CHAPTER 5   Academic literacy perceptions and requirements of supervisors - data analysis and discussion

5.1   Introduction

The framework that was introduced in Chapter 4 discusses at length the importance of the concept of audience in the academic writing transaction. Much emphasis was given to the relationship between academic writer and reader with the implication that an awareness of one another's expectations of academic writing has the potential to produce better quality student writing. This chapter focuses on providing a supervisor perspective (the primary audience for the writing of postgraduate students) of the postgraduate writing environment and discusses their perceptions on how this context is affected by academic literacy issues. It is therefore an attempt at providing a description of the context in which postgraduate academic writing takes place (a context in which the postgraduate student as writer of academic texts plays a central part) from the point of view of supervisors at the University of Pretoria. It further aims to determine supervisors' requirements, expectations and perceptions of their postgraduate students with regard to academic literacy and, more specifically, their writing ability.

Apart from the potential in raising supervisor awareness of matters that concern academic literacy and writing specifically, requesting the type of information described above is essential for writing course design. From the perspective of the academic writing course designer who often plays the part of intermediary or liaison between postgraduate students and their supervisors regarding writing matters, this information is crucial towards the design of writing courses that are relevant to students' needs as well as the requirements of specific disciplines.

As already mentioned, a number of postgraduate supervisors at the University of Pretoria confirm that many postgraduate students still struggle with academic writing. As a result of a growing number of requests addressed to the Unit for Academic Literacy (UAL) involving writing support for postgraduate students, it was decided to select a specific group of these students as a focus group for the application of the

designed framework. Although the focus group for the proposed writing course in Chapter 10 is a very specific group of postgraduate students (from the School of Agricultural and Food Sciences in the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences), it was decided to do a campus wide supervisor survey as a first step in order to gain a general impression of supervisor perceptions and requirements regarding academic literacy and writing. This was done in order to gain a more general understanding of supervisor perceptions, expectations and requirements but also with the specific purpose of possible future contact with such supervisors. A **survey of postgraduate academic literacy was therefore conducted among all postgraduate supervisors** at the UP. In this chapter, the results of the survey as a whole are reported first under section 5.2.2. Subsequently, an abstraction is made from these results specifically for the study group from Agricultural and Food Sciences compared to the rest of the respondents.

Ultimately, this chapter and the following four chapters are an attempt at providing a multi-faceted account of the different role players and issues within the tertiary environment that have bearing on the writing context. Chapter 9 specifically integrates the major findings in Chapters 5-8 with regard to their implications for writing course design.

5.2 Academic writing requirements for postgraduate studies

The following section reports the results of a survey conducted at the University of Pretoria that determined supervisor perceptions of postgraduate academic literacy as well as the academic writing requirements for postgraduate studies offered in different faculties at the University.

5.2.1 Survey instrument

Although there are numerous documented difficulties in the construction and use of questionnaires as information soliciting instrument (see Nunan, 1992; Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2002), it was considered a suitable initial instrument for determining certain general issues regarding academic literacy and

writing in the postgraduate context. It was envisaged that, once broad trends were established, more specific, discipline-oriented information could be elicited by means of focus group interviews and ongoing discussions with supervisors in specific disciplines.

Having worked with postgraduate students with literacy problems in our generic Academic Writing for Postgraduate Studies (EOT 300) course for the past three years, I have designed the questionnaire not only to confirm certain assumptions and expectations I have about the academic literacy and writing ability of postgraduate students, but also to gain important additional information with regard to what specific academic literacy and writing requirements supervisors have of their students.

In the construction of the questionnaire, I focused on the following issues:

- the **level of experience** of postgraduate supervisors;
- supervisor **awareness** about the **language preference and use** of their postgraduate students;
- the **formal language background** of supervisors;
- supervisor **awareness** about the **academic literacy levels** of their postgraduate students;
- supervisor **awareness** about the specific **literacy and writing difficulties** of postgraduate students;
- the **importance** that supervisors award to **writing regarded as a process**;
- the **importance** that supervisors assign to **language usage** in the writing of students;
- what **strategies** supervisors use to ensure **final language correctness** of written texts;
- specific **requirements** of supervisors with regard to **academic writing issues** (e.g. referencing systems; use of evidence; other stylistic requirements); and
- the **willingness** on the part of postgraduate supervisors to **accept support from the UAL on writing matters** (towards a possible closer working relationship between the UAL and specific faculties/departments).

After a lengthy process of determining which lecturers in the different faculties at the University were involved with students at postgraduate level, 500 questionnaires were distributed at three campuses (The Main Campus, the Onderstepoort Campus [Veterinary Sciences] and the Groenkloof Campus [Education]). Lecturers had sufficient time to complete the questionnaires and in the end, 101 (approximately 20%) completed questionnaires were sent back. Respondents from a wide range of disciplines returned the questionnaires (supervisors from 52 departments in 8 faculties responded) with the highest number of responses originating from the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences. A complete copy of the questionnaire is included in Addendum A.

5.2.2   Analysis and interpretation of the results for all supervisors

5.2.2.1 Introduction

It is important to point out that this analysis of the data is primarily descriptive. Where appropriate, however, analyses attempt to establish noteworthy relationships between prominent sections of the data.

5.2.2.2 Section A - Institutional and professional issues

The first issue addressed in Section A of the questionnaire focuses on the language background of supervisors. It was considered important to determine supervisors' language experience in a more formalised context because of a possible relationship with how confident they felt in dealing with issues pertaining to the language use of their postgraduate students. Although only 40% of supervisors had had exposure to formal tertiary language training of some kind, a large percentage (67%) have confidence in their own language abilities to ensure the language correctness of final drafts of postgraduate texts. This corresponds well with the supervisory experience of supervisors, where the more experienced supervisors generally indicate that their own language ability is adequate in order to ensure such correctness. A large number of supervisors also indicate that to ensure language correctness they make use of a wider

support system (other colleagues, people they know who are proficient in the specific language, editors, etc.).

