




## The Role of the Writing Centre in Enhancing Student Employability: A Case Study of a University in South Africa

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### ABSTRACT

In the quest of bridging the high graduate unemployment gap of South African graduates, universities introduced initiatives which sought to assist graduates gain the necessary working experience. South African graduates struggle to find sufficient employment due to lack of work experience. The peer-to-peer coaching led by senior students, who are postgraduate students, leads to the enhancement of graduate employability. Therefore, this paper sought to investigate the contribution of the writing centre in increasing the chances of employment for its consultants. In light of this, literature was consulted to reveal the role of the writing centre in promoting student employment. Unstructured interviews were conducted on fifteen (15) participants, who were identified through convenient sampling technique. Thematic analysis was adopted to analyse the collected data. The paper found that the programme equips students to be familiar with the working environment. The study further revealed that the writing centre office is under-capacitated financially. The study thus proposed that the programme must be financially supported by the university, Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and other external stakeholders to continue capacitating the development of students. The study, therefore, concluded that the writing centre office effectively promotes student employability and increases the working experience of writing centre consultants.

### KEYWORDS

Writing centre; employment; unemployment; graduates.

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Career building is one of the most difficult tasks for students in general; in light of this, universities had to find alternative measures to promote student employability. Peer-to-Peer tutoring is a programme developed to enable students to teach one another without having adult supervision, and universities seized this programme as a method of promoting student employability (Craig, 2023). The writing centre unit is an office which assists university students with academic writing and, to achieve its objectives, the office employs post-graduate students to assist under-graduate students with academic writing, which is a form of peer-to-peer tutoring (Wright & Mustar, 2019). The intention of this paper is to assess the role played by the writing centre in increasing chances of employment for its consultants.

Various studies reveal that students learn better when they learn amongst themselves or with one another. The peer-to-peer tutoring programme was therefore addressed to fill this gap through employing senior students to assist the junior students (Chandra & Palvia, 2021). Kremer-Herman (2022) states that this initiative was introduced to boost student performance. Sabelo and Legg-Jack (2019) states that many first-time entering students (FTENS) struggle with academic writing. The writing centre unit was therefore established to address this imbalance. Therefore, the peer-to-peer tutoring approach was employed to allow these students to be able to learn from one another (Tohara, 2021).

The peer-to-peer facilitation programme meant that instruction opportunities were being opened for the post-graduate students (Venner & Washburn, 2021). Institutions began providing incentives in terms of remuneration of the post-graduate students who assist other students with various academic duties in the writing centre office (Bidandi, 2022). The provision of temporal duties for post-graduate students means providing work experience for them which is normally required in job applications. Venner and Washburn (2021) state that the peer-to-peer facilitation programme prepares the post-graduate students for the work environment by exposing students to the working experience.

The writing centre services are offered by consultants who are also students, enabling clients to be free in expressing their academic writing problems. The time sacrificed by post-graduate students in assisting the undergraduate students with academic writing skills is converted to a work experience (Cady, 2022). This process exposes the post-graduate students to a working environment whereby they get to interact with many different people, and polish their social interacting, communication and multi-tasking skills (Fisher & Frey, 2019). Wankiiri-Hale et al. (2020) adds that the acknowledgement and contract signing by these post-graduate students cements the notion of their temporary employment by their institution.

### Statement of Problem

The issue of high graduate unemployment due to lack of job experience is a major crisis in South Africa (Graham, Williams & Chisoro, 2019). The inability of entry students to write proper academic papers and assignments, which led to writing centre consultants being employed, was

equally identified as a problem. The crisis of inexperienced graduates who are not ready for employment has been equally identified in this paper. The paper sought to highlight the impact of the peer-to-peer facilitated writing centre unit services in creating working experience for writing centre consultants and increasing their employment chances.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS**

#### **Scarcity Theory**

Numerous actions and choices made by people who experience shortage in a particular area of life are explained by the scarcity theory. The definition of scarcity, given by Mullainathan and Schilbach (2013), is "having less than you feel you need." The basic tenet of the scarcity theory is that, through affecting people's thoughts and decisions, scarcity itself creates a specific mindset that, in turn, affects people's behaviour. The principal area in which scarcity theory has been used is poverty (Zhao & Tamm, 2018). Scarcity theory's conceptual framework was applied to economic decision-making and poverty. According to this theory, there are three ways that poverty influences economic choices and actions, all of which are based on two fundamental psychological processes (tunneling and cognitive load).

