Perspectives from a South African university on students' writing apprehension, attitudes to writing, and performance

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&

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Background to Study

- Two year (2011-2013) research project – involving 40 participants drawn from around the world

- Exploration of questions about teaching, learning & transfer within context of critical transitions

- Multi-institutional, multi-layered research project

Rationale of study

- To contribute to finding solutions to some of challenges facing institutions of higher learning in South Africa - particularly relating to under-preparedness of first year students

- 2011 NBT results
  - 13,000 students enrolled for first year courses
 - Only 16% deemed proficient in academic literacy

Why investigate writing transfer?

- Need to understand writing-related attributes that 1st year university students carry over from high school, or don't;

- The critical role that writing plays in learning, particularly at university:

  - interface between student and lecturer
  - writing to learn

Data collection

- **The Daly-Miller Test** to measure levels of writing apprehension among the participants

- **Pre - semester survey** to gather data on students'
  - experiences/ beliefs about writing and themselves as writers
  - expectations of writing at university level

- **Authentic writing task**
  - literacy narratives

# Levels of writing apprehension: the Daly-Miller Test
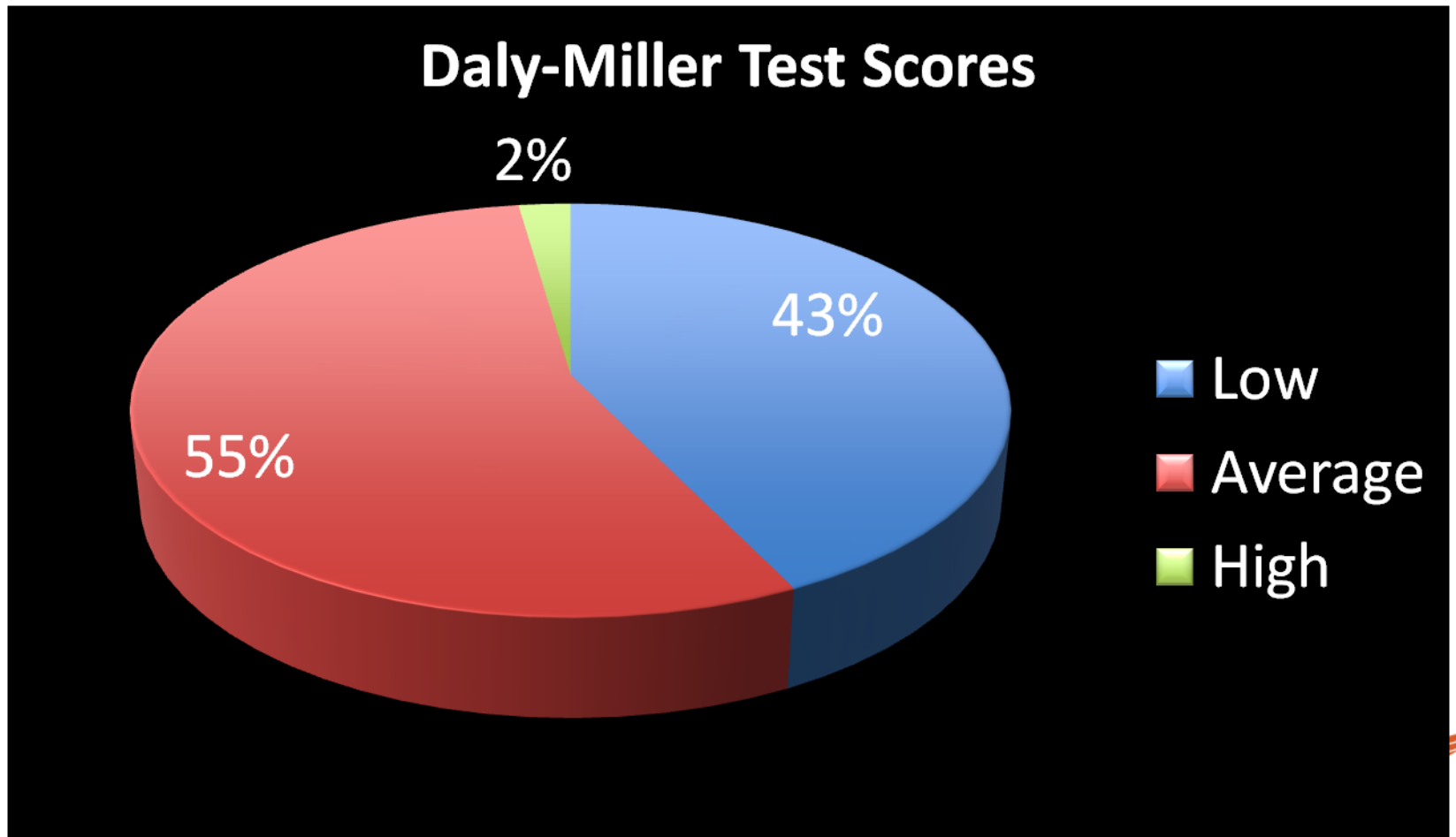
- Of the 487 students who took the test, 43% were not fearful of writing tasks; 55% exhibited normal levels of apprehension; only 2% were highly apprehensive about writing.
- Of the 43%, 42 students scored between 115 and 130. According to the test, they were unlikely to be motivated to
    - Listen or read assignments carefully
    - Adhere to assignment deadlines
    - Take careful note of assignment deadlines
    - Make effective use of instructor feedback
- The mean for the range 60 – 96 (i.e. normal levels of apprehension) is 78. Of the 268 whose apprehension fell within the 'normal' range, 190 (i.e. 71%) scored above the mean, which placed them close to the group whose lack of apprehension was cause for concern
- These generally low levels of writing apprehension seemed to be explained by the results of the Pre-Semester Survey (given later in this presentation) which showed limited exposure to writing in high school.

