'We do not have a writing culture': exploring the nature of 'academic drift' through a study of lecturer perspectives on student writing in a vocational university

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‘We do not have a writing culture’: Exploring the nature of ‘academic drift’ through a study of lecturer perspectives on student writing in a vocational university.

Abstract

Vocational universities are increasingly becoming susceptible to pressures associated with the phenomenon known as ‘academic drift’. Yet the specific influence of such pressures is experienced differently at various institutional levels and by different stakeholders in such universities. Exploring lecturers’ understanding and perceptions of student academic writing can make visible the ways in which these pressures are realised, for example in the types of writing given value and writing pedagogies deemed suitable in the context of the vocational university. In this paper we report on an ethnographically shaped study exploring lecturers’ writing pedagogies and perceptions of students as academic writers at a South African vocational university. The study analytically illustrated how wider socio-political, regulatory and ideological framings of these universities was implicated in lecturers’ writing practices and pedagogies. The study found that lecturers and students were generally constricted by narrow vocationalist agendas, which reinforced negative conceptions of students as academic writers. Our findings suggest that while the explicit impact of academic drift drivers was minimally felt at the undergraduate diploma level of study in our research site, this appeared to close off the potential for writing to act as a means to facilitate students’ epistemic access to their disciplines.

Keywords

Vocational university, academic drift, student academic writing, writing pedagogies, South Africa

Introduction

The importance of academic writing, both as a signifier of intellectual acumen and aid in securing graduate employment and subsequent advancement, is widely assumed by universities. Additionally, university assessment regimes, dominated by the requirement to produce written texts to demonstrate learning, further cement the status of academic writing as a valued academic practice. The ways in which institutions understand and construct writing practices also offer an illuminating means whereby wider socio-political or regulatory framings, ideologies and values can be investigated. Academic writing practices can therefore act as a proxy for these wider framings and values. In particular, exploring the views, perceptions and writing pedagogies of subject lecturers, who are the main custodians of student writing development and support in the university, can help to make visible the points of connection between academic writing and these
wider socio-political framings. Focusing on subject lecturers’ perceptions and practices is of particular interest in vocational HE (HE) contexts where the multimodal texts and literacy practices encountered in such contexts are so diverse (Edwards and Smith, 2005; Edwards et al, 2013). Such diversity is primarily prompted by the institutional mandate to service the dual function of preparing graduates to meet the needs of both the university and professional domains. The complexity of literacy, language and writing practices required by these two different domains places particular demands on subject lecturers in vocational universities in ways that are not equally apparent in traditional universities.

Where empirical attention has been given to subject lecturers’ writing pedagogies, research has often focused on lecturers’ individual practices, on specific interventions, or has foregrounded students’ perspectives on those practices (see Tuck, 2018 for a detailed discussion). Limited attention has been paid to exploring the interrelationship between lecturers’ practices around student academic writing and broader institutional or societal contexts, with the exception of a small sample of researchers working within the academic literacies perspective (for example, Tuck, 2018 and McKenna, 2004) The research reported here, conducted in the South African (SA), vocational HE setting of the university of technology (UoT), is closely aligned to this body of research. It directly focused on lecturers’ perceptions and practices of student academic writing situated in this institutional context, explored through ethnographically shaped data collection strategies. Key to our analysis in this paper are the interrelated concepts of regulative and instructional discourses (Bernstein, 1996; 2000). These two concepts allow our analysis to illustrate the how wider socio-political framings, regulatory processes and values that determine the nature of the regulative discourse come to influence the practices of individual lecturers, i.e. what is described by the instructional discourse. Particularly, our analysis reveals the ways understandings of UoTs as a specific institutional type become implicated in lecturers’ perceptions and practices associated with student writing development.

Bernstein’s concepts of instructional and regulative discourses are part of his more elaborate theorisation of curriculum knowledge and recontextualisation. Together these theoretical concepts attempt to explain how curricula and the types of knowledge which underpin them are transformed and reconfigured because of ideologically charged struggles (Horden, 2014). These struggles involve different actors and processes as knowledge moves from its sites of production in either disciplinary or professional domains to become part of curriculum knowledge, academic subjects, pedagogic practices and assessment tasks – a process known as recontextualisation (Horden, 2014; Coleman, 2016). As a result, curriculum decision-making comes under the influence of the prevailing moral, socio-political, and regulatory norms (Shay, 2011, 2015). In vocational HE contexts, recontextualisation activities which support such decision-making are particularly complex and
layered since curricula ‘face both ways’ (Gamble, 2006; Wheelahan, 2010): towards the disciplines and also the various professional and occupational contexts (Horden, 2014). Tracing recontextualisation processes offers insight into what knowledge students are given access to. Explorations can draw attention to issues of epistemic access (Horden, 2014) and how such access is enacted in pedagogy in the vocational HE sector. The types of writing practices that students are expected to show competence in can therefore act as a powerful marker of what knowledge is privileged in the learning context (Paxton and Frith, 2013) pointing towards the extent to which students’ access to academic or professional domains is being facilitated through the development of these valued writing practices. In this paper we highlight how our focus on lecturers’ perceptions and pedagogies of student academic writing can make these elements visible.