The inability of university graduates to find suitable jobs for their qualifications is best explained by this theory because it is indeed a case whereby unemployed graduates have less than they feel they need or deserve. The crisis of graduate unemployment leads university graduates straight to the deep end of poverty (Shahriar et al., 2021). People living without jobs are subjected to poverty, which means that they are unable to provide for themselves and their families, as a result of scarce financial resources (Kansiime et al., 2021). This therefore means that they get less of what they feel they deserve.

University initiatives, through their throughput strategies, try to bridge the graduate unemployment gap by providing work experience for students before they even graduate (Mseleku, 2022); However, this initiative does not seem to be enough, as students participating in such programmes are not being given a decent stipend. This notion speaks directly to the scarcity theory, which implies that people are not getting what they feel they deserve (Ruixiang et al., 2019). The fact that students are not being paid well in these programmes does not suggest that these programmes are a failure or ineffective, because the initial aim of the programme is to assist students to succeed in their academics while giving work experience to post-graduate students (Anjum, 2020).

The above discussions informed the authors to underpin the scarcity theory as the foundation of the study. These discussions reveal that people are not gaining what they feel they deserve (De Bruijn & Antonides, 2022); this is a case when qualified graduates are not acquiring jobs for which they have studied and qualified. In light of this, the scarcity theory was deemed suitable for this paper as it speaks directly to the contents of this study, in terms of the lack of satisfaction experienced by graduates in relation to their stipends and unemployment. Equally, the theory mentions psychological factors that are influenced by poverty, which, in this

case, is faced by the unemployed graduates as a result of lack of work experience, hence this is indeed a suitable theory for this paper.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the crucial factors that lead to high youth unemployment, especially for graduates, is the crisis of lack of working experience. Universities are faced with a problem of producing graduates who are not absorbed by the labour market, and this is due to lack of work experience (Pambudi & Harjanto, 2020). This frustration has led to universities coming up with plans to prepare their graduates for work-readiness (Hagedorn et al., 2022). The writing centre, which is part of the throughput strategies of the university to enhance productive graduates, thus became the best space to groom university graduates for work (Grooms, 2019).

The writing centre is an academic space where students are inducted into academic writing. Studies have shown that senior students are far more informed regarding academic writing than First-Time Entering Students (Ftens). This led to universities temporarily employing senior students to assist first year students with academic writing (McCann et al., 2020). This initiative accommodated both parties, the first-year students and senior students, as the first-year students felt welcomed by being tutored by their peers, whereas senior students received working experience from the university (Dreznick, 2022).

Cho and Lee (2021) state that there are academic and non-academic benefits of peer tutoring. Baroudi and David (2020) agree to this notion that peer tutoring creates and inspires confidence in student tutors. Students who are being tutored receive assistance with their academics, while those who are tutoring gain working experience (Wankiiri-Hale et al., 2020). The peer tutoring programme is seen to be mutually beneficial to all students. Peer tutoring is future-oriented in the way that it caters for the working future of the post-graduate students who serve as peer helpers, whereby the programme prepares them for the work-place environment (Borren et al., 2023).

The ever-rising unemployment rate in South Africa has graduates hanging by their fingernails and on the brink of collapse due to poverty. Statistics South Africa (2023) states that 10.6% of the graduates in South Africa remain unemployed even one year after graduation. The percentage is believed to have increased by 0,2% due to the effects of the global pandemic (Ozil & Arun, 2023). The contraction of the economy in the previous quarters led to experienced workers being retrenched and thus increased competition for unemployed graduates as they do not have the necessary work experience (Akinleye et al., 2023). As a result, unemployed graduates find themselves under huge financial stress. The notion of financial hardship directly assesses the form and level of deprivation that a person is feeling as a result of a lack of financial resources and in relation to their personal demands (Achdut & Refaeli, 2020). Difficulties paying bills, buying food and clothes, affording adequate housing, utilities, health care, and transportation expenditures are some of the areas that have been identified as signs of financial stress (Patel, 2023). The crisis of the high graduate unemployment rate has psychological

implications on the unemployed graduates, as they are being subjected to humiliation in society, pressure and poverty (Frankham et al., 2020).

