

Shifting the Narrative: International Students and Communication Skills in Higher Education

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This research digest provides an overview of perspectives on communication skills for international students with English as an additional language (EAL). In addition, it proposes that the narrative surrounding this issue be shifted towards a focus on communication skills for *all* students in higher education.

Initially, this analysis takes into account recurring public perceptions played out in the media where the English language competencies of EAL international students are presented as evidence of declining standards for communication skills in higher education more broadly. As higher education institutions increase their efforts to address the diverse range of communication skills of their students, the discourses that have dominated the distinctions between EAL international students and domestic students require re-framing. The times have changed and the discussion needs to move to more practical ideas which can address the complexities that often surround this issue.

As such, this research digest suggests that a focus on developing and assessing the communication skills of all students will shift the institutional and external perceptions of the English language 'problem' of EAL international students. This would enable a shift towards a broader agenda for the explicit development and assessment of communication skills as core business for higher education institutions, linked to educational success and enhancing graduate employability. In this paper we have used the term 'communication skills' to refer to all aspects of communication including English Language Proficiency (ELP).



The current context

Negative media coverage in Australia frequently suggests that Australian higher education institutions are failing to ensure that EAL international students graduate with the required communication skills for further study or employment. Despite increased policies and practices that focus on assuring the communication skills of EAL international graduates within institutions, the media and employers repeatedly question the quality of international students who graduate from Australian higher education institutions (Dunworth, 2013; Graduate Careers Australia, 2015). Allegations of inadequate admission processes (*Herald Sun*, 2015) and pressure on academics to soft mark international students' work (ICAC, 2015; ABC, 2015), coupled with reports of widespread plagiarism (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 2014), have created a general sense of concern and urgency regarding how best to address these issues.

Such external stakeholder concerns have largely driven debate in the area of international student education and are accompanied by claims that academic standards in Australian higher education are declining. At the same time, significant work is taking place within higher education institutions to address these growing concerns through the implementation of policies and practices that seek to develop and assure students' English language skills (Arkoudis & Doughney, 2014). To put it simply, higher education institutions are doing more than ever in this area, but stakeholder perceptions have largely remained unchanged from Birrell's seminal study in 2006 (Birrell, 2006) to the *Four Corners* report broadcast in 2015 (ABC, 2015). Why is this so?

While concerns surrounding the communication skills of our graduates continue to be identified as only an EAL international student 'problem' (Haug, 2015), the matter will remain unresolved. Rather than marginalising the issue of communication skills and treating it as peripheral to the core business of higher education institutions, the development of robust processes, practices and sustainable resources for assuring the communication skills of all graduates is needed.

Institutions need to have a stronger evidence base of practices that work best to develop students' communication skills alongside their disciplinary knowledge. Without this, the communication skills of graduates will continue to be the Achilles' heel of Australian higher education.

Widening access to, and increasing provision of, Australian higher education over the last decade has produced a diverse student population with differentiated academic abilities and needs. This diversification includes international and domestic students with a broad range of educational and cultural backgrounds. Increased participation has altered the overall student profile of higher education in Australia (Kemp & Norton, 2014), producing significant resource challenges for institutions (Larkins, 2015). At the same time, increased emphasis on graduate learning outcomes and course progression, retention and completion have emerged as key institutional performance measures for both internal quality assurance and external regulatory and accreditation purposes. Within this expanded and diverse higher education environment, the challenge facing institutions is to demonstrate that core teaching, learning and assessment practices are in place to ensure that all students – including international EAL students – meet minimum standards of communication skills upon graduation.

This research digest argues that the narrative around communication skills in higher education needs to shift from being viewed and discussed as an EAL international student problem to being seen as a central issue about how our institutions assure the communication skills of their graduates.