Pre-semester survey

- To determine :
  - How many short and long assignments were done at high school
  - Motivation to write
  - The kinds of writing skills developed at high school
  - How writing assignments were carried out
  - The kinds of feedback that were received
  - Perceptions of self through the eyes of others
  - Genres of writing produced at high school
  - Perceptions of self as writer
  - The kinds of writing produced for enjoyment

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Frequency of short vs long papers
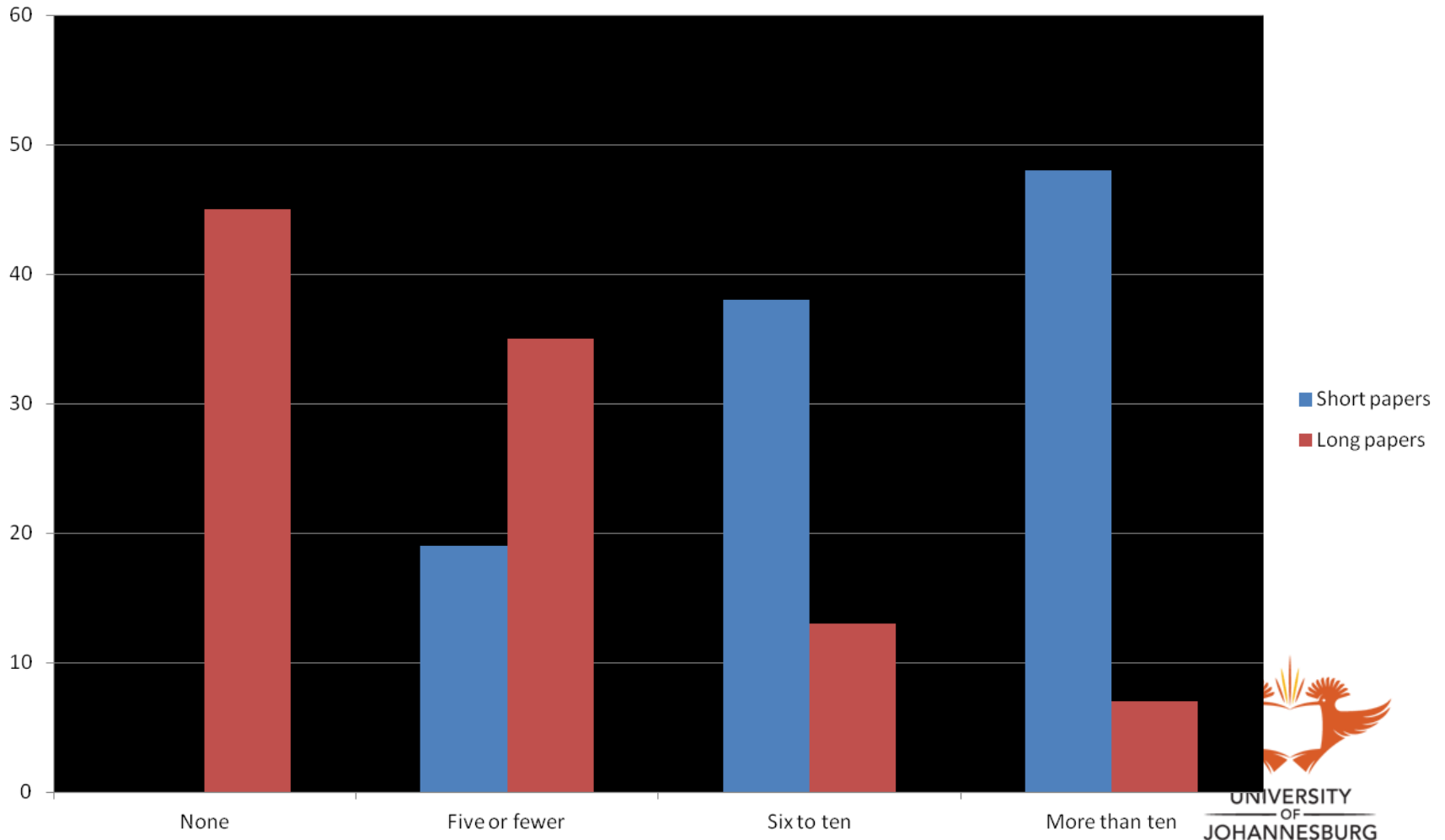
According to these statistics:

- the majority of the 470 students very limited exposure to continuous writing

- school writing assignments were mostly short (5 pages or shorter)

- A significant 45% had not written any long papers (5 or more papers) at all.

It was likely, therefore, that the students would initially struggle to cope with university writing where, even at first year, longer pieces of writing are expected.

