; and
- ❖ Find and collect scientific knowledge in a variety of study fields, analyse, interpret, and evaluate texts, and in a coherent manner synthesise and propose solutions in appropriate academic genres by making use of linguistic conventions used in formal language registers.

The module consists of eight study units. The different study units and what is addressed by each are presented below (see Louw, Potgieter and Zeeman, 2013:xii-xiii).

- Study Unit 1

This unit focuses on **learning strategies and study skills**. The study unit introduces students to: relevant learning strategies and study methods; how to analyse, interpret and answer examination questions; effective time management; and how to handle examination stress.

- Study Unit 2

Effective listening and note-taking are addressed in this unit. The unit focuses on active and passive listening; how to reach an in-depth understanding of listening texts; and how to take and construct notes in a coherent way.

- Study Unit 3

Unit 3 focuses on **the completion of written assignments and the writing of examinations**. The unit assists students to interpret examination as well as assignment questions through the identification of instruction words or action verbs.

- Study Unit 4

This unit deals with **reading comprehension**. It introduces students to the use of relevant reading strategies like scanning, skimming, comprehensive reading and critical reading.

- Study Unit 5

In this study unit, the emphasis is on **academic language usage**. It introduces students to how academic language is used in a tertiary academic environment. The unit includes the use of formal language; the correct use of the passive construction; the characteristics of an appropriate academic writing style; the correct application of discourse markers and the accurate formulation of sentences.

- Study Unit 6

Unit 6 deals with strategies for **writing an appropriate academic assignment**. Using a process-writing approach, it exposes students to an interpretation of assignment topics; the formulation of an elementary problem statement; the comprehension, basic interpretation and integration of sources; the planning of a structured academic text; the integration of data and the reaching of conclusions; basic referencing techniques; information ethics and the avoidance of plagiarism; as well as editing.

- Study Unit 7

The study unit emphasises the **analysing and interpreting of graphic information**. It introduces students to the reading and interpretation of graphs, tables, figures and doing simple numerical calculations.

- Study Unit 8

This study unit focuses on **seminar skills**. It covers the preparation and planning for seminars; the taking of notes during seminars and the concise, critical and coherent presentation of information.

2.7.2.2 Composition of AGLE 121 (Advanced skills in academic literacy)

The AGLE 121 module bears 12 credits and is compulsory for all first year students during the second semester, including those who got exempted from doing the AGLE 111 module. Apart from the lecture-based academic literacy component, this module includes two other compulsory components, namely, Computer and Information Skills and a Reading Laboratory component. Although the complete module (including the two additional components) is co-ordinated by the Subject-Group: Academic Literacy, other academic

structures at the VTC are responsible for the content and implementation of the two additional components.

Laboratories for both the Computer and Information Skills and the Reading Laboratory components of the module are made available to students right from the beginning of the academic year. Students are expected to have completed all three components by the end of their first year.

With regard to the overall outcomes for the module, Van der Walt, Louw, Potgieter & Zeeman (2012:v-vi) state that after the completion of AGLE 121 students should be able to:

- Demonstrate knowledge of applicable learning strategies and study skills in order to study effectively;
- Use and demonstrate different reading strategies;
- Demonstrate understanding of relationship between different parts of a text;
- Distinguish between formal and informal language;
- Write in an academic writing style;
- Be familiar with skills associated with critical thinking;
- Distinguish between facts, opinions and informed opinions;
- Assess the accuracy and validity of information; and
- Demonstrate knowledge of various academic genres.

Similar to AGLE 111, the lecture component of AGLE 121 consists of eight (8) study units. Although the module has been designed to be more in-depth (advanced AL) when compared to the AGLE 111 module, it is in many respects repetitive in terms of the AL abilities addressed by its focus and content. The units of the AGLE 121 module are composed as follows (see Van der Walt, Louw, Potgieter & Zeeman (2012:xvii-xviii).

- Study Unit 1

Unit 1 focuses on **learning strategies and study skills**. This study unit introduces students to relevant learning strategies and study methods; how to analyse, interpret and answer examination questions; effective time management of examination stress. It generally has a similar focus as in the module discussed above (AGLE 111).

- Study Unit 2

This unit focuses on **strategic reading**. It includes emphasis on different reading strategies, various text types and on the ability to recognise the relationships between different sections of a text. The unit also includes a number of comprehension exercises.

- Study Unit 3

Unit 3 deals with **academic language usage**. The focus of the unit is similar to that of the AGLE 111 module as it introduces students to academic language usage and its accurate application. The unit also includes the use of formal language; the correct use of the passive construction; the characteristics of an appropriate academic writing style; the correct application of discourse markers and the accurate formulation of sentences. Although these issues have already been introduced in the AGLE 111 module, the difference is that they are presented and dealt with in a more comprehensive and in-depth manner than in the AGLE 121 module.

- Study Unit 4

This unit emphasises the importance of valid academic **argumentation**. It introduces students to critical thinking, facts and opinions; factual accuracy of statements; relevant and irrelevant information; inconsistencies in reasoning; the main characteristics of an argument; the power of arguments as well as the formulation of arguments.

- Study Unit 5

Unit 5 builds on what students did in Unit 4 with its focus on the **planning and structuring of an academic assignment**. It introduces students to academic genres; the formats of various rhetorical text types; the planning and structuring of an academic assignment as well as the writing of an appropriately structured academic text.

- Study Unit 6

In Unit 6, the issue of **empirical research and the composition of a research paper** is addressed**.** The unit emphasizes different steps in the research process such as topic interpretation; the basic interpretation and integration of sources; the formulation of a

problem statement; the planning and production of a structured academic text; the integration of data and the reaching of conclusions; applicable and accurate referencing techniques; information ethics and the avoidance of plagiarism; as well as editing.

- Study Unit 7

This study unit focuses on **seminar skills**. Students are introduced to logically structured and source-based presentations; the discussion of an academic subject; the posing of clarifying, explanatory and critical questions; as well as a personal point of view.

- Study Unit 8

Unit 8 emphasises important aspects in academic **writing**. It includes a focus on sentence and paragraph construction (focusing on cohesion and coherence in writing); summarising; how to write different types of introductions and conclusions; and how to reference source material. It culminates in a major written assignment in which students have to incorporate all of the above issues.

As indicated earlier in this study, the aim of the current study is to ascertain the effectiveness of the modules outlined here.

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter provided the theoretical framework in which the current study is situated. It started by outlining important changes experienced by the higher education system in South Africa since 1994. This outline sought to indicate how tertiary education in general has changed since 1994, as well as the expectations of South African society about university education. An overview of universities as they existed shortly before 1994 was also given.

Furthermore, an analysis of the secondary schooling system in South Africa with regard to its crucial role in supplying students that are prepared adequately for dealing with the demands of the higher education sector was presented. The challenges currently faced by secondary schools to accomplish the above were also highlighted.

The chapter further focused on the importance of reducing the high dropout rate among university students and discussed some of the underlying causes in this regard. Among these

causes, the generally low academic literacy levels of students are an important concern for universities. To this end, the role of English used as a language of learning by the majority of tertiary students (and the fact that most of these students are EAL users) was highlighted.

The use of academic literacy interventions as a mechanism designed to assist students to cope with the academic challenges presented by university education was extensively discussed in this chapter. The specific context of the AL intervention at the Vaal Triangle Campus of North-West University was also provided in order to situate this intervention in the wider context of AL support.

The next chapter provides an outline of the specific research design and methodology used by this study.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide a framework of the research plan and how it was executed. The techniques and methods chosen and utilised by the researcher to address the research questions will be detailed.

The next sub-section therefore again states the primary research question and shows how the specific objectives, based on the secondary research questions discussed in Chapter 1, are addressed with regard to the selected research methods.

3.2 Research objectives

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the primary research question focuses on a determination of the impact of the academic literacy intervention at the Vaal Triangle Campus of North-West University. Such a determination should help the specific campus in determining the effectiveness of the intervention so that, if necessary, adjustments could be made to provide maximum benefit to students. In order to eventually answer the primary research question, the following specific objectives were identified for the secondary research questions. This study therefore intends to:

- Objective 1: Conduct a thorough literature review on the history and context of university education as a precursor to academic literacy interventions being instituted at South African universities and, more specifically, what research findings are available on the impact of AL interventions in the South African tertiary context;
- Objective 2: Determine statistically whether the intervention participants show any significant improvement in the specific AL abilities tested by the TALL as a result of the two AL modules used as interventionary measure at the VTC;
- Objective 3: Determine statistically whether there exists any significant correlation between students' overall academic achievement and their achievement in the academic literacy modules;

- Objective 4: Establish what student perceptions are about the impact of the two academic literacy modules at the VTC;
- Objective 5: Determine academic staff perceptions about the impact of the academic literacy modules at the VTC; and
- Objective 6: Based on the results of the investigations above, provide recommendations to course designers, lecturers and policy makers in order to maximize students' academic potential through the use of academic literacy programmes.

3.3 Research methodology

3.3.1 Research design

Mouton (1998:35) defines research designs as sets of guidelines and instructions to be followed in addressing a given research problem. The development of a research design follows logically from the research problem (primary research question) and its main function is to enable the researcher to anticipate what appropriate research decisions should be taken so as to maximize the validity of the eventual results (Mouton, 1998:107). As mentioned earlier, the primary research question that needs to be answered in this study is: What is the impact of the academic literacy intervention offered by the North-West University's Vaal Triangle Campus? The research design of this study is therefore closely related to one's choice of research paradigm, as well as to which specific research strategies and techniques would enable one to determine most comprehensively and reliably what the impact of the AL intervention is at the VTC.

Mouton (1996) mentions that although there has been some criticism of research designs that employ research techniques belonging to both the quantitative and qualitative research paradigms in the same study, most researchers accept that "quantitative and qualitative tools are compatible and that the choice for their inclusion in a particular project is determined by the specific research problem" (Mouton, 1996:40).

Therefore, as a result of the varied nature of the kinds of data that need to be collected in order to reach the specific research objectives stated in Section 3.2 above, this empirical

study makes use of both the quantitative and qualitative research paradigms for data collection and analysis.

3.3.1.1 The quantitative and qualitative research paradigms

According to Durrheim (2006:47), quantitative research mainly involves data collected in the form of numbers and uses a statistical type of data analysis. The following main characteristics of this type of research are provided by Leedy and Ormond (2005:85):

- With regard to purpose, quantitative researchers seek explanations and predictions that will generalize to other persons and places. The intent is to establish, confirm, or validate relationships and to develop generalizations that contribute to theory.
- Quantitative studies represent the mainstream approach to research. Concepts, variables, hypotheses and methods of measurements tend to be defined before the study begins and remain the same throughout. Methods are chosen that allow objective measurement of the variable of interest and detachment from the participants so that unbiased conclusions can be drawn.
- With regard to data collection, the quantitative paradigm identifies one or a few variables they intend to study and collect data which is related to those variables. Methods of measuring each variable are identified, developed and standardized to ensure the reliability and validity of the measurements.
- Concerning data analysis, quantitative researchers rely more on deductive reasoning by beginning with certain premises and drawing conclusion from them.
- As for report findings, the quantitative approach reduces data to means, medians, correlations, and other summarizing statistics.

As alluded to above, there is also a qualitative dimension to this study with specific reference to a number of open-ended questions included in the three questionnaires that were developed specifically for the study. Such questions aim to provide a richer, more personal account of specific phenomena that are investigated, and the data gathered in this way is, therefore, often highly personal and opinion-based.

3.4 Sampling

The primary target population for this study includes all first year students registered during the 2012 academic year at the VTC. Within the primary population, two sub-populations could be identified with some overlap between the two. In order to determine the impact of the AGLE 111 module, all students registered for the module represent the population (this includes all students who scored between 0% and 49% for the TALL written at the beginning of 2012). Similarly, in the case of investigating the impact of AGLE 121, the population consists of all students registered for the module in 2012 (in this case, the module is compulsory for all first year students, it therefore includes those students who scored from 50%-100% for the initial TALL, as well as students who did AGLE 111 during the first semester and who were allowed to continue with AGLE 121). In the case of both modules, the researcher aimed at involving as many participants as possible in the research.

A secondary population for the study consisted of all the lecturers who taught first year modules during the 2012 academic year. Again, the researcher attempted to involve as many as possible of these lecturers in the research.

3.5 Methods of data collection

According to Doyle *et al.,* (2004: 422) an important aspect of research in the social sciences is the decision as to how data should be collected. The success of this study will therefore depend on the appropriateness of the methods the researcher employs in the collection and analysis of data.

The first method used to collect data for this study is that of ability testing. The study makes use of a pre-test/post-test design in order to determine statistically whether any significant improvement took place in student scores for the TALL (a comprehensive description of the TALL is provided in Chapter 4 of the study). As mentioned in Chapter 2, the TALL is the assessment instrument used at the beginning of the academic year by the three campuses of North-West University to determine the academic literacy levels of their first year students. For this study, the data of two different versions of the TALL was utilised. The 2012 version of TALL was used as pre- and post-test for determining the impact of the AGLE 111 module. The post-test data of the 2012 version of TALL was then used as pre-test for AGLE 121 and,

because not enough time had elapsed to also use the 2012 version as post-test for AGLE 121, the 2011 TALL was used as post-test.

The second method for data collection used in the study is the survey. According to Bless and Higson-Smith (1995:41), making use of surveys is a prominent method for gathering data in the social sciences. They further explain a survey as a research instrument that provides a researcher with information concerning how people think and act. Welman and Kruger (2001:146) note that researchers may use survey questionnaires to obtain the following type of information from their respondents:

- Biographical particulars (their age, educational qualification, etc.);
- Typical behaviour (which television programme they favour, etc.);
- Opinions, beliefs and convictions (about any topic or issue); and
- Attitudes.

Finding out what students' perceptions were about the different AL modules was considered important perception-based data for this study. Two structured questionnaires were developed by the researcher for this purpose, one for each module. In addition, it was considered important to determine first year lecturer perceptions about AL, data that was also gathered using a structured questionnaire designed for this purpose. These questionnaires are attached as Addendums A, B and C at the end of the study.

In the rest of this section, the research methodology is described in detail for reaching each of the specific objectives set out in Section 3.2.

3.5.1 Objective 1: Review of the literature

A literature survey was conducted on specific aspects of the historical evolution of tertiary institutions in South Africa and how these changes affected students in terms of the language of learning used in tertiary education. The available literature on academic literacy interventions and, more specifically, literature that reports findings on the impact of AL interventions was also surveyed and discussed in Chapter 2 of the study.

3.5.2 Empirical research

a) **Objective 2**: The results of the TALL administered to all first year students at the beginning of the 2012 academic year were compared to the results of the same test administered as a post-test to the students towards the beginning of the second semester. This was done so as to be able to use the same test results as a pre-test for the AGLE 121 module as well. At the end of the second semester, the 2011 version of TALL was used as a post-test for the AGLE 121 module. Therefore, the results of the 2012 TALL were compared to those of the 2011 TALL for the AGLE 121 module. These two comparisons were done with the aim of ascertaining whether there was any significant improvement in the AL abilities tested by the TALL of students who: 1) did not pass the AL test at the beginning of the year and consequently attended the academic literacy intervention (AGLE 111) during the first semester; and 2) the students who scored 40% and higher for AGLE 111 as well as those students who passed the test at the beginning of the year – all these students are generally required to complete the compulsory, advanced AL module (AGLE 121) in the second semester.

   In order to account for the possible influence of other variables (e.g. students developing some AL abilities due to their exposure to other academic subjects), a further analysis of two specific sub-groups of students was conducted. In one sub-group (the experimental group) the results of the post-test at the beginning of the second semester of the students who scored between 40% and 49 % on the test at the beginning of the year (and who all needed to complete the first semester AL course) were compared to the results on the same tests of those in the second sub- group (the control group). This sub-group consisted of students who scored between 50% and 59% for the first test and who were therefore not required to complete AGLE 111 during the first semester.

b) **Objective 3**: The performance of students in their other modules was also analysed with a view of determining whether any correlation exists between the results of those modules and the academic literacy modules taken by the same students.

c) **Objective 4**: Separate questionnaires were distributed to students registered for each academic literacy module (AGLE 111 and AGLE 121) at the end of each semester to determine their perceptions about these modules.

d) **Objective 5**: A questionnaire was also distributed to academic staff members in various departments and schools to ascertain their perceptions about the effectiveness of the academic literacy modules offered to students.

e) **Objective 6**: Recommendations based on the findings of the results in Chapter 4 are provided in Chapter 5 of the study.

3.6 Data analysis

Mouton (2002:108) asserts that in the research process, data analysis involves "'breaking up' data into manageable themes, patterns, trends and relationships". The analysis of the data for this study involved two different kinds of statistical analysis. Firstly, the data that was collected by means of the two versions of TALL (2011 and 2012) was analysed making use of dependent means *t*-tests in order to determine whether there has been any statistically significant change in student performance. Field (2009:325) mentions that this test is used "when the same participants took part in both conditions of the experiment (the test is sometimes referred to as the matched-pairs or paired-samples *t*-test". Results of the *t*-tests were interpreted at the $p<0.05$ (or 95%) confidence level. These *t*-test results were submitted to further analysis to determine levels of practical significance. In this case, Cohen's *d* and the Pearson Product Moment correlation (*r*) was used in order to determine the effect sizes for any statistically significant results. According to Field (2009:785), effect size "is an objective and (usually) standardized measure of the magnitude (or size) of an observed effect." In this study, effect sizes calculated by means of Cohen's *d* were interpreted as:

- $d = 0.2$ indicated a small effect;
- $d = 0.5$ a medium effect; and
- $d = 0.8$ a large effect size.

For the Pearson Product Moment correlation, the widely used interpretation of *r* provided below is also used for the interpretation of effect size data in this study (see Field, 2009:57).

- $r = .10$ (small effect);
- $r = .30$ (medium effect); and
- $r = .50$ (large effect);

The data of the three questionnaires was analysed mainly in terms of frequency counts and averages calculated. Responses to open-ended questions were categorised into themes and examples of these are reported in Chapter 4.

3.7 Ethical considerations

According to Mouton (2002:238), it remains the responsibility of the researcher at all times to conform to a morally acceptable code of conduct as determined by the scientific community whenever undertaking any research project. To this end, the ethical implications of this study have been considered carefully. Both versions of TALL contain a form that is bound into the test where students' permission is asked for using their results in research. Students therefore have to complete this form before they start writing the test. All three questionnaires contained a cover letter indicating the voluntary nature of participation on the part of all prospective participants. In addition, students and staff were informed of the purpose of the questionnaires and how the data would be used. They also had to sign a form included at the beginning of the questionnaire giving the researcher permission to make use the data (see Addendums A, B and C).

