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Academic writing ability and performance of first year university students in South Africa.

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Abstract

Poor academic performance and high failure rates in South African tertiary institutions have lead to a need for intervention of some sort. Academic performance is said to be strongly influenced by one's academic writing ability. Therefore, this study aimed to determine how much influence academic writing ability has on academic performance. It also aimed to establish which measure - the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) or Wechsler Individual Achievement Test II (WIAT-II) - is a more accurate measure of academic writing. Lastly, the research aimed to determine whether any differences between English First Language (EFL) and English Additional Language (EAL) students' exist. A convenience sample of 125 first-year Psychology students from the University of the Witwatersrand wrote argumentative essays that were analysed quantitatively using the IELTS and WIAT-II scoring system. Correlations and t-tests, as well as regression and reliability analyses were used to investigate the aims and establish the results. From the results it was evident that the IELTS and WIAT-II are both adequate measures of academic writing. However, the results showed that academic writing ability is not a major predictor of and contributor towards academic performance. Significant differences in performance were noted between groups of EFL and EAL students on all measures. The results also showed that failure rates were not as high in this sample as in previous statistics. Further investigation is required in order to determine other factors that contribute to one's academic performance. Other aspects of academic literacy such as reading and speaking, as well as previous preparedness or intelligence, may need to be considered as determining factors of academic success.