**Using the analytical concepts of the instructional and regulative discourse**

Bernstein (2000) claims that curricula are always structured according to the prevailing instructional and regulative discourse (Wheelahan, 2010; Shay et al, 2011). For Bernstein (2000), the term ‘discourse’ is used to mean a rule or principle which creates and determines the functions and relationships that constitute curriculum, pedagogy and assessment practices. The rules of the instructional and regulative discourses express how the curriculum can be understood to result from intensive struggle over choices around the selection and transmission of knowledge in any educational programme of learning – thus encapsulating the process of curriculum recontextualisation (Shay, 2011). The instructional discourse provides the rules or principles through which educational instruction is conveyed. It ‘refers to what is transmitted’ (Morais, 2002, 560) communicating the curriculum’s message through the subjects being taught, relations between subjects and how they are taught and assessed (Coleman, 2016). Choices and practices at the level of instruction determine pedagogic practices. These are in turn ‘shaped, by among other things, the norms of the prevailing socio-political order’ (Shay, 2011, 317). Analytically, the regulative discourse therefore functions to provide this overarching social, political and moral ordering that informs and directs the ways in which meaning, norms, values and practices are given expression at the level of instruction (Bernstein, 2000; Morais, 2002; Wheelahan, 2010). The relationship between these two discourses are such that the regulative discourse dominates the instructional discourse in that the ‘attitudes and values, rules of conduct and principles of social order’ (Morais, 2002, 562) are intimately implicated in what content and knowledge is included in curricula and how it is transmitted in pedagogic practice. Therefore, choices available to lecturers at the level of instruction or pedagogy, may, for example, come under the influence of values held within the wider sector about the place and status of UoT institutions and their qualifications; what Coleman (2016) refers to as the sectoral regulative discourse.
Our research is concerned with investigating how UoT lecturers’ writing practices come under the influence of socio-political and ideological pressures that operate in the broader institutional, sectoral and HE systems. We are especially interested in considering how the sectoral regulative discourse (Coleman, 2016) and how factors embedded within it, such as dominant understandings of institutional differentiation in the SA HE system, construct lecturers’ perceptions about student writers and shape their practices around student writing pedagogies. The argument we advance in this paper is that alongside the perceptions and values that individual lectures may hold about students, academic writing or writing pedagogies, are a range of tensions and struggles at the level of regulation, ideology and identity linked to the UoT which filter into and create an ‘internal order’ informing and regulating the possibilities available at the level of pedagogic practice. We offer explanatory insights into the make-up of the sectoral regulative discourse and how these influences become instantiated in the instructional discourse of lecturers’ writing pedagogies. ‘Academic drift’ (Edwards and Miller, 2008) is a particularly visible feature of institutional differentiation and a core component of regulative pressures. We begin by arguing that academic drift is experienced rather acutely by UoTs. Then, by exploring lecturers’ perceptions and practices of student academic writing, we show how academic drift pressures become visible in unexpected ways in the kinds of writing and writing pedagogies valued and given legitimacy by lecturers.

In the following section, we discuss some of the features that pattern the UoT sectoral regulative discourse, placing particular attention on how institutional differentiation is realised. This discussion suggests that in the SA system, institutions which value theoretical knowledge and research come to hold more status and prestige.

**Institutional differentiation – academic drift and the shift towards conceptual coherence**

The relationship between or status of universities is frequently constituted around various aspects of differentiation, where the type of knowledge prioritised within institutions act as the primary differentiator. Globally, the divide between traditional and vocational universities are frequently understood as one of knowledge differentiation – that is, whether institutions assign value to either everyday/practical or abstract/theoretical knowledge (Horden, 2016; Shay, 2011 & 2012; Wheelahan, 2010; Young, 2013 and Muller, 2008; Perrellon, 2003). Traditional universities give credence to theoretical knowledge while vocational universities, in contrast, place more value on practical knowledge that has specific relevance to professional contexts (Codling and Meek, 2006 and Horden, 2016).
Muller (2008) uses the notion of ‘curriculum logics’ to describe how university curricula place more or less emphasis on certain knowledge types. The curriculum logic at play in traditional universities tends to be guided primarily by the disciplines and conceptual knowledge, therefore displaying conceptual coherence (Shay et al, 2011). In contrast, vocational universities, like UoTs, derive their curriculum logic from factors external to a discipline, as the often practical knowledge required by specific professions or occupations. These curricula are thus said to show contextual coherence (also see Shay et al, 2011, 106). Wheelahan (2010) and Shay (2012), however stress that theoretical and practical knowledge are not regarded as equal. Rather theoretical knowledge is generally regarded as having more value. This has led scholars to assert the importance of foregrounding such knowledge in HE qualifications irrespective of institutional type (Horden, 2016) with Wheelahan maintaining that ‘access to abstract knowledge is an issue of distributional justice’ (2010, 1). Within HE systems, the regulative discourse can be seen at play when higher value is ascribed to university curricula that foreground conceptual coherence at the expense of institutions whose curricula show stronger contextual coherence.

In national HE systems, Bleiklie (2003) proposes that institutional differentiation can take one of two paths: hierarchical or functional ordering. While hierarchical ordering allocates a specific rank position to institutions based on a prescribed set of evaluation criteria (typified by global ranking indices such as the Times HE World University Rankings), functional ordering recognizes the differential and unique tasks and functions fulfilled by institutions. Knowledge differentiation continues to be a key determinant of such ordering, and in practice most national HE systems resemble more of a hierarchical–functional continuum. Echoing the claims by Horden (2016) and Wheelahan (2010) that theoretical knowledge holds more value, most HE systems increasingly give more recognition to institutions and institutional types that assign greater value to the pursuit of theoretical knowledge and ‘pure’ research (Bleiklie, 2003; Codling and Meek, 2006; McFarlane, 2011). This shift is often understood as ‘academic drift’: a term used particularly within vocational universities to describe the uptake and valuing of academic practices usually located in traditional universities and the devaluing or dismissal of those traditionally associated with vocational qualifications and institutions (Edwards and Miller, 2008).