Formal ethical clearance for the research has also been obtained institutionally: ethical clearance project number 0003107S1 (Prof. S. Coetzee-Van Rooy is the project leader in this regard).

3.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, the details of the research plan and how it was executed were outlined. The techniques and methods chosen and utilised by the researcher to address the research objectives were also discussed in detail. The chapter specified the target population of the study, the sampling procedure, methods of data collection and how the data was analysed. The chapter concluded by giving an indication of the ethical considerations taken into account by the researcher in carrying out this study.

The following chapter discusses the results that emerged from the analysis of the data collected in this study.

CHAPTER 4

PRESENTATION OF` RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

As stated in Chapter 1, this study sought to evaluate the impact of the academic literacy intervention offered by the North-West University's Vaal Triangle Campus. Given the modalities of the study provided in Chapter 3, this chapter seeks to document the data collected for purposes of this study as well as to give an analysis of the said data.

The data referred to above was gathered through a series of tests, questionnaires, and final results in other mainstream modules. Although this study aims to present a more objective assessment of the academic literacy modules offered by the Vaal Triangle Campus of North-West University (using empirical test data), it is also important that one gathers opinion-based data that would provide information on the 'lived experiences' of students. As Conrad and Serlin (2006:361) note, participants in any given research are often the "best judges of their own experiences". This would involve that respondents provide information on how they experienced these modules, data that would, therefore, focus on their perceptions of the academic literacy modules.

The following section first provides a description of the assessment instrument that was used for gathering the test data for the study. This is followed by a presentation and discussion of the test data.

4.2 Research findings

As stated in Chapter 3, the test data used in this study was collected through the administration of a series of TALL assessments (referred to in the discussion of the results as TALL 1, 2 and 3). TALL 1 (the 2012 version) was utilized as pre-test and TALL 2 (the 2012 version) as post-test for evaluating the impact of the AGLE 111 module. For the assessment of the impact of AGLE 121, TALL 2 (the 2012 version) was used as pre-test and TALL 3 (the 2011 version) as a post-test.

4.2.1 The Test of Academic Literacy Levels (TALL)

The TALL is an academic literacy test administered to all admitted first year students admitted to the Vaal Triangle Campus of the North-West University to determine their levels of academic literacy in English. According to Butler (2007:150), this test is "typically a low to medium stakes test since it is not used for admission purposes but identifies students' level of risk with regard to their functional AL". The TALL is a widely used test in South Africa, mostly for the same purpose as articulated above. It has, for instance, been used by three other South African universities, namely, the Universities of Pretoria, Stellenbosch and Free State for a number of years.

4.2.1.1 Description of the TALL

Initial versions of the TALL were composed of 7 sections designed along key academic literacy abilities. Based on extensive piloting of test items, students had a limit of 55 minutes to complete the tasks contained in the test. Butler (2007:152-154) outlines these sections as follows:

> Section 1 is a scrambled text in which sentences in a paragraph have been scrambled, and students have to rearrange the sentences so that the paragraph forms a cohesive whole. It therefore not only tests students' ability in recognizing text relations, drawing on their interpretative abilities regarding the context, but also their ability to recognize lexical clues contained in the sentences.
>
> Put differently, it assesses students' command of various grammatical features of the texts.
>
> In Section 2, students' knowledge of general academic vocabulary is assessed. The context created for this section is specifically that of the tertiary academic environment, and the words tested are a selection of items from the different levels of the Coxhead academic word list (Coxhead, 2000).
>
> Section 3 deals with visual and graphic literacy. Students are therefore asked to interpret graphic information augmented by a short text discussion. This section mainly involves simple numeric computations and making inferences based on such calculations.
>
> The fourth section emphasizes the importance of students being able to recognize different written text types. Students are requested to match two groups of sentences with regard to similarity in text types.

Section 5 includes a longer text that students have to read and subsequently answer comprehension type questions on the content of the text. Questions focus on students' ability to classify and compare information, make inferences, recognise metaphorical language, recognise text relations and distinguish between essential and non-essential information.

Section 6 of the test assesses a number of academic literacy abilities. This question on text editing firstly provides students with a text they have to read where specific words have been omitted. Students then have to choose between four options regarding where these words have been left out in the sentences. The second part of the question requires that students, having been provided with the specific place where a word has been left out, choose between four options as to what is the correct word.

The third part combines the formats of the first two parts in the sense that students are required to integrate the two tasks and do both simultaneously. They therefore have to find both the position where a word has been left out as well as the most suitable word that would fit that position. This section of the test assesses students' functional knowledge of sentence construction, word order, vocabulary, punctuation and at times communicative function (cf. Van Dyk and Weideman, 2004b), with the main focus on the former, i.e. on grammatical or structural features of the language.

The last section (Section7) of the test provides students with the opportunity to produce a short written text. This section is scaffolded in the sense that it provides phrasal prompts as to how students should structure their texts (usually an argument). It typically provides a short starting phrase that serves to introduce different sections of the argument.

It is important to note that a number of changes have been made to the test from the time that Butler (2007) described the different sections referred to above (these changes are applicable to both the 2011 and 2012 versions of the test used in this study). Notably, the sequence of sections has been altered. For the 2011 and 2012 versions of the TALL, Section 2 of the test focuses on 'Interpreting graphs and visual information' (previously Section 3) and Section 3 on 'Understanding texts' (previously Section 5). Section 3 is followed by 'Knowledge of academic vocabulary' (Section 4). Section 5 deals with 'Text types' and Section 6 still focuses on 'Grammar and text relations'. Although the sequence of sections may have changed, Butler's descriptions above are still valid for these sections. It is further important that, mostly for practical purposes of administering and scoring the test, Section 7 (the writing section) was left out of later versions of the test (such as the 2011 and 2012 versions).

4.2.1.2 The reliability of the TALL

Weideman (2006:77) asserts that "the reliability of a test is usually expressed in terms of statistical measures. In the case of the crucially important internal reliability of a test, that is, its consistency across all the items in the test, this statistical measure is done in terms of an index (from 0-1) termed alpha".

The TALL has consistently yielded high alphas or reliability measures (Weideman, 2006: 77). A summary of its measures (calculated by Iteman analyses) across three versions of the test is provided in Table 4.1 below (adapted from Weideman, 2006:77).

Table 4.1 The TALL – Reliability measures

Date and version of the test	**Alpha**
TALL 2004 (University of Pretoria)	0.95
TALL 2005 (North-West University)	0.94
TALL2005 (University of Stellenbosch)	0.89
TALL 2005 (University of Pretoria)	0.93
TALL 2006 (Pilot 1)	0.92
Average	**0.92**

The high reliability measure for the 2006 version of the TALL has been confirmed in Weideman and Van der Slik (2008). The reliability of the TALL is therefore beyond reproach as, according to Butler (2007:151), it has consistently measured at "an average reliability (measured by Cronbach's Alpha) of above 0.9 across the three administrations mentioned above (and across three different versions of the test based on the same construct) for the period 2004-2006", as shown in Table 4.1 above.

In addition, all versions of the TALL are based on a theoretically defensible construct (see Van Dyk & Weideman, 2004). According to Rambiritch (2013), this construct was developed in 2004 and draws on the work of, amongst others, Blanton (1994), Bachman and Palmer (1996) and Yeld (2000).

The 'blueprint' of this construct outlines what students should be able to accomplish functionally with regard to their academic literacy ability. Although Weideman's (2007:xi) functional abilities that define AL have already been provided in Section 2.7.1, it was considered essential to include them again in a discussion of the TALL since they form such an important part of how the test was designed. In terms of this definition, students are academically literate in a language if they can:

- understand a range of academic vocabulary in context;
- interpret the use of metaphor and idiom in academic usage, and perceive connotation, word play and ambiguity;
- understand relations between different parts of a text, via introductions to conclusions, and know how to use language that serves to make the different parts of a text hang together;
- interpret different kinds of text type (genre), and have a sensitivity for the meaning they convey, as well as the audience they are aimed at;
- interpret, use and produce information presented in graphic or visual format;
- distinguish between essential and non-essential information, fact and opinion, propositions and arguments, cause and effect, and classify, categorise and handle data that make comparisons;
- see sequence and order, and do simple numerical estimations and computations that are relevant to academic information, that allow comparisons to be made, and can be applied for the purposes of an argument;
- know what counts as evidence for an argument, extrapolate from information by making inferences, and apply the information or its implications to other cases than the one at hand;
- understand the communicative function of various ways of expression in academic language (such as defining, providing examples, arguing); and
- make meaning (e.g. of an academic text) beyond the level of the sentence.

4.2.1.3 The administration of the TALL

All the students who were admitted as first year students in the beginning of the 2012 academic year were given the 2012 test version (Test 1) to write. All those who were identified as being "at risk" were automatically registered for the AGLE 111 module. This module, as stated in both chapters one and three, is an academic literacy module designed for those students identified through the TALL as being "at risk". It is offered during the first

semester at the VTC. All those who were identified through the test as having little or no risk were exempted from doing AGLE 111. Both groups of students mentioned here were registered for the advanced, compulsory AL module (AGLE 121) in the second semester of 2012. For the purposes of this study, the two versions of the TALL were utilised in the following way:

a) At the beginning of the second semester (during July), the same test that was used at the beginning of the year (the 2012 version administered at the end of January – Test 1) was administered again to all AGLE 121 students (which included all students who gained admission to AGLE 121 – i.e. those who had passed AGLE 111, as well as all those who were exempted from doing AGLE 111 who had automatic admission to AGLE 121). This was done right at the beginning of the second semester, before formal lectures in the AGLE 121 module started (so that no students could have benefited from any formal teaching in the AGLE 121 module). In this case, a long enough period of time has elapsed to counter possible effects of student recall. The purpose of this pre-test/post-test design was to ascertain whether there was any improvement in TALL scores since the first test was taken in the beginning of the year. It therefore focused specifically on the possible effects of the AGLE 111 module.

b) Towards the end of the 2012 academic year (during October), the 2011 version of TALL (Test 3) was administered to all the AGLE 121 students as a post-test to ascertain possible improvement in AL levels, since the 2012 TALL was administered at the beginning of the second semester (Test 2). Due to the length of the period of time between the July test (the pre-test [Test 2] in this case) and the post-test written in October (Test 3) not being more than three months and to account, therefore, for any possible student recall, the 2011 TALL (Test 3) was used in this regard.

c) Once all these data were collected, whole-group comparisons were effected statistically. However, in order to account for other variables apart from the two AL modules that may have had an influence on possible student improvement, specific sub-groups' results were also isolated and compared to ascertain levels of improvement, if any.

The sub-section below discusses the results of the three administrations of the TALL mentioned above. The discussion begins by tabling the results, followed by a discussion of the statistical significance and practical significance (effect sizes) of these results for each of the two AL modules. This discussion is then followed by a comparison of the marks achieved by students for the AGLE 111 and AGLE 121 modules (the TALL is not used for assessment in these modules, separate formative and summative assessment opportunities [such as a final examination] are used to assess the modules) with the marks students achieved for the other mainstream modules for which they were registered during the 2012 academic year. The discussion will then proceed with the tabling and discussion of the data of the three questionnaires (marked A, B and C) used in the study.

4.2.1.4 Tabling and discussion of TALL results

As mentioned above, this sub-section tables and discusses the results of the three administrations of the TALL obtained as part of the current study. A total of 1394 students sat for the initial TALL a week before the start of formal lectures in the 2012 academic year. A total of 1149 students (82%) in this group 'failed' the test while only 245 (18%) 'passed'. For 2012, more than 80% of the first year students were, therefore, considered to be 'at risk' with regard to their AL levels. The TALL results for the 2011 academic year were not much better. Out of a total of 1324 students who wrote the test in 2011, only 436 students (36%) 'passed', while 846 students (64%) were considered to be 'at risk'.

It is worth noting that the profile of the results for 2011 and 2012 given above is largely similar to those in the years preceding them. A study conducted on the *Toets van Akademiese Geletterheidsvlakke* (TAG) and the TALL on both the Potchefstroom and the Vaal Triangle Campus of NWU in 2009 revealed that the high failure rate is historic. According to Verhoef (2010:1), less than 50% of the students passed the TALL at the Vaal Triangle Campus between 2007 and 2010 – see Table 4.2 below).

Table 4.2 TALL results at the Vaal Triangle Campus from 2007-2010 (Adapted from Verhoef, 2010:1)

TALL 2007		TALL 2008		TALL 2009		TALL 2010	
N	Passed (%)	N	Passed (%)	N	Passed (%)	N	Passed (%)
445	36.4	499	37.8	589	41.8	989	45.7

The TALL scores reflected in Table 4.1 above show the gravity of the challenge faced by the VTC in terms of the provision of academic literacy support to its students. It is clear from the above discussion that the majority of the students who get admitted at the VTC are in dire need of such support. As Lacroix (2012:49) observes, these students do experience difficulties in dealing effectively with the course content as they lack the necessary academic literacy abilities required at the post-secondary level of study.

The outcome of the TALL administered at the beginning of the 2012 academic year is presented in Figure 4.1 below.

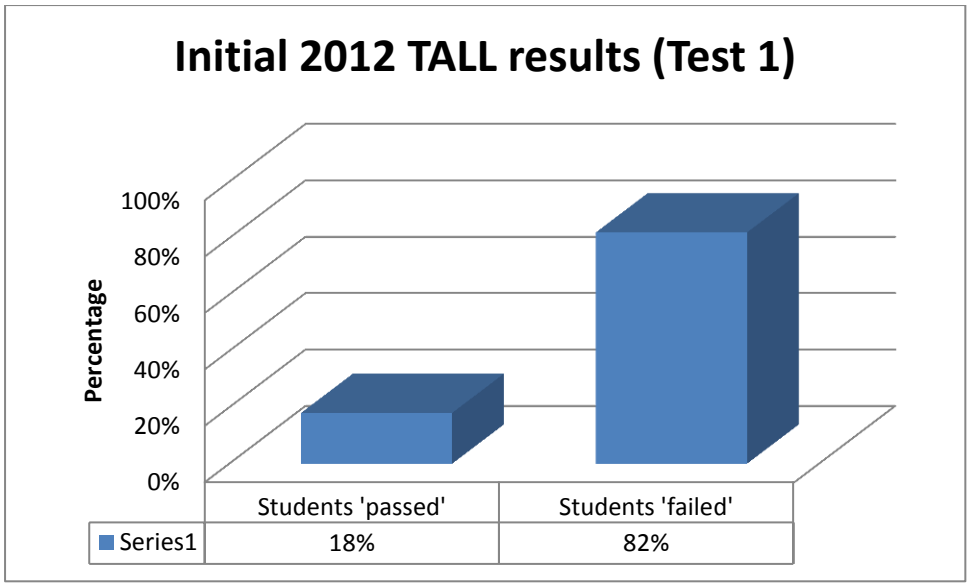

Figure 4.1 Initial TALL results (beginning of 2012)

As mentioned above, the 82% reflected in Figure 4.1 are those students who are identified as being 'at risk' and, as such, in need of some form of AL intervention (the cut-off point for the TALL at the VTC has been set at 50%). These are, therefore, the students who get automatically enrolled into the AGLE 111 module which is offered during the first semester of every academic year.

4.2.1.4.1 Assessing the impact of AGLE 111

As referred to earlier, the same TALL given to the group of first year students at the beginning of the 2012 academic year (Test 1) was again administered to them at the beginning of the second semester (Test 2). This was done to ascertain whether their exposure to the AGLE 111 intervention had had any impact on their AL levels. The results of Test 2 were then compared to those of Test 1. Table 4.3 below presents the *t*-test results of this comparison.

Table 4.3 T-test results for Test 1 and Test 2 (AGLE 111)

	T-test for Dependent Samples Marked differences are significant at p < .05000							
Variable	**Mean**	**Std.Dv.**	**N**	**Diff.**	**Std.Dv. Diff.**	**t**	**df**	**p**
Test 2	38.44656	21.91897						
Test 1	29.69400	9.84804	683	8.75256	20.98691	10.89926	682	0.000000

For this analysis, only the results of those students who wrote both Test 1 and Test 2 were taken into account (n=683). Table 4.3 above shows that the mean score for Test 2 (m=38. 44656) is higher than the mean score of Test 1 (m=29.69400) – also see Figure 4.2. Although students did not improve so much on average that they surpassed the cut-off point of 50% set for the test, the difference between the means shows that student scores improved by 8.7% between the two tests. Interpreted at a significance level of $p<0.05$, this improvement is statistically significant ($t=10.89926$, $p<0.000000$). With regard to the practical significance (effect size) of this result, Cohen's *d* was calculated at $d=0.89$ [$d>0.8$]. This indicates a large practical significance for this improvement.

It is important to keep in mind that this group of students was identified as being 'at risk' regarding their AL levels at the beginning of the year following their performance in Test 1. At a superficial level, one could be tempted to assign the statistically and practically significant improvement of student performance to the impact of their exposure to the AGLE

111 intervention (which is based on the same 'blueprint' as that of the TALL). However, it is important to note at this point that students' exposure to the tertiary academic environment as a whole may also have contributed to such improvement. The problem faced by the researcher in this regard is that it is notoriously difficult to create experimental and control groups for purposes of comparison when one deals with these kinds of interventions. The issue here is primarily an ethical one. It would, therefore, be unethical to withhold the benefits of attending an AL intervention from students who need such support in order to create a control group that is not exposed to the intervention. Keeping in mind the cautionary note about the influence of other variables above, as well as the fact that what is taught in AGLE 111 and what is tested by the TALL focus on the same abilities, one may claim some benefit that is derived by students in attending the AGLE 111 module.