Motivation to write
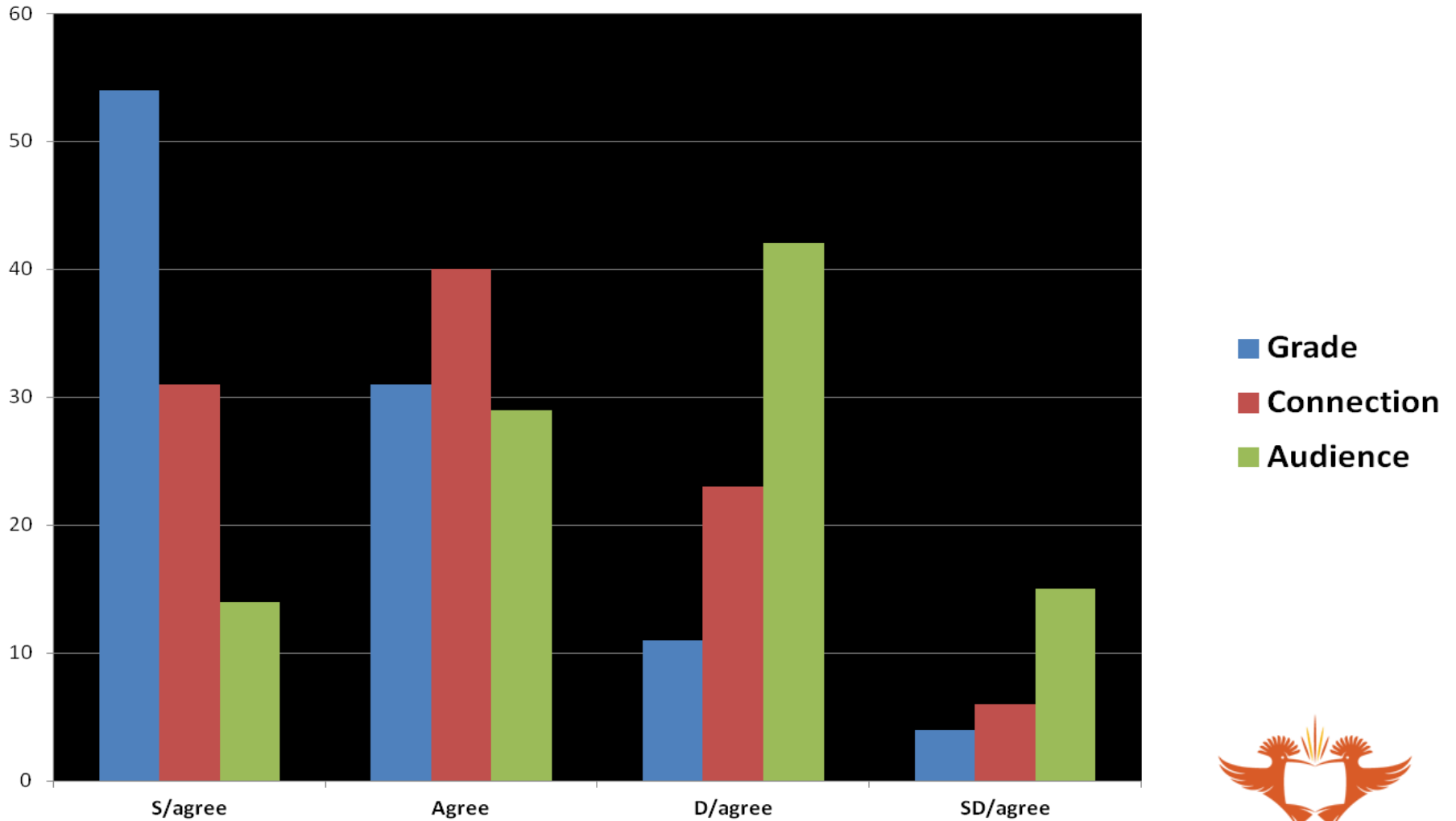
Asked what had motivated them to write at high school:

- 54% said it was grades
 - This correlated well with the difficulty experienced by previous cohorts to accept feedback without grades, as shown in a previous study (Dube, Kane and Lear, pending).

- The need for gradual introduction of narrative feedback was thus indicated
  - Clarification of the rationale for such an approach, on students' entry to university, is critical

Frequency of different kinds of writing assignments
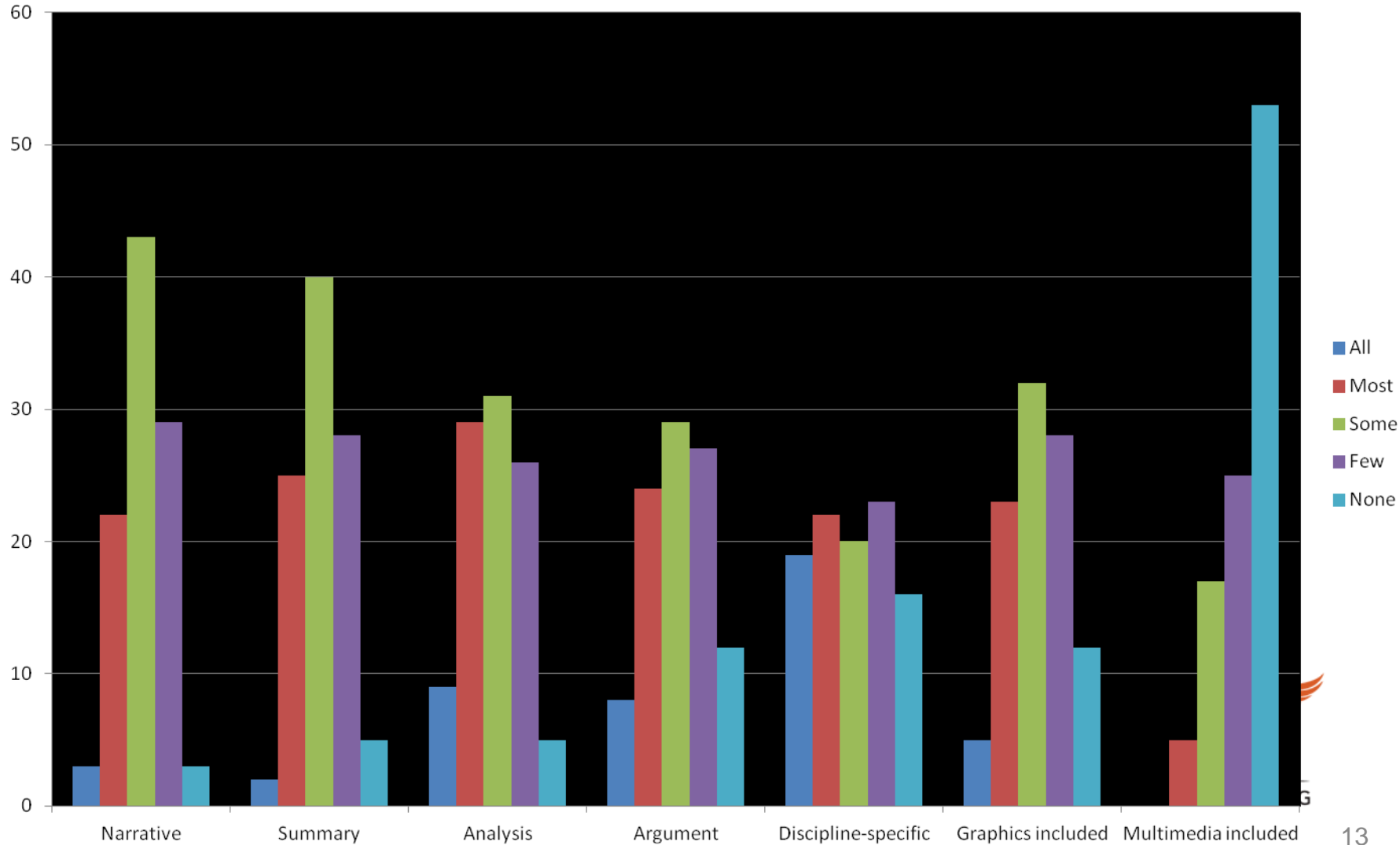
- High school assignments were were mostly either narratives or summaries of school texts.