By explicitly integrating the development and assessment of oral and written communication skills into disciplinary teaching and learning, the 'problem' of international EAL students can be re-framed within the broader more significant issue of ensuring appropriate communication skills of all graduates for further study or employment. To realise this, institutions need to have a stronger evidence base of practices that work best to develop students' communication skills alongside their disciplinary knowledge. Without this, the communication skills of graduates will continue to be the Achilles' heel of Australian higher education. Based on a review of related literature, this research digest offers suggestions for policy and practice.

Why traditional approaches are not the answer

Research indicates that effective communication skills are critical for success in higher education study and for achieving positive graduate employment outcomes (Arkoudis & Doughney, 2015; Blackmore et al., 2014). Yet communication skills have traditionally been situated as marginal to core teaching and learning practices in disciplinary contexts. Perceived as a specialist or support service, many academics consider teaching communication skills to be outside both their area of expertise and job description (Dunworth & Briguglio, 2011). Invariably the issue of communication skills is seen in terms of admission requirements or extra-curricular support, and not necessarily as the immediate responsibility within disciplinary teaching and learning.

Relying solely on admission requirements to account for the communication skills of international students is not enough (Rochecoste et al, 2010; Dunworth, 2013; Wingate, 2015). Research indicates that English language entry requirements do not in themselves assure communication standards for international students upon completion (O'Loughlin & Arkoudis 2009). There are a wide variety of English language entry pathways used by higher education institutions and there is very little evidence to suggest that the different types are comparable (Murray & Arkoudis, 2013).

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This variability and inconsistency result in students commencing their studies with diverse levels of preparedness and abilities. Furthermore, English language entry requirements indicate preparedness to commence rather than capacity to successfully complete the course of study (Arkoudis & Doughney, 2015). This places the spotlight firmly on how institutions develop and assess oral and written communication skills beyond entry.

The role of our higher education sector is increasingly seen in terms of graduate employability (Kinash & Crane, 2015; Bennett, 2014) and the production of graduates with the skills to contribute and work within a rapidly changing, complex and global society (CEDA, 2015). As the sector widens, the role of higher education in a complex economic, political, cultural and international environment will increasingly be scrutinised by government, media, employers, prospective students from both domestic and international markets and the community more broadly. The need to produce a highly skilled workforce able to operate across disciplines, interact effectively in teams and able to adapt to change quickly has become a priority for higher education institutions. Students need to develop transferable skills to enable them to work in jobs that may not yet exist. Higher education institutions are increasingly called upon to be more accountable and to demonstrate how practices and policies ensure that a diverse cohort of graduates have oral and written communication skills aligned with professional, academic and community standards.

To achieve this, Australian higher education institutions need to ensure that their students develop the appropriate oral and written communication skills throughout the duration of their disciplinary study leading to standards of achievement upon graduation (Gribble, 2015; Hawthorne & To, 2014). Within this changing higher education environment, traditional approaches towards the teaching and assessment of communication skills as non-core will also need to evolve.

What works best?

There is a plethora of research that makes claims for the effectiveness of particular communication skill interventions on international 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?'. He argues that practices need to be based on evidence of their impact on student learning. Furthermore, he emphasises that practices need to be scalable. In other words, there may be evidence that some students benefit from personalised one-on-one consultations with staff to improve their written communication skills. Yet, without ongoing institutional support and the concomitant resourcing of a given strategy, particular practices are ultimately unsustainable and therefore likely to be ineffective.

Therefore, the critical issue is not only about what options work best, but how institutions can develop sustainable and integrated whole-of-institution approaches to assure international graduates' communication skills upon exit. With a variety of practices, strategies and initiatives occurring across the sector to develop graduate communication skills, the emerging priority for institutions is to identify what works best, both in terms of impact on student learning and as sustainable, scalable practice with support from academic leaders and teaching staff.

Identifying high impact practices for communication skills

The literature is unequivocal that high impact student learning occurs when communication skills are integrated within disciplinary learning and assessment (Arkoudis, Baik, & Richardson, 2012; Dunworth, 2013; Wingate, 2015). There are a number of studies that provide evidence to support the move in this direction (Arkoudis, 2013; Briguglio, 2014; Dunworth 2014; Murray & Nallaya, 2014; Fenton-Smith, Humphreys, Walkinshaw, Michael, & Lobo, 2015).

