


First-year students' perceptions of factors affecting academic writing



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Background: An increasing number of students are entering universities in South Africa with inadequate academic writing proficiency, displaying unsatisfactory academic writing literacy levels. Therefore, many academic literacy researchers in South Africa have argued that poor academic writing proficiency is a direct result of poor academic performance, especially in academic assessments.

Objectives: The current study focuses on possible factors affecting first-year students' academic writing proficiency at an institution of higher learning.

Method: The study followed a qualitative research approach, and a case study research design was deemed relevant. This study employed focus group interviews, with each group consisting of five students ($N = 25$). Thematic analysis was used to analyse the collected data.

Results: The study's findings showed that switching from high schools to university writing can be difficult, particularly for students who must adapt to new requirements and expectations.

Conclusion: The study reveals that first-year students face significant challenges in academic writing due to limited preparation in high school. These difficulties emphasise the need for enhanced writing instruction and support to help students meet university-level expectations.

Contribution: This study contributes to understanding the gap in academic writing preparation between high school and university, highlighting the specific challenges students face in academic writing. It also underscores the importance of targeted support to bridge this gap and enhance students' academic writing proficiency.

Keywords: academic literacy; academic writing; academic performance; academic literacies; academic language proficiency; academic writing proficiency; academic writing skills.

Introduction

An increasing number of students are entering universities in South Africa with inadequate academic writing proficiency, displaying unsatisfactory academic writing literacy levels. Subsequently, studies conducted show that a growing percentage of students with insufficient academic writing proficiency enrol at universities (Brodhacker 2016; Khumalo & Reddy 2021; Mdodana-Zide & Mukuna 2023; Pineteh 2014; Schulze & Lemmer 2017; Alogla 2018; Hungerford-Kresser & Amaro-Jimenez 2012; Khan, Majoka & Fazal 2016). This perspective aligns with the position put forward by Modhish (2012), who contends that students lack sufficient practice in employing discourse markers and are inadequately exposed to linguistic elements. Furthermore, Saud (2016) analysed 50 texts produced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in Saudi Arabia, revealing their inability to produce coherent written texts in English. The analysis highlighted that these texts were marked by poor organisation, restricted vocabulary, and improper use of cohesive devices. Nonetheless, numerous recent studies have indicated a prevailing deficiency in cohesion within the written work of EFL learners. First-year students' academic writing is shaped by various factors, including the development of coherence in their essays. According to Alsariera and Yunus (2023), challenges in maintaining coherence are common among EFL learners. These challenges also resonate with students at South African universities, impacting their writing skills and overall academic performance. In connection with this, Han and Hiver (2018) suggested that these factors affecting students' academic writing proficiency depend on the instructors of EFL writing who tend to concentrate more on teaching learners' grammar and appropriate language structures. According to Damilola (2022), first-year student teachers' English

academic writing proficiency plays a crucial role in shaping their academic identity. The study on South African university students demonstrates how writing proficiency influences their self-concept and academic development (Damilola 2022). These findings highlight the need for targeted support to enhance academic writing skills, which are vital for both academic success and professional identity formation. Çavdar and Doe (2012) argue that the educational system has played a major part in students' common problematic issues in academic writing among learners. First-year students' academic writing is influenced by their reading self-concept, which plays a significant role in their ability to engage with academic texts. Cekiso (2024) highlights how students' perceptions of their reading abilities can impact their writing performance. This relationship is particularly relevant for students at South African universities, where reading skills are integral to academic success. The above-mentioned studies revealed that first-year students' writing proficiency is affected by a range of factors in different contexts. Consequently, there is a need for structured guidance in organising their writing to avoid logical inconsistencies.