- Few assignments involved analysis or argument.

- The low percentages of students with experience of discipline-specific genres had implications for the UJ's academic literacies modules in terms of inducting students into the discourses of their various disciplines
  - close collaboration between AL practioners and subject lecturers was critical for meaningful 'induction' to occur.

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Students' experience of high school writing
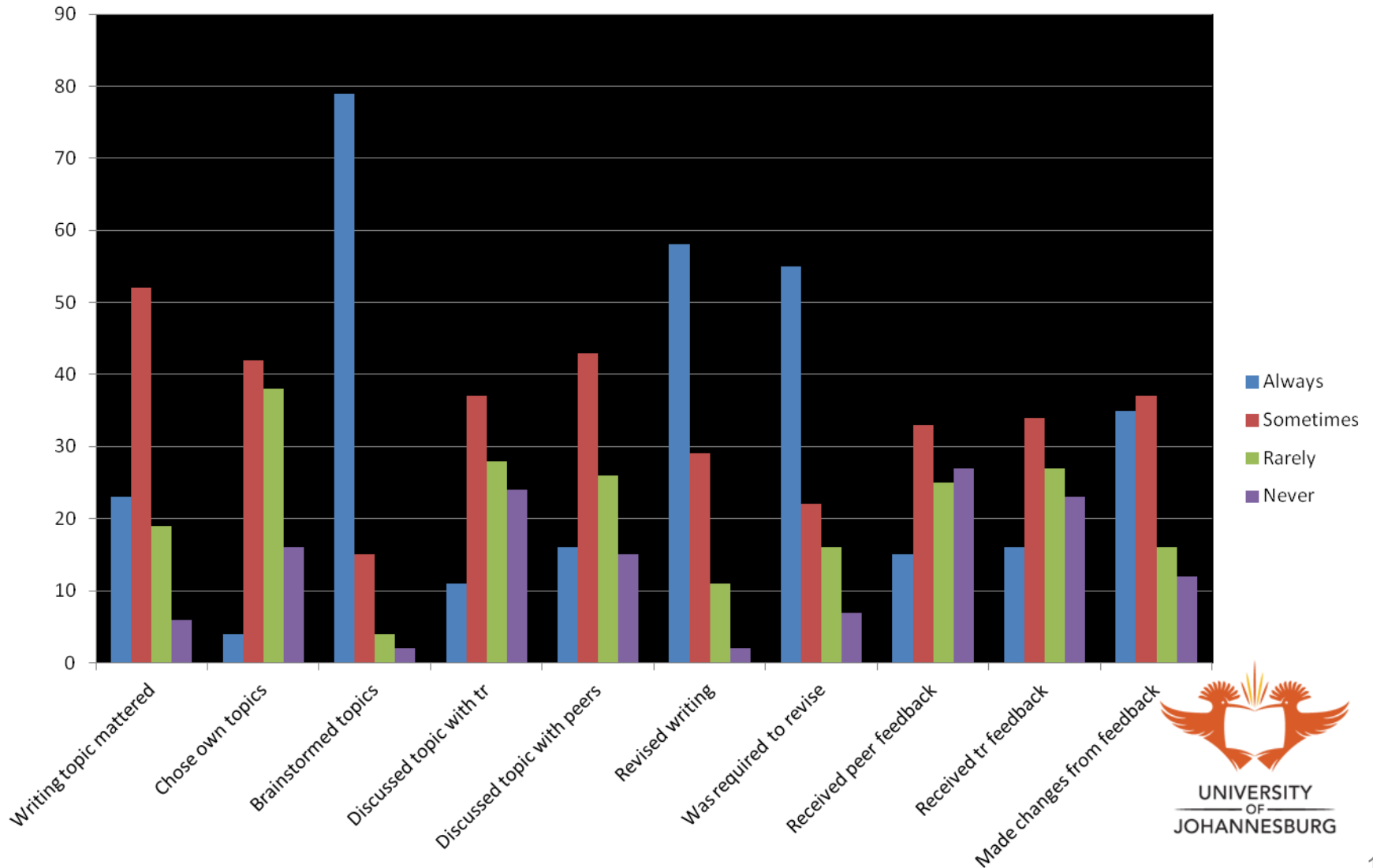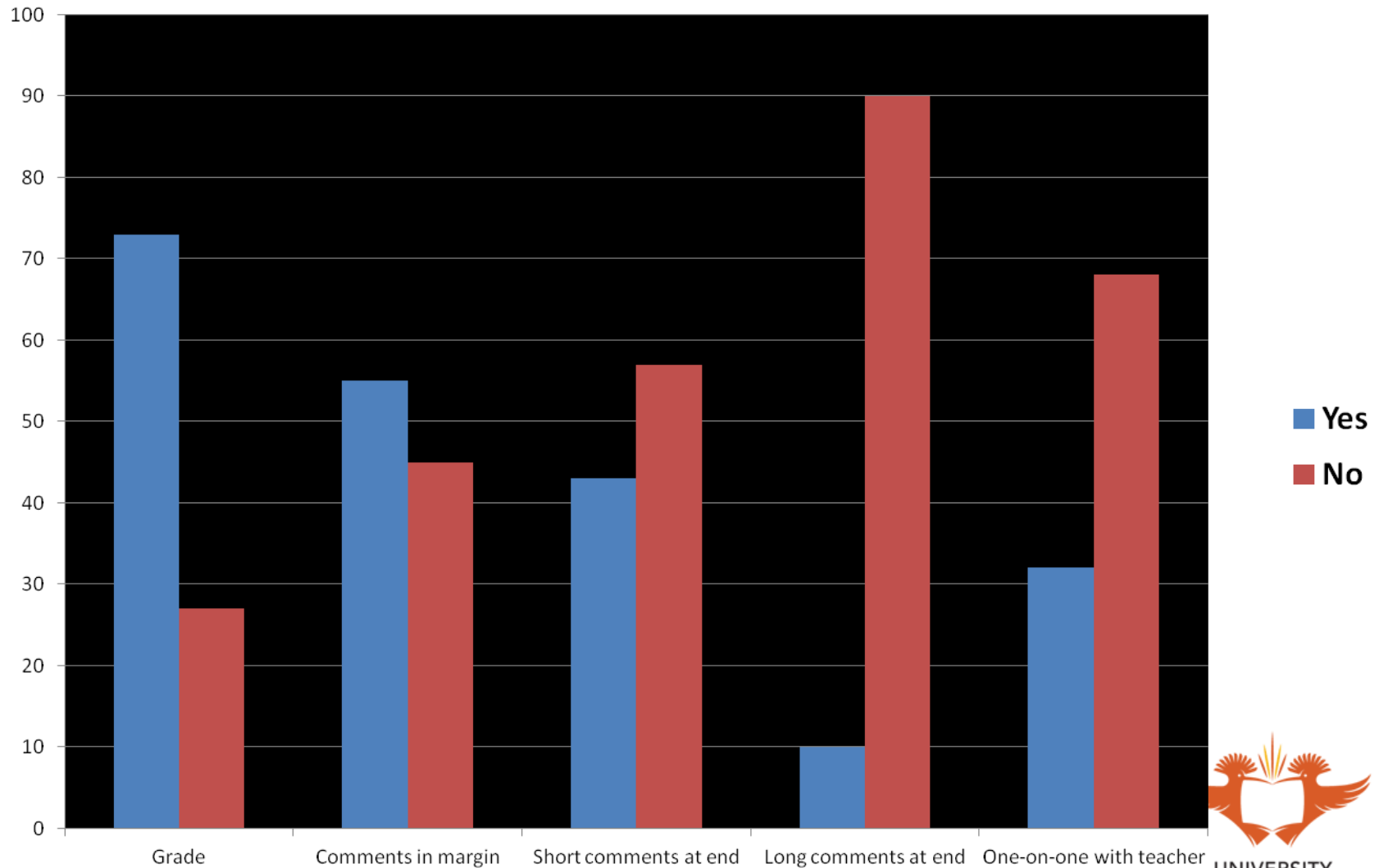
- Most of the students had wide experience of brainstorming composition topics and revising their work:
  - 79% always brainstormed topics
  - 58% revised their writing
  - 55% reported that revising was a requirement

- However, the brainstorming was mostly individual, as only about 48% indicated that they had received peer feedback at school.

Kinds of feedback received

- Most feedback received was in the form of
  - a grade (perhaps explaining why grades were the main motivation to write)
  - comments in the margin
  - short comments at the end.

- This seemed to explain the scant attention paid to extensive narrative feedback among the students in the previous study referred to above

- The lack of experience with extensive narrative feedback called for gradual introduction of it, as well as explanation of the rationale behind it
  - particularly as little one-on-one interaction with teachers occurred in high school