These studies highlight the limitations of communication skills programs, including those English language proficiency programs which sit outside the disciplinary curricula and are supported by staff who are not recognised by students as disciplinary academics. First, there is some evidence that attendance at adjunct support programs does not necessarily lead to improved learning outcomes (Baik & Greig, 2009; James, 2010), in which case these programs are not necessarily the best use of resources. Second, some of the studies indicate that there are low attendance rates in workshops (Harris & Ashton, 2011; Rochecouste, Oliver, Mulligan, & Davies, 2010) and the main reasons for this are that students are struggling. Third, it is argued that a non-compulsory model separate from the curriculum does not impact the students most in need due to non-attendance or avoidance (Arkoudis, Baik, & Richardson, 2012; Wingate, 2006), as students would rather focus on their studies than attend English language proficiency (ELP) programs (O'Loughlin & Arkoudis, 2009). The international literature supports these findings (for example, Garcia, et al, 2013; Wilkinson, 2013; Wingate, 2015).

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Other institutional practices which sit outside disciplinary teaching are being established across the sector to address the communication skills of students entering higher education study. For example, the use of diagnostic tools to assess the English language proficiency of EAL students at entry has been integrated into institutional policy across many parts of the sector. In particular, Post-entry Language Assessments (PELAs) have seen rapid uptake in the sector over the last five years (Harris, 2013).

Yet, the effectiveness of these diagnostic tools remains contingent on a number of institutional factors, including the integration of the tools into a wider and more strategic communication skills policy that is operationalised and resourced. In an institutional case study (Harris, 2013), the need for institution-wide awareness, support and ownership from all levels of staff, including leaders, was seen as an important feature of successful adoption. Harris' study demonstrates that, while successfully integrated PELAs seem to represent a relatively resource-friendly solution to the issue of addressing the communication skills of international students, they do not address the ongoing and cumulative development of communication skills towards exit standards or outcomes necessary for our graduates.

Other practices focus on 'front-loading' communication skills development in core subjects for first year students. While these programs can show that students develop their oral and written skills by the end of a semester, there are very few programs that extend into second and third year. A recent study (Fenton-Smith, Humphreys, Walkinshaw, Michael, & Lobo, 2015) demonstrated the successful implementation of an institutional-wide stand-alone language program at an Australian university.

While the authors note evidence of improved student language and literacy skills, they identify potential risks and challenges in terms of integrating communication skills in other subjects. These include:

- disengagement of disciplinary academics towards the development of communication skills due to the view that it is being taken care of elsewhere
- unrealistic expectations from both students and academic leaders that one program will 'fix' the problem
- the proposal that programs need to be part of a broader robust institution-wide strategy
- difficulties in designing and measuring outcomes (Arkoudis, 2014; Fenton-Smith et al., 2015).

Responsibilities for integrating communication skills within the disciplines

The above discussion has highlighted that, while a number of higher education institutions have developed institutional strategies for assuring the communication skills of their graduates, practices can be isolated, short-term and not connected to disciplinary assessment. Arkoudis (2014) argued that it is not possible to protect minimum standards for oral and written communication skills unless these are assessed, and that the most appropriate place for this assessment to occur is within disciplinary teaching and learning. She argues that this is best achieved through an integrated approach that includes a variety of strategies that fit together to develop and assess students' communication skills – what she terms as shared responsibilities.

While there is much agreement in the research about the importance of integrating communication skills development within disciplinary teaching and learning, there is still debate about who is responsible for developing and assessing students' communication skills (Briguglio, 2014; Dunworth, 2013; Harris & Ashton, 2011). This issue will be reviewed below, in order to explore what we know works best and to identify future directions for research.