The current research, conducted within the South African context, holds particular significance in its examination of the factors affecting first-year students' academic writing proficiency at a higher learning institution. The authors of the article believe that students' perspectives are valuable for lecturers, as they are likely to assist them in designing relevant writing interventions and preparing informed academic writing lessons. This focus provides a deeper understanding of the challenges and facilitators of academic writing proficiency, particularly from the students' standpoint. Previous research has typically neglected the nuances of students' experiences in adjusting to the demands of academic writing at the university level. By prioritising the students' perspectives, this study seeks to identify the specific barriers they face, such as insufficient preparation in high school, challenges with research skills, and difficulties in adapting to university writing conventions. The findings underscore the importance of addressing these challenges early in students' academic careers to prevent them from persisting into postgraduate studies. If left unaddressed, such difficulties can hinder their academic progression, potentially leading to academic underperformance or even withdrawal from the institution. Therefore, this research aims to identify the factors impacting first-year students' academic writing proficiency and offer an in-depth understanding of the students' perspectives, which can inform future interventions and support strategies intended to bridge the gap between high school and university expectations in academic writing.

To achieve this goal, this article addresses the following research objectives:

- To explore the challenges first-year students in the selected institution face in developing academic writing proficiencies.

- To examine the influence of students' prior educational background on their academic writing proficiency in the first year of higher education in the selected institution.

Literature review

Ariyanti and Fitriana (2017) conducted a study at Widya Gama Mahakam University, Indonesia, to examine the educational needs and challenges faced by EFL students in writing argumentative essays. The research revealed that students encountered significant grammar, cohesion, and coherence difficulties. Additionally, minor issues included problems with paragraph organisation, word choice, and vocabulary accuracy. The researchers also noted that limited class time and large class sizes were significant obstacles hindering improvements in students' academic writing quality.

According to Can (2009), some students become perplexed when interpreting feedback from teachers regarding their academic writing proficiency. Can further suggests that teacher feedback can effectively address students' writing concerns compared to assessments, as students often feel anxious or apprehensive about their own writing abilities. Can also asserts that conflicting feedback provided by instructors from different departments within an institution may contribute to students' lack of confidence in their academic writing skills.

Research conducted by Bacha (2012) indicates that teachers often perceive students' academic writing as deficient. According to Bacha, students may experience anxiety when tasked with writing English compositions, primarily due to concerns about making errors in grammar and vocabulary usage. From a psychological standpoint, several factors contribute to these writing challenges.

Al-Marwani (2020) asserts that academic writing proficiency serves as a critical assessment method at the university level, where students engage in various written assignments and research endeavours. However, acquiring proficiency in academic writing is a formidable task for many students. At university level, students are expected to generate ideas independently and organise their writing into logically linked and well-developed paragraphs. This involves conducting adequate background reading on the topic, creating a clear outline, crafting an effective introduction, developing the main body coherently, and concluding with a strong summary.

The quantitative research conducted by Sajjad, Imran and Shahzad (2021) explored the academic writing challenges encountered by university students at Kfueit. The study employed surveys administered to both students and teachers, with 40 students participating in the survey. The results highlighted significant difficulties reported by students in academic writing, particularly in areas such as word choice, vocabulary usage, and paraphrasing. On the other hand, teachers identified critical writing and stylistic

issues as the most daunting aspects of academic writing based on their feedback.

Ngidi (2007) conducted a study examining perceptions from students and lecturers regarding 37 factors influencing students' success or failure at a historically black university in South Africa. The research revealed a limited correlation between lecturers' perspectives on reasons for student failure and the reasons perceived by students themselves. Notably, lecturers ranked students' academic literacy as the 13th most significant factor among the 37 causes of failure. In contrast, students placed less emphasis on their academic literacy, ranking it 23rd. These findings suggest a discrepancy: students may either overestimate their academic literacy abilities, or lecturers may underestimate its importance. Consequently, many students may lack interest, commitment, or motivation to engage in generic or study skills interventions aimed at improving academic literacy. If students do not prioritise academic literacy highly for academic success, they are less likely to value such detached or impartial courses. Despite this, Ngidi's (2007) study confirms that lecturers indeed view academic literacy as a contributing factor to student failure.

