

Addressing English language proficiency in a
business faculty

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Abstract

"In the Faculty of Business and Law at Edith Cowan University, the percentage of international students enrolling in both undergraduate and postgraduate courses is increasing rapidly. The vast majority of these students come from backgrounds where English is not their main language of communication and a number come from regions where English is barely spoken. In order to assist these students in the most effective manner, at the beginning of first semester in 2009, the Faculty initiated the Business Literacy and Numeracy Project. This paper delves into the literacy aspect of this project. It charts why such a project was established, outlines various actions taken, and proposes some likely outcomes."

Addressing English Language Proficiency in a Business Faculty

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Abstract: In the Faculty of Business and Law at Edith Cowan University, the percentage of international students enrolling in both undergraduate and postgraduate courses is increasing rapidly. The vast majority of these students come from backgrounds where English is not their main language of communication and a number come from regions where English is barely spoken. In order to assist these students in the most effective manner, at the beginning of first semester in 2009, the Faculty initiated the Business Literacy and Numeracy Project. This paper delves into the literacy aspect of this project. It charts why such a project was established, outlines various actions taken, and proposes some likely outcomes.

Context

In early 2007, there was a surge of media interest in higher education in Australia driven, to a large extent, by a 2006 report produced by Professor Bob Birrell. Birrell (2006) outlined difficulties of graduate international students reaching English language proficiency required for immigration. He was scathing in his criticism of Australian universities, asking how many of these international students came to be enrolled in an Australian university, let alone graduate with a degree. Global and national headlines followed, all pointing to the perceived lack of English competence among graduates (see Ewart, 2007; Elson-Green, 2007 and Barthel, 2007).

Responding to criticism of admission policies and teaching of international students, in 2007, Australian Education International (AEI) commissioned a National Symposium on the English language competence of international students. This resulted in discussion papers that looked at entry pathways, in-course language development and support, and employment issues. A final paper outlined numerous outcomes, including strengthening in-course language and academic support, more generalised use of post-entry English language assessments, and developing more effective mechanisms to audit both entry and progression (AEI, 2007, p. 17).

This symposium also led to a significant project convened by Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA). The project, called ‘Good Practice Principles for English language proficiency for international students in Australian universities’, drew on outcomes from the National Symposium and work already underway in universities (Australian Universities Quality Agency [in-text as AUQA from this point forward], 2009a). A number of guiding ideas underpin the principles, one of which acknowledged that “it can no longer be assumed that students enter their university study with the level of academic language proficiency required to participate effectively in their studies” (AUQA, 2009, p. 2). Of the ten principles, eight stress various responsibilities of universities which can be summed up as to “measure, monitor and build [English language] competencies” (Nagy, 2009).

Birrell’s initial article specifically targeted the Accounting profession. Over the ensuing years, the media kept the story alive and some Business faculties around Australia responded to the ongoing scrutiny. Early in 2009, with the final report of the Good Practice Principles Project imminent, the Faculty of Business and Law (FBL) at Edith Cowan

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University initiated the Business Literacy and Numeracy Project, which aims “to ensure that students ... have adequate literacy and numeracy skills to succeed in their course and future employment, and to provide appropriate support where this is not the case” (Clark-Murphy, 2009). Informed by current debate about English language proficiency issues, this Project unfolded through the year.

It is timely, as in March 2009 when the final good practice principles report was released, it included a warning: “as part of AUQA quality audits universities can expect to be asked about the way they have addressed the principles” (AUQA, 2009a, p. 2). True to its word, AUQA’s 2009 audit reports indicate its seriousness in addressing aspects of English proficiency and entry pathways. Curtin University of Technology (Curtin) was congratulated for “taking the initiative to develop an instrument to diagnose and provide support to the English language proficiency of students” (AUQA, 2009b, p. 21), as was RMIT University (AUQA, 2009c, p.21) despite its work still being at a trial stage. Some entry pathways were questioned at Macquarie University (AUQA, 2009d, p. 31) and the University of Canberra was noted as implementing a proposal that “did not seem to be informed by the current national debate about English language proficiency issues” (AUQA, 2009e, p. 27).