Strong organisational leadership is required to integrate oral and written communication skills within institutional quality assurance processes and unit level learning (Hattie, 2015; Freeman & Ewan, 2014). Firstly, leaders are ultimately responsible for setting the standards of achievement required by the institution for students to graduate. In this way, leaders need to articulate specific and explicit standards for the oral and written communication skills of all graduates at the program level.

While difficult to formulate and implement, articulation of standards must precede any efforts to evidence their achievement. Sadler (2015) argues that in order to assure standards, a central issue is where to pitch the 'pass' levels. We need to set 'pass' level standards for communication skills and this should be done at the program level within each institution.

Second, leaders have the resources and delegation to cultivate and formalise an institutional approach towards evidence-based practices for the graduate communication skills of international students. Degree and unit coordinators also play a critical part in realising an evidence-based culture by seeking to demonstrate impacts on student learning, which include oral and written communication skills.

Once established and articulated, responsibilities for achieving minimum levels of communication skills for all students should be distributed within the institution according to the professional roles of key people involved in teaching and learning. The idea of distributed responsibilities is useful in considering how various approaches contribute to ensuring students have attained threshold levels of English language communication upon graduation.

Distributed roles and responsibilities include:

- **Academic leaders** (can include Deputy Vice-Chancellor or Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic) and Associate Deans Teaching and Learning) – What is the evidence base that graduates have attained threshold oral and written communication skills upon completion? How can a culture of evidence-based practice be supported?
- **Course coordinators** – What communication skills are students expected to have on completion of the course? Where and how are these assessed during the course of study?
- **Teaching academics** – What are the learning outcomes for the unit in terms of communication skills? How will these be taught and assessed?
- **Academic Language and Literacy (ALL) advisers** – How can course coordinators and teaching academics include ALL advisers in developing resources for teaching communication skills that link to disciplinary assessment?

In turn, a committed model of distributed institutional responsibility towards the achievement of standards for communication skills should increase international students' awareness of their own responsibilities towards developing communication skills and highlight the importance of these skills for success in further study and employability.

While responsibility for academic standards ultimately resides with the academic governing bodies of each institution, a distributed model of responsibility can ensure that practice is implemented and sustained. However, each facet of academic practice requires deliberate and sustained leadership to ensure transparency of practices, institutional consistency and the analysis of evidence to monitor impact on student learning.

Quality assurance and impact on student learning

The need for higher education institutions to demonstrate the achievement of student learning outcomes has increased in recent years. The establishment of the Tertiary Education and Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) in 2011 – coupled with an expanded and increasingly competitive sector – has increased external scrutiny on claims made by higher education institutions. Alongside the regulatory architecture for all Australian qualifications, some specific accreditation requirements for courses leading to professional practice also exist, reflecting specific standards for the oral and written communication standards of practitioners.

Within this environment, it is important to acknowledge that outcome statements do not indicate qualities that students should hold prior to learning (Adelman, 2015). Rather, learning outcomes statements articulate the impact of learning towards the development of measurable and demonstrable skills. Therefore, institutional graduate attribute statements that refer to the communication skills of graduates are merely claims until evidenced. Institutional leaders need to be able to point to evidence demonstrating that the oral and written communication skills of their students are developed, assessed, monitored and measured throughout the duration of a qualification.



They also need to demonstrate that each graduate has met a threshold level of communicative ability required for professional employment or further study. Practical and explicit thresholds for communication skills at the program level are often hard to find outside regulatory or accreditation frameworks. So, how do we close the gap between what is espoused and what is enacted in disciplinary teaching (Green, Hammer & Star, 2009)?

By re-situating the development and assessment of communication skills as a key teaching and learning performance measure, higher education institutions can begin to demonstrate how they account for the communication skills of their graduates. Rather than being the responsibility of separate units or programs, a whole-of-institution strategy that is core to achieving espoused learning outcomes is required. A holistic and quality-assured system for developing the communication skills of students would ensure that practices are integrated across the institution as part of a strategic policy.

