

Facilitating self-directed learning amongst international students of health sciences: The dual discourse of self-efficacy

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This paper reports on a curriculum initiative that was designed to address the need for international students at an Australian university to access the range of learning services available to them outside of regular coursework. The initiative was motivated by the well-documented low rate of uptake of services across the tertiary sector, and by Principle 3 of the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations' (DEEWR) *Good Practice Principles for English Language Proficiency for International Students in Australian Universities*, which stipulates that students take greater responsibility for their learning and that universities inform students of the opportunities available to them. The paper explains how students were set the task of exploring the learning services in their environment. It also explains how this task was given discipline-specific validity for students of health sciences by embedding it within a thematic course unit focussed on the concept of "self-efficacy". Data about the effectiveness of the initial implementation of the task are discussed. Preliminary findings indicated students saw value in attending services but required a clearer rationale for doing so as part of an in-course assignment.

Key Words: learner responsibility, academic language and learning, academic support, English for academic purposes, learning services, good practice principles, self-efficacy, health sciences, curriculum.

1. Introduction: Implementing the *Good Practice Principles*

Developments about the way forward for academic language and learning (ALL) in Australian universities have been strongly influenced by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR)'s report *Good Practice Principles for English Language Proficiency for International Students in Australian Universities*, published in 2009. The document served two functions: (i) "to describe what is known about current good practice"; and (ii) "to assist universities and other institutions in reviewing and improving their own activities" (DEEWR, 2009, Document 1, p. 2). As Dunworth (2010, p. 6) points out, debate about academic language proficiency prior to this report was focussed "primarily on using gatekeeping devices to restrict access to higher education courses", but since publication, this has shifted "to a more nuanced view that also incorporates the responsibility of universities to address their students' language development needs over the course of their studies".

Going forward, discussion will increasingly focus on the actual implementation of the *Good Practice Principles* (GPPs). So far, there have been few published accounts of how the principles have been activated at the institutional, program or course level. A search of the Database on Research in International Education contains only two such papers. Bartlett (2009) discusses the various ways in which the notion of "responsibility for learning" is understood by

students and considers the implications of this for implementing GPP #3 (the principle that asserts the responsibility of students to actively develop language proficiency). Dunworth (2009) explicates Curtin University of Technology's mechanism for enabling students to assess their own English language needs (the online tool "UniEnglish") and places it in the context of the GPPs.

This is not to claim that initiatives are not underway in most Australian universities. Indeed, as mentioned, one function of the DEEWR (2009) report was to document examples of good practice already in place throughout Australian higher education. The report points to the exemplars contained in the government-commissioned discussion paper, "In-course language development and support" (Arkoudis & Starfield, 2007) – which contains eight case studies of content-based curriculum interventions – and the submission by the Association for Academic Language and Learning (AALL) to DEEWR's GPP project, which contains two such case studies (see DEEWR, 2009). As a way of promoting further exposure of context-specific innovations, DEEWR (2009) recommended that the department "make arrangements for the hosting and maintenance of a resource website for use by universities" that would contain, amongst other things, "examples of initiatives and good practices underway within universities" (Document 3, p. 1). However, this recommendation has yet to be acted on.

DEEWR (2009, Document 1, p. 4) suggests five areas in which the GPPs can be most effectively implemented:

1. University-wide Strategy, Policy and Resourcing
2. Prospective Students and Entry Standards
3. Curriculum Design and Delivery
4. Transition and Social and Academic Interaction
5. Quality Assurance.

For ALL course developers, the third area (curriculum design and delivery) is of primary importance. For them, the key question is, "How can the *Good Practice Principles* be manifested in learning and assessment activities?" It is on this area that the present paper focuses, by showcasing one curriculum initiative that was put in place at an Australian university and explaining how it links to one of the GPPs (as well as presenting some preliminary findings on its effectiveness).