Guan et al. (2022) discovered that financial stress was statistically more likely to lead to depression than other variables of income and socio-economic standing, such as occupation. Srivastava et al. (2021) found that the prevalence of common psychological disorders predicted economic difficulties more significantly than other socio-economic status factors, such as education and property ownership. Those suffering from depression, psychosis, substance abuse disorders, or who have attempted suicide, are far more likely to have financial problems as the root of their troubles (Maloy, 2023).

Financial difficulty increases the likelihood of having mental health issues (Sampson et al., 2021); hardship may be the most predictive predictor of moderate to severe mental impairment (Wilson et al., 2020). Financial stress has been linked to increased depression and self-harm behaviour (Ettman et al., 2021). Suicide rates have also risen during economic downturns (Konstantinos & Fountoulakis, 2020). This therefore suggests that, due to psychological factors of unemployment and financial hardships faced by unemployed graduates, suicides and other factors influenced by psychological factors, such as crime, are likely to be the result.

To prevent all the consequences linked with graduate unemployment, universities had to look deeply at some of the causes of graduate unemployment, which includes lack of work experience. The introduction and enhancement of a student employment programme, in exchange for work experience, appeared to be an effective strategy to mitigate the graduate unemployment dilemma (Nabulsi et al., 2021). The programme does not focus on money but enables senior students to be prepared for work, through the experience that they would have acquired as the writing centre assistants (Mavunda, 2022). This strategy mitigates the graduate unemployment crisis through providing work experience for senior students and thereby avoid the social ills associated with graduate unemployment and poverty (Mseleku, 2022).

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

There are three common research methods that are used in research, namely qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research. Qualitative research is a type of research that aims to gather and analyse non-numerical data in order to gain an understanding of individuals' social reality, including understanding their attitudes, beliefs and motivation. The qualitative research approach was employed in this paper to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of the writing centre consultants regarding the employment opportunities presented by the writing centre for them. In this regard, unstructured interviews were conducted on the identified participants. The use of unstructured interviews assisted the researchers to obtain quality insights into the participants' beliefs, thoughts, perceptions and experiences. The use of unstructured interviews increased the reliability and validity of the findings of this study as it

enabled the researchers to probe further and seek more explanations from the answers of the participants.

The table below shows the profile and demographics of participants.

**Table 1.**

*Profiles and demographics*

Participant	Gender	Age	Number of Years Working in The Writing Centre	Employment Status	Post
Participant 1	Female	23 Years	2 Years	Permanently employed	Educator
Participant 2	Female	25 Years	2 Years	Temporarily employed	Administrator
Participant 3	Male	27 Years	3 Years	Permanently employed	Attorney
Participant 4	Female	25 Years	1 Year	Permanently employed	Secretary
Participant 5	Male	23 Years	2 Years	Temporarily employed	Intern
Participant 6	Male	24 Years	2 Years	Temporarily employed	Intern
Participant 7	Female	27 Years	3 Years	Permanently employed	Research Assistant
Participant 8	Female	25 Years	1 Year	Temporarily employed	Educator
Participant 9	Male	28 Years	3 Years	Permanently employed	Lecturer
Participant 10	Male	33 Years	2 Years	Permanently employed	Lecturer
Participant 11	Female	29 Years	1 Year	Permanently employed	Educator
Participant 12	Male	26 Years	2 Years	Permanently employed	Administrator
Participant 13	Male	32 Years	3 Years	Permanently employed	Coordinator
Participant 14	Female	26 Years	2 Years	Temporarily employed	Student Assistant
Participant 15	Female	25 Years	2 Years	Temporarily employed	Educational Assistant

A sample of fifteen (15) participants was identified, through convenient sampling technique, to represent the entire population of the writing centre consultants. Convenient sampling is part of non-probability sampling technique whereby the relevant participants are identified by the researcher (Reisner & Hughto, 2019). As part of the convenient sampling strategy, the researchers selected the participants based on their accessibility and availability.