Attitudes to writing
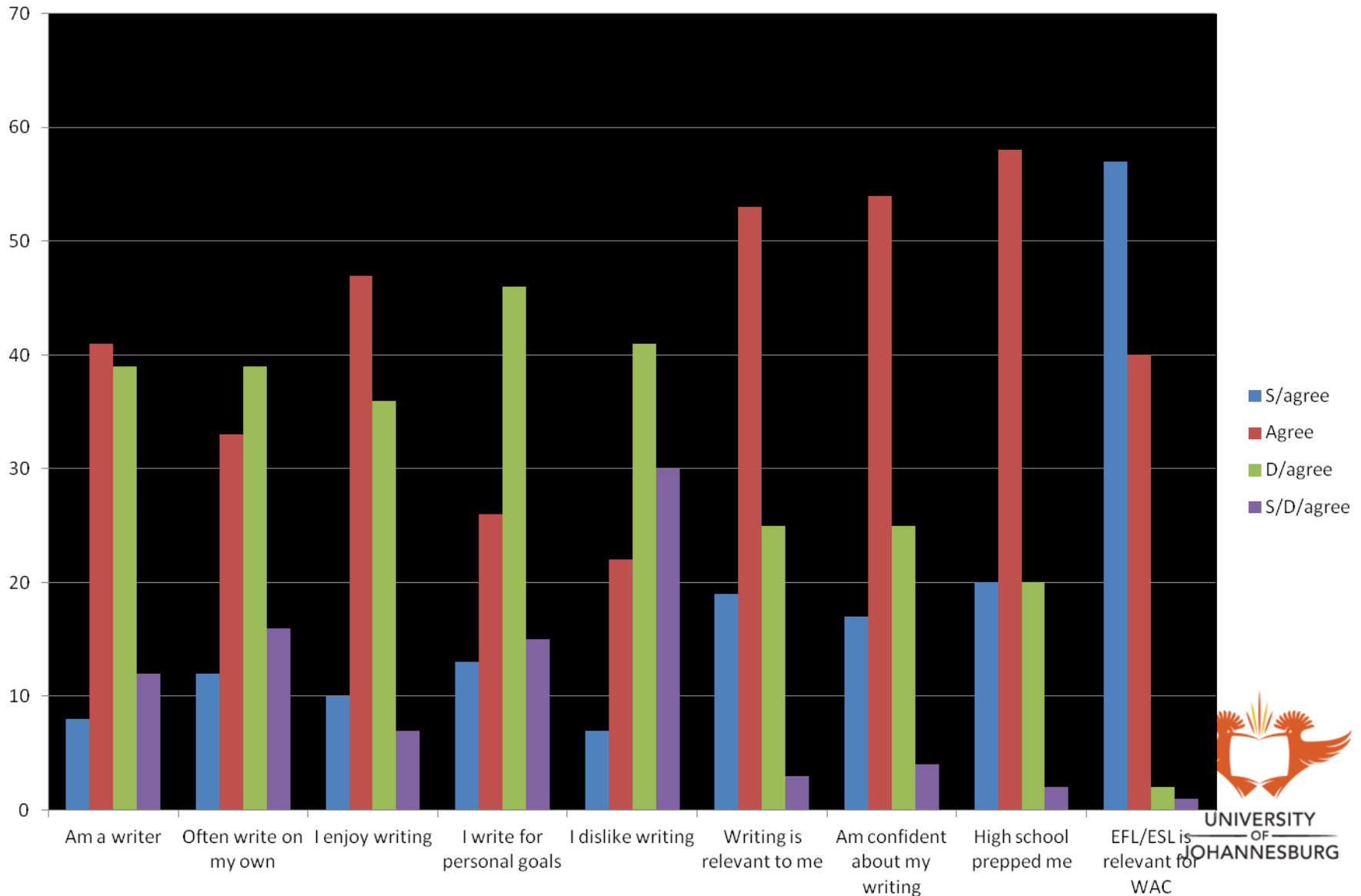
- Although 56% of the students said they enjoyed writing, only 48% saw themselves as writers, and even fewer (45%) wrote on their own

- However, this seems to contradict the results of the Daly-Miller Test, in which an overwhelming 98% had either moderate or low levels of writing apprehension

- It also does not correlate with the 98.5% who indicated that they did no private writing of their own in high school.

- Despite their limited exposure to writing, 78% thought high school had prepared them for university

- 97% thought the EFL and LES modules would help them with writing in the disciplines

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Kinds of private writing produced in high school
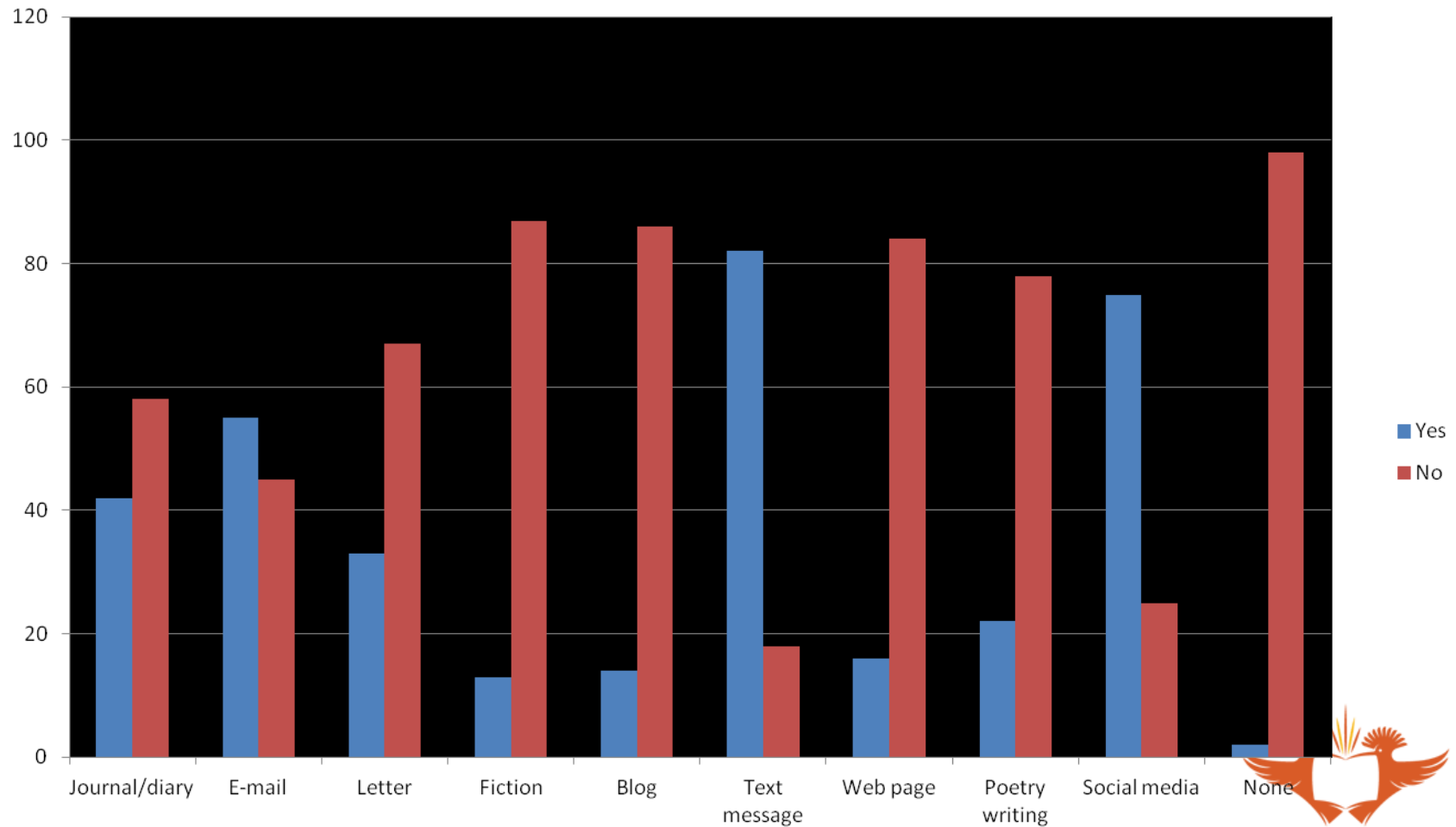
- Most private writing consisted of, in order of frequency:
  - Text messages
  - Social media
  - E-mail
  - Journals