In the European HE sector, there is some acknowledgement of the converse phenomenon of ‘vocational drift’ affecting traditional universities who have also come under market pressures to ensure their qualification and graduates hold more relevance and utility for outside industries and professions (De Wit and Verhoeven, 2003; Perellon, 2003; Croxford and Raffe, 2015). However, the strength of hierarchical ordering influences almost always ensures that the institutions with higher reputational status and position, typically those serving a traditional university function, are more able to sustain their advantage and thus less ‘vulnerable to mission drift’ (Croxford and Raffe, 2015).
In contrast, those institutions at the bottom on the hierarchy who, in a bid to improve their status and ascend the ranking ladder, emulate the research activities and performances of the more prestigious, higher ranking universities, are more susceptible to academic drift drivers (De Wit and Verhoeven, 2003 and Codling and Meek, 2006). According to Croxford and Raffe (2015), who advance a specific sociological argument, the rigidity and persistence of the hierarchical ordering of institutional differentiation reflects wider social structures, resulting in the paradoxical nature of this trend: despite any implied specialisation accommodated in national HE systems, the hierarchical ordering and dominance of uniform ranking criteria, means vocational institutions are condemned to try (and to fail) to be the same as traditional universities. Functionalism is thus trumped by hierarchical ordering.

**Sectoral regulative discourse of the university of technology**

The regulatory framework of the SA HE system recognises three distinct institutional types: traditional universities, vocational UoTs and comprehensives (Cooper, 2015). These institutional types are principally organised around their ‘curriculum logics’. As vocational universities, UoTs occupy the contextual coherence end of the continuum. Despite the veneer of institutional diversity evidenced in the national institutional profile, government funding regimes which reward research outcomes contribute towards the increased conformity to the global trends of academic drift and hierarchical prestige (Shay et al, 2011; Kraak, 2018).

Since their creation, UoTs have faced ongoing struggles linked to their academic identity and place within the wider sector (Winberg, 2005). A distinct feature of the post-apartheid transformation agenda, UoTs were created as an attempt to disrupt the racially differentiated university sector and more effectively consolidate existing divisions between ‘traditional’ and ‘vocational’ institutions (Coleman, 2016). The vocationalist objective of UoTs in the main ensures that qualifications offered – predominantly undergraduate diplomas – prioritise skills development linked directly to industry-referenced jobs, roles and functions (Du Pre, 2010). However, in the absence of direct policy guidance explicating the ‘institutional function’ of UoTs (Kraak, 2018) academic drift pressures have become more prominent. To enhance their university status, vocational institutions and academics working in this sector have sought to assert their academic and research credibility and gain the same legitimacy as their traditional university counterparts (Winberg, 2005; Kraak, 2005 & 2018; McKenna and Powell, 2009; Shay et al, 2011). Despite efforts to improve their academic legitimacy by bolstering research roles and outputs (Kraak, 2018), recent research by Cooper (2015) paints a less optimistic picture of the status of UoTs within the wider, hierarchically ordered sector. Using research activity, rather than functional role or historical and racial vestiges which defined
institutions in the apartheid HE landscape, Cooper’s (2015) categorisation maintains that when compared to traditional universities all UoTs are in the lowest institutional category because of limited publication outputs and insignificant masters and doctoral-level graduate numbers. Cooper’s analysis also tentatively points to a distinct social class dimension associated with student enrolments at different institutional types. Croxford and Raffe (2015) confirm a similar trend in their analysis of institutional diversity in the UK. UoTs have, for example, consistently attracted a predominantly black student cohort (see Fisher and Scott, 2011) thus occupying a distinct place within the university system in SA based on both their epistemic characteristics and their race-class profiles.

The sectoral regulative discourse is therefore made up of these wider trends that determine the hierarchical ordering in the SA system and, in turn, the position, identity of and attitudes towards the UoT within it.

**Methodological orientation**

The focus of our research investigation was to explore UoT teachers’ perspectives on student writing and student writers and the pedagogic practices through which they enact these perspectives. The research design sought to foreground the influential role of lecturers on the learning contexts of HE and their knowledge of the institutional and discursive conditions which in turn shape their practice (Tuck, 2018). The research therefore honed in on the perspectives and practices of individual lecturers using methodologies enabling fine-grained explorations, while still drawing on wider, socio-structural analytical tools. In the first instance the data collection and analysis methods recognised the interrelationship between lecturers’ perceptions of student writers and the writing pedagogies they deemed appropriate. Then, the analytical lenses of regulative and instructional discourses were used to identify the manner in which socio-political and ideological constructions of vocational education and UoTs as institutional type became instantiated in lecturers’ views and classroom practices around academic writing.

