

Strengthening the Evidence-Base for Graduate Communication Skills

Draft Final report 2016

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Executive Summary

Graduate communication skills have been the ‘Achilles heel’ of Australian higher education for over a decade and the media continually feature a range of associated concerns: entry levels, soft marking and the employability of graduates. While universities have attempted to address these concerns by offering a range of initiatives and interventions, the majority of which are offered outside of a student’s program, most fall short due to the difficulty in providing *evidence* that graduates have achieved threshold standards in oral and written communication skills.

Seeking to strengthen evidence-based approaches, we created the *Distributed Expertise Model* that aims to assist universities in developing, assessing and demonstrating graduates’ communication skills. The model, based on a whole-of-program approach, utilises current expertise already available in universities and identifies high impact practices for student learning. These practices apply to all students and are both sustainable and scalable across the program. In addition, these high impact practices strengthen the evidence-base and inform quality assurance processes.

Key questions we asked:

- How do DVCs (Academic and/or Learning and Teaching) and program leaders know that their graduates have attained threshold oral and written communication skills?
- Within programs, what takes place as part of the curriculum design to assure communication skills are developed and assessed across a student’s course?
- What are the practices that have high impact?
- How is the impact on student learning evaluated?
- How scalable are the practices?
- How can institutions demonstrate to external stakeholders that their graduates have achieved the communication skills for further study or employment?

In our discussions, consultations and research, we found that it was generally difficult for university leaders and program coordinators to know whether or not their graduates had met threshold standards for communication skills. This was due to:

- The lack of articulated thresholds for oral and written communication skills at the program level;
- The lack of assessment tasks that explicitly measured oral and written communication skills throughout the program; and
- Limited or no implications should a student not attain appropriate levels of communicative ability.

This led to the finding that drove the project: that universities know that their graduates have achieved the threshold standards of oral and written communication skills because ***of the cumulative milestones for communication skills that students must meet before they can graduate.***

There are limited examples of some milestones occurring across a range of programs in universities and these are outlined in this report. However, we found that on most occasions, assessment of communication skills was low stakes, meaning students could successfully pass their unit or degree even though their communication skills were assessed as below satisfactory level, limiting quality assurance of graduate outcomes.

This project offers a practical and achievable model to:

- Strengthen institutional and program level practices for developing graduate communication skills;
- Embed practices within institutional quality cycles and existing practices;
- Highlight institutional commitment towards communication skills to internal and external stakeholder including prospective students and employers; and
- Produce evidence of institutional approaches towards developing appropriate levels of oral and written graduate communication skills for employment or further study.

As core a function of higher education, institutions need to be able to demonstrate and be accountable for the levels of communication skills each graduating student has achieved. During the project we reached over 600 educators in Australia and internationally through the delivery of seminars, webinars, workshops and conference papers. We consulted with government, accreditation agencies and employer groups. Although many may not agree with the best way for institutions to develop program specific communication skills, all agreed that more needs to be done.

The main outcome of the project was the development of the *Distributed Expertise Model*. This model can be used to guide a whole-of-program approach, to assist universities strengthen their evidence-base for graduate communication skills.

Glossary

Communication skills: In this project, the term ‘communication skills’ has been defined as the ability to use and communicate meanings appropriately in spoken and written contexts. It is through language that students interact with teaching academics and peers to develop their disciplinary knowledge, to apply this knowledge to various contexts and to demonstrate learning.

This means that effective communication skills are more than correct use of grammar and sentence structure. Communication skills are higher order cognitive skills as they are central to learning in higher education, and are used to convey meaning and interpretation of

complex ideas in the disciplines. The focus is on the ability to communicate meanings in ways that are appropriate within various contexts.

Program: a course of study leading to a qualification offered by the university. Some universities refer to this as 'course'.

Unit: the components of a 'program'. In some universities the terminology used is 'subject' or 'course'.

Graduate capabilities: the skills that equip students to work in addition to the specific knowledge and skills of their field of study. They are also referred to as 'generic skills' or 'transferable skills'.

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Acronyms

ACCI	Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry
AIG	Australian Industry Group
ALL	Academic Language and Learning
ALTC	Australian Learning and Teaching Council
AQF	Australian Qualifications Framework
BCA	Business Council of Australia
CPA	Certified Practising Accountants
DCA	Dental Council of Australia
DEM	Distributed Expertise Model
DOET	Department of Education and Training
DVC A	Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic
EA	Engineers Australia
ESOS	Education Services for Overseas Students
OLT	Office of Learning and Teaching
PELA	Post Entry Language Assessment
PVC	Pro-Vice Chancellor
TEQSA	Tertiary Education and Quality Standards Agency
WIL	Work Integrated Learning

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1. Project Overview

It is reasonable to expect that university graduates have achieved minimum levels of communication skills upon graduation. Universities state that communication skills are an important graduate attribute for their students. Communication skills are also very important for graduate employability. In September 2016, the Minister for Education indicated that the government proposes to link university performance to graduate employability:

... continuing the policy work we've been undertaking to work towards incentives and policy settings in higher education that encourage excellence in innovation within our universities. And the measure of that excellence has to be employment outcomes for graduates, and the achievement of those employment outcomes ... (Birmingham, 2016).

In 2015, 58% of employers indicated that the most important criterion when recruiting graduates was their communication skills (Graduate Careers Australia, 2015). There is a clear link between communication skills and employability. This link has been established within research, and the increased use of English language tests by professional bodies indicates employers' uncertainty of the quality of university graduates in terms of their communication skills.

The demand driven system of higher education introduced in Australia in 2009 facilitated significant increase in higher education participation. For the period 2004 to 2013 bachelor level commencements across Australian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) increased by 47.8 per cent with clear surges in overall numbers from 2009 onwards (Larkins, 2015). As student numbers continued to climb, the diversification in both domestic and international student cohorts saw students entering higher education study with differing communication skill levels and needs.

During this period of growth, commentators questioned the English Language proficiency of Australian higher education graduates. Initially, this was targeted at the burgeoning international market but that commentary broadened more recently to include all students and reference to communication skills rather than English language skills *per se*. As we write this final report, media reports are drawing attention to entry standards within Australian universities, noting the highest attrition rates in a decade (Bagshaw, 2016), low entry standards (Bagshaw and Ting, 2016) and accuse universities of enrolling students who have few prospects of completing their course (Editorial, The Australian, 2016). There is no doubt that our student populations are more diverse and less prepared for university study than in previous decades, hence they need more support as they transition into university study and beyond.

