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**Conceptual Framework Document for Academic Literacies
at Stellenbosch University**

17 September 2020

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Conceptual Framework Document for Academic Literacies at Stellenbosch University

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1. Purpose of this document

This document aims to

- provide a comprehensive background and conceptual framework regarding academic literacies (AL) and why there is a need for these in tertiary curricula (Section 2);
- update the working definition for AL (Section 3) and identify the gaps in the offerings based on a survey done (see Addendum A), which will aid the University and programme designers in both current initiatives as well as the implementation of new approaches and practices (Section 4);
- clarify what services are currently available and the modes in which they offer support to faculties in the development of AL (Section 5) and outline the financial implications (Section 6); and
- propose suggestions for the way forward for faculties (Section 7).

2. Background

2.1 Internationally and in South Africa, AL are increasingly viewed as an essential component of the formal academic higher education curriculum, for undergraduate as well as postgraduate students. The reasons for this are multiple:

- They are very much part of graduate attributes, which include qualities such as curiosity, creativity and critical approaches to knowledge.
- There is a growing view that students in higher education should be taught not only content knowledge but also how to acquire and communicate knowledge in an academic setting.
- Schools in South Africa and elsewhere prepare students unequally (and in most cases inadequately) with regard to AL.
- Modern modes of communication are changing at an accelerating pace and are becoming ubiquitous, with varied modalities and levels of complexity.
- Students are increasingly exposed to different modes of teaching and learning (face-to-face, blended and online) that require additional skillsets for students to engage with.

2.2 The development of AL has become a priority at Stellenbosch University, as can be seen in the increasing number of faculties making AL a compulsory component of their students' degree programmes. The following policy documents also reflect the indisputable importance of incorporating AL development at Stellenbosch University:

- The Stellenbosch University Centre for Teaching and Learning (SUCTL, 2002) provides guidelines with reference to what were called 'generic skills' at the time, implying skills necessary for all disciplines, for example writing skills or information literacy skills.
- **The Stellenbosch University Library and Information Service Information Literacy Framework (2014)** describes the development of different levels of students' information literacy competency. It articulates the broad principles and ways of integrating information skills into

teaching and learning. The collaboration between the library and academic and support services staff fosters innovative programmes for expanding information skills.

- The SUCTL **Strategy for Teaching and Learning** guidelines (2017-2021) explain how academic literacy forms part of the graduate attributes of ‘an enquiring mind’ and of ‘a dynamic professional’. In the Strategy for Teaching and Learning, these concepts are explained as follows:

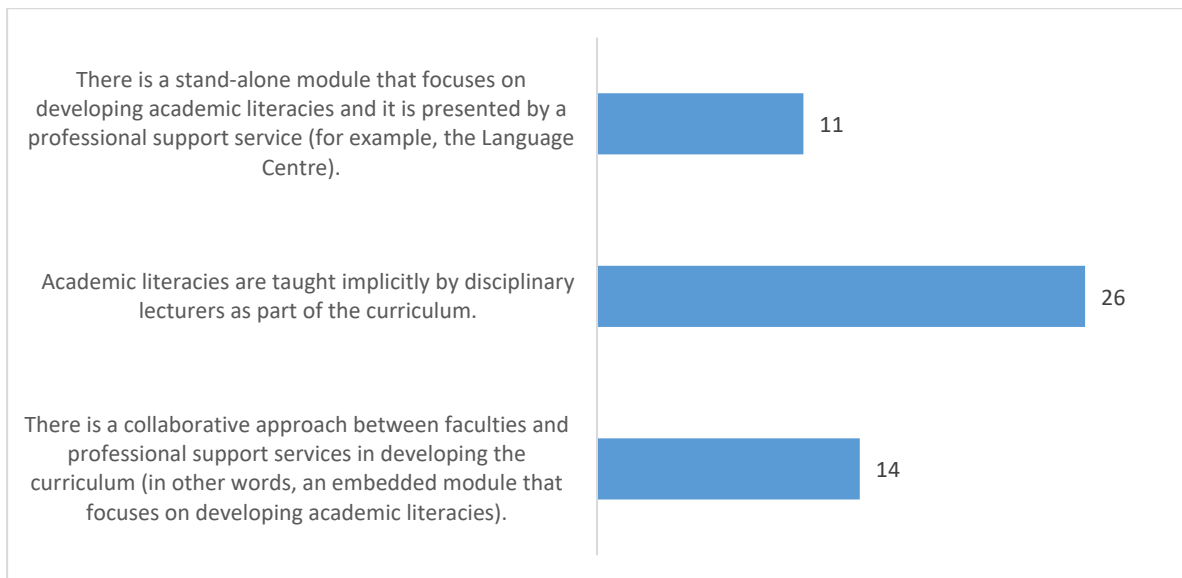
‘An enquiring mind’ requires a student to acquire **academic literacy**, which includes appropriate reading and writing skills; the graduate attribute of a ‘dynamic professional’ requires a student to acquire **digital literacy**, which includes the mastery of appropriate IT skills. Also, the attributes of ‘a dynamic professional’ and ‘a well-rounded individual’ within the South African context, require awareness of the value of multilingualism, appreciation of the linguistic diversity in the country, and development of skills using more languages than one (SUCTL, 2017:12).