The university where this study was located typifies the institutional profile of a UoT in many ways. Mountain City UoT came into being in 2005 as a result of an institutional merger between a historically black and historically white ‘technikon’. Its student population, of over 35 000, is predominantly ‘black’ (90%) and undergraduate (94%). The Faculty of Management Studies (FMS), where all research participants were located, is the largest at Mountain City. With almost 13 000 students, 93% black and 95% undergraduate, the faculty student demographic mirrors that of the institution overall.
The ethnographically-shaped data collection activities were undertaken primarily through a series of multiple interviews with seven lecturers who taught on two distinct diploma courses in FMS. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to select participants and the final participants reflected staff demographics at the institution. Two participants held doctoral level qualifications, and alongside some undergraduate teaching they also supervised masters and doctoral students. One of the participants had an established academic publication record, while the other participants defined their primary role as lecturer. The in-depth interviews were dialogic and ethnographic (Lillis, 2008). They were organised around three broad topic areas exploring 1) participants’ biographical and academic histories, 2) their understandings of student writing in the university and their writing pedagogies and, 3) their insights into and perceptions of the wider institutional conditions that framed their academic activities. As part of the interview process a form of ‘text-based interviewing’ (Prior, 2004:189) allowed us to use textual artefacts in the form of curriculum documents, PowerPoint lesson slides, marked assignments and screenshots of online assignments uploaded via the institutional learner management system, as prompts for lecturers’ to discuss their pedagogic practices. These documents were used to reinforce and confirm lecturer accounts of institutional processes and procedures or to evidence pedagogic practices. Our analysis framework was guided by the analytical lenses of regulative and instructional discourse. Our initial data sets of 21 transcribed interviews were subject to data structuring activities that sought to develop a ‘set of analytic categories’ or codes (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:161) which were guided by our initial research problems and thus focused on lecturer views of their students as academic writers, writing pedagogies, curriculum practices and values, institutional conditions, functions and reputational status of their courses and the institution. Regulative and instructional discourse as theoretical concepts there then retrospectively mapped onto these codes, in a manner similar to that adopted by Coleman (2012) as a way of making visible how broader contextual factors play a role in curriculum and pedagogic practices associated with student academic writing. Data was analysed in terms of thematic content and how this threw light on principles and rules which constituted writing curriculum and pedagogy.

Findings
In this section, we present our findings in the form of two broad overlapping thematic threads. The first of these illustrates the textual practices, types of writing and writing pedagogies that are promoted and given value in the research sites. Here insights into the nature of the instructional discourse and the curriculum enactments of the what with respect to student academic writing
development, are offered. Particularly, our findings focus on how students and their ability to engage with the writing demands of the university are described by lecturers and how these views determine the writing development pedagogies lecturers deem appropriate within their specific diploma contexts. We are concerned with how the influence of the regulative discourse can be traced through the instructional discourses implied by lecturers’ writing pedagogies. Finally, in the second thematic thread we highlight lecturers’ perceptions and understanding of their UoT institutional context and the extent to which institutional conditions, which enact aspects of the regulative discourse enable or restrain particular views of academic writing. In this way, our research provides insights not only into what lecturers think about student writers and how they respond to academic writing development, but also point to some of the reasons why.

Instructional discourse: what textual practices, types of writing and writing pedagogies are privileged

Generally, lecturers in the study distinguished between the different forms of writing that students need to become familiar with and demonstrate competency in. Distinctions were based on the utilisation and value these genres have in either target industries or professions served by the qualification or on the general academic environment of the university. For example, as Sapna, an academic practices lecturer explains, ‘So if you’re working for a company, you have to write business letters. …So basically we’re (lecturers) looking at what they (students) would use in a work environment…’. This points to how the written genres and writing practices used in industry become a focal element when curriculum and pedagogic choices are made. Curriculum and learning outcomes are also firmly aligned to industry requirements, as noted by Robert, a subject lecturer who teaches on the Public Management diploma

...well my perception of student writing is that one needs to look in terms of the outcomes — then our specific communication is geared towards preparing people for management positions in the public service. Now that would be one of the outcomes...Our major aim is to prepare people for industry. People who study further would of course be exposed to the more academic side of things, like proposal writing...

Professional textual practices and writing genres are distinguished from ‘the more academic side of things’, by implication, referring to academic essays or as Robert suggests ‘proposal writing’.

Robert’s example appears to suggest that proposal writing is an academic text type that students might only be exposed to after their initial undergraduate diploma. This highlights an instance of how differential exposure to the written practices of the university, premised on academic progression beyond diploma level studies, is experienced. It also hints at how the influences of academic drift might be experienced differently depending of the levels of study (e.g., undergraduate or postgraduate) or whether you are a student or lecturer.
An example from the Marketing Management department explicates how the written genres in the undergraduate diploma course validates those in the target profession. The recontextualisation of the Marketing Plan as a core textual artefact of this profession results in the significant curriculum and pedagogic attention it gets in the diploma. This attention ensures that students become familiar with the stylistic and structural features of the plan and that they develop increased levels of sophistication and expertise in the construction and writing of this text as they move into the senior and final years of their diploma. When describing the Marketing Plan, Clive, a subject lecturer explained that its stylistic features are characterised as being ‘...not like an essay, so there’s not much use of continuous prose’. Instead, ‘It is mostly tables, bullets and small paragraphs...and it is very technical’. Janet, another lecturer, suggests how contextual realities associated with industry are taken into consideration when students produce the Marketing Plan. The premise that ‘business people don’t have a lot of time to read certain things’ becomes a key factor when drawing students’ attention to the significance of the specific stylistic features that prescribe the technical and concise writing this text type demands.