This diverse and often unprepared cohort has changed the higher education environment resulting in increased pressure on academics whose classroom responsibilities have extended to aspects of learning support and development of communication skills.

Over the last ten years, while all indicators pointed to the importance of graduate communication skills, there has been very little evidence to demonstrate progress. A number of approaches have been put in place but most have been small scale, peripheral and often unknown outside of specific unit.

Fundamental Tensions

English language entry levels

Australia's demand driven system of higher education was introduced in part as a policy setting to achieve increased higher education participation. As concerns about graduate communication skills circulated, many pointed to lowered standards of entry as the overarching problem. There is no doubt that the student population has changed and diversified, however, institutions have never been more accountable for ensuring that admission practices are sound, that students receive targeted support, that performance data is analysed by cohort, and that graduates achieve positive outcomes.

While some may bemoan a time when students were less diverse, more prepared and the system harder to access, our current system requires that universities respond to the realities of student diversity by setting appropriate admission standards and responding to the challenges that supporting each student presents.

English language diagnostic tools

In the last five to ten years, a growing number of Australian universities have introduced diagnostic tools such as Post-Entry Language Assessment (PELA), such that many institutions have established some form of a post-entry task. However, few PELAs are part of a student's course of study and most require only specific cohorts to complete it. In the majority of cases, a PELA is used to identify students who may benefit from academic and language support early in their studies. In almost all cases, there are no implications should a student not complete the task and there is no compulsion to participate in follow-up measures, which are often online and/or generic. Recent research indicates that most students who would benefit from support often choose to avoid completing post-entry tasks for language assessment and don't consider extra curricular teaching and learning relevant to their studies (Harris, 2013; 2016).

For a PELA to be truly effective, it needs to be integrated within curriculum processes, preferably as an early low-stakes assessment task. In this way, students perceive it as part of their course and relevant. Feedback is timely and contextualised and students are aware of their standard against that required by the discipline. There are implications for students who do not complete the unit, . Feedback stresses the role of students to take responsibility for the development of their communication skills. Where possible, integrated learning support is included within the unit, or at the least, targeted to assessment tasks (see Case Study, ECU's Post-Entry English Language Assessment www.graduatecommunicationskills.com.au).

Outsourcing the development of communication skills

As student cohorts have changed, there has been a dependence on outsourcing the development of communication skills to Academic Language and Learning (ALL) Advisors. This support is largely separated from disciplinary learning. Communication skills are high order cognitive skills important for success in university and for employability yet there has been a false dichotomy in university teaching and learning that separated disciplinary knowledge from communication skills. Effective communication is more than simply using English to transmit disciplinary knowledge. It requires students to demonstrate their level of understanding by, for example, applying information in new ways, analysing how different parts relate to each other, and evaluating and justifying decisions. These are all part of higher cognitive skills where communication is used to demonstrate students' learning and application of the content taught. Students' communication skills include both academic and social communication, and develop as they transition from enrolment, through teaching and learning in an academic environment and into professional employment or further study. As such, communication skills are essential for students to demonstrate their understanding and application of complex ideas in their field of study.

Taking responsibility

The separation of learning support from disciplinary content has become widespread, despite research that shows that communication skills, particularly written work, developed outside of a student's discipline lacks context and specificity (see, for example, Clark and Ivanic, 1997; Gee, 1996; Hyland, 2004; Haggis, 2006; Kalantzis and Cope, 2012; Wingate and Tribble, 2012). A key issue identified through earlier OLT/ALTC projects that investigated the teaching of graduate attributes in Australia found academic staff lacked competence, confidence and/or willingness to implicitly teach communication skills (de la Harpe, Radloff, and Wyber, 2000; Jones, 2008; de la Harpe et al, 2009). In the same vein, it has long been reported by linguists from different pedagogical approaches that many academics lack the expertise to include the explicit teaching of writing, value content over skills, cite an already overcrowded curriculum, have no desire to include 'skills', or do not recognise the need (Hyland, 2002; Haggis, 2006; Clarence, 2012; Wingate, 2007; Lea and Street, 2000; Jacobs, 2005, 2010; Murray, 2013; Theis, et al. 2014).

These fundamental tensions have resulted in either ad-hoc practices that are not sustainable or scalable, do not maximise use of the available resources and, more importantly, do not assure that students have achieved minimum levels of communication skills upon graduation (Arkoudis, 2014). This project addresses this oversight, offering a model that shows how communication skills can be integrated into core disciplinary teaching.

The Research Project

The overall aim of this project was *to achieve genuine advancement in university policies and practices related to graduates' communication skills*. While the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) has resulted in universities mapping learning outcomes linked to AQF levels at the program level, we found that this is a *starting* point rather than the endpoint for ensuring graduates' threshold standards for communication skills. At present, a number of programs find it either difficult, or are unable, to support claims that students have attained these levels because there is little or no assessment of communication skills. Where

there is assessment, there is often no implication should minimum levels not be attained. This is a major obstacle to assuring graduates have attained threshold levels.

We sought to provide outcomes that would be of benefit to a wide range of stakeholders in higher education. These outcomes are specifically targeted at three key areas:

- 1) Institutional level policies, systems and strategies for sustainable practices, which take into account different types of institutions and contexts. The outcomes at this level are intended for institutional leaders and managers to inform strategy development;
- 2) Degree program level practices for integrating communication skills with disciplinary teaching and learning. These outcomes are intended for program leaders and heads of disciplinary academic units to enable them to implement institutional strategies at the local level; and
- 3) Unit of study level practices for ensuring the integration of communication skills learning and assessment within disciplinary units of study.

The project comprised three distinct phases:

Modelling: Based on background research (literature, OLT/ALTC projects, interviews) a discussion paper was developed to inform an evidence-base of practices (Appendix 1). The discussion paper included a draft framework, which informed the development of a Distributed Expertise Model which is detailed later in this report and in Appendix C: 'Graduate Communication Skills Framework'.

