

## ResearchSpace@Auckland

### Journal Article Version

This is the publisher's version. This version is defined in the NISO recommended practice RP-8-2008 <http://www.niso.org/publications/rp/>

### Suggested Reference

Matheson, N. J. (2013). Improving outcomes for Pasifika students in an academic writing course. In *Create & Collaborate: Foundation & Bridging Educators Inaugural Conference, 2012* (pp. 59-69). Auckland, New Zealand, Ako Aotearoa - The National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence, Auckland. Retrieved from <https://ako.aotearoa.ac.nz/ako-aotearoa/ako-aotearoa/news/fabenz-2012-conference-proceedings-now-available>

### Copyright

Items in ResearchSpace are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise indicated. Previously published items are made available in accordance with the copyright policy of the publisher.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](#)

<https://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/docs/uoa-docs/rights.htm>

# Improving outcomes for Pasifika students in an academic writing course

••• Neil Matheson

*The University of Auckland*

## Abstract

*With assessment at the tertiary level still based largely on writing output, the ability to write well is a decisive factor in academic success. This is one reason behind the popularity of an academic writing course at a New Zealand university. Arts faculty targeted admission programme requirements and English language diagnostic recommendations have increased enrolments in this course, but disproportionately poor outcomes for Pasifika students indicate the course may be acting more as a barrier than the intended step to academic success for this group. This paper describes a project undertaken to identify and address immediate issues contributing to such outcomes for Pasifika students. Steps taken include finding out more about the students, closer collaboration between support and academic staff, adaptation of course content, assessment processes and classroom practice, and a greater focus on student engagement throughout the course. Interim results of this project in its first semester of operation will be reported.*

## Introduction

With assessment at the tertiary level firmly based on writing output, and increasing numbers of students from traditionally underserved groups arriving at university (Middleton, 2008; Ministry of Education, 2010), demand for bridging-type writing courses has increased. Enrolments in *English Writing 101*, a credit-bearing, academic writing skills course at The University of Auckland, have tripled from 2006 to 2012, as more students recognise a gap between writing skills learned at high school and those required at university.

Part of the increase in enrolments in *English Writing* comes via referrals from DELNA (Diagnostic English Language Needs Assessment) (2010), the university language-diagnostic system, or via the Targeted Admissions Scheme (TAS) run by the Faculty of Arts. TAS provides entry to students who

might otherwise be excluded due to recently raised university entry criteria. TAS students are required to complete an academic writing course in their first year. A significant number of TAS students are Pasifika, with numbers in *English Writing* increasing from 35 (19%) in 2008 to 116 (35%) in 2012. Pasifika achievement is lower in the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA); in 2009 for example, 46.1 *per cent* of Pasifika achieved an NCEA Level 3 qualification, compared to around 75 *per cent* for Asian and Pakeha/European groups (Statistics New Zealand, 2010, p. 38).

*English Writing* is designed to help students with English as a first language write in an academically appropriate way. The course combines process and product, providing practice in skills such as generating ideas, drafting, revising, peer review and integration of sources, and exploring a range of academic text types through illustration and practice. Students receive detailed feedback on their writing from experienced tutors, with peer review practised and completed online. Students who successfully complete the course can reasonably expect grades in other courses to improve, as their writing will be better structured, and ideas expressed more clearly in an appropriate style. In effect, *English Writing* acts as a stepping stone to broader success at university.

### Pasifika student outcomes

However, for some students *English Writing* appears to be acting more as a barrier than a step to success. Table 1 illustrates the problem for Pasifika students, who had a mean pass rate of just 55.3 *per cent* from 2008 to 2012, almost 16 *per cent* lower than all *English Writing* students over the same period.

Table 1  
Pass rates (%) in *English Writing 101*, 2008-2012.

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012 <sup>1</sup>	Mean
Pasifika	48.3	47.4	66.3	58.8	55.7	55.3
All students	68.5	68.6	72.8	74.7	71	71.1

A similar trend was evident for new undergraduate first-year students across all Arts courses from 2008 to 2011, with Pasifika students averaging a 65.4 *per cent* pass rate, around 17 *per cent* lower than the 82.7 *per cent* pass rate for all students.

---

<sup>1</sup> Only Semester One 2012 data available

Table 2

Pass rates (%) for new undergraduate first year Arts students, 2008-2011.