Our Situation

Despite media rhetoric that international student enrolments will decrease, FBL has continued to experience strong growth. In addition, there are many local students who have English as an additional language (EAL). Data shows both cohorts are heavily represented among those most likely to graduate with a number of units failed. Some academic staff also experience disquiet about the level of English proficiency among EAL students so the increase in their numbers has intensified concern. These concerns are mostly expressed in terms of uneasiness about admission policies, i.e. FBL accepts students who do not satisfy basic entrance standards or that some entry standards are too low. This is being addressed at both Faculty and University level and is too complex an element to include in this paper. Other issues are also voiced such as lack of Learning Advisors within FBL to support the EAL cohort and feelings of inadequacy in dealing with literacy needs of students. As a result, this Project has been overwhelmingly welcomed within the Faculty.

In order to achieve the aims, a number of tasks were undertaken. Initially, the main actions focused on assessing students to ascertain levels of English language proficiency. In order to find the most suitable diagnostic tool, post-entry language assessments (PELAs), so-called as the nomenclature suggests the result does not affect a student’s admission to the university, were researched. Secondly, learning support options at Australian universities and best practice in learning support were analysed. Looking only at the literacy component of the Project, this paper highlights key aspects of those developments and suggests possible outcomes.

Diagnostic Assessment of English Language Proficiency

The most pressing task at the start of this Project was to ascertain whether or not students in FBL have adequate English language proficiency to succeed in their studies. In March, a series of diagnostic assessments were conducted in a large undergraduate core unit. An International English Language Testing System (IELTS) diagnostic assessment was adapted and students completed three tasks that comprised writing and speaking. English teachers examined all aspects following a detailed marking key. The results were generally low and indicated that FBL needs to address the level of language competency of EAL students.

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IELTS assessment is regarded as generalised rather than specifically addressing academic English needs. To find more appropriate forms of assessment, in June, a small group of students from this cohort agreed to participate in further trials, this time to test four PELAs; two computer-based and two paper-based. For both paper-based tasks, assessment was based on the TOEFL strategy [like IELTS, the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is used worldwide to assess English language proficiency].

The first paper-based exercise was an integrated writing task that involved reading, listening and writing. Based on a TOEFL initiative, it took around 50 minutes to complete. Students read a passage from their textbook, listened to a brief lecture rebutting the views, and wrote a short comparative essay. Integrated writing specifically appraises a student's ability to participate in a lecture situation. However, in terms of preparation and delivery, it requires the equivalent of producing a short lecture for each cohort, and is best administered in small groups. This makes it more suited for placement within a unit rather than for general diagnostic assessment.

The second paper-based task was a 20 minute writing exercise that asked students to complete an encyclopaedic entry for a recent invention. Remarkable for its simplicity, it is designed by Alex Barthel at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) to specifically diagnose academic writing. Earlier this year, he trialled it with 3,500 students and found it to be "quick and efficient" (Barthel, personal communication, April 3 2009). The key is the utilisation of trained examiners using the TOEFL strategy to assess papers. This task was simple to administer and IELTS examiners found it easy to assess. More importantly, it was evaluated by the examiners as positive in terms of diagnostic potential and validity.

The computer-based tools trialled were the screening aspect of the Diagnostic English Language Needs Assessment (DELNA) [from the University of Auckland] and the English Language Skills Assessment (ELSA) [from ACER]. At the University of Auckland, students complete the DELNA Screening which takes around 20 minutes. Those who fail to reach a certain score are asked to register for a further two hour diagnosis that, at this stage, is not entirely computer based. The DELNA Screening assesses vocabulary and speed-reading. Results revealed our students experienced difficulty with the speed-reading component but found the vocabulary quite easy. Almost all the EAL students who participated would have been asked to undergo the further two hour diagnosis.

The ELSA test is an hour long and consists of reading, grammar, listening and writing. All results are computer generated, including the short written essay. The way in which ELSA runs proved difficult as no stable link could be made through a standard web browser. In the end, a Remote Desktop Connection was sent and installed by IT staff. Results suggest the test was too easy. In addition, the written component, already problematic due to its lack of academic rigour, generates a computer-based result where only language that has been programmed can be assessed.