Engagement: We engaged with the sector and more broadly with external stakeholders. In 2015, a series of state-based workshops enabled extensive engagement across the sector, allowing stakeholders to contribute and share best practices, and test and fine-tune the framework. These workshops were held in six Australian cities with over 100 institutional representatives from 18 universities. In addition, we conducted over twenty interviews with academic leaders including Deputy-Vice-Chancellors Academic or equivalent, Heads of School, Accreditation Managers, and Teaching and Learning Specialists.

We also conducted interviews with three employer groups; three professional accreditation bodies and representatives from government to inform opportunities and strategies for universities to strengthen their evidence-base for graduate communication skills.

Production and dissemination: In 2016, a series of national dissemination workshops aimed at Program Leaders were held in four Australian cities with representation from 28 universities and higher education institutions and 90 representatives. The workshops explored in detail the best approaches to rethink, consolidate and strengthen approaches to communication skills, as well as raise them to levels that can situate them within institutional quality assurance practices and core business.

The final phases of the project included preparation and dissemination of resources to support universities and other higher education providers based on the framework. The

resources include a succinct articulation of high impact practices for student learning, approaches for monitoring and evaluating practices, and case studies as appropriate.

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2. The Distributed Expertise Model

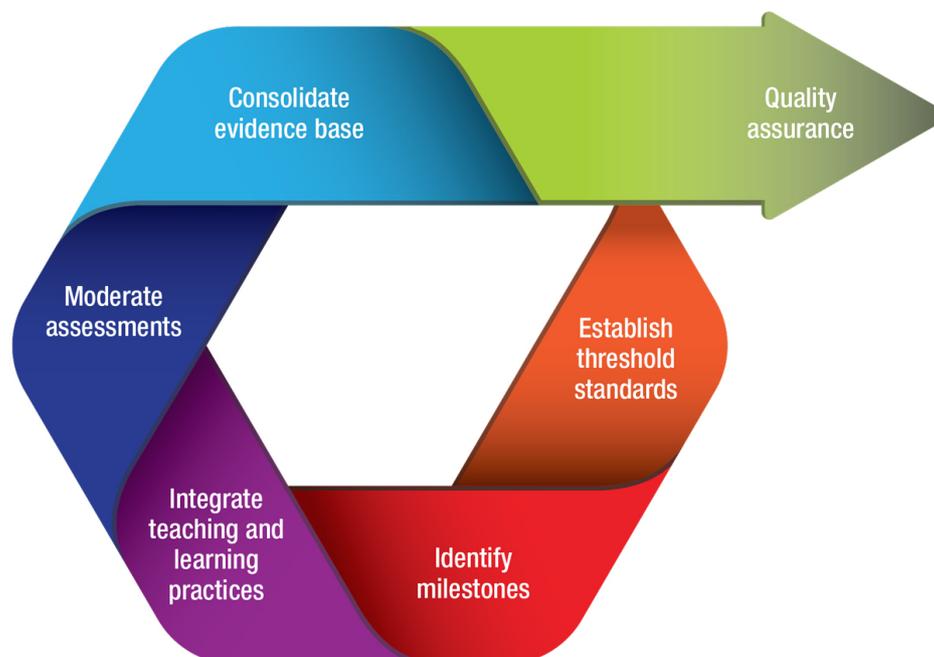
This section presents the *Distributed Expertise Model* (DEM) developed for this project. It introduces the overarching Model, presents the four different approaches that were found to typify the program variations that exists within universities, and offers strategies that can inform whole-of-program approaches for graduate communication skills.

Two main findings from the project led to the implementation of a whole-of-program approach.

1. *The highest impact on student learning is when communication skills are included in disciplinary assessment tasks throughout a student's program.*
2. *Universities know that their graduates have achieved threshold standards of communication skills because of the cumulative milestones that students must meet before they can graduate.*

In order to action these findings, we developed the *Distributed Expertise Model* that offers a way for universities to provide evidence that graduates *have achieved* threshold standards required for communication skills. The DEM incorporated six action points for strengthening the evidence-base for graduate communication skills within a whole-of-program approach. This model is readily adaptable to all programs and aims to assist universities in strengthening their evidence-based approaches to the teaching and learning of communication skills.

Figure 1: Distributed Expertise Model



Principles Underpinning the Model

1. Responsibility for assuring graduates' threshold standards for communication skills is distributed across all stakeholders: institutional leaders, program coordinators, teaching

academics, academic language and learning advisors, students, and representatives from industry and professional associations.

2. University-wide policy outlines requirements for program coordinators regarding quality assurance of students' communications skills.
3. The development and assessment of students' communication skills takes place through cumulative milestones within their program of study.
4. Program teams provide evidence of cumulative milestones that lead to achievement of threshold standards.
5. Leadership is critical to success, both at the institutional level (through systems that provide time and resources), and at the program level (through mapping of course learning outcomes and good learning and teaching practices).

As the research progressed, it became clear that disciplinary programs have differing requirements regarding graduates' communication skills. We identified the following four approaches that inform identification of milestone units as part of the Distributed Expertise Model:

Top and Tail approach

- Used in generic programs at the undergraduate level; for example, Bachelor of Arts or Science.
- Students' levels of communication skills are assessed in both the foundation (or a core) unit and the capstone (or common final) unit.

Professional practice approach

- Used for programs such as nursing, teaching and engineering, which have external professional accreditation standards that include communication skills.
- Students' levels of communication skills are assessed throughout the program in the identified milestone units.
- Students should, ideally, achieve minimum threshold standards prior to enrolling in professional practice placement/s or work integrated learning options.

High entry-level approach

- Used when high entry-level requirements are in place in undergraduate and postgraduate coursework programs; for example, Law or Medicine.
- Students' levels of communication skills are assessed in the first year of study in the identified milestone units.

Higher degree by research approach

- Prior to entry, students demonstrate high level of communication skills using a variety of evidence.
- Students must successfully demonstrate required levels of communication skills at the first significant milestone in their candidature.

Unpacking the Model

Establish Threshold Standards

Interpretations of what constitutes minimum communication skills vary according to different degree programs. It is important to articulate minimum levels of communication skills as a starting point for developing robust learning and teaching approaches within programs. Without this, it is difficult to know if students have demonstrated minimum levels in their oral and written work. As Sadler (2015, p.6) points out “where should the lower boundary be set, so when all units are taken together, the result satisfies disciplinary-based expectations, professional accreditation requirements and the capabilities society expects of higher education graduates”.