- There was some contradiction here, however, as almost all the respondents then went on to indicate that they had not done any private writing at all. This could be an indication that the students did not consider these activities as constituting "writing".

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Conclusions

- The low levels of writing apprehension are probably attributable to the limited exposure to writing at high school which consisted mostly of short narrative or timed assignments of 5 pages or fewer.

- Because the participants were mostly motivated to write by the grades they received in high school, adjustment to the assessment procedures applied in the UJ modules, which focuses mainly on written feedback, is likely to be problematic.

- With most high school writing limited to narrative and timed assignments, it is likely that these students will struggle with academic writing at university, despite the belief among most of them that high school had provided sufficient preparation for university study.

- Even in participants' private writing, there was preference for texts of limited length such as text, social media and e-mail messages.

If the initial positive attitude towards the UJ modules is to be maintained, the insights gained from these surveys must be taken into account when planning module curricula.

Literacy Narratives

Literacy development

❖ The aim of this aspect of the study is to explore how literacy development influences preparedness for study at the University of Johannesburg.

❖ In order to gather additional information on previous experiences with reading and writing, students were asked to write literacy narratives.

- *A literacy narrative tells a story about one' own experiences with reading and/ or writing. It also explores how these experiences, both positive and negative, have shaped you and how they might relate to your present feelings about, or abilities in, reading and writing.*

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Introduction

❖ Pre-conceived ideas about literacy (De Rosa, 2008)

  ❖ Many students arrive at university with narrow definitions of literacy

    ❖ Learned at school

    ❖ Learned at home

    ❖ Reinforced culturally

❖ Labels

  ❖ Many students acquire, or assign themselves, a literary status, e.g., *good* or *bad*; *weak* or *strong*. This is often the result of

    ❖ Placement tests/ rankings

    ❖ Placement in particular writing courses

    ❖ What they have been told by the "experts"

❖ Common assumptions & misconceptions

  ❖ Many students hold beliefs which impact negatively on literacy development and learning in general

Definitions of literacy

- "Socially constructed, context-dependent, language making practices including reading and writing" (De Rosa, 2008)

- "Literacy is always in flux. Learning to read and write necessitates an engagement with this flux, with the layers of literacy's past, present and future embodied in the social relationships we have with people who taught us to read and write" (Brandt, 1998).

- Literacy narratives become sites of self-translation where writers can articulate the meanings and the consequences of their passages between language worlds" (Soliday, 1994)

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The exploration of identity in literacy narratives

❖ Erikson (1968) identifies the search for identity as the decisive psychosocial task of adolescence

❖ Students construct identities in literacy narratives (Carpenter & Falbo, 2003)

  ❖ For themselves - hero, victim or rebel

  ❖ For their teachers - tyrants, nurturers or fools

❖ Typical narrative structures

  ❖ Hero

      ❖ "Rise-to-success"

          ❖ "Child prodigy"

          ❖ Winner of prizes/ rewards

      ❖ Confronting and surmounting all obstacles

      ❖ Success achieved as result of perseverance & hard work

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The exploration of identity cont'd

❖ Victim

  ❖ Feelings of helplessness and stigmatization

  ❖ Inability to change literacy labels/ self-perceptions

  ❖ Impact of damaging experiences at school/ with teachers

❖ Rebel

  ❖ Challenges conventional wisdom

  ❖ Resists literacy labelling

  ❖ Dismisses values of mainstream education

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Context

❖ The issue of literacy is particularly salient in the South African context

- Majority of students educated in English
- Less than 10% of students have English as a first language
- Majority are 2nd, 3rd or 4th language English speakers (Lemmer, 1996)

❖ Students who are expected to learn in a second language before they have acquired competence in a first language will experience problems in both languages resulting in "semi-lingualism" (Lathy, 2006).

"Without assistance, many of them cannot make the difficult but necessary border crossings between languages" (Seligman and Gravett, 2010).