As already indicated, a comprehensive strategy (such as the one proposed by the framework in this research) that aims to support postgraduate students with academic writing, has to address how informed the immediate supervisors of these students are with regard to their language preference and use as well as their academic literacy ability. Since the difficulties of additional language users specifically in reaching native user competence in an additional language are well known (an ability that is further complicated by using that language in a tertiary academic context), the questionnaire also attempts to determine supervisor awareness about the language status of their postgraduate students. Additionally, the questionnaire had the underlying aim of possibly raising awareness about language and literacy matters among supervisors that might encourage them to be proactive in addressing literacy difficulties (for example, requiring that students complete a literacy assessment when they commence with their studies), rather than discovering student problems at a later stage only. Introducing the early literacy assessment of postgraduate students is, however, an issue that should be handled with caution, since a determination of academic literacy levels should not evolve into serving a gatekeeping function that would deprive students of the opportunity to engage in postgraduate study. If such an assessment is to be used as part of the admission criteria for postgraduate studies, it could potentially be used to deny students access to postgraduate studies. So, while one would like to raise awareness about literacy difficulties on the one hand, one would also wish to encourage supervisors to seek relevant support for students with such difficulties.

Supervisors were therefore asked to make a general distinction between whether their postgraduate students at the time consisted mainly of primary language users of the language of learning, additional language users of the language of learning, or whether there was an even spread between primary and additional language users. Very significantly, 87% of the supervisors indicate that their students are either a mixed group of primary and additional language users or mainly additional language users of the language of learning (see Figure 5.1). A very small percentage (only 13%) of the respondents indicate that their postgraduate students include mainly

primary language users of the language of learning. Although the data reported here are impressionistic in nature (these are therefore not the official figures on the language preference of postgraduate students, but the impressions of a portion of supervisors at the University), the general spread they report between additional and primary language users is largely supported by the official university data available for 2006. From a total of 9952 postgraduate students registered at the University in 2006 (Bureau for Institutional Research and Planning [BIREP], 2006), 3673 students are Afrikaans native language users (see Figure 5.2). A total of 2731 students only are native English users. With regard to their language preference, 7158 students prefer to study in English (see Figure 5.3). This total includes 948 students who are Afrikaans native language users who prefer to study in English, but also 3479 students who are users of a variety of other native languages and who are, therefore, additional language users of English. Thus, from a total of 9952 postgraduate students, 4427 are additional language users of English (largely similar findings are reported for 2005). This trend is also borne out in Chapter 7 of the research in the sense that from the group of students that was initially tested with TALL, the majority were additional language users of English.

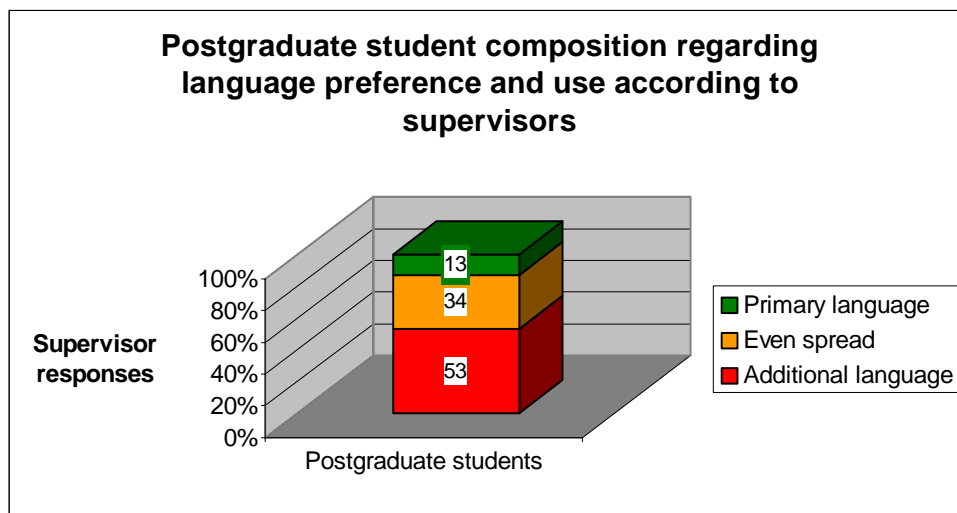**Figure 5.1   Postgraduate students' language preference and use according to supervisors**

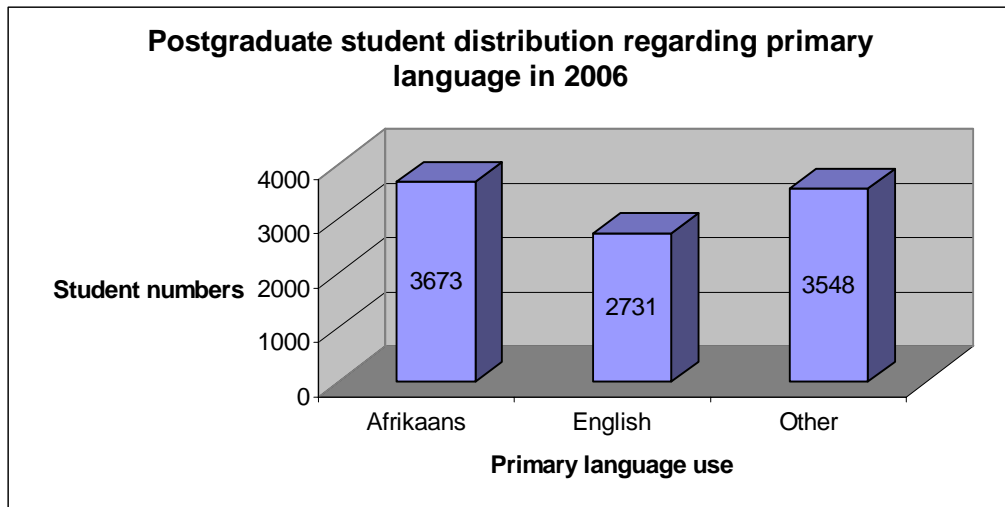**Figure 5.2   Primary language use of postgraduate students at the UP for 2006**