At the postgraduate level, there has been a large increase in international numbers over the past two years. Due to the limited time they spend within a course, early diagnosis of English language difficulties is imperative, with results closely linked to a range of support options. However, this cohort is invariably overlooked so, in August, English language diagnostic assessment took place with postgraduate students enrolled in three units within the domestic and international MBA and MPA courses. Over 200 students participated in the short written task while 47 also completed DELNA Screening. Once again, results of the written task for international students were generally low and a high percentage of the students who participated in DELNA failed to complete the speed-reading component.

The results clearly point to the need of implementing a PELA at the beginning of each semester, targeting all newly enrolled students. However, choosing a PELA is not straightforward. Katie Dunworth from Curtin claims that, "over one third of Australia's universities offer some kind of PELA, with many more considering their introduction. At present, most existing PELAs are paperbased ... and are linked to a particular course of study.

... [M]ost universities are designing their own instruments in response to their perceived needs” (Dunworth, 2009, p. 9). In fact, many universities are moving towards online PELAs, and Curtin has led the way.

In readiness for an AUQU audit, Curtin produced and launched UniEnglish – an online tool designed to assist in diagnosis. As seen, they were commended for their efforts. UniEnglish incorporates reading, writing and listening tasks and instant feedback is given on all but the writing which is assessed by a language specialist. UniEnglish is not compulsory but students are strongly encouraged to complete it. However, the uptake is said to be low so to overcome this to some degree, Curtin Business School, which comprises around 75% international students, has incorporated part of UniEnglish into a first year core unit within its Bachelor of Commerce.

Both Deakin University and the University of Newcastle have developed online diagnostic tools, using DELNA as their basis. Ownership of the diagnostic tool allows them to change the tasks to suit the faculty and test validity. Neither is compulsory and, due to the online environment, there is no way of knowing who actually sits these diagnostic tools. Both universities stress that the key is students taking responsibility for their learning (see principle 2, AUQA, 2009a).

Despite lack of security and other computer-based issues, online PELAs are favoured by many universities in the belief that they are cost effective and easy to maintain. DELNA Screening is relatively easy to use and cheap to run (the University of Auckland charges \$5 per student). However, in our trials, the failure rate of computers was around 5%, with slow internet speed being blamed. With over 3,000 students potentially being assessed, it looms as a significant problem. In addition, if completion is compulsory, a scenario many universities are analysing at the moment, the logistics of establishing a secure environment for an online PELA are extremely difficult.

Validity of online tools is still being established. Research testing DELNA’s validity has been undertaken and while findings assert that the two components in the screening mode are “robust measures”, difficulties in evaluating any particular language tests are raised (Elder & Randow, 2008, p. 189; see also Read, 2008, p. 188; Davies & Elder, 2005, pp. 804-9), an issue for a further paper. There is little research regarding ELSA’s validity for use in a university setting, but a number of discussions with academic language and learning professionals support the conclusions of it being too easy and lacking academic items to measure skills. Barthel trialled numerous PELAs at UTS but settled on a 20 minute written task. Another university, looking to develop its own PELA, brought in a leading test designer on a part time basis and created a new fulltime senior position. Outlining the difficulties, the senior appointee mused, ‘we might do something ‘not dissimilar’ to the task set by Alex Barthel’. Indeed, as Barthel asserted, it is ‘cheap and efficient’. At this stage, the simple writing task, working out at around \$7 per student, is FBL’s preferred option.

In an ideal world, an online PELA that suits diverse needs will be made available. Students complete the task in orientation week, receive their diagnostic results within three days and, if necessary, book into and systemically complete beneficial learning support options. That is FBL’s preferred approach. Data from universities trialling online PELAs indicate that ideal is far from reality. In the real world, while research points to compulsory diagnostic assessment as the best way forward, few universities have compelled their students to complete such a task. However, many Business faculties have introduced a writing assessment in a first year core unit and integrated learning support within that unit to assist students’ English language proficiency. That is another option for FBL should compulsion be a problem.

Providing best practice learning support

The second aim of the Project is to provide appropriate support where English language proficiency is poor. At ECU, there are four Learning Advisors (LAs) who provide services to the entire university although another two are listed as being available only to a specific school. Analysis of learning support offered by Australian universities reveals that ECU's ratio of Learning Advisors to students is 1:4,800. Of interest, Curtin's ratio is 1:3,700; the University of Western Australia's (UWA) is 1:3,000 and Murdoch University's is 1:1,700 (Association for Academic Language and Learning [AALL], 2008, Appendix A).

