

What works best: Strengthening the evidence-base for oral and written communication skills in higher education

OLT Strategic Priority Commissioned Project

The project is a collaboration between The University of Melbourne, Edith Cowan University, James Cook University and University of Technology, Sydney.

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Executive summary

Issues around English language communication skills of Australian graduates have been simmering for a number of years, with occasional accusations in the media of soft marking and the decline of academic standards. This cycle will continue while English language standards continue to be simplistically equated with English language entry and test scores and graduates' proficiency cannot be adequately demonstrated. What we lack is a strong evidence-base from which institutions can claim that graduates have achieved at least a minimum level of oral and written communication skills upon graduation. This OLT project aims to fill this gap.

The discussion paper that follows this Executive Summary outlines the aims and purposes of the project and uses relevant research to develop a framework that will inform the collection of evidence-based practices for communication skills in higher education. The focus of the project is on identifying practices that result in high impact on student learning. While there is little available within current research that points to high impact practices, what does emerge is that the high impact practices are most likely to occur when communication skills are incorporated into disciplinary learning and assessment.

The main findings from the literature review are:

- Communication skills are essential for all graduates.
- Communication skills are a key factor in employability of graduates and employability influences institutional reputation.
- While much has been written about developing students' communication skills in higher education, most of it is small-scale research based on projects in specific disciplines that demonstrates some improvement in students' communication skills.
- Communication skills have largely been invisible within teaching and assessment in higher education.
- Communication skills need to be integrated into disciplinary learning and assessment, rather than assessed separately from disciplinary knowledge. The best place to do this is within units.

This project will identify evidence-based approaches that increase the impact on student learning that are sustainable and scalable within units and degrees. State-wide workshops will be run to engage the sector in identifying such practices. Specifically the following questions will be used to guide the discussion and seek case studies of best practice:

- How do DVC (Academics) or equivalent know that their graduates have attained threshold oral and written communication skills upon completion?
- What are the best practices within curriculum design at degree and unit level for the development of oral and written communication skills?
- What is the evidence of impact on student learning?
- How scalable is the practice?

The project outcomes will be the identification of three or four institutional models that demonstrate coherent integration of communication skills within disciplinary learning and assessment. High and low impact practices will also be identified, and resources will be developed for institutions to strengthen their evidence-base.

Discussion Paper

Introduction

This discussion paper, 'What works best: Strengthening the evidence-base for oral and written skills in higher education', forms part of an Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT) funded research project in the strategic priority area of English language support. The project is a collaboration between The University of Melbourne, Edith Cowan University, James Cook University and University of Technology, Sydney.

This paper presents some of the key considerations and questions for the state-wide workshops which will be held between August and October 2015. The workshops will provide opportunities for the sector to identify practices that are sustainable and scalable across degree programs to ensure that students graduate with adequate levels of oral and written communication skills.

Project Overview

Australian higher education institutions (HEIs) have graduate attributes that typically include communication skills. Yet, at present it is not possible to determine with any confidence the English language standards of graduates on completion of their degree (Arkoudis, 2014). This project aims to strengthen the institutional evidence-base for monitoring and evaluating strategies to develop and assess oral and written communication skills within higher education.

Australian HEIs have developed a number of practices to address the English language learning needs of their students. These have mainly focused on international students (Arkoudis & Doughney, 2014; AUQA, 2009; Dunworth, 2013a) and have concentrated on developing academic writing. Since the introduction of the *Higher Education Standards Framework* in late 2011, HEIs have refocused attention on developing strategic plans to address the English language learning needs of all students. However these practices are often fragmented (Dunworth, 2013b), and not core business within learning and teaching practices (Arkoudis, 2014). An important concern for HEIs is in identifying and implementing good practices that are sustainable and develop and assure students' English language skills (Arkoudis & Doughney, 2014). There is little publicly available information that can guide institutions towards best practice approaches and effective strategies for monitoring and evaluating these approaches (Arkoudis, 2014; IEAA, 2013). This project seeks to engage with the sector and produce outcomes in the form of a framework, with best practice resources, which will have significant impact in this area of importance and need.

This project has three major phases:

Phase 1 – Modelling

Based on background research (literature, OLT/ALTC projects, interviews) a framework will be developed to inform an evidence-base of best practice.