Postgraduate student distribution regarding primary language in 2006

Afrikaans: 3673
English: 2731
Other: 3548

Student numbers / Primary language use

Figure 5.3   Language preference of postgraduate students at the UP for 2006

Language preference of postgraduate students for 2006

Afrikaans: 2794
English: 7158

Student numbers / Languages of learning
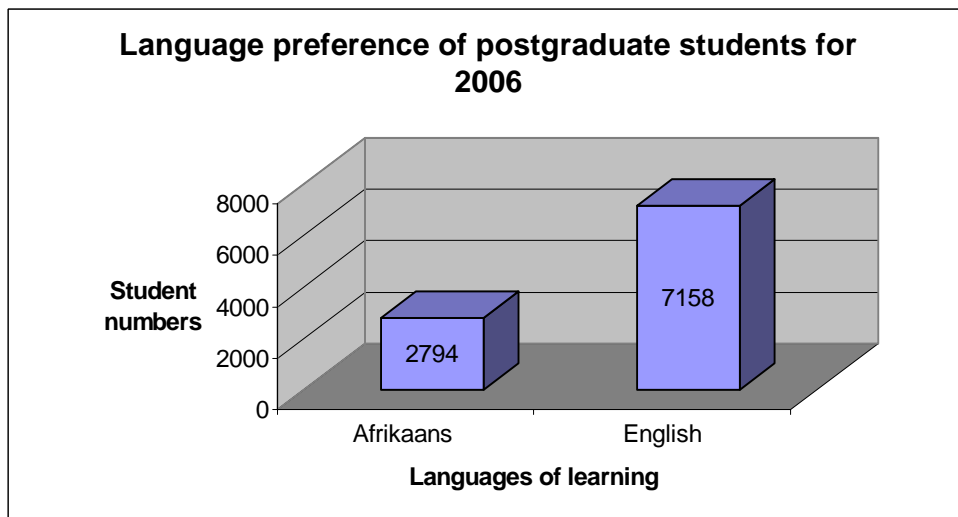
Although students have a choice between using either English or Afrikaans as a language of learning at the University, there is a tendency for postgraduate students to prefer to write in English specifically, no matter what their primary language is (they are also sometimes advised to do so). The reason for this is probably related to the

status English enjoys as a *lingua franca* in South Africa but also perhaps because English is widely perceived as a world language that provides access to employment and international communication (Horne & Heinemann, 2003; Van der Walt, 2004). The inclination of postgraduate students to write in English in South Africa might further be influenced by the number of accredited academic journals that are still available in Afrikaans. A study by BIREP (2006) found that, for example, from a total of 236 journals that are accredited by the Department of Education (for 2005), only 15 have Afrikaans titles. During 2005, only 6.5% of journal articles by UP academics were published in Afrikaans journals. The trend regarding language preference and use mentioned above is alarming when one considers the generally low rating supervisors in this survey award their additional language students with regard to academic literacy and writing ability specifically. I will return to this issue later in the chapter.

5.2.2.3 Section B - Supervisor perceptions about the academic literacy levels of their students

In the construction of the questionnaire, it was considered crucial that supervisors understand exactly what is meant by the term 'academic literacy'. Therefore, in order to create a shared understanding of what academic literacy means in the context of this survey, the term is defined in the questionnaire as:

> *the integrated academic language ability of students that enables them to cope with the demands of studying in a tertiary academic environment. Such ability incorporates, amongst others, aspects of how students deal purposefully with written texts in their interpretation and production of such texts. This mainly includes: an understanding of how different academic texts work (their structure, type of content and how language is employed to create this structure and content), strategies for selecting, arranging and generating information appropriately in their academic argumentation and how students generally integrate their familiarity with academic language conventions (e.g. register, style and appropriateness and correctness of language) in their production of academic texts.*

The first question related to the concept of academic literacy in the questionnaire focuses on whether supervisors see a relationship between student achievement and their academic literacy ability. Eighty-three per cent of the respondents indicate that academic literacy plays an important role in the completion of postgraduate studies. In the explanation for their choices, responses range from language and literacy-

related difficulties experienced by students that complicate their studies to a relationship between the duration of studies and academic literacy levels. One respondent, for example, indicates that: *"Literacy levels facilitate access to literature reading in order to develop concepts and expression of opinions and ideas."* In effect, a number of supervisors indicate that students with lower levels of academic literacy generally take longer to complete their studies. One respondent notes that: *"It does not prevent them from successfully completing their studies, but definitely the ease with which they complete their studies/takes longer to complete."* Another related issue involves the increased effort and time spent with lower literacy level students on the part of supervisors. Some respondents are adamant that: *"Reading and writing skills compromise them, it takes enormous amounts of time from me."* In this context, there are important institutional issues that are obviously complicated by students who do not have an adequate literacy ability. The first such issue is that of students who do not complete their studies as a result of their struggle to deal with the literacy demands of postgraduate studies. The second issue is that students take longer than they are realistically supposed to in order to complete their studies. Obviously, the throughput rate of postgraduate students at universities in South Africa is a crucial issue that warrants constant monitoring and investigation in order to ensure that there is a continuous supply of highly qualified, employable professionals.

Reponses to a question about the general academic literacy levels of postgraduate students were elicited by means of a Likert scale. On a scale of 1-5 with 1 described as poor and 5 as excellent, 77% of the responses range between levels 1 and 3 ('poor' to 'average'). Only 23% of the respondents feel that their students approximate an excellent level of academic literacy (see Figure 5.4, below). The generally negative perception of their students' literacy levels can, to some extent, be expected within the wider context of the history of education in South Africa. This is, however, not the literacy profile that one would expect from postgraduate students, given the fact that they have been exposed to the tertiary environment for a considerable time. It should be noted again that these are supervisors' perceptions and not actual student ability. There is, however, a noteworthy parallel between the general perception of supervisors about the literacy levels of postgraduate students and the results of TALL as well as the text analysis for the specific study group (discussed in detail in Chapter 7).

Figure 5.4   Supervisor perceptions of their students' general academic literacy ability
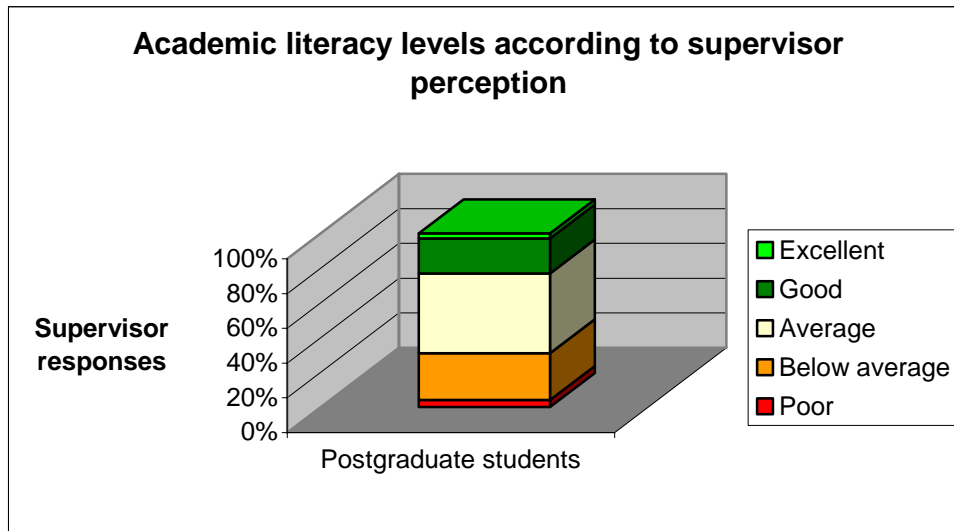
Based on the general expectation alluded to above that postgraduate students are supposed to be academically literate, supervisors were probed about their specific expectations in this regard. Although a large majority of respondents (96%) feel very strongly that the students who are admitted to postgraduate studies should already be academically literate in their disciplines, there is general agreement that the measures and strategies they have in place to select academically literate students are not always successful. Regarding an average mark (in this case 60%) for the previous qualification being a good indicator of academic success, 82% of the respondents feel that it is either not a good indicator at all, or not necessarily a good indicator. As explanation for this choice, a large group of respondents mention that in their disciplines, undergraduate studies often do not prepare students adequately for the demands of postgraduate writing. This is mainly a result of the formulaic and factual types of knowledge that are typically required of students, and which do not necessarily contribute to the development of writing fluency. One respondent notes that: *"60% is a low mark – proficiency in a technical subject does not imply proficiency in the use of language."* Although one would expect that an intermediate degree such as 'honours' would provide more exposure to the rigours of extensive writing tasks, this is also not necessarily the case in all disciplines. Regarding this issue, a respondent mentions that: *"Honours is lecture-based. When they reach*