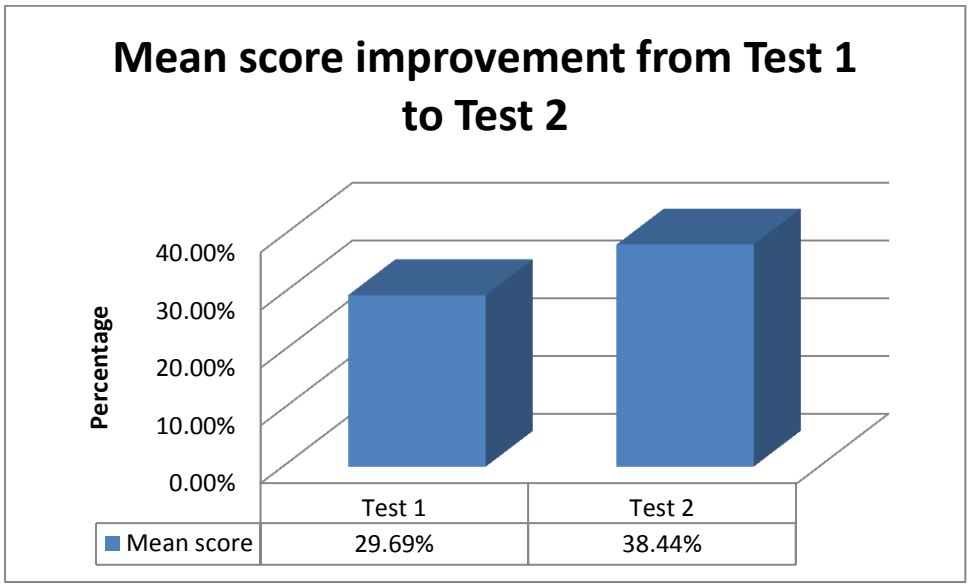

Figure 4.2 Improvement in mean scores: Test 1 to Test 2

In an effort to discount the influence from other variables, for example, students being exposed to the development of AL abilities in their other academic modules, the researcher decided to do a further analysis of two specific sub-groups of the students who wrote both Test 1 and Test 2. These sub-groups were identified as follows:

a) The **experimental** group (those who scored between 40% and 49% in Test 1): As a result of their scores, students falling in this sub-group attended the AGLE 111 module during the first semester, and

b) The **control** group (students who scored between 50% and 59% in Test 1): students in this sub-group were exempted from attending the AGLE 111 module during the first semester, and therefore, were not exposed to the AL intervention that could have caused an improvement in their performance, if any. It is further important to mention that Test 2 was administered during the first week of the second semester of the academic year under review. Students had not been offered any AL lectures that were presented as part of the AGLE 121 module during semester 2.

A comparison of the performance of these two sub-groups on Test 1 and Test 2 is presented in Table 4.4 and Table 4.5 and discussed below.

Table 4.4 T-test results for the **experimental group** (40%-49%)

	Experimental group T-test for Dependent Samples Marked differences are significant at p < .05000							
Variable	**Mean**	**Std.Dv.**	**N**	**Diff.**	**Std.Dv. Diff.**	**t**	**df**	**p**
Test 1	43.83846	2.85245						
Test 2	51.16923	41.50915	130	-7.33077	41.76371	-2.00135	129	0.047453

Again, only the results of those students who wrote both Test 1 and Test 2 were taken into account for the experimental sub-group (n=130). Table 4.4 above shows that the mean score for Test 2 (m=51.16923) is higher than that of Test 1 (m=43.83846) for the experimental group. This indicates that the students' scores between the two tests have improved by 7.3%. At a significance level of $p<0.05$, the experimental group also shows a statistically significant improvement ($t=2.00135$, $p<0.0475453$) in test scores. However, although Cohen's *d* is still reported at a level that indicates practical significance ($d>0.2$), meaning that the result is not trivial in this regard, it only amounts to a small practical effect (D=2.57).

Similar to the discussion of the results for the larger group above, the preliminary conclusion for the experimental group is that, in addition to the general exposure to the tertiary academic environment, students' exposure to the AGLE 111 intervention module had a positive influence on the students' performance in Test 2. However, this preliminary conclusion should be interpreted in comparison with the results of the control group. The results of the latter are outlined in Table 4.5 below.

Table 4.5 T-test results for the **control** group (50%-59%)

	Control group T-test for Dependent Samples Marked differences are significant at p < .05000							
Variable	**Mean**	**Std.Dv.**	**N**	**Diff.**	**Std.Dv. Diff.**	**T**	**df**	**p**
Test 1	53.61972	2.67991						
Test 2	51.95775	16.30200	71	1.66197	16.08899	0.87041	70	0.387051

Table 4.5 above shows that, for the control group (those students who did not do AGLE 111), the mean score for Test 2 (m=51.95775) is lower than that of Test1 (m=53.61972). This indicates a decrease of 1.6% between Test 1 and Test 2. Although interesting, this is not a statistically significant decrease (t=0.87041, p<0.387051) at the confidence level of p<0.05. It would, however, be fair to say that the students in the control group did not show any improvement in their TALL results from Test 1 to Test 2.

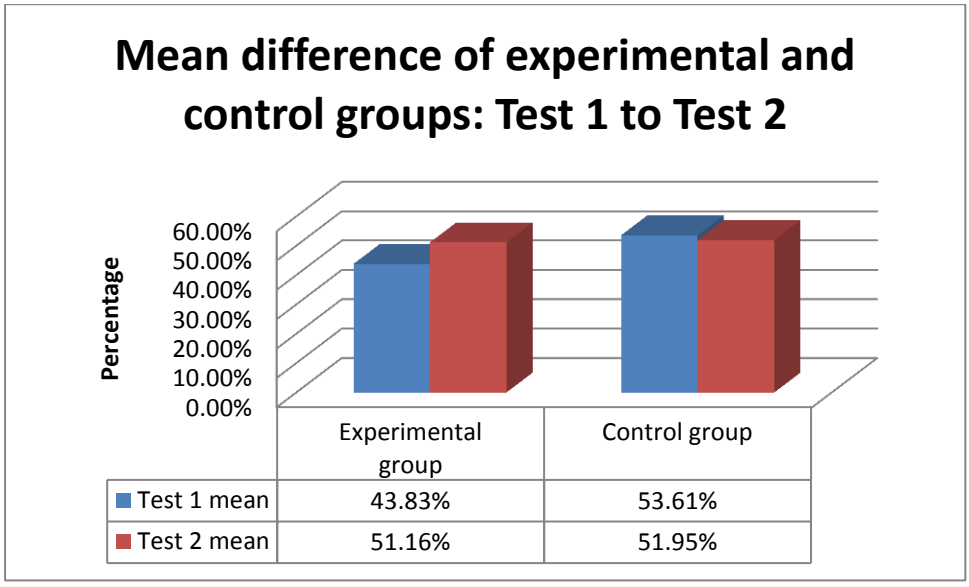

Figure 4.3 Difference in mean scores of experimental and control groups: Test 1 to Test 2

Therefore, when the results of the control group are compared to that of the experimental group above, the students who were exposed to the AGLE 111 intervention showed a statistically significant increase in results (with a mean for Test 2 that is higher than the initial cut-off point of 50%), while, for all practical reasons, the control group showed no improvement (also see Figure 4.3). One should, therefore, be able to come to a cautious

conclusion (as a result of the small effect size) that students seem to derive positive benefit from the AGLE 111 module specifically.

4.2.1.4.2 Assessing the impact of AGLE 121

As noted previously, AGLE 121 is a compulsory module for all first-year students at the VTC. Therefore, the results of all students who wrote both Test 2 (at the beginning of the second semester) and Test 3 (in October 2012) were compared to determine the possible effect of the AGLE 121 module on students' AL levels. It must be noted that in this case, the researcher did not have the luxury of creating the same sub-groups (as experimental and control groups) as for AGLE 111, since all first year students had to complete the AGLE 121 module. The comparison of the results for Test 2 and Test 3 are presented in Table 4.6 below.

Table 4.6 T-test results for Test 2 and Test 3 (AGLE 121)

	T-test for Dependent Samples Marked differences are significant at p < .05000							
Variable	**Mean**	**Std.Dv.**	**N**	**Diff.**	**Std.Dv. Diff.**	**t**	**df**	**p**
Test 3	45.66865	16.01085						
Test 2	39.71223	17.01157	834	5.956417	17.21320	9.993248	833	0.000000

This analysis again only took into account the scores of the students who wrote both Test 2 and Test 3. Table 4.6 above shows that the mean score for Test 3 (m=45.66865) is higher than the score of Test 2 (m=39.71223). This indicates an increase in mean of 5.9% between the two tests (see Figure 4.4). Again measured at a confidence level of $p<0.05$, this increase is statistically significant ($t=9.993248$, $p<0.000000$). However, although this improvement is statistically significant, the calculation of Cohen's *d* shows a practical significance ($d=0.35$) that falls between a small and medium effect [$0.2<D<0.5$] for this improvement.

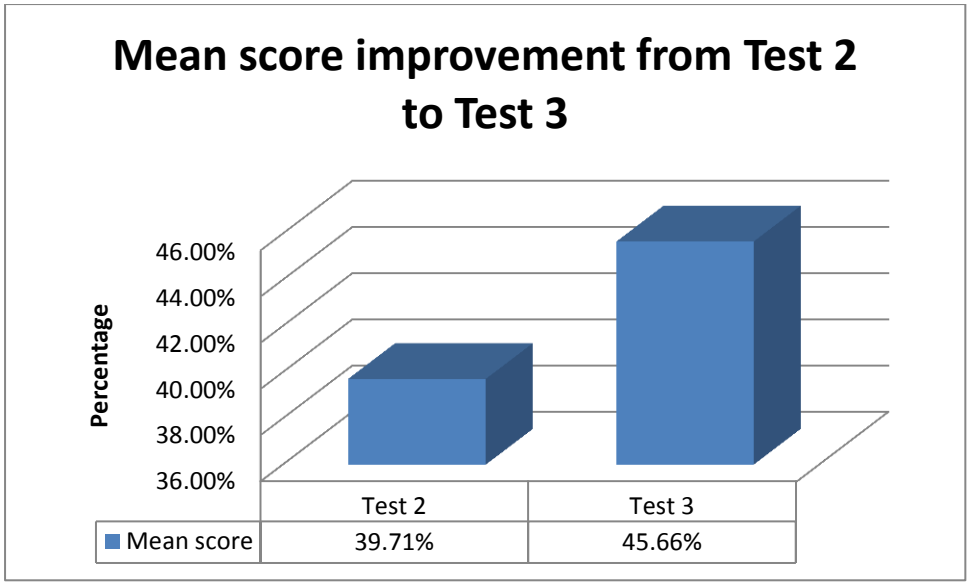

Figure 4.4 Improvement in mean scores: Test 2 to Test 3

Similar to interpretations of the improvement students showed between Test 1 and Test 2, only cautious conclusions are possible for the positive effect of the AGLE 121 module. Although there was a statistically significant improvement in average student scores from Test 2 to Test 3, other variables may again have played a role in this improvement. However, keeping in mind the alignment between the focus of the module content and the abilities tested by the TALL, one cannot disregard the influence of the module on the improvement (as mentioned above, it was not possible to create sub-groups for further analysis for this module since it is compulsory for all first year students).

The sub-section below discusses students' average performance in AGLE 111 and AGLE 121 compared to the average these students achieved in the other modules they were registered for during the academic year under review.

4.2.1.4.3 Correlation between the AGLE 111 and AGLE 121 marks and the marks for students' other modules

A recent study by Van Rooy and Coetzee-Van Rooy (2014) investigated the relationship between a number of language ability measures and how strong these predicted academic success at the VTC. The main findings of this study indicate that average Grade 12 results below 65% cannot be used with confidence to predict academic success at university. In addition, measures such as Grade 12 language marks and academic literacy tests (such as the

NBTs and TALL) are also not good predictors of academic success. However, the most important finding of this research for the context of the current study is that the two AL modules, AGLE 111 and AGLE 121, are good predictors of academic success at the VTC. Because the Van Rooy and Coetzee-Van Rooy study focused on 2010 averages for AGLE 111 and AGLE 121 (correlated with other module averages in the first [2010], second [2011] and third year [2012] for these students), it was decided to repeat the part of their analysis that focused on the relationship between the AGLE 111 and AGLE 121 averages and the averages of students' other modules for 2012 (see Table 4.7 below).

Table 4.7 Average marks for AGLE 111 and AGLE 121 compared to average marks in other modules (2012)

	Correlations (VTC 2012 All modules) Marked correlations are significant at p < .00100						
Var. X & Var. Y	**Mean**	**Std.Dv.**	**r**	**r^2**	**t**	**p**	**N**
AGLE111	49.01984	12.71832					
Average (other modules)	54.59504	11.50840	0.538586	0.290074	23.99406	0.000	1411
AGLE121	54.88122	14.78835					
Average (other modules)	57.29463	10.47401	0.609368	0.371329	31.35993	0.000	1667

Similar to the findings of Van Rooy and Coetzee-Van Rooy (2014), there is a highly significant correlation (at a confidence level of $p<0.001$) between the averages for both AGLE 111 and AGLE 121 and the averages of other modules for which students were registered during 2012. The analysis further shows that for both modules, large effect sizes were achieved ($r > 0.5$ for the Pearson product moment correlation). The significant correlation between the marks of the two AL modules and students' other modules essentially means that if a student performed better in the AL modules, the student also performed better in his/her other modules and *vice versa*. In this instance, it is important to note that Van Rooy and Coetzee-Van Rooy (2014) do not find the TALL to be a good predictor of academic success in the first, second and third year of studies. Based on the fact that a large majority of students at the VTC 'failed' the TALL over a number of years (see Section 4.2.1.4) a finding that the TALL does predict well would have meant that the AL intervention had a minimal effect on student achievement and could just as well be done away with.

The next sub-section presents and discusses the data collected through the administration of a number of survey instruments developed specifically for the purposes of this study. These

instruments aimed at gathering opinion-based data from students and staff with regard to how they perceived the AL intervention at the VTC.

4.2.2 Questionnaire data

This sub-section discusses findings drawn from three questionnaires (see Addendums A, B and C) issued by the researcher to three groups of participants, namely, students who were registered for the AGLE 111 module, students who were registered for the AGLE 121 module as well as the academic members of staff who were teaching first year students during the 2012 academic year. The two questionnaires issued to students were administered near the end of each AL module in order to ensure that students would have had the experience of attending the module in order to provide reliable answers to questions about the modules. The questionnaire to academic members of staff was first issued near the end of the 2012 academic year and again in February 2013.

For ease of reading and reference, the questionnaires are marked ‘Questionnaire A’, ‘Questionnaire B’ and ‘Questionnaire C’ respectively and will be tabled and discussed as such in this sub-section.

With the assistance of colleagues in the Subject Group: Academic Literacy at the VTC, a total of 394 questionnaires (Questionnaire A) were distributed and collected from the AGLE 111 students towards the end of the first semester. Towards the end of the second semester, a total of 1162 questionnaires (Questionnaire B) were also distributed and collected from the AGLE 121 students. This was also done with the help of colleagues in the same subject group. The last of the three questionnaires mentioned above was issued to all academics who were lecturing first year modules at the VTC during the 2012 academic year (Questionnaire C). The researcher distributed these questionnaires himself to all faculties and departments after having identified relevant academics in this regard. A total of 13 of the 23 questionnaires that were distributed to the targeted respondents in December 2012 and February 2013, were completed and returned.

In order to enhance clarity, findings from the three questionnaires mentioned above are tabled and discussed separately below. The researcher does, however, discuss common features/themes from all these questionnaires where applicable.

4.2.2.1 Discussion of results: Questionnaire A

Questionnaire A was designed to ascertain students' perceptions of key aspects relating to the academic literacy module (AGLE 111) offered during the first semester of the academic year. As stated earlier, this module is offered to all first year students identified through the TALL results at the beginning of the year as being 'at risk' following their failure to achieve an acceptable score (50%) in the said test. The questionnaire was distributed to students to complete at the end of the semester after having experienced the AGLE 111 module. The tabling and discussion of the data collected with this questionnaire firstly focuses on participants' biographical details (including issues such as age, gender, qualifications for which they are registered, etc.). Secondly, issues related to students' language background are addressed. Finally, students' perceptions about various aspects concerning the AGLE 111 module are reported. Included in this discussion are aspects such as respondents' perceptions of the TALL, whether they found the module helpful for their studies and whether they believed that the module could be improved in any way.

4.2.2.1.1 Biographical details

The first section in the questionnaire focuses on respondents' biographical details. The first question therefore focused on the gender and age of respondents.

Table 4.3 below indicates that the majority of the respondents in this study are female students. Female students therefore constitute 63% of the respondents while the male respondents only constitute 37%. The average age of the respondents is 20 years. According to the Department of Higher Education and Training (2013:34), there are more female students (59%) in the higher education sector as compared to their male counterparts (41%) and the average age of these students is 21. This therefore means that the findings of this study reflect the general enrolment trends in higher education in general as well as those of the Vaal Triangle Campus of the North-West University, both in terms of age and gender of registered students. This is confirmed by the NWU Annual Report (NWU, 2012:34-35) which indicates that during the year under review, the University had 67% registered female students as compared to their male counterparts who accounted for only 33%. The report further reveals that at the VTC, the University enrolled 59.2% female students and only 40.8% male students. What is interesting about the age statistic is that one would expect the average age for first year students to be nearer to 19. However, the TALL data for 2012 (that

includes a section on students' date of birth) indicates that a substantial number of students who register as first years at the VTC are older students (approximately 400 students started with first year studies later in life with ages ranging from 21 to 45). This obviously influenced the average of the age variable. One may to some extent also expect such students to be more 'mature' and responsible with regard to their studies.

Table 4.8 Age and gender of respondents

Average age	Gender	
	Male	Female
20 years	36.6%	63.4%

The next question in the questionnaire determined for which qualifications students were registered. Figure 4.5 below shows that BA Communication Studies, BCom Accounting, BEd and BA Development, Governance and Political Sciences are the most popular qualifications.