2. Good Practice Principle #3

Specifically, this paper is concerned with *Good Practice Principle 3*. Before outlining the implementation strategy, therefore, it is necessary to understand the principle itself. GPP #3 is defined as follows:

Students have responsibilities for further developing their English language proficiency during their study at university and are advised of these responsibilities prior to enrolment. (DEEWR, 2009, Document 1, p. 3)

The principle thus has two distinct aspects: (i) the responsibility of students to develop their language proficiency during tertiary study; and (ii) the responsibility of institutions to inform students of the resources available for doing so.

There are many ways in which students could take responsibility for the ongoing development of their language proficiency. One strategy is to take advantage of the range of (generally free) language and learning support services available on campus. Most if not all Australian universities offer learning support workshops, individual consultations with language support staff, social interaction through clubs or a student exchange program, and career development seminars or consultations. However, a recent report from the Australian Learning and Teaching Council suggests that these services are underutilised: "Despite the time and effort that has been invested in language and learning support for international students in Australian universities ... it seems that, for a number of reasons, many students avoid or are unable to use such services" (Rochecoste, Oliver, Mulligan, & Davies, 2010, p. 20).

The initiative outlined in this paper seeks to redress the lack of take-up by making one-off access of the services an assigned task within four foundational ALL courses taken by the majority of international students with English as an additional language (EAL).

3. The institutional and course context

The strategy was undertaken at Griffith University, an institution situated at five campuses in South East Queensland. It is Australia's ninth largest higher education provider with a student population of 43,000, of whom approximately 20% are international students. In 2010, a program of four full-credit English Language Enhancement Courses (ELECs) was put in place by the university executive with the participation of top-level management in all academic elements. Importantly, this was not a stand-alone initiative conceived by, and implemented within, a single faculty, department, degree or course, as is the case in many universities, but rather a top-down model of a campus-wide intervention in line with DEEWR's (2009) recommendation that universities adopt "an overall philosophy and systematic plan for English language development endorsed by senior management" (Document 2, p. 9). Each course was aligned with one of the university's major academic groupings:

- English Language and Communication for Business and Commerce
- English Language and Communication for Health
- English Language and Communication for Science, Environment, Engineering and Technology
- English Language and Communication for Arts and Social Sciences.

The courses were intended to boost the oral and written English language skills of international students and to maximise their chances of succeeding in their academic studies. They were also created to ensure that the University met the requirements of the GPPs.


Since 2010, all international students enrolled at Griffith have been required to take an ELEC as part of their degree (preferably in the first semester of the first year), unless they are exempted by having met certain criteria. Each course runs for one 13-week term, with a 2-hour lecture and a 2-hour tutorial per week. The curriculum innovation that is the subject of this paper was implemented in the health course for students of nursing, psychology, human services, social work, exercise science and biomedical science.

4. The university service reflection task

Due to the compulsory nature of the program, the designers of the ELEC curriculum saw an opportunity to promote take-up of learning services by a large number of international students early in their degree. They did this by creating a "University Service Reflection Task" (USRT) and making it a small part of the assessment for each of the four courses. In short, students were obliged to research the range of learning opportunities (for convenience's sake, labelled "services") open to them at university, then access at least one and submit a written reflection on the experience. The task sheet that students received is shown in Fig. 1.

It was hoped that the task would heighten student awareness of – and the need to avail themselves of – the resources available for developing ALL capabilities throughout their degree (i.e. GPP #3) in three ways:

1. by ensuring that all students receive a thorough orientation to the learning support activities at the very beginning of their degree;
2. by ensuring that students seriously consider the pros and cons of
 - (a) all such activities – by selecting one to attend, and
 - (b) one activity in particular – by composing a written reflection; and
3. by ensuring that all students did actually access at least one service, breaking the cycle of avoidance of learning opportunities offered outside of compulsory coursework.