master's they have to do extensive writing and they start suffering." Those who are therefore responsible for teaching students who were not exposed to much writing in their undergraduate studies (as well as on honours level) would do well in proactively addressing this issue in the form of extra and appropriately designed support for postgraduate students who experience literacy difficulties.

A further disconcerting statistic is that, although supervisor perceptions clearly indicate their belief that many postgraduate students experience academic literacy difficulties, only 45% of these supervisors indicate that some form of formal academic literacy assessment is required before admitting students to postgraduate degrees. Furthermore, the strategies for determining such levels vary greatly, with 84% of the respondents who indicate that they assess academic literacy stating that their strategies are either not successful or only partly so. The reasons for their choice range from stating that even with a relatively good mark for the previous degree, one is often still unsure about students' level of literacy and that undergraduate studies do not prepare students adequately for the literacy level required at postgraduate level; to a concern about the quality of previous tuition at other institutions (both locally and from other countries) and that it is probably unwise to trust marks from other institutions as a sole indicator of students' literacy abilities. As one respondent summarises this point: *"A good average mark is not necessarily indicative of academic literacy."* Obviously, the increasing pressure to produce growing numbers of master's and doctoral graduates will to some extent influence admission to postgraduate studies at South African universities. Therefore, regarding access to postgraduate studies the possibility exists that, even if a reliable assessment instrument is used to determine the academic literacy levels of prospective students, reality will probably dictate that students with low literacy scores gain access to postgraduate studies. It is for this reason that institution-wide knowledge of and access to a reliable assessment instrument (such as the Test of Academic Literacy Levels - TALL), that could be used to determine literacy levels accurately, could assist supervisors in identifying and addressing literacy problems timeously.

In an inquiry about what supervisors thought was the most difficult aspect of postgraduate studies for their students, 72% indicate that the actual writing of the academic text is the most difficult. Although, for example, they had the opportunity

to award prominence to the perceptive ability of understanding the literature (or for that matter anything else they thought important), they perceive students to struggle most with the actual process of writing. In my experience, many postgraduate students (especially inexperienced academic writers) struggle with writing because they still entertain the idea that writing is a more or less once-off event. The misconception that 'you are not a good writer if you cannot do it right the first time' or just mere ignorance about writing practised as a process, can be addressed productively in exposing students to a multiple draft approach to writing. Such an approach allows for the development and honing of students' writing ability right from the initial stages of developing a thesis, planning their writing and collecting and incorporating sources of information, through to producing numerous drafts of a written text while making use of strategies of revision and editing. A multiple-draft approach has the potential to foreground the soundness of argumentation, the acceptability of evidence, the cohesion and overall coherence of their texts, as well as the language correctness of the texts students produce.

5.2.2.4 Section C - Specific literacy and writing difficulties experienced by postgraduate students

In order for the broader concept of academic literacy to be interpreted more specifically with the aim of providing a possible focus for writing courses, I decided to make use of a slightly altered version of the definition of academic literacy of Weideman (2003b:xi) in the design of the questionnaire. This definition identifies a number of functional components of academic literacy with regard to what students could practically do with academic texts. Supervisors responded to twelve statements in the form of again rating their students on a Likert scale. Their responses are summarised below in Figure 5.5.

Although the first two statements that deal with students' use of **general academic vocabulary** and **subject-specific terminology** respectively do not appear to present as big a problem as some of the other issues addressed, the fact that for both these statements the highest percentage of responses (56% and 48% respectively) identify postgraduate students as being 'average' in these abilities, is unexpected at postgraduate level (this issue is also addressed in more detail in Chapter 7). One

would expect that most students who have progressed this far in tertiary education should at least have a 'good' command of subject-specific terminology. Although the issue of general academic vocabulary could be addressed in a functional manner in a literacy course, subject-specific terminology is best left to the designs of subject experts.