Establish Threshold Standards	
What	What are the minimum levels of communication skills we require our students to demonstrate to be eligible for graduation?
When	Establishing threshold standards needs to be included in early curriculum design processes and quality assurance cycles.
Who	The program leader and team, in conjunction with the course advisory committee and/or accreditation bodies, define the types of communication skills required and articulate the levels of mastery required by each student in order for progression and graduation.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify and agree to threshold oral and written communication skills for graduates to be able to pass their degree program. • Design levels or thresholds of achievement that are specific, assessable and measurable. • Confirm the threshold is consistent with graduate attributes, program learning outcomes, industry feedback, relevant professional accreditation requirements, and other requirements including the Australian Qualification Framework (AQF). • Make the threshold visible through approvals, policy documents, staff consultation workshops, and all student information. Inclusion of details within course and unit information for students. • Ensure the process is aligned with established course review cycles to embed, formalise and make explicit the requirements for graduate communication skills.
Evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Course design and review documents including mapping matrices. • Policies that include statements about minimum levels. • Student information including program learning outcomes that refer to required levels of communication skills.

Identify Milestones

Milestones are crucial for quality assurance as they provide the evidence that students have reached the required standard for the program. The focus is on curriculum design across the program.

Identify Milestones	
What	What level of communication skills is necessary for student progression and at what points during the program should they be demonstrated?
When	In the Top and Tail Approach, milestones are likely to be at the commencement and end of the course; whereas in the Professional Practice Approach, they may be included in each year level.
Who	The program and/or course leaders and full teaching team, having established minimum threshold standards, identify the points during the program where students are required to meet specific standards.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Establish points throughout the program when milestone/s must be demonstrated.• Design milestones as summative assessment task/s that act as a 'hurdle' requirement for communication skills.• Identify unit/s in which these tasks will take place.• Map the curriculum to ensure formative or developmental assessment tasks assessing communication skills precede the milestone/s.• Map all tasks on Course Outcomes documentation.• Include support features that are available to students at risk of not meeting the threshold.• Ensure all information related to milestone requirements is made available to students at the commencement of their program.• Develop policies, procedures and mechanisms to manage student support and additional interventions for students who may be at risk of not meeting the milestone.• Ensure all staff in the program are aware of these milestones.
Evidence	Course design that includes mapping of milestones for communication skills meets all requirements of program and institutional committees. Minutes of meetings capture all details. Audits of assessment tasks are noted and support measures are documented.

Integrate Teaching and Learning Practices

Within milestone units, curriculum design practices include communication skills in disciplinary teaching and learning. Constructive curriculum alignment can be used to assist teaching teams and the focus in this step is on the development and assessment of discipline-specific communication skills that demonstrate students' levels of engagement with the content knowledge. It is through English language communication that students and teaching academics interact to exchange and develop understandings of the content.

Integrate Teaching and Learning Practices	
What	What are the teaching and learning approaches that will support students to achieve the communication skills learning outcomes?
When	During curriculum design of the unit.
Who	Despite specific units being nominated for milestones, Head of Program, Unit Coordinators, disciplinary specialists, literacy specialist/s, and librarian/s should all be engaged in the teaching and learning processes.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Map curriculum, teaching and learning activities and assessment tasks against the threshold standards for oral and written communication skills. • Develop assessment rubrics and criteria. • Establish partnerships and develop co-teaching opportunities between teaching academics and literacy specialists. • Budget for professional development activities to up-skill academic staff as required.
Evidence	Teaching and learning plans outline requirements linked to the integration of communication skills within program design. Assessment rubrics and criteria are published.

Moderate Assessment

Most, if not all, Australian universities have institutional-wide policies related to assessment, moderation and benchmarking. Communication skills need to be included in moderation processes, taking into account disciplinary differences that exist in assessing communication skills.

Moderate Assessment	
What	What agreement is there regarding minimum levels of communication skills in the assessment?
When	At the end of each teaching period and during scheduled benchmarking activities.
Who	Head of Program, Unit Coordinators and teaching academics.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that all policies related to assessment and moderation state the process for moderating milestone assessments and include requirements for communication skills more generally. • Collect samples of formative and summative assessment items from across the program and review how oral and written communication skills are integrated. • Ensure the range of tasks is related to Course Learning Outcomes. If specific tasks are required by industry, check suitability. • Review assessment rubrics and criteria linked to communication skills, and benchmark all aspects with suitable partners. • Organise blind marking of milestone assessments to establish and maintain consistency of standards.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In conjunction with teaching academics and literacy specialists, create an assessment bank and feedback examples that demonstrate types and levels of oral and written communication skills.
Evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment and Moderation Policies. • Benchmarking Policies and agreements. • Moderation reports outlining outcomes of moderation and blind re-marking processes. • Minutes of Board of Examiners or Assessment Appeals Committees demonstrating moderation.

Consolidate Evidence-Base

At this stage of the process, evidence is available across the program of the cumulative milestones that provide confirmation of the assessment of students' communication skills. Evidence of levels of attainment can be used for benchmarking purposes.

Consolidate Evidence-Base	
What	What evidence can we collect to demonstrate how communication skills are developed and assessed and to evaluate whether these practices are effective?
When	At the end of each teaching period.
Who	Head of Program, Unit Coordinators.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a process for the collection and review of materials related to course design, assessment, moderation, benchmarking, student support and interventions, and teaching and learning practices for communication skills. • Engage all staff in professional activities that facilitate the sharing of successful strategies, tools and methods for developing and assessing communication skills. • Review practices to ascertain if they are sustainable and scalable across units and the program. • Report review findings and recommendations regarding moderation and benchmarking activities to staff regularly. • Update internal requirements for communication skills as external contexts change, including professional requirements.
Evidence	Evidence is collated and available for internal Academic Board Reviews and external evaluators. Policies for the collection and review of teaching materials are in place.

Quality Assurance

The loop is completed through evaluation of the evidence-base that can result in improving practices across the program, and inform internal course reviews as part of the quality assurance process.