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PORTFOLIO: UNIVERSITY SERVICE REFLECTION TASK

Task

- Attend one of the services below and write a reflection on your experience.
- Note that some services are not offered after Week 6 in the semester, and that almost all of them will require advanced bookings to attend. It is your responsibility to make arrangements to attend the service of choice as early as possible. Refer to the relevant website below for further information regarding service dates.
- The selected service must be conducted in English and must not have been specifically created for members of your nationality.
- The reflection is to be 250 words (+/- 10%). A word count should be in brackets at the end of the reflection.
- The reflection is to be typed (1.5 line spacing) and in 12 point Arial font.
- The reflection is to be submitted with your completed portfolio in Week 11. If this task is not submitted, 10% will be deducted from the final portfolio score.
- The reflection should include the following parts:
 - **Introduction**
This includes an overview of your academic situation, the service chosen, and your reason for choosing this particular service.
 - **Body**
This includes a description of the service (eg. where, when, who, and what was involved) and a review of the service (eg. what was useful for you, how you intend to apply the knowledge learned, and what areas were not satisfied by the service).
 - **Conclusion**
This includes your overall appraisal of the service and suggestions for future personal development in this area.

Services

- **Library Learning Services** (academic, computing, and library research services):
 - <http://www.griffith.edu.au/library/workshops-training>
 - http://www.griffith.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/109992/ls-guide-draft-2010-website.pdf
- **StudentLinx** (social networking service):
 - <http://www.griffith.edu.au/griffith-english-language-institute/university-initiatives/student-linx>
- **EnglishHELP** (English Higher Education Language Program):
 - <http://www.griffith.edu.au/griffith-english-language-institute/university-initiatives/englishhelp>
- **Careers and Employment** (job search seminars and career counselling appointments):
 - <https://intranet.secure.griffith.edu.au/community-welfare-recreation/careers-employment/assistance-with-job-search/job-search-seminars>
 - <https://intranet.secure.griffith.edu.au/community-welfare-recreation/find-career-direction/?a=78458>
- **Griffith University Clubs** (professional, political, recreational, social, religious, sporting etc.):
 - <http://www.griffith.edu.au/clubs/clubs-a-to-z>

Figure 1. The University Service Reflection Task (student handout).

The task touches on the paradoxical nature of learner autonomy and agency, much debated in TESOL over the past 30 years. That is, how can a compulsory assignment (within a compulsory course) promote self-directed learning? Smith (2008) sums up the debate thus:

There persists a tension ... between pedagogical approaches which construe autonomy primarily as something learners lack and so need to be 'trained towards' and those which take as a starting point the idea that learners – of whatever background culture – are already able, at least to some degree, to exercise control over their own learning. (p. 396)

The USRT does not imply that international students are unable to exercise control over their own learning, but it does recognise that some element of training towards greater take-up of learning opportunities is appropriate early in their degrees.

5. Implementation within the course

This section focuses on the discipline-specific framework used to implement the USRT in the health strand of ELEC. Although the task could be implemented as a stand-alone activity (as it was in the business, science and arts courses), recent English for Academic Purposes (EAP) literature supports a movement away from generic approaches to ALL in favour of content-based syllabi. Baik and Greig (2009) make this case in their evaluation of an adjunct ESL tutorial program for architecture students. Their literature review shows that:

- student attendance is worse for generic academic skills programs as opposed to discipline-specific ones;
- the generic approach lacks a theoretical rationale, whereas discipline-specificity is supported by models of language-in-context widely accepted in applied linguistics; and
- preliminary findings indicate the discipline-specific approach results in better academic outcomes for students.

Baik and Grieg (2009, p. 410) conclude that “students value those aspects of the program that are focused on the content of the course rather than the more generic language and academic skills”.

On this basis the task was incorporated into the health course within a unit of work driven by the theme of “self-efficacy”. An advantage of this theme was its relevance to students from the full spectrum of health disciplines, including psychology, social work, nursing, human services, and biomedical and exercise science. First, then, we need to understand what is meant by “self-efficacy” and the reasons for its utility within ALL practice.