- The Stellenbosch University Learning and Teaching (SULT) memo to Deans and Vice-Deans entitled “The embedding of graduate attributes in the mainstream curriculum” presented an opportunity to participate in a project to embed graduate attributes in the curriculum (SULT, 2013).
- The SULT Teaching and Learning Policy (2018:7) emphasises that academic programmes are “continuously renewed to ensure an alignment with the changing context and the **SU graduate attributes**, thereby enhancing graduates’ contributions to the South African and global societies and their career opportunities”.
- The University’s Language Policy of 2016 outlines the language plans of faculties that indicate how language is being used in the undergraduate curriculum and how financial support for this is provided.

2.3 There are a number of AL modules that support the acquisition of AL in the undergraduate curriculum but less so in postgraduate programmes. However, there are currently a number of options for postgraduate students to receive AL support, some of which are free.¹

The graph shown below is taken from a recent survey (2019) on AL that was distributed to first-year lecturers in all the faculties at Stellenbosch University. The graph presents the three ways in which AL can be offered and shows the distribution of the University’s current offerings.

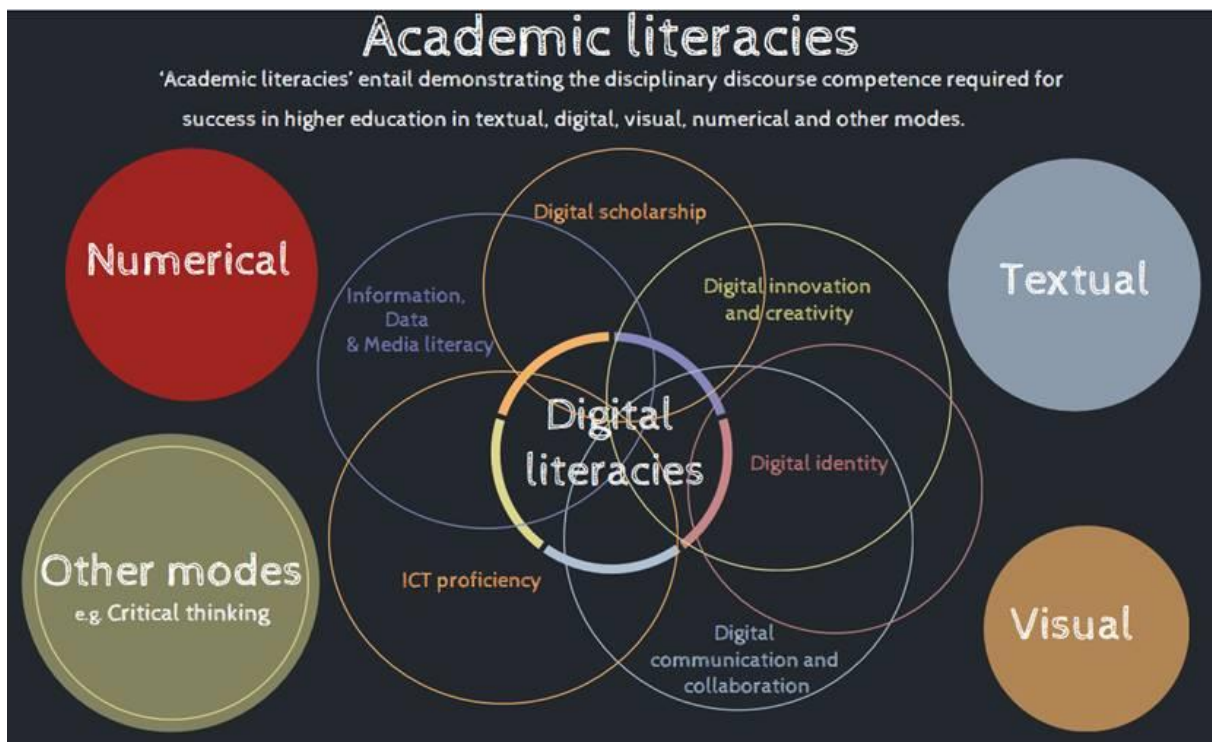
¹ See <http://www.sun.ac.za/english/research-innovation/Research-Development/workshops>.