Figure 5.5   Supervisor perceptions about the academic literacy difficulties of postgraduate students
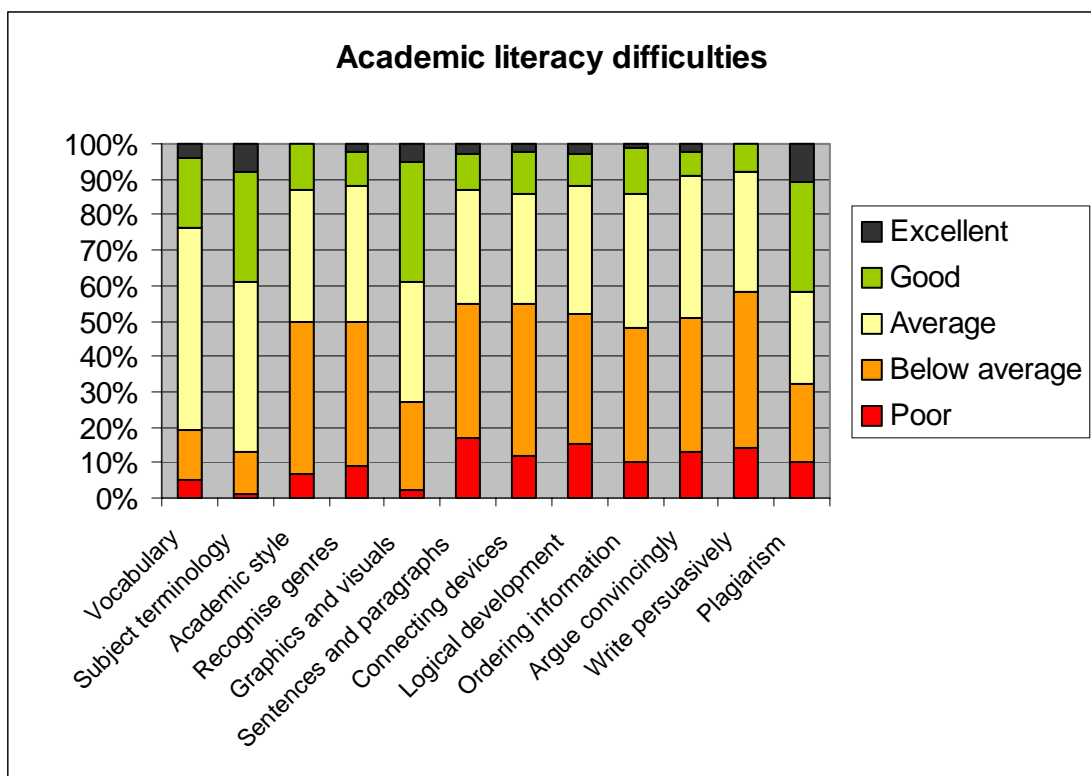
Issues such as **academic style** and mastering **specific genres** (e.g. a technical report, thesis, etc.) and **functional text types** (e.g. argumentative, descriptive writing) used in the academic environment appear to present a considerable problem to students. A very large group of respondents (87%) indicate that their students have an 'average' to 'poor' ability to write in an academic style. Eighty-eight per cent of the respondents indicate that their students experience difficulty (an 'average' to 'poor' ability) in making productive use of the genres and functional text types regularly used in the tertiary environment. This finding is important in the context of recent positive

teaching results in genre studies that promote genre as a basis for writing development (see Johns, 1997; Johns, 2005). Within the context of writing course design this is an aspect that allows for the development of a competence in writing in those types of genres most often used in specific disciplines. As a result of the noted variability in supervisor/lecturer expectations about various aspects of academic writing (see Harwood & Hadley, 2004), writing course materials that focus on genre would be best developed in close consultation with discipline specialists.

Only two statements in this section of the questionnaire focus on the structural, linguistic aspects of language usage – one focusing on **structuring sentences and paragraphs** and the other on **making use of connecting devices** towards achieving fluency in writing. Students received low ability ratings from their supervisors on both of these. Eighty-seven per cent of respondents rate their students as having an 'average' to 'poor' ability in structuring sentences and paragraphs, and 86% feel that their students have an 'average' to 'poor' ability in making use of connecting devices. This is a clear indication that supervisors believe their students to be experiencing language proficiency problems in addition to other literacy difficulties, in the sense that many students are not proficient enough in the language of learning in order to make functional use of the language when they write. One note of caution must, however, be added here, which is that supervisors may be more familiar with these concepts relating to structure, grammar and language organisation than with concepts in this list. This may therefore have caused them to seize upon these, to their more familiar explanations of their students' lack of language competence.

With regard to issues concerning the **logical development of texts**, **ordering of information**, **convincing argumentation** as well as **persuasive writing**, more than 80% of the respondents rate their students as having between 'average' to 'poor' ability. The only two issues that students appear to have some control over are their **understanding of plagiarism** as well as their **use of graphic and visual information**. Most supervisors (68% and 72% respectively) indicate that their students have an 'average' to 'excellent' understanding of the implications of plagiarism and make productive use of graphic and visual information in their writing. Although supervisors might be of the opinion that their students indeed understand the implications of plagiarism, this does not seem to prevent some students from

plagiarising others' work. In my experience, students are often shocked to find out that they are not allowed to use someone else's exact words without quoting directly, and seem relatively unaware of lecturers' ability to notice when some source has been plagiarised.

Although some supervisors mention that it is difficult to generalise about the academic literacy of their students, the analysis above is a clear indication that supervisors perceive many of their students to be experiencing difficulty with various aspects of functional academic literacy. On a practical level, it will be important to make supervisors aware that most of the issues mentioned above (with the possible exception of subject-specific terminology) can be addressed in a functional manner in an academic writing course for postgraduate students.

When asked specifically about the **academic writing ability** of their students and distinguishing here between the ability of primary and additional language users, 52% of respondents rate the writing ability of their primary language students as 'good' to 'excellent'. This is not the case, however, for their additional language students. Ninety-three per cent of respondents rate their additional language students as having an 'average' to 'poor' writing ability (see Figure 5.6, below). This is very significant in the UP context, since a large number of postgraduate students (nearly half of all postgraduate students registered in 2005 and 2006) are additional language users of English. It is even more significant when one considers that responses to the following question show that a large majority of respondents (90%) believe that the successful completion of postgraduate studies depends to a large extent on students' writing ability.

Figure 5.6   Supervisor perceptions on the writing ability of postgraduate students
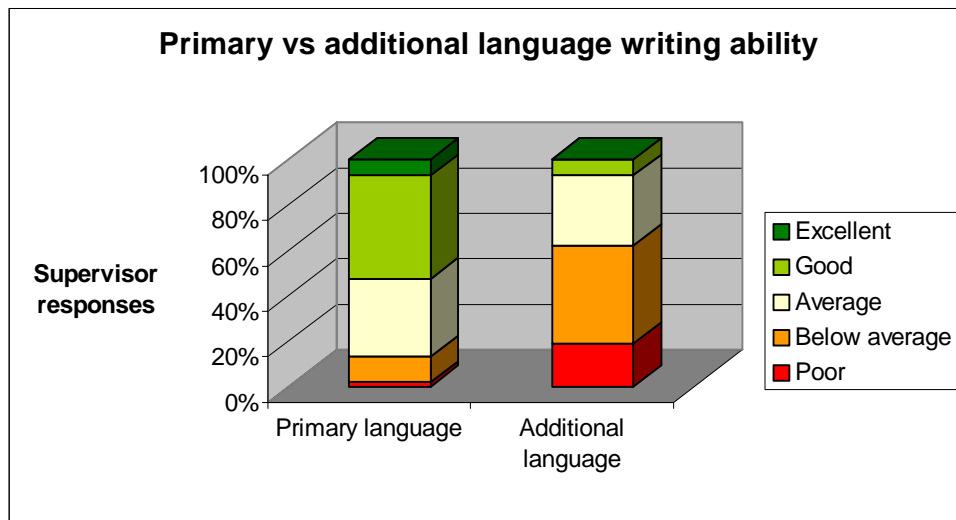
5.2.2.5 Section D - Academic writing requirements of disciplines

Section D of the questionnaire focuses on writing issues that were expected to be more discipline specific in nature. The first issue deals with the discipline-specific nature of the language used in the discipline. In response to this question, it is apparent that a large majority of supervisors (70%) support the existence of the discipline-specific use of language. Responses to the following question further indicate that for supervisors, the language is not only specific in terms of subject specific terminology, but also in the use of specific genres and text types (62% of supervisors selected the combined option while only 31% selected the option for terminology only). These findings can also be related to the issue on who should teach students the academic discourse of specific disciplines in Section F of the questionnaire. A large majority of respondents indicate that subject specialists also need to take responsibility for this issue.