5.1. Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is a central concept in social cognitive theory, most closely associated with the Canadian psychologist Albert Bandura (1997). Every individual formulates personal efficacy beliefs, referred to as one’s “perceived self-efficacy”. These are one’s convictions about the likelihood that actions will or will not result in intended outcomes. A lack of self-efficacy cripples an individual’s incentive to act, and conversely, a strong sense of self-efficacy can lead to a range of positive and productive behaviours.

One’s sense of self-efficacy, according to Bandura (1997), can fluctuate in accordance with four major factors: (i) enactive mastery experience (our belief is impacted by what we achieve – both the things we do and those we don’t do); (ii) vicarious sources (our belief is impacted by observations of others’ achievements); (iii) verbal persuasion (our belief is impacted by what others tell us); and (iv) physiological/affective states (our belief is impacted by how we feel). The USRT (and associated tutorial materials, as explained in the next section) fits into the first category, since it involves an actual experience, namely visiting and critiquing a university service.

Another important link between the USRT and self-efficacy is the concept of critical thinking – a common staple of ALL instruction. For Bandura (1997), a key to human adaptation and change is to recognise that social and institutional structures are not immutable. These structures are created by people as much as people are created by them. Social structures place constraints on individuals but also provide the resources for personal development. People lacking self-efficacy are “less apt to exploit the enabling opportunities provided by the social system and are easily discouraged by institutional impediments”, whereas self-efficacious people “are quick to take advantage of opportunity structures and figure out ways to circumvent institutional constraints” (Bandura, 1997, p. 6). Within this paradigm, critical thinking is viewed as the ability to evaluate the constraints and affordances of one’s environment, diagnose options, and exercise choice. For university students, this means the ability to recognise, create and take advantage of learning opportunities in the academic context. Significantly for the university service *reflection* task, Bandura notes that “the making of choices is aided by reflective thought” (1997, p. 7). Critical thinking, then, is an example of self-efficacious behaviour.

One way of developing the skills for the critical analysis of, and direct action upon, one's environment is to understand the typical reasons people are *not* self-efficacious (and thereby avoid such habits). The main reasons, according to Bandura (1997), are lack of perceived benefits (the effort involved in an activity overrides the lure of potential outcome), self-induced dependency (allowing someone else to do a task on one's behalf), interpersonal intimidation (high confidence opponents undermine one's ability to perform at routine levels), conforming to type (one's performance conforms to a subordinate label or inferior role that is externally imposed), and perceived task difficulty (dwelling on the difficult aspects of a task hampers self-belief). By making students aware of these negative strategies (as is done in the learning materials discussed in the following section), ALL practitioners can potentially reduce their impact on individuals' progress through university.

The multidimensional nature of self-efficacy is another reason why it is a useful concept in ALL curricula. Self-efficacy is often referred to as being "domain-specific": that is, it is evident in different domains of individuals' lives to different degrees. For example, driving a car and fixing a car can be affected by different levels of self-belief: I may see myself as a competent driver but a hopeless mechanic. Thus, "general self-efficacy" is a reasonably blunt concept: we need to evaluate self-belief in reference to specific areas of activity. Two such domains in which efficacy beliefs play a major role in people's lives are scholastic achievement and health. Regarding the former – "academic self-efficacy" – there is a vast literature on how self-belief influences student advancement (e.g., Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991; Pajares, 2003; Schunk, 2003; and Zimmerman, 2000). A common finding is that

self-efficacious students participate more readily, work harder, persist longer, and have fewer adverse emotional reactions when they encounter difficulties than do those who doubt their capabilities. (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 86)