Quality Assurance	
What	What can we do to improve practices across the program to ensure that our students have graduate level oral and written communication skills for future success?
When	Ongoing
Who	Institutional Leaders, Faculty leaders, Heads of Program and all staff.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Update all processes for course review and design to include explicit approvals for the development and assessment of oral and written communication skills.• Monitor performance data and moderation reports to ascertain whether students who do not meet the threshold for communication skills are able to graduate.• Act on feedback from students, employers and staff.• Provide regular reports to leaders, staff and students outlining the actions arising from quality assurance activities and a timeline for implementation.• Review and assess the impact of initiatives designed to assure graduate communication skills at the end of each teaching period.
Evidence	Following this model, university leaders have AQF mapping, along with performance data to support claims of graduates' standards of communication skills.

High Impact Practices for Student Learning

Universities acknowledge that more work needs to be done to evidence that graduates have the requisite levels of oral and written communication skills. In summary, there are many initiatives and a range of practices is emerging across the sector but practices and approaches are varied and lack coherency. Work Integrated Learning (WIL), capstones, course mapping, e-portfolios and diagnostic tools are being increasingly used and stronger alignment of teaching and learning to skills for employment is being adopted. However, greater leadership and institutional policy settings are needed to articulate, influence and cultivate an environment to facilitate accountability for graduate communication skills.

While any intervention based on developing and improving students' communication skills can work, few provide evidence that graduates have attained required standards. The research on impact tells us that learning outcomes need to be visible and scaffolded throughout the program and aligned with teaching and learning activities (Hattie, 2015).

Hence, following the work of Hattie (2015), we sought to identify high impact practices on student learning. The project considers practices for assuring graduate communication skills as high impact if the practice is scalable, applies to all students and is sustainable. High impact practices are

integrated into the assessment and quality assurance processes of the program. For this project, high impact practices for student learning were identified as:

- a. incorporating *assessment* of communication skills within *disciplinary teaching*, and
- b. the inclusion of *implications* should a student fail to achieve minimum communication skill levels at key milestones across the program

High impact practices need to be integrated across a program in a whole-of-program approach. This creates a strong evidence-base that graduates have achieved threshold standards for that program in terms of communication skills.

Assessing Impact

Current practices to support the development of oral and written communication skills of students include monitoring of admission requirements; diagnostic tools to assess English language proficiency at admission; curriculum mapping at unit and program level to align with AQF and professional accreditation requirements; the development of assessment rubrics; assessment moderation; applications to direct at risk students to academic support; benchmarking activities and in some disciplines exit testing.

Citing the existence of these practices as evidence that the oral and written communication skills of students are taken care of is no longer acceptable. Rather the *impact* of practice needs to be evidenced to determine its value to student learning and skill development. Furthermore with pressure on institutional resources to undertake and implement a range of practices, the identification of effective and high impact practices that will contribute to student development is necessary. A robust quality assurance process underpinning academic practice will yield evidence to enable institutions to demonstrate the impact of their practice on the oral and written communications skills of their graduates.

The Impact Assessment Tool can be used to assist in measuring the impact of each practice for the development and assurance of graduate communication skills. The Tool sets out the attributes of high impact practices for assuring and evidencing graduate communication skills. For each practice, institutions can measure the impact by considering the positive responses to the questions in the Tool. For each 'no' or 'not sure' answer, institutions can assess how best to shift practice towards 'yes' or review the practice entirely.

Figure 1 Impact Assessment Tool

Measures	Yes	No	Not sure
Are the levels of oral and written communication skills achievement articulated?			
Is the achievement of these levels of communication skills assessed?			
Can students fail based on communication skill level?			
Does the practice apply to all students?			
Is the practice sustainable?			
Is the practice scalable?			
Is there evidence of student development?			
Does the practice occur across the program?			
Is the practice visible to students?			
Are all staff aware of the practice?			
Are the outcomes of the practice reported at the program level?			

Benefits of the Distributed Expertise Model

The Distributed Expertise Model offers a way for universities to provide evidence that graduates have achieved threshold standards required for communication skills.

- ✓ Responsibility is shared by stakeholders who understand what is required for students to achieve minimum standards.
- ✓ University leaders, generally the DVC Academic or DVC (or PVC) Learning and Teaching, oversee policy compliance, hence there is institutional ownership.
- ✓ Through their engagement on advisory groups, industry bodies and professional associations have confidence in graduates' communications skills.
- ✓ Program teams are involved via mapping of skills, establishing where development of oral and written communication occurs, and devising assessment tasks for appropriate units within the program. As this takes place across the program, strategies and tasks are sustainable and scalable. They are visible to students within weeks of enrolment and, as a result of feedback, remain so during their study.
- ✓ Threshold standards are clearly detailed in program documents and specific unit outlines, along with actions required if the standards are not attained. There are implications if students fail to meet minimum threshold standards. Generally, students will fail the unit and cannot progress until a pass is achieved.

- ✓ As the development and assessment of communication skills is integrated within the program of study, all learning and teaching is contextualised to their program. This is regarded as best practice.
- ✓ A range of contextualised strategies and support measures are available for all students, some of which are linked directly to assessment tasks.
- ✓ Assessment tasks and marking are moderated both internally and externally.
- ✓ There is a strong evidence-base of students' achievement of the required communication skills because it is mandatory that they meet minimum threshold standards at key points throughout their program.

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3. Research informing the DEM

Consultation and Findings

The broad engagement strategies conducted throughout the project including the institutional workshops and interviews with academic leaders yielded a number of important insights, and demonstrated a disconnect across the sector as how to strengthen the evidence-base of oral and written communication skills of students. Similarly, interviews and consultations with employer groups, accreditation bodies and government, confirmed the need for better evidence of how graduates are equipped with the necessary oral and written communication skills.

What was clear from all stakeholder groups, is that while communication skills are key to succeeding in higher education and in the workplace, what is meant by graduate level oral and written skills is often obscure and contingent on the context of the stakeholder.

For universities and higher education institutions, we found broad acknowledgment that more work needs to be done to evidence that graduates have the requisite levels of oral and written communication skills. Similarly, government, employer groups, accreditation and professional bodies flagged the need for evidence that is visible, authentic and relevant to the development and achievement of graduate communication skills.

The project has identified the following key findings:

English language communication skills are very important for graduate employability.

Employers mainly seek graduates who can communicate effectively in oral and written English, and assume that they have the required disciplinary and technical skills. Employers also consider it core business of universities to produce graduates who have appropriate levels of communication skills for the workplace.

