Vol 7 | Issue 1 (2019) | pp. 3-11

JOURNAL OF
Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice

www.jpaap.napier.ac.uk

'Permission to write': Building a community of inter-disciplinary writers

Barbara Kensington-Miller and Susan Carter, University of Auckland, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

Academic writing has been described as enjoyable, terrifying, and hard slog, with many reasons why academics struggle to write. Here, we describe the third iteration of a generic writing programme for academics who wanted to meet the imperative to publish. Using surveys, weekly feedback and our own journals we gathered evidence of the programme's effectiveness. We developed a structured framework within a community of practice where academics could gain writing acumen and increase confidence, giving themselves permission to write amid conflicting requirements of teaching, research and service. Our data shows the different dimensions of the course that participants experienced as effective, enabling us to anatomise writing support with the precision that facilitators will find helpful. Significantly, we make the case that the social dimension enabled our academics to be productive.

Keywords: academic writing programme; writing support; scholarly writing; feedback; community of practice

Introduction

For many academics, writing is a challenge whether it is done collaboratively or alone (Cameron, Nairn, & Higgins, 2009; Weaver, Robbie, & Radloff, 2013). Grant (2006, p. 483) describes the process as "exhilarating, or quietly pleasurable, or plain hard work. Putting together a rigorous article can be challenging. In addition to care with scholarly apparatus, structure, style, and grammar (Hathaway, 2015), research writing stirs up emotions, sometimes positive and more often negative (Gallego Castaño, Castelló Badia, & Badia Garganté, 2015). There is institutional pressure on academics to be more outcome-focused, income-generating and entrepreneurial; high status is still accorded research and publication activity in comparison with teaching and service (Douglas, 2012; Roberts & Weston, 2013).

This century's neoliberal emphasis on research outputs has intensified pressure to publish. Research productivity is increasingly pivotal for universities to obtain funding (Jung, 2014). Yet high rejection rates increase journals' 'quality' measurement—it is in journals' competitive interest to reject. Dread of failure on submission darkens the imperative to write. For many academics the process of writing remains hard work (Turner, Brown, & Edwards-Jones, 2013) with the spectre of possible, or probable, rejection at the end of it.

In this article, we describe a structured writing programme for academics, which has continued to attract and sustain a sizeable group over the duration of a twelve-week semester. We argue that the productivity of academic writers improves in a collective and peer-based environment rather than as the solitary activity that is debilitating for many. We also argue that the pedantic rigour of scholarly writing can be demystified by providing feedback and critique of drafts from very early on. However, creating that productive environment takes multiple leverages, as we explain.

The programme was conceived as a collaborative venture to mitigate many of the challenges faced by novice academic writers: lack of confidence and artisanal skills, inexperience, time pressures, and more. Although originally designed and promoted for early-career academics to progress their writing, it attracted a surprising number of senior academics in its third iteration. How this would play out was of interest to us for possible future adaptations. This study's significance is our attention to the specific factors which influence the writing process for novice writers and those who struggle to write and how these factors were addressed by the programme.

The paper begins with literature establishing why there is a compelling need for writing support. Here, we tease out the benefits of a social dimension for writing, using the insights of situated learning theory and communities of practice. The context of the programme follows, what it involved and who attended. Our findings and discussion are organised around the emerging trends that are illustrated with excerpts gathered from surveys, weekly feedback and our own reflective journals.

The challenge of academic writing

Literature confirms the common experience that academic writing seems to generate a great deal of anxiety in those whose jobs demand that they do it. One author labels writers as 'vulnerable and all of them are tense' (Zinsser, 1994), yet most academics have a substantial publication obligation built into their contract – 'it's not a hobby' (Murray, 2013). Often academics find teaching and service demand their time (Churchman, 2006) and pressing responsibilities outside of academia often must be met so that writing is squeezed into periods when they are tired (Brown & Watson, 2010; Lafrance & Stoppard, 2006).

Consequently, academics often write in snatches of time, feeling frazzled and aware that they are not able to fully reflect on their work even though they know that reflection improves quality (McLean & Pasupathi, 2012). Both quality and quantity depend on stringent time management under pressure (and, while quantifying writing output is resented by some, tenure frequently requires a hard-nosed accountability regime). Academics are increasingly squeezed, with more pressure, more auditing, and with less favourable employment opportunities (Austin, 2003). Given that 'the impact of new managerialism and performativity…has been to render all academic identities more unstable' in terms of job security (Archer, 2008, p. 401), it is unsurprising that academics are anxious about writing. Those with thin research publications welcome support for writing rather desperately. Many others do so too, as they seek to find their best possible, or at least most satisfying, writerly identity (Lee & Boud, 2003).

Academic writing also depends upon technical skill with language and communication (see, for example Hyland, 2012). Usually, linguistic control develops accumulatively over some time, during which writing can be frustrating, particularly for those who like doing research and do not get pleasure from the intriguing possibilities of language (Anson & Forsberg, 1990). Like learning how to fix a car engine, writers must get the knack of tinkering with the mechanics of language (Gopen & Swan, 1990). Several authors provide very useful guides to academic writing (Carter & Laurs, 2017; Kamler, 2001; Lee & Aitchison, 2009; Murray, 2013; Rankin, 2001; Zinsser, 1994). Some aim for more powerful or stylish writing (Elbow, 1998; Sword, 2012, 2015). Others use a genre approach to make the expectations that readers bring to any text more visible so that they can be met (Bazerman, 2009; Bazerman, & Prior, 2003; Paltridge, 1997) and linguistics studies anatomise academic writing to show its workings (Swales & Feak, 2000). Yet busy academics are often unaware of such resources, or feel too busy to avail themselves of more reading, and turn instead to writing groups.

Support for academic writing

There is an assumption that student learning advisors have helped research students with literacy and academic writing for at least four decades, so by the time they are academics they will have mastered the complex manoeuvres of academic writing (Carter & Laurs, 2014). In our experience, this is a naïve assumption for the reasons we have cited above. Academic developers are only beginning to seek sophistication in supporting academic writers, often through various forms of writing groups that include peer review (Aitchison & Guerin, 2014; Paré, 2014). Instead of engaging with linguistics or genre dissection of writing, or with 'the science of scientific writing' titular (Gopen & Swan, 1990), academic writers are 'often dependent on tacit knowledge, with its own ritualized practices and mythologies, foremost of which is that feedback is widely...regarded as beneficial to learning' (Aitchison & Guerin, 2014, p. 53). Writing groups enable psychological diffusion of the tensions that trouble writers through the assurance that others also grapple with writing. The release of laughter within a writing group shrinks what is monstrous about the pressure of academic writing (Thesen, 2014). Arguably, feedback from several sources, shows writers how accessible their writing is to other people (Aitchison, 2014; Carter & Laurs, 2017): writing can then be 'shaped by participation in realms of social interaction' (Paré, 2014, p. 20). As academic-developers, desire to provide writing workshops sits within this context of this literature.

The social aspects of writing

Learning is often conceived as an individual process separated from other activities, and with identified learning outcomes achieved as the result of teaching. Wenger (1998) and Lave and Wenger (1991) disagree with this notion, instead advocating learning as social participation in which participants are active in the practices of social communities and construct identities accordingly (Aitchison & Lee, 2006). They see learning as both an action and a form of belonging. Central to this is their concept of community of practice having the following key criteria: mutual endeavour, where participants negotiate ways of working together to achieve something; expert-novice interaction, which connects participants in a variety of ways and defines membership; and shared repertoire, which are the routines, words, tools and ways of doing things that become part of shared practice. Wenger maintains that individuals transform more easily with support of a community enabling progress.

This theory resonates with us: in practice, we have noticed that an intrinsic condition for learning is the sense of inclusion, membership of a community. At the same time, we are aware from working with early career academics that they often feel marginalised in their department, being 'junior school' and fresh out of their PhDs. Our intention therefore was that new academics might benefit from an alternative writing community to their departmental ones, when they exist (Warhurst, 2006).

Academics must often find ways to develop writing for publication: the peer-reviewed journal article is often a key indicator of academic identity and worth (Lee & Boud, 2003). Thus, our programme drew on the social dimension to investigate whether this improved productivity. Equally important, our intention was to demystify the activity of scholarly writing by working collectively and to provide assurance that others similarly struggled through multiple iterations of their writing.

Methodology

Action research was employed (see Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006), as this methodology involves actively participating in a change situation whilst simultaneously conducting research. In particular, we draw on participatory action research (Hawkins, 2015), which has emerged as a significant methodology for intervention, development and change within communities and groups. It produces knowledge and improves practice through collaboration; Warhurst (2006, p. 111) describes it 'as social meaning-making and as legitimate peripheral participation'. It is particularly suitable for academic development workshops, building on the work of Paulo Freire (1972), who identifies the social limitations of a "teacher" as one who stands at the front and "imparts" information to passive "student" recipients. Freire led the desire for co-constructed learning that empowers learners into agency. Participatory action research does that, particularly in our case when, as academic developers, we oversee writers at work in a community that we have shaped and redesigned.

Research site description and participants

The programme occurred at a large New Zealand research-intensive university that requires academics to be continually research-active, with increasing research outputs. We, the authors, are both academic developers and research-active senior lecturers in higher education. The twenty-four participants in this study were all academics at different stages of their career and from a range of disciplines across the faculties of Medical Sciences (n=5), Science (n=7), Arts (n=5), Education (n=4) and Business (n=1). Two further participants were from the Library (n=2). Participants self-selected to attend, in response to an email invitation sent to all academics at the university. The invitation detailed that eligibility required being at the writing stage with all data collection and analysis completed. Participants also needed to be available for the scheduled meeting time of two hours each week.

We were cautious about offering generic research writing support for academics being aware of their diversity particularly in discipline. Behind the programme we describe here sit two earlier iterations. The first iteration was a pilot with two academic-writer participants and one facilitator. When both the novice and experienced participants of the trial endorsed it as remarkably helpful, the second iteration was university-wide with thirty-four participants. Doctoral students were permitted into the second iteration as we had not initially specified academic level. This was a mistake as we were soon to realize they were relatively naïve about academic writing compared to the academics, some of whom felt uncomfortable working alongside doctoral students: peer review collapsed when pairs crossed the academic/student roles. To mitigate this predicament we separated the doctoral students and ran a concurrent course with them, a time-expensive option for us that resolved the discrepancy issues. In the doctoral group, we noted that often just the opportunity to talk about their writing seemed to 'nudge' them through some of doctoral threshold concepts (Kiley & Wisker, 2009), such as the demonstration of critical thinking.

For the third iteration, we specifically excluded doctoral students. Half the group identified as early-career, while the other half were senior academics, including three at professorial level.

The programme

The writing programme is adapted from the book Writing Your Journal Article in 12 Weeks by Wendy Laura Belcher (2009). Belcher's book provides instruction, exercises, structure, and deadlines for participants to rigorously revise an unpublished or rejected article, chapter, or conference paper and submit this to a suitable academic source by the end of the course. Following discussions with an academic who had run a similar programme in Australia with early-career academics (Weaver et al., 2013), we made changes to Belcher's prescription: firstly to accommodate faculty from all disciplines and academic levels, and secondly, to write articles in various disciplinary fields from the start rather than through revision. The workbook was followed with respect to programme length. Many of the suggested activities were used, although not all, as some, such as 'selecting a journal', were less appropriate in a multi-discipline group. We added group discussion about different aspects of article writing relevant to all, and peer review of writing, based on a one page guide that was first discussed. In our third iteration, the order of topics was adjusted based on our reflections of the previous year to customise it to the participant cohort (see Table 1). In particular, we significantly increased the frequency of peer review in class, and we allowed time for participants to share advice and constructive stories from their own journeys with writing: more time for talking.

Table 1 Weekly topics for the programme

Programme week	Topic
1	Starting your paper
2	Developing your argument
3	Reviewing the literature part 1
4	Reviewing the literature part 2
5	Strengthening your structure
6	Presenting your evidence
7	Writing your methodology
8	Writing your discussion
9	Introductions and conclusions
10	Peer reviewing
11	Editing your article
12	Wrapping up your article

Data collection

Ethics consent was obtained in order to evaluate the programme. Two paper-based anonymous surveys were given to the participants with questions about their views on academic writing. The first survey was administered in the first week of the programme. Closed questions gave us detail on what areas of the writing process participants were confident with, the number and type of categorised outputs in their last three years and their goals for publication. Open questions identified obstacles they face, their level of confidence, and how they manage their writing. The second end-point survey had similar questions, as well as ones on future plans for writing and satisfaction about the course. Follow-up emails post-completion of the programmes were sent out, requesting information on the progress of their submissions. Due to the small number of responses so far, it was not statistically meaningful and we have left this information out here. We are still pursuing a better way to collect this data for future use.

Weekly feedback was gathered anonymously on questions such as name one thing that was unclear today; what activity did you find the most useful today; what would you like more of; what would you like less of; and responses added to our data collection. Being academics, participants were also very vocal and would willingly share suggestions for improvement, which we welcomed. Additionally, both authors kept journals, notes throughout their facilitation of the programme as they planned and then performed post-mortems on each of the classes. These notes purposefully sought pedagogic points of use to the programme's development and likely to critique generic writing support.

Data analysis

At the stage of data analysis, the limitations of participatory action research (Hawkins, 2015) cut in: participants provided critique, but the authors undertook the task of thematic analysis. The open questions in the surveys were analysed separately by both authors to ensure possible bias was avoided and to have consensus. Initially, multiple readings provided familiarisation with the data and then open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) was used to identify and classify recurring concepts that were relevant to the usefulness of the programme. Six areas were confirmed by both authors and the weekly feedback, class discussions and teacher journals provided further validation.

The multiple influences on the writing process

Initially the participants' goals for publication were straightforward and predictable, for example, completing two articles during the year. Their goals did not substantially change in the post-survey, as we had made sure at the outset they were realistic. What surprised us, however, was the rapid improvement in their motivation and confidence right from the first week. We had anticipated improved confidence over the programme, but had not expected it so quickly and so visibly.

In the first class, we asked what brought them to enrol. Our notes recorded many explanations about what demotivated them as writers: '*being a perfectionist*', '*being judged*', '*anxiety*', '*unanticipated demands*', '*imposter syndrome*', '*having a reviewer say it's terrible*', '*how long it takes me*', '*lack of feedback*', '*exhaustion*', '*lack of confidence*'—their comments confirmed the literature cited at the outset of this article. Despite the conflicting requirements of teaching, research and service which

constricts academics, they became ambitious writers: '*I feel confident that I can communicate ideas through writing*', '*there's a book inside me*', '*I want to communicate ideas and information about things I care about*', '*I want to clearly explain in simple terms complex interactions and human thoughts*'. What, we wondered, had triggered the early turning point?

At the outset, a number of the participants articulated their hope of developing good writing habits even when swamped by teaching and service loads: '*I want to understand how to keep writing moving despite other pressures*.' They expected that good habits would simply occur by committing dedicated time each week to a structured programme. As the semester pressure tightened, in the programme they behaved more like students: wanting extensions, arriving late, missing classes. We were worried we would lose them but they adjusted to the group expectations.

We began by setting homework each week, specific writing to bring for peer review. As the weeks passed, the academics continued to remain reliant on us setting homework. They liked producing what was demanded, but if we suggested 'do some more writing if you have time,' they'd report the following week that they hadn't managed to write. We had hoped after 3-4 weeks they would be self-managing, but each week they would wait quite eagerly to hear what their homework was before heading back to their busy academic worlds. It seemed to reassure them that the homework set for the week would see them complete their article over the twelve weeks; they trusted the process. Like our students, academics thrived within a structure managed by someone else.

As we analysed the surveys, our journals and weekly feedback, we noted six areas emerging that principally influenced the writing process: the structure of the programme, the craft of writing, the community of practice that developed, the confidence that emerged, the pleasure of writing that grew, and how they made time to write.

1. Structure of the programme

The structure inspired by Belcher (2009) was adapted in response to our initial pilot programme. We changed the order of topics, shortened or deleted others, giving substantial time instead to peer review and discussion. The rhythm of weekly workshops helped sustain them, as curiously to us they behaved more and more like their own students, responding to '*regular hours, sense of a deadline*' and the prompting '*reminders of homework*'. Sharing in pairs or groups was productive and, they felt nurtured '*being in a space which placed academic writing as an important activity*' and where there was '*regular commitment to the writing process*' finding these both *'helpful and inspirational.'* The framework was stable, logical and safe. Our journals noted their relief when we set time limits on exercises, organised their pairs or groups, and even quite firmly asked people not to go on talking when time was up for that. We learned that even senior academics thrive under a firm regime, something that was counter-intuitive to us.

2. Craft of writing

Our academics were at different stages in their careers and from a variety of disciplines so we were catering for writers from natural and medical sciences, social sciences, and humanities. Despite the diversity they collectively learnt technical aspects of generic writing for crafting their different articles. At times, writers worked across radically different disciplines for feedback exercises concentrating on '*structured and guided peer-review of writing as writing, rather than on content.'*

Working with the pragmatics of writing within a structure helped demystify what worked well: developing a writing plan and getting started; developing the argument; deciding on a structure for their paper; the joinery used to connect the paragraphs and sections; writing the method, results and discussion and conclusion sections; the beginning and the end. In many cases, academics from non-text-dependent disciplines found that quite simple explanations they were unaware of gave drastic improvement in their writing process and product. An example was the simple explanation of the structure of a paragraph, with topic sentence expressing one idea of the author's, then examples and evidence, then a summary sentence leading onto the next idea: the following week an exuberant academic told us this tip had suddenly enabled her to write clearly after years of tangled prose.

We included extensive peer review: once we taught them how to give and receive feedback constructively, this technique was recognised as a significant benefit, particularly '*getting helpful feedback on early drafts of my work.'* It clarified what was required to be scholarly. Each week we increased the amount of time for peer review. Even if they had not had time to complete the required tasks during the preceding week to get feedback on their own work, they still engaged in critiquing, recognising that they were learning about writing. They valued having peer review: '*I would have never engaged with my writing that much without this.'* We guided constructive reviewer questions in every lesson. As the weeks progressed, the group gained a new '*appreciation for the technical dimensions of writing'* and to '*understand writing as a craft and the processes that produce good written matter are logical.*' New aspects in the programme they valued most included making a clear argument, structuring an article logically, preparing through revision, and giving the right amount of detail. Gradually, they became more capable with their approaches to their writing.

3. Community of practice

The effect of working in a group was powerful and we had not realised the full immensity of this. They valued community, *'good people to work with and good teachers.'* Increased personal interaction and a lively good-humoured group identity were drawcards for them. The academic writing process became humanised: '*It helped me as I needed someone who could patiently read and comment on my paper as I did for everyone. Reciprocity was missing before.*' Some people are able to learn by noticing moves and linguistic choice in the articles they read to emulate, but with this group their shared repertoire prompted learning when possibly previous academic reading had not. They learned from '*listening to others and reading other peoples' ideas and expressions*' which '*makes your arguments and writing stronger*.' The '*support, confidence and collegiality of being with other staff*' sustained their mutual endeavour to achieve their common goal. They were members of a group connected through their writing and this belonging gave them what they described as '*permission to write'* as they felt '*respected and valued*.' They also '*loved being a part of the bigger Uni experience, meeting brilliant busy people who have a voice and great things to say.*' One participant said '*you call it networking but I call it university community'*.

Again and again collegiality was mentioned as a driver, a highlight, and assurance from '*meeting people from outside my area who are in the same situation*.' They talked about '*the group dynamic, our diversity and how we leveraged it'* to be productive. The effect of the collective was restorative, encouraging and galvanizing.

4. Pleasure of writing

The group began the programme with many fears about writing, particularly '*Am I really good enough?'* As we worked through the different phases of writing they grew closer as a group and their fears began to change to pleasures: '*instant rewards that come when I have said something that is perfect and sparkling*', '*when someone reads it and complements* [sic] *me*.'

As pleasure increased we noticed a shift in attitude: '*crafting or finding good words*' was more enjoyable, and they found '*the pleasure of language*' and satisfaction in '*the coming together of ideas*.' They actively sought '*inspiration from well-written articles*' and found their '*creativeness*' and '*agency in how and what you say*'. They also found ways of '*setting aside days for writing*', '*prioritising oneself over work*' and some developed habits of '*starting the day writing*.' There was new '*pleasure in collaboration*' and in the '*bouncing of ideas*'.

5. Confidence

Along with pleasure came a newfound confidence: '*I now have a sure footing that I am working on a far better document' and 'I have found more confidence to put my work forward.'* There was also more confidence in the writing output being achievable: '*I am feeling more realistically optimistic about what I can achieve. I still have the same list but it's more do-able*' and another said '*my paper is well on target for submission*.'

'*I feel less like an imposter'* was an expression we heard more than once as the programme advanced. Throughout the programme, everyone grew confident that they had something interesting or significant to say. Similarly, confidence levels improved substantially for writing a scholarly paper, revising paper drafts, editing their paper, and responding to peer feedback.