The literature on self-efficacy and health is also substantial (e.g. Strecher, De Vellis, Becker, & Rosenstock, 1986; Schwarzer & Fuchs, 1995; Schwarzer, 2001), and the findings are not dissimilar to those in education. For example, Schwarzer (2001, p. 48) states that "the intention to change a habit that affects health depends to some degree on a firm belief in one's capability to exercise control over that habit". Closely echoing Zimmerman's comments on education, Schwarzer (2001) notes that in the area of health-related self-efficacy,

self-beliefs influence the goals people set for themselves, what courses of action they choose to pursue, how much effort they invest in given endeavors, and how long they persevere in the face of barriers and setbacks. (p. 48)

It is this dual application of self-efficacy to both health and learning that makes it useful in a course on academic language and learning for health sciences. It can engage students on both levels, being relevant to their professional lives, where the goal will be to nurture self-efficacy beliefs in patients and clients, and relevant to their student lives, where the goal is to seek out ways to ensure scholastic achievement. Capitalising on the bi-dimensionality of self-efficacy was therefore a design principle underlying the materials developed for the self-efficacy unit, as outlined in the next section.

5.2. The self-efficacy unit

As mentioned above, each ELEC consists of a two-hour lecture and a two-hour tutorial each week. In preparation for the lecture in this unit, students have a required reading: "Perceived self-efficacy in health promoting behaviour" – a sub-section of chapter 7 of Bandura's (1997) defining work, *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. In the lecture, students are given an introduction to the concept of self-efficacy and are encouraged to consider how and why it is important in health care. (In the early stages of the unit, therefore, the focus is solely on discipline-specific material.) Thus, students consider Bandura's ideas concerning the link between self-efficacy and health outcomes, as summarised here:

lifestyle habits can enhance or impair health. Thus, people can exert some behavioral control over the vitality and quality of their health. Social

cognitive theory distinguishes among three basic processes of personal change: the adoption of new behavior patterns, their generalized use under different circumstances, and their maintenance over time (Bandura, 1986a). Efficacy beliefs affect each of these phases of personal change: whether people even consider changing their health habits, whether they can enlist the motivation and perseverance needed to succeed should they choose to do so, their success in restoring control after setbacks, and how well they maintain the changes they have achieved. (Bandura, 1997, p. 279)

In the second half of the lecture, links are made between these ideas and the field of education. The argument is pitched that, just as patients are best served by taking control of their own health – e.g., by altering unhealthy lifestyle habits – rather than relying solely on the so-called “expert” (doctor, nurse, psychologist, etc.) to cure their ills, so too international students are best served by taking responsibility for their own learning, rather than relying on the so-called “expert” (discipline lecturer, ALL adviser, etc.) to improve their language proficiency or academic results.

These ideas are reinforced by various learning activities within the lecture. In one task (Fig. 2), students are presented with the five major reasons why people typically relinquish personal control over their actions (as discussed in the previous section). They are then asked to discuss whether, as international students, they have ever harboured similar thoughts.

Reasons People Relinquish Personal Control	Have you ever thought...?
The effort involved in mastering an activity outweighs perceived benefits.	“I won’t study something that I don’t receive a grade for.”
Self-induced dependency: an easy outcome is obtained by getting someone else to do the task for you.	“I’ll copy a friend’s work.”
High-confidence opponents undermine your use of routine skills.	“I feel intimidated by some of the ‘Australian’ students who seem really confident in class.”
You are cast in a subordinate role or assigned a label.	“As an international student it’s unlikely I’ll be as successful as a local student.”
Thinking about the formidable aspects of a task weakens your self-belief.	“I look at some assignments and I think ‘I’ll never be able to do this’... then I want to give up completely.”

Figure 2. Activity from self-efficacy unit about negative thought processes.

In another task (Fig. 3), students are asked to consider a list of high-risk lifestyle habits and determine which ones pose the most serious threats to public health either in their home country or in Australia.

risky behaviour	Your Ranking (1 = most serious; 6 = least serious)
problem drinking	
substance abuse	
smoking	
reckless driving	
overeating	
unprotected sexual contact	

Figure 3. Activity from self-efficacy unit about risky lifestyle behaviours.