Methodology

❖ Students were provided with guidelines designed to

- Prompt them to reflect upon their own personal literacy development and how these experiences shaped them and may have influenced their present literacy practices and attitudes towards reading and writing

- Encourage them to think more deeply about issues relating to literacy

❖ Literacy narratives were selected by simple random sampling

❖ Data obtained was analysed using qualitative content analysis following a deductive approach

❖ Codes were imposed at category level and examined for how each was manifested in the data

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Categories identified

❖ Reading and writing

- Earliest memories of reading and writing
- Happiest memories of reading and writing
- People and institutions providing greatest support for reading and writing
- Attitudes towards reading and writing

❖ Electronic technologies

- Earliest memories using electronic technologies
- Happiest memories using electronic technologies
- People or institutions providing greatest support for use of electronic technologies
- Attitudes towards electronic technologies

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Results and discussion

❖ The importance of reading and writing as essential life skills

❖ The search for identity

❖ The role of people and institutions in literacy development

❖ The role of affective factors in literacy development

❖ The impact of electronic technologies on literacy development

❖ Obstacles to literacy development

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Reading and writing as essential life skills

❖ Passing Matric and being admitted to university are made possible by the acquisition of reading and writing skills.

  ❖ "I am where I am today simply because I can read and write."

❖ The development of literacy skills

  ❖ Facilitates learning

  ❖ Improves the ability to think critically, analyse, problem-solve and communicate

  ❖ Improves opportunities for employment

  ❖ Enriches lives and civil society, leading to the development of an informed citizenry

  ❖ Enables assistance to parents/ families in need of literacy-related support

❖ Reading and writing are necessary tools for coping and succeeding in today's world.

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The search for identity

❖ Reading and writing

  ❖ Opens minds

  ❖ Improves self-esteem and self-confidence

  ❖ Provides a "feeling of belonging"

  ❖ Allows for self-expression and catharsis

  ❖ Increases one's ability to deal effectively with peer pressure

  ❖ Develops one's ability to cope with social injustice- "feel less angry at world," "learn to forgive"

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The role of people and institutions in literacy development

❖ Families play a pivotal role in students' literacy development, especially mothers

  ❖ Provide encouragement

  ❖ Teach children how to read and write

  ❖ Assist with homework

  ❖ Provide an unwavering source of support and motivation,

  ❖ Challenge students to strive for higher levels of achievement

❖ Teachers, schools, librarians and Sunday school teachers are singled out as important sources of additional support

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The role of affective factors in literacy development

❖ Motivation
- ❖ Intrinsic
  - ❖ Willingness/ desire to learn
  - ❖ Recognition of value of work hard
  - ❖ Self-esteem & self-confidence
- ❖ Extrinsic
  - ❖ Family
  - ❖ Peers
  - ❖ Teachers
- ❖ Positive experiences
  - ❖ Family members applauding success
  - ❖ Successful oral presentations
  - ❖ Successful performance on tests/ assignments
  - ❖ Awards/ class recognition

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Role of affective factors cont'd

❖ Negative experiences

  ❖ Fear inspired by strict teachers

  ❖ Criticism

  ❖ Being laughed at by peers when reading aloud

  ❖ Unsuccessful performance on tests/ assignments

  ❖ Placement in remedial classes

❖ Persistence & resilience

  ❖ Shifts in attitudes, especially in high school, lead some students to withdraw or give up

  ❖ Certain factors, "over-confidence", loss of interest and/ or boredom, deter students from full engagement in literacy–related activities

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The impact of electronic technologies on literacy development

❖ The use of electronic technologies is widespread

❖ Students obtain cell phones at an early age (between 8 and 12) and boast of having the latest models, describing themselves as the "coolest kids in the neighbourhood" and "feeling good" about being "on top."

❖ Cell phones and computers are bought for students by their parents, many of whom cannot use these devices themselves

❖ Electronic technologies are predominantly used for

   ❖ Social networking

   ❖ Downloading music

   ❖ Playing games

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Electronic technologies cont'd

❖ Some students make mention of using the Internet to complete school assignments

  ❖ Makes school (work) easier

  ❖ Improves marks

  ❖ Enables access to what is needed "without touching a textbook"

  ❖ Saves time - "All I had to do was search (for) the information I wanted, and I was done."

❖ The majority of students describe their introduction to electronic technology in rapturous terms – "ecstasy," "life-changing," "the next best thing to being alive," "a friend" they will "never abandon."

  ❖ Provides happiness

  ❖ Affords independence

  ❖ Allows one to stay connected at all times

Obstacles to literacy development

❖ Growing up in an impoverished, often rural, environment

❖ Learning in a second language at an early age when the first language has not been well developed

❖ Being taught in one's home language when English is designated as the language of instruction

❖ Holding negative attitudes towards reading and writing

❖ Being educated in a disadvantaged learning environment

  ❖ Under-resourced schools

  ❖ Large classes

  ❖ Being taught by fellow students (sometimes only one year older) rather than the teacher

  ❖ Lack of (or limited) access to a computer lab or library

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Conclusion

❖ The majority of students subscribe to narrow definitions of literacy

❖ For many, being admitted to the University of Johannesburg confirms that they have "made it"

❖ The majority of students assign themselves, or have been assigned, a literacy label

❖ The majority of students construct identities for themselves in their literacy narratives utilising typical narrative structures, with the hero and victim identities being most prominent

❖ The widespread use of electronic technologies is having far-reaching effects on how students develop literacy

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The way forward

❖ Students will write a subsequent literacy narrative to promote an understanding of literacy as a continuous and changing experience.

❖ Focus groups will be used to further explore issues emerging from the literacy narratives.

❖ Data obtained from the literacy narratives and focus group discussions will be triangulated with data from pre/ post - survey questionnaires on first-year writing, the Daly-Miller Test on writing apprehension, student marks on first- year authentic writing tasks, and information contained in the University of Johannesburg 2011 student profile questionnaire.

❖ Results will be used to identify what separates successful students from unsuccessful ones in order to devise interventions to support the development of academic literacies among first-year students.

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