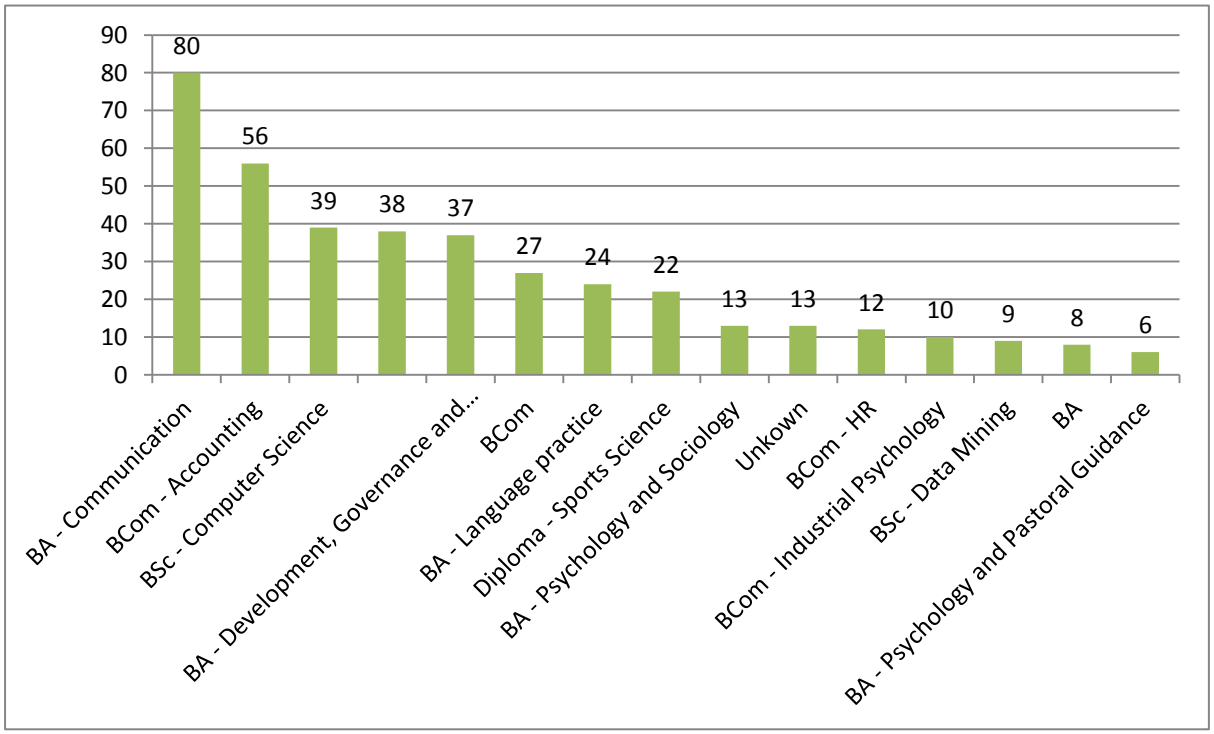

Figure 4.5 Qualifications for which respondents are registered (n=394)

This distribution also illustrates the diversity of the fields of study being pursued by the respondents. It must be mentioned at this point that this diversity of disciplines, as will be shown later in the discussion, has not been taken into account in the conceptualisation or delivery of the AGLE 111 module (it is, therefore, generic in nature) and, as a result, some respondents feel that the module is not relevant to their needs. This point will be elaborated upon in greater detail later in this chapter.

Keeping in mind the generally low scores students achieved on the TALL, it was important to determine whether there existed any meaningful pattern in the types of secondary schools these students attended. In order to achieve the classification and distribution shown in Figure 4.6 below, the researcher compared the school names and types provided by the respondents with the Grade 12 final results list for the 2011 secondary school academic year released at the end of that year (Department of Education, 2011). Figure 4.6 below shows that the majority (63%) of the 'at risk' students (those registered for AGLE 111) who were registered at the VTC during the 2012 academic year attended schools that are generally perceived to be 'better performing' (Department of Education, 2011:6-302), as 51% attended former 'Model C' schools and 12%, private schools.

It is also noticeable that 25% of these students come from township schools which are generally described as dysfunctional and poorly resourced (Masitsa, 2010:92). As mentioned earlier, the Grade 12 results list for the 2011 academic year show that both private and former Model C schools are the better performing schools in South Africa compared to township and farm schools (Department of Education, 2011:6-302). From the above it is clear that the majority of students who register at the VTC come from the so-called better performing schools in the country. Although one would have expected students who have attended better performing schools to be adequately prepared for tertiary education, this is clearly not the case with regard to their academic literacy levels if one considers the poor results of the TALL written at the beginning of the 2012 academic year at the VTC. It would also be fair to say that even if universities could focus more of their recruitment efforts on the schools that perform better, they will not necessarily enrol students without some form of risk concerning their AL levels, and that the need for AL interventions would most likely remain.

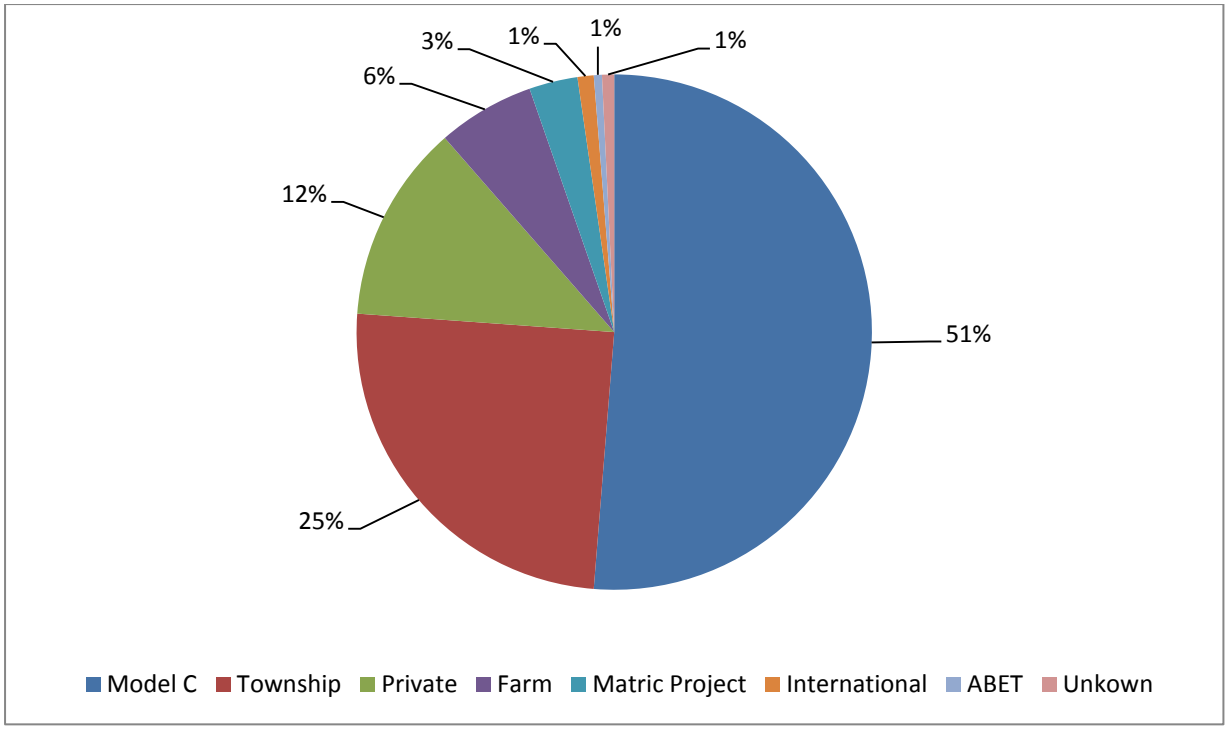

Figure 4.6 Type of schools attended by respondents

4.2.2.1.2 Language background

The next section discusses important issues regarding students' language background. Table 4.9 below presents information on respondents' home language use as well as the language of learning respondents used during primary and secondary school.

From the data in this table it is clear that a large majority of respondents in this group are additional language users of English. Sesotho is listed as a majority home language (40.4%) by the respondents, followed by isiZulu (21.3%), isiXhosa (9.9%), and other indigenous African languages. Because this study focuses on the English academic literacy modules, the very small percentage of respondents who listed Afrikaans (1.5%) as their home language is not surprising. However, the data clearly highlights the fact that although only 1.5% of the respondents use English as a home language, 98% of the respondents had to use English as a language of schooling at secondary school. Coetzee-Van Rooy (2011:157) reports a similar distribution of home language use in her study on the discrepancy between the perceptions of English proficiency and scores on an English proficiency test.

Table 4.9 Respondents' home language and language of schooling (n=394)

Home language		**Schooling language**	
Language	**Percentage users**	**Primary school**	**Secondary school**
		Percentage	**Percentage**
Afrikaans	1.5%	8.2%	2%
English	0.5%	57.9%	98%
isiXhosa	9.9%	8.0%	0%
isiZulu	21.3%	7.4%	0%
Sesotho	40.4%	14.3%	0%
Setswana	3%	1.5%	0%
siSwati	3%	0.3%	0%
Xitsonga	2.3%	0.3%	0%
Tshivenda	3%	0.3%	0%
English and other*	0.3%	0.1%	0%
Other	14.8	1.7%	0%

* This indicates the percentage of those respondents who indicated that they use English and another language as both their home language and the language of learning at school

As mentioned before, the picture regarding respondents' use of home language changes drastically when it is compared to their language of schooling. During the primary and secondary school phases English is listed as the dominant language of learning for the majority of respondents. At primary school level English dominates with 57.9%, followed by Afrikaans and other indigenous African languages; while at secondary school level the respondents' schooling took place almost exclusively in English (98% of respondents indicated English as their language of learning at secondary school). This finding is

interesting in so far as mother tongue education is concerned, particularly at the primary level of schooling. It is interesting to note that in the case of every African home language, only a minority of respondents indicated that they received their schooling in their home languages. This, according to many scholars, is an important requirement for the acquisition and mastery of English proficiency. According to Mahlasela (2012:30), the mastery of the home language has 'cognitive benefits' for the learning and acquisition of a second language. This view is supported by Coetzee-Van Rooy and Verhoef (2000:167) who argue that competence in the first language (home language) could influence academic success in the second language in instances where the latter is used as a language of teaching and learning.

The finding of the current study in this regard also confirms that the majority of students at this campus, as is the case nationally in the country, are additional language users of English, and yet English is the dominant language of learning and teaching in the country. This is where many of the learning problems of these students originate, as discussed extensively in Chapter two of this study.

The next question in the questionnaire sought to determine respondents' perceptions about the number of languages they used, as well as their proficiency in using these languages classified in terms of the abilities of speaking, listening, reading and writing (see Table 4.10 below). Respondents therefore had to indicate first which South African languages they used. Thereafter they had to indicate their proficiency regarding the four abilities mentioned above for each of the languages they used.

Table 4.10 reflects that respondents generally perceive themselves as being multilingual. For all the languages concerned, the majority of respondents perceived their proficiency in the four language abilities as being 'average' to 'excellent'. The most important finding in this part of the data is that, except for the speaking of English, over 60% of the respondents perceive their English ability in the remaining three skills as 'excellent'. A negligible percentage of respondents indicated that they experienced difficulty with regard to their use of the four language skills in English. It would therefore be fair to say that the large majority of respondents perceive themselves to be proficient in English, a finding that is similar to that of Coetzee-Van Rooy (2011). It is also interesting that, following Cummins, one would expect respondents to rate their ability in the speaking of English higher than they did. This could probably be explained to some extent by Coetzee-Van Rooy's (2011:21) finding that for participants in her study, English functions as the language of writing and reading and the

home language in the domain of the family. English in this case is therefore the language in which students read and write **best**. The most important issue here is, however, the strong dissonance between respondents' positive perceptions of their English ability and the low levels of academic literacy in English already discussed earlier in this study.

Table 4.10 Self-perception of abilities in strongest languages (N=394)

Language skill	Rating	Sesotho	isiZulu	isiXhosa	English	Afrikaans
SPEAKING	1	9.6%	18.4%	46.7%	13.3%	49.3%
	2	26.4%	43.6%	36.3%	39.0%	39.75
	3	64.0%	38.0%	17.0%	47.7%	11.0%
	TOTAL	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**
LISTENING/UNDER -STANDING	1	7.0%	27.6%	48.8%	2.8%	38.8%
	2	24.0%	34.0%	37.2%	21.0%	49.2%
	3	69.0%	38.4%	14.0%	76.2%	12.0%
	TOTAL	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**
READING	1	4.0%	39.0%	36.0%	4.0%	39.9%
	2	37.0%	36.2%	56.7%	21.4%	53.1%
	3	59.0%	24.8%	7.3%	74.6%	7.0%
	TOTAL	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**
WRITING	1	36.9%	48.8%	58.7%	3.4%	43.8%
	2	15.1%	25.7%	36.0%	32.6%	45.2%
	3	48.0%	25.5%	5.3%	64.0%	11.0%
	TOTAL	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**

Key to Table 3: 1=Poor, 2=Average, 3=Excellent

4.2.2.1.3 Respondents' impressions about AGLE 111

The data reported below outlines respondents' responses to a series of questions on their impressions of the AGLE 111 module. These questions range from their opinions and feelings about the outcome of the initial TALL they took at the beginning of the year, their attendance of lectures in the module, areas in which their attendance of the given lectures benefitted them, to their general perceptions about the module. Please note that all comments of respondents included in this section as examples have been quoted verbatim.

The first question in this section focused on respondents' perceptions about the results of the TALL they wrote at the beginning of 2012. It is interesting to note that the majority of the respondents (as reflected in Table 4.11 below) are dismissive of the TALL results. A total of 71.7% feel that the test scores do not reflect their true abilities while only 28.3% feel they do. This is not surprising though when one considers that most students perceive themselves as having an excellent command of English. Asked to substantiate their answer in this regard, most of the respondents who feel the test scores do not reflect their true ability are of the view that the time allocated for the test was inadequate and, as a result, the test was unfair. In this regard, some of the respondents had the following to say about the test:

> "*It is definately not. Everything happened so fast. The test was written during the orientation and I wasn't prepared and I didn't even know what to expect."*
>
> *"I was too tired when the test was written."*
>
> *"It was very difficult to understand. We are straight from high school, we should start young or start with easier things and that was like feeding a new born baby meat instead of porridge I'm sorry, my intensions aren't to be rude."*

Those who feel the test scores reflect their true ability (although they had their own concerns too), generally indicated that they feel they need to learn more about those AL abilities that were assessed by the test. One student said the following in this regard:

> *"I know English very well but I don't know what happened on the day. The time wasn't enough again I was very tired because we were being orientated by that time. I see my failure as an opportunity for me to learn more about literacy."*

Table 4.11 Respondents' perceptions about the initial TALL scores (n=367)

Do the TALL scores reflect your true AL ability in English?		
Choice	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Yes	104	28.3%
No	263	71.7%

The specific time at which the TALL is usually written at the VTC (during the orientation week at the beginning of academic year, before lectures commence), as expressed in the respondents' comments cited above, could have negatively affected the TALL results for such students. The test was administered at 11 am during the course of the orientation week. It is plausible that the respondents had been involved in other activities the previous day/evening that could have caused them to feel tired on the day they wrote the test. Tiredness could therefore not be ruled out as a variable in this regard. Although this issue has been addressed in the past with members of the house committees on campus, the manner in which the students are engaged the evening before they have to write the test should be such that they get enough rest in order to ensure that their ability to perform optimally when they write the test is not compromised.

With regard to the time allocated for the completion of the test (which is 55 minutes), it is important to note that an integral part of the academic literacy demands at tertiary level is that students are expected to read substantial amounts of literature and, therefore, have to read fast enough (and with an adequate level of understanding) to get through the reading at university level. This issue does, however, warrant further investigation with regard to whether students will perform better if they are given more time. What makes such an investigation problematic is that it would be unethical to allow some students extra time to complete the test while others have to complete it in the originally allocated time (in order to be able to compare results).

Figure 4.7 below indicates that the majority of the respondents were not content with the TALL results (and mostly chose the 'emotional' options from those available). This finding is also understandable in a context where these students' Grade 12 results in English have provided them with access to university education. Out of 328 students, 68 felt demotivated, 30 felt angry and 63 indicated that they could not believe the results. Some students (23) also indicated that the results were unfair. Eighty-five respondents, however, perceived the outcome as positive as they felt the test tested abilities they could develop further (one could also add the 24 respondents here who felt that the TALL tested abilities they did not do at school, abilities which could presumably be developed at university level). One could interpret the positive response as students who recognized the need to sharpen the skills required for their success in a tertiary education environment. Some of the 'other' reasons supplied by the respondents were: "*I was just bored", I didn't care much cos I was expecting it', 'I have no idea'*.

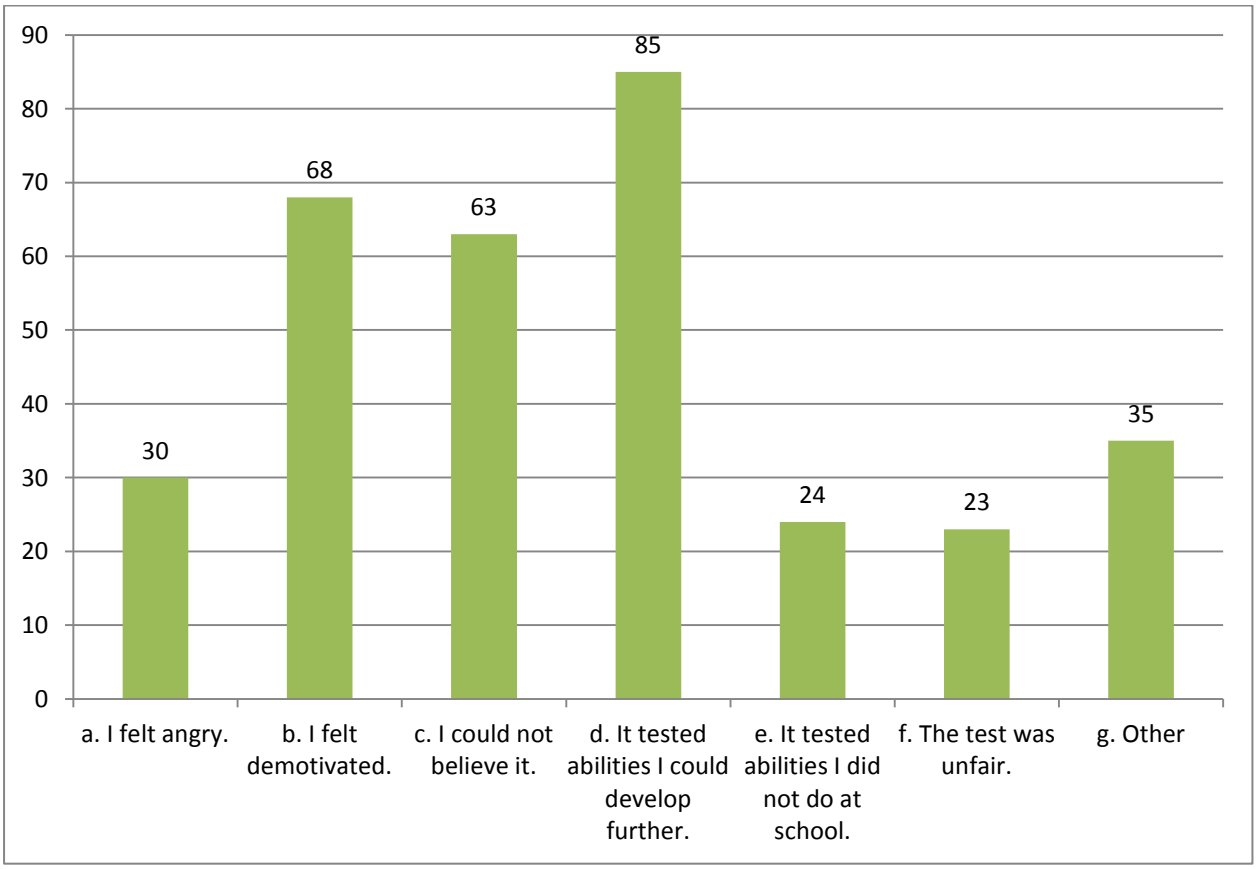

Figure 4.7 Respondents' reaction to initial TALL results (n=328)

For the following group of questions that focused on respondents' perceptions of the AGLE 111 module, the researcher felt that it was important to determine first what students thought about their own levels of attendance of the academic literacy lectures. This issue has obvious implications for how the rest of the data is interpreted in the sense that, for students to be able to comment sensibly on their experiences of the module, they needed to have attended the lectures.