According to Weaver (2006), students often encounter significant challenges with grammar and syntax, which can detract from the clarity and effectiveness of their writing. Common issues include errors in grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure, which frequently arise from insufficient foundational knowledge or limited practice. Lecturers observe that these recurring difficulties often indicate gaps in students' understanding of fundamental writing conventions. Addressing these issues is crucial for improving overall writing quality, as mastery of grammatical and syntactical rules is essential for clear and effective communication.

Research by MacDonald (2010) highlights that students frequently encounter difficulties in organising their ideas and maintaining coherence in their writing. Lecturers note that students often struggle with structuring their essays in a logical manner, creating clear transitions between paragraphs, and presenting a cohesive argument. These challenges can undermine the overall effectiveness of their writing, as a well-organised and coherent structure is essential for conveying ideas clearly and persuasively. Addressing these issues is crucial for enhancing students' ability to produce structured and logically coherent written work.

According to Hyland (2004), students often struggle with mastering academic writing styles, including maintaining a formal tone, adhering to proper citation practices, and following disciplinary conventions. Lecturers observe that students frequently use informal writing styles or fail to cite sources correctly, which compromises the credibility and professionalism of their work. Mastery of these academic conventions is essential for producing credible and professionally acceptable written content, highlighting the need for targeted instruction in academic writing practices.

Studies by Schunk and Zimmerman (2007) suggest that a lack of motivation can significantly impede students' writing development. Lecturers have reported that some students may fail to recognise the relevance of writing assignments, which in turn affects their engagement and effort in completing these tasks. This disconnection between perceived relevance and academic tasks can result in diminished enthusiasm and lower quality of writing, underscoring the importance of fostering motivation and demonstrating the practical value of writing assignments.

Meyers, Smith and Cekiso (2024) argue that lecturers, serving as mentors, are responsible for enhancing students' competence and confidence, particularly those experiencing writing apprehension. The authors emphasise the importance of avoiding instilling false beliefs about students' academic writing abilities. Feedback should highlight their positive qualities instead of solely focusing on students' mistakes. Negative comments early in students' writing development can exacerbate writing anxiety. Therefore, lecturers should provide feedback that is 'honest but tactful' to foster students' confidence in academic writing and cultivate a positive attitude towards evaluation.

Theoretical framework

Academic literacies theory

The Academic Literacies Theory is pertinent to this study, as it centres on the development of students' literacy skills, specifically their academic reading and writing abilities. Lea and Street (2006) identify the key characteristics of academic literacy practices from the students' perspective, emphasising shifts in writing styles, the focus on new genres employed in various contexts, and the use of appropriate language in literacy practices. These new forms allow students to navigate the social meanings and identities conveyed through their writing (Lea & Street 2006). This view highlights that academic literacy encompasses writing for diverse contexts, which plays a vital role in the academic socialisation of writers (Alsariera & Yunus 2023).

The Academic Literacies Theory emerged in the late 1990s, drawing on the work of scholars such as Lea and Street (1998), who focused on academic writing within higher education in the United Kingdom (Wingate & Tribble 2012). In reviewing the literature, Wingate and Tribble (2012) explain that the Academic Literacies model was developed in response to a perceived deficiency in academic writing instruction in the UK and sought to challenge misconceptions held by the media and lecturers regarding the causes of student failure (Alsariera & Yunus 2023). Wingate and Tribble also highlight that the term 'literacies' was pluralised to reflect the understanding that literacy practices are not singular, given students' engagement across various academic disciplines.

Academic Literacies Theory is pertinent to this study, as it highlights the social and contextual factors that influence students' writing practices. It focuses on how students

navigate disciplinary conventions and academic expectations. The theory also emphasises the importance of understanding students' experiences with writing, particularly in diverse academic settings. This framework facilitates the exploration of the challenges first-year students encounter in adapting to academic writing requirements at a selected institution. This is because there is a direct correlation between academic socialisation and academic literacies. Students who actively engage in academic socialisation are more likely to develop their academic literacies compared to those who do not. The application of Academic Literacies Theory in this study enhances the understanding of how study skills and academic socialisation contribute to students' mastery of academic writing and literacies (Alsariera & Yunus 2023).

