

A student-centred approach: The English Language Support Service for international students

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This article outlines the purpose, development and delivery of the English Language Support Service (ELSS), which is offered to international students in their first year of study at a medium-sized university in regional Victoria, Australia. Additionally, this article explains how the support provided is contextualised, timely and appropriate to student needs, allowing students to take on new concepts with meaning and immediate application, in conjunction with their degree coursework. ELSS has been specifically designed to aid international students with their initial exposure and transition to studying in an Australian context. It aims to help international students become more assured in their place at university, and acclimatise to the Australian academic language, culture and landscape enough in order to subsequently engage confidently with their assignments and the remainder of their degree.

Key Words: International students, higher education, transition, inclusivity, readiness, academic culture, academic preparedness.

1. Introduction

Within the last ten years, the number of international students studying in higher education courses at Australian universities has almost doubled, from 198,405 to 358,632 students (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2019a). This number of international students has meant that in 2015, almost half of Australia's universities reported international student enrolments of over 20 per cent (including on-shore partner providers), with the top two institutions reporting over 40 percent enrolments (Department of Education and Training, 2016). As the third most popular destination for international students after the United States and the United Kingdom (International Consultants for Education and Fairs [ICEF] Monitor, 2018), Australia has seen international education become an important part of its economy in recent years. International education is now the third most impactful service export after iron ore and coal (ICEF Monitor, 2019), contributing AUD37.6 billion to the Australian economy in the year 2018-19 (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020b). More specifically, international student fees have come to comprise the largest growth in the tertiary sector, and are the "single biggest source of university revenue" (Norton et al., 2018, p. 3) in this country, consisting of 23.3 percent of total university revenue in 2017 (Department of Parliamentary Services, 2019). Moreover, the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation released a study which identified Australia as the most expensive study location, proving more costly than the United States and the United Kingdom. The average international student in Australia was projected to spend an average of AUD42,093 per year on living expenses and university fees combined (Australian Government, 2020; Herber, 2014;), thus highlighting the individual significance of each international student to Australia's economy and its universities. As a result, the onus has increasingly shifted towards universities

needing to make an effort to support their international student cohort once they reach Australia's shores.

International education has steadily increased to become a valuable part of Australia's economic success. Therefore, the significance of supporting international students during their studies is highlighted when we consider the immense contribution this group has made to Australia's financial wellbeing (as seen above), which has become altogether more clear during the current COVID-19 crisis (ICEF Monitor, 2020). This is not to mention the contribution this student cohort makes to wider aspects of Australian society. Apart from enriching the cultural fabric of the Australian community, recent figures shed light on the role international education plays in Australia's job numbers by maintaining almost 250,000 jobs in the year 2018-19 (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020b). Importantly, Australia's university sector cites reasons for international students choosing to study in Australia to include the sector's excellent educational standards, the fact that students are provided a safe learning and living environment, and the standard of living in Australia (Universities Australia, 2019).

Aside from providing quality education and educational experiences at our universities, it is necessary to support international students as part of their transition to studying in an Australian higher education context (Le & McKay, 2018). This includes ensuring the students become familiar with the university conventions expected in the Western system of learning and teaching, as Australia hosts international students from a wide variety of backgrounds, educational experiences (including from non-Western traditions of learning), and linguistic abilities. As part of this cohort's transition to study in an altogether different environment, there are naturally skills and expectations to which our international students need to be introduced, including Academic Integrity requirements. Furthermore, in the current higher education climate in which academic integrity issues of various kinds, including contract cheating, are becoming more prominent (Fass-Holmes, 2018; Fatemi & Saito, 2019; Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency [TEQSA], 2020;), specialist support options for international students need to be considered and woven into the fabric of tertiary institutions. Currently, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA, 2019), Australia's independently-run quality assurance and regulatory body for higher education nation-wide, is in the midst of supporting Australian universities to safeguard academic integrity. Furthermore, various regulations, frameworks and laws outline tertiary providers' responsibilities of supporting international students in their care (Department of Education and Training, 2019b; TEQSA, 2015; *Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act 2011* (Cth.) s 1.3). Therefore, it is imperative that higher education providers realise the necessity of providing tailored academic support for international students in order to help lighten the load of transitioning to Australian academic expectations and requirements. This article will introduce one such support service which is based on a discipline-specific approach delivered as weekly classes which run alongside students' degree courses.

Aside from the social and cultural challenges international students encounter, a major source of difficulty is often the academic and linguistic requirements, and, more particularly, the gap between students' previous understandings, expectations and experiences of learning compared to requirements which await them in Australia (Freeman & Li, 2019; Le & McKay, 2018). International students, particularly those arriving from non-Western educational backgrounds, are expected to quickly adapt to a foreign learning environment, including negotiating learning in a language other than their L1 (first language).