Figure 4.8 below indicates that despite the negative sentiments expressed by the majority of the respondents about the TALL results (as shown in Figure 4.7 above), a large majority indicates a satisfactory attendance of AGLE 111 lectures. Three hundred and sixty-eight of the 384 students reported to have attended between 75% and 100% of the lectures. Two hundred and twelve claim to have a 100% attendance record, 156 students say they attended 75% while only 13 attended 50%. A tiny minority (3) indicated that they attended less than 50% of the lectures. The positive attendance data reported by respondents is generally supported by the attendance registers kept by academic members of staff who present the lectures to students.

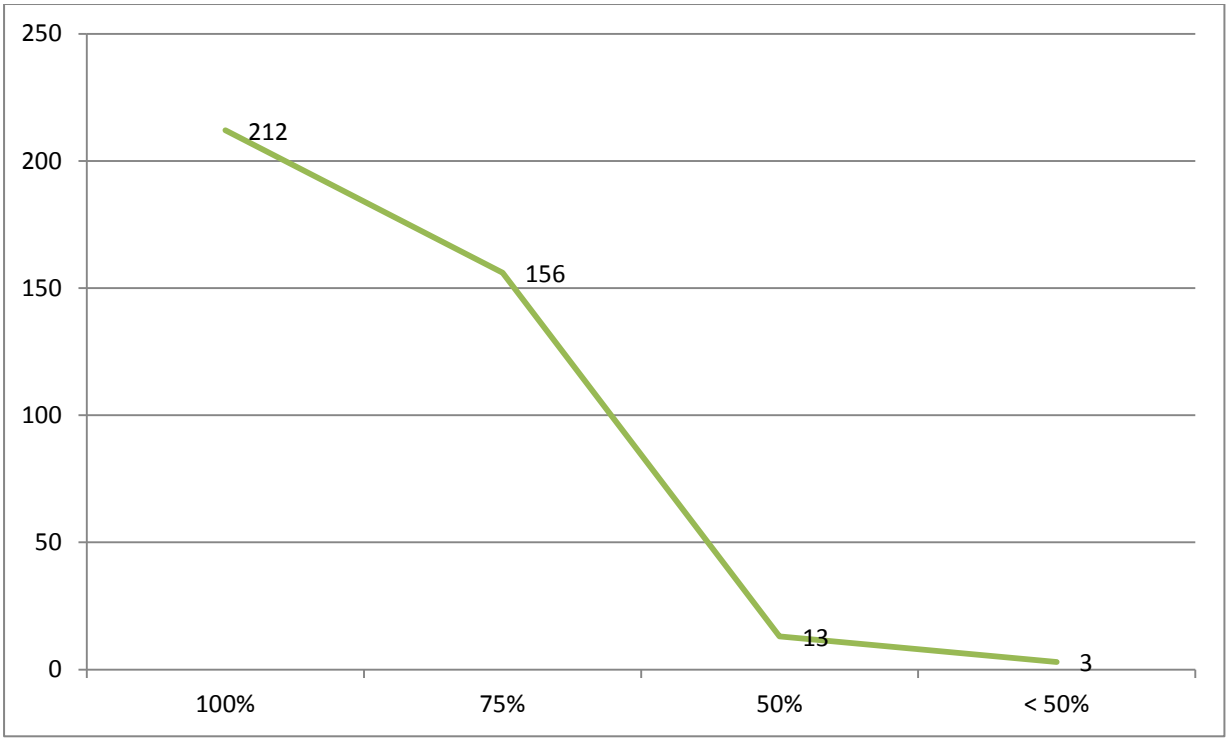

Figure 4.8 Respondents' attendance of AGLE 111 lectures (n=384)

The reason why students regularly attended the academic literacy lectures could, in part, be connected to their responses to the data presented in Table 4.12 below.

Table 4.12 reflects that a large majority (74.4%) of respondents 'enjoyed' attending AGLE 111 lectures while 25.6% did not. It is also interesting to note that 92.1% of the respondents feel they have benefitted from their attendance of AGLE 111 lectures while only 7.9% feel they did not. This is noteworthy since most respondents indicated a high level of unhappiness about the initial TALL results.

The following are examples of positive comments by those students who enjoyed attending AGLE 111:

"*It is challenging"; "I love the lecturer"; "It helped me improve my English"; "I really enjoy the module, the lecturer makes it understandable and interesting"; "Well prepared teacher, he knows what he's doing. I think he's proud of his skill".*

The 25.6% who did not enjoy attending AGLE 111 lectures had the following, among other things, to say about the module and the lectures:

"It's a total waste of time"; I don't see why I should attend it as it is just a waste of money"; "I believe when I came here at NWU they looked at my English scores which I believe were very good".

It is to be expected that some students would show some form of resentment towards what is often seen as a 'remedial' module that they are forced to do (this can also be seen in the emotional nature of some of the negative comments above). It is, however, a very positive finding that almost 75% of the respondents indicate that the module is enjoyable, but even more important, that over 90% feel that they have benefited from the module. Therefore, even some of those students who may not have enjoyed the module, indicated that they could see some relevance for them doing the module.

Table 4.12 Respondents' general perceptions of AGLE 111 lectures

Enjoyed attending AGLE 111 lectures			**Benefitted from AGLE 111 lectures**		
Choice	**Frequency**	**Percentage**	**Choice**	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Yes	297	74.4%	Yes	363	92.1%
No	89	25.6%	No	23	7.9%

Respondents were further asked to indicate that if they felt they have benefited from the AGLE 111 lectures, in which areas of academic literacy they thought they have benefited most. These results are reported in Figure 4.9 below.

Figure 4.9 shows that the majority of respondents felt that they have benefitted from the key focus areas of AGLE 111, namely, academic writing, reading and study skills. A total of 229 respondents indicated that they have benefitted more from academic writing skills (learning about different writing strategies for writing tests, examinations and longer assignments), 180 from study skills (e.g. strategies to summarise information) and 155 from reading skills such as learning to use different reading strategies such as scanning, skimming, comprehensive reading and critical reading.

Some respondents had the following to say about why they felt they have benefitted from the module:

"It has helped me a lot because I can even write an essay without struggling."

"It has helped me with summaries and study skills'.

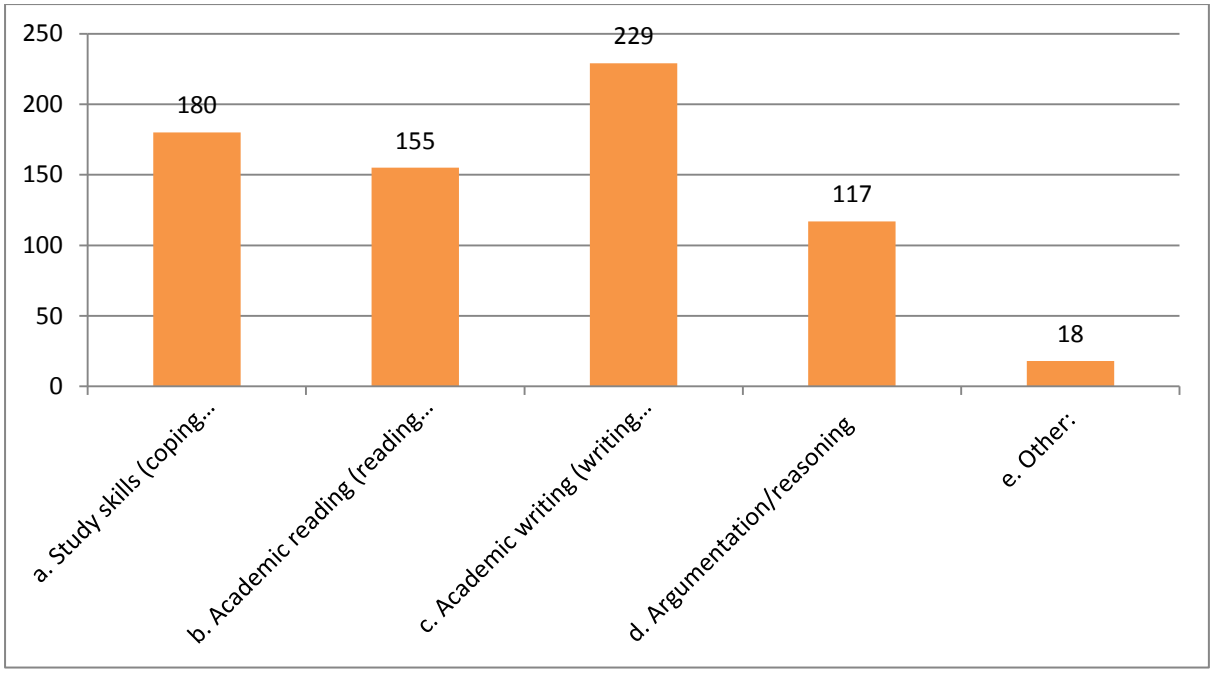

Figure 4.9 Respondents' perceived area(s) of improvement

In order to determine whether respondents found what they learned in the AGLE 111 module valuable for their other subjects/modules, they were asked to indicate whether they used the abilities they have learned in the academic literacy module in their other modules. Table 4.13 below presents a summary of the responses for this question.

Table 4.13 indicates that 85% of the respondents felt that AGLE 111 has assisted them in their other modules whilst only 15% felt the opposite.

Table 4.13 Respondents' perceived impact of AGLE 111 on other modules

AGLE 111's perceived assistance in other modules		
Choice	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Yes	323	85%
No	57	15.0%

Among the numerous comments made by the respondents who felt positive about the impact of AGLE 111 on their other modules, were the following:

> "*I have become better at analyzing poetry in ENLS classes, thanks to AGLE."*
>
> *"The course has helped me with the mastery of the language required at tertiary level."*
>
> *"I do, BA Law which mostly deals with language usage, and communication skills. AGLE has assisted me in in that aspect cause we learn about reasoning, interpreting, grammer etc."*
>
> *"I'm doing well in my assignments."*
>
> *"I was able to obtain a very good mark in my ENLS module's assignment on an essay because of the writing skills I learned in AGLE"*
>
> *"If it wasn't for AGLE 11 I would have fallen the first two weeks of my tertiary days.*"

Those who felt the module did not help them in their other modules had the following, among other things, to say:

> "*… this module was a waste of time …"*
>
> *"I felt bored throughout…."*
>
> *"… the stuff done in AGLE we don't do in Accounting".*

In the second last question in the questionnaire, respondents were asked to indicate whether they thought that their academic literacy levels in English have improved as a result of having attended the AGLE 111 module.

Table 4.14 below indicates that 93.4% of the respondents felt that their academic literacy levels have improved significantly as a result of their attendance of the AGLE 111 module whilst 6.6% felt that the module did not help them improve their level of academic literacy. It is important to note that some of the respondents who indicated that the module did not improve their AL levels have the impression that they were registered for other modules that do not require the type of reading, writing and reasoning activities that are contained in the

module. This could be inferred from their comments relating to this question which are, among others, the following:

"My modules use numbers."

"… not relevant to what I am doing …"

"We are not writing essays in my other modules."

Those who felt that the module did help them had the following, among others, to say:

"I'm getting better marks in my modules."

"I now know how to write a summary."

"My level of reasoning has tremendously improved."

"I did not have these abilities before, now I'm better."

"I now see English in a different light – bravo AGLE!"

Table 4.14 Respondents' perceived improvement of their own academic literacy levels

AGLE 111 impact on perceived improvement of academic literacy levels		
Choice answer	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Yes	354	93.4%
No	24	6.6%

When asked to recommend any desirable changes to the module, most respondents felt that the module was perfect as is. Some of them made the following comments in this regard:

> "*None, the module is owk as it is, because, it is not time consuming, and it does what AGLE does."*
>
> *"None, it is perfect the way it is."*
>
> *"Nothing, because I learned a lot."*
>
> *"I don't think there should be any changes, everything runs smoothly and the lecture is able to attend to students needs."*
>
> *"Nothing, it is already great"*.

A small number of respondents who recommended changes felt that more time needed to be allocated to the module. They felt that the once-a-week double-period slot allocated to the module should be extended:

> *"AGLE 111 should be attended twice a week as it is important to us because it helps us to learn the things that we did not know."*
>
> *"No changes I would recommend unless the extension of attending the AGLE sessions."*
>
> *"AGLE 111 should be attended twice a week."*
>
> *"Offer two days in a week for sessions."*

The next subsection tables and discusses findings drawn from Questionnaire B.

4.2.2.2 Discussion of results: Questionnaire B

As stated earlier in the introduction, Questionnaire B was distributed to all students who were registered for the second semester module (AGLE 121). This was done towards the end of the semester in question. A total of 1162 questionnaires were completed and returned to the researcher (in this case, therefore, a considerably larger number of respondents completed the questionnaires than for Questionnaire A). This questionnaire, although similar in many respects to Questionnaire A, was tailored to also capture the perceptions of those students

who did not participate in the completion of Questionnaire A because they did not attend the lectures offered as part of the AGLE 111 module. Furthermore, because the number of returned questionnaires is much higher than that of Questionnaire A, this afforded the researcher an opportunity to confirm the information gathered though Questionnaire A. Findings from Questionnaire B are tabled and discussed in the following section.

4.2.2.2.1 Biographical details

Again, the first section in the questionnaire focused on the biographical details of students. Table 4.15 below focuses on information on the age and gender of respondents.

The data in Table 4.15 confirms the findings of a similar question in Questionnaire A by showing that the majority of the respondents in this questionnaire are female students (66.3%) while male respondents only constitute 33.7%. The average age of the respondents is 20 years of age. As shown earlier in Table 4.8, these statistics reflect the general enrolment trends in higher education in general and at the VTC in particular in respect of the age and gender variables.

Table 4.15 Age and gender of respondents

Average age	**Gender**	
	Male	**Female**
20 years	33.7%	66.3%

Regarding the qualifications for which students were registered, Figure 4.10 below may provide a more reliable picture than the data of Questionnaire A as a result of the higher number of respondents. It shows that the majority of respondents are registered for BEd (212), BCom Accounting (206), BA Development, Governance and Political Sciences (148), and BA Law (102). The data for this question is, however, not that different from the data shown earlier in Figure 4.5 – no major changes are observed in the qualifications students pursue for this substantially larger group of respondents.

As mentioned in the discussion of Questionnaire A, this diversity in fields of study is also not reflected in the design of the AGLE 121 module. Like AGLE 111, AGLE 121 is a generic module that does not differentiate between different disciplines with regard to its content. Again, some students have judged the AGLE 121 module as being irrelevant to their needs, an issue that will be elaborated upon in greater detail in Chapter 5.

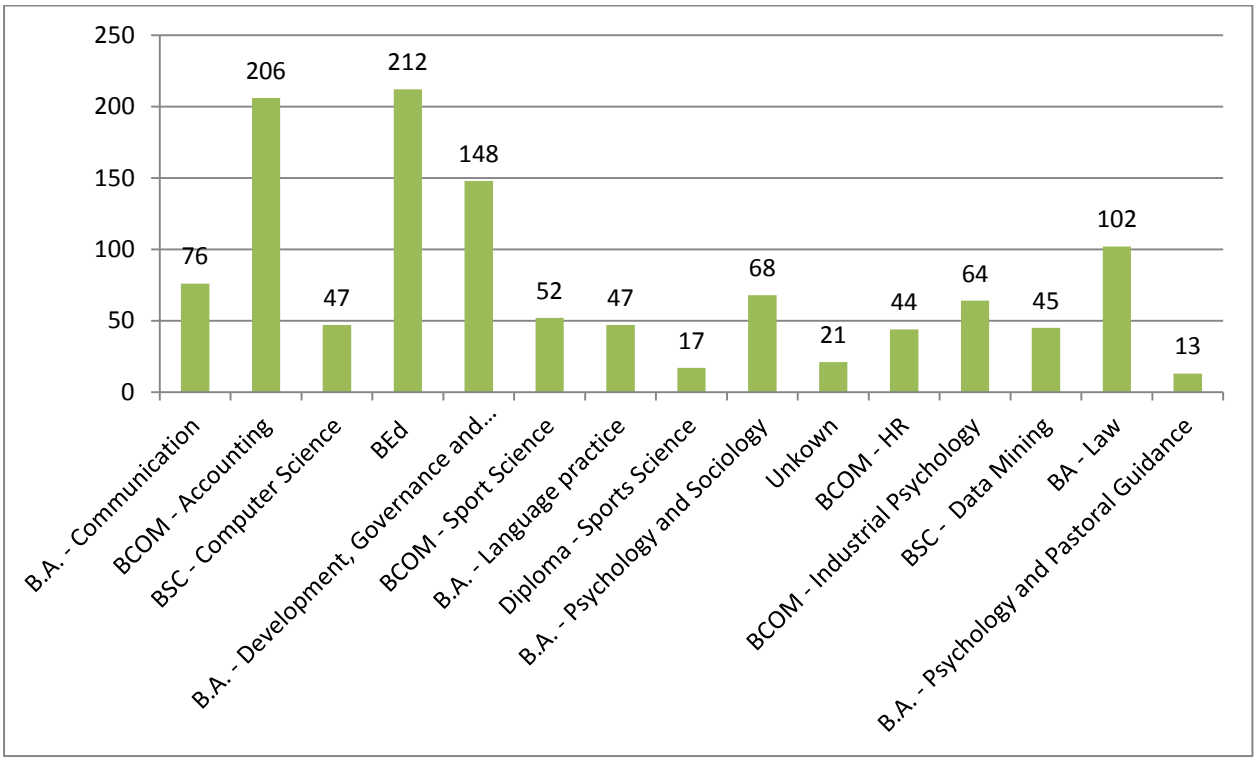

Figure 4.10 Qualifications for which respondents are registered

With regard to the type of schools respondents attended, there is little difference in the profile for the whole group of first year students (this time including those students who passed the TALL) regarding the distribution reported for Questionnaire A.