The ECU Learning Centre is centralised and offers similar services to most other universities: one-on-one consultations; downloadable resources; workshops and short courses; and ESL short courses. Lecturers are also offered embedded learning support, but experience indicates that a faculty may have to cover costs. Outside of the Learning Centre, some ESL units are available for credit. All of these services are optional but it is clear from research that students most in need are the least able or the least willing to access support measures.

While no one approach is regarded as best practice, this centralised model, called the 'deficiency' model, is judged as less effective (see AUQA, 2009a, pp. 9-10). Current research stresses the need for an integrated approach, where language development is incorporated into subject content and the process of learning. With increasing numbers of EAL students, this allows a range of support measures to be offered, a practice advocated within the good practice principles (see principle 6, AUQA, 2009a). In addition, support courses are more valuable when students gain credit for completing them successfully.

Universities are introducing various measures and the key is offering learning support best suited to the student population. UWA has developed a Communication Skills Framework that aims to include written and oral skills, information literacy and interpersonal skills in a coherent manner throughout a student's course (University of Western Australia, 2009). In a completely different way, UTS ran an Academic Literacy Integration Project that looked at embedding many aspects of learning support into courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate level (University of Technology, Sydney, ELLSA Centre, 2009).

This approach of embedding language support can take place at course, unit or lecturer level. For example, Macquarie University offers a Masters in Accounting (CPA Extension) that links the course with its English language centre (Macquarie University, 2009, see also Dale, Cable & Day, 2006); Curtin Business School has comprehensive ESL support within a core 'Communications' unit for all Bachelor of Commerce students (Carmela Briguglio, personal communication, May 12 2009) and Murdoch's ESL Learning Advisor works, where possible, one-on-one with lecturers (Colin Beasley, personal communication, April 22 2009). The embedding of learning support, however, "can be costly and complex to develop" (Association for Academic Language and Learning, 2008, p. 8), and may be difficult to maintain due to limited resources. There can also be differences in teaching philosophies, priority of language needs and power relations between academics and LAs. At another level, there is often a tendency for academics to refer students to learning support units or advisors rather than addressing students' academic learning skills themselves (Tapper & Gruba, cited in Huijser, Kimmins, & Galligan, 2008, p. A-23).

In order to provide the best possible learning support for FBL students, ESL trained LAs would ideally be situated within the Faculty and offer a range of integrated services. Their main tasks would comprise limited embedding in key units at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels; conducting small workshops targeting common problems and larger workshops on more general academic issues; running professional development with staff; and other tasks as required. Many students regarded as 'at risk' lack confidence in seeking assistance so the LAs need to be highly visible, housed in accessible rooms with clearly

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visible signage. To fully implement integrated learning support, ESL units, prepared specifically the FBL cohort, should be offered for credit.

A Glimpse into the Future

It is impossible to pre-empt Faculty and University decisions but for the Project to have successful outcomes, two new elements are required. Firstly, a PELA that assesses all students needs to be implemented. Voluntary completion has not proven effective elsewhere, so the PELA needs to be compulsory for all newly enrolled undergraduate and postgraduate students. Secondly, their results must be linked in a strong, visible and attractive manner to a range of learning support options devised specifically for FBL's cohort (see Hirsch, 2007, p. 203). To facilitate these outcomes, a number of integrated English language support systems need to be rolled out throughout 2010; all contextualised within the Faculty and the various disciplines. Recommendations are currently being considered and University policies analysed.

In 2011, ECU is due for its next AUQA audit. By the time the audit is finalised, a new body, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), will be fully operational (AUQA, 2009f). Glimpsing into the future, ideally ECU's TEQSA audit report will include a Commendation that reads along the following lines:

TEQSA commends the Faculty of Business and Law at ECU for its exemplary approach in addressing English language proficiency. The Faculty has followed best practice principles in all respects. In particular, the Faculty is commended for its inclusion of postgraduate students, a cohort largely overlooked.

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