Students are then asked to brainstorm the types of behaviour that are considered risky to one's "academic health". The list of behaviours given in Fig. 4 is provided to stimulate discussion.

Do you ever exhibit the following types of behaviour at university? If so, why, and how often?

- I don't attend lectures and/or tutorials.
 - I don't prepare for lectures and/or tutorials.
 - I don't do course readings or do them superficially.
 - I don't make notes in lectures.
 - I don't participate in tutorials.
 - I don't make use of university services, such as English HELP.
 - I don't diagnose/address my problems/weaknesses.
-

Figure 4. Activity from self-efficacy unit about risky academic behaviours.

In the tutorial that follows this lecture, students are re-introduced to the self-efficacy theme through Bandura's (2007) construct of "enactive mastery experience" (p. 80) – i.e., mastering new skills through task-based practice, one of the four major influences on perceived self-efficacy, outlined in section 5.1. Habel (2009, p. 100) has argued that this aspect of Bandura's theory is highly applicable to the development of academic skills: "In an ALL context, having students undertake tasks is the best way to increase their self-efficacy: this reinforces what we know about active, student-centred learning". Thus, in the tutorial students are required to complete two tasks that target aspects of university life which they may find challenging: note-taking in lectures and seeking help and information.

In the note-taking activity (titled "Self-Efficacy in Action 1"), students follow these steps:

1. Discuss how easy/difficult it is to comprehend and take notes in lectures (i.e., share levels of perceived self-efficacy).
2. Learn the Cornell system of note-taking (the method devised by Pauk (2000): students note down key information during lectures, reflect on main ideas afterwards, and devise follow-up questions).
3. Watch/listen to an online mini-lecture on a health topic and attempt to take notes in the Cornell style.
4. Discuss lecture contents with a partner.
5. Critically analyse the usefulness of the Cornell system (pair/group discussion).
6. Think of at least one more strategy to improve the lecture listening experience.

In the second activity about seeking help/information (titled "Self-Efficacy in Action 2"), students follow these steps (adapted from Baker & Mak, 2007):

1. Discuss situations in which they might need to ask for help/information in Australia as students – e.g., asking a tutor to explain something from a tutorial.
2. Discuss what they find challenging about dealing with these situations (i.e., share levels of perceived self-efficacy).
3. Study a selection of communication strategies for seeking help/information.
4. Critically analyse some dialogues exemplifying the strategies.
5. Create a short role play with a partner in which some of the communication strategies are applied in challenging situations.
6. Share role plays in small groups.
7. Discuss what is needed to improve effectiveness in asking for help/information when in Australia.
8. Critically analyse the usefulness of the role plays (pair/group discussion).

In both activities the students are encouraged to critically analyse whether the tasks have been of use. This emphasises the point made in section 5.1 that critical thinking is a key aspect of self-efficacy. That is, a self-efficacious student is one who continually experiments with and analyses new learning strategies. The main objective of the tutorial is not to master the Cornell method or learn how to ask for help; rather, it is to understand the more general point that self-efficacy in education entails a willingness to diagnose where, how and why one experiences learning difficulties and then to experiment with solutions.

The final step of the tutorial is to set up the USRT (see Figure 1). The tutor explains that a characteristic of self-efficacious people is that they actively seek out enabling opportunities in their environment. In the field of health care, this might involve making healthy lifestyle choices; in the field of education, this might involve sampling the learning opportunities that are available on campus outside mandatory course requirements. The task sheet provides students with a list of learning service opportunities, including websites, and sets them the task of choosing one activity, attending it sometime during the semester, and submitting a 250-word reflection detailing the service chosen, reason(s) for selecting it, and an evaluation of the experience.

6. Student Feedback Data

This section presents preliminary data sourced after the initial trial of the task.