Research methods and design

Research approach

The study employed qualitative research methodology. Crossman (2020) defines qualitative research as collecting and working with non-numerical data and attempting to interpret the meaning of that data. According to Crossman, the qualitative research method allows researchers to examine the meanings that people ascribe to their behaviour, actions, and interactions with others. This research approach was deemed relevant as it addresses the how and why questions of research and allows for a deeper understanding of experiences, phenomena, and contexts (Cekiso 2024). A case study design was used in line with the qualitative research approach. Cherry (2022) defines a case study as an in-depth investigation of a person, group, or event. The researchers go on to explain that in a case study, nearly every aspect of the subject's life and history is analysed to identify patterns and causes (Cekiso 2024). Therefore, the case study design was deemed appropriate as it allowed the researchers to better understand the factors affecting first-year students' academic writing proficiency.

Research participants

In this study, 25 participants were specifically selected based on whether they were first-year students at the chosen university. According to Creswell (2014), purposive sampling entails choosing participants because you think they could add something to your analysis (Cekiso 2024). Specifically, the participants were selected from a group of students who took the course 'National Diploma: Language Practice'. The purpose of doing language practice as a course is to improve language skills through structured learning, enhancing communication, comprehension, and fluency in the target language. The ages of the students ranged from 18 to 34.

Data collection method

This study employed focus group interviews as the primary data collection method. According to Patton (2001:51), a focus group interview is defined as 'a research method that brings together a small group of people to answer questions in a moderated setting', with groups selected based on

specific demographic characteristics, and questions designed to explore a particular topic of interest. Five focus groups of first-year students, each comprising five participants (N = 25), were involved in the study. Focus group interviews were utilised because they enable participants to engage with one another, facilitating the exchange of ideas and enhancing the depth of responses, which may not arise in individual interviews. The combination of focus group and individual interviews allowed for a more comprehensive exploration of the research phenomenon, thereby strengthening the reliability of the findings.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis. According to Suter (2012), thematic analysis is a popular technique for qualitative data analysis that uses a coding system to arrange information so that researchers can make logical and significant inferences from the data. To analyse data, we reviewed the raw responses and began the process of coding using inductive codes generated by the data. According to Thomas (2006) and Williman (2011), inductive analysis refers to approaches that primarily use detailed reading of raw data to derive concepts, themes, and a model through interpretations made from the raw data. In the current study, the researchers identified response categories. A response category is a set of replies that can be grouped because they are part of the same theme. In other words, similar segments were put together (Cekiso 2024). Keywords or phrases were used to identify categorical segments easily. We identified segments that contain meaningful units and created a label (i.e. a code). Throughout this process, patterns in the data began to take shape, forming the themes through the process of clustering initial codes. The themes reflected trends and patterns in data. Finally, we checked if the themes had enough data to support them (Cekiso 2024).

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval to conduct the study was granted by the Tshwane University of Technology Research Ethics Committee on 30 August 2024 with the clearance number REC2024/01/005 (HUM). The purpose of the study was explained to the participants, and they were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were asked to complete a consent form, which assured participants' anonymity and confidentiality. This action reduces researchers' adherence to ethical standards such as responsibility, openness, honesty, justice, respect, privacy, dignity and integrity to reduce risks of harm. Extra care and caution were applied when working with vulnerable populations (Cekiso 2024).

Findings

The subsections that follow, provide critiques and analyses of the participants' data regarding possible factors affecting first-year students' academic writing proficiency at a higher institution of learning. The following five themes were derived from the focus group interviews.

