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Students’ Perceptions of Writing: Evidence from Undergraduate Economics in South Africa

By

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ABSTRACT

Thinking and writing economics can be an extremely daunting and difficult task, especially for undergraduate students. Few opportunities exist for students to apply their knowledge and write critically in the economics discourse, especially in their undergraduate years of study. With this in mind, the Nedbank and Old Mutual Budget Speech Essay Competition was launched in 1972 with the aim of encouraging young students to participate in important national economic debates. The competition is open to full time and part time undergraduate and postgraduate students from South Africa and SADC countries. A university department at a large residential university in the Gauteng province has instituted a system to encourage students to write the essay in small and regular intervals throughout the first semester of the year. Students are also provided with writing support outside of the classroom and a number of motivational talks are held to encourage students’ participation and academic engagement.

Despite the department’s efforts, many undergraduate economics students choose not to participate in the competition. The aim of this study is to analyse students’ perceptions of writing in order to understand why participation in the writing competition is so low. The study begins by exploring the literature related to the writing process, university writing and writing like an economist. Thereafter, the study briefly explains the model used to encourage writing among undergraduate economics students. Subsequently, the study’s methodology is described and a univariate analysis is applied to survey data from the 2018 cohort of second and third year economics students. Results suggest that students struggle to synthesise large volumes of literature to form their own economic views. Furthermore, students seem to struggle with time management of essay writing amidst their busy academic timetables. The study provides some useful information on how the department could adapt its writing model to assist students to better manage the writing process and subsequently, encourage more meaningful academic engagement and greater competition participation.

Keywords: academic writing, undergraduate economics, students’ perceptions

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1. Introduction

Writing has long been identified as a process which yields a product (Murray, 1972 & Elbow, 1998). However, writing clearly and persuasively can be difficult mainly because the writing process itself is often intimidating and demotivating (Elbow, 1981). University or College students often experience this intimidation first hand, for a variety of reasons. Some students may be writing in a new language, other students may be struggling to integrate theory with their opinions, writing for a specific discourse may prove challenging or a lack of basic time management may hinder the writing process, among countless other challenges (Phakiti and Li, 2011).

As if the writing process was not perplexing enough, writing in the economics discipline at university-level comes with its own challenges (Brunnermeier, 2017). As aspiring economists, economics students are required to “think like an economist” and write using the “language of economic analysis” (Neugeboren, 2005). This involves clearly stipulating any underlying assumptions, outlining any underpinning theories, presenting relationships using mathematical equations and conducting empirical validations using different kinds of data, among rigorous analysis and discussion (Neugeboren, 2005 & Brunnermeier, 2017).

The writing process, thinking like an economist and convening a piece of writing using the language of economic analysis can seem daunting to many undergraduate economics students who have little writing experience and sparse engagement with economics discourse. In the South African context, Nedbank and Old Mutual launched the budget speech essay competition in 1972 in an attempt to encourage economics students to debate topical issues faced by the South African economy. While the competition receives about 20 000 essay entrants per annum, this is a small number of entries considering that the University of South Africa’s economics department alone teaches 30 000 economics students per semester (University of South Africa, 2018).

A university department at a large residential university in the Gauteng province has instituted a system to encourage students to write the essay in small and regular intervals throughout the first semester of the year. Students are also provided with writing support outside of the classroom and a number of motivational talks are held to encourage student participation and academic engagement. Despite the department’s efforts, many undergraduate economics students choose not to participate in the competition. The aim of this study is to analyse students’ perceptions of writing in order to understand why participation in the writing competition is so low.