Universities in recent years have developed a number of initiatives to develop graduates' communication skills.

There are a number of varied practices in place across many universities to provide support for students in developing their communication skills. However, the project found that a majority of those interviewed in universities were unable to articulate how they knew students graduate with at least minimum levels of communication skills. One of the main reasons for this appears to be that while there are pockets of activity for developing communication skills, these are not assessed within disciplinary teaching and learning contexts, and sit outside quality assurance processes within degree programs.

Assessment of communication skills within degree programs can assure graduates' communication skills.

Universities know that their graduates have achieved threshold standards of communication skills because of the cumulative milestones they must demonstrate before they can graduate. This requires an integrated approach where responsibilities are shared across DVC (Academic), program

co-ordinators, teaching academics and students; and utilises current practices. It also needs to be adequately resourced within institutions.

Usually evidence is an accumulation of processes, proxies and milestones

There is no one solution to ensuring that all graduates have the required communication skills upon graduation. Rather, institutions can build an evidence-base demonstrating how communication skills are developed, assessed and validated through a holistic, embedded and continual approach across the institution's operations.

Other broad themes that emerged from consultations include:

- Initiatives and practices targeting the issue of communication skills are emerging across the higher education sector but practices and approaches are varied and lack coherency;
- Greater leadership and institutional policy settings are needed to articulate, influence and cultivate an environment where communication skill development and assurance is stimulated within institutions;
- Employers consider oral and written communication skills of graduates critical to employability but there are concerns about a diversity of graduate behaviours, attitudes, competencies and skills which are often articulated by employers in terms of communication skills;
- Employers and universities need to work more closely to bridge the gap between expectations of graduates from employers and academic requirements within curriculum;
- The communication skills of graduates is a key concern of government to maintain the integrity and reputation of the Australian sector;
- More robust evidence that students are able to demonstrate graduate attributes, particularly communication skills is required for regulatory and accreditation purposes; and
- Professional bodies seek evidence that students have achieved context-specific communication skills aligned to the demands of professional practice.

Institutional Approaches

To gain broad perspectives, practices and views about the issue of graduate communication skills the project team conducted a series of state-based institutional workshops in 2015 and conducted over twenty semi-structured interviews with senior academic staff around the country including Deputy-Vice-Chancellors Academic or equivalent, Heads of School, Accreditation Managers, and Teaching and Learning Specialists.

A number of themes emerged from the workshops and interviews that identified a shared understanding of significant issues impacting on graduate communication skills in higher education:

- Student entry pathways into higher education are diverse
- Admission is no longer a standard bearer in higher education
- Oral and written communication skills are not the same as English proficiency
- Different understanding (or interpretation) of what constitutes graduate level communicative ability
- Exit thresholds for the communication skills of graduates is problematic
- A lack of clarity about what evidence is required
- Usually evidence is an accumulation of processes, proxies and milestones
- Work Integrate Learning (WIL) and capstone experiences are important for developing communication skills.

While a shared understanding of the key challenges and contexts relevant to the development and evidencing of graduate communication skills was identified, a less clear understanding of what practices worked best to achieve this emerged. To some degree, differences in admission practices, student cohort and program offerings may influence the need for diverse practice across the sector. Moreover, the variability of practices and initiatives across the sector represents an energised effort towards addressing the issue of oral and written communication skills in higher education without clear evidence of which practice will be most effective and resource friendly.

The following section is a distillation of differentiated practices and identified priorities towards achieving best practice collected during the workshops and through interviews. Practices have been organised under broad headings indicating a particular policy area.

Early Identification, Assessment and Support is essential to evaluate a student's capacity to progress successfully through the program. Rather than rely on imprecise measures for admission as a proxy for communicative ability, the use of diagnostic assessments and transition mechanisms are increasingly being used by HEIs. The earlier a student's learning needs are identified the better able HEIs are to provide targeted and timely support to mitigate failure. There is currently a diversity of approaches towards these early identification tools with some universities using them to provide support services to international students only, while for others they represent one element of a more integrated suite of practices for communication skills support. Some issues identified by those interviewed included the perception of students that these assessments were for international students only and are considered remedial; that they were often stand-alone measures disconnected from the broader curriculum; and that they may reinforce to academic staff that communication support is outside core responsibility.

Program Design is an important element in the development and measurement of student learning outcomes at the program level. Across the sector the use of Program Learning Outcomes are mapped against individual units to ensure coherent and key skills are developed throughout the duration of the program. While mapping exercises can sometimes represent 'tick-box' exercises which diminish the integrity of the program, other HEIs are developing online analytic applications that provide visualisations of mapping to evidence that assessment is aligned to program learning outcomes and to graduate attributes. While learning outcomes can be articulated and mapped most universities agreed that setting thresholds of achievement for outcomes was problematic but desirable.

Curriculum design is evolving across the sector to better align teaching and learning with employability skills. Key features include the introduction of individual units for employability with a focus on communication skills for professional employment; capstone courses which embed employability skills or may represent work place experience; work integrated learning (WIL) opportunities and in some cases using successful WIL grade as a condition of graduation. Greater effort to expose students to communication skills required and expected by industry is through the guest speakers who model communication necessary for the workplace, although many observed that more work was needed to include industry.

Assessment is the best opportunity a student has to demonstrate their level of communication skills. However, most universities reported that a number of issues currently hampered the effectiveness of assessment as evidence of a student's communicative ability. Firstly, the variability in assessment

practices and policies within institutions and a lack of mechanisms ensuring consistency was a challenge; second, assessment rubrics often undermined the importance of oral and written communication skills to both the student and the assessor with most rubrics capping the communication skills value at ten per cent of the total mark; and third, the need to diversify assessment tasks so that students can develop employability skills and be exposed to more nuanced forms of communication ability. The use of ePortfolios for the collection of assessment items as evidence of student achievement is seeing increased use across the sector. The use of portfolios in digital form provides useful data for students to demonstrate skill level and reflection for improvement and is also valuable data of student development that can be used by universities to document, measure and report achievement levels.