Theme 1: Limited academic writing experience

The findings indicated that first-year students frequently encountered challenges when expected to write academically, mainly due to their limited experience with formal writing in high school. Many students expressed feelings of inadequacy, struggled with the transition to longer, structured essays, and were unfamiliar with academic writing conventions. Their prior education did not provide the necessary training in research, argumentation, or the proper writing style expected at the university level. This lack of preparation has created a steep learning curve for them as they adjust to academic writing demands.

The following extracts serve as evidence of what the students said:

'We never really wrote essays in high school, so when we started university, we had no idea how to approach an academic paper. It was a steep learning curve. In high school, we mostly did short assignments and projects but no real academic writing. Now, we're expected to write long, structured essays, and I'm struggling to keep up.' (Focus Group 3, Age group 18–34)

'We had no formal writing training in high school, so we didn't learn how to research or structure an argument properly before university. The writing style we were taught in high school doesn't match what's expected at university. We feel like we have to learn everything from scratch.' (Focus Group 5, Age group 18–34)

'We were used to writing in a more creative, informal way, but academic writing demands a completely different approach. It's a challenge for me to adapt. High school didn't focus much on writing skills, so we are now finding it difficult to express my thoughts in the structured academic format expected here.' (Focus Group 1, Age group 18–34)

The above findings highlight that many first-year students struggle with academic writing due to limited exposure and training in high school. They often lack the experience of writing essays, conducting research, and structuring arguments, which makes the transition to university-level writing particularly challenging. The shift from shorter assignments to longer, more structured essays is a significant hurdle, and the difference in writing styles between high school and university further complicates their ability to meet academic expectations. As a result, students often feel they are starting from scratch in mastering the skills required for academic writing. The findings of this study align with literature by emphasising the challenges first-year students face due to limited experience with formal academic writing, particularly in terms of research, argumentation, and adhering to academic conventions. This lack of preparation contributes to a steep learning curve as students adjust to university-level expectations.

Theme 2: Language barriers and academic writing difficulties

The findings of this study illustrated that language barriers present significant challenges for students in academic writing, particularly for those whose first language is not

English. These barriers hinder their ability to express ideas clearly and affect their confidence in their writing skills. The following exploration highlights the difficulties that students face as they try to navigate the demands of academic writing in a second language. These challenges encompass issues with vocabulary, grammar, formal tone, and overall clarity of expression, which can lead to a sense of frustration and self-doubt:

'English isn't our first language, and it's really hard to express myself academically. Sometimes, we feel my ideas are lost in translation. We are constantly worried about my grammar and vocabulary, and that makes it hard for me to focus on the content of my writing.' (Focus Group 2, Age group 18–34)

'We are a bit embarrassed about my language skills. We don't think my writing sounds formal or academic enough for university. Writing essays in English is hard because my first language is different, and we struggle to find the right words to express complex ideas.' (Focus Group 3, Age group 18–34)

'We often feel stuck because I can't express myself as clearly in English as we would in my home language. We are scared of making grammar mistakes, and we think that affects my confidence in writing essays for my courses.' (Focus Group 4, Age group 18–34)

The findings of this study highlight that language barriers pose substantial obstacles for students in academic writing, especially for those whose first language is not English. These barriers affect students' ability to express ideas clearly, often leading to frustration and a lack of confidence in their writing. Challenges with vocabulary, grammar, and achieving the appropriate formal tone contribute to the difficulty students face in meeting academic writing expectations. As a result, students may experience self-doubt and anxiety, hindering their overall performance and progress in academic writing.

Theme 3: Adapting to university writing expectations

The findings of this study revealed that the transition from high school to university writing can be a challenging adjustment, especially when students are faced with new expectations and requirements. Many first-year students find themselves struggling to adapt to university-level writing, where the emphasis is placed on proper citation, critical argumentation, extensive research, and adherence to academic integrity.