In general, non-vocationally oriented writing for diploma students primarily took the form of essays and appeared to be located in specific subjects in this Marketing Management course. Such curriculum organisation is a fairly common practice in UoT courses, where most writing practices associated with more academic-type activities associated with the university are undertaken in content or ‘theory’ subjects (see Coleman, 2012 and 2016). Njabulo, a subject lecturer notes that ‘The writing type in (my) subject is predominantly essay writing. My students have to justify what they say. They have to explain to the reader why they are saying that’. In contrast to the concise writing of the Marketing Plan, the essay, for Njabulo, appears to value the justification of ideas and detailed explanations. Njabulo’s description of essay writing further signals a detachment from the textual practices strongly associated with the technical and concise styles valued when constructing the Marketing Plan. To highlight the contrasting textual prescriptions of the Marketing Plan which places heavy reliance on bullet lists, Njabulo asserts, ‘I don’t like bullet points. They (students) can use bullet points and I teach them how to use it. If they are giving me a list, they give me these things and they are going to discuss them further down under the bullet points’. Njabulo is therefore accentuating the textual and discursive differences between the two common genres in this diploma and is possibly also alluding to his view that the professional genres are somewhat inferior to those with a stronger theoretical basis.

Lecturers’ descriptions of the contrasting textual practices associated with the industry referenced Marketing Plan and those more closely aligned to the academy suggest that the curriculum is
attempting to service both the theoretical and practical interests implied in the educational ethos of the UoT sector. The inclusion of these textual practices highlights how these dual educational intentions are configured into the curriculum logic of undergraduate diploma courses. However, the prominence of professional written genres and the attention given through pedagogic practices to ensuring that students develop the necessary competencies associated with these genres, suggests a curriculum logic that points in the direction of contextual coherence. The essay when described is also contrasted to the stylistic and rhetorical features prized in the professional genres. Lecturers’ descriptions placed less emphasis on how specific disciplinary conventions or norms might be important for shaping the textual practices associated with the construction of these academic essays. These views help bolster the claim that the curricula in the research sites are aligned to the contextual logic of the professions. Additionally, it suggests that academic drift drivers are not taken up by lecturers in relation to their pedagogic practices in undergraduate diploma teaching.

The lecturers held various views about students and their ability to meet the multiple personal, curricula or pedagogic expectations of the course and the university more generally. In many ways these views reflected how UoT students are frequently positioned in the wider sector as being in deficit because of both race-class and institutional hierarchies. Lecturers spoke of students as arriving at the university without the appropriate language, writing or dispositional requirements needed to function or participate in ways deemed suitable by the lecturer or by specific departmental or institutional norms. Njabulo highlights how students’ backgrounds preclude them from embracing the focus on writing foregrounded in his subject and those generally associated with the university.

…most of the students will come from backgrounds where reading and writing is not embraced. It’s much more oral. So if the students had to talk, they’ll do much better than if they write

Yet Njabulo still sees this oral focus in students’ communicative repertoires as a strength while both Sapna and Angie conclude that students’ have specific oral communication barriers. Angie notes that ‘The students that I have don’t like to speak in class’ while for Sapna such reluctances can be attributed to ‘the language barrier’ when she says ‘I think some of the challenges is the fact that some of these students really don’t speak English, they struggle…’.

There was also an expectation that arriving university students would have mastered a set of ‘writing basics’ which would enable them to immediately and appropriately complete the various writing related activities and tasks required by individual lecturers. Angie, an academic practice lecturer, characterising her students’ competence in writing basics, highlights that students’ writing tends to have ‘very poor sentence structure, poor spelling, poor cohesion. Some of them don’t know what a paragraph is and still write bullets or numbers in the margin’. In many ways these
descriptions of students reflect dominant and pervasive perceptions that position the majority of
students in the sector as in deficit of the prerequisite intellectual, socio-cultural and dispositions
characteristics required of university study (Boughey and McKenna, 2016). However, the manner in
which individual universities and institutional types are starting to reflect particular race-class
divisions in their student demographics means that the impact of such deficit constructions are
amplified in the UoT setting – which primarily services the university access and success aspirations
of black students from low socio-economic and under-resourced schooling backgrounds. Thus
lecturers’ understanding and construction of their pedagogic roles associated with student academic
writing was strongly filtered through these prevailing assumptions. Most of the lecturers in our study
therefore saw value in ensuring that their writing pedagogies attempted to address, in various ways,
the perceived gaps or omissions in their students’ academic writing. In this way their writing
pedagogies would help students to develop suitable levels of competency in the types of writing
privileged in the university and target professions.

Regulative discourse: how institutional conditions shape perceptions and pedagogic
practices around academic writing

Many of the research participants were able to make some connection between their personal views
and understandings about students as academic writers, their approaches to writing pedagogies and
how these issues were understood and enacted through, especially, curriculum practices at
institutional level. The institution was regarded as having ‘very strict parameters’ instantiated
through prescribed syllabi and ‘standardised assessments’ which constrained the kinds of teaching
and learning practices accommodated. Clive made a direct association between the institutional
environment and what he felt was a deficit positioning of students. This he felt limited his pedagogic
practices. In a fictive scenario he described, he suggests how he might be able to become uncoupled
from these current curriculum and pedagogic constraints:

*If we were doing teaching differently and I could have one-on-one relationships with students,
than it wouldn’t be a deficit model or it wouldn’t be a deficit because...I could teach them
based on where they’re at but because we have standardised syllabuses and standardised
assessment it is a deficit and that’s a reality*

Clive furthermore draws a direct connection between his pedagogies and his institutional location
observing that ‘If we’re talking about a different type of educational context, then my ideas would
be different. There would be no deficit’.

Njabulo recounted how when perplexed by problems he was encountering around student academic
writing during his early years as a lecturer in his department, he was unable to find reasonable
explanations from his more experienced colleagues. He later attributed his colleagues’ views that

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student writing and subject teaching were unrelated, as a consequence of the institution not valuing academic writing as an essential part of how knowledge was constructed and expressed in a discipline.