	2008	2009	2010	2011	Mean
Pasifika	58.5	68.8	67.8	66	65.4
All students	80.8	83.2	82.9	83.9	82.7

Source: Equity Office (2011, p. 22)

Madjar, McKinley, Deynzer and van der Merve (2010, p. 3) point out that prior school achievement is one of the main contributors to disparities in academic outcomes at university, and students who make limited progress in their first year are more likely not to complete their degree. Both factors are significant for Pasifika students in *English Writing*, as they have lower NCEA achievement rates and they are more likely not to pass this first year course. In effect, as Benseman, Coxon, Anderson and Anae (2006) state, lower-level papers such as *English Writing* “are acting as a de facto culling mechanism to reduce the numbers of students and...they cull differently according to ethnicity” (p. 151).

This paper describes a research project designed to help *English Writing* recapture its role as a stepping stone to academic success, instead of acting as a culling mechanism based on ethnicity. The project focuses on Pasifika students in particular, who have poorer outcomes in the course. Pasifika students are also targeted in the Tertiary Education Commission’s Pasifika Framework 2013–2017, one aim of which is to create an “unprecedented step up in Pasifika participation and educational performance” (2012, p. 5). The project also reflects objectives in The University of Auckland’s Strategic Plan 2013–2020, which emphasises the university’s special character based on New Zealand’s place in the Pacific and in our most diverse city (2012). Objective 4 of this Plan calls for “a diverse student body of the highest possible academic potential” (p. 6), while Objective 7 aims for a “high quality learning environment that maximises the opportunity for all our students to succeed” (p. 8).

### General issues affecting achievement

Student retention, completion and achievement is a well-researched area. In a report aiming to improve tertiary education outcomes for diverse first-year students in New Zealand, Zepke *et al.* (2005) note that factors affecting student retention, persistence and achievement have been investigated internationally for 50 years. They identify two broad themes in the literature on student retention: integration, influenced mainly by the work of Tinto (for example, 1993), which

focuses on students integrating into a new academic culture, and adaptation, which emphasises institutions adapting to a more diverse student body.

In New Zealand, a number of studies have also investigated completion. For example, Scott and Smart (2005) found that ethnicity was a significant risk factor for New Zealand tertiary students, even when other factors, such as gender, socio-economic status, highest school qualification and study intensity were controlled for. Tumen, Shulruf, and Hattie (2008) noted lower rates of graduation for Māori and Pasifika students, though they found that age was the only factor that systematically predicted completion (more mature students completed more often), while ethnicity itself was not significant once high school achievements, first-year results, intensity of study and other background factors were controlled for.

### **Specific issues affecting Pasifika achievement**

Educationalists and researchers have also focused on issues that directly affect Pasifika students in New Zealand tertiary settings, with findings mirroring themes in the broader literature. Many factors appear to be inter-related. Middleton (2008) argues that social changes in New Zealand from 1960 to 1980 closed alternative pathways to employment, forcing non-traditional students into tertiary education and increasing the need for bridging programmes. Benseman *et al.* (2006) identify motivation and attitudes, family, peer group and financial pressures and lack of support services as reasons for Pasifika not completing courses. They note that language may still be an issue for students in some situations, and this is particularly true in *English Writing*, a language-focused course. Scott (2009) found that part-time status has a negative impact on completion, which is likely to be significant for Pasifika students who need to work or who have family responsibilities.

In a Statistics New Zealand report (2010, p. 57), factors affecting Pasifika tertiary learning outcomes were divided into two areas: home or community factors, and institutional factors. Home factors included competing demands from family, church, or work. Institutional factors included the availability of learning support, teaching practices and relationships, and the place of Pacific knowledge and experience within courses. Affective factors were also recognised, including personal attitudes, motivation, and a lack of integration into the institution.

Informal investigations carried out as part of this research project also indicated issues affecting Pasifika student achievement and ways to improve outcomes.

The informal investigations included discussions with Equity staff, colleagues in other first-year courses and the First Year Experience (FYE), a programme assisting new students. Informal feedback was also gathered through discussion with Pasifika *English Writing* students and via anonymous written feedback from these students gathered by Equity staff.

### **Five strategies employed**

Through consideration of the literature and the informal investigations, five broad strategies were identified, all of which can be classed as adaptive (Zepke *et al.*, 2005) to some degree; that is, adaptations to meet the diverse needs of students. Benseman *et al.* (2006) support this approach, suggesting “institutional responsibility is a key element in improving retention of...Pasifika in tertiary education” (p. 161). The strategies aimed to raise the pass rate among Pasifika students by 10 *per cent*, to a level closer to those of all students in *English Writing*.