Phase 2 – Engagement

State-based workshops will enable extensive engagement across the sector, allowing stakeholders to contribute and share best practices and test and fine-tune the framework. Stakeholders from industry, professional bodies, academic and general staff, universities and other higher education providers will be included in this process. The workshops will explore in detail the best approaches to rethink, consolidate and strengthen English language approaches and raise them to levels that can situate them harmoniously within institutional quality assurance practices and core business.

Phase 3 – Production and dissemination

Preparation and dissemination of resources to support universities and other higher education providers based on the framework will be undertaken. The resources will include a succinct articulation of best practices, approaches for monitoring and evaluating practices, and case studies as appropriate.

We plan to prepare a high level report that provides an authoritative and accessible analysis for developing best practices for all students, including practical strategies for HEI leaders, course coordinators, and academic staff. The outcomes will be designed to assist HEIs to strengthen their approaches by having a strong evidence-base to inform their policies and practices. Particular attention will be given to:

- Gathering evidence for identifying and supporting best practice approaches;
- Exploring strategies for developing and assessing written and oral English language development; and
- Identifying the use of learning analytics and online technologies to support best practice outcomes.

Project Outcomes

We aim to identify three or four institutional models that demonstrate coherent integration of communication skills within disciplinary learning and assessment. High and low impact practices will also be identified, and resources will be developed for institutions to strengthen their evidence-base.

Research informing the project

Communication skills for all students

Much of the research as well as OLT/ALTC projects that have informed this project have centred on English language proficiency issues for international students. Since the development of the *Good Practice Principles for English Language Proficiency for International Students in Australian Universities* (AUQA, 2009), there has been increased activity within the higher education sector to better address the language and learning needs of international students. With the widening participation in higher education and the early work of *The Higher Education Standards Framework* (DIISRTE, 2011), interest has focused on assuring threshold ELP learning outcomes of all students.

However, the use of the term ELP is not appropriate for this project as it is more commonly identified with international students and English language testing. In order to progress the discussion and to include all students, the term ‘communication skills’ is used in this project. It is the most pragmatic term to use when referring to English language and literacy in higher education. This is because the term ‘communication skills’ resonates most with teaching academics and is inclusive of all students. An additional advantage is that academics and leaders of teaching and learning more widely use ‘communication skills’ in relation to student learning outcomes in line with the Australian Qualification Framework (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013).

Within this project we have attempted to define how we can consider communication skills across the student life-cycle. The English Language Proficiency (ELP) continuum (O’Loughlin & Arkoudis, cited in Arkoudis, Baik & Richardson, 2012) has been used and further refined to apply to all students (Figure 1). The continuum describes the development of communication skills, beginning with basic communicative skills upon entry to higher education, to the development of discipline-specific language skills acquired through study, and finally to the professional social communicative language skills students should have developed by graduation. Included in the exit level is preparedness for professional and/or further study, as indicated within the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013). The continuum is useful to frame the development of communication skills that students should demonstrate across their degree. We have intentionally excluded specific communication skill levels, as these vary across disciplines and degrees. These decisions are made within courses, and when relevant, linked to professional accreditation requirements.

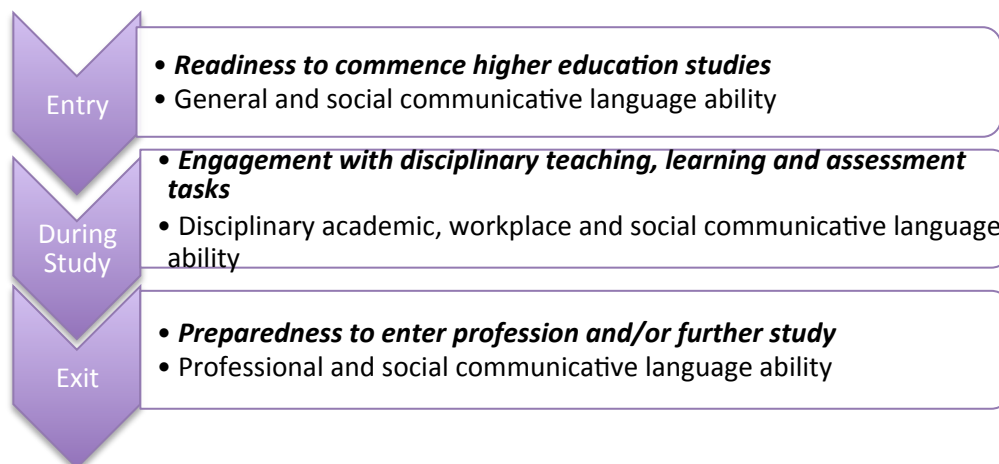


Figure 1: ELP developmental continuum (adapted from Arkoudis, et al. 2012, p.13)