The following exploration examines the difficulties students face in meeting these expectations, ranging from understanding citation styles to learning the importance of academic integrity and the structure of more complex essays:

'In high school, we never had to cite sources properly or follow strict formatting rules. Here, I feel lost trying to understand citation styles like APA. The way we're expected to argue points in university is new to me. In high school, everything was more straightforward, but now I need to back up my ideas with evidence.' (Focus Group 4, Age group 18–34)

'We didn't realise how much research would be involved in writing an academic essay. We're not used to sourcing information and integrating it into our writing. The professors

here expect a high standard of writing. We're still learning how to organize my ideas and write in a more academic tone.' (Focus Group 1, Age group 18–34)

'We are used to writing short answers, but now we have to craft long, well-supported essays with introductions, body paragraphs, and conclusions. It's overwhelming. We had to learn what academic integrity means and why plagiarism is such a serious issue. It was never emphasized in high school.' (Focus Group 3, Age group 18–34)

In conclusion, the findings highlight the significant challenges first-year students face in adapting to university writing expectations. These students often struggle with the unfamiliar demands of proper citation, developing evidence-based arguments, conducting research, and adhering to academic integrity standards. The shift from high school writing, which was more straightforward, to the complex and structured essays required at university can be overwhelming. As students adjust to these new expectations, they must navigate the intricacies of citation styles, academic tone, essay organisation, and the importance of avoiding plagiarism, all of which contribute to the difficulty of making this transition.

Theme 4: Influence of prior education on writing proficiency

The findings highlight that prior education plays a significant role in shaping students' writing proficiency at university level. Students who had strong writing instruction in high school felt more prepared for university-level writing tasks, while those from schools with a focus on exams, rote memorisation, or group work found the transition to academic writing more challenging. These students often felt unprepared for tasks that required critical thinking, analysis, and independent argumentation, highlighting the varying levels of writing preparation across different high school environments. As a result, some students are now working to catch up on essential writing skills and strategies needed to succeed in university courses.

'My high school didn't focus much on writing skills, so we didn't have a strong foundation in academic writing. Now we're catching up. We had a great English teacher in high school who taught us how to structure essays properly, so we're not struggling as much as some of my peers.' (Focus Group 1, Age group 18–34)

'We attended a school where the focus was more on exams, not writing assignments. Now, we have to adjust to writing papers, which is difficult for me. We came from a school that emphasised rote learning and memorisation, so when it comes to writing essays that require analysis and critical thinking, we feel unprepared.' (Focus Group 5, Age group 18–34)

'In my high school, we had a lot of group projects, but we didn't do much individual writing. We are now learning how to write and argue points by myself. We were taught a lot of theory and not much practical writing in high school, so now we're struggling to apply that knowledge in written form for my university courses.' (Focus Group 3, Age group 18–34)

The findings of this study highlight that many students feel unprepared for academic writing at university due to a lack of

emphasis on writing skills in high school. Some had strong essay structuring foundations, easing their transition, while others struggled with adapting from rote learning or group-based tasks. The shift from theory-focused education to analytical and critical writing has been particularly challenging.

Theme 5: Challenges with research and source integration

The findings of this study reveal that many first-year students face significant challenges when it comes to research and the integration of sources into their academic writing. Students often report that their high school education did not adequately prepare them for tasks such as finding credible academic sources, properly summarising research, and integrating it into their essays. They struggle with skills like referencing books and journal articles, avoiding plagiarism, and synthesising different sources to build coherent arguments. These difficulties suggest that students may lack the foundational research skills required for university-level writing, leading to a sense of overwhelm and uncertainty as they attempt to navigate academic expectations. The challenges also highlight a gap in students' ability to critically engage with sources, which is essential for developing strong, evidence-based academic arguments.

