



## He whakawhitinga ki te whare wānanga:

He rauemi tēnei hei tautoko i ngā tauira Māori ki te tuhituhi i te reo Ingarihi

## Bridging to tertiary study:

A support resource for academic writing in English for Māori students

Dr Diane Johnson  
Dr Sophie Nock

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**Dr Diane Johnson**  
**dianej@waikato.ac.nz**

**Dr Sophie Nock**  
**sophnock@waikato.ac.nz**

## **Executive summary**

This small-scale project was conducted over a period of only a few weeks in January and February 2015. The overall objective of the project was to measure the extent to which a tailor-made series of academic writing units could support the English writing skills of Māori students entering tertiary study and/or of Māori students who were already enrolled in tertiary study but experiencing low levels of success. The intention of the work was to make a contribution to the capacity of Māori students to respond appropriately to the English writing demands that are made of them in tertiary education contexts and to support staff who assist them in doing so. A four unit instructional resource, founded in current best practice in genre-based approaches to English academic writing, was developed for the project. The units aimed to make explicit what is often implicit, that is, precisely how texts that emulate those produced by successful members of academic communities of practice are constructed. The units were presented to the students in power point form and, in the spirit of a 'just for me; just in time' (Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching, n.d) approach to learning, the units were available on line for the students to access in their own time. At the end of the project, the students were asked to complete an anonymous on-line questionnaire where they evaluated various aspects of the project. The data gathered in this final phase of the project indicate that the students found this approach to supporting engagement in, and enhancement of, academic writing instruction in English very useful and interesting even though, as members of the digital native generation (Prensky, 2001) they did not always find the delivery mode ideal.

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<sup>1</sup> This project had ethical approval from the ethics committee of Te Pua Wānanga ki te Ao (the School of Māori and Pacific Development) at the University of Waikato.

## **1.0 Introduction**

There remains a significant gap between Māori and the rest of the population in terms of success in tertiary education. (Ministry of Education, n.d, p.5) Anecdotal evidence suggests that many Māori, particularly those whose schooling was conducted in a Māori-medium context, have difficulty in writing assignments in English in an appropriate way and to an acceptable standard, yet many are reluctant to seek help, particularly from non-Māori staff. The aim of this project was to assist Māori students by designing and trialling a number of units (4) of a self-access English academic writing resource intended primarily for Māori students and centring on issues of relevance and significance to Māori. A sample of Māori students was asked to trial the units, and to report their responses in focus group discussions and self-completion questionnaires. The units in the resource have been revised wherever this was possible and will be made available as a set of self-access power points.

## **2.0 Background**

The success rate of Māori students within the New Zealand education system is poor according to a representative sample of research reports and papers reviewed and synthesized by Earle (2007). This is also reflected in more recent analyses by the Tertiary Education Commission (hereafter TEC) (2013) and Ministry of Education statistical reports.<sup>2</sup> There are a number of key points made in Earle's report which have been central to the development of the support resource for students in this project. These are listed below:

- Māori students have the lowest rate of progression from school to tertiary study of any ethnic group.
- The number of Māori moving from school to degree level study is increasing. However, the participation rate in degree level study for Māori aged 18 to 19 has increased only slightly and remains at less than half the rate for all students.
- Performance at school has a higher correlation than any other factor with the success of Māori school-leavers in their first year of degree level study. Success in first-year study is more closely linked with retention rates after the first year than any other factor. Continued success in courses is closely related to qualification completion.

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<sup>2</sup> [www.educationcounts.govt.nz](http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz)

- Māori students enter degree level study with, on average, lower level school qualifications and lower level National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) results than their non-Māori peers, see for example TEC (2013).
- Māori students who had the same level of performance in NCEA as non-Māori did slightly less well on average in their first-year degree studies.
- Once factors such as school achievement are eliminated, a significant factor affecting the average performance of Māori students is the type of institution they attend. Māori school leavers who study at universities with a higher proportion of first degree level (and above) students are less likely to pass 75% or more of their first-year courses than Māori school leavers at other institutions. However, Māori students who are successful at these institutions are more likely to continue in study and complete a qualification than Māori at other institutions.
- Māori school-leavers who have completed at least three years of equivalent full-time degree study are less likely to have gained a qualification than other Māori students if they have failed several courses, switched between degree programmes and/or studied part-time.