2. The English Language Support Service

2.1. Background

The importance of the initial experience encountered by international students upon arriving in Australia has been highlighted by the Australian government (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020a; Lawson, 2012). It has been suggested that higher education institutions

have increased their support of international students in recent years (Arkoudis, 2019; Fatemi & Saito, 2019), which is a welcome development. Research by Freeman and Li (2019) suggests that there is a strong benefit to embedding transition support into courses and propose that there is a lack of academic support which spans across the disciplines in this fashion. Further, discipline-specific support has been shown to lead to an increase in the chances of academic success for international students, as such initiatives indicate acceleration in grasping academic skills, performance and success (Song, 2006, as cited in Ashton-Hay et al., 2016). Published international student feedback has indicated that students especially value support which centres on assignments (Ashton-Hay et al., 2016). In an attempt to aid students in their transition to studying at an Australian university, a university located in regional Victoria initiated the English Language Support Program (ELSP) in 2014, now called the English Language Support Service (ELSS), for international students in their first semester of study. The support program outlined in this article combines the dual approach of aiding international students with study skill comprehension and comprehensively discussing assignment requirements at a linguistic level.

While Australian universities have made great strides in providing some level of academic support for international students in various settings, much of this support is provided at several (often pre-determined) points during the semester, with offerings usually comprising of one-on-one support, intermittent workshops or linguistic support (see Ashton-Hay et al., 2016; Silva et al., 2016). These efforts function more as a “supervisory framework” (Silva et al., 2016, p. 470), rather than an intensive support which actively engages and connects with the weekly needs of students as they move through the semester. This is where ELSS differs, as all support provided links directly to the students’ degree and individual course expectations and requirements, reacting to student need as the opportunity presents itself in the students’ first semester journey in a sustained manner. Moreover, all support is provided with the explicit consideration of students’ English language abilities and needs. The cohort of international students requiring assistance at this university contains students arriving from partner institutions in China, exchange students, and traditional international students aiming to commence and complete the entirety of their degree in Australia.

The English Language Support Service began as a language support mechanism provided to international students in response to the University’s decision to maintain an overall IELTS entry (International English Language Testing System) band score of 6.0 across most degrees, excluding Nursing, Engineering and Education degrees (which require an overall IELTS band score of 6.5 or 7.0). With this in mind, an academic position was created for a lecturer to develop and implement a support program for international students in the first semester of their degree. IELTS provides guidelines for educational institutions which outline whether, depending on the IELTS level achieved, students are expected to have the necessary English skills to succeed in their academic degree or training course (IELTS, 2019). The key consideration is whether the degree or training course is linguistically demanding. With that in mind, as the official *IELTS Guide for education institutions, governments, professional bodies and commercial organisations* (IELTS, 2019, p. 15) recommends that:

- a. students with an overall IELTS band of 6.5 or below studying “linguistically demanding academic courses” require additional English study upon acceptance into their degree, and that
- b. an overall band score of 7.0 is only “probably acceptable [for] linguistically demanding” academic courses, and that
- c. “English study [is] needed” for results of 5.5 to 6.5,

it is clear that academic and linguistic support should form part of a university’s support strategy, even when commencing students have met the English level standards identified for entry into the institution.

Since its inception, the premise upon which ELSS was based has been one of flexibility, accessibility and reactivity to the needs of the students. Classes and workshops provide support which is

contextualised, timely and appropriate to student needs, allowing students to take on new concepts with meaning and immediate application. With this in mind, what follows is an exploration of the workings of the program and how it has been used to ease international students' initial apprehensions about studying in a vastly different environment than the one to which they have been accustomed.

2.2. Delivery methods and evolution of ELSS

ELSS lecturers providing support to international students and working with degree academics to develop tailored ELSS content are qualified Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL) professionals with experience in linguistic and study skills development. This has been an important marker of ELSS, which is also appealing to students who attend ELSS classes. While the program was still in the planning phase, it was determined that it would be beneficial for ELSS classes to explicitly cover academic skills such as critical thinking; academic writing; time management; referencing; researching; grammar; note-taking; and understanding tutorial questions, readings, course content and assignments. When ELSS classes commenced in the early stages, it became evident that students were most interested in receiving information that was directly relevant to understanding their coursework and approaching assignments. If the aforementioned skills were relevant to either coursework or assignments, students were willing to take this information on board and attended sessions addressing these concepts more readily. Therefore, a flexible approach has been the key to students engaging with ELSS; an approach where the teacher has prepared material about a certain study skill for class prior to assignment time (and later in the semester if necessary), but is firstly focused on, and ready to explain course requirements and to respond to any specific requests from students, especially regarding assignments. As ELSS is not a preparatory bridging program, but runs concurrent to the students' degree courses, ELSS aims to support students throughout their initial contact with Australian courses, thus preparing them for success in subsequent courses in future semesters.