In order to provide a general indication of specific written genres and text types that may inform decisions about writing course design, the next question attempted to determine prominent genres and text types generally used in postgraduate study

(respondents were also asked to rate genres and text types in order of importance). An analysis (Table 5.1, below) of the responses indicates that a thesis/dissertation (70%), as could be expected, is by far the most prominent genre that postgraduate students have to produce. A research proposal is rated second (38%), and an academic article third (25%). Fourth most important is an academic essay (18%) and last, a report (12%). With regard to writing course design, this finding is a general indication that a focus on thesis or dissertation writing could be a potentially productive genre for authentic writing development. In practice, however, one will have to consider the usefulness (and practicality) of this genre for the design of writing course materials. Although one could make use of any specific stage in the production of a thesis or dissertation (such as the literature review, for example), it may be very difficult to co-ordinate so that all students in the group produce a literature review at the same time. It might be more practical to work with a genre such as a research proposal which is much shorter in length but is also connected to a shorter specified time regarding its production. This is, however, an issue that obviously needs to be clarified with a specific department or discipline and could be more adequately addressed in focus group interviews.

Table 5.1   Supervisor perceptions on the importance of specific written genres

Rank	Genre	Percentage
1	Thesis/dissertation	70%
2	Research proposal	38%
3	Academic article	25%
4	Academic essay	18%
5	Report	12%

With regard to specific text types used in postgraduate writing (Table 5.2, below), it appears as if argumentation (57%) and factual writing (54%) are by far the more prominent text types used in this environment. Only 24% of the respondents selected descriptive writing as their first priority with regard to the use of text types. It should be noted, however, that one rarely finds that a specific text type is used on its own in

academic texts. More often, a combination of these text types is used in order to build a sound academic argument and to write convincingly in the academic environment. This is another issue that should be addressed in focus group interviews, probably in combination with the previous issue on genre.

Table 5.2   Supervisor perceptions on the importance of text types

Rank	Text type	Percentage
1	Argumentation	57%
2	Factual writing	54%
3	Description	24%

One of the more prominent characteristics of working with ideas in the tertiary academic environment is that argument is usually built on **evidence**. This is confirmed by all of the respondents (100%) who say that claims should be substantiated in academic argumentation. A large group of respondents identify 'empirical evidence' and 'evidence from the literature' as acceptable evidence. As expected, this is an issue that calls for a focus on specific disciplines, since a number of evidence types mentioned by respondents are field-specific in nature. Among these are preferences such as 'mathematical proof' in Mathematics, 'statutes and laws' in the legal field and 'photographic evidence' in Mining Engineering as well as in Plant Production and Soil Science.

With regard to a specific **referencing system** expected of students, 64% of the respondents indicate that they prefer the Harvard method. Fourteen per cent, however, indicate that referencing is done according to discipline-specific journals. Based on these results it seems, therefore, that the Harvard would be a good default method to use in a general type writing course where students are not studying within the same discipline. Used as a point of departure, one should be able to make productive comparisons that focus on important principles of referencing when comparing the Harvard with other, more idiosyncratic methods preferred in specific fields.

5.2.2.6 Section E - Supervisor feedback

This section of the questionnaire attempts to elicit responses on the prominence of language in the **feedback** that supervisors provide on student writing. Ninety-nine per cent of the respondents indicate that they provide feedback on the language use of their students throughout the writing process. Of this group, 83% give attention to 'language correctness', 'style and register', 'structure', 'clarity of meaning' as well as to the 'logical sequencing of ideas'. Although only 51% make use of a fixed marking scheme in the final assessment of their students, 81% of respondents thoroughly discuss with students the way in which they will be assessed before the actual assessment. Seventy-one per cent of those who do make use of a formal marking scheme include a language component in the marking scheme and award an actual mark for language use.

Respondents were also asked to rate the language issues that are emphasised in the final mark. In response to issues such as 'language correctness', 'style and register', 'logical flow of ideas', 'overall structure' and 'clarity of meaning', the use of 'style and register' appears to be least important. All other issues mentioned above appear to be equally important in judgements about language use. One would have expected, though, that an analysis of this data specifically would have revealed significant patterns that could have been investigated further towards offering suggestions to supervisors on the provision of language-related feedback. This limitation of the data in that it does not differentiate meaningfully between these language issues could possibly be a result of supervisors not fully understanding what such issues entail. This is another matter that could be further explored in focus group interviews with supervisors.

As can be expected at this level of tertiary education, supervisors appear to be well aware of the important role language plays in postgraduate studies, and seem to spend considerable time and effort on language-related matters. Some supervisors, however, express the need to be able to *"focus more on the content rather than on correcting language mistakes all the time"*. This is an important issue for the mere reason that reading for the quality of content does not necessarily coincide with reading for fluency and correctness of language. It is therefore often required that texts be read at

least twice in order to address both issues adequately. As a result, supervisors could be saved considerable time and effort if the written texts they receive are relatively error free and they could concentrate on the value of ideas and the argument presented by students.

As has already been discussed, the issue of feedback, especially the correction of grammatical errors, is far more complicated than merely stating that one does or does not correct errors. Offering support to supervisors with the provision of language-related feedback will obviously involve making supervisors aware of the current debate about this and encouraging them to adjust their provision of feedback accordingly.

5.2.2.7 Section F – Academic literacy support

A crucial issue in providing writing (and overall literacy) support to postgraduate students in a variety of disciplines is whether subject specialists regard language and literacy specialists as being capable of providing such support to their students. In response to the question on who should take responsibility for teaching writing to their students, the majority of respondents (64%) indicate that a combination of subject and language specialists should be responsible. It is clear that subject specialists do award a role for language and writing specialists in this regard. Seventy-six per cent of respondents further indicate that they think their students would benefit most in attending an integrated academic literacy course rather than language specialists providing an editing service only.