A robust quality assurance process underpinning the strategy would facilitate the measurement of successful teaching and assessment practices commensurate with the impact of student learning. In this way, institutional systems and structures could enable and sustain practices that are valuable. For example, mapping learning outcomes to curriculum can be superficially executed or situated within a wider quality assurance project that itself is scrutinised for impact, improvement opportunities and evidence (Oliver, 2013).

Rather than implement ad hoc practices that may not be subject to formalised quality assurance processes (such as planning, designing, reporting and reviewing), mainstream teaching and learning already exist within a systematised quality assurance structure. This presents ideal sites for strengthening the evidence base of what works best for student learning. However, before achieving systemic and structural change within institutions, a cultural shift needs to occur. Institutional leaders are able to realise this shift by situating the communication skills of international students as a core function of the evolving higher education environment.

There has been very little research into understanding and articulating exit standards and to ensuring that students graduate with the English language skills for employment or further study.

As institutions continue to make claims about the outcomes of the education they offer in global markets to attract international students, transparent, accountable and effective systems of internal quality assurance processes are necessary to demonstrate evidence on practices that have high impact on student learning.

Future research priorities

As discussed in this paper, there is renewed pressure for higher education institutions to demonstrate that international students meet agreed standards for communication skills within disciplinary teaching across the qualification. Opportunities for further research into how institutions can strengthen the evidence base of effective practice in this area are found in the professional accreditation frameworks and in new technological tools including learning analytics.

In Australia we have not been keen to define communication skills standards and this has resulted in employer groups relying on English language tests as a way of assuring graduate levels. There has been very little research into understanding and articulating exit standards and to ensuring that students graduate with the English language skills for employment or further study. This is where more research is needed to develop an explicit framework for describing communication skills standards. Australian higher education needs a set of national communication skills standards for graduating students that are aligned with communication skills for the workplace. This would need to be supported by professional development to develop the practices of academics and course coordinators.

This is not an easy task, but some of the groundwork has been done through projects from the Office for Learning and Teaching.

While there is a substantial body of research into evidence-based frameworks for graduate communication skills within disciplines that require professional accreditation, there is limited analysis into evidencing graduate communication skills more broadly for all students including international students. While assessing the communication and clinical skills of medical graduates often involves the use of additional testing mechanisms, this approach is met with widespread resistance for generalist undergraduate teaching. However, due to the scope of available research into evidence-based practice for the health and other professions, further research to identify transferable and scalable practices may be instructive.

Increasingly, institutional leaders and teaching and learning academics are utilising digital tools to enable data-driven decision-making. Business intelligence systems and learning analytic applications are currently being tested and implemented across higher education institutions domestically and internationally, utilising existing online data and assessment systems. New fields of research into how best to use these new technological tools specifically to measure and document graduate communication skills is required.

Conclusion

While there are existing practices within the sector to enhance the development of oral and written communication skills among EAL international students, there is little evidence that these practices are sustainable within institutions, nor that they can be effectively scaled for use across whole-of-course or institution. Significantly, there is little evidence to demonstrate if or how institutions measure the effectiveness of current practices in relation to their impact on student learning. As claims about learning outcomes and graduate attributes continue to be used by higher education institutions within an increasingly diverse and competitive market, scrutiny from a range of stakeholders including government, prospective students, international markets, the media, parents, employees and professional associations will follow.

Increased accountability to external stakeholders is a feature of a mass higher education system in a globalised industry. Robust internal systems which seek to assess the effectiveness of practice towards the development and assessment of student communication skills and which provide evidence of exit standards will require a shift in culture, practice and process. In shifting the narrative about communication skills as a core function of higher education relevant to all students, we need to focus on student progression rather than deficit; on developing agreed communication skills standards that are taught and assessed within degrees; and on collecting evidence of practices that have high impact on student learning. Can we really afford as a sector not to do this?

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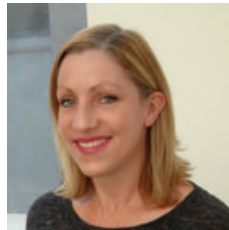
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