#### *Better knowledge of students*

The first strategy was to get to know students better to understand individual needs. The literature has noted problems for Pasifika students with motivation, engagement and integration (for example, (Madjar *et al.*, 2010; Statistics New Zealand, 2010), especially in large university classes. The literature also calls for learner-centred teaching (Airini *et al.*, 2010; Benseman *et al.*, 2006; Zepke *et al.*, 2005; Zepke, Leach, & Prebble, 2006), a condition of which is knowledge of individual students. Demonstrating such knowledge can help students feel more involved and can help build motivation and engagement. To this end, a database of information on each student was constructed. English language ability, TAS status, attendance, assignment submission and collection, and summaries of communication were collated, along with email and telephone contact information for more efficient and effective communication.

This was a time-consuming but successful strategy, as it helped build a clear picture of each student and allowed us to individualise our teaching. For example, knowledge of a student’s language level helped ensure the students were enrolled in the right course. Repeating students and TAS students were identified and noted as being at risk, and this allowed us to target them with extra information and offers of help early in the semester. It also acted as an “early warning system” (Zepke *et al.*, 2005, p. 17) of those at risk of dropping out.

### *Closer collaboration with support staff*

The second strategy was closer collaboration with support staff. Many researchers emphasise the importance of effective support systems for students (Airini *et al.*, 2010; Benseman *et al.*, 2006; Statistics New Zealand, 2010; Tumen *et al.*, 2008; Zepke *et al.*, 2005), including making such systems an integral part of the course experience (Madjar *et al.*, 2010, p. 106). In the Arts Faculty, support is wide-ranging, including Equity staff, a Tuakana (experienced student) mentor for the course, First Year Experience (FYE) programme staff, TAS academic advisors and others. Discussion with Equity and FYE staff led to the development of an action plan pooling our resources.

A number of actions were taken as part of this joint effort. For example, information on academic or personal problems students faced was shared where appropriate, allowing for more effective responses. Equity staff supported attempts to contact students by following up with text messages and reinforcing announcements via their own email lists. Extra workshops for Māori and Pasifika students were planned and run together by Tuakana and *English Writing* staff, with complementary approaches making the sessions more effective. Names of students who had not submitted assignments were sent to the Tuakana mentor immediately after deadlines, allowing him to check on their progress. FYE staff contacted absent students and offered to run extra sessions focusing on main assignments. TAS advisors were contacted as further support for some students.

### *Adaptation of course content and assessment structures*

The third strategy was to adapt course content and assessment structures to better suit the learners. One goal was to allow Pasifika learners to draw more on their own world view and knowledge. Such an approach is recommended in the literature (Airini *et al.*, 2010; Statistics New Zealand, 2010; Zepke *et al.*, 2005), and is another integral component of a learner-centred teaching approach. It can have a direct impact on student engagement (Zepke, Leach, & Butler, 2010). The fact that *English Writing* focuses on writing skills meant such a change was more feasible than might be the case for courses focusing on subject content.

An action which had already been initiated along these lines was the use of student texts as models, including those by Māori or Pasifika students. Using such texts as the basis of learning materials is a form of contributing student pedagogy (Hamer *et al.*, 2008). This approach helps validate and encourage student voices, allowing a more diverse range of views to be expressed. Another action was to choose assignment and tutorial topics to allow Pasifika students

to employ their own knowledge and experience where possible. For example, a report on first language retention in New Zealand communities was used as a basis for a tutorial on quantitative data description, allowing Pasifika students to draw on their own experience of first language retention or loss.

A second change to the course was the provision of alternatives to assessed online peer review. A number of Pasifika students were unable to meet deadlines for online peer assessed work, due to access, organisation or preparedness problems.

We provided an alternative option: hard copy peer review. This was utilised by up to 10 *per cent* of students, reducing loss of marks for uncompleted work. Such flexibility in assessment procedure is supported in the literature, for example by Zepke *et al.* (2010).