As indicated in *Ka Hikatea 2013 - 2017* (Ministry of Education), there have been improvements in participation and achievement rates at higher levels in tertiary education for Māori students in recent years. For example, the number of Māori students enrolled in qualifications at Bachelor's level or higher increased from 21% of Māori students in 2007 to 28% in 2012. There has also been an overall increase in tertiary level course completion. However, it remains the case that there is a significant gap in overall tertiary education success rates between Māori and the rest of the population.

For many Māori students, meeting writing requirements in tertiary educational contexts is challenging. This is often particularly the case for those students whose schooling has been conducted in whole or in part through the medium of te reo Māori. While many of these students have little difficulty in developing what Cummins (2008) in his international study of student writing capacity refers to as 'basic interpersonal communicative skills' (BICS) in English, they appear to have considerably more problems in relation to the development of 'cognitive academic language proficiency' (CALP). As indicated in a recent research project

(Peters, 2014), this is something that is of concern to a number of parents and caregivers. As one of them (p. 170) observed:

[We] were trying to help them and encourage them - as much as we could to improve their *taha Pākehā, te reo Pākehā* so that they are able to with some sort of confidence . . . to answer the questions in the exams.

Although there are some English language writing development programmes available in tertiary institutions, the lack of success of Māori students suggests that these programmes may be failing to meet the needs of Māori students. This could be because (a) because they make too many assumptions about existing competencies and are, therefore, pitched initially at too high a level, and/ or (b) they fail to take account in the development of materials of cultural and affective factors that can present significant barriers in the case of Māori students, and/or (c) their mode of delivery does not engage students who have high levels of familiarity with technology.

If the targets proposed in *Ka Hikatea* are to be met, providers need to respond in a positive and practical manner. The development of this resource is one such response.

### **3.0 Project Design**

The overall approach to the design of the materials for the project was primarily one that emerged out of research on discourse analysis and academic writing that has been conducted over the past three decades (see, for example, Bazermann, 1994; Bhatia, 1993 & 1998; Crombie, 1985a & b; Eggins & Martin, 1997; Houia-Roberts, 2003a & b; Hyland, 2004; Miller, 1994; Paltridge, 2001; Pilegaard & Frandsen, 1996; Swales, 1990). One of the project leaders had supervised a number of MA and PhD theses in the area (see, for example, Lin, 2010) and had co-authored two books designed to teach academic writing in English to Taiwanese students (Crombie & Johnson, 2009; Johnson & Crombie, 2013).

Academic discourse involves “peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing” (Bartholomae, 1986, p. 4). The literature on academic writing makes frequent reference to the significance of 'discourse communities', that is, groups or networks of people who have a broadly agreed set of goals and mechanisms for communication among their members (Swales, 1990, pp. 24-27). Some examples of academic writing are more prototypical than others, that is, they conform more closely to the

practices of successful members of the academic community. However, few of those who can produce writing of this type are able to articulate precisely what is involved and, hence, provide novice writers with the guidance they generally require. The instructional resource developed for the project aimed to make explicit what is often implicit, that is, precisely how texts that emulate those produced by successful members of academic communities of practice are constructed. The intention of this work is to make a contribution to the capacity of Māori students to respond appropriately to the English writing demands that are made of them in tertiary education contexts and to that of academic staff to assist them in doing so. As Houia-Roberts (2003b, p. 66) maintains; "Appropriate models can be liberating in that they provide an authentic cultural resource as a starting point for the exploration of new possibilities and individual creativity".

### ***3.1 Analytical approach***

The analytical approach to the project construction involved:

- (a) making use of existing research in the area of academic writing to determine the various issues relating to writing academic texts in English that have been found to present particular problems for novice writers of academic texts (e.g. drawing conclusions on the basis of evidence in the context of a text which is arguing a case for a particular point of view;
- (b) deciding on an instructional approach that focused on these issues;
- (c) selecting several genres for inclusion in the instructional units that have been the focus of this project;
- (d) designing each of the units around themes that were of relevance to contemporary Māori (e.g. differences between traditional and current approaches to information and information transfer);
- (e) designing instruments to be used in the evaluations following the trialling of the instructional units,
- (f) identifying and contacting potential participants for running the trials;
- (f) revising the instructional units in line with the advice and feedback of those involved in the trials wherever possible;
- (g) arranging for the revised units to be widely available.

### ***3.2 Project phases***

The first phase of the project involved the production of culturally relevant materials made up of four self-access units. These units were:

1. Introduction understanding about writing
2. Writing explanation texts
3. Writing argument texts
4. Supplementary language resource

The units are attached as copies of power point slides in ***Appendix 1***.