Progression was identified as a key issue by many of those interviewed. New conceptions of milestones representing not just a pass for each unit but a more explicit measure to assess key skills including communication skills is being considered by many universities. These types of milestones act as a gatekeeper for student progression especially in disciplines where communication skills are key attributes.. Other approaches that are emerging include formally identifying the focus of communication skills development over the program such that first year is about transition, second year consolidation and third year refinement. One of the issues encountered with these practices is the need to formally articulate thresholds for effective application.

Data collection and analysis about student's communication skills are not well developed across the sector. Some information about the communication skills component of individual assessment items can be harvested from platforms like Blackboard© and Turnitin©. However, while individual staff members may utilise data held in these systems, practice is not widespread. Additionally, while the use of learning analytics is developing to identify students at risk, information is not usually specific enough to provide triggers or alerts based on individual students' communication skills. A number of universities recognised the need for greater quantitative measures and analytic applications to contribute to a strengthened evidence-base of student achievement, allow greater moderation and provide the basis for academic support.

Professional Development for academic staff undertaking disciplinary teaching was identified as a persistent issue in the development of communication skills especially at the undergraduate level. In particular, the need to include sessional staff in professional development and learning is essential due to the large share of teaching they perform. Further, to achieve a distributed expertise model the inclusion and resourcing of all staff, including sessional staff is necessary and productive. Some interviewees discussed the possibility that academic staff require a Professional Certificate in Assessment to stimulate best practice.

Quality Assurance measures to ensure graduates achieve appropriate communication skills require greater attention across the sector. While most institutions have in place reporting mechanisms for performance data and in some cases unit reports that detail communication skills for cohorts, very few academic leaders interviewed could point to evidence-based approaches to demonstrate graduate communication skills other than course mapping and student progression. As such opportunities to further develop robust mechanisms for the collection of data exist within institutions through quality assurance measures such as moderation, calibration, benchmarking and reporting.

Academic leaders, through implementation, communication and support for institution wide policy and practice, cultivate institutional culture. Leadership visibly demonstrating the need to strengthen evidence that students achieve appropriate communication skills influences staff, faculty and students. Leadership that articulates a consistent message will facilitate agreement about the expected outcomes of appropriate communication skills development. Many HEIs reported that clear and aspirational policies for communication skills focuses attention on a shared goal and provides an accessible reference point to guide practice.

Themes from Interviews with Key External Stakeholders

Government

The Australian government is a key stakeholder in assuring that our higher education system produces graduates that meet the expectations and needs of employers and that it fulfils obligations to students and parents to develop higher education at appropriate academic standards. Australian higher education needs to be competitive globally and therefore the achievement of graduate outcomes including key skills sought by employers such as communication skills, needs to meet the expectations of a range of stakeholders not least students. Representatives of the Department of Education and Training (DOET) and The Tertiary Education and Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) were interviewed for this project.

Government acknowledges that more can be done within universities to highlight the importance of communication skills and increase visibility of achievement standards for communication skills. Currently, there is a lack of evidence that points to how graduates have achieved graduate communication skills and is usually received through employer feedback post-graduation such survey data suggests employers are not satisfied with graduates' communication skills.

While it is important for industry and business to better define what their needs are and what skill-sets they need, universities also need to adjust to the broad expectation that their role includes preparation for graduate employment. Therefore, more visible achievement standards are required. This may require work integrated learning (WIL) experiences or other elements of the curriculum designed to enhance employability, included on certification or graduation statements.

For TEQSA the challenges associated with assuring graduate communication skills reflect the inherent issue with outcomes based regulation and accreditation as to how an outcome can be demonstrated. As there are no consistent and universal methods for demonstrating outcomes in higher education, other indirect methods of evidencing graduate outcomes must be adopted. Primarily, evidence of outcomes is usually process based or based on proxies.

As with the Higher Education Threshold Standards (2011), the new Higher Education Standards (2015) places the onus on institutions to demonstrate outcomes. Learning outcomes are a paramount concern to TEQSA. Of key interest to TEQSA is how institutions themselves ensure that whatever combination of units a student takes to qualify for a program will assure that disciplinary and generic skills have been demonstrated and assessed.

Of course, how each institution does this may differ and therefore the evidence presented to demonstrate learning outcomes will differ across the sector and according to the qualification level and the field of education.

The project has undertaken an analysis of the new Standards Framework with reference to the Distributed Expertise Model (Appendix D Aligning the distributed expertise model (DEM) and the Higher Education Standards (2015)).

Employer Groups

With increased emphasis on employability and the use of employer feedback to measure graduate outcomes in Australia, interviews with key industry groups including Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI), Australian Industry Group (AIG) and The Business Council of Australia (BCA) were conducted to identify key issues facing employers in relation to graduate communication skills.

As a nexus between government, higher education and business, employer groups are active participants in the policy context for educational outcomes and are key stakeholders in the assurance of graduate outcomes. Employer groups represent a large and diverse range of employers, play key roles in public policy formulation and contribute to initiatives to strengthen graduate outcomes for businesses. For example, ACCI and BCA are two of five partners for the National Work Integrated Learning (WIL) strategy aimed to address literacy and numeracy skills development, and raise awareness of professional and workplace environments, through professional learning.

All employer groups interviewed noted concerns about the levels of oral and written communication skills of graduates as expressed by employers. It was noted that the issue of communication skills for graduates is a perennial discussion for employers as the importance of oral, written and interpersonal communication is a central element of employment. The enduring issue of communication skills can lead to the perception that there must be a problem. While employers concede that there is not a crisis in the communication skills of graduates, there is a general view that universities need to do more in developing, assessing and making visible communication skills aligned to professional competencies and employer expectations.

Based on employer feedback, the groups report that businesses want graduates who can problem solve, who are able to contextualise communication skills to the workplace, who are flexible, adaptable and who are interested in learning. These are often attitudinal attributes where appropriate communication skills are critical. Therefore when graduate employees disappoint on these measures often the criticism is about their communication skills.

One group observed that often the real concern at the heart of what many employers report as poor communication skills may be an issue of 'work readiness'. However, "work readiness" has become an increasingly problematic term and contingent on specific context for meaning. In this way, the conversation about communication skills and broader 'soft or generic' skills for graduate employment is often difficult given the lack of specific or agreed measures for professional practice in many contexts.