3. Working definition of academic literacies

A working definition of AL developed by the task team for the purpose of this conceptual framework is the following: ‘Academic literacies’ entail demonstrating the disciplinary discourse* competence required for success in higher education in textual, **digital, visual, gestural, ***numerical and ****other modes.

The infographic below is a visual representation of the working definition used in this document. The infographic is also available as an interactive PDF on My.SUN.ac.za that can be used to explain or communicate the working definition of AL as used in this document. More detail regarding the various forms of AL can be found in the text below this infographic.



*‘Academic discourse’ stresses the way that language is used but includes values and attitudes, ideology and the way that AL are influenced by social class and biography (Gee, 1992).

**‘Digital literacies’ are a set of interrelated elements that include but are not limited to data literacy, media literacy, communication and collaboration, digital identity, scholarship, innovation and creativity, information literacy and information technology proficiency. This definition of digital literacies recognises the interdependency between all elements and the overlap between information and communications technology proficiency and each of the other elements (La Trobe University, 2015).

***‘Numerical literacies’ are described as “a ‘habit of mind,’ competency, and comfort in working with numerical data ... the ability to reason and solve quantitative problems from a wide array of authentic contexts and everyday life situations” and to understand and create “sophisticated arguments supported by quantitative evidence” and to “communicate those arguments in a variety of formats (using words, tables, graphs, mathematical equations, etc., as appropriate)” (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2014).

****‘Other modes’ include, for instance, critical and information literacy. Critical literacy emphasises the value of AL in facilitating critical thinking, which is necessary for academic practices to foster successful functioning in the workplace and to facilitate the emergence of citizenship in a democratic society. Information literacy is defined as

a repertoire of understandings, practices, and dispositions focused on flexible engagement within the information ecosystem, underpinned by critical self-reflection. The repertoire involves finding, evaluating, interpreting, managing, and using information to answer questions and develop new ones; and creating new knowledge through ethical participation in communities of learning, scholarship and practice (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2014).

When students practise AL, some or all of these elements are involved.

4. Possible approaches for Stellenbosch University

During the survey conducted in August 2019, a number of gaps in the current offerings of AL were identified. A synopsis of the more important ones to emerge is given below:

- Both *barriers* and *enablers* highlight that there is a current focus (in terms of AL) on textual and critical literacy and not so much on digital literacy, despite digital literacy being seen as one of the three most important AL categories. Yet, according to what lecturers say they already do, they are making an effort with digital literacy.
- There is a gap in terms of critical AL.
- Feedback on enablers and barriers supports the notion of a move towards more collaborative approaches to the teaching of AL – particularly between AL specialists and disciplinary specialists. This is in contrast to what is currently the default method in the faculties (according to the graph). However, there is some collaboration between the Language Centre, librarians and faculties.

There are a number of perspectives from which AL can be advanced in faculties. These include the following:

4.1 Learning centred

- 4.1.1 Support for the acquisition of AL is aligned with the disciplinary discourse competence required for students to be successful in a specific programme.
- 4.1.2 Support for the acquisition of AL is provided for all students in all programmes.
- 4.1.3 The University meets the specific needs of certain groups of students whom it has admitted, such as students enrolled for Extended Degree Programmes, international students and/or students who are identified as having additional language needs.
- 4.1.4 The approach provides the opportunity for students to *learn about* the forms and conventions typical of the various components of AL as well as multiple opportunities to *practise* these.

4.2 Flexible

- 4.2.1 The approach is flexible and context sensitive, which implies that it will take different forms, depending upon various aspects of context.
- 4.2.2 Faculties or departments choose the design and focus best suited to their programmes, the disciplines and the level of study in collaboration with various support units, as informed by AL research and relevant best practice.
- 4.2.3 The provision builds on the potential strengths in the teaching and learning setting, including the strengths of the academic staff within faculties and support units.

