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Developing academic literacies: A faculty approach to teaching first-year students

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With increasing diversity among students seeking higher education places in the past two decades, Australian universities are under constant pressure to juggle the competing demands of maintaining student enrolments, achieving rankings, and building a strong reputation in a competitive market, while ensuring the academic literacies of all students. As a result of increasing financial constraints, many universities have been forced to make economies of scale by creating large first-year units that aim to develop the literacies of students across many and varied programs within the same unit of study. This paper reports on one faculty's attempt to support first-year student success within the constraints of such an environment. The investigation focused on the two-fold initiative of embedding academic language and learning practices within a large, multi-disciplinary unit, and complementing it with an academic writing intervention for students identified as likely to benefit from this. A diverse range of students undertook this dual program, including some for whom English was an additional language (EAL), some mature aged students, and some who were first in their families to undertake university studies. A mixed-methods approach was used to determine any improvements in the performance of these participating students. These students were found to have built a strong foundation for the rest of their studies, and specialist faculty academics believed that the dual program prepared students well for their future disciplinary studies. The benefits of adopting such a collaborative approach are worthy of consideration by educational leaders striving to support student success in the face of the multi-faceted challenges of today's higher education arena.

Key Words: academic literacies; diversity; first-year students; reflective practice; English language proficiency.

1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, the effects of globalisation have brought about great changes in learning and teaching. In the university sector, one area that has received considerable attention has been the increase in student mobility in general, and in particular, the number of students entering English-medium universities throughout the world from a range of educational, linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Many international students choose to undertake degree programs in Australia, which offers numerous benefits. These include improving their English language and intercultural awareness, and ultimately providing graduates with a qualification that will lead them to better employment outcomes as global citizens. While opening the doors to more international full fee-paying students, the Australian Government has also created greater flexibility to allow

local or 'domestic' students from non-traditional backgrounds to undertake degree programs. In 2008, for example, the Final Report for the Review of Australian Higher Education recommended a significant increase in the participation rates of domestic students in higher education, specifically those from previously under-represented groups (Birrell & Edwards, 2009). With such broad diversity within the demographics and previous educational experience of commencing students, many find the acquisition of academic literacies challenging. In this paper, 'academic literacies' refers not just to language skills such as grammar, sentence structure and paragraphing, but also general writing skills such as overall structure, argument development, research and referencing, and critical and reflective thinking.

Four interlinked factors have recently formed the driving influence in the teaching of academic literacies in Australian universities. The first is financial constraint. The Australian government has reduced its monetary support to universities: for example, in the 2014 budget it announced that over the following three years, 2015-2018, it would reduce its subsidisation of local under-graduate student fees by $1.1 billion (Bexley, 2014). This has been a significant contributing factor to Australian universities having worked to obtain a large increase in the numbers of international full fee-paying students. In 2019, for example 178,744 international students commenced in the Higher Education sector in Australia, representing a steady growth since 2016, when there were 130,990 commencements in the sector (Australian Government, Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020). One recent report into the numbers of students in Australian universities found that about 25% were international, and that about 10% of all students on university campuses were from China alone (Babones & Centre for Independent Studies, 2019). However, the ongoing effects of COVID-19, particularly on international student enrolments are emerging, and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

The second factor concerns a shift in the makeup of domestic students. Like other Western countries, Australia is also seeing a large growth in university enrolments among students from non-traditional and diverse backgrounds. The numbers of students who come from socio-culturally disadvantaged backgrounds (Devlin, 2013), are mature aged, are first in their families to undertake tertiary study, and who come from families for whom English is an additional language, (EAL) have increased over the past couple of decades (Clerehan, 2003, p. 73). This change has become more marked since the *Review of Australian Higher Education* of 2008 (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, Scales & Australian Department of Education and Workplace Relations, 2008), which recommended reforms in the financing and regulatory frameworks within the sector.