Thematic analysis was adopted in the paper to analyse the collected data. Thematic analysis is typical of qualitative research. It emphasises identifying, analysing and interpreting qualitative data patterns (Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019). The study considered all ethical considerations during the data collection process; with respect to participants, confidentiality was ensured, participation was voluntary, and the participants were given the liberty to withdraw anytime they wish or not continue with participation if they felt uncomfortable.

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

**Verbatim responses are recorded to the following questions:**

**How does lack of work experience influence graduate unemployment?**

Participant 1: *"Lack of job experience affects graduate employability negatively, it makes graduates to be less attractive in the work environment, leading to them not being employed, because many employers do not want to take a risk of employing graduates with no job experience."*

Participant 4: *"Lack of work experience influences graduate unemployment, because most of the courses offered by universities are based on theory and not practical work, thus depriving students the opportunity to gain skills and jobs experience through practicals, universities ought to know that job experience has now become the primary focus for employers."*

The responses of the participants in this question are aligned with the assertions of Okolie et al. (2020) about the lack of experience being one of the contributory factors to graduate unemployment. This therefore suggests that to overcome this crisis, universities need to come up with strategies which will equip students with work experience. These programmes can be in the form of integration of theory with practical activities, to enable students to have experience of what they are studying for; also, the interventions, such as the peer to peer facilitated programmes at the writing centre, where students can work part-time and, in turn, gain work experience.

**Explain the social and psychological challenges faced by unemployed graduates.**

Participant 8: *"In some cases unemployed graduates become a laughing stock in society for being graduates but are unemployed, they become financially dependent on other family members, equally, unemployment causes extreme stress which may lead to depression, and this limits the social life of unemployed graduates."*

Participant 2: *"One of the difficult social challenges is that the society expects a lot from graduates, and this causes pressure to graduates' which later causes depression, stress and anxiety."*

Participant 13: *"Psychologically the fact of seeing some of your peers whom you studied with, succeeding buying houses, cars and marrying in front of you while you are stranded and unemployed brings immense pressure and stress."*

Participant 6: *"Being financially dependent on another person brings psychological pressure, especially when you know that you also should be contributing but because you do not have money, you cannot."*

This is aligned with the argument of Sampson et al. (2021), that financial difficulty increases the likelihood of having mental health issues. The crisis of the high graduate unemployment rate has psychological implications on the unemployed graduates, as they are being subjected to humiliation in the society, pressure and poverty (Frankham et al., 2020). This, therefore, means that the society puts extreme pressure on unemployed graduates which has psychological consequences such as depression due to financial dependency and societal negative criticism.

**Explain whether the role played by the writing centre in terms of enhancing student employability is enough or not.**

Participant 14: *"...the writing centre curbs unemployment crisis by creating job opportunities and experience for WSU students."*

Participant 10: *"The writing centre plays a huge role to reduce graduate unemployment crisis because now most of the writing centre consultants end up being fully employed as lecturers of the university because of their skills."*

Participant 5: *"I do not think that the role played by the writing centre in enhancing student employment is enough because it employs few students and offers temporary jobs as opposed to permanent jobs."*

However, Participant 12 had a contrary view in relation to this question: *"The role played by the writing centre is enough in my opinion, because it 'kills two birds with one stone', it assists first year students with academic writing skills while allowing senior students to accumulate at least one year work experience, which helps when one is applying for a job."*

A study by Venner and Washburn (2021) revealed that a peer-to-peer facilitation programme prepares the post-graduate students for the work environment by exposing students to the working experience. Universities are faced with a problem of producing graduates that are not absorbed by the labour market and this is due to lack of work experience (Pambudi & Harjanto, 2020). This implies that the writing centre peer-to-peer facilitated programme provides students with job experience and employment opportunities, because students are now perceived as work ready as a result of the work experience that they acquired in the writing centre. The differing opinions of the participants suggest that there is still a need for improving the capacity of the writing centre on enhancing student employability, while effectively executing its role of improving the writing skills of students.