The second phase of the resource involved the design of instruments to evaluate the resource from the perspective of the students. A simple questionnaire was designed along with questions for the focus groups and the semi structured interviews.

The third phase of the project was focused on transferring the 4 units into a power-point format that would allow a degree of interaction and would also allow students to self -correct some of the tasks with which they were engaging. The power points slides were made available to the students via Moodle, the assumption being that familiarisation with the University's eLearning platform would support their overall academic progress and foster student interaction.

The fourth phase of the project involved recruiting students to participate in the trials of the units. This process involved contacting the Māori student mentors in each of the faculties and schools and asking for recommendations about students that fitted the criteria and who might therefore be appropriate participants. In the final analysis, 11 students began the unit trials with 10 completing. The students had four weeks overall to complete the units.

The final stage of the project was the completion of the questionnaire and the focus group interviews. The results from these group meetings are reported in the following section of this project report and attached as ***Appendix 3***. In order to protect the identity of the students and to remove the project leaders from the feedback section of the project, the questionnaires and focus group discussions were conducted by a Māori PhD student who was engaged as the project assistant.



The materials have been revised, wherever possible, to take account of student feedback. Other feedback, while very useful, has not been able to be acted upon within the scope of this project but it provides useful information and suggestions for future revisions of the materials and provides the basis for potential future research projects.

#### **4.0 Report on data from the post-project questionnaire**

The principle outcomes of the project are expressed through the data gathered from the student questionnaire. This was administered through SurveyMonkey<sup>3</sup> and the data are reported below. The information is also summarised and attached in *Appendix 2*

##### ***4.1 Identifying the target audience***

The main criteria for establishing the trial group involved selecting students who were in their first year of study but this was later opened to any student studying in any year, and who identified themselves as Māori (**Q1**). A small sample of students (12) enrolled at Waikato University were, therefore, selected to participate in the pilot project.

##### ***4.2 Participants' details***

The participants' ages (**Q2**) - from highest to lowest - included: 21-25 years (62.5%), 16-20 years (25%), 26-35 years (12.5%) and over 35 (0%). For students (**Q3**) who were *about to begin* studying for a first degree, a total of 14.29% answered 'yes' while 85.71% indicated 'no'. Effectively, the report shows that all students (**Q4**) were already involved in studying for a first degree. It also indicated that students were (**Q5**) enrolled in a range of subject areas across degrees including: BMS & BSc (3), Environmental Studies (1), Law and Media (1), Media and Creative Technology (2), Psychology (1), or Social Science (2) and Māori & Pacific Development (2). The project trial was run over the first 4 weeks of Semester A, in 2015.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.surveymonkey.com>

#### ***4.3 Designing and implementing the survey-based questionnaire***

After establishing the target group, it was decided to use a survey-based questionnaire as the main method for the collection and analysis of feedback data. The questionnaire comprised 15 questions including open, closed and multiple choice questions and participants' written responses. It was designed using automated online software and a link to the survey was delivered to students' email. When students completed the questionnaire, the results were stored in the software programme and then analysed. A range of questions were designed, trialed and revised before the questionnaire was finalized.

#### ***4.4 Participants' difficulties in writing academic assignments***

The survey found that in (Q6) 62.5% of students had past difficulties in writing assignments in English while 37.5% experienced no difficulties. In (Q7), participants' reasons for difficulties included:

- lack of writing skills and knowledge to produce appropriate academic assignments. Students reported having difficulty with understanding and using subject related terminology;
- low self-esteem and confidence also contributed to difficulties in writing assignments in English. Students reported being unwilling to share their difficulties with others, particularly with lectures, for fear of being judged and feeling embarrassed;
- a misunderstanding of assignment instructions. Students reporting a lack of understanding of teacher expectations for assignments.

All students indicated in (Q13) that these difficulties from 'most difficulty' to 'least difficulty' arose from:

- overall assignment structuring (87.5%)
- grammar (62.5%) and vocabulary (62.5%)
- punctuation (50%)
- paragraphing (37.5%)
- other (12.5%).

In (Q14), the '*other*' category indicated a dislike for referencing.

These figures were based on students' selection of multiple choice answers in relation to these questions.

#### 4.5 Completion time

From the ‘least time’ to ‘most time’ each student spent completing the three main units ranged from 1 hour to 20 hours (Q8). The students reported that the supplementary language resource (SLR) often took longer to complete than was anticipated (Q9).

#### 4.6 Completing the units and SLR

The survey asked students (Q10) to give an overall impression about each unit they completed ranging from ‘very interested’ to ‘not useful at all’. The following **Table 1** indicates students’ responses across different units and their selected categories only.

Units	Very interesting & very useful	Interesting & useful	A little interesting & a little useful
Unit 1: Introduction	37.50%	50.00%	12.50%
Unit 2: Writing explanation texts	50.00%	37.50%	12.50%
Unit 3: Writing argument texts	62.50%	37.50%	0.00%
Unit 4: Supplementary language resource	50.00%	50.00%	0.00%

*Table 1: Summary of student responses*

While the participants found unit 4 less interesting, overall, more than 50% of the participants indicated ‘very interesting’ and/or ‘very useful’ across all three units and the SLR. The reasons for the students’ very positive responses to Q10 included:

- the facilitation of good writing practices;
- time for students to study in their own time and their own work place allowed;
- help with motivation, and self-confidence, and interaction with tutors;
- help with the development of an understanding of academic writing principles in a simple way;
- help with revision, and referencing;
- clarification of terminology and concepts associated with writing assignments in English.

The students reported that the use of interactive tasks and tables consolidated learning, broke up the tedious chore of reading through the units and improved focus. Despite these responses, students also indicated that some tasks required more work than others but that the units as a total resource were helpful for students with on-going struggles during their study (Q11).

#### ***4.7 Working with other units***

As a follow-up question to **Q10** the majority of participants indicated in (**Q12**), from ‘highest rated’ to ‘lowest rated’ that they would be ‘interested (50%)’, ‘a little interested (37.5%)’, or ‘very interested (12.5%)’ and ‘not interested’ (0%) in working with additional units relating to academic writing.

#### ***4.8 Indicative conclusions drawn from the questionnaire data***

The report profiles a small group of young Māori students actively engaged in the pursuit of tertiary education across a range of subject areas for personal and professional goals. It indicates some of the difficulties these students have experienced when writing academic assignments in English (see 4.4 above) and some reasons for these. The report indicates that the units and SLR have been useful to students whether new or familiar with the information presented in the resource as a means to facilitate comprehension and to develop practical skills associated with the production of academic writing. It also highlights students’ experiences with using and completing the units in terms of time and overall impressions of students’ interests in the current and future resources. As a result, (Q15) the presentations could include:

- less writing;
- more interesting activities – these are seen as a major motivator for students to read and complete all units from beginning to end;
- more user-friendly interface and software to deliver better presentation of information to engage students’ interest and interaction.

The information drawn from the questionnaire responses indicate the need for this kind of resource as a tool to help new students make a meaningful transition from secondary school to tertiary study and to provide revision for current students. It should be noted that, because of the small number of participants that any conclusions drawn are indicative rather than conclusive but it is clear that the information emerging from the project evaluation instruments will serve to inform future resources in terms of overall design and implementation.

#### **5.0 Report on data from the focus group meeting**

Most of the students reported having had problems with writing in English. Some key comments from the focus group meeting are:

I've had heaps of problems with my writing cause sometimes I don't understand the question. So, I write heaps and hopefully whatever I write some of it covers the answer.

I didn't do English (as an option) at high school because I found it easier but once I came to university I found it hard to write an essay in English with the grammar and things like that. There was also understanding questions where I didn't know what the lecturer wanted me to write. So, being in economics at the moment, and writing about the advantages and disadvantages of economic theory and being a concise essay I didn't know exactly what he was asking, for example, was it meant to be creative or straight fact. It's just hard to know what to write about.

Going from high school to university the different interpretations of words like examine and describe etc. were different to what I was used to at high school as they go into more depth whereas at high school you covered the basics but don't go right into it.

Significantly and as predicted, students do not ask directly for help rather they try to manage the issues alone. Where help was sought it was often too late to have any bearing on achievement. This is reflected in comments such as:

I got help from friends last year who helped me understand it better and gave me feedback in terms of what I was doing wrong.

When I came to university it wasn't really hard where to go to ask for help. I know that there's an English department in Management and if I did my essays early enough I would go there but I don't.

You can get a little whakamā<sup>4</sup> about asking for help because sometimes looks can make you think that this might be a silly question and I just look dumb to them and so I went to Google, which became my friend and help on how to describe and examine things. That's where it comes in handy as it uses diagrams and tables and is easy to refer to back to if I need to break down a question to an assignment or essay. You can Google examples or past essays and sometime you find them on Moodle.

Because I don't like asking for help, I use Google, as well. I would just search on Google and try to get a better understanding and start from there but I did that for the first year and a half and then I started getting help from Māori support in FASS who were very helpful in my last semester. However, I mainly use Google.

I was just too shy to ask for help.

You don't know what to do or what to ask because sometimes I would think well what do I ask, could you do it for me.

Using Google was time consuming as there were so many different interpretations online to find and then you kind of understood each interpretation but then you didn't know how to apply that to what I was trying to answer. So, it took a long time, such as researching. It was helpful in the end but it was time consuming and because I spent so much time on that part of the essay or question it didn't leave much time for other parts only because I left it to the last minute.

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<sup>4</sup> embarrassed, shy or uncomfortable

It's not until you get your grade back really that you know what you've done wrong. There's not really anyone out there that can tell you or go over your assignment. I mean you can't show the lecturer as they won't do that or can't look at it. So, it's not until you get feedback that you know what to do and now I've got to wait for the next assignment and is the feedback going to be good for the next one.

When asked if the project units had helped them to improve their writing, the participants were generally positive.

Some of it was helpful even though I'm in my third year I still need help with structuring my writing because it's loose and it's all over the place. However, I should know better.

I think it was a good recap. Filling that gap between high school and university. I think it would be a very good course for people going from high school to university.

It drilled in old habits of how to structure and I used it as a tool for my assignment during the holidays and hopefully I think that the essay mirrors how its being presented in the units. So, that was easy rather using Google. I did the assignment and then went back to see if I had covered the points that were in the units and I did.

A useful summary of the overall tone of feedback from participants can be found in the following commentary:

I think they [students] would use it. I would. It's a compact resource kit that'll help students learn key terms more effectively. It'll save time for students who are unfamiliar with the terms by not having to gather information from different sources; it's all in one place. Personally, I'll go to the library website for help before going to the library staff - the same could probably be said about this resource. Also, some students don't like to leave their comfort zone like asking for help or advice; this resource will solve that issue. But, of course they'll need to eventually ask for help in other areas but this resource would give the student ample time to dictate when they're ready to leave their comfort zone. The resource is a great tool to use for transitioning from secondary to tertiary level. The resource being FREE is a BONUS!

## **6.0 Contribution to existing knowledge, outcomes for learners**

It was anticipated that this small pilot project would contribute to existing knowledge and understanding of ways in which Māori students at tertiary-level could be helped to overcome the problems they experience in writing academic assignments in English and, in particular, the ways in which they respond to instructional materials that are designed specifically to be of contemporary relevance and cultural significance. The perceived benefits to learners that have emerged from the project include:

- i) an increased awareness of the ways in which academic discourse is typically constructed;
- ii) increased competence in producing written text in English (particularly in response to assignment questions) that emulate those produced by successful members of academic communities of practice.

In 2013, the University of Waikato (had 2,290 enrolled Māori students (the highest percentage of Māori students in any of the New Zealand universities) all of whom, along with the staff who are responsible for their academic welfare, could potentially benefit from the instructional resource that has been an outcome of this project. In that the intention is to make the resource freely available, the resource could potentially also be of benefit to a considerably higher number of Māori students engaged in tertiary level study in Aotearoa. Future uptake of the use of the resource will depend on further dissemination of the outcomes of this project.

## **7.0 Recommendations**

This was a small-scale project which was conducted over a period of only a few weeks. While the short time frame of the project and the small cohort of students suggest that any outcomes emerging from this project should be indicative rather than conclusive, the very positive reactions from the participants have led to a number of specific recommendations that the project team wishes to advance. These recommendations are that:

- there would be value in seeking to expand the current resource into a complete English language-based academic writing resource with extra units that cover additional aspects of academic writing. It is envisaged that an expanded resource, building on the units already developed, would include a wide range of model texts and writing tasks, would start very simply and build gradually towards the creation of fully referenced sample academic assignments.
- any future development of the resource consider the issue of the delivery mode of this type of material. While the students found the approach to supporting engagement in, and enhancement of, academic writing instruction in English adopted in this project to be very useful and interesting, it is equally clear that the delivery mode did not always directly appeal to students who belong to a digital native generation (Prensky, 2001). In itself, the question of delivery mode provides scope for further investigation and the basis for a future research project.
- tertiary providers be made aware of the fact that this group, which undoubtedly is representative of Māori students across the sector, expressed strong feelings of resistance to asking for help from the sources at the institution. The development of effective strategies to combat this resistance could provide the basis for further research activity.

- the findings which emerged from the overall project be made available through future seminars or workshops.

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