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Challenges arise in assigning academic journal readings to students, firstly in getting students to read them, and secondly, in supporting students’ understanding and learning. Students need to be able to read for meaning and structure, and adapt their reading strategies for different tasks and disciplines. In particular, reading as preparation for essay-writing requires students to find, organise and synthesise information from various sources. Both the reading and writing are difficult tasks for students, particularly those who are students studying in their second language. This paper describes an initiative aimed at supporting students in reading academic articles in preparation for completing an essay for assessment purposes. The initiative involved a structured two-week tutorial exercise that provided students with practice (individual and group) in using a framework for reading journal articles and extracting themes. The initiative was a pilot for a larger cross-disciplinary project for investigating practical ways to develop student’s academic literacy in their respective disciplines.

Forty-one students enrolled in an undergraduate unit in human resource management participated in the exercise. Approximately 40 per cent of the students were internationals: mainly from China and India. On completion of the exercise, participants were invited to respond to a survey about their experience and perceptions of the exercise. The findings revealed that students were uniformly positive about the value of the exercise. However, qualitative analysis of student’s open-ended responses revealed differences in the degree to which students felt they could transfer their readings skills to other tasks; in their perceptions of the usefulness of their learning beyond the immediate task; and in the responsibility students accepted for their own learning. Further, many students felt that the length and complexity of the readings posed high barriers to their learning. The findings from this pilot will inform the future project stages. It confirmed student preferences for readings that are shorter and more stimulating; the importance for students, particularly internationals, of being exposed to structured learning activities to support the development of their academic literacy skills;
and the importance of discipline-specific reading and writing tasks for students in constructing and transferring knowledge in their university studies.