Integrating communication skills within disciplinary learning

While there is evidence of developed and emerging practice in relation to the development and support of English language levels within institutions, there is an inconsistent approach to the development and assessment of oral and written communication skills across the sector. Instead of oral and written communication skills being considered core business within teaching and learning, the use of English language entry requirements are increasingly considered proxies for the maintenance of standards in higher education. Evidence shows this is not enough to assure that students graduate with required levels of oral and written communication skills (Craven, 2012; O'Loughlin & Arkoudis, 2009). Once students enter institutions, the development of communication skills is often viewed as an 'optional extra'. Responsibility has rested primarily with individual students and with Academic Language and Literacy (ALL) advisors.

There is also much variation within HEIs about the extent to which communication skills are integrated and assessed within disciplinary curricula and if these skills are even assessed. The role of assessment moderation across disciplines and institutions to 'calibrate' (Sadler, 2012) the levels of oral and written communication skills required for achievement is vital. Moderation must be underpinned by criteria and consensus (Nulty, 2011) at the institutional and disciplinary levels (Deane and Krause, 2012) to ensure a standardised approach to the attainment of minimal level communication skills.

Identification of minimum level communication skills is complex. Terms like 'standard', 'threshold' and 'outcome' are 'fuzzy' (Krause et al, 2014) and need to account for a variety of reference points, including disciplinary benchmark statements and professional accreditation requirements, the AQF and international benchmarks. A review of these reference points demonstrates how discipline specific oral and written communication skills are able to provide a clearer benchmark for attainment levels than relative measures of achievement.

An integrated approach to institutional responsibility for the development and evidencing of graduate communication skills is necessary to ensure graduates have met the requisite levels of oral and written communication skills.

The following questions highlight the importance of an integrated approach of shared responsibility:

- **Academic Leaders:** How do leaders know that oral and written communication skills are developed during study? What is the evidence that threshold skills have been achieved upon completion?
- **Course coordinators:** How are communication skills assessed during the course of study? What are students expected to have demonstrated on completion of the course?
- **Teaching academics:** How are communication skills explicitly taught and assessed within the unit? What evidence exists that students have achieved the required communication skills?
- **Academic Language and Literacy (ALL) Advisors:** How are advisors involved in developing resources for teaching communication skills? What measures are used to evaluate the success of co-curricular support?

Challenges for institutions

Employers in Australia consistently rate interpersonal and communication skills (written and oral) as the most important selection criterion for graduate employment (Graduate Courses Australia, 2013). Yet, community and employer perceptions concerning levels of graduate communication skills are influenced by media reports about the integrity of assessors and institutional pressure to ‘soft-mark’, ineffective admission processes (Independent Commission against Corruption NSW, 2015; Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2015) and wide-spread and systemic plagiarism (McNeillage & Visentin, 2014).

Research indicates that there are a number of challenges faced by HEIs that are accentuated by the separation of communication skills from disciplinary learning and assessment. Table 1 outlines some of the key issues.