6.1. Methodology

As part of a wider investigation into student views on the fledgling ELEC program, five one-hour student focus groups were held at the completion of second semester, 2010, for each of the four language enhancement courses (two for the largest course, Business and Commerce). Participants comprised a convenience sample of 15 students, divided as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Composition of focus groups for ELEC review.

Focus group #	English language enhancement course	<i>N</i>	Total course enrolment
1	Business & Commerce	3	689
2	Business & Commerce	2	689
3	Health	4	51
4	Science, Engineering, Environment & Technology	3	72
5	Arts & Social Sciences	3	34
TOTAL:		15	850

None of the focus group moderators were involved in the teaching or convening of the course under discussion. This was done to ensure that the students could speak freely and in confidence. Students were also assured in writing that involvement in the focus groups would have no bearing on their grades. They were informed that the discussions would be recorded and transcribed but that their personal identity would not be divulged. The moderators were provided with a series of questions to pose, with the same questions asked of each group. The data presented here are derived from answers to the following question:

How useful did you think the university service reflection task was for learning about study skills or for improving your English skills?

Transcriptions of the answers were analysed by the author using the qualitative research software NVivo 8. Responses were coded for commonly occurring themes. The number of comments about each theme was noted. Due to the small number of representatives from each

course, definitive conclusions are not drawn about the effectiveness of the task within particular courses. However, taken together, the responses do provide illuminative insights into both positive and negative aspects of the USRT.

6.2. Findings and discussion

The participants interpreted the question in two ways. Some took it to be a question about the usefulness of writing a 250-word reflection, while others took it to be a question about how effective the service they attended was. Whichever way it was interpreted, comments were evenly balanced, although students were slightly more negative than positive about having to write a reflection but slightly more positive than negative about the service experience itself. The former finding may be understood in relation to the paradoxical nature of learner autonomy or agency foreshadowed above. Table 2 shows results for all the cases in which students discussed the issue of writing the reflection.

Table 2. Students' comments about writing a reflection on a university service.

Positive themes	No. of comments	Negative themes	No. of comments
Reflective writing is free.	2	I didn't understand the purpose of writing the reflection.	5
I learned how many services there are.	2	I didn't know how to write it.	3
It forced me to attend a service.	1	I received no feedback.	1
Writing about it made me remember what I learned.	1	It only made me attend one service.	1
The reflections provide good information for the university.	1		
TOTAL:	7	TOTAL:	10

Although only preliminary, these results point to some emerging issues. On the positive side, all the major rationales for the task were mentioned. Two students confirmed that doing the task made them realise how many services there are. One stated:

I think the most important thing was that I realized there's so many services ... I had no idea there's so many. Like, since then I've taken tax service, I've taken workshops at the library ...

However, the number of comments is too small to consider the findings generalisable.

On the negative side, the five comments about not knowing the purpose of the written reflection are interesting. As one student put it:

What was the actually the purpose behind doing that? Our reflection? What it just to for your uni – was it for the university interest to see how the services are actually affecting the student, or is it for us to reflect on our study?

Even the students in the health group (including the author of the above comment) seemed unclear about the task's purpose, and none of them mentioned the underlying theoretical framework of self-efficacy (one reason possibly being the time lag between the self-efficacy unit in week 2 and submission of the task in week 11).

The lack of understanding is also evident in the three comments on not knowing how to write a self-reflection. This may be due to the unstructured manner of assessment. The ELEC designers decided to make the reflection a compulsory part of a portfolio of written tasks to be handed in

at the end of the course. It was given a brief, qualitative comment by a marker, and a small deduction in overall marks for the portfolio was imposed on non-submitters to ensure compliance. It was decided not to allocate a point score for this piece so as to focus students' attention – through free reflective writing – on the experience of attending a service rather than on the quality of the writing (e.g., grammar). However, several comments indicate that students are unsettled by written assignments that have no clear goal in terms of grades:

... we don't have a guideline, and we really don't know what they are looking for. And it's not, and they say that your grammar and your English won't be assessed in this task, or something like that and ... So I don't really know what they just want to look ...