I started to engage with a few colleagues about language and I was getting responses that I couldn’t quite understand because I thought I was talking about something which was fundamental in the teaching of students. But I was not getting an engagement in that until later on I realised that we do not have a writing culture.

The lack of ‘a writing culture’ was ascribed by some participants to a larger identity struggle inherent in the UoT because of its historical roots in the technikon sector. Janet as one of the participants who witnessed the move from the technikon to the UoT experienced some of the consequences on her own career progression. She firstly suggests that the lack of an academic writing culture experienced in the contemporary institutional context can be attributed to the rigid vocational focus of the technikon environment.

I just think if you’re looking at you know, where we came from in terms of the technikons, it was your industry experience that counted so you always kind of relied on that. We didn’t have this whole academic writing culture

Janet’s observation suggests that the distinctions between ‘university/academic’ and ‘professional’ textual practices that are pervasively enacted through curriculum and pedagogy can be traced to deeper and more entrenched distinctions which also define and pattern the identity constructions of academics in this UoT setting. Janet’s reflection on her own identity within her changing institutional climate reinforces her sense of ‘academic drift’:

There’s no way that I would survive, if you look at the environment today, okay, with my current qualifications because unfortunately, teaching is not the main focus at the institution. You must have a balance with research, which I don’t have and your research is publishing. It’s not going to conferences, it’s not presenting, it’s not that. It’s not even studying further...It’s about publication

The pressure to publish and the recognition it is given within the institution, is however, not seen as being matched by a supporting or enabling culture that promotes academic writing. Robert recounts that when he permanently joined the university he experienced a marked difference from the traditional university where he had completed much of his postgraduate studies; at the UoT ‘there was no real focus on writing for publication, no focus...institutionally, it must be something like, it must be a culture, you know’.

Even when the institution started to explicitly focus on research Robert felt that this did not sufficiently translate into ‘enthusiasm in creating a culture for writing’.

But I think when we are taking on the research role, from a technikon because we want to compete with universities because we’re also now all of a sudden, a university of
technology...But now all of a sudden you’re going nowhere if you don’t do research, going nowhere if you don’t publish

While acknowledging the increased importance of research in the institutional profile, this shift is still regarded with suspicion—as being driven by instrumentalist motives to ‘compete with (traditional) universities’.

Discussion

A key assertion advanced in this paper is that the kinds of texts and writing pedagogies lecturers in our study deemed appropriate in the context of their diploma courses reflect wider, dominant values, attitudes and regulatory prescriptions associated with vocational education and specifically UoT qualifications. We describe how the instructional discourse asserts what textual practices and types of writing are given status pedagogically, while also showing how lecturers’ perceptions of student writers, and pedagogic responses to their students’ writing needs, reflect and are constructed by social values and attitudes circulating in the sectoral regulative discourse. Through our focus on the interrelationship between classroom practices and influences located in the wider sectoral context, we are able to illuminate how the writing pedagogies of the UoT lecturers in our research site are implicated in and constrained by how the UoT as an institutional type is ideologically and structurally positioned within and by the broader university system. Our ethnographically shaped explorations of the written texts, practices and pedagogies of academic writing show that there are particular consequences for the type of academic writing practices to which, especially, diploma students are given access. In particular, our study draws attention to how influences on writing pedagogies by the sectoral regulative discourse have the potential to constrain student academic access and true democratic participation in society. Conversely, analytically exploring the consequences of writing pedagogies which resist the influences of such sectoral regulative discourses could provide insight into how such classroom practices might offer wider change and encourage epistemic access for students.

Our findings show the enactment of the strong vocationalist agenda associated with UoTs through the type of written genres valued in the research sites of two undergraduate diploma courses. The course curricula show the clear privileging of written genres and textual practices deemed relevant and given validation in professional practice. While there is recognition of the academic location of the diploma courses in the broader university sector, any direct impact of academic drift agendas on undergraduate studies, more visible in wider institutional differentiation debates, and clearly also an issue for lecturers own professional identities, was not immediately obvious in our research sites. Limited evidence emerged in the data of attempts to reinforce or strengthen the alignment between
subjects and their particular disciplinary homes. Value was, however, accorded to students becoming familiar with and gaining competence in certain written genres of the academy, with the academic essay representing the primary textual artefact most associated with the university domain. Lecturers tended to promote more generalist conceptualisation of the essay grounded in fixed language and stylistic features that are also largely seen as transferable between different subjects. As a result, pedagogic practices generally placed more attention on introducing students to the technical competencies associated with such essay writing (as evidenced by the need to help students master the ‘writing basics’) rather than overtly helping students to see how essays could act a vehicle through which disciplinary meaning-making could be expressed. In this way our findings echo insights and arguments raised by McKenna (2004), McKenna and Sutherland (2009) and Coleman (2016) about the way in which academic writing in the UoT setting tends to construct academic writing as a technical skill delinked from disciplinary knowledge making.