#### *Revisit classroom teaching practice*

The fourth strategy was to consider ways to improve classroom teaching practice. This is consistently mentioned in the literature as being vital for student success (for example, Benseman *et al.*, 2006; Statistics New Zealand, 2010). In fact, we considered this our strongest area. Airini *et al.* (2010, pp. 25-32) describe a Quality Tertiary Teaching toolkit (QTTe), which recommends many of the practices already employed in the course. Academic staff in *English Writing* are experienced teachers with backgrounds in second language, primary or secondary school teaching. Peer observation in the course has shown tutors effectively manage classes to engage students and elicit ideas, they encourage a range of views, and they individualise their teaching. Feedback on writing is timely, detailed and clear. Student work is incorporated in learning materials and student learning is scaffolded, with a step-by-step approach to skill building. Students are encouraged to support and learn from each other through opportunities such as peer review and shared writing tasks. The lack of tutorial attendance by Pasifika students, however, indicated something was wrong.

Insight into how classroom practice might be improved was provided by Equity's decision to place a number of TAS students in a single tutorial stream, along the lines of a Tuakana tutorial run in another subject (Henly, 2009). The TAS tutorial required a different approach from the other tutorials, which confident students tend to dominate if allowed to. In the TAS tutorial, for example, small groups worked better initially than a whole class approach. Discussions covered different ground, reflecting the cultural backgrounds and experiences of the Pasifika students. Students appeared to benefit from more explicit explanation



and language support, such as advice on discourse markers and word collocations. This tutorial illustrated that complacency over classroom practice was unwarranted. Despite our assumptions about effective teaching practice, we may still have been unconsciously catering to the more confident students and limiting chances for some Pasifika students to learn.

### *Employ a proactive approach*

The final strategy was to take a much more active, hands-on approach to keep Pasifika students on-task right through the course. Motivation and attitude have been noted as problematic for Pasifika students (Statistics New Zealand, 2010, p. 57) and Madjar *et al.* (2010, p. 8) recommend a proactive approach for the most at-risk students. Equity staff also recommended this to ensure at-risk students were not distracted by the freer university environment. Using the database described earlier, we targeted at-risk students with extra support. We sent multiple reminders of upcoming assessments, emailed those who had missed assignments with completion instructions, and explained late assignment submission procedures (some Pasifika students had completed drafts but were reluctant to submit if they missed a deadline). Personal and school emails were used, along with follow-up phone calls and texts.

Responses were often surprising. *English Writing* staff had expected students to know much of the information, to access it online, or to ask if unsure. In fact, some students appeared to know little about missed assessments or online task processes (“no idea what the heck she is on about” was one response to a reminder about these), and were grateful for the explanations. Task completion rates increased directly in response to this approach.

Based on a suggestion by Equity staff to initiate contact with students outside the classroom, we also attended pre-semester TAS student orientation sessions to build relationships with students (Zepke *et al.*, 2005, p. 17) before classes began. Extra workshops in the Tuakana campus space built on this approach, and we attended a mid-semester writing wānanga on the university marae. We stayed around after classes to talk to students and tutors adopted a more flexible approach to office hours. Perhaps as a result of this more open approach, there was a noticeable increase in the number of Pasifika students taking up offers of one-on-one help.

### **Conclusion**

At time of writing, it is too early to know whether the strategies employed have had a positive effect on Pasifika pass rates, though early indications such as

coursework completion rates are positive. Zepke and Leach (2006) point out that the adaptation approach employed here is only part of a larger picture, and Government, teachers and institutions need to work together to support success (p. 117). A different approach is also required from some students. Tutorial attendance rates continue to be low among Pasifika students, while a small number do not attend class or submit any work at all, possibly indicating other motivations for enrolment. Middleton (2008) warns against unrealistic expectations, pointing to US data that indicates some students simply do not do enough work to pass and at-risk students often avoid support systems designed for them.

One positive outcome for *English Writing* staff is a better understanding of the issues faced by Pasifika students. We think we have become more supportive as a result. A small example is a change in attitudes towards late assignments. We had tended to treat these simply as troublesome or extra work. Now, with a better understanding of the obstacles some students have overcome to complete work (and fresh memories of the work we have put in to help them), every submitted assignment, even late ones, signifies a step towards a successful outcome. Further research on the effectiveness of strategies employed in this course will indicate whether such optimism is justified.