A further two factors have come into play. First, following the establishment of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) in 2011, there has been increased scrutiny of all areas of compliance across the university sector, but in particular, of English language standards. Universities are now required to be more accountable for ensuring that all students (regardless of their first language) are sufficiently competent in the English language to undertake their chosen courses, and that early diagnosis and intervention is provided where students may be at risk of non-completion due to language weaknesses. Second, concerns have increasingly been voiced by academics over recent years about poor English language skills among international university students, both before and after graduation (Benzie, 2010; Birrell, 2006; Burton-Bradley, 2018; Watty, 2007), and at the same time, media reports have highlighted a perceived increase in the incidence of plagiarism and contract cheating (e.g., McNeilage & Visentin, 2014). Media reports have also exposed reports of moral dilemmas among academics who are deeply concerned about a lack of preparedness of international students when commencing their studies in Australia (O'Neill & Worthington, 2019). Approaches to the teaching of academic literacies, therefore, need to take into account the fact that international students and those from non-traditional educational backgrounds are being admitted to the universities with varying experiences of academic writing, coupled with differing perceptions of academic integrity.

The approach to these issues adopted by the university where this research was conducted (here-after, "the university") is to create one or more large, compulsory first-year units in each faculty in which students from many disciplines are co-taught. As well as creating funds through stream-lining of coordination, teaching and administration, such units are also seen by senior university policy makers as an ideal home for the administration of English language diagnostic testing, known as Post-Entry Language Assessment (PELA). Such testing is increasingly being adopted in Australian universities. When conducted within a common first-year unit, this testing allows language specialists to provide support that is aligned with the unit, to those who need it, including non-traditional and international students. This common first-year unit can also allow a consistent focus on teaching students how to demonstrate an appropriate understanding of the principles of academic integrity for their discipline, particularly from a linguistic perspective.

This paper charts one university's response to the challenge of balancing the competing demands of providing support for students in developing discipline-specific discourses and critical thinking within an aggressive and competitive marketplace, while at the same time meeting government compliance demands. Similarly, in other Australian universities, academics teaching first-year students accept the compromise of defining 'discipline' at a broad faculty level. For example, Fenton-Smith et al. (2017) have found a balance between large-scale units and a discipline-specific focus at Griffith University in Queensland:

> In an ideal world … it may be more pedagogically effective to focus at the narrowest and most discipline-specific level. But the pragmatic reality is that the higher the degree of specificity, the greater the administrative complexity and financial outlay. (p. 466)

In an attempt to cater to students who needed support early in their studies, the Humanities faculty at the university adopted a dual approach by creating a compulsory first-year communications unit and aligning it with a new language skills-based support partner program. The coordinators of the respective programs had been influenced by research into genre and discipline-specific discourse from Australia (e.g. Chanock, 1994, 2006; Christie, 1987) and overseas (e.g. Berken-kotter & Huckin, 1995; Freedman & Medway, 1994; Gee, 1999; Johns, 1995), along with the academic literacies work of Lea and Street and others (Haggis, 2006; Johns, 1997; Lea & Stierer, 2000; Lea & Street, 1998, 1999; Lillis & Turner, 2001; Street, 2004). While the institutional im-perative to create a centralised unit was strong, they were committed to trying to embed academic literacies within disciplinary contexts, while avoiding as much disembodied study skills focus in the unit as possible. This dual approach aimed to satisfy a range of criteria for a large and varied cohort of commencing students.

2. The development of the Academic and Professional Communications unit and SUCCESS program

2.1. Building the programs

It was within the above contexts that the compulsory credit-bearing unit of study known as Aca-demic and Professional Communications (APC) was created in the Faculty of Humanities at the university. Established in 2014, it was envisaged by the faculty's academic leaders as a general study skills unit, and as a vehicle for meeting government and university requirements for Post-Entry Language Assessment (PELA) and support (called the SUCCESS program in this faculty), in addition to providing formal tuition in the area of academic integrity (every program at the university has a Designated Academic Integrity Unit, or DAIU). Both the PELA and the SUC-CESS program were established at this time, in conjunction with APC. The SUCCESS program consists of 10 × one-hour additional tutorials and is compulsory for students who fall below a certain score in the PELA (although other students are also welcome to opt in where places are available). Both the PELA task itself and the cut-off score are mutually agreed by both program

coordinators (APC and SUCCESS), in consideration of the academic literacies demands of APC. In this way, the co-created programs have provided a double-backstop for students who may otherwise have been at risk of non-completion due to issues of English language, by offering early intervention for best outcomes.

APC was created as the parallel to equivalent communications units in each of the other three faculties (Business/Law, Health Sciences, and Science and Engineering), which were also being created around that time, in response to TEQSA demands for greater accountability for English Language Proficiency standards. APC was thus instituted as a compulsory unit for all first-year students in all Humanities courses (with the exception of the Bachelor of Education course, which has its own communications unit). The working party that was established to create the APC unit included its prospective coordinator, and the Faculty English Language Development Coordinator of the SUCCESS program (henceforth labelled 'the coordinators'), along with the faculty's Dean of Learning and Teaching, and several experienced faculty academics. The APC Coordinator was a discipline-based academic of writing and communications, a long-standing academic from one of the three schools within the faculty, who had already established links in a second school, while the SUCCESS coordinator, a long-standing (academic) English language specialist, was based in the faculty Office of Learning and Teaching, and worked across all schools in the faculty. There was a concerted effort to maintain a close and seamless alignment between the two programs for face validity, so that academic language development would be seen as an inherent part of the dual program, rather than a "bolt-on". Therefore, regular consultation between the coordinators was seen as a key element of the approach. Students are not necessarily motivated to independently seek improvements in academic language (Fenton-Smith et al., 2017), particularly if they are not performing well (Arkoudis, Baik, & Richardson, 2012; Wingate, 2006), and students who most need assistance with language and academic skills are least likely to attend voluntary workshops (Harris & Ashton, 2011). Therefore, if this initiative was to be successful, it would have to be viewed as an integral and mandatory part of the students' course of study.

Such a large compulsory unit of study has the advantage that teaching of literacies was no longer seen as belonging in a remedial unit, as it had previously been viewed in the Faculty of Humanities: it became essential for all first-year students, who were regarded as novice learners in the tertiary context (Krause 2012; Wingate & Tribble, 2012, p. 484). Further, a significant number of students would have come either from non-traditional educational backgrounds, or would have entered via enabling pathway programs with limited time to become fully conversant with the literacies requirements of the host university (Murray & Nallaya, 2016).

The first problem facing the coordinators was the wide range of courses in which the unit would be made compulsory. Unlike the more homogeneous courses in the other faculties, Humanities includes a diverse range of courses: 'English' theory-based courses such as Cultural Studies and Literature; Social Sciences and Asian Languages courses, such as History, Anthropology, International Relations, Security Studies and Korean Studies; creative arts such as Fine Art, Performance, Screen Arts, and Creative Writing; 'professional' courses such as Library Studies, Journalism, Professional Writing and Internet Studies; design courses such as Photography, Jewellery Design, and Digital Design; and built environment courses such as Architecture, Construction Management, and Urban and Regional Planning. Across this wide array of disciplines, the coordinators recognised that APC would not be able to address "the deep language, literacy and discourse issues" (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 159) of the students. This would be particularly difficult since students would be in mixed tutorial groups of 25 to 30 students, and taught by one of a team of tutors sourced from all the courses covered in the unit. The challenge, therefore, was to establish whether this initiative would provide students with a strong foundation for the academic language and learning requirements they would need within the faculty.

2.2. Essay writing

In response to the issues outlined in Section 2.1, the APC working party set out three principles. First, the APC unit would teach students to write academic essays, which were seen by their disciplinary colleagues as central to their students' academic achievements. They specified an argumentative essay, since they viewed this as encouraging more complex and critical thought than the descriptive or analytical essays the students were more familiar with from their schooling. Recognising that the essay is one of the most difficult genres for first-year students, and one in which many of them lack confidence (Krause, 2012), they established a scaffolding framework that would take students through the process step-by-step (research, argument development, draft writing, redrafting), with extensive feedback (mainly from tutors, but informally also from peers) at each stage. A unique feature of this process was that students made a 'first draft' trial submission which would attract not only extensive guidance and feedback, but also an indicative mark that could be improved upon by allowing a second-chance and 'final draft'. This would remove the pressure associated with a one-off task, allowing for multiple submissions and reworking (Kift, 2009; Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010). It would also allow students to learn about paraphrasing and academic integrity, as stipulated by university policy, without risking plagiarism penalties on their first attempts at writing. Within this principle, the coordinators recognised that the unit would focus on broad-based writing skills, such as argument development, structure, relevance and appropriateness of sources, and use of formal language, which would be generally relevant for all students. They would need to leave the discipline-specific discourse to their colleagues in other units. According to Applebee (1996, as cited in Rex & McEachen, 1999), this could include

> not just concepts and associated vocabulary, but also rhetorical structures, the patterns of action, that are part of any tradition of meaning-making. They include characteristic ways of reaching consensus and expressing disagreement, of formulating arguments, of providing evidence, as well as characteristic genres for organizing thought and conversational action. In mastering such traditions, students learn not only to operate with them, but also how to change them. (p. 69)

Australian language and literacy specialist Kate Chanock (2006, p. 3), who was also working in the Humanities context, aimed to "help students to recognise what is generic and what is discipline-specific across their writing tasks". This distinction underpinned the coordinators' planning for this unit, in that the unit would provide them with generic skills and understandings, which would prepare them for the discipline-specific focus they would later receive.

The second principle agreed by the working party was that as far as possible, students would ground their research and essay writing in topics associated with their chosen disciplines. Despite being unable to teach discipline-specific understandings, the unit could begin to develop students' information literacies in their discipline, and encourage them to explore in some depth a topic related to their future studies. In order to impose some structure on this essay assignment, the coordinators created a formulaic phrase that enabled all students to create their own topic within their discipline: 'the role of X in Y', where X is replaced by the relevant professional person or an issue in the profession, and Y by the influence of that professional or issue. For example, recent topics have included 'the role of the children's librarian in promoting early literacy', 'the role of community artworks in enriching urban environments', and 'the role of European landscape art in influencing early Australian painting'. It was hoped that this formula would permit students with deep interests in specific areas of their discipline to pursue those interests, while providing a framework for those lacking ideas or confidence. Students would be supported to design a topic and research it by a team of Humanities librarians and their APC tutors. Since the tutor team was to be drawn from the full range of courses offered, tutors would be able to talk with colleagues and the librarians about topics and research they were unfamiliar with.

2.3. Critical reflective thinking

The third principle established by the APC working party was that first-year students needed support to learn how to learn at university. To enable them to focus on their own learning, students would be required to complete detailed self-reflection rubrics before submitting all assignments. The emphasis on reflection was to become much more significant than this, however. Working from the research of reflective practitioners, such as Brookfield (1987), King and Kitchener (1994), Mälkki (2010) and Mezirow (1998), the coordinators had found in previous units they had created that a focus on identifying and challenging assumptions (Mälkki 2010) gave students a framework that helped them move from descriptive and analytical responses to the critical reflection that would be valued in their university studies of Humanities. Since their colleagues (like the majority of Australian and overseas academics) value critical thinking (Beasley & Cao, 2014; Vyncke, 2012), the working party considered this would be a valuable component of the unit.

The coordinators therefore set up a second assignment in the unit: a critical reflective thinking assignment, which would involve students identifying and challenging their own assumptions as learners as well as assumptions in texts from their own disciplines. This second assignment would culminate in a group portfolio, in which students would provide examples from their own disciplines to use as a basis for critical reflective thinking. Through this assignment, the APC unit would challenge students to begin to think of themselves and their discipline in a broader context. This critical reflective component would add a disciplinary perspective to the otherwise large, multi-disciplinary unit.

2.4. The SUCCESS program

The SUCCESS coordinator was able to shape the program in the light of her work on the APC working party. What followed was an ongoing close collaboration between the two coordinators to ensure the relevance and effectiveness of the SUCCESS program and, importantly, face validity and usefulness from the students' perspective. Murray and Muller (2018) note that students are less likely to invest their time in attending additional English classes if they are not seen as being directly relevant to their coursework. The SUCCESS program was therefore tailored to provide an extension to the skills provided in APC, focusing on maintaining the relevance of the SUCCESS program from the students' perspective. Taking into account the fact that written assignments make up the majority of university assessments, and thus are "high stakes" (Murray & Muller, 2018, p. 4), the SUCCESS program offered a scaffolded approach to understanding and completing written assignment tasks which addressed the students' immediate academic requirements within the APC unit. For example, SUCCESS students would be given the opportunity to practise and develop their skills in writing reflections, constructing paragraphs and understanding the rationale behind using specific referencing systems, with close attention paid to the linguistic conventions associated with academic writing.

Established in 2013, the university's English Language and Learning Policy stipulated that the PELA should be taken by all commencing students (i.e. regardless of their language background) in order to identify and provide early support to those for whom limitations in English language proficiency may adversely affect their studies. In keeping with this policy, students are required to undertake the SUCCESS program if they fall below a certain grade on the PELA, a short piece of writing completed in the first week of each semester in conjunction with APC. The SUCCESS student group typically comprises mainly international students, with a number of local students of all ages. While the needs of English L1 speakers and those from EAL backgrounds differ, the limited size of the classes (usually no more than 10-12 students) allows for tailored individual assistance from the tutors, who are English language specialists. In fact, the presence of both English L1 and L2 students in the SUCCESS program can be seen as an advantage, as opposed to being regarded as a 'remedial' program which may stigmatise non-native speakers. Murray and Muller (2018, p. 1358) noted, "an increasing sense within the HE sector that English language

support is often interpreted too narrowly as non-native speaker provision and ignores the needs of the wider student population".

Finally, the English language specialist not only maintains close communication with the APC coordinator, but also with the team of tutors, so that she is available to assist with specific language and communication issues, and to liaise regarding individual students and any problems as they arise.

3. Research methods and data sets

The current project sought to investigate whether the combination of the APC unit (particularly the redrafting processes it employed) and participation in the SUCCESS program achieved improvement and increased grades in key areas of academic writing. The university's ethics committee provided approval for the project and the scripts used were de-identified prior to analysis. In Semester 1, 2018, 758 students from 28 courses completed the face-to-face version of APC. Of these, 40 students also participated in the SUCCESS program, following the submission of their PELA. The latter group became the participants in the current study. These students were of mixed ages and included both school-leavers and mature-aged students. Over half of the students had English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D). This cohort represented a greater concentration of non-traditional and EAL/D students than the APC unit as a whole.

A mixed-methods approach was employed. First, scores were recorded for first drafts and second drafts, respectively, and differences measured. Second, student assignment reflections from the APC Assignment 2 were selected only from the SUCCESS cohort so that they could reflect on the dual program. Third, students who attended the SUCCESS program (in conjunction with APC) were asked to complete an evaluation at the end of the course.

4. Findings

4.1. Student evaluations

Large faculty-based academic skills units often score low marks on student formal evaluations. Nevertheless, APC has consistently scored equal or higher satisfaction levels than equivalent communication units: for example, the 2018 evaluation showed an overall satisfaction rate of 81%, with equivalent units in other faculties scoring between 70% and 79%. SUCCESS evaluations also revealed a high level of satisfaction. The students were asked to respond to a series of statements to indicate their perceptions of the benefits of the program via a 5-point Likert scale, representing responses ranging from 'Strongly agree' to 'Strongly disagree'. This evaluation is completed by all students who undertake the SUCCESS program. In the semester covered by this paper (Semester 1, 2018), 41[1] students undertook the SUCCESS program and the Academic and Professional Communications unit concurrently. Students were also given a choice of whether to respond by pen and paper or electronically. The combined results are presented in Table 1. Respondents were also invited to add comments (optional) after each of the statements. In addition, a set of open questions was presented. Overall, the vast majority of the students felt that they had benefited from the SUCCESS program (Table 1).

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[1] One of these students opted not to submit his/her second (final) draft and therefore does not appear in the Academic and Professional Communications figures in Table 1, hence the discrepancy in numbers.

Table 1. Collated student responses to the SUCCESS statements (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree; *N* = 41).

	SA *n* (%)	A *n* (%)	U *n* (%)	D *n* (%)	SD *n* (%)
1. Overall, I am pleased that I participated in the SUCCESS program.	18 (44)	21 (51)	2 (5)	0 (0)	0 (0)
2. The SUCCESS program assisted me to do better in my assignments in this unit.	14 (34)	20 (49)	7 (17)	0 (0)	0 (0)
3. I am more confident about my use of academic language as a result of participating in SUCCESS.	9 (22)	24 (59)	7 (17)	1 (2)	0 (0)
4. The SUCCESS program has motivated me to continue to develop my academic writing skills.	15 (37)	22 (54)	4 (10)	0 (0)	0 (0)
5. My academic language and knowledge improved as a result of participating in SUCCESS.	14 (34)	21 (51)	6 (15)	0 (0)	0 (0)

4.2. Student learning

On the basis of student satisfaction, therefore, both programs could be seen as successful. The next issue was whether they were also successful in improving student learning, an issue which was examined through a quantitative comparison of assignment results in the APC unit. The cohort who completed APC in Semester 1, 2018 numbered 758 students, of whom 40 students also completed the SUCCESS program. Table 2 presents some data comparing these two groups.

Table 2. Comparisons between marks (first draft and final draft) of SUCCESS students and those of the full cohort of APC students.

	Marks range first essay*	Marks range final essay*	Average marks first essay*	Average marks final essay*	% increase	Number of students who scored under 20 for the first essay*	Number under 20 for the final essay*	Number who passed APC
SUCCESS students (*n* = 40)	0–28	9–32	15.18	22.18	18%	26 (65%)	12 (30%)	36 (90%)
Full APC cohort (*n* = 758)	0–36	0–40	19.04	25.28	15.5%	393 (52%)	111 (15%)	728 (96%)

(*marks were out of 40)

Although the SUCCESS group was small, some observations of the quantitative data can be made. While the SUCCESS group started from a lower average score on the first essay, they increased their average mark by more than the whole cohort. This suggests the value of the SUCCESS tutorials. The low average of all students on the first version essay is not surprising. Academic essay writing requires a complex set of skills and understandings, which develops with time, detailed feedback and practice. The students interviewed by Krause (2012, p. 158) commented on finding that university essays required much more complex research, thinking and argument development than they had previously been accustomed to, an attitude expressed frequently by APC and SUCCESS students. While more than half the SUCCESS students were able to achieve a pass score on their final version, the number of those who passed in the whole cohort increased more than threefold. This suggests that while all students can improve academic writing, for some students at risk, this improvement is slower and requires continuing input and support, ideally from Academic Language and Learning (ALL) specialists (Harper, 2013).

4.3. Student reflections

As part of the critical reflection portfolio in APC, students were required to write a final reflection, thinking back over their semester's learning, and forward to how it might apply to future studies and their lives after university. Following is a selection of reflections from the 40 students who completed the APC unit and the SUCCESS program in Semester 1, 2018. Students were de-identified and given a randomised ID number as part of the program database.

Some students focused on what they had learned about academic writing and referencing:

> *This unit helps me with writing academic style essays, referencing and general be able to wade through university. I find that this unit allows me to see the differences in essay writing that I was used to back in high school. I find that the academic writing style was quite different and brand new to me as well as the referencing, which I was familiar with as I often used APA 6th ed.* (Student #25)

> *I am also satisfied with how this unit has shaped my English skills and essay writing as well as my research skills. As well as this unit I have also been satisfied with the SUCCESS program which allowed me to develop further skills in essay writing and has enabled me to revisit some of the English skills I learnt in high school which I have since thought were useless.* (Student #67)

> *Studying this unit helped me change the way I should write, think and give credits for the work of others because during my past research, reports and analysis I never use to give credits of the work of others. Now onwards after learning through this unit I know how to cite the credit work of others and reference it.* (Student #76)

Within this group, some homed in on the value of redrafting for their essay writing:

> *Writing the essay draft was one of my favourite aspects of this unit, because I was fortunate enough to receive detailed feedback from my tutor. Which helped me understand what I am doing wrong and what areas I lack in the most.* (Student #64)

Several students believed that the skills they had developed would transfer into future essay writing:

> *This Academic and Professional Communications unit taught me the way of doing research, find out the useful and peer-reviewed articles to support my argument, the professional referencing style, the way of writing professional essay and so on. I believe that I can process these skills to each assignment writing in this unit and into other units, too.* (Student #24)

> *I am happy that this unit gave me a second chance at writing an academic essay, which allows me to improve on how I will do my essays in the future.* (Student #25)

Some reflected on developing sound learning processes that would be useful throughout their studies:

> *So, I had some kind of negative thoughts about this unit, APC. But after I complete all of my assignments, I realised that this unit is very helpful to my study because it is not only about 'the correct usage of English in an academic way'. It has also assisted me to get an idea of a standard procedure of work process, and as well as the way to arrange my ideas in order to express them clearly.* (Student #31)

> *Through the systematic study of repeating the process of research, extraction, reflection, and finally responded from my own thesis and arguments, I believe this is what learning is to remember and to apply. Especially we are receiving a lot of fragmental information every day that they are likely to be forgotten soon after. The reflective thinking allows me to think an issue from different angles including the other's that a better understanding surely help the communication.* (Student #44)

Others wrote about less tangible areas, particularly their growth in confidence:

> *It has also enabled* me *to feel grounded and comfortable as this unit was a perfect introduction to university standards, academic essay writing and ultimately university life. Therefore making me feel much more confident over the semester with my other units… I have changed my attitude about myself as a student, as I have learnt that I am capable of achieving new things as I tended to doubt myself before I began my first year at university. I now realise that as a student I am capable of achieving and learning new skills and facts that once deemed as too advance for* myself. (Student #67)

This growth in confidence was seen as particularly important by some international students:

> *I am braver than before, I am not afraid to talk to local students. The listening ability has improved either. At the beginning, it is hard for me to understand what you are talking about and I cannot move my eyes just looked at the speakers' mouths.* (Student #61)

> *I am also learning to express my own opinion without fear of being wrong or being judged. Thank you for that [tutor]. I guess my background taught me to be quiet, taught me that thinking differently than others is a shame and it only characterises me as a fool, but I don't believe in that anymore. I totally understand now why APC is a first year unit, I feel that it gave me a good base for my next three years of studying.* (Student #69)

Some students were able to see their reflective thinking in a broad context:

> *I very much like collaborating with different people from various cultural background because I know for some, they will see things differently the way I would and that would challenge me as a person and also my perspectives in life and how maybe I could adjust to such situation. That is the only way I know I will grow as a person, student and in discipline I am in. I like to also take into account people's opinion because they may know something that I don't. That way I would explore and seek for more information in order to gain a deeper understanding of my future job reference.* (Student #22)

> *From this unit and the portfolio, I have learnt how critical thinking is important on gaining our knowledge. Think outside of the box is really important nowadays as the rapid change of the society and technology brings us to a more competitive environment. In order to be outstanding among the talented people in this society, we need to improve our thinking and perspectives in different areas to create creative and innovative ideas which can eventually bring us to a better living.* (Student #9)

4.4. Tutor responses

The tutors working in the APC unit come from the range of disciplines represented by the students themselves. While their focus is on developing students' skills in clarity of expression, cohesion of argument and application of research, the range of their disciplinary backgrounds provides an authentic context within which students will develop these generic skills. The richness of their

varied backgrounds enhances the unit. Many APC tutors have commented that they greatly enjoy working with a new and ever-changing range of topics. Students also comment regularly on the breadth of perspectives they are able to gain and share by working with others from very different disciplines, as suggested in the reflections discussed above.

4.5. Responses from faculty colleagues

From the point of view of academic colleagues in the faculty, the joint program is also considered a success in promoting student learning and supporting retention. In 2017, as part of a faculty-based review of the Bachelor of Arts (BA) course, discipline-based academics across the faculty were asked to comment on whether APC should be replaced by a focus on academic literacies within discipline-based units. The respondents overwhelmingly preferred the APC unit, citing its value as an introduction to Humanities studies, which would ensure a consistent academic foundation for all students. One disciplinary colleague responded that the unit 'does the heavy lifting, the foundational work that releases us to focus on the next level of academic work with our students'.

This range of student reflections suggests a positive response to their APC and SUCCESS studies. While it was not possible to provide a fully discipline-based focus in either program, students in this cohort saw both programs as creating a foundation on which to build their ongoing disciplinary studies.

5. Conclusion

At the university, a strong investment has been made into first-year programs in an attempt to provide timely academic writing support within the myriad financial and regulatory constraints of the current higher education environment. In the second and subsequent years, developing students' disciplinary discourse must be left to subject specialists in smaller, discipline-based units. This, however, has its own problems: the evidence is strong that these academics are neither willing nor confident to develop students' discipline-based literacies (Wingate & Tribble, 2012); nevertheless, members of the university's central Learning and Teaching unit are currently attempting to map this follow-up throughout all courses to ensure that discipline-specific academic literacies appropriate to the level and context of the relevant degree programs are sufficiently developed, taught and tested at key points from start to finish. This ongoing project is beyond the scope of the current study.

Over the last two decades, higher education in Australia has been shaped by a range of variables. These include globalisation, economic drivers, and equity and diversity imperatives. As a result, the demographic makeup of the commencing student cohort each year is wide and varied. This means that for most students, adjusting to the culture of a university setting is not a passive process. The challenges associated with this are felt mostly in the completion of written assignments according to a prescribed code to which many are not accustomed. For this reason, the first-year experience forms a critical part of the transition to higher education, and there is considerable emphasis in core first-year units on meeting the various compliance demands, both from the individual university and from the sector as a whole. In the current higher education environment, academics often find themselves juggling with programs to find a reasonable balance among competing agendas. This paper describes two interlinked programs that have provided positive learning outcomes for a range of students by way of improved satisfaction and increased grades.

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