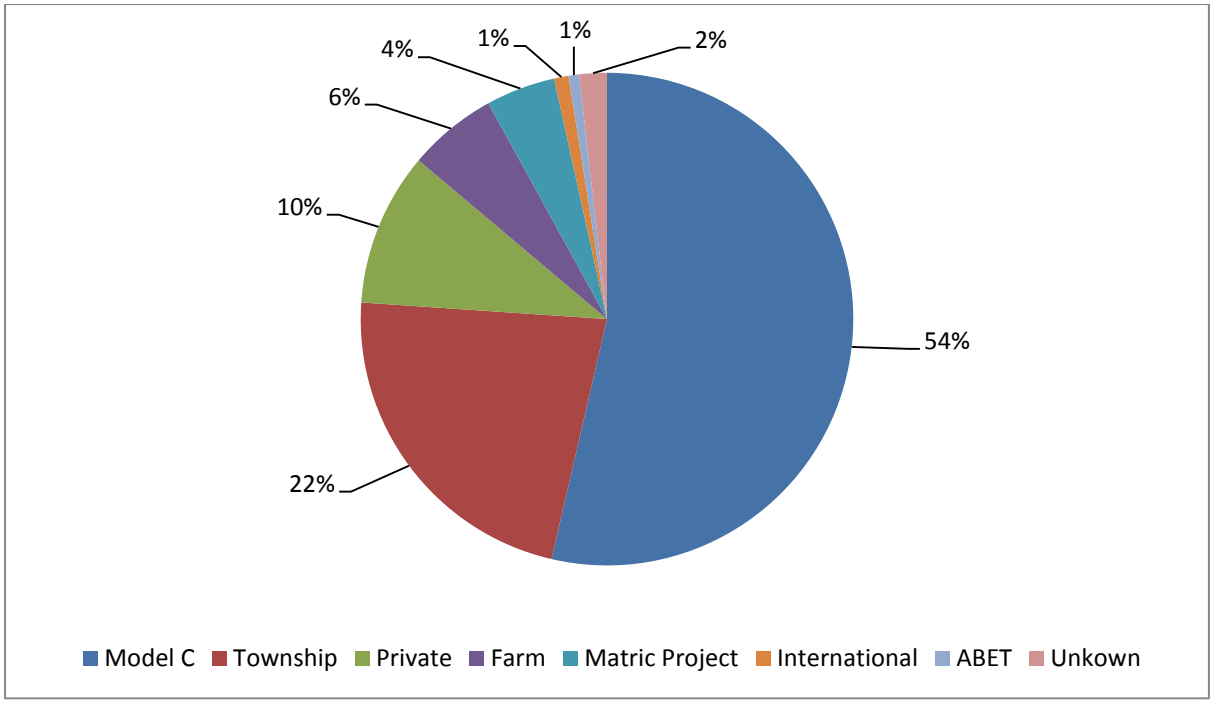

Figure 4.11 Type of schools attended by respondents

Figure 4.11 above shows that the majority (64%) of the first year students who were registered at the Vaal Triangle Campus of North West University for AGLE 121 during the 2012 academic year came from the 'better-performing' schools as 54% of them were from former Model C Schools and 10% from private schools. It is also noticeable that 22% of these students came from the largely dysfunctional and poorly resourced township schools. This spread is almost identical to the one reported on in the discussion of Questionnaire A in this regard.

It is clear from the findings of both questionnaires that the VTC attracts the majority of its new students from the 'better performing' schools in the country. Again, this emphasizes the disturbing notion that even the better schools do not prepare students adequately regarding high enough AL levels that would enable them to study successfully at university.

4.2.2.2.2 Language background

As shown in Table 4.9 earlier, Table 4.16 below confirms that an overwhelming majority of the respondents in this study are additional language speakers of English. One noticeable difference is the increase of Afrikaans and English home language users in this group (an increase not indicated for the Sesotho, isiZulu and isiXhosa users), indicating that most

students from these two language groups were not part of the initial 'at risk' group who had to register for AGLE 111. Sesotho is again listed as the largest home language (36.7%) used by the respondents, followed by isiZulu (18%), Setswana (11.8%), isiXhosa (10.7%), and other indigenous African languages.

Table 4.16 Respondents' home language and language of schooling (n=1162)

Home language		**Schooling language**	
Language	**Percentage**	**Primary school**	**Secondary school**
		Percentage	**Percentage**
Afrikaans	4.0%	5.8%	4.5%
English	4.7%	62.7%	95.4%
isiXhosa	10.7%	9.0%	0%
isiZulu	18.0%	4.2%	0%
Sesotho	36.7%	12.9%	0%
Setswana	11.8%	1.5%	0%
siSwati	1.7%	0.3%	0%
Xitsonga	2.4%	0.3%	0%
Tshivenda	1.8%	0.3%	0%
isiNdebele	1.0%	0.1%	0%
***Other**	7.2%	1.7%	0.1%

*This indicates the percentage of those respondents who indicated that they use English and another language as both their home language and the language of learning at school.

Again, a very similar profile to that in Questionnaire A emerges from Table 4.16 regarding respondents' language of schooling. English is confirmed as the dominant language of learning at primary school level (62.7%) followed by Sesotho, IsiXhosa, Afrikaans and other indigenous African languages. At secondary school, no African language is used as language

of learning, with English again dominating as a language of learning with 95.4% of respondents indicating that they have used this language for secondary school tuition. The only other language indicated by respondents that was used for learning in this schooling phase is Afrikaans, used by 4.6% of the respondents.

Table 4.17 Self-perceptions of abilities in strongest language (N =1162)

Language skill	Rating	Sesotho	IsiZulu	IsiXhosa	English	Afrikaans
SPEAKING	1	12.0%	13.0%	13.0%	12.0%	37.6%
	2	29.7%	28.9%	39.0%	29.1%	35.4%
	3	58.3%	58.1%	48.0%	58.1%	27.0%
	TOTAL	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**
LISTENING/UNDER-STANDING	1	14.0%	15%	10.0%	3.8%	26.2%
	2	28.3%	40.3%	30.8%	19.0%	48.8%
	3	57.7%	44.7%	59.2%	77.2%	24.0%
	TOTAL	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**
READING	1	23.0%	44.1%	25.0%	10.0%	32.0%
	2	34.3%	30.0%	28.7%	21.4%	47.0%
	3	42.7%	25.9%	46.3%	68.6%	21.0%
	TOTAL	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**
WRITING	1	33.0%	49.0%	16.7%	7.0%	28.3%
	2	36.6%	36.8%	47.3%	24.6%	46.7%
	3	30.4%	14.2%	36.0%	68.4%	25.0%
	TOTAL	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**

Key to Table 10: 1 =Poor, 2 = Average, 3 Excellent

What is of interest in Table 4.17 above, is that even with three times more respondents than those in Questionnaire A, respondents still perceive themselves to be at a high level of proficiency in English.

Similar to responses in Questionnaire A, participants also see themselves as multilingual regarding the number of languages they control. Regarding their use of English, only 15 students (out of a group of 1162 respondents) indicated that they have difficulty in speaking English, 7 had challenges with listening and understanding in the same language, 11 had problems with reading and only 4 indicated that they had challenges with writing in English.

4.2.2.2.3 Respondents' impressions about AGLE 121

With regard to students' reactions to the initial TALL results, Figure 4.12 indicates that 54% of the respondents still indicated that the TALL results did not reflect their true AL ability in English. This is, however, a much lower percentage than that indicated in Table 4.11 for Questionnaire A (71.7%). More students therefore seem to have made the connection between what is tested in the TALL and what is taught in the two AL modules. Thus, there seems to be less resentment of the TALL results towards the end of the year, after the students have been exposed to the AL modules and the general demands of tertiary study.

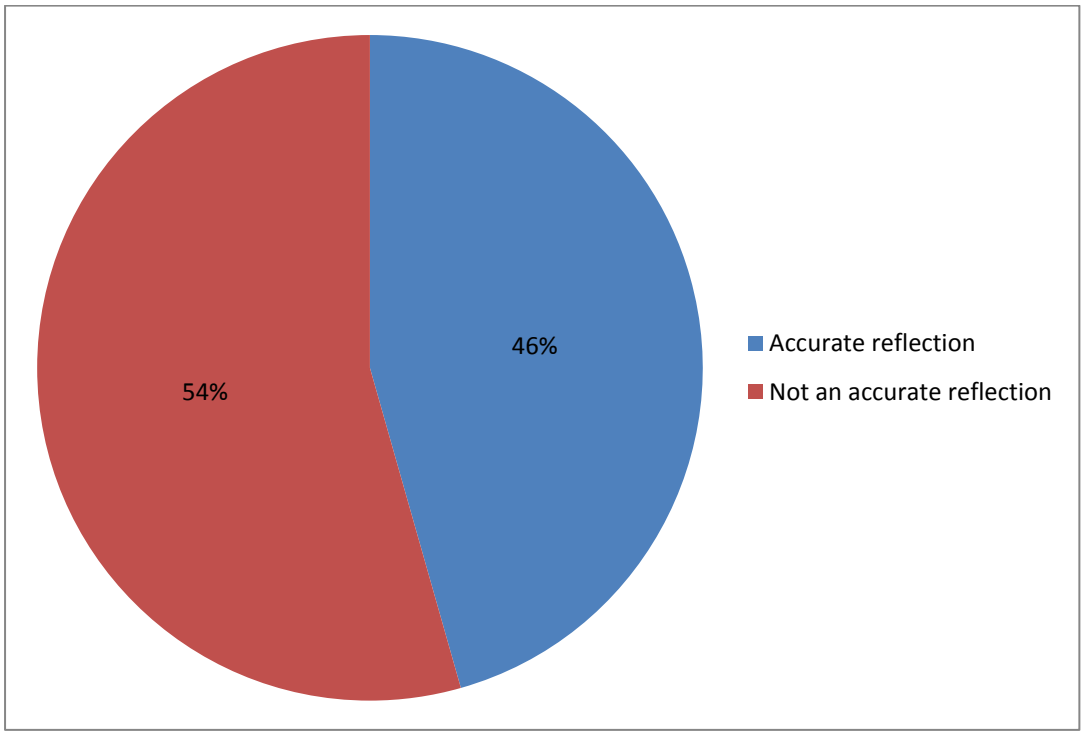

Figure 4.12 Respondents' perceptions about initial TALL scores

It was important that Questionnaire B also took into account issues specific to the group of students who 'passed' the TALL in the beginning of the year. To this end, this specific group of students was asked to give their opinions about the fact that they had to do the AGLE 121 module despite the fact that they had passed the initial TALL (and as a result, were exempted from doing the AGLE 111 module). Figure 4.13 below shows that the majority of the respondents were positive towards the fact that the AGLE 121 module was compulsory for all students, even though they passed the initial TALL. These students saw it as an opportunity to develop their abilities further (136, and 88 respectively indicated it as such).

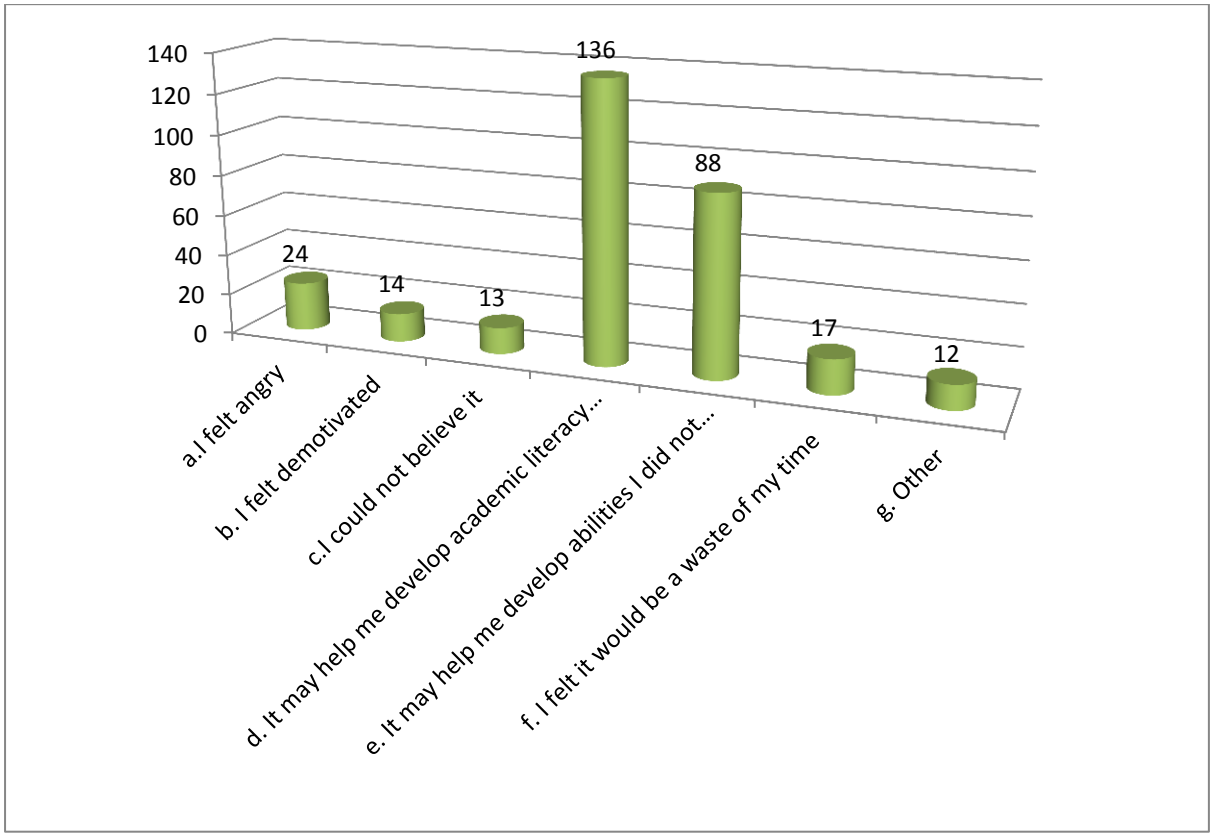

Figure 4.13 Respondents' reaction to the compulsory nature of AGLE 121 (n=304)

Figure 4.14 below indicates that the majority of respondents reported to have attended most of the AGLE 121 lectures. A total of 980 of the 1050 respondents indicated to have attended between 100% and 75 % of the lectures. Again, this is supported by the attendance records kept by the AL lecturers. Respondents' comments in this regard are shared in the discussion of Table 4.18 below.

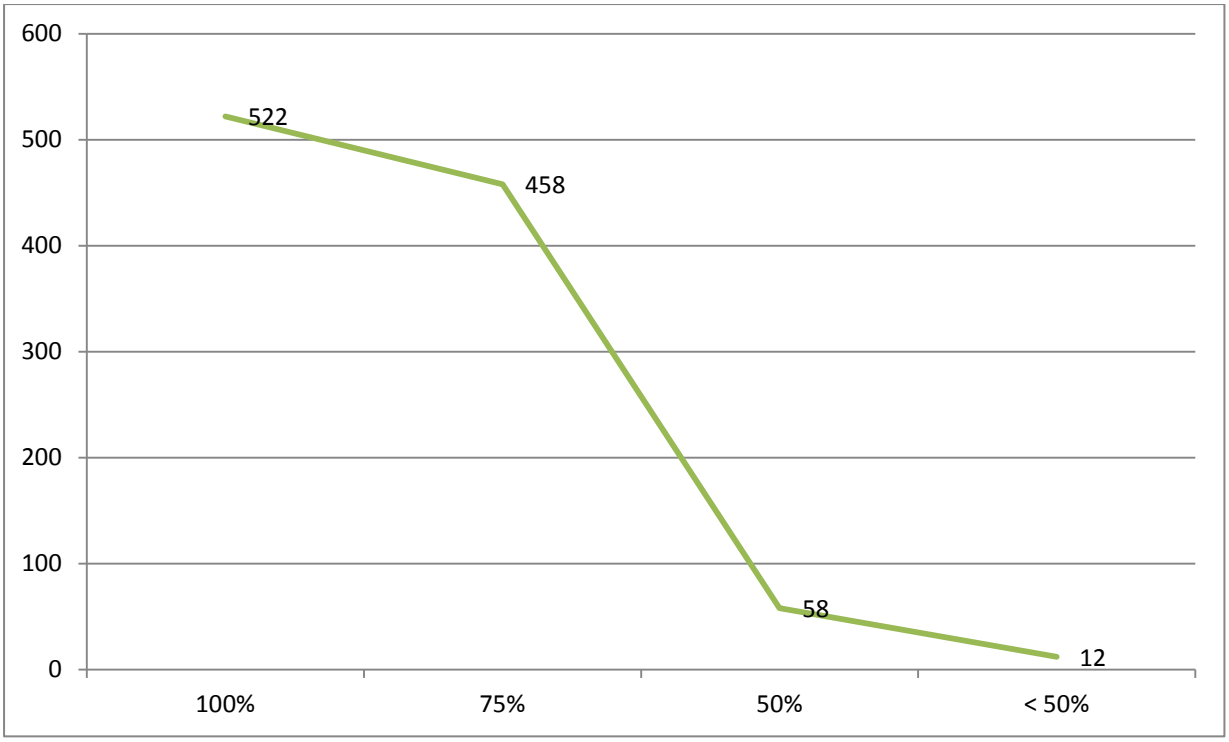

Figure 4.14 Respondents' attendance of AGLE 121 lectures (n =1050)

Table 4.18 below shows that 78% of the respondents indicated that they enjoyed attending AGLE 121 lectures, while 22% indicated that they did not. It is also interesting to note that 81% of the respondents feel they have benefitted from their attendance of AGLE 121l lectures while 19% feel they did not. This does not deviate much from the feelings expressed by the group that did the AGLE 111 module as captured in Table 4.12.