Table 1: Key issues identified in research

Key issues: What we know	
Entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a wide variety of English language entry requirements used by an increasingly diverse range of HEIs (Murray & Arkoudis, 2013; O'Loughlin & Murray, 2007) in an expanded system (Larkins, 2015). • There is little evidence to indicate that the different types of English language entry requirements are comparable, resulting in commencing students with diverse levels of preparedness for higher education study (Murray & Arkoudis, 2013; O'Loughlin & Murray, 2007). • English language entry requirements indicate preparedness to commence rather than a capacity to successfully complete higher education studies (Arkoudis et al., 2009).
During Study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students do not develop their communication skills through osmosis (Dunworth, 2013b; Rochecouste, Oliver, Mulligan, & Davies, 2010). • When communication skills are integrated into disciplinary teaching, learning and assessment, there is evidence of increased retention rates and higher grades among students (Baik & Greig, 2009). • Institution-wide post-entry language assessments (PELA) are often not completed by ‘at risk’ students, and often do not result in these students attending support programs (Dunworth, 2013b; Harris, 2013; Ransom, 2009). • Communication skills are important for success in higher education study and for employability (Arkoudis et al., 2009; Gribble & Blackmore, 2012). • Students do not regularly attend communication skills programs that are separate from their disciplinary studies (Arkoudis, Baik, & Richardson, 2012; Harris & Ashton, 2011; Wingate, 2006). • Academics are concerned about their students’ communication skills, but do not believe they have the time and expertise to address these concerns within the disciplinary curriculum (Baik, 2010; O'Loughlin & Arkoudis, 2009). • ALL advisors have expertise in developing students’ academic language and literacy, but developing collaborative approaches within disciplinary curricula is often a hit and miss affair (Briguglio, 2014; Dunworth, 2013b).

Exit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students are often unaware that they need to develop their communication skills for employability or further study (Arkoudis et al., 2009). • Increasingly graduates have to demonstrate that they have the required communication skills for employment (see for example, nursing, teachers, doctors, accountants, and engineers) (Arkoudis et al., 2012; Humphreys & Gribble, 2013). • The use of student portfolios to evidence the development and assessment of oral and written communication skills (Banta et al., 2009) may be useful, although it is unclear whether in practice any responsibility exists for assessing the portfolio prior to completion. • Standardised English language tests were designed to assess readiness to commence higher education study, and may not be suitable for assessing work readiness (Humphreys & Gribble, 2013; O'Loughlin & Arkoudis, 2009). • The development of international exit tests such as the OECD's Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) to measure global student performance are not designed to evidence best practice within institutions (Ewell, 2012).
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By establishing an evidence-base of effective and sustainable teaching and quality assurance processes, Australian higher education institutions can demonstrate that their graduates have achieved appropriate standards of oral and written communication skills to domestic and international employer groups, professional bodies and the broader community.

Evidence-based approaches

One of the aims of this project is provide resources that will strengthen the evidence-base for oral and written communication skills for all students. This section presents the research which has informed the approach undertaken in the project for strengthening the evidence-base.

Impact: What works best?

There is a plethora of research that makes claims about the effectiveness of particular communication skill interventions on students' learning. This is not surprising given that nearly any intervention can show some evidence of success (Hattie, 2015). Hattie argues that attention should not be on 'What works?' but rather on 'What works best?' This project will consider the impact on student learning and the extent to which interventions are scalable in order for institutions to make decisions about how to effectively utilise available resources.

Part of core business within learning and teaching

Communication skills should be more visible within university learning in order to be able to evaluate the impact or 'value-add' on student learning. There is much research on effective teaching in higher education that proposes that academics can improve their teaching by evaluating their students' learning (Ramsden, 2003; Biggs and Tang, 2011; Hattie, 2015). The research indicates that aligning learning objectives with teaching and learning activities and assessment tasks impacts on student learning. Research also reveals that it is important that criteria for success are clear to students, that learning activities are challenging, and that students have opportunities to give and receive feedback in order to improve. In other

words, communication skills need to be visible in unit level learning outcomes otherwise students do not consider these important skills to develop (Arkoudis, 2014).

Leadership is integral

Strong organisational leadership is required to integrate oral and written communication skills within institutional quality assurance processes and unit level learning (Arkoudis, 2014; Hattie, 2015; Freeman & Ewan, 2014). Degree and unit coordinators also play a critical part in realising an evidence-based culture in departments and universities by seeking evidence to support interpretations of impact on student learning, which include oral and written communication skills.

Collecting the evidence

Drawing on the discussion so far, the focus of this project is to identify evidence-based approaches that increase the impact on student learning, and are sustainable and scalable within subjects and courses.

State-side workshops

The purpose of the state-wide workshops is to engage the sector in identifying such practices, and develop institutional models of integrated practices. Specifically the following questions will be used to guide the discussion and seek case studies to strengthen institutional practices:

- How do DVC (Academics) or equivalent know that their graduates have attained threshold oral and written communication skills upon completion?
- What are the best practices within curriculum design at degree and unit level for the development of oral and written communication skills?
- What is the evidence of impact on student learning?
- How scalable is the practice?

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