Although a large majority of supervisors depend on their own ability as well as that of their co-supervisors to ensure the final language correctness of postgraduate student texts, there is also a clear indication that supervisors are aware of other available support structures that can be accessed if needed. Fifty-two per cent indicate that professional language editing is a requirement before submitting final drafts of written texts (specifically dissertations and theses). An important issue addressed by a number of supervisors is that professional language editing can become a tremendous burden if the editor is not also a specialist in the specific discipline. It is therefore

strongly emphasised by these respondents that editors be used who are knowledgeable about the discipline.

It is further a very positive indication that after having completed a very lengthy questionnaire on academic literacy, 67% of the respondents are prepared to participate in a follow-up interview that will focus on more specific issues regarding academic writing in specific disciplines.

The most important findings of this section are summarised in Table 5.3.

Table 5.3   Important findings regarding supervisor perceptions and requirements of academic literacy and writing

- Although the majority of supervisors have not been exposed to formal tertiary language training, most supervisors feel confident in their own language ability to ensure the final correctness of student writing. The majority of supervisors also make use of additional resources (such as colleagues) to ensure such correctness. Professional language editing is, however, a formal requirement only for approximately 50% of respondents.
- Supervisors appear to be aware of the general language status of their postgraduate students in the sense that additional language users of English outnumber mother tongue Afrikaans and English users respectively at the university. A large number of comments by respondents were also directed at the literacy problems of additional language users specifically.
- Supervisors generally believe that an adequate level of academic literacy is crucial in the successful completion of postgraduate studies.
- A large majority of respondents believe that their postgraduate students' academic literacy levels range from average to poor.
- Almost all respondents feel that students should already be academically literate when they are admitted to postgraduate studies.
- There is general agreement that measures and strategies to select academically literate students are not always successful. Less than 50% of these supervisors indicate that the academic literacy of their postgraduate students is formally assessed.
- Supervisors indicate that they believe that writing specifically is the most important literacy difficulty for students.
- Supervisors believe that their students experience literacy problems over a wide spectrum of functional literacy abilities, but more notably in the areas of writing in an academic style and making use of academic genres, as well as making use of academic language in the construction of arguments.
- Supervisors point out that writing ability is crucial in the successful completion of postgraduate studies. They do, however, generally rate their

additional language students as being average to poor regarding their academic writing ability specifically.

- All supervisors confirm that making use of suitable evidence is crucial in the construction of an academically sound argument. What counts as suitable evidence can differ across disciplines but generally, empirical evidence and evidence from the literature are acceptable.
- Regarding a specific referencing system, the majority of supervisors indicate the use of the Harvard method.
- Almost all supervisors provide feedback on the language students use in their writing.
- Supervisors are generally prepared to accept support from the UAL in the development of their students' writing ability. The majority of supervisors also indicate that they share this responsibility with language and writing experts.

A number of other data sets will be added to the impressionistic postgraduate student profile and writing requirements provided by supervisors for the whole of the University in order to inform the design of writing interventions aimed at the needs of specific disciplines. Firstly, as has been mentioned already, an abstraction is made of the results of the supervisor survey that are relevant to the study group. This analysis is provided in the following section (5.2.3). Based on the latter analysis, focus group interviews that address a number of pertinent issues raised in the questionnaires will be conducted with these supervisors specifically. In addition, a survey that determines the academic literacy needs of students who form part of the study group, an analysis of the results of the Test of Academic Literacy Levels (TALL), as well as the analysis of an actual written academic text that these students have produced, will all add to a more comprehensive student profile, as well as to a better understanding of the literacy and writing requirements of the specific discipline.

5.2.3 A discussion of the data pertaining to supervisors from the School of Agricultural and Food Sciences compared to supervisors from other faculties

Because this research culminates in a proposal for an academic writing course specifically for postgraduate students from the School of Agricultural and Food Sciences (henceforth referred to as 'Agriculture'), it was considered essential to analyse the results of the questionnaire with a focus on this particular group of

supervisors. Where results do not present any noteworthy differences between the two groups of respondents (the supervisors from Agriculture and the rest of the respondents, respectively), such results are not repeated in this section, since they have already been adequately addressed in the previous section.

With regard to the issue of a formal language background, there is a notable (though not totally unexpected) difference between the supervisors from Agriculture and the rest of the respondents. A substantially lower percentage of respondents from Agriculture show formal tertiary language training of any sort (whereas 41 per cent of the other supervisors indicate previous tertiary language experience, only 15 per cent of the respondents from Agriculture do so). It is interesting to note that in response to the question on professional editing being a requirement for more extensive writing tasks, a lower percentage of the respondents from Agriculture indicate that editing is a requirement (36 per cent compared to 54 per cent of the rest of the respondents). Although all the respondents from Agriculture regard their postgraduate students' level of academic literacy as 'average' to 'poor', these respondents also generally fall in the category of being the least experienced regarding postgraduate supervision when compared to the rest of the respondents (the majority of the supervisors from Agriculture have successfully supervised between 1-5 master's and doctoral students). These supervisors would do well in acknowledging the central role of revision and editing in the texts their students produce, not only with regard to ensuring the final correctness of written texts, but also in awarding them more opportunity to focus on the quality of ideas and argumentation. Such an awareness should obviously focus on the development of students' own ability towards productive revision of their own texts, but also on creating an awareness about other resources that could be employed to fulfil this function. One could, however, argue that the ability to correct their students' language mistakes is important in the development of supervisors themselves. This is again one of those issues that should not be regarded in the absolute terms of either correcting mistakes or not, but rather in how much time and effort are spent by supervisors on language-related issues.

Of further note is that most of the Agriculture supervisors (92%) are involved in some tutored postgraduate degree. The separate modules that are presented to students in such degrees offer an excellent opportunity for working with authentic texts to which

students are exposed in their studies, and should address sufficiently the issue of relevance that is often one of the biggest problems of support courses. There should, therefore, be a number of less extensive writing tasks that could be utilised in the design of a writing course for these students.

With reference to the issue of language use, only 8 per cent of the respondents from Agriculture indicate that their students are mostly primary language users of the language in which they study at the UP. Ninety-two per cent therefore indicate that their students are either additional language users of the language of learning (85%), or an even spread between additional and primary language users (7%). The literacy problems of additional language users, especially if they have never used a language of learning for study purposes before, have already been discussed at length earlier in this chapter.