**Explain the advantages and disadvantages of being a writing centre consultant**

Participant 11: *"The advantage of working in the writing centre is that you gain experience, learn to communicate and interact with new people every day, receive a salary and be exposed to bursary and scholarships opportunities."*

Participant 7: *"One of the amazing things that you get for being a writing centre consultant is a certificate that you get which adds to the curriculum vitae as a job experience."*



Participant 3 argued: *“one of the most common disadvantages of working in the writing centre relates to the issue of not being paid on time, and having to fight for your salary, which by the way is little.”*

Participant 9: *“The disadvantage of working in the writing centre is the issue of being paid less than you deserve, and that you do not rest, you are always willing to help other students no matter how busy you are and end up not focusing on your own academic commitments.”*

The responses therefore suggest that the writing centre, through the peer-to-peer facilitated programme has its benefits for consultants relating to job experience, bursary and self-development opportunities. A study by Cho and Lee (2021) revealed that there are advantages and disadvantages of participating in the peer-to-peer facilitated programme. This is also closely linked to the scarcity theory, which is embedded in this study, which focuses on "having less than you feel you need" (Mullainathan & Schilbach, 2013). This basically means that writing centre consultants are being paid less than they feel they need. It further proves the scarcity of jobs for the young, unemployed graduates.

#### **How can the Writing Centre office improve its role to enhance student employability?**

Participant 15: *“The writing centre can improve its capacity to enhance its role on enhancing student employment through establishing its own independent department, which will the employ more students and create some permanent posts.”*

Participant 5: *“The writing centre can enhance student employment through recommending its assistants to other departments, in simple terms expose them and their skills to the labour market for them to be recognised by other employers.”*

The utterances of the participants are supported by the writings of Dreznick (2022) that the writing centre approach to employ students to assist other students accommodates both parties, the first-year students and senior students, as the first-year students felt welcomed by being tutored by their peers, whereas senior students received working experience from the university. The initiative of providing students with an opportunity to have a one year working experience through assisting other students with writing centre related services is perceived to be effective in enhancing student employability.

#### **Recommendations**

This paper equally provides possible remedies for the afore-mentioned problems by suggesting the proper training of writing centre consultants in techniques required for job interviews; this will enable students to be aware of how to compose a CV and respond to job interviews. These techniques will further enable students to present themselves favourably as a result of the experience they accumulated through working in the writing centre.

This study recommends that there should be continuous skills development workshops to equip the writing centre consultants. This will enable the consultants to grow and be able to enrich their skills which will prepare them for future jobs. Development of the skills will enable the writing centre consultants to have diverse skills and thus qualify for many jobs.

Exposing unemployed university graduates to the labour market is suggested by the paper; this will enable unemployed graduates with writing centre working experience to be noticed by the employers. This means that the writing centre would help considerably to enhance student employability. This deliberate strategy will bring many new opportunities for unemployed graduates.

An increase of the writing centre stipend is also recommended by the study, to bring about confidence to the writing centre consultants. This is likely to encourage the writing centre assistants to have a feeling of pride that they are really working. An increase of the remuneration of workers is also a performance appraisal technique which boosts the effectiveness of workers.

### CONCLUSION

Through consulting various forms of literature, collection of data following ethical considerations and using a suitable methodology for the study, this paper managed to effectively highlight the crucial role played by the writing centre in enhancing student employability, through offering these students a working knowledge by assisting their peers on academic writing aspects. This paper revealed psychological, financial and social prejudices which unemployed graduates face, through not being employed as a result of a lack of work experience. This study showed that the writing centre bridges the gap of lack of work experience for most of university graduates.

The theoretical underpinning employed in this paper revealed that unemployed graduates are gaining less than they feel they need, as they are underpaid and also not employed for the various qualifications for which they studied. The paper equally considered the advantages and disadvantages of part time working in the writing centre for work experience. The study produced possible solutions to the identified problems. The study made various findings and thoroughly discussed them, and thus was able to conclude that the writing centre, with all its flaws that need to be improved, nevertheless plays a vital role in reducing the huge burden of lack of experience on university graduates, through offering students a working experience while they are still studying.

The study was conducted only at one university and not extended to other universities in South Africa. This served as a limitation to the study as the findings of this study cannot necessarily be generalised to other universities in terms of the role played by the writing centre in enhancing student employability. The paper used a qualitative research approach and convenient sampling technique, and this further serves as a limitation of the study because a restricted number of conveniently identified participants was interviewed. The researcher therefore proposes that, for future research, a different method and a larger sample could be used at different university campuses in order to check whether the findings correlate with this study.

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