The study begins by exploring the literature related to the writing process, university writing and writing like an economist. Thereafter, the study briefly explains the model used to encourage writing among undergraduate economics students at a large residential university in the Gauteng province. Subsequently, the study’s methodology is described and a univariate analysis is applied to survey data from the 2018 cohort of second and third year economics students from this university. The results are discussed and used to provide useful recommendations to encourage more meaningful academic engagement and greater competition participation among undergraduate economics students at the university of interest.
2. Conceptual Framework

2.1. The Writing Skills System

A university department at a large residential university in the Gauteng province has instituted a system to encourage students to write the essay in small and regular intervals throughout the first semester of the year. The essay forms part of the curriculum of a formal subject and counts 10% and 20% of the semester mark for this subject for second and third year students respectively. Students are required to attend writing lectures once a week, for 12 academic weeks, where different aspects of writing in economics are addressed. The lecture is about 40 minutes long and takes place in the afternoon in a lecture venue or a computer laboratory, depending on the objective of the lecture and theme for the week. There is a writing tutor available to consult with students, individually or in a group, for up to 25 hours per week. The writing tutor is typically a postgraduate student, who has extensive writing experience. There were four motivational talks held to discuss aspects around competition entry, writing and general economics discourse.

The system used in the writing skills classes is process-driven, as opposed to product-driven, which is similar to Elbow’s process (Elbow, 1998). Each lecture is based on a specific theme and involves the completion of an activity which contributes towards the essay gradually. Each weekly activity is generally quite different in order to hold the students’ interest. Activities include mind maps, blog posts regarding current affairs (mainly economics and politics-related), shorter opinion-pieces on aspects of the essay and referencing practice exercises, among other activities highlighted in table 1 below. Each activity is graded and students are provided with detailed feedback on each activity for reflective improvement purposes. Table 1 below outlines activities for 8 weeks, with the remaining 4 weeks used for additional student consultations.

*Table 1*

**Writing skills activity outline**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week and theme</th>
<th>Second year activity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Third year activity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 1: An introduction to argument</td>
<td>Activity 1: Online discussion</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Activity 1: Online discussion</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 2: Essay planning</td>
<td>Activity 2: Mind map</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Activity 2: Mind map</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 3: Developing good arguments</td>
<td>Activity 3: Referencing practice</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Activity 3: Referencing practice</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 4: One-to-one or group consultation</td>
<td>Activity 4: Sub claim formulation</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Activity 4: Sub claim formulation</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.2. What Does Literature Say?

Literature suggests that writing should be process-driven (Elbow, 1998). Moreover, writing tasks should be aligned clearly with the discipline, sequentially with the curriculum and broken down into manageable and meaningful pieces that can scaffold each other (Beufort, 2007). It is also important to be mindful of transitions from secondary to higher education, both from a curriculum and writing perspective (Foster, 2017).

The writing skills system outlined in the preceding section is process-driven, in line with Elbow (1998), curriculum-aligned and presented in smaller pieces, in line with Beufort (2007), and grounded in writing theory, more specifically, the Toulmin model (Toulmin, 1958). The Toulmin model is a method of reasoning which involves three essential parts – the claim, the grounds or evidence (comprising of the data, qualifier and rebuttal) and the warrant (Wentzel, 2011). Toulmin (1958) outlined that a good argument should begin by explicitly stating the claim, shown as \( C \) in figure 1 below, otherwise known as a viewpoint. This claim should be supported by facts or evidence, referred to as data, \( D \). \( D \) can take an empirical or non-empirical form. The relevance of the data with respect to the claim is then explained clearly and this is called the warrant, \( W \). The warrant is critical because it is the reader’s explanation of their viewpoint. The extent to which the claim can be accepted is then rigorously critiqued and this is called the qualifier, \( Q \). The qualifier is usually used to constructively validate or invalidate the viewpoint based on all the available evidence. Lastly, the counterview, also called the rebuttal, \( R \), is then explored. The rebuttal can focus on the claim, the data or the warrant and takes into account opposing views.
When students are constructing the main part of their essay, known as “the body” of their essay, the Toulmin model is used as a guide to help them formulate their views systematically. Since the Toulmin model itself is a process, students are encouraged to take one claim from their essay and use the Toulmin model to transform their claim into a concise, meaningful paragraph. The budget speech competition essay is usually about 2500 words in length and this translates into about five or six claims within the essay, over and above the introduction, conclusion and references. Students gradually build up each claim throughout the semester and receive feedback on the clarity and quality of their claims. Each activity is accompanied by a rubric, which provides clear writing guidance and rigorous feedback to each student. Table 2 below outlines one of the rubrics used for a weekly activity on claims.