Lecturers’ perceptions and views about their students as academic writers acted as a key catalyst for organising writing pedagogies in ways that primarily focuses on ensuring that students become proficient in the professional written genres deemed necessary. These perceptions of students were for the most part underpinned by prevailing and dominant discursive framings of students as being in deficit of the written, communicative, dispositional and cultural norms and practices of the university. When viewed within the context of the UoT setting, these perceptions also reflect the impact of race-class dimensions of the university system in South Africa (Cooper, 2015), with students’ low socio-economic and under-resourced schooling backgrounds becoming the key reasons of these presumed deficits. Although practices varied, lecturer assumptions about students often encouraged the continued reliance on student academic writing pedagogies aimed at addressing or fixing the perceived gaps and omissions which are regarded as inherent to the student. Coupled with the strong instrumentalist vocational agendas of the UoT, which most of the lecturers’ valued and readily accepted, pedagogic practices showed the strong adoption of approaches that foregrounded the recontextualised communicative and dispositional norms and practices of industry. A key outcome of this overall curriculum and pedagogic focus was to ensure that students would be able to signal their inclusion in their chosen profession through the adoption and demonstration of competence in the written and communicative repertories validated in these target professions.

There is a sense emerging from data for this study that UoT lecturers feel compelled to offer students the best possible option to attain success in their professional careers – and thus place their pedagogic focus on ‘the most visible aspects of writing’ (Lillis, 2006, 32). Within the already narrow prescriptions of the institution’s vocational agenda such strategies have the consequence of limiting the scope for considering or implementing either alternative writing pedagogies that might...
look towards the disciplines for validation or the overt recognition of communicative and cultural resources students already possess. Instead lectures and their writing pedagogies appear to be caught in a self-reinforcing cycle where dominant discourses of student deficiencies and the reputational status of the UoT as serving students least prepared for university learning, coupled with its instrumentalists’ vocational agenda, conspire to place enormous pressure on lecturers to adopt pedagogic strategies most likely to ensure that students and their writing skills are favourably recognised and accepted by their respective industries. The tensions created by such pressures and their impact on UoT lecturers’ pedagogic practices are poignantly raised by Alexander (2018) in her critical interrogation of her writing pedagogies. She asserts that institutional discourses of student deficit reinforce the uptake of a study skills approach to writing, which in turn scuppers her efforts to meaningfully recognise the varied linguistic and other resources students bring to their studies and to provide opportunities for students to engage in academic meaning-making. Supported by Wheelahan’s argument that access to theoretical and abstract knowledge especially by students completing vocational qualifications, would increase their opportunities for educational progression and their capacity to engage and contribute to ‘society’s conversations’ (2010:16), we see the potential benefit of academic drift influences for deepening and broadening the academic writing practices and skills UoT students are currently exposed to. When considered in light of the acknowledged effects of academic drift in the sectoral regulative discourse, our research interestingly shows how minimal these influences are on the kinds of academic writing which diploma students are expected to master. Rather, our findings highlight the pressures placed on (predominantly undergraduate) lecturers to respond and conform to the more narrowly defined vocationalist and instrumental institutional functions associated with UoTs in the sectoral regulative discourse (see Coleman, 2016).

**Concluding comments**

The SA HE system is becoming more susceptible to the pressures of institutional convergence fuelled by hierarchical ordering mechanisms that encourage institutions to chase status and prestige indicators determined by their research outputs. In this prevailing climate, the task of securing validation for UoTs and their unique contribution to the sector and the development imperatives of the SA society, is an increasingly arduous task. While socio-political and ideological manoeuvrings are played out at the national level, the direct impact, especially, of academic drift drivers are experienced differentially at various institutional levels and by different stakeholders in the system. The research reported here focused explicitly on the experiences of UoT subject lecturers but was also able to consider implications for undergraduate diploma students in the UoT. By viewing academic writing as a proxy for wider socio-political, regulatory and ideological framings of the UoT
sector and then exploring how these wider understandings become implicated in lecturers’ perceptions and pedagogic practices of student academic writing, our research has been able to make visible what knowledge is privileged, the extent to which students are given access to different knowledge types valued in curricula, and importantly why these positions hold. We argue that an exploration of what happens in student academic writing pedagogy can provide insight into the broader sectoral regulative discourse that affects and directs the types of writing and pedagogies deemed suitable in the context of a UoT. The pedagogic practices of lecturers in our study show that specific written genres, primarily relevant to target professions, are validated because of narrow and prescriptive conceptualisations of vocational HE given status in the sectoral regulative discourse. This is despite the identity contestations introduced by academic drift pressures acting on the entire sector. The influence of academic drift is thus felt in unexpected ways, particularly at the level of pedagogy. As a result less room is allowed for writing pedagogies able to accommodate genres and practices that service conceptual knowledge and meaning-making valued by disciplines. So while lecturers may be trying hard to develop the kind of writing culture which might be esteemed within the academic drift agenda, they and students are in practice ‘locked-in’ to curricular and pedagogic choices that are best able to meet the demands of industry, while reinforcing generalised and decontextualized notions of academic writing. Students in the UoT demography (mainly black, poorer students) may therefore be pushed less in the direction of ‘academic’ drift and more towards a version of ‘vocational’ drift which offers a very hollowed out version of academic learning. Our research also makes clear that the current direction of institutional convergence has a profound effect on reinforcing negative conceptions of UoT students as academic writers and closing off the possibilities of expanding the ranges of written genres they have access to developing and becoming competent in, especially during their diploma studies. The influence of academic drift agendas and its uptake in undergraduate curricula, particularly through bolder inclusions of conceptual knowledge, or shifting writing pedagogies, practices and assessment regimes is currently under-researched. The research reported here makes an initial contribution to expanding our understanding of how academic writing practices reflect wider ideological views, but also points to the possibilities of what writing pedagogies offer, in that they can be harnessed to offset discourses and framings that, at times, threaten to frustrate students’ epistemic access to a broader range of valued knowledge types.