On the flip-side, two students saw the freedom offered by the reflective writing approach as a positive development. As one student put it: "for me, easier write like non-academic style – not academic styles".

Table 3 shows results for all the cases in which students discussed the issue of attending university services.

Table 3: Students' comments about attending university services.

Positive themes	No. of comments	Negative themes	No. of comments
It was good for improving my English and academic skills	9	The service did not improve my grammar.	5
I learned more about the local place and culture.	2	I didn't get enough attention.	3
Non-specific praise (e.g. "the service was useful").	2	I am too busy to attend services.	2
It was good for meeting different people.	1	The service was not intellectually engaging.	2
I could get one-to-one tuition.	1	I couldn't understand it.	1
		Non-specific criticism.	1
TOTAL:	15	TOTAL:	13

The number of positive and negative comments was roughly even. It is pleasing that the largest body of comments (9) was supportive of the capacity for the services to improve English language and academic skills. For example:

Yeah, my I quite enjoy about this because they really teach me so many useful skill for how to structure your essay and how to ... The most important is how to using the APA referencing guides, because I, before, I really confuse and really don't understand what is this about and after I go to the English HELP I really got why I went.

These comments were offset, however, by the five students who felt the service they attended did not sufficiently address their problems with grammar. The issue here seems to be the well-documented mismatch of expectations between students who want grammar checks and academic advisers who eschew proofreading (see, for example, Johnston, Yoshida, & Cornwell, 2010). One student stated:

I wasn't really satisfied because firstly, it was grammar checking but they didn't see my grammar. They just tried to change all the essays. So they kind of ignored my essay. I wasn't feel like good and also ... It was *she* and it was like, she was like, kind of reorder the structure of my essay.

7. Conclusions

The comments expressing a lack of understanding of the USRT's purpose (Table 2) suggest that a more explicit rationale for the task needs to be written into the materials. Such a rationale ought to make a clearer link to *Good Practice Principle #3*, by informing students that:

1. they have responsibilities for further developing their English language proficiency during their study at university;
2. the USRT is an opportunity to learn about the range of options for enabling this development, and to investigate one;
3. a good written reflection is one that exhibits a student's capacity for critical evaluation of a learning opportunity, and this capacity is a component of self-efficacy.

At a bigger picture level, the findings have led to a reconsideration of what assessment means to international students, and how this impacts on successfully achieving the goals of GPP #3. As mentioned above, the fact that the task was evaluated by a qualitative comment rather than a numerical grade was a possible source of confusion for students. However, this offers a productive teaching point: by including a reading on summative and formative assessment, accompanied by an exploration of how these two methods motivate and/or demotivate individual learners, students can reflect on what drives their learning. For one learner, it may be grades; for another, it may be skill acquisition (including the crucial skill of communicative competency). This develops an awareness of how different academic tasks offer opportunities for advancement in different ways.

It is readily admitted that more thorough research needs to be conducted on the effectiveness of the USRT and the course activities in which it is embedded. A wider snapshot of student views could be obtained via an in-class or online questionnaire. It would be interesting to discover if any of the trends that emerged in the exploratory focus group data were confirmed by a larger sample of responses.

Nevertheless, the primary purpose of this article was to provide a concrete example of how DEEWR's *Good Practice Principles* have been addressed at the level of curriculum design. This was accomplished by showcasing the USRT as a mechanism for putting *Principle #3* into action, and by demonstrating how it was embedded within a discipline-specific framework in a course for health students. As argued in the introduction, the number of published "good practice" exemplars is still small, despite the large number of initiatives being trialled throughout the higher education sector. It is hoped that more widespread reporting of these initiatives will be forthcoming in the future.

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