2.2.1. ELSS collaboration with Faculty

By shaping a support service based on student needs, ELSS is able to tailor content in a flexible manner, therefore maximising the reach and efficacy of the support provided by the University. In order to best organise weekly classes, the ELSS lecturer forms a relationship with course coordinators, lecturers and tutors, requesting access to course descriptions, assignment information, and the relevant Learning Management System (Moodle) site for the course, asking whether there are any specific problem areas academics anticipate or have experienced with international students in past iterations of the course. Involving the degree lecturers in the planning stages allows for an element of agency on their part, and has proven to significantly contribute to the tailoring of ELSS support to individual international student cohorts, due to the valuable insights of the academics, which contribute to further informing the customised support to be given to the academics' incoming students.

It is well accepted that learning is best achieved when meaningful and purposeful learning environments, which allow for "practicing critical literacy" (p. 4), are experienced by students, and it is no different for language learners (Lee et al, 2019). As students are exposed to these relevant skills during the meaning-making process of preparing for assignments, meaningful learning in an authentic learning environment is facilitated in ELSS classes. In this manner, ELSS draws on the authentic learning (Brown et al., 1989, as cited in Roach et al., 2018), as it aids students to progress in relevant skills by being "embedded in the physical and social context within which it will be used" (Herrington et al., 2010, p. 15 as cited in Ozverir et al., 2017). It is this factor which has played a key role in the success of ELSS, as well as the fact that ELSS heeds the call to universities which "requires support programs to foster [students'] agency toward exploring and exploiting what they need when they need it" and "to design support services with open/flexible points of entry and exit" (Sharma, 2019, p. v).

2.2.2. Adaptation: responding to student needs in Business Faculty

In addition to focusing on developing strong bonds between ELSS staff and Faculty, it is necessary for the ELSS lecturer to become very familiar with the overall structure of the various degrees being supported, and, more particularly, with the individual courses which are identified and targeted as historically challenging courses for international students. One such course is the Fundamentals of Law core course. In this linguistically demanding course, students are introduced to the foundations of the Australian government and legal system, delving into the formation of government, legislation and regulations, the function and principles of Common Law, and the formation and application of Contract Law, among other concepts. On the issue of gradual engagement with legal principles foreign to those originally from outside of Australia, Deljo (2000) asserts that “values inherent in the Australian legal system may challenge the values of those from other traditions and cultures” (p. 242). The majority of students enrolled in this course have been Chinese students from partner institutions, which has meant that any assumption of a general understanding of what constitutes the Australian government and its legal system would be a disservice to the students. As a result, the weekly ELSS classes for Business students have largely focused around the course content students need to learn, comprehend, and apply to their mid-semester test; a case study assignment requiring the use of the Issue, Rule, Application, Conclusion (IRAC) approach; and an end-of-year exam. It is in situations like this that it becomes evident that the ELSS lecturer is expected to transition seamlessly from the requirements of the courses of one Faculty to the next. In ensuring that international students are able to make progress in and grasp the basics of the Fundamentals of Law course, the ELSS lecturer focuses on the essential points within the course PowerPoints (ideally prior to the Fundamentals of Law lecture taking place), and breaks down the terminology and general concepts of the week’s focus. Due to the fact that the students come with very limited understanding in this field, the ELSS lecturer utilises his or her TESOL expertise to engage with the content at a linguistic level. As assignments commence for this and other courses, the focus shifts to understanding the case study, assignment, and IRAC format, along with the associated study skills needed to successfully complete this assignment – referencing, researching, paraphrasing and academic writing, all of which can be applied to assignments students are simultaneously attempting in their other Business courses. If the need for additional classes is identified, the ELSS lecturer has the flexibility to arrange for Assignment or Study Skills Workshops to further equip students with necessary knowledge. Therefore, the support students receive when electing to attend ELSS classes is strongly tailored to the specific demands and challenges students face as they encounter them throughout the semester.

2.2.3. Adaptation: Responding to student needs in the Master of Social Work degree

It was identified early on that one of the degrees with the highest concentration of international students is the Master of Social Work. These students have degree lectures scheduled for one full day a week, and this cohort of international students in particular often travels from Melbourne to our regional campus in order to attend classes. After initial poor attendance rates at face-to-face ELSS classes, online classes of 1.5 hours duration were offered as an alternative through the specially designed ELSS Moodle site, and have continued to operate in that format ever since. The sessions are recorded, uploaded onto the Master of Social Work section of the ELLS Moodle site, and sent out via email, so that the students, who have competing priorities in their lives, are able to familiarise themselves with the ELSS content on-demand in their own time, and return to the resources in future, if they so wish.