**Table 2**

*An example of a rubric used for a weekly activity on claims*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Good (2 – 3)</th>
<th>Mediocre (1 – 1.5)</th>
<th>Weak (0 – 0.5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Claim**     | 1. The sub-claim is clearly stated at the beginning of the paragraph.  
2. The sub-claim is clearly connected through argument to make up bigger claims, until the thesis is reached. | 1. The sub-claim is partially stated at the beginning of the paragraph.  
2. The sub-claim is partially connected through argument to make up bigger claims, until the thesis is reached. | 1. The sub-claim is not stated at the beginning of the paragraph.  
2. The sub-claim is not connected through argument to make up bigger claims, until the thesis is reached. |
| **Data**      | 3. Empirical evidence is used to derive the sub-claim.  
4. Claims are logically derived from given facts or axioms (deduction). | 3. Empirical evidence is partially used to derive the sub-claim.  
4. Claims are partially derived from given facts or axioms (deduction). | 3. Empirical evidence not used to derive the sub-claim.  
4. Claims are not derived from given facts or axioms (deduction). |
3. Methodology

In May 2018, members of the writing skills team wanted to examine second and third year students’ perceptions of writing. More specifically, the team was interested in the factors that hindered undergraduate writing. Thus, a voluntary questionnaire was issued in the writing skills lectures and students were encouraged to anonymously share their experiences of the writing skills system. Some of the questions were open-ended while others were either likert or binary-type questions. The questionnaire consisted of a comprehensive informed consent clause and students were sufficiently briefed on the purpose of the study. The questionnaire satisfied all the ethical clearance requirements of the residential university where students were surveyed.

The lecturer was not permitted to discuss aspects of the questionnaire with the participants. Students were free to leave their completed questionnaires in a folder after class at the back of the venue. The study made use of a descriptive research design and the questionnaire issued to participants contained 15 questions. Table 3 below outlines the structure of each question:

Table 3
Survey questions and answer structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How useful were the writing skills lectures?</td>
<td>Participants could choose from three options: not useful, somewhat useful or extremely useful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Provide a brief reason for your answer.</td>
<td>Open-ended: participants were provided with 4 lines of space to respond.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How did you go about writing your essay this semester? Did you follow the</td>
<td>Open-ended: participants were provided with 4 lines of space to respond.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
structure provided in class (weekly activities) or did you use another structure? If you used another structure, please tell us more about this structure.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. What was missing from the writing skills lectures? You may select more than one option.</td>
<td>Participants could choose from five options with 4 lines of space to elaborate: tips on how to manage reading large amounts of information, tips on how to summarise and synthesise large amounts of information, tips on how to begin thinking for an essay, the research process or other (please elaborate).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. What did you like about the writing skills sub-module?</td>
<td>Open-ended: participants were provided with 4 lines of space to respond.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. What did you dislike about the writing skills sub-module?</td>
<td>Open-ended: participants were provided with 4 lines of space to respond.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. What more can we do to support you with your writing?</td>
<td>Open-ended: participants were provided with 3 lines of space to respond.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Did you make use of the writing tutor?</td>
<td>Participants could choose from two options: yes or no.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. If yes, what exactly did the writing tutor assist you with? If no, why did you not make use of the writing tutor?</td>
<td>Open-ended: participants were provided with 4 lines of space to respond.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Was the writing tutor helpful?</td>
<td>Participants could choose from two options: yes or no.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. At any point, did you struggle to understand what your lecturer was saying? If yes, what exactly did you struggle with?</td>
<td>Participants could choose from two options with 4 lines of space to elaborate: yes or no.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Do you struggle to read in English?</td>
<td>Participants could choose from two options: yes or no.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Do you struggle to write in English?</td>
<td>Participants could choose from two options: yes or no.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Did you attend any of the Budget Speech Competition Motivational Indabas?</td>
<td>Participants could choose from two options: yes or no.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. If not, why did you not attend any of the Budget Speech Competition Motivational Indabas?</td>
<td>Participants could choose from three options with 3 lines of space to elaborate: too busy studying, Indabas were scheduled at inconvenient times or other (please elaborate).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ own adaptation