For some, as their confidence grew the writing process became enjoyable: '*I am now relaxed about putting words on paper. I'm seeing it as fun, in a new way, less than intimidating.*' Through discussion, they recognised that '*idea creation is emotional'* and when writing seemed psychologically challenging, accepted it as a symptom of the birth of an idea.

6. Retrieving time

The group persistently grumbled about lack of time to balance all the requirements of academia while also finding time to write. As we thrashed out ideas together, different approaches to manage time pressure emerged: '*blank out small pockets of the day*', '*write before doing anything else in the day*', '*get up at 5am*', '*research days*', '*setting goals for evenings or weekends which are not negotiable*', '*stay at home*', '*deadlines*', and '*working in cafes*'. One participant talked about the '*pomodoro method of writing for 25 minutes and then 5 minute breaks*' using a timer to break down work into intervals. There were also the usual suggestions of closing down email.

As time went on, absences initially only observed by us were noted by everyone and members became concerned if someone missed more than one session. Time for emotional support was cherished, '*being cared for, no strings*', '*building network*', '*coffee and commiseration with colleagues*', and time to share frustrations with others who '*understand the struggle I'm going through on this writing*', as well as the joys, '*when it flows*', and '*when it is finished and done*'.

Conclusion

We do not suggest the programme is a panacea for all academics, many of whom work as lone wolves. Rather, we provide practical implications for those hoping to set up similar groups for academics who prefer to write within a social framework. Our study affirms the value of generic writing support for time-poor academics; many spoke about being transformed as they developed confidence (Lea & Stierer, 2011) and pleasure in their writing. We offer two significant contributions, which are interdependent. The first is the importance of multiple leverages: providing structure, generic writing skills, collegiality and social obligation, and requiring accountability. The second is the importance of building a healthy community of practice, a well-documented concept (Wenger, 1998), as the collective environment created social obligation to make time for writing, and proved a significant factor for writing productivity (Jawitz, 2009). Writers made time for writing.

Essentially our group thrived within the community of practice that developed. They *mutually endeavoured* to support and encourage and provide endless feedback on each other's articles. The *expert-novice interactions* they moved between defined their membership and their *shared repertoire* of routines and ways of doing things became regular practice. Driscoll, Parkes, Tilley-Lubbs, Brill, & Pitts Bannister (2009) explain that as collaboration and experiences are shared, a commonality of intellectual purpose, experience and resolve takes over and feelings of isolation and professional self-doubt diminish. It helped that we demanded a semester-long commitment at the outset: commitment was key. The social dimension was far more powerful than we had anticipated, in particular around guidance, feedback and inspiration (Linder, Cooper, McKenzie, Raesch, & Reeve, 2014).

We also found that articulating the goals and objectives when work was presented were drivers for productivity. The cycle of talk and writing in turn improved the quality of the writing. Scholarly rigour was rendered manageable by introducing peer critique of drafts from early on, with friendly discussion enabling co-constructed learning. This allowed writers to get over their obstructive 'stage fright' (Flaherty, 2005, p.7). We had hoped for improved style, expected improved productivity, and felt it would have been optimistic to hope that over one semester, confidence might visibly improve. Watching what happened astounded us; academics (re-)discovered the pleasure and satisfaction of research writing.

Additionally, our findings lead us to argue that the overall success takes multiple leverages. There was accountability within the structure regarding writing and a willingness to see text as something that needs mechanical tuning up. The craft of writing was enhanced in our case by practical exercises, templates, questions and mini-lectures that we were able to supply from lengthy experience teaching academic writing at postgraduate level. Although Aitchison, Kamler, and Lee (2010, p 5) precaution against 'reducing the complexity of writing to a set of tools and techniques', we felt we won trust by drawing on years of teaching experience and that our ideas were welcomed. We had not been so ambitious to hope authors might (re-) kindle their love of academic writing. Instead, we found that the combination of multiple approaches to writing worked together with the community of practice, and friendly commitment hauled academics out of anxiety and dread into productivity. Reaching that relationship with their own language became pleasurable and manageable.

Biographies

Barbara Kensington-Miller is a senior lecturer in Higher Education at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. She has a background in Mathematics and Biochemistry and works in academic development. Her research area focuses on supporting early-career academics.

Susan Carter is a senior lecturer in in Higher Education at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. She has a background in English literature and works in academic development. Her research area focuses on doctoral education.

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