As evidenced in Figure 1, the assignment demands placed on the Master of Social Work students are significant and complex. Not only are students required to understand the course content adequately, they quickly discover that the expected level of output and dedication while studying at a post-graduate level is significantly higher than what they have previously experienced. This is not to mention the novel skills students need to urgently acquire in order to have the best chance at succeeding in their assignments, which follow in quick succession. Research by Brown (2008)

has found that when inviting post-graduate students in the UK to share their culture shock experiences, the demands of their Masters level course was one of the most quoted reasons for stress, and that overall anxiety peaked in the students' first semester, where "academic cultural differences, the intensity of the assignment schedule, and language difficulties" (p. 22) culminated in affecting students' sense of progress. In an attempt to ease their anxieties, the Master of Social Work students attending online and recorded ELSS sessions have eagerly seized the opportunity to engage with a support service which provides in-depth assignment support, and explanations of key study skills, which many of the students have not employed in their studies in their home countries. ELSS sessions targeted at Master of Social Work students have been well-attended and the engagement has been constant throughout the semester, which is likely a response to the concentration of assignments (see Figure 1), and the abundance of wide-ranging academic skills which accompany them.

Master of Social Work Weekly Plan (online classes)	
Week 2	APA Referencing session and researching in brief
Week 3	Assignment 1: Annotated Bibliography and paraphrasing
Week 4	Assignment 2: PowerPoint assignment and sentence length
Week 5	Critical thinking and research (extended)
Week 6	Essay writing and academic writing (paraphrasing, paragraphs)
Week 7	Assignment 3: 3,000 word essay requirements and incorporating evidence
Week 8	Essay help - Casual question and answer session
Week 9	Assignment 4: Reflective journal requirements and reflective writing
Week 10	Assignment 5: Role play assignment and questioning, summarisation, interpretation, etc.
Week 11	Critical reflection – how it differs from a reflective journal, strategies
Week 12	Assignment 6: Critical reflection assignment based on role play requirements and revision

Figure 1. ELSS and assignment schedule for Master of Social Work students.

2.2.4. Adaptation: Responding to student needs in Nursing

Perhaps the most typical representation of ELSS serving undergraduate students is the support of international students in the Bachelor of Nursing degree. ELSS classes for Nursing students involve the option of attending 1.5 hour weekly face-to-face or online sessions. Similar to the Master of Social Work schedule, the ELSS lecturer provides essential information such as referencing, researching and paraphrasing in the few weeks prior to the first assessments becoming available to students. Thereafter, assignment requirements and marking guides are made explicit to students through careful description, clarification, and relevant examples. It is surprising how often a seemingly simple and elementary strategy, such as addressing the task description in plain English, or case study example (text or video), is all that is needed to enable the students to start an assignment with confidence. Of course, this approach is paired with arming the students with the relevant study skills linked to the assignments, such as essay or reflective writing. At other times, there are major barriers, such as understanding how to formulate and record a narrated PowerPoint, or a video presentation using screen capture technology. All of these aspects, which may at first seem very basic and explicit expectations to all students, are actually foreign and implicit expectations loaded with unfamiliar concepts for our international students, and require careful explanation. It is imperative that students have somewhere they can turn to where academic expectations are made explicit (Freeman & Li, 2019; Pattison & Robson, 2012). It is for this reason that, once international students see the value of attending specialist support classes tailored to

their specific needs by taking into consideration their linguistic and academic needs, they continue to engage with ELSS past the first assignment, and promote the support to their classmates through word of mouth.

Since 2018, there has been an increase in the number of international students studying Nursing at this university, most of whom come from India. While many of the same challenges faced by students already identified in this article are certainly found within this cohort, there is here the added element of progressively introducing nurses-in-training to the importance and application of critical thinking as regards linking the students' academic experience and expectations to real world implications as a future nurse (Kaddoura et al., 2017). When critical thinking has been applied differently in students' previous academic pursuits (Floyd, 2011), it is difficult enough to swiftly learn and employ this skill without some opportunity for comprehension and transition to this way of learning. Let us consider, then, the extra pressure of sudden expectation of critical thinking, while undertaking linguistically demanding study in a foreign academic culture and undertaking the task of two-way translation (L2 [English] to L1 [home spoken language], and back to L2 [English]) to consume and produce knowledge. It is an expectation that all tertiary students learn to think critically, but, as posited by Floyd (2011), while "all students face challenges in this field [...] international students face a double challenge: not only must they think critically, but they must think critically in a second language (L2)" (p. 289). In order to facilitate a positive attitude towards degree assignments and to avoid panic and confusion, the ELSS lecturer employs a holistic approach by highlighting the critical thinking skills necessary to successfully complete an assignment. Here, the ELSS lecturer is required to take a step back and continually point out to students the reasoning behind set assignment tasks (to know what knowