

# Contemporary Challenges to Students' Achievement in English in the Foundation Programme at the National University of Sāmoa.

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## Abstract

*The challenges to proficiency and competencies in English of students for whom English is a second language are many and varied. Students in the Pacific Region are no exception despite the long history of colonization and the current pressures of globalization. This paper will focus on contemporary challenges to students' achievement in English in the Foundation Programme at the National University of Sāmoa and various measures implemented to address these issues in this international language of learning which has important consequences for students' progress at the tertiary level.*

**Keywords:** English, Second language, University students, Sāmoa

## Introduction

The 4th of the 17 United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted in 2015 which builds on the initial Millennium Development Goals is to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all." (UNDP 2015) It is linked intimately to SDG 16 which directs all signatories to "promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels." Linguistic and literary empowerment is a fundamental part of the equation in achieving these national and global goals which encapsulate the dream of an ideal world with peace, serenity, security and justice for all peoples. The 2016 OECD Summit in Norway noted that "skills transform lives and drive economies" (<http://skillssummit2016.no/>) and conceded that whilst the fact of modernity and rapid change meant that there were many unknowns in this regard, the consensus was that "education and skills that were good enough to enable us to compete yesterday will not be good enough tomorrow" (Solberg 2016 *ibid*).

Sāmoa has instituted through the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture (MESC) a National Literacy Week over the past several years and for the first time in 2016 included Numeracy as well. Themes are adopted to guide activities and these have included 'Readers are Leaders' and "Reading is the key to Success" as well as "Read to Succeed". This year's Literacy and Numeracy Week theme was "Explore through Words and Numbers". The national spotlight is honed in on lifting the levels of literacy as well as numeracy to achieve these SDG's and to invest in our cultural capital.

An example of this focus is the report at the end of the 2016 National Literacy and Numeracy Week where The Sāmoa Observer highlighted the win by an 11year old Sāmoan student, Alexandria Slaven in the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) multi-media competition on the topic of "why reading matters" to mark the 50th Anniversary of International Literacy Day. (Sāmoa Observer, 9th September 2016). In her winning letter, Alexandria penned the phrase "Illiteracy kills dreams." In her interview, she stated: 'I love to read because it takes me places... we need to be obsessed as a nation to teach our children how to read to minimize poverty and illiteracy. Let's make the world a better place.' (*ibid*: 1) The youth of the Pacific are extending their agency and vocal repertoire and urgent messages across the media including other digital platforms and social networks to spread their views and hopes for better futures for themselves and generations yet to come, part and parcel of the 'dream' of that ideal world characterized by the parameters of the 17 SDGs set out by the United Nations in 2015.

The problem of low English proficiency and declining levels of competency has been a concern locally and regionally for some time now resulting in the introduction in 2012 of the Pacific Benchmarking for Education Results (PaBER) programme, with the aim of improving quality of education and student performance in the

Pacific, especially with regards to the low levels of literacy and numeracy. The key findings highlighted several domains which contribute to this situation including teacher quality, assessment system, curriculum and materials, school governance and management together with the need for an effective Education Management Information System (EQAP 2016: 6).

However, despite all the governmental, institutional and media focus, as well as from anecdotal evidence and personal encounters of the researchers with the same, it is surprising that in Sāmoa many students and parents are still unaware of the national language policy that English is one of the two official languages of Sāmoa. As Lameta states “Whilst there is no explicit legislation defining the official status of languages in Sāmoa, that status is implicit in Sāmoa’s constitution, where Sāmoan and English are given official recognition ....Further evidence of the implicit official languages policy is found in the bilingual policy in education and the numerous domains, such as formal ceremonies, the judiciary and the media where the two languages are used to convey the same message” (Lameta 2006: 43). It follows then that the question can be asked as to whether this lack of awareness is contributory to retarding the expected necessary changes in proficiency and competencies in English, particularly in learning institutions where it is promoted and practised.

For lecturers teaching English in the English & Foreign Languages (EFL) Department at the National University of Sāmoa (NUS) these challenges become the centre of concern. The compulsory English course for all Foundation Programme students is coded HEN004 and titled Foundation English. In order to graduate with a Foundation Certificate in any of the six major streams: Foundation Certificate of Arts (FCA), Foundation Certificate of Commerce (FCC), Foundation Certificate of Education (FCE), Foundation Certificate General (FCG), Foundation Certificate of Nursing (FCN), Foundation Certificate of Science (FCS); students must pass Foundation English plus seven other Foundation courses specified by the particular Faculty. The increase in student numbers in the compulsory HEN004 Foundation English course (See Table 1) particularly in the last five years since the 2009 tsunami is a fundamental challenge which has had great impact on human and physical resources requiring more part time tutors, more space in terms of rooms for tutorial groups and more lecture and tutorial times. In fact, the increases have ranged from 48 percent in 2010 to 130 percent in 2012, to 122 percent in 2015. As a result, classes were stretched to accommodate more students beyond the desirable ideal number per class, especially trying, in view of the fact that students are second language users of English. The University staffing policy states a ratio of 15.5 students to one staff member per class (2016 NUS Staffing Policy Manual: 131), but the reality and teaching practices are far from achieving it. Full time staffs take classes with excessive numbers, requiring considerable effort and teamwork. Moreover, adequate staffing is another challenge and qualified part-time staff has been extremely difficult to secure.

Sāmoa has 41 secondary colleges (of which 3 are private, 15 are church and 23 are government colleges). The number of high schools and colleges that sit the Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) has varied with each year from 34 to 40, (Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture (MESC), SSLC Examination Results 2010–2016) which is a reflection of the availability of staff in the schools or the absence of students at the senior levels and graduating classes. English is a compulsory subject for all students who sit SSLC. The 2015 SSLC results (ibid) showed the majority of students came from the long established main stream Government schools operated by MESC and the Christian Churches as well as one private school making a total of 10 well established colleges with high enrolments. The 30 other colleges with passes serve the district areas and are fraught with staffing and resource needs.

High achieving students in English are undoubtedly a reflection of the quality of the home environment and the teaching and resources available in the institutions they patronize. Most students will naturally continue the pattern instilled in them from their homes and college environments throughout their studies at university (Anae et al 2002; Fanene 2007; Gibson and Ogbu 1991; Jones and Manuatu 2002; McNaughton 1995; Pitt and MacPherson 1994; Gunderson 1991).

## Underachievement in English

With particular reference to the literacy of first year students at NUS, Vaai, Heem, Arp & Koria's 2010 study confirmed what had been discussed in many academic fora, that reading competencies appeared to be declining and problematic. The findings confirmed that "67.3 percent of the students sampled in Phase I were reading at age 13 and less...obviously inadequate to cope with tertiary level reading materials" (28). The majority of students surveyed also reported a limited hour of extra reading outside of class per week with access to very limited range of reading materials at home (ibid). The researchers proposed the Proficiency in English Language Test (PELT) starting Semester 1, 2013 focussing on the two skills of reading and writing. This test was not intended as a placement or entry test into the NUS Foundation English courses since the entry criteria was already set by the University based on the scores from Sāmoa's national examinations, the Pacific Senior Secondary Certificate (PSSC) which from December 2013 has been renamed Sāmoa School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) (Vaai and Heem 2014: 25). PELT is intended as an indicator of competencies in reading and writing and a red flag for extra tutorial attention on an individual basis where required. It was also determined that the cohort would also be given a similar test, PELT 2 at the end of semester to help gauge the progress of students (ibid: 26).

In 2013–14, results from the PELT tests conducted were variable whilst the SRA results were encouraging with 92.4 percent passing in Semester 1, 2013 with the initial cohort (Vaai and Heem 2014: 32). From 2013, cards from the SRA Laboratory have been used as part of the course work for the Foundation English course, HEN004. Students were required in 2013 and 2014 to read a total of 10 multilevel cards in the appropriate colour level and to answer a multiplicity of questions that comprise comprehension, structural word analysis and meaning which was worth 15 percent out of 50 percent of the total internal assessment. The impressive pass rate for the SRA exercise for the initial cohort and following cohorts, established and validated by the scores given in by tutors to coordinators and moderators, lead the researchers to conclude that the "SRA Laboratories can be an important tool to provide vital, cumulative assistance in building increasing competencies in reading and writing in English" (ibid: 41). These assessments demonstrated that introducing the SRA Laboratory as an intervention to improve comprehension with second language learners of English was producing positive results and needed to be continued and monitored with future cohorts in the HEN004 Foundation English course.

Vaai and Heem (2014) have outlined the challenges and major concerns with literacy and proficiencies in English for first year Foundation students at NUS as well as the resultant innovations and strategies adopted such as the introduction of the Proficiency in English Language Test (PELT) and the inclusion of Self Reading Assessment (SRA) Laboratory in the Foundation English course. Vital to this discussion was UNESCO's Pacific Islands Literacy Levels (PILL) Report 1992 which raised the alarm about the decline of literacy levels in Pacific Island countries, including Sāmoa for literacy tests taken in Years 4 and 6. Moreover, Kral (2010) reported in his survey "The Status of English in Sāmoa" that the majority of students performed below the achievement levels targeted by MESC and on entering the job market, or university or vocational training, "find themselves unable to communicate themselves in English or use the language as a tool for advancement" (6) and thus concluded "at every level of transition from primary school to high school, or from high school to work place, or high school to university, remedial training in English is necessary for most of the youth." (ibid) Furthermore, in 2012, the Pacific Islands Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (PILNA) Report carried out by the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment (SPBEA) under the banner of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) reiterated these same concerns for Pacific countries, describing the situation of literacy as "alarming" (SPBEA, 2) stating definitively "with literacy...in the Pacific \*in+ a dire situation with only three in every ten pupils being able to acquire the literacy skills expected after four years as well as six years of formal schooling(30% after 4 years and 29% after 6 years), questions should be raised about the effectiveness of the education system in each country in allowing such a situation to prevail." (ibid) The most recent PILNA Report 2015, showed that levels of numeracy were improving but literacy in English was still on the decline and needed much in terms of resources and support to improve (Afamasaga-Fuatai, 5 September, 2016).

Since 2006, total student enrolments in the Foundation Certificate Programme has increased variably (Refer Table 1) with an increment in Foundation Graduates since 2011 (Refer Table 2). Faculty enrolments and completion rates have also varied over the years. In 2015–16 due to 20 percent plus increases in student enrolment, a different approach was adopted with students reading 5 compulsory cards, chosen from varying increasing levels of difficulty and were allotted a mark value of two percent each, or 10 percent in total given under test conditions in tutorial classes.

**Table 1: Foundation Enrolments**

FOUNDATION ENROLMENTS 2006-2015											
	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	TOTAL
FCA	118	98	96	106	163	177	204	155	139	190	1446
FCAg								9	1	13	23
FCC	98	55	73	63	141	187	159	127	168	142	1213
FCE	180	248	162	145	184	325	346	191	175	270	2226
FCG	73	77	33	48	45	81	67	55	29	120	628
FCN	9	17	16	15	37	87	100	87	98	112	578
FCS	55	46	74	70	92	137	154	127	165	148	1068
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>533</b>	<b>541</b>	<b>454</b>	<b>447</b>	<b>662</b>	<b>994</b>	<b>1030</b>	<b>751</b>	<b>775</b>	<b>995</b>	<b>7182</b>

**Table 2: Foundation Graduates**

FOUNDATION GRADUATES 2006–2013									
Prog	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	TOTAL
FCArts	79	80	69	79	76	102	113	133	<b>731</b>
FCAg								3	<b>3</b>
FCCom	63	41	61	41	80	89	99	90	<b>564</b>
FCEd	56	99	82	54	61	55	106	73	<b>556</b>
FCGen	43	43	22	27	23	43	56	45	<b>302</b>
FCNur	6	11	6	8	7	40	45	43	<b>174</b>
FCSci	39	37	57	48	52	80	56	104	<b>503</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>286</b>	<b>311</b>	<b>297</b>	<b>257</b>	<b>299</b>	<b>409</b>	<b>505</b>	<b>496</b>	<b>2863</b>

## English Teaching Contexts

In 2016, admission criteria for first year Foundation students changed from an aggregate based on grade bands plus a subject entry of grades 1–4 for Foundation English which was compulsory, to raw scores. With regards to students enrolling in the Foundation Certificates in the Arts, Commerce, Science, and General Programmes, up until 2015, the aggregate was a total of 15 with English of grades 1–4 and best 3 subjects. For students enrolling in the Foundation Certificates of Education and Nursing, the aggregate was initially 20 and eventually was raised to 18 with an English grade entry of 5, which meant that those students had to enrol in the bridging course, Progressive English Skills in Semester 1 prior to Foundation English in Semester 2.

With raw scores as the new criteria for entry, the NUS Senate approved that the entry be a total aggregate of 200 marks comprising English and 3 best subjects. The English grade was set at 50 percent for entry into the Foundation Certificate Programme with the same dividing principle regarding the Foundation Certificates operating as before, having the entry for the Foundation Certificate of Education set with an aggregate of 160 marks and English at 40 percent, whilst the entry for the Foundation Certificate Nursing was set with an aggregate total of 180 marks and English at 40 percent.

However, from Semester 1, 2017, it is the intention of NUS in order to achieve the objective of quality teachers that the entry for the Foundation Certificate for Education is on par with Arts, Commerce, Science and General. The change from aggregates and subject entries based on grade bands to raw scores provoked uncertainty and controversy especially with regards to the issue of moderation of internal assessment tasks for the SSLC. Questions as to whether students admitted under this raw score entry criteria were able to cope with tertiary level studies came to the fore and gauging the proficiencies and skills of first year students came under the spotlight once again.

Thirty-nine high schools and colleges throughout the nation and 1,944 students sat the 2015 Secondary School Leaving Certificate and attained the following results:

**Table 3: SSLC English Passes per Score Level**

90	80	70	60	50	TOTAL
20	108	233	381	400	1142

As Table 3 indicates, 1,142 students passed SSLC to enter Foundation English in 2016 at NUS. However, analysis of the results by school and subject showed there were students who attained the 200 aggregate but did not pass English and likewise, students who passed English but did not attain the 200 aggregate (Refer Table 4). Based on the information provided by MESC for enrolment purposes, the total figure involved is 380 students. These students are still able to enrol in other faculties with a lower entry requirement and may register in HEN004 Foundation English or the bridging course HEN003 Progressive English Skills depending on the mark obtained.

**Table 4: Total Aggregate & English Passes**

Total students with 200 aggregate plus English	1040
Total students with 200 aggregate minus English	142
Total students with English minus Aggregate	237
Total enrolment expected	1135

One advantage of this prior information is that time and effort will therefore be focused on the necessary personnel to deliver the courses, together with skills, activities, resources and support services that are needed by students to cope with and succeed in their academic studies. HEN004 Foundation English is a compulsory, core course for all students from any of the five Faculties, i.e., the Faculty of Arts, Commerce, Education, Science, Applied Science and Nursing. A pass in HEN004 Foundation English is mandatory for external scholarships as well as entry into any degree programme in the various faculties of the University.

From 2015, the assessment was split with course work being 40 percent and the examination 60 percent. Prior to that, the ratio of course work to examination had been 50 percent: 50 percent. The components of course work include comprehension using the SRA Laboratory exercises worth 10 percent, note taking and summary of article worth seven percent, expository essay worth seven percent, Research assignment worth 13 percent and an oral presentation based on the research assignment worth three percent.

The SRA Reading Laboratory, a component (10 percent) of the internal course assessment since 2013, recommends that readings be scheduled over a “concentrated period of time instead of spreading it across the year, preferably 10 sessions of 30–45 minutes, and as close together as possible” (Parker 2006). Whilst the SRA Handbook recommends “individualized reading at the student’s own pace” (ibid) as mentioned earlier, from 2015, due to the increasing number of student enrolments together with the added numbers of lecturers and part time tutors needed to deliver the course (10 part time tutors and 10 full time lecturers in 2015) this exercise was adapted to suit the changing circumstances.

The Foundation English course is a 14 weeks’ programme with four contact hours per week, of a one hour lecture and 3 hours of small group tutorials. For practical reasons and given the full schedule of other topics that are equally important to the programme, the photocopied, pre-selected five articles was considered sufficient to bring about some positive impact or upward slope of the reading proficiencies of students. The SRA strategy, a core part of the HEN004 curriculum since 2013, aims to help students develop skills in decoding, vocabulary, structural analysis and study skills, along with interesting students in reading to enlarge their general and specific knowledge as well as to develop the habit of independent work and a sense of personal responsibility as in taking charge of their own learning. Unique to the SRA Reading Laboratory is their “carefully structured system for teaching and developing essential skills and beneficial attitudes in an orderly and purposeful way” (ibid). It is also flexible and can fit a variety of schedules and circumstances.

The methodology used in implementing this measure is the compilation of test scores throughout the semester from tutorial groups of 25 or more students. This involved quite a considerable number of groups, in fact as many as 45 groups in Semester 1, 2016. The measure consisted of testing students in their tutorial groups on a set day during the week for five weeks. The tutor administered the set SRA article for the week at the tutorial where each student read and answered the questions that followed. The answer sheets were then collected to be marked by the tutor and the results logged for each student and collectively by the Coordinator. At the end of semester and after the final examination, all the course assessments, including the SRAs results and final exam marks were collected and collated for presentation and final scrutiny for approval at Departmental, Faculty and Senate level which then became the permanent record for the course and student.

## Results

The discussion will follow the order in which the activities were implemented during Semester 1, 2016: the PELT test, the 5 SRA activities and HEN004 results of internal assessments, particularly the research results worth 40 percent and the final examination worth 60 percent.

Following enrolment, a total of 903 students originally registered in the HEN004 Foundation English course. The large number of students resulted in three lectures being held concurrently in the mornings and two in the afternoons and in different venues (Lecture theatres F201, D101, Fale and Gym). The first lecture is usually short and introductory, covering the aims and expectations of the course and students, assessment requirements and for students to register in a tutorial group where assessments are carried out and recorded. After these notices, the PELT test is distributed for students to complete in the remaining 45 minutes. As in the past, the first lecture was always short of the number of students expected, and the PELT test showed this clearly (Refer Table 5).

**Table 5: Pelt Results per Faculty**

	Totals	Passes	Language	Writing
<b>FCA</b>	23	17 (74%)	14 (61%)	19 (83%)
<b>FCE</b>	48	13 (27%)	11 (23%)	23 (47%)
<b>FCG</b>	31	13 (42%)	14 (45%)	11 (35%)
<b>FCN</b>	25	8 (32%)	8 (32%)	14 (56%)
<b>FCC</b>	22	13 (59%)	12 (55%)	17 (77%)
<b>FCS</b>	15	10 (67%)	12 (80%)	11 (73%)
	164	74 (45%)	71 (43%)	95 (58%)

1. The PELT results show a total of 164 students attempted this requirement. Table 5 illustrates 45 percent of the students passed, with 43 percent passing the Language section and 58 percent in the Writing section. An analysis of the Language section when separated into Grammar and Comprehension showed some distinct differences between the two skills by the FCC and FCS students, with both groups showing noticeable weaknesses in Comprehension. Although the overall results seem insignificant, it at least differentiated the areas of weaknesses that students exhibit and for educators to be aware of and take into consideration in their teaching. Indicative also is the problem of guessing which is another concern in need of attention and it is expected of second language users, which is probably reflected in Table 6 with regards to Science and Commerce students whose results appear contradictory to expectations of comparable achievement in comprehension to the scores obtained in the grammar section.

**Table 6: Passes in Grammar and Comprehension by Faculty**

	FCA	FCE	FCG	FCN	FCC	FCS
<b>Grammar</b>	14	15	15	8	18	14
<b>Comprehension</b>	13	16	14	7	11	8

Section B comprised a writing section with a stimulus table to analyse and respond to in essay form, worth 20 marks. A few students did not attempt this part and the most plausible explanation is lack of time management and test taking skills.

The conclusions derived from this exercise confirms the PELT test as relevant and necessary for the purpose of establishing an overall and preliminary indication of the proficiency and competencies demonstrated by every new intake of Foundation students that enrol, in contradistinction to their SSLC results. Clearly, time and venues pose critical considerations as they have been problematic in the recent past and it is unfair to expect the best of newly initiated students under such trying circumstances. Additionally, sponsorships or funding by the Ministries of Education, Health, and Foreign Affairs being available for some Faculties, as well as assistance, financial and otherwise from foreign chancelleries, regional offices and private enterprises could benefit by including PELT results in their considerations of awards. As further concrete evidence of recent and higher level certification, the PELT test is ideal for the purpose as an indication or predictability of success in the areas of intended study.

2. The 5 SRA reading exercises are compulsory for all Foundation English students and were carried out by each tutor in one set tutorial of the week for five weeks. The SRA box contains 110 articles organized into a series of "colour designated difficulty level that range both above and below the average grade or age" (Parker, 2006). The articles were selected from a range of topics that consisted of a variety of global settings, lifestyles, problems and perspectives and increased in level of difficulty as the sequence of articles progressed.

The results did indeed show up the discrepancies in reading abilities in relation to the range of students in HEN004 Foundation English. The number of students that attended class during the first half of semester 1



totalled 903 students and decreased to 849 by Final Exam time. The SRA results are based on the 889 students that attended the first half of semester when the readings were in progress.

The SRA Box has a range of 10 colours with 11 articles in each colour band, representative of the level of reading difficulty involved. The five SRA reading articles were selected from the lower middle to the top range, consisting of an article each from the gold, tan, lime, green and purple colour range and administered in that order (Refer Table 7 below)

**Table 7: SRA Colour and Approximate Reading Levels**

Colour Levels	Approximate Reading Level (USA Grades)
Violet	4.5
Rose	5.0
Red	5.5
Orange	6.0
Gold	7.0
Brown	8.0
Tan	9.0
Lime	10.0
Green	11.0
Purple	12.0

The amount of time taken to complete an article is 30–45 minutes (for first language students) however, for our second language students, most took well over 50 minutes to an hour, while some did not complete. The articles were on topical issues that are globally and locally relevant and interesting even to second language students and citizens of an under-developed nation recently upgraded to least developed. Students are encouraged to use dictionaries during the exercise. Each assessment involved comprehension with reading an article, answering questions with multi-choice options as well as questions on structural word analysis and meaning. From the course marks for Semester 1 2016 (Refer Table 8), the SRA results worth 10 percent of the Course Assessment, showed the following:

**Table 8: Misses, Failures & Passes per Article**

	Article	Passed	Failed	Missed
<b>Gold</b>	<b>1</b>	587 – 66%	222 - 25%	77 – 9%
<b>Tan</b>	<b>2</b>	610 – 69%	229 - 26%	55 – 6%
<b>Lime</b>	<b>3</b>	610 – 69%	206 - 23%	69 – 8%
<b>Green</b>	<b>4</b>	590 – 66%	163 - 18%	121 – 14%
<b>Purple</b>	<b>5</b>	589 – 66%	168 – 19%	117 – 13%
<b>Totals</b>		2986 – 67%	998 – 22%	439 – 10%

Table 7 indicates two thirds of the students passed the SRA reading activities per card based on the totals of the Comprehension worth 10 marks and Learn about Words Section worth 33 marks. Noticeable from the results are the number of students who missed out or were not in attendance when the exercise was in progress, which increased as the Semester was nearing the mid-term break. Incidentally, the number of missed assessments increases upward with the colour (Green and Purple) and difficulty level. Absenteeism therefore categorically contributed to and explains the failure rate that occurred in this assessment. The numbers and percentage for the failed articles is relatively consistent within the 5 colours which is also indicative of the level of difficulty in the readings. Even though the overall volume of missed articles was high,



determination by number of individuals involved and the Faculty concerned indicated crucial information that is relevant to the Faculties for future consideration, as the following Table 9 demonstrates, especially for the Faculty of Education whose graduates will bear the onus of teaching the nation’s future school-age population, and the Faculty of Nursing whose graduates will be dealing with matters of life and death.

**Table 9: Missed SRA & Research Assignments per Faculty**

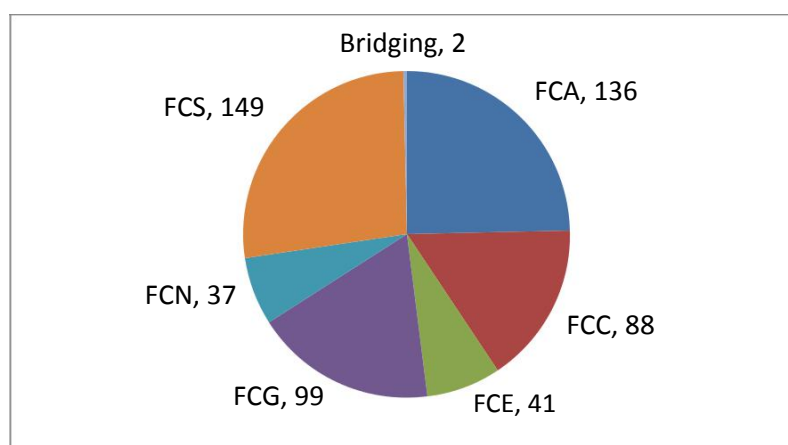
	SRA		RESEARCH	
<b>FCA 172</b>	27	16%	28	16%
<b>FCC 101</b>	10	10%	39	39%
<b>FCE 155</b>	39	25%	46	30%
<b>FCG 174</b>	26	15%	28	17%
<b>FCN 77</b>	13	24%	16	21%
<b>FCS 160</b>	33	21%	17	11%
<b>Totals</b>	148		147	

Absenteeism is a real concern to staff and when students were asked about their absences, many reasons were given. The most common one is clashes with other courses that are on at the same time, and despite students being reminded that Foundation English was core, and compulsory and that they would not graduate if they did not pass, it did not make any difference to the student making the necessary changes in schedule. Other reasons were illnesses of family members, especially grandparents, parents and themselves last. Students have the least say in the matter, when the choice is between work generating income or education of children which incurs expenses. Church, village and family obligations (in the order given) are other reasons for students missing classes, and the absenteeism ranges from 1–2 days to weeks, as the roll books will verify. The question could be raised as to what extent could absenteeism be related to work in class that is tedious and has little appeal to students, especially when the language is not that of their mother tongue. The possibility of implementing an Extensive Reading (ER) Programme where students were able to read for pleasure such as that advocated by Day and Bramford (1998) is worth investigating as an additional future measure to help improve students’ achievement in English.

3. The HEN004 Final Exam results showed a 71 percent pass rate overall (See Table 11), with a constant of 53.1 and 53.0 for the mean and median respectively. Noticeable is the high number in the D- E grades, which is quite discrepant with the results of former years as the records will verify, showing that the results were lower in 2016 than in some previous years. Apparent also is the high number of students who did not sit (DNS) the exam (32 students) or did not complete (DNC – 53 students) the programme. These high numbers is a recent development since the tsunami of 2009 when enrolment numbers doubled thereafter in the following years.

The analysis of pass rates by faculties is self-explanatory. The Faculty of Science with 160 students showed 93 percent of their own students passed the HEN004 Foundation English, representative of 19 percent of the total number of students in Foundation English as shown in the following graph (Refer Figure 1) and table (Refer Table 10).

**Figure 1: HEN004 PASSES per FACULTY**



**Table 10: Passes for Programme and per Faculty**

	<i>FCA</i>	<i>FCC</i>	<i>FCE</i>	<i>FCG</i>	<i>FCN</i>	<i>FCS</i>	<i>Bridging</i>
<b>Total students</b>	172	101	155	174	77	160	10
<b>Passes</b>	136	88	41	99	37	149	2
<b>% Pass Overall (849)</b>	18	11	5	13	5	19	0.3
<b>% Pass within Faculty</b>	79	87	26	57	48	93	20

The FCS also had the highest number of students with A and B grades and the least failing grades, followed by the Faculties of Arts and Commerce as seen in Table 11 below. Of interest is the high number of E grades, DNS and DNC that are evident in the FCE and FCG or General programme as it does not have an independent Faculty but is allocated a responsible Faculty on a rotational basis. These high numbers with failing grades are a concern as these graduates are being groomed to educate the children and youth of the nation. Unique to the Faculty of Education is the availability of sponsorships by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports (MESCS) which goes some way to explain the large number of students that register in their programme.

**Table 11: Passes per Grade per Faculty**

Grade	<i>FCA</i>	<i>FCC</i>	<i>FCE</i>	<i>FCG</i>	<i>FCN</i>	<i>FCS</i>	<i>BRIDG.</i>	Total
<b>A</b>	18	10	0	3	0	36	0	67
<b>B</b>	38	40	2	15	1	53	0	149
<b>C</b>	82	38	39	81	36	60	2	338
<b>D</b>	6	1	8	8	6	2	0	31
<b>E</b>	21	6	76	47	22	6	0	178
<b>DNS</b>	4	5	10	6	7	1	5	32
<b>DNC</b>	4	5	20	14	7	2	1	53

Table 12 below compares the total number of passes per grade between the national examination SSLC 2015 for all students who sat this examination and entered NUS in 2016 and the results obtained in the compulsory Foundation English course HEN004.

**Table 12: Passes per Grade for SSLC 2015 & Hen004 Foundation English 2016**

	<b>SSLC</b>	<b>HEN004</b>	<b>DIFFERENCE</b>
<b>A:80–100</b>	128 (11.2%)	67 (7.8%)	52%
<b>B: 65–79</b>	397 (34.7%)	149 (17.5%)	37%
<b>C: 50–64</b>	617 (54%)	388 (45.7%)	68%
<b>D &amp; E grades</b>		209 (24.6%)	
<b>DNS &amp; DNC</b>		85 (10%)	
		294 (34.6%)	

The table clearly indicates a large discrepancy between the SSLC and HEN004 results, ranging from one third to two thirds of the students falling short of the required competency at Foundation. The implication is that the SSLC Examination may have been too easy for students to pass and enter NUS and students may then be unable to continue or keep up. As a result, there are students at NUS currently who could well have benefitted from an extra year at college. This is an important issue which needs careful attention in the future. To ensure the quality of students and the NUS qualifications, entry levels are currently being reviewed by Senate and the Ministry of Education, Sports & Culture, together with associated vital aspects such as curriculum, assessments and pedagogy that are relevant and appropriate.

Of particular interest is the matter of research that is the climax of the HEN004 Foundation English course curriculum—where students are required to carry out a piece of research on a chosen topic set by the teaching academic team. Students are given 4 weeks to undertake a research project using a variety of resources from any of the Libraries in Apia and Regional Offices, chancelleries, ministries, newspapers and internet, of applying their newly acquired skills in gathering and presenting information orally and in writing. It is interesting to note that students begin engaging in research assignments for the external national exams at Year 12 for the Sāmoa School Certificate and Year 13 for SSLC. The comprehension exercises with the SRA Laboratory cards which count towards the course work take place in the first half of semester so that when the research assignment is undertaken in the last half of semester, the skills needed for the latter exercise will have been honed further. This sequencing is especially important given that this research assignment demands a lot of reading, note taking, paraphrasing, summarizing, referencing and presenting orally and in writing, a coherent, well supported argument about a chosen topic.

**Table 13: Overall Passes in Hen004 SRA & Research Essay**

	<b>SRA Pass/Fail</b>		<b>RESEARCH Pass/Fail</b>	
<b>FCA (173)</b>	136 - 16%	37 - 4%	109 - 13%	64 - 8%
<b>FCC (101)</b>	87 - 10%	14 - 2%	77 - 9%	24 - 3%
<b>FCE (155)</b>	108 - 13%	47 - 6%	81 - 10%	74 - 9%
<b>FCG (174)</b>	143 - 17%	31 - 4%	109 - 13%	65 - 8%
<b>FCN (77)</b>	55 - 7%	22 - 3%	38 - 5%	39 - 5%
<b>FCS (160)</b>	149 - 18%	11 - 1%	118 - 14%	42 - 5.5%
<b>Totals (849)</b>	681 - 80%	168 - 20%	537 - 63%	312 - 37%

**TABLE 14: Total Passes in SRA & Research Essay per Faculty**

<b>FCA (173)</b>	136 - 79%	109 - 63%
<b>FCC (101)</b>	87 - 86%	81 - 81%
<b>FCE (155)</b>	108 - 70%	81 - 52%
<b>FCG (174)</b>	143 - 82%	109 - 63%
<b>FCN (77)</b>	55 - 71%	38 - 49%
<b>FCS (160)</b>	149 - 93%	118 - 79%

The results are consistent with the final exams (Refer Table 13): the FCS showing the highest number of students and percentage pass rate overall and within their own Faculty. The research assignment is the assessment task requiring the most attention and focus: the discrepancies are noticeable between SRA and Research results (refer Table 14) with FCE barely passing at 52 percent and FCN at 49 percent, indicating that about half the number of students did not attempt the research project and the implications are many and serious which makes it problematic in presenting pass rates as evidence of the impact of these measures. However, these pass rates can be seen as indicators of the complexities of these challenges and provide continued motivation for lecturers to persevere in their efforts to help students improve their achievements in English.

The analysis of HEN004 course work assessments during the semester and the final exam at the end of semester has highlighted several key challenges that will require continued examination, emphasis, support and research. These include the decision that PELT tests will continue to be administered annually to each new intake of HEN004 students. The time and venue(s) are critical considerations that should be resolved early on, given the high number of students involved and the urgent need for the results that inform teaching. In addition, SRA laboratory readings will still continue as a valued component of course assessment so that students will grow in appreciation and acknowledge the importance of reading proficiencies across the curriculum as essential to academic success at university. Most importantly, students' attendance in classes and completion of assessments as part and parcel of curricular expectations and requirements need to be emphasized more often. The results have categorically shown that absenteeism and non-submission of assignments are the major causes of failure, separate and distinct from expected scholarly performance and concomitants of tertiary institutions. There is also a need for entry levels to be reviewed and monitored in order to promote student success and maintain academic standards. Moreover, the EFL Department will continue to advocate for the growth of the Academic Support Services with appropriate staff and resources to fulfill its mandate and support the vision, mission and objectives of the University which includes the goal to "actively upgrade and maintain quality and creativity in teaching and learning". (2017 NUS Calendar: 38). Curricular innovations and strategies to facilitate improvements of proficiencies in English for Foundation students at the National University of Sāmoa are to be encouraged and supported by all stakeholders to fulfill the linguistic empowerment of the youth and to achieve national and global goals of development.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has addressed contemporary challenges to students' achievement in English in the Foundation Programme in the National University of Sāmoa. It has also discussed results from measures such as PELT, and the inclusion of the SRA Laboratory exercises as an essential component of the course work for the Foundation English course, coded HEN004 which were introduced in 2013 in an effort to address some of these challenges. The lecturers in the English & Foreign Languages Department are committed to continuing their efforts to assist students improve their comprehension and reading skills which are vital to success in their learning journeys.

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