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The Good Practice Principles: Silver bullet or starter gun?

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The *Good Practice Principles for International Students in Australian Universities* have provided the higher education sector with a framework for action in the area of academic language and learning (ALL); and the imprimatur of DEEWR has ensured that they have been nationally disseminated and are now widely recognised. Yet, while they have been nationally acknowledged as appropriate and desirable, the means by which they might be achieved is by no means certain. In order to realise these principles, ALL educators and colleagues in Australian institutions must grapple with major issues that arise chronologically over students' academic careers. These issues include: how can we know whether students have sufficient English language proficiency to participate effectively in their academic studies; how can we best help them to develop their language use in an academic context; and how can we know that they are sufficiently proficient for graduate employment? By systematically addressing these issues, universities will be more able to achieve greater parity in participation, progression and professional outcomes for all students. The *Good Practice Principles*, while not a silver bullet in ensuring equity, can nevertheless act as a useful launching point for discussions aimed at substantive change. Indeed, they served as a starter gun for an AALL-sponsored symposium in January 2011 in Perth. This paper draws on symposium themes and discusses their relevance in the broader Australian context.

Key Words: Academic language and learning, Good Practice Principles, language proficiency.

1. Introduction

Student English language proficiency has been the subject of much recent scholarly literature across a wide range of disciplines in Australia's universities. Examples include accounting (Birrell, 2006), health sciences (Scouller, Bonnano, Smith, & Krass, 2008), business (Watty,

2007), education (Benzie, 2010), engineering (Stappenbelt & Barrett-Lennard, 2008) and applied linguistics (Crichton & Scarino, 2007). This literature has presented equally diverse perspectives on this topic, illustrating the complex nature of the constructs addressed and the difficulty that tertiary institutions face if they seek to develop a coherent and cogent approach to the development of students' language capabilities. Government-sponsored reports have also contributed to the discussion (Baird, 2010; Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). Growing concerns have been expressed in the literature, government reports and the media about the English language levels of international students in Australia. This in turn has prompted the development of the *Good Practice Principles for English Language Proficiency for International Students in Australian Universities* (DEEWR, 2009). The *Good Practice Principles* have been generally welcomed as a way of moving forward on this issue, providing a "useful blueprint for how universities can go about ensuring that their English language provision is relevant and robust" (Murray, 2010, p. 52). However, this blueprint lacks detail, and many universities are uncertain how to implement the *Good Practice Principles* in their own contexts.

A symposium was held in January 2011 to identify progress and to engage in an ongoing discussion of issues in implementing the *Good Practice Principles* within Western Australian universities. This symposium brought together close to fifty practitioners in the field of academic language and learning who considered three key questions primarily derived from the *Good Practice Principles*:

- How can we know whether students have sufficient English language proficiency to participate effectively in their academic studies?
- How can we best help them to develop their language use in an academic context?
- How can we know that they are sufficiently proficient for graduate employment?

Participants were divided into groups, with each group focusing on a specific question. Each group then reported back to a final plenary session. The outcomes from that symposium have contributed to the substance of this paper, which is divided into sections that reflect the key questions above.

2. How can we know whether students have sufficient English language proficiency to participate effectively in their studies?

Institutional English language entry requirements can assist but do not ensure that students will enter university at a sufficiently high level of proficiency. Ascertaining adequate proficiency is complicated by multiple entry pathways and a wide range of accepted English language tests (Leask, Ciccarelli, & Benzie, 2003). An additional complicating factor is that incoming students may, indeed, not even commence their degree course in the same year in which their English language proficiency is evidenced, with an allowable two-year gap between testing and beginning Australian university studies. These variables have led to a great diversity of general proficiency levels and contextual understanding among students new to a given institution. Institutional English language admission requirements need, therefore, to be complemented by alternative methods of determining whether students are sufficiently proficient. These methods include evidence-based planning and early detection of students at risk.

With regard to evidence-based planning, the availability of statistical data on the performance of past cohorts can be helpful, as this will provide universities with an understanding of retention rates, conformance with academic integrity policies and fail rates. While it is essential not to conflate the notions of academic performance and English language proficiency, consistent low grading of assessments by students from specific entry pathways may indicate gaps in the language proficiency or academic literacy outcomes of these pathways (Stappenbelt & Barrett-Lennard, 2008). Analysis of statistical data can therefore provide important information in adjusting admission policies and planning for future cohorts, but may come too late for some students who are identified as requiring additional language support only when they have already failed components of their degrees. Early detection of students who are at risk, or who

need additional support to participate with optimal effectiveness, is therefore an additional process that has been integrated into the strategies of universities in Western Australia.

Tutorial participation is a common way of identifying need post-entry in Western Australia's universities. Oral interaction in classes is often an assessed component of a unit of study. However, oral participation is a notoriously unreliable indicator of proficiency, as it may be affected by a number of factors (Briguglio, 2000), including the size of the class, tutor inexperience in facilitating group discussions, lack of intercultural awareness among students or staff, or the absence of an environment or task conducive to oral interaction. Tutorial participation is best combined with other approaches to identify levels of proficiency and areas of need.

An additional approach common in Western Australian universities is post-entry language assessments (PELAs). PELAs take many forms and are administered to different cohorts through a variety of modes (Dunworth, 2009). Curtin's *UniEnglish*, for example, is an optional online instrument available to students throughout the year. Students scoring below a certain mark are advised to attend academic language and learning classes. *UniEnglish* has the advantage of being available to all first year students, but there is no follow-up to establish whether this option is taken up. Indeed, although *UniEnglish* was accessed by 66% of new students in 2009, only 14% of those went on to complete it (Dunworth, 2010a). This lack of participation by students reflects the experience of universities in other states (Ransom, 2009).

Like Curtin, both Edith Cowan University (ECU) and the University of Western Australia (UWA) have trialled online assessments for English language proficiency, albeit on a much smaller scale: ECU in the Faculty of Business and Law, and UWA in the Faculty of Engineering, Computing and Mathematics. Although computer-based diagnostic or screening PELAs are highly regarded in terms of both logistics and resources, in neither case was the online environment judged as satisfactory to the purposes of the PELA, which was intended to identify students who required additional English language development during their studies. Issues included technical problems such as slow computer speeds, questions about the validity of the instruments used, and unsustainable pressures put on computer rooms given the perceived need for a "secure" test environment. Following these trials (see, for example, Harris, 2010), both universities adopted short written tasks similar to those administered at the University of Technology, Sydney (Barthel, 2009), these being evaluated as the most cost-effective and appropriate for assessments that required moderation.

Student participation in these trials differed according to whether students completed the PELAs as part of their normal course of studies or whether they were required to complete them out of class. At UWA, the PELA was integrated in the common core unit, Introduction to Professional Engineering. Close to 100% participation was achieved with the task conducted in class during the first two weeks of semester. Similarly, at ECU in 2009, trials of a variety of PELAs within designated units led to high participation rates. In 2011, PELAs were extended to all newly enrolled students in the Faculty of Business and Law. These students were asked to complete the short written task and a numeracy test prior to or during the early weeks of semester one. The requirement was attached to their acceptance of offer and enrolment documents and was couched in terms of assisting and supporting students. Tests were conducted in Orientation Week, with further tests in weeks three and five of the teaching period. Despite wording in letters of offer that indicated the PELA was compulsory, initial completion of the PELA was 44.4%, rising to 50.4% by the end of semester when it was advertised as compulsory for specific cohorts. Other universities note similar problems with PELAs that are not administered as part of a unit, but some believe that once PELAs become part of the culture of higher education, participation rates are likely to increase (Read, 2008).

While symposium discussion of Question Two centred mainly on post-entry methods of determining English language needs, it should be noted that the issue of English language entry requirements is one that may still not have been satisfactorily addressed. In setting English language entry scores, universities are acknowledging that students have the skills to commence their studies in a range of courses; yet in each of the PELA trials at ECU, one or two students were judged as being so weak in English language proficiency that questions were raised as to

how they came to be enrolled. The fourth good practice principle indicates that universities need to be aware of weak entry pathways. English language testing systems are also not infallible indicators of English language proficiency, as recent reports on corruption in English language testing have highlighted (Cohen, 2011). PELAs therefore remain a "hot" topic, and are seen by many as necessary in verifying admission processes.

While it does seem that, in some instances, the need for high levels of post-entry support would be reduced by implementing more careful monitoring of practices in assessing English language entry requirements, in looking more broadly at academic literacies, Murray (2010) indicates that "few students, domestic or international, ESB or NESB, enter university adequately equipped" (p. 61). This links to the WA-AALL symposium's second question, "How can we best help students to develop their language use in an academic context?"

3. How can we best help students to develop their language use in an academic context?

Workshop participants agreed that inculcating an institutional philosophy of shared responsibility and a whole-of-institution approach to developing the academic language skills of all students was a necessary part of assisting students to develop their language use. Such an approach requires the inclusion in the process of those in many roles: university managers and administrators, course and unit coordinators, teaching staff, academic language and learning educators, and the students themselves.

The support of university leaders and administrators was considered crucial. Only at an institution-wide level is it possible to map language development across the whole university, and to identify broad graduate attributes that incorporate high-level English language proficiency and communicative competence in a disciplinary environment. It is up to the institution, too, to express its position on the importance of English communication skills for studying and working in Australia, and to support its stated position with appropriate resourcing and behaviours.

All universities in Australia provide some form of academic language and learning support through a learning centre or other centralised unit, and many through faculty-based units as well. During the workshop, participants noted that academic language and learning centres had a role to play in the provision of workshops, consultations, drop-in sessions, accessible online resources, and groups that foster interaction between international and domestic students (Barrett-Lennard, 2011; Lange & Barrett-Lennard, 2010). However, they also indicated that the most needy students were often among the least likely to seek assistance, an argument well supported in the literature (Baik & Grieg, 2009; Hirsh, 2007; Kennelly, Maldoni, & Davies, 2010; McKauge, et al., 2009; Ransom, 2009; Song, 2006). This tendency was evident in the 2011 PELA trials at ECU. Students who were deemed "at risk" were asked to attend an individual consultation and subsequently linked with a Learning Advisor, but compliance was low, with less than 50% opting to engage in support measures.

In order to reach greater numbers of students in need, workshop participants emphasised the role that academic language and learning advisors played in assisting discipline-based academic staff to embed language development in their units of study. Research in this area consistently reports that language development integrated or embedded into disciplinary units of study are likely to achieve the most effective results (Andrade, 2006; Barrie & Jones, 1999; Crosling & Wilson, 2005; Stappenbelt & Barrett-Lennard, 2008). The involvement of language and learning advisors in this process means that disciplinary staff do not necessarily have to increase their workload in order to incorporate language development into their units, as the assistance offered by advisors can include workshops or seminars additional to the allocated study hours, shared planning of unit content and team teaching. For example, one of ECU's most effective projects involved embedding English language and academic support in a core unit in their MBA and MBA International courses. In that intensive program, the academic language and learning advisor spends an hour in the classroom on a regular basis (Harris & Ashton, 2011). Likewise, ALL educators teach into units across almost all faculties at UWA, and Curtin offers

the SUCCESS program, which comprises a pre-written, generic core of self-contained academic literacy modules. The basic material is then adapted by academic language and learning advisors in collaboration with unit coordinators to make it more relevant to a given discipline, and the adapted version is then integrated into units of study.

AALL workshop participants also noted the role that unit and course coordinators could play in promoting English language development by engaging students in reflective practice; creating an environment that fosters intercultural understanding; providing regular and meaningful feedback to students; ensuring early identification of need and ongoing follow-up; and incorporating language skills and standards into the curriculum and assessment tasks. Participants also noted that students needed to take responsibility for their own English language growth by developing proficiency through use at all opportunities.

In short, workshop participants acknowledged that there is no silver bullet; rather, language proficiency is developmental and requires a number of complementary strategies offered at different levels of the institution.

4. How do we know that students are sufficiently proficient for graduate employment upon completion of their studies?

Universities have tended to focus on student English language entry levels and readiness to undertake academic study, and have given less consideration to the levels of English language proficiency of their graduates. This is in spite of the ubiquity of graduate attribute statements referring to high level communication skills (Dunworth, 2010b). Research into the employment of international students has identified English language proficiency as "a key issue for both graduate job access, and for subsequent mobility within work" (Arkoudis et al., 2009, p. 12), and the Graduate Outlook Survey for 2010 produced by Graduate Careers Australia identified interpersonal and communication skills as being the most important selection criterion for recruiting graduates, above academic qualifications, for the fourth year in a row. Despite this, there are few measures in place to ensure that graduating students have attained a level of proficiency that employers will accept.

The workshop participants identified a number of ways in which it would be possible to identify whether graduates had attained a sufficiently high level of proficiency for employment in their chosen discipline, although most of those measures had yet to be implemented. These included obtaining feedback from employers; analysing graduate employment rates within an institution from the perspective of language proficiency; and incorporating capstone units, workplace integrated units and authentic work-related tasks and assessments into courses. It should be noted that some activities already exist which contribute to our understanding of language proficiency with regard to employment. Curtin University, for example, has introduced the concept of the i-portfolio, a student tool for demonstrating various capabilities, including language proficiency (Curtin University, 2011). In addition, UWA has recently identified an expected level of proficiency for each year of study, mapping language and communication skills development across an entire course of study (Barrett-Lennard, Chalmers, & Longnecker, 2011; Chalmers, Barrett-Lennard, & Longnecker, 2010).

5. Conclusion

Two years on from the publication of the *Good Practice Principles*, contributions at the symposium from participants, representing a cross-section of universities in Western Australia, indicated that there is a strong intent and willingness among institutions to implement them. Most institutions have started to introduce activities to address the issue of student English language proficiency, although what is clear from the range of measures available across and within universities is that there is no single catch-all solution. It seems that individual institutions need to find their own "best fit", which is likely to incorporate a number of complementary strategies. Suggested strategies include monitoring pre-admission requirements closely and engaging in evidence-based planning to minimise issues post-entry; incorporating tutorial participation tasks and PELAs to detect students at risk early in their studies; providing

students with varied support throughout their degree with a particular emphasis on embedding skills into the curriculum; and introducing student portfolios and employer feedback to check that desired graduate outcomes have been reached. There is agreement among practitioners that in order to achieve measurable and recorded progress on the issue of language proficiency, it is necessary for there to be a whole of institution approach. In other words, senior managers need to take responsibility for the development of student English language proficiency, ensuring that it is given the resources that it requires and the attention that it deserves. With such support, ultimately it will become integrated into teaching and learning in such a way that the three key questions addressed at the symposium will be answered as a matter of course.

Acknowledgements

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