Both groups of supervisors (the group from Agriculture and the group that makes up the rest of the supervisors) believe that academic literacy plays a seminal role in their students' completion of their studies. Similarly, both groups rate their students low with regard to their academic literacy levels and believe strongly that such students should already be literate when they are accepted for postgraduate studies at the University. It is, however, noteworthy that a larger percentage of respondents from Agriculture (62% compared to 43% of the other respondents) indicate that they determine the academic literacy of potential postgraduate students before they are accepted as students. It therefore appears as if the supervisors from Agriculture have a keen awareness of the importance of their students' literacy levels and how this ultimately contributes to the success of such students at university. It is further significant that the majority of respondents from Agriculture selected the option of making use of a proven testing instrument in determining the academic literacy levels of their students. A sizeable proportion of these supervisors do, however, still depend on assumptions about students' literacy levels with regard to the marks they have achieved for their previous degree, which is a possible explanation for 33% of these respondents indicating that their strategy for determining literacy levels is possibly non-valid and unreliable.

In their response to the question about the most difficult component of postgraduate studies, both groups of respondents indicate that the actual writing of the academic text is most difficult. A noteworthy difference between the two groups of respondents is that whereas only 4% of the respondents from the rest of the supervisors believe that dealing with the literature in the discipline is a problem, 23% of the supervisors from Agriculture see this as a difficulty. On the basis of these results, it would therefore be sensible to include a substantial component that focuses on academic reading strategies in a writing course for these students.

Responses to the enquiry about different functional aspects of their students' academic literacy did not yield any notable differences between the two groups apart from the fact that, whereas respondents from other faculties still selected the options 'good' to 'excellent' for a number of statements on the literacy abilities of their students, this is ominously absent in the choices of respondents from Agriculture. One could therefore conclude that the supervisors from Agriculture generally do not see their students as displaying an above average ability in academic literacy, or if so, only a very small percentage of students are regarded as having an excellent level of academic literacy. To some extent the results for the previous question can be explained by the response of respondents from Agriculture to the question on academic writing ability. Although they appear to have few primary language postgraduate students, sixty-two per cent of these respondents rate their primary language students' writing ability as 'good' to 'excellent'. However, this picture changes dramatically in their rating of additional language writing, where only 8% indicate that their students have an above average writing ability. Eighty-three per cent of these respondents believe that students' successful completion of their studies depends to a very large extent on their ability to write successfully in a tertiary environment.

The most important written genres for the respondents from Agriculture are in order of importance: a thesis/dissertation; academic essay; research proposal; and report writing. With regard to specific functional text types, argumentative writing is the most important type, followed by factual writing and then descriptive writing as the least important of the three.

As has been discussed earlier in this chapter, all respondents indicate that it is paramount that all claims must be substantiated by means of providing suitable evidence in academic argumentation. For the respondents from Agriculture, acceptable evidence most importantly amounts to that gained through empirical investigation (including experimental and laboratory results). It was also emphasised that results need to be statistically significant. Slightly less important is evidence collected from authoritative literature. One respondent further indicated that photographic evidence is acceptable in specific contexts.

The Harvard method is the preferred method of referencing for 77% of the supervisors from Agriculture. It would therefore be safe to include material on this method in a writing course for students from Agriculture, and as the need arises, augment the Harvard by including other methods required of students (two respondents indicate that they make use of the referencing system prescribed by specific academic journals). In my experience, it is relatively easy to switch from one method to another (from the Harvard to, for example, a specific requirement of an academic journal) once one has mastered the principles of one system of referencing to an acceptable level. Respondents from Agriculture further indicate that their students' ability in acknowledging sources is relatively poor (77 per cent of respondents rate their students as having an 'average' to 'poor' ability).

With regard to the type of feedback supervisors provide on their students' written work, all the respondents from Agriculture indicate that they provide feedback on students' use of language. Although only 53% of these supervisors make use of a formal marking scheme for the final assessment of their students' written texts, 92% discuss with students the way in which their work will be assessed before the final product is submitted. Of those supervisors who do make use of a marking scheme for final assessment, 78% include a section on language use in the assessment and 50% award an actual mark for language use. With regard to the specific language issues in such assessment, it appears as if supervisors from Agriculture focus slightly more on language correctness, the logical flow of ideas, overall structure of the text and clarity of meaning than on students' use of style and register. It is important to say, however, that the last issue is regarded as only slightly less important than the first four, and it

would thus be fair to observe that these supervisors attend more or less equally to all of the issues raised by this specific question.

The section of the questionnaire that focuses on language assistance for postgraduate students is an attempt to determine supervisors' willingness to accept assistance from the UAL in supporting their students with their writing development. It is quite apparent from the data that the respondents from Agriculture see a central role for writing specialists in the development of their students' writing ability. A large group of these respondents (54%) believe, however, that this is not the sole responsibility of writing specialists and that they themselves should be involved in such development. The majority of these respondents further indicate that they believe a writing support course is the best assistance that could be offered to their students. As indicated earlier in this section, the majority of these supervisors (62%) do not require the professional language editing of their students' final written texts (such as theses). Most of the supervisors from Agriculture indicate that they trust their own abilities in ensuring the final correctness of the written texts produced by their students.

5.3   Conclusion

The supervisor survey reported in this chapter has, to a large extent, gauged institutional awareness of the academic literacy abilities of postgraduate students. Generally, the picture that emerges from this chapter is that supervisors are suitably aware of (and frustrated by) the literacy difficulties (with specific reference also to academic writing ability) that their postgraduate students, especially additional language users, experience. Although they would like to admit students who are academically literate and who can, in effect, already produce written texts that are acceptable in this environment, they realise that many of the students who are currently admitted require support in the development of this ability. The majority of supervisors indicate that admission requirements for postgraduate studies are not always sufficient in determining the academic literacy levels of students. There is thus a strong possibility (as currently appears to be the case) that students with low levels of academic literacy in English will be admitted to postgraduate studies at the University. Supervisors have further suggested that generally, they believe that

subject specialists (in this case the supervisors themselves) have an important role to play in the development of their postgraduate students' writing ability. It therefore seems that at the UP it is not the classic case of shifting this responsibility to the literacy or writing experts. They further believe that the UAL could support them in this endeavour. A favourable environment therefore seems to exist in which productive interaction may take place between the UAL and academic staff from the different faculties at the University in jointly addressing the development of the academic writing ability of their postgraduate students.