Some of the positive comments expressed in this regard are listed below:

"*I learn more about the things I did not know.*"

"... because it improve my English skills."

"Enables us to learn the language English better."

"The lecturer is the best – he motivates you to come to class every time."

The 22% of the respondents who indicated that they did not enjoy attending AGLE 121 lectures had the following to say about the module and the lectures:

"AGLE 121 classes feels like you are taught something you already know."

"It's on Friday."

Table 4.18 Respondents' general perceptions of AGLE 121 lectures

Enjoyed attending AGLE 121 lectures N =1051			**Benefitted from AGLE 121 lectures N=1042**		
Choice	**Frequency**	**Percentage**	**Choice**	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Yes	932	78%	Yes	930	81%
No	119	22%	No	112	19%

Table 4.19 Respondents' reaction to whether AGLE 121 lectures assisted them in other modules

AGLE 121 perceived assistance in other modules		
Choice/Answer	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Yes	835	81.2%
No	186	18.8%

With regard to whether students felt that AGLE 121 assisted them in their other modules, Table 4.19 above shows that 81.2% of the respondents felt that AGLE 121 indeed helped them in their other modules whilst only 18.8% felt the opposite. Among the numerous comments made by these respondents were the following:

"*I was always performing better in my other modules but now I excel ...*"

"I now do better analysis in my politics studies".

Those who felt the module did not help them in any way had the following, among other things to say:

"useless module..."

"this is the worse course ever!"

Focusing on the impact of the module on their AL levels, Table 4.20 below shows that 82.2% of the respondents indicated that the module did have a positive impact on their academic literacy levels whilst 7.8% indicated the opposite. It is possible that the respondents who felt that the module did not play a role in the improvement of their academic literacy levels are those studying modules that are not focused primarily on the reading and writing of extended texts – for example, accounting and mathematics. This could be inferred from what some of them had to say about the module content as being 'irrelevant'.

Below are some of the positive comments made by respondents in this regard:

"I did because it is where I had an opportunity to learn and improve the skills I have such as reading and listening."

"The lecturer was amazing, she is very knowledgeable and exciting."

"I always learned new things in every class."

The following are some of the negative comments from the respondents:

"It's a waste of time."

"It's a money making scheme. If you do well in the pre-test you shouldn't do this course."

"... plain BORING"

Table 4.20 Respondents' perceived improvement of their own academic literacy levels

AGLE 121 impact on perceived improvement of academic literacy levels		
Choice/answer	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Yes	936	82.2%
No	24	17.8%

With regard to the perceived benefits students derived from AGLE 121, Figure 4.15 shows that the majority of respondents expressed the opinion that they have benefitted from the key focus areas of the AGLE 121 module, namely academic writing, reading and study skills. Again, the majority of the respondents indicated that they had benefitted most from support in appropriate academic writing.

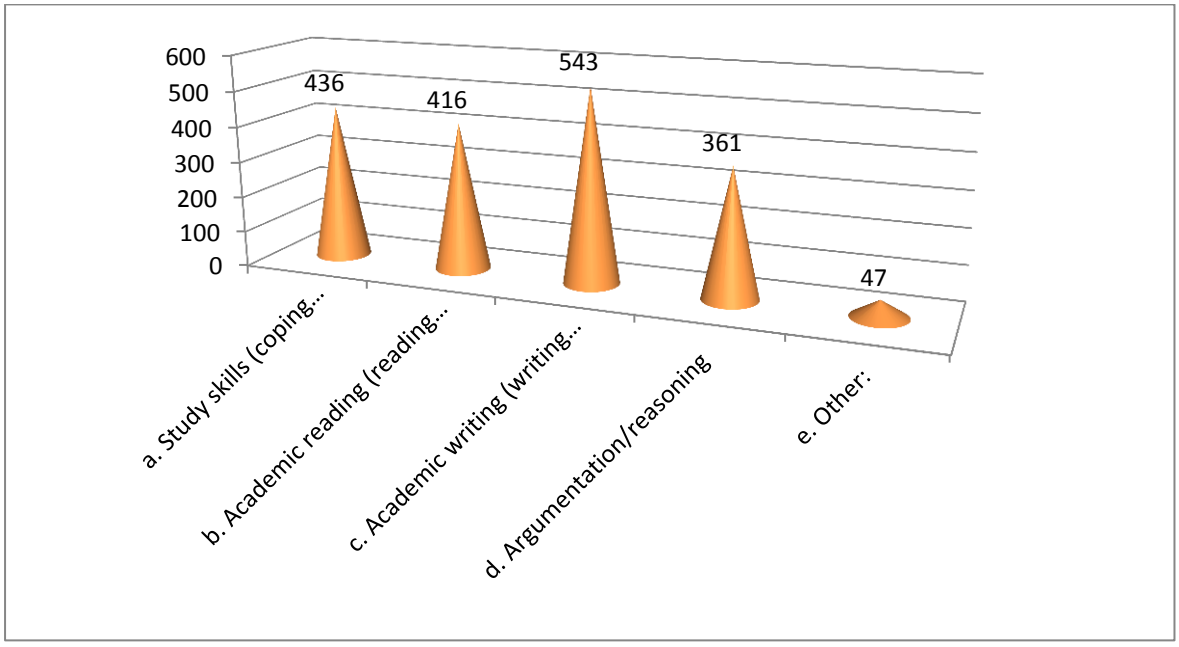

Figure 4.15 Respondents' perceived area(s) of improvement

The next sub-section tables and discusses findings drawn from Questionnaire C.

4.2.2.3 Discussion of results: Questionnaire C

As stated in the introduction to the section discussing the questionnaire data, this questionnaire was distributed to all academic members of staff at the Vaal Triangle Campus of North-West University who taught mainstream first year modules during the 2012 academic year. It was designed to gather the targeted academics' perceptions of the impact of the two academic literacy modules offered on campus. With the assistance of various departmental and school secretaries a total of 23 questionnaires were issued to the target population during the months of December 2012 and February 2013.

Some questionnaires were returned by respondents whilst some were collected by the researcher himself during the month of June 2013. A total of 13 questionnaires were completed and returned.

The findings from the respondents' responses in this regard are presented in Table 4.21 and discussed in terms of the main themes isolated from the given responses.

Table 4.21 Main themes drawn from lecturers' perceptions of their students' academic literacy ability and progress

1. Theme 1. Lecturers perceive their students' academic abilities to be inadequate.
2. Theme 2. Lecturers have little knowledge of AGLE 111 and AGLE 121 modules.
3. Theme 3. Lecturers perceive academic literacy support currently offered by the University to students to be inadequate.
4. Theme 4. Lecturers state that most of their disciplines are different from others and as such need "specialized" attention.
5. Theme 5. Lecturers perceive academic writing to be one of the key challenges faced by their students.
6. Theme 6. Lecturers feel that the responsibility of teaching students academic literacy lies with the academic literacy lecturers.

Theme 1: Lecturers perceive their students' academic abilities to be inadequate.

As Hendrich and Scheepers (2004:250) observe, South African higher education institutions continue to experience growing levels of under-preparedness in the students that gain access to these institutions. The perceptions of the lecturers who participated in this study concur with Hendrich and Scheepers' observation in this regard. Lecturers rated the academic literacy levels of the groups of students who were in their classes during the 2012 academic year as being anything between "low" and "average". This suggests that, according to them, not much improvement occurred in this group of students throughout the academic year in question despite the intervention strategies put in place by the university to help improve this situation. As discussed in Theme 2 below, it is interesting to note that the majority of these academics seem not to be familiar with the key intervention strategy put in place by the university to deal with the problem of "under-preparedness" of its students: the academic literacy modules. They seem not to know what these modules contain or what they seek to achieve.

Theme 2: Lecturers have little knowledge of AGLE 111 and AGLE 121 modules.

Although the AGLE 111 and AGLE 121 modules have been designed as an intervention aimed at assisting students admitted by the University to be successful with their studies, it is clear that mainstream lecturers know little about the focus and content of these modules. When asked to state what they thought were the key focus areas of these modules, 92% of the lecturers indicated a general lack of knowledge in this regard. Some stated that the modules are about "basic English proficiency", "computer skills" and "academic literacy" while others just stated that they had "no idea" what the two modules were about. Because academic literacy development is ideally something that should be embraced by all lecturers at an institution, this finding is unfortunate and should be addressed by the Subject-Group: Academic Literacy at the VTC. Possible strategies as to how the dissemination of information about the AL intervention could be achieved will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Theme 3: Lecturers perceive academic literacy support currently offered by the University to students to be inadequate.

It is clear from the discussion in Theme 2 above that the lecturers who participated in this study feel that not enough is done by the university in the area of academic literacy support given to students. The majority of them feel that more needs to be done in this area in order to assist students to perform better.

It is interesting to note that 76.9% of the respondents indicated that they did not see any major changes in their students' performance throughout the academic year in question, despite their attendance of AGLE 111 and AGLE 121 modules. It therefore appears as if these mainstream lecturers do not feel positive about the impact of the AL intervention. However, taking into account the general lack of knowledge about what academic literacy entails, one should treat this finding with caution. It is important to note though that the success of academic literacy interventions often depends on the goodwill and support of mainstream lecturers and that the subject group would therefore need to change the perception of mainstream lecturers so that they could see the relevance of such an intervention. This issue is explored further in Chapter 5 of this study.

Of further significance in this regard is the observation from these respondents that a single academic year is not enough in terms of the amount of support students need in so far as academic literacy support is concerned. A total of 84% of the lecturers feel that a longer period is desirable in this regard. Some stated that such support should be given "throughout the duration of the students' undergraduate studies" while others stated that students need "a more intense programme that they would take more seriously". This aspect will also be further elaborated in Chapter 5.

Theme 4: Lecturers state that most of their disciplines are different from others and as such need "specialized "attention.

As indicated earlier, the lecturers who participated in this study were drawn from almost all disciplines offered on campus. It is therefore not surprising that most of them feel that their specific disciplines have specialized academic (and not generic) academic literacy requirements. A majority of them indicated that their disciplines require the usage of specific vocabulary as well as specific genres and functional text types.

Theme 5: Lecturers perceive academic writing to be one of the key challenges faced by their students.

Academic writing is cited by the lecturers who participated in this study as being one of the key challenges faced by their students during the academic year in question. This observation is significant since academic reading and writing are key focus areas of both the AGLE 111 and AGLE 121 modules.

Theme 6: Lecturers feel that the responsibility of teaching students academic literacy lies with the academic literacy lecturers.

Not surprisingly, most of the lecturers feel that the responsibility of teaching academic literacy lies with 'experts' in the field in question – the academic literacy lecturers. Although they are best situated to know about the AL demands of their disciplines, mainstream lecturers often do not see themselves as AL experts. Focusing on AL development in addition to the content these lecturers need to cover often seems a daunting task to them. It is, however, important that AL lecturers should work closely with mainstream lecturers, specifically in discovering and confirming what specific AL abilities are required by different disciplines.

4.3 Conclusion

This chapter presented a discussion of the research findings of the empirical part of this study. Notably, some of the key findings discussed in this chapter are that the AL intervention does have an impact on the improvement of the academic literacy levels of students who take part in them. However, one should be cautious in attributing this improvement exclusively to the effect of the intervention. In addition, the majority of respondents in this study are additional language users of English. Although the majority of respondents had low scores for the initial TALL written at the beginning of the year, they generally perceive themselves as being fully proficient in English. The respondents further experienced both the academic literacy modules as effective and stated that these modules made a significant contribution to their success in other modules. Regarding the perceptions of lecturers, it was found that lecturers seem to be very aware of the poor AL levels of their students, but do not see any impact of the AL modules on their students' AL abilities. They generally feel that more should be done by the university to improve such levels. In addition, they believe that their disciplines have unique AL requirements and that these should be catered for by specialized support that is offered by AL experts.

The next chapter discusses the conclusion and recommendations of the study, as well as limitations and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

The primary research question this study attempted to answer focused on whether the academic literacy intervention at the VTC had any impact on improving students' academic literacy levels. The secondary research questions were set out in such a way that, in answering these, they would provide one with an answer to the primary question as well. Based on the most important findings of the investigation, the following section firstly provides answers to the secondary research questions posed in Chapter 1.

5.2 Addressing the secondary research questions

- **What evidence is available in the literature regarding the impact of academic literacy courses that may inform the current study?**

This question was addressed through the literature investigation conducted as part of the study. The most important finding of the literature survey is that, although there seems to be a dire need for some sort of academic literacy intervention at South African universities, very little evidence exists about the true impact of such interventions at these universities. Only a few studies attempt to determine the impact of such interventions. Although most of these studies report some improvement regarding various aspects of academic literacy, they also appear to be regularly limited by issues such as small sample size and the use of inadequate and inappropriate assessment instruments for determining such levels, especially in the case of discipline-specific interventions. Because most academic literacy interventions are bound by a specific context, it is also very difficult to generalise the findings of such studies to one's own context. Therefore, more empirical evidence is necessary before a claim could be made that AL interventions show a substantial impact in improving the academic literacy levels of students.

- **Can the impact of the AL intervention at the VTC be determined conclusively by making use of AL ability testing?**

An extremely reliable and validated AL assessment instrument (the TALL) was used in this study for determining the initial academic literacy levels of students as well as whether there has been any improvement in such levels after students were exposed to the AL modules (AGLE 111 and AGLE 121) offered at the VTC. The main finding in Chapter 4 is that, for both modules, there was a statistically significant improvement in the mean scores calculated for the pre- and post-tests used to assess the impact of these modules.

For AGLE 111 specifically, both statistical and a large practical significance were found for the improvement shown by student scores. It was further possible to isolate specific sub-groups in the data for AGLE 111. This was done in an attempt to assign the significant improvement to the influence of the AGLE 111 intervention and not to any other variables that may have had an effect on the improvement. Also in the case of the sub-groups, a statistically significant improvement was found when the pre-test data of the experimental group (those students exposed to the AGLE 111 module) was compared to the post-test data. However, only a small practical significance was shown for this improvement in the experimental group. A comparison between the analysis of the experimental group and that of the control group (students who did not do AGLE 111) shows that whereas the experimental group did show improvement, there was no improvement (actually a slight regression) in the average score of the control group. Therefore, although one should be careful to assign this improvement to the exclusive influence of the AGLE 111 module, one may conclude that the module has had a definite influence in the improvement of AL levels.

In the case of AGLE 121, a comparison of the mean scores in the pre- and post-test data also revealed a statistically significant improvement in students' academic literacy levels. However, in this case no control and experimental groups could be isolated from the data because of the compulsory nature of this module. In addition, although the improvement in mean scores showed statistical significance, it only showed a small to medium practical significance (effect size). Therefore, one should also be careful in assigning this improvement exclusively to the influence of the AGLE 121 module.

However, an analysis of student achievement in the two AL modules correlated to their achievement in the other modules for which they were registered in 2012, shows both statistical significance and a large practical significance between these sets of scores. Therefore, one could conclude that if students performed better in the AL modules, they also performed better in their other modules, and *vice versa*. AGLE 111 and AGLE 121 therefore appear to be good predictors of the academic success of students.

A judicious overall conclusion would therefore be that although there was a definite improvement in the AL levels of the students who attended both AL modules (and that, as a result of the module content being aligned with those abilities tested by the TALL one could claim some influence of the modules on this improvement), one still cannot say with certainty **how much** of the improvement could be assigned exclusively to the influence of these modules.

- **What are the perceptions of the students who are exposed to the AL intervention about the impact thereof?**

One of the more interesting findings in both questionnaires is that although the TALL results generally show low academic literacy levels for the majority of the students, they perceive their English proficiency as high. Based on the impression created by their Grade 12 final results for English (they have been accepted for university study, partly based on this result), this is not unexpected.

It is further clear from the questionnaire data that students generally feel positive towards both AL modules. Therefore, although the majority of students were dismissive of the TALL results at the beginning of the year, linked to their inflated perceptions about their own proficiency in English, students have still attended the modules regularly and indicated that they both enjoyed the modules and benefitted from them. They further indicated that the modules were valuable in that the abilities they have developed in the modules could also be used in their other mainstream modules. However, some students indicated that they did not find the modules relevant for their other modules because the content of their other modules (such as mathematics and accountancy) did not require the textually-based AL abilities focused on in the AL modules. When asked about possible improvements to the modules, the majority of the students indicated that the modules are adequate in meeting their needs.

Some, however, did indicate that they could probably have benefitted more by additional time allocated to these modules.

- **What are the perceptions of academic members of staff who teach first year modules about the impact of the AL intervention?**

The data of the lecturer survey revealed that they see the academic literacy levels of their students as inadequate. However, mainstream lecturers seem generally unaware of what is done in the academic literacy modules. They further have the perception that not enough is being done to support students in developing their academic literacy abilities, so for all practical reasons they do not see any substantial improvement in their students' AL abilities. This perception is important because one would like these lecturers to promote the importance of the AL modules to the students they see in class.

Most of these lecturers further believe that their disciplines are distinctly different from other disciplines and they expect special attention in the academic literacy support that is offered to their students. They also feel that it is not their responsibility to improve their students' academic literacy levels, and that academic literacy experts should take responsibility for this.

5.3 Addressing the primary research question

Although the assessment data in this study shows that the AL intervention has a definite positive impact on students' academic literacy levels, it is difficult to assign this improvement to the exclusive influence of the intervention. Therefore, other variables (such as AL abilities being addressed in students' mainstream modules) may also have influenced the improvement to some extent. However, how much AL development takes place in other modules is debatable when one considers the fact that most mainstream lecturers have a substantial content load to cover in a module, as well as the fact that they generally do not see it as their task to develop their students AL abilities. Furthermore, although the AL modules have a positive effect on the development of AL levels, mainstream lecturers seem not to see these benefits in their students. Students, on the other hand, appear to experience the impact of extra AL support offered to them.