Another group reported that perspectives on graduate employment from members do not always focus on disciplinary specific or technical skills but focus on communication skills. Underdeveloped communications skills can influence employer perceptions of graduates in many complex ways including in less tangible behavioural and interpersonal conduct. This can include appropriateness of language and presentation skills, which are often masked when employers articulate concerns around 'communication skills'. In this way employer feedback relating to communication skills is often based on quite different measures from the oral and written communication skills developed and assessed during a higher education qualification.

While all interviewees recognised a misalignment between the oral and written skills developed in higher education and the needs of professional work, the role business should play in contributing to developing specific communication skills was less clear. For large companies, graduate programs are designed to develop skills that are not expected as part of higher education curricula or experience. These employer- resourced programs often address professional communication skills, corporate culture and behaviours, and other technical or industry specific knowledge and skills. However, for smaller businesses with restrictions on resources, or for professions where the skill base of employees is narrow or highly specialised these programs are usually not available. In these cases, often businesses may expect 'career-ready' graduates. The variability of professional roles and contexts and the expectations of specific employers regarding the communication skills of graduates is immense, and can often create tension between employers and graduates which can contribute to a sense of waning academic standards in higher education.

External accreditation agencies and professional bodies

External accreditation agencies represent significant elements of the architecture for assuring graduate communication skills in Australia. The three agencies interviewed, Engineers Australia (EA), the Dental Council of Australia (DCA) and Chartered Practising Accountants (CPA) Australia, are key stakeholders in the development and assessment of communication skills aligned to the demands and requirements of professional practice. Each of these national agencies accredits higher education programs according to specific accreditation standards. These include intellectual, technical and functional, personal, organisational and business management, interpersonal and communication skills. Only graduates who have passed all units in an accredited program are eligible for professional practice. As such, the agencies have an important role in protecting professional standards, reputation and in managing risk to employers and the broader community. As agencies that set professional learning outcome standards for professional practice in Australia across engineering, dentistry and accountancy industries the perspectives of accreditation agencies in relation to communication skills is significant.

For each agency, oral and written communication skills are considered crucial graduate attributes. For professions such as Engineering and Accountancy, the nature of work has evolved such that oral and written communication skills are increasingly as important as the technical skills.. For example, project management, client negotiation, cultural awareness and appropriate interpersonal skills required for successful practice rely on well-developed communicative ability. For health professions such as Dentistry, graduate communication skills are considered compulsory to practice due to the potential health risks of poor or ineffective communication.

The specificity of professional contexts provides a level of specificity to the descriptors, standards or domains that define the nature of oral and written and communication skills required for practice. Across the accreditation requirements articulated by the agencies in relation to communication skills, the definitional scope is broader than oral and written communication skills only and can include transparency, confidentiality, emotional intelligence, clarity, sensitivity to cultural and social contexts, conflict resolution and the ability to read and listen effectively. While these descriptors are broad in scope there are no explicit thresholds, except the measurement of English proficiency for international students. To achieve program accreditation HEIs must provide evidence that students have opportunities to develop and demonstrate the professional skills, competencies and learning outcomes against the accreditation standards or descriptors. HEIs usually do this by mapping the learning outcomes for each unit against the assessment to demonstrate that requisite skills are measured.

However, there is some concern that although mapping for communication skills can be demonstrated within a unit or across a program, the marking rubrics used for each assessment item may undermine the intent of the mapping. For example, if assessment rubrics routinely attribute a nominal value to communication skills of 10 per cent, students can continue to pass each assessment item over the course of the program despite failing to demonstrate the communication skills intended to be assessed. Another issue for some accreditation agencies is the emergence of first year communication skills units which usefully indicate the explicit assessment of oral and written communication skills early in the program, but do not evidence the development of communication skills over the duration of the program. Agencies reported that more nuanced and detailed evidence would be preferable to mapping. For example, portfolios of student assessment are considered useful tools for the collection of evidence demonstrating how assessment is aligned with accreditation requirements. Portfolios also demonstrate levels of competency and reflective practice to demonstrate the relevance of each assessment and its application to professional practice.

Although each of the agencies interviewed has a different focus concerning the specific communication skills required for professional practice, many shared perspectives emerged. There was consensus that HEIs need better evidence to demonstrate that each student's communication skills has been developed, assessed and measured. Across the agencies a number of high impact practices were identified that would contribute to a stronger evidence base for HEIs:

- WIL or capstone experiences that provide realistic work experiences and exposure
- Assessment diversity that develops authentic professional skills such as report writing, developing recommendations, writing briefs or leading a meeting.
- Communication skills conceived more broadly to include written, oral, personal behaviours and attitudes
- Benchmarking and calibration of assessment, curriculum design, marking rubrics and weightings across institutions
- Greater collaboration with industry
- Marking rubrics that ensure students who fail the communication skills component do not pass the assessment
- Work placements over the duration of the program
- Hurdles to graduation including passing work placements
- Portfolios to collect evidence of student achievement

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Table 1 Key Findings External Stakeholders

Key Findings Government
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government has a key stake in assuring oral and written communication skills of graduates. • More robust evidence that graduates have achieved communication skills is necessary. • Curriculum that enhances graduate employability would benefit employers and graduates. • Quality assurance mechanisms within institutional operations including professional development, academic leadership and benchmarking can contribute to assuring learning outcomes including communication skills are achieved.
Key Findings Employer Groups
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employers consider oral and written communication skills of graduates critical to employability. • Concerns about a diversity of graduate behaviours, attitudes, competencies and skills are often articulated by employers in terms of communication skills; • Employers value graduates that can apply academic skills to work-place environments. • Universities need to do more to demonstrate how key communication skills for employment are being developed, assessed and evidenced. • Employers and universities need to work more closely to bridge the gap between expectations of graduates from employers and academic requirements within curriculum.
Key Findings Accreditation Agencies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional accreditation agencies consider the demonstration of specific communication skills as essential for entry into practice, • There are a range of risks associated with students graduating without the requisite communication skills for practice including financial, organisational, reputational, physical and medical. • A broader conception of what oral and written communication skills means is required within HEIs. • Agencies seek nuanced and detailed evidence of how HEIs develop, assess and measure the communication skills of students in professional programs. • High impact practices include greater alignment to professional competencies, scaffolded development over the duration of the program and the teaching and learning architecture to ensure students who do not have the appropriate communication skills do not graduate.

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