## References

- Airini, & Sauni, P. (2004). Bring only the most beautiful: Towards excellence in adult education pedagogy. Paper presented at the *Adult Education Research Conference (AERC) and the Association for the Study of Adult Education (CASAE) 2004 Conference*. University of Victoria, Canada.
- Airini, Brown, D., Curtis, E., Johnson, O., Luatua, F., O'Shea, M., ... & Ulugia-Pua, M. (2010). *Success for all: Improving Māori and Pasifika student success in degree-level studies*. Wellington: Teaching and Learning Research Initiative.
- Benseman, J., Coxon, E., Anderson, H., & Anae, M. (2006). Retaining non-traditional students: Lessons learnt from Pasifika students in New Zealand. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 25(2), 147–162. doi: 10.1080/07294360600610388
- DELNA (Diagnostic English Language Needs Assessment). (2010). *First language data*. Unpublished raw data.
- Equity Office. (2011). *Final Equity Statistics Report 2011*. Auckland: The University of Auckland. Retrieved from <http://www.auckland.ac.nz/ uoa/home/about/eo-equity-office/eo-reports-and-plans>

- Ferguson, P. B., Gorinski, R., Wendt Samu, T., & Mara, D. (2008). *Literature review on the experiences of Pasifika learners in the classroom. Report to the Ministry of Education*. New Zealand Council for Educational Research. Retrieved from [www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications](http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications)
- Hamer, J., Cutts, Q., Jackova, J., Luxton-Reilly, A., McCartney, R., Purchase, H., ... & Sheard, J. (2008). Contributing student pedagogy. *inroads – SIGCSE Bulletin*, 40(4), 194-212.
- Henly, M. (2009). Te wero, the challenge: Providing students from ethnic minorities with culturally appropriate learning support during their first year of tertiary study. *The International Journal of Learning*, 16(9), 207-219. Retrieved from [www.Learning-Journal.com](http://www.Learning-Journal.com)
- Madjar, I., McKinley, E., Deynzer, M., & van der Merve, A. (2010). *Stumbling blocks or stepping stones? Students' experience of transition from low-mid decile schools to university*. Starpath Project. Auckland: The University of Auckland.
- Middleton, S. (2008). Beating the filters of failure: Engaging with the disengaged in higher education. Keynote address in *Engaging Communities, Proceedings of the 31st HERDSA Annual Conference*, Rotorua, 1–4 July 2008. Retrieved from [www.hersda.org.au](http://www.hersda.org.au)
- Millward, P., Turner R., & van der Linden, D. (2012). The retention and success of under-represented groups in a Bachelor of Education program in New Zealand. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 40(2), 171-183. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2012.670873>
- Ministry of Education. (2010). *Education Counts. Provider-based enrolments*. Retrieved from [http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/tertiary\\_education/participation](http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/tertiary_education/participation)
- Scott, D., & Smart, W. (2005). *What factors make a difference to getting a degree in New Zealand?* Wellington: Ministry of Education.
- Scott, D. (2009). A closer look at completion in higher education in New Zealand. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 31, 101-108.
- Shulruf, B., Hattie, J., & Tumen, S. (2008) Individual and school factors affecting students' participation and success in higher education. *Higher Education*, 56, 613-632. doi: 10.1007/s10734-008-9114-8
- Statistics New Zealand and Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs. (2010). *Education and Pacific peoples in New Zealand*. Wellington: Author

- Tertiary Education Commission. (2012). *Tertiary Education Commission Pasifika framework 2013–2017*. Retrieved from <http://www.tec.govt.nz>
- The University of Auckland. (2012). *Strategic Plan 2013–2020. Draft*. Auckland: Author.
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Tumen, S., Shulruf, B., & Hattie, J. (2008). Student pathways at the university: Patterns and predictors of completion. *Studies in Higher Education*, 33(3), 233–252.
- Zepke, N., Leach, L., Prebble, T., Campbell, A., Coltman, D., Dewart, B.,... & Wilson, S. (2005). *Improving tertiary student outcomes in the first year of study*. Teaching and Learning Research Initiative. Retrieved from [www.tlri.org.nz](http://www.tlri.org.nz)
- Zepke, N., & Leach, L. (2006). Improving retention and student outcomes? Some questions about the retention discourse. In *Engaging students: Retention and success. Bridging Education in New Zealand*. Proceedings of the 6th Conference of New Zealand Association of Bridging Educators. 5–6 October 2006. Auckland.
- Zepke, N., Leach, L., & Prebble, T. (2006). Being learner-centred: One way to improve student retention? *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(5), 587–600. doi: 10.1080/03075070600923418
- Zepke, N., Leach, L., & Butler, P. (2010). *Student engagement: What is it and what influences it?* Teaching and Learning Research Initiative. Retrieved from [www.tlri.org.nz](http://www.tlri.org.nz)