5.4 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following specific recommendations are made:

- A concerted effort should be made again to inform relevant structures at the campus about the importance of the TALL written at the beginning of each year. In this regard, students should be allowed to be well-rested the night before they have to take the test. It is unfair to expect of students to write this test when they did not have enough sleep, especially because the implication is that, if they 'fail' the test, they have to complete the first semester module and obviously pay for it.
- Although the majority of the students in this study indicated that they found the modules beneficial, more can be done to change the negative perceptions about the results of the TALL. For example, the purpose and the content of the test could be explained to students shortly after they have written the test (in one of the first lectures of AGLE 111). This may help students to understand the functional nature of the abilities tested, and help them to make a connection between such abilities and what is taught in the AL modules.
- This study has indicated that the current generic AL modules do have a positive effect on improving students' AL levels. However, there is a possibility that one would be able to make an even greater difference if the modules were more relevant to the specific disciplines students pursue. This may be beneficial in a number of ways that could address some of the concerns raised above. Firstly, students may be even more motivated to treat the modules seriously if they could see the practical relevance of the material used in the modules for their other subjects. In the second place, redesigning the modules to be more discipline-specific (while maintaining the underlying AL abilities identified earlier in this study) would enable AL course designers to uncover the specific AL requirements of different disciplines (mainstream lecturers have also indicated that their disciplines have specific AL requirements). This will mean that AL course designers and mainstream lecturers will have to work more closely together. If closer working relationships could be established with mainstream academics, this may ensure that such lecturers become more knowledgeable about what is done in AL. In fact, the VTC has already started with a process of reconceptualising its AL intervention and diversify it to cater for the specific AL requirements of the different academic disciplines on campus. What will be important in this case, is to continually measure the impact of newly designed interventions in order

to see whether they make a more substantial difference in developing the AL abilities of students.

5.5 Limitations of the study

It is important to note that this study was conducted at only one of the three campuses of North-West University. As such, one should be careful not to generalise these findings to the other two campuses. However, because the student profile of the Mafikeng Campus is close to that of the VTC and they make use of the same generic AL intervention (as do the Potchefstroom Campus), one may expect similar gains for this campus if the implementation of the intervention is done in a similar way as at the VTC. This obviously needs to be investigated empirically before any claims could be made in this regard. Similarly, one should be cautious to generalise the findings to any other university that does not have the same profile as the VTC.

5.6 Suggestions for further study

The persistence of low levels of academic literacy with which students enter the higher education sector in South Africa, coupled with the proliferation of AL intervention programmes across the sector, is a matter that necessitates rigorous and regular monitoring. This monitoring should take the form of constant evaluation and refinement of the intervention mechanisms used.

The following suggestions are therefore made for possible further research:

Firstly, it may be beneficial to replicate the same study across the other campuses of North-West University. This could give a clearer picture of the effectiveness of the AGLE 111 and AGLE 121 modules on the other campuses.

The impact of any newly designed, discipline-specific modules at the VTC will also have to be determined. One would probably not be able to use the TALL for such an assessment, but will have to design assessment instruments that evaluate whether specific AL abilities improve in students' mainstream modules in order to show any effect.

5.7 Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the positive impact of the AL intervention on the improvement of AL levels of students at the VTC. It has further made recommendations about various important issues that were pointed out in the findings. If taken seriously, the implementation of these recommendations may lead to the intervention having an even greater impact on the improvement of students' AL levels.

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Addendum A

RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE A – Student perceptions about the impact of AGLE 111 (academic literacy) at the Vaal Triangle Campus of the North-West University

Introduction, consent and additional information

This questionnaire includes questions about your language background as well as your perceptions of the academic literacy modules offered on campus. The questionnaire forms part of a broader study undertaken by the researcher to establish the impact of the compulsory academic literacy module, AGLE 111 offered by the Vaal Triangle Campus of the North-West University (NWU).

The information provided by participants herein will be used for research purposes as well as to inform academics and academic managers at the NWU about the best possible ways to provide academic literacy support to students. The data collected will be reported anonymously in books, academic journals, at academic conferences, and in reports to academic managers. Your responses to this questionnaire will not influence your results in any of your modules.

The necessary ethical considerations have been taken into account in the development of this questionnaire. The ethical clearance reference is:

I (please give your full names and surname).....

Student number .....

hereby give permission to the researcher, Mr. G.J. Mhlongo to report the data gathered in this questionnaire anonymously in books, academic journals and institutional reports, and at academic conferences. In addition, he may make use of any student records such as final results (marks) that will be reported on anonymously.

....

Signature **Date**

SECTION A: BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Please put a cross (X) in the block that represents the appropriate answer to the following questions, or write down an answer.

1. What is your gender?

Female		Male	

2. What is your age?

_____

3. At which school did you complete Grade 12 (matriculate)?

Name of School	Town / city

4. For what qualification are you enrolled (e.g. BA Communication)?

_____

SECTION B: LANGUAGE BACKGROUND

1. What is your home language?

a. Afrikaans		k. Portuguese	
b. Dutch		l. Sesotho	
c. English		m. Setswana	
d. French		n. SiSwati	
e. German		o. Spanish	
f. Hebrew		p. XhiTsonga	
g. IsiNdebele		q. XhiVenda	
h. IsiXhosa		r. Other(specify)	
i. IsiZulu			
j. Italian			

2. What was the language of teaching used in your pre-tertiary education? Use the 'additional information' column if you want to add extra information.

Education level	Language	Additional information
a. Primary school 1		
Primary school 2		
Primary school 3		
b. Secondary school 1		
Secondary school 2		
Secondary school 3		

3. Did you receive any formal schooling in English as a subject, in other words, did you study English as a subject at school (or in any other formal educational context)?

a) Yes	
b) No	

4. If yes, for how long did you study English as a subject?

.....years.

5. Please mark the languages you know in order of your proficiency/ability in them, as requested below.

5.1 Language known: Afrikaans	Excellent	Poorly	Average
Read			
Write			
Listen/Understand			
Speak			
5.2 Language known: English			
Read			
Write			
Listen/Understand			
Speak			
5.3 Language known: IsiZulu			
Read			
Write			
Listen/Understand			
Speak			
5.4 Language known: Sesotho			
Read			
Write			
Listen/Understand			
Speak			
5.5 Language known: (Specify).....			
Read			
Write			
Listen/Understand			
Speak			
5.6 Language known: (Specify).....			
Read			
Write			
Listen/Understand			
Speak			

SECTION C: IMPRESSIONS ABOUT AGLE 111

1. Do you think the score (code) that you received for the English academic literacy test (TALL) that you wrote at the beginning of the year is an accurate reflection of your academic literacy ability in English?

a) Yes	
b) No	

Please substantiate your answer:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

2. How did you feel when you first learnt that you did not pass the test?

a) I felt angry.	
b) I felt demotivated.	
c) I Could not believe it.	
d) It tested abilities I could develop further.	
e) It tested abilities I did not do at school.	
f) The test was unfair.	
g) Other:	

3. How did you feel when you first learnt that you had to complete an English academic literacy module (AGLE 111) because you did not pass the test?

a) I felt angry.	
b) I felt demotivated.	
c) I could not believe it.	
d) It may help me develop academic literacy abilities essential for tertiary study.	
e) It may help me develop abilities I did not do at school.	
f) I felt it was a waste of my time.	
g) Other:	

4. How many AGLE 111 class sessions have you attended this semester?

a) 100%	
b) 75%	
c) 50%	
d) <50%	

If you attended less than 50% of the AGLE 111 lectures, please provide a reason as to why this happened:

_____

_____

_____

_____

5. Do you like attending AGLE 111 class sessions?

a) Yes	
b) No	

Substantiate your answer:

_____

_____

_____

_____

6. .

a) Do you think that you have benefited from attending the AGLE 111 lectures?

a) Yes	
b) No	

b) If yes, which aspect(s) of the module did you find most helpful in your studies?

a) Study skills (coping mechanisms, making summaries, etc.)	
b) Academic reading (reading strategies, reading comprehension, etc.)	
c) Academic writing (writing strategies for writing tests, examinations, longer assignments, etc.)	
d) Academic argumentation/reasoning	
e) Other:	

c) If no, why not?

_____

_____

_____

7. Do you believe that your attendance of the AGLE 111 module helped you to do better in your other subjects?

a) Yes	
b) No	

Please substantiate your answer:

_____

_____

_____

8. Do you believe that the module helped you to develop your academic literacy abilities?

a) Yes	
b) No	

If not, please substantiate your answer:

_____

_____

_____

9. If you were to recommend any changes to the module, what would they be?

_____

_____

_____

Addendum B

RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE B – Student perceptions about the impact of AGLE 121 (academic literacy) at the Vaal Triangle Campus of the North-West University

Introduction, consent and additional information

Your participation in this research project is voluntary. The questionnaire includes questions about your language background as well as your perceptions of the academic literacy modules offered on campus. The questionnaire forms part of a broader study undertaken by the researcher to establish the impact of the compulsory academic literacy module, AGLE 121 offered by the Vaal Triangle Campus of the North-West University (NWU).

The information provided by participants herein will be used for research purposes as well as to inform academics and academic managers at the NWU about the best possible ways to provide academic literacy support to students. The data collected will be reported anonymously in books, academic journals, at academic conferences, and in reports to academic managers. Your responses to this questionnaire will not influence your results in any of your modules.

The necessary ethical considerations have been taken into account in the development of this questionnaire.

I (please give your full names and surname).....

Student number .....

hereby give permission to the researcher, Mr G.J. Mhlongo to report the data gathered in this questionnaire anonymously in books, academic journals and institutional reports, and at academic conferences. In addition, he may make use of any student records such as final results (marks) that will be reported on anonymously.

....

Signature **Date**

SECTION A: BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Please put a cross (X) in the block that represents the appropriate answer to the following questions, or write down an answer.

1. What is your gender?

Female		Male	

2. What is your age?

_____

3. At which school did you complete Grade 12 (matriculate)?

Name of School	Town/city

4. For what qualification are you enrolled (e.g. BA Communication)?

_____

SECTION B: LANGUAGE BACKGROUND

1. What is your home language?

a. Afrikaans		k. Portuguese	
b. Dutch		l. Sesotho	
c. English		m. Setswana	
d. French		n. SiSwati	
e. German		o. Spanish	
f. Hebrew		p. XhiTsonga	
g. IsiNdebele		q. XhiVenda	
h. IsiXhosa		r. Other(specify)	
i. IsiZulu			
j. Italian			

2. What was the language of teaching used in your pre-tertiary education? Use the 'additional information' column if you want to add extra information.

Education level	Language	Additional information
a. Primary school 1		
Primary school 2		
Primary school 3		
b. Secondary school 1		
Secondary school 2		
Secondary school 3		

3. Did you receive any formal schooling in English as a subject, in other words, did you study English as a subject at school (or in any other formal educational context)?

a) Yes	
b) No	

4. If yes, for how long did you study English as a subject?

.....years.

5. Please rate all the languages you know in the table below by awarding ‘1’ for your strongest language followed by ‘2’ for the second strongest, etc. Then also indicate your proficiency in each of the four language skills for every language you know by marking the appropriate box with an ‘X’.

5.1 Afrikaans - Rating	**Poor**	**Average**	**Excellent**
Read			
Write			
Listen/Understand			
Speak			
5.2 English – Rating			
Read			
Write			
Listen/Understand			
Speak			
5.3 IsiZulu – Rating			
Read			
Write			
Listen/Understand			
Speak			
5.4 Sesotho – Rating			
Read			
Write			
Listen/Understand			
Speak			
5.5 Other Language: (Specify) ..... Rating			
Read			
Write			
Listen/Understand			
Speak			
5.6 Other language: (Specify) ..... Rating			
Read			
Write			
Listen/Understand			
Speak			

SECTION C: IMPRESSIONS ABOUT AGLE 121

1. Do you think the score (code) that you received for the English academic literacy test (TALL) that you wrote at the beginning of the year is an accurate reflection of your academic literacy ability in English?

a) Yes	
b) No	

Please substantiate your answer:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

2. How did you feel when you first learnt that you did pass the TALL test?
(NB: **Not** applicable to for students who failed the test at the beginning of the year)

a) I felt happy.	
b) I felt motivated.	
c) I could not believe it.	
d) It tested abilities I have mastery over.	
e) The test was very fair.	
f) Other:	

3. How did you feel when you first learnt that you had to complete an English academic literacy module (AGLE 121) despite the fact that you did pass the TALL test? (NB: **not** applicable for students who failed the test at the beginning of the year)

a) I felt angry.	
b) I felt demotivated.	
c) I could not believe it.	
d) It may help me develop academic literacy abilities essential for tertiary study.	
e) It may help me develop abilities I did not do at school.	
f) I felt it would be a waste of my time.	
g) Other:	

4. How many AGLE 121 class sessions have you attended this semester?

a) 100%	
b) 75%	
c) 50%	
d) <50%	

If you attended less than 50% of the AGLE 121 lectures, please provide a reason as to why this happened:

_____

_____

_____

_____

5. Do you like attending AGLE 121 class sessions?

a) Yes	
b) No	

Substantiate your answer:

_____

_____

_____

6. .

a) Do you think that you have benefited from attending the AGLE 121 lectures?

a) Yes	
b) No	

b) If yes, which aspect(s) of the module did you find most helpful in your studies?

a) Study skills (coping mechanisms, making summaries, etc.)	
b) Academic reading (reading strategies, reading comprehension, etc.)	
c) Academic writing (writing strategies for writing tests, examinations, longer assignments, etc.)	
d) Academic argumentation/reasoning	
e) Other:	

If no, why not?

_____

_____

_____

_____

7. Do you believe that your attendance of the AGLE 121 module helped you to do better in your other subjects?

a) Yes	
b) No	

Please substantiate your answer:

_____

_____

_____

_____

8. Do you believe that the module helped you to develop your academic literacy abilities?

a) Yes	
b) No	

If not, please substantiate your answer:

_____

_____

_____

9. If you were to recommend any changes to the module, what would they be?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Addendum C

RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE C – Lecturer perceptions about the impact of the academic literacy modules (AGLE 111 and 121) at the Vaal Triangle Campus of the North-West University

Introduction, consent and additional information

This questionnaire forms part of a broader study undertaken by the researcher to establish the impact of the compulsory academic literacy (AL) modules, AGLE 111/121 offered by the Vaal Triangle Campus of the North West University. The questionnaire includes questions about your perceptions of your students' AL ability as well as your opinion about the impact of the current AL intervention offered on campus.

In order to create a shared understanding of what is meant when we refer to academic literacy, the term is defined for the purposes of this questionnaire as:

…the integrated academic language and reasoning ability of students that enables them to cope with the demands of studying in a tertiary academic environment. Such ability incorporates, amongst others, aspects of how students deal purposefully with written (and spoken) texts in their accessing, processing and production of academic information. This mainly includes: an understanding of how different academic texts work (their structure, type of content and how language is employed to create this structure and content), strategies for selecting, arranging and generating information appropriately in their academic argumentation and how students generally integrate their familiarity with academic language conventions (e.g. register, style and appropriateness and correctness of language) in their production of academic texts.

The information provided by participants herein will be used for research purposes as well as to inform other academics and academic managers at the NWU about the best possible ways to provide academic support to students. This will not in any way influence your performance evaluation or your students' academic results.
The data collected herein will be reported anonymously in books, academic journals, at academic conferences, and in reports to academic managers.

The necessary ethical considerations have been taken into account in the development of this questionnaire. The ethical clearance reference is:

When you agree to participate by completing this questionnaire, you give permission to the researcher to report the data anonymously in books, academic journals, at academic conferences, and as part of institutional reports at the NWU.

I, (please give your full names and surname).....

hereby give permission to the researcher, Mr G.J. Mhlongo to report the data gathered through this questionnaire anonymously in books, academic journals, institutional reports and at academic conferences.

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Signature **Date**

SECTION A: PROFESSIONAL INFORMATION

1. To which faculty and department/school do you belong?

Faculty	
School/Department	

2. Did you complete any formal English language course at your undergraduate level (English on first, second or third year level, for example)?

a) Yes	
b) No	

3. If yes, please provide details about the course/qualification:

COURSE	LEVEL/QUALIFICATION
a)	
b)	
c)	
d)	
e)	

4. Please list the specific course(s)/module(s) that you present or have presented to first year students during the 2012 academic year:

Module/course code:	
Number of students:	

SECTION B: LECTURERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR STUDENTS' ACADEMIC LITERACY ABILITY AND PROGRESS

1. Considering the definition of academic literacy provided in the introduction, how would you rate first year students' level of English academic literacy:

   a) When they first arrive at the university:

1.Low	2	3. Average	4	5. High

   b) At the end of the first semester:

1.Low	2	3. Average	4	5. High

   c) At the end of their first year:

1. Low	2	3. Average	4	5. High

2. .

   a) Do you believe that an acceptable level of academic literacy is necessary for students to succeed in a university context?

a) Yes	
b) No	

c) If yes, please explain in short what AL abilities you believe students need to master in order to be successful with their studies:

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3. Two academic literacy modules - AGLE 111 and AGLE 121 – are offered on the VTC campus to first year students. What do you think is the focus of these modules?

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4.

a) Considering your contact with the first year students of 2012, do you believe that the AGLE 111/121 modules had an effect on students' academic literacy abilities (in essence, therefore, did you notice any significant changes in their AL abilities)?

a) Yes	
b) No	

b) Please briefly explain your answer to 4a. above:

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5.

a) Do you believe that offering academic literacy support to students for 1 year is sufficient for the development of their academic literacy abilities?

a) Yes	
b) No	

b) Please briefly explain your answer to 5a. above:

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6.

a) Do you believe that the university is doing enough in supporting students who are ‘at-risk’ regarding their AL abilities in order to succeed with their studies?

a) Yes	
b) No	

b) If no, could you offer any suggestions on how students could be better supported to develop their AL abilities:

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7.

a) Do you believe that the AL abilities students need in your discipline are different from those required in other disciplines?

a) Yes	
b) No	

b) If yes, in what way are they different?

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8.

a) Do you believe the language used in your discipline is specific to the discipline in question?

a) Yes	
b) No	

b) If you believe discipline-specific language exists, in what way would you say it is specific in your discipline?

a) Using specific genres and functional text types (e.g. formal reports, etc.)	
b) Using field/subject specific terminology	
c) A combination of A and B above	
d) Other (please specify)	

9. In your experience of teaching first year students, what do you believe are the most challenging aspects of their academic work?

a) Mastering specific vocabulary in their respective discipline(s)	
b) General reading of prescribed material	
c) General writing of assignments, test and exams	
d) All the above	
e) Any other(please specify)	

10. To what extent does your students' successful completion of their studies depend on production of correct and meaningful written texts (*tick an appropriate box)*

1 not at all		2		3		4		very large extent 5	

11. How much writing is typically required of your students? please elaborate (e.g. for first year students – 2 assignments, 2 tests, 1 exam, etc.)

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12. Who do you think should be responsible for teaching students the academic literacy abilities they need for successful study?

a) Subject lecturers	
b) Academic literacy specialists	
c) A combination of A and B above	
d) Other (specify)	

Thank you so much for your participation and co-operation