4.3 Collaborative

Multidisciplinary collaboration between different role players is undertaken when new programmes are designed or existing programmes are evaluated (academics/disciplinary specialists, library, Language Centre, Centre for Teaching and Learning, Centre for Learning Technologies and blended learning coordinators or equivalent roles within faculties).

4.4 Systematic

- 4.4.1 Support for AL should be part of the design of a programme and regular review processes.
- 4.4.2 This approach encourages discussion and consensus on AL at programme, departmental and faculty level with regard to
 - a) all modes of AL (textual, digital, visual, gestural, numerical and other);
 - b) discipline-specific academic conventions;
 - c) how, when and where AL are fostered; and
 - d) common issues such as referencing techniques, academic voice, originality/plagiarism and the use of Turnitin.

(While it is advantageous to students to receive similar messages about AL from various sources, this is not always feasible as disciplinary conventions may differ.)

5. Support

Various divisions or departments provide support for the design or delivery of AL interventions. It is considered best practice in many universities to provide this support in larger, multidisciplinary design teams. The following services at Stellenbosch University provide support for AL:

- Language Centre
- Library and Information Service
- Centre for Learning Technologies (SUNLearn and other platforms)
- Centre for Teaching and Learning
- Department of Information Science
- African Doctoral Academy
- Blended learning coordinators

6. Financial implications

6.1 While additional funding for innovation might be required to expand the provision of AL, it should be seen as part of the regular programme offering and not as an add-on.

6.2 AL modules are offered within the general service course format and funded accordingly. Other services such as Writing Centre consultations, advice, collaborative research and evaluation, training and research support are free. A Reading Lab program is now also available to enhance reading speed and improve comprehension. The University subsidises all of these programmes.

6.3 The University could provide financial support for developmental activities, for example an extension of the Fund for Innovation and Research into Learning and Teaching, which would also allow for academics to visit other universities in order to learn from best practice or to attend conferences on AL.

7. Recommendations and way forward

7.1 The contents of this conceptual framework document have been approved by the Committee for Learning and Teaching and recommended to Senate.

7.2 This document will appear on the policy section of the SU website as well as on the Language Centre's website.

7.3 Faculties, in collaboration with the relevant support division(s), should consider faculty-specific guidelines for how AL could be fostered in the University's teaching and learning programmes with reference to "[e]mbedding of graduate attributes in the mainstream curriculum" (SULT, 2013).

7.4 The faculty-specific guidelines should be tabled and discussed at the Committee for Teaching and Learning on an annual basis.

7.5 The contents of this conceptual framework document should inform the Institutional Policy for Teaching and Learning when it is revised.

8. References

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Addendum A

Summary of responses to a survey sent out in August 2019

Which activities do you already have in your first-year modules that help students to develop academic literacies?

(Total number of responses: 41)

Category of AL	Number of responses
Textual (reading and writing) literacies	31
Digital literacies (including information literacies, information and communications technology literacies, data literacies and media literacies)	31
Digital capabilities (including communication, collaboration and participation; learning skills; innovation and creativity; digital scholarship; and career and identity management)	31
Oral (spoken) literacies	20
Visual literacies	18
Numerical literacies	17
Critical literacies	24

What academic literacies challenges do your students experience at first-year level?

Reading, comprehension and critical thinking.

Based on your answers to the previous two questions, which of the academic literacies listed above do you regard as the most important for your first-years and why?

Three main AL highlighted are critical, digital and textual, with critical being highlighted as the most important.

What are the enablers in your environment for the development of academic literacies?

Collaboration between disciplinary staff and AL specialists (Language Centre)
Tutorial sessions
Dedicated AL courses such as comprehension skills
Lecturers and tutors
Regular and timely feedback
Flow of the curriculum
Competent library staff
SUNLearn
Technology
RGAs

What barriers to the development of academic literacies are there in your environment?

Large classes
Diverse student abilities
Unstructured and implicit teaching of AL
Time constraints
Funding for tutors (large classes)
Unsuitable lecturing facilities
Students' own infrastructure and financial limitations
Students' not understanding the importance of AL
Lack of collaboration between AL specialists and disciplinary specialists
Technological support for licenses and hardware
Lecturers' feeling inadequate to teach specialised skills
Impact of social media on quality of student writing