'We didn't learn how to properly find and use academic sources in high school. Now, I'm struggling to integrate them into my essays. We are not sure how to summarize academic articles and use them to support our arguments. It feels like we are just summarising what others say without forming our own opinions.' (Focus Group 2, Age group 18–34)

'Research feels overwhelming. There are so many sources, and we don't always know which ones are credible or how to incorporate them into our writing. We were taught how to make connections between different research findings in high school. Now, I find it hard to blend sources into a cohesive argument.' (Focus Group 4, Age group 18–34)

'We didn't know how to reference books or journal articles properly until we came to university, and that's something we are still struggling to master. We find it difficult to use sources without plagiarising, especially when I'm not fully confident in my paraphrasing skills.' (Focus Group 5, Age group 18–34)

The findings of this study illustrate that students face challenges in using academic sources effectively, as high school education did not emphasise research skills. Many struggle with summarising and integrating sources into their arguments, often feeling they are merely repeating others' ideas. Difficulties include identifying credible sources, blending research cohesively, and mastering referencing and paraphrasing to avoid plagiarism.

Discussion of findings

The findings of this study reveal that first-year students face significant challenges in academic writing due to their limited prior experience and inadequate preparation in high school. As many students struggled with adapting to the formal writing expectations of university, they encountered

obstacles such as the inability to conduct research, structure arguments, and properly cite sources. These challenges are consistent with the existing literature, which identifies a gap in students' academic writing skills, especially in relation to the transition from high school to university-level writing (Bacha 2012; Can 2009). The Academic Literacies Theory provides a relevant framework for understanding these difficulties, as it emphasises how students' academic writing practices are shaped by social, contextual, and disciplinary expectations. Students must navigate these expectations to align their writing with university conventions, which can be particularly challenging when their previous education did not adequately prepare them for such tasks (Lea & Street 2006).

Furthermore, language barriers were found to compound the challenges students face in academic writing, particularly for non-native English speakers. Issues with grammar, vocabulary, and the ability to express complex ideas clearly created a sense of frustration and self-doubt among students. This finding aligns with existing research that highlights the struggles of students, particularly those from non-English-speaking backgrounds, in mastering the academic language required at university (Ariyanti & Fitriana 2017; Weaver 2006). The Academic Literacies framework, which was used to underpin the current study, underscores the importance of understanding the intersection between language and writing, suggesting that students' writing skills are not only determined by their linguistic abilities but also by their experiences in different educational contexts (Lea & Street 2006). This theory highlights the need for targeted writing support that addresses both the language barriers and the academic conventions students must master to succeed at university.

Conclusion

The study successfully addresses both objectives by exploring the challenges first-year students in the selected institution face in developing academic writing proficiencies and examining the influence of students' prior educational background on their academic writing proficiency in the first year of higher education in the selected institution. The findings of this study underscore the significant challenges first-year students face in transitioning to academic writing, primarily due to inadequate preparation in high school. Students often lack essential skills in research, source integration, and structuring academic arguments, which results in a steep learning curve as they try to meet university-level expectations. These difficulties are further exacerbated by the differences in writing styles between high school and university, leaving students feeling unprepared and overwhelmed. The study highlights the need for targeted support in research, academic writing conventions, and critical thinking to help students navigate these barriers.

Consequently, two key recommendations emerge: first, high schools should enhance their focus on formal academic writing skills, including research, critical thinking, and academic

argumentation to better prepare students for university-level writing; and second, universities should implement more robust orientation programmes or writing workshops that address the gap between high school and university writing standards, with an emphasis on research techniques and academic writing styles. However, the study has two limitations: the sample was confined to first-year students at a single university, which may not capture the full spectrum of student experiences across institutions, and it primarily examined challenges without exploring the specific support mechanisms that could alleviate these difficulties. Further research could address these limitations by incorporating a broader sample of students and exploring effective interventions to enhance academic writing proficiency at the university level.

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Authors' contributions

P.P.M. contributed to the writing of the original draft. M.C. contributed to the writing and validation of the article through reviewing and editing. I.P.M. contributed to the visualisation and data curation.

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Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this article are available from the corresponding author, P.P.M., upon reasonable request.

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