Acknowledgments

Moeain Arend is thanked for his assistance with data collection and the initial data analysis activities associated with the broader research project on which this paper is based.
References


De Wit, K. and Verhoeven, J.C. (2003). “The context changes but the divisions remain: the binary higher education system in Flanders – the case of information science”. Studies in Higher Education, 28(2), 143-156


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Technikons represented the vocational education and training segment of the HE system during the apartheid era in South Africa. They had a similar mandate as the Polytechnics in the UK and institutes of technology in Australia and offered primarily undergraduate vocational diploma courses. By 2005 all technikons were rebranded as universities of technology as part of the post-apartheid government’s attempts to transform the university sector.

In order to ensure a reasonable degree of privacy for our participants but without compromising the importance of the specific professional and disciplinary location linked to the insights and findings of our study, we use pseudonyms for all participants, a generalised description of their teaching area instead of the actual subject names and changed the name of the departments to mask their identity.
### RESPONSES to REVIEWER COMMENTS from AUTHORS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reviewer Comments</th>
<th>Revisions</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>REVIEWER 1</strong></td>
<td>The following inclusion (in bold) was made with the previous revision (submitted 22 Sept).</td>
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| The paper could be strengthened by a greater discussion of the data which emerged from the textual data (i.e. curriculum documents and Powerpoint slides) which you mention in the methodology. | *As part of the interview process a form of ‘text-based interviewing’ (Prior, 2004:189) allowed us to use textual artefacts in the form of curriculum documents, PowerPoint lesson slides, marked assignments and screenshots of online assignments uploaded via the institutional learner management system, as prompts for lecturers’ to discuss their pedagogic practices. These documents were also used to reinforce and confirm lecturer accounts of institutional processes and procedures or to evidence pedagogic practices.*  

Here we provide detail of how the textual data was used to support the interview process and also how these documents were enlisted during the analysis phase as a way of reinforcing and confirming lecturer accounts. The themes discussed in our data do not draw specific attention to these documents and do not warrant the inclusion of a separate analysis of how they reinforce or highlight the description of the themes. In light of the recommendation by Reviewer 1 we have made the following inclusions (in red) to reinforce how these textual data were used as part of the ethnographically shaped data collection processes.  

In the conclusion it is stated that ‘our study draws attention to how influences on writing pedagogies by the sectoral regulative discourse have the potential to constrain students’ academic access and true democratic participation in society’. The connection between this statement and the data needs to be made clearer.  

With the previous revision submitted 22 Sept, this sentence was removed from the conclusion. |
| In the conclusion it is stated that ‘our study draws attention to how influences on writing pedagogies by the sectoral regulative discourse have the potential to constrain students’ academic access and true democratic participation in society’. The connection between this statement and the data needs to be made clearer. | |
| It would be useful to have a more thorough explanation of a ‘vocational university’ for an international audience. Does it attract a particular student body and have particular admissions arrangements and what is the nature of the curriculum on offer in vocational universities more generally as well as the institution in which the research was conducted? | The notion of the ‘vocational university’ both in respect to how it is understood within the broader global university sector and the specific form it takes within the South Africa context is explicated in various sections of the paper. For example;  

- On pages 4 & 5 a description of the core distinctions between traditional and vocational universities is presented.  
- On page 6 the University of Technology as a particular type of vocational university located in the SA context is described (see paragraph 3). As part of this description the type of knowledge prioritized, its roles and function with respect to type of qualifications offered and its links to industry are outlined. Also discussed are the typical student demographics (further expanded on page 7). |

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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Note 1: Reference is made to how the precursor of the UoT, the technikon, can be regarded as having had a similar mandate to the polytechnics in the UK – thus offering some correlation to an institutional type familiar to an international audience. In order to reinforce the international comparison, we have included a short reference to the Australia higher education context in the end note (see below)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>They had a similar mandate as the Polytechnics in the UK and institutes of technology in Australia and offered primarily undergraduate vocational diploma courses.</td>
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<td><strong>what is meant by ‘individualised classroom practices’? (page 2)- do you simply mean the practices of individual lecturers?</strong></td>
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<td>The sentence has been changed to aid meaning.</td>
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<td>These two concepts allow our analysis to illustrate the how wider socio-political framings, regulatory processes and values that determine the nature of the regulative discourse come to influence the practices of individual lecturers, i.e. what is described by the instructional discourse.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>There are some small typos throughout, including full stops missing on page 2, 13 and 14.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>With the previous revision of the manuscript, submitted 22 Sept, various typos and grammatical omissions were corrected.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Page 15 should read ‘need to become familiar with and demonstrate competency in’</strong></td>
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<td>Corrected</td>
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<td><strong>REVIEWER 2</strong></td>
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<td>The first sentence in the Methodology section says that &quot;The aim of the study was to explore UoT teachers’ perspectives on student writing and student writers and the pedagogical practices to which they enact these perspectives&quot; (p. 7). I wonder if this is rather the means / the focus of investigation, and that the aim is to investigate the influence of regulative discourse on pedagogical practices?</td>
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<td>Agreed – we have changed the sentence to appropriate reflect the focus of our investigation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The focus of our research investigation was to explore UoT teachers’ perspectives on student writing and student writers and the pedagogic practices through which they enact these perspectives.</td>
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<tr>
<td>On p. 14, the findings section ends with an interview quote. It may read better to end this section with an interpretative comment by the author(s), for instance by moving the sentence on line 9-13 (&quot;While acknowledging the increased importance of research...&quot;) after the quote.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Corrected as suggested.</td>
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