Based on the validity criteria specified by Sullivan (2011) - mainly content and response process in this instance - the questionnaire used in this study is sound. In terms of the content, the questions were developed by the lecturers interested in ascertaining whether students in the course experienced any writing challenges. Moreover, the student responses matched the questions.

Non-probability sampling was applied in this study as survey responses were voluntary. Out of approximately 190 enrolled second year students and 301 enrolled third year students, 51 second year students and 82 third year students volunteered to participate in this study by
completing the questionnaire. Responses to each questionnaire were processed and all responses were collectively used to conduct a descriptive analysis of each question. The data does not contain enough general demographic information over time, such as age, race, academic performance, schooling quintiles and home language, to conduct meaningful bivariate and multivariate analyses. Nevertheless, the univariate analysis does provide a useful starting point for measuring the writing experience of student participants.

4. Results

All data were analysed graphically. For the binary response and likert-scale type questions, analysis was done with respect to the response options. For example, we looked at how many students responded yes or no and how many students responded not useful, somewhat useful or extremely useful for these questions. Similarly, the open-ended questions were coded according to each response and all responses were analysed graphically.

4.1. How Useful were the Writing Skills Lectures?

On average, the second year students found the writing skills lectures more useful than the third year students. 56% of second year students found the lectures to be ‘extremely useful’, while 42% found the lectures to be ‘somewhat useful’ and only 2% found the lectures to be ‘not useful’. For the third years, 37% of participants found lectures “extremely useful”, 61% found lectures “somewhat useful” and 2% rated lectures as “not useful” respectively. This meant that, on average, for the both groups of students combined, 46% found the writing lectures to be ‘extremely useful’, 52% found lectures to be ‘somewhat useful’ and 2% felt that they were ‘not useful’.

![Usefulness of lectures](image)

Figure 2: Usefulness of lectures – second year versus third year students

4.2. Reason for response in question one.

For students who felt that the writing skills lectures were ‘not useful’, the primary concern was that instructions were unclear or difficult to follow. This concern, as well as the opinion that some of the lectures were unnecessary due to their content being self-explanatory, featured prominently amongst respondents who felt that the writing skills lectures were ‘somewhat useful’. This group also felt, on average, that the lecturer elaborated well which led to a clearer understanding of concepts while some respondents disagreed and thought that the lecturer’s instructions were unclear and difficult to follow. For students who felt that the writing skills lectures were ‘extremely useful’, the majority felt that the lecturer elaborated well which led to a clearer understanding or that the lectures helped to improve their writing skills.
4.3. Process and method applied by students

Table 4

Process and method applied by students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Second year students</th>
<th>Third year students</th>
<th>All</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class Method</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>75.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own Method</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Response</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ own adaptation

76% of all students followed the method of writing an academic essay and the structure that was discussed in class.

4.4. What was missing from the writing skills lectures?

When asked what was missing from the writing skills lectures, the most common response was ‘tips on how to manage reading large amounts of information’, with 21% of the respondents selecting this option. Other most common responses include ‘Tips on how to summarise and synthesise large amounts of information’ (11%) as well as a combination of both ‘Tips on how to manage reading large amounts of information’ and ‘the research process’ (9%).

4.5. What did you like about the writing skills sub-module?

When asked what they enjoyed most about the writing skills system, the two most common responses were that the course helped students to refine their writing skills and prepared them for postgraduate research (38%) and that the course exposed them to new information on an interesting topic (14%). Only 10% of students responded that they didn’t enjoy any aspect of the writing system.
4.6. What did you dislike about the writing skills sub-module?

When asked what they disliked most about the writing skills course, the two most common responses were ‘nothing’ (17%) and that the workload was too much, with too many mini-submissions (11%). Only 2% of all students responded that they disliked everything about the sub-module.

4.7. What more can we do to support you with your writing?

When asked what more could have been done by the lecturer and tutor to support students with their writing, the two most common responses were that there should be more lecture time, more individual consultation time and more writing tutors available to consult with (13%) and ‘nothing’ (11%). This question also had a high non-response rate of 47%.

4.8. Did you make use of the writing tutor?

A greater proportion of second year students (61%) chose to consult with the writing tutor than did third years (55%). Overall, 57% of all students sought the help of one of the writing tutors during the semester.

4.9. If yes, what did the writing tutor help you with? If no, why did you choose not to consult?

Of all students who sought the help of a writing tutor, 87% said that the tutor was helpful in clarifying concepts and explaining instructions and helped with format, structure and referencing for their essays. Of all students who opted not to see a writing tutor, the most common reason cited was that they did not have time to consult with a tutor (12%) or that the lecturer had already explained clearly enough (8%). Some of the results from this question did not make sense entirely. For example, people who answered that they didn’t see the tutors still answered option 2.

![Figure 4: Reasons for choosing not to consult with a tutor](image)
4.10. Was the writing tutor helpful?

Of all students who opted to seek the help of a writing tutor during the course, 96% responded that they found the writing tutor to be helpful.

4.11. At any point, did you struggle to understand what your lecturer was saying?

23% of all students reported that at one point or another, they struggled to understand what the lecturer was saying.

4.12. Do you struggle to read or write in English?

5% of all students reported that they struggle to read in English and 6% of all students reported that they struggle to write in English.

4.13. Did you attend any BSC Motivational Indabas?

17% of all student participants elected to attend at least one of the motivational indabas.

4.14. If not, why did you not attend any of the BSC Motivational Indabas?

Of the students who did not attend any of the motivational indabas, 58% reported that this was because the indabas were scheduled at inconvenient times and 25% reported that they were too busy studying during the time the indabas were scheduled to take place. The remainder of students reported a combination of these two reasons or ‘other’.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study finds that the current writing system does what it was intended to do, and that is to get students to write. Many student participants seem to understand and appreciate the writing system in its current form. They find the lectures useful, complete the weekly activities, engage with the lecturer and writing tutor and write the essay using the suggested writing structure discussed during the lectures.

Despite its success, there are a number of areas that could be improved upon to enhance the student writing experience and participation in the competition. The writing skills system needs to equip students to better read, synthesis and analyse large volumes of information. This could help students to see writing the essay as less intimidating and more manageable. Furthermore, the weekly submissions seem to put students under additional pressure over and above their busy academic timetables. The writing skills system needs to find a way to enhance student participation through less frequent activities. This could help students to better manage their writing. Longer lecture periods could also assist students to engage with the lecturer regarding the writing process. In addition, past experiences of competition finalists and winners suggest that the motivational talks encouraged them to participate in the competition. This, together with the results from the question 14, is an indication that more needs to be done to encourage students to attend the motivational talks by arranging them at more convenient times during the semester.

Research-guided practice is critical for the development of effective learning and writing opportunities for students in any context. While it is important to implement strategies that may seem effective to improve student engagement and writing, it is important to follow the implementation up with research into the effectiveness of such strategies, especially when student retention and success is a priority. The survey used in this study was by no means comprehensive and does not necessarily imply that the writing system presented here is the only way to encourage undergraduate student writing. A reasonable next step would be to explore other ways to encourage students to write at university. Moreover, it is important to
ascertain the value of writing in the overall learning process, by examining whether increased undergraduate writing enhances students’ academic engagement and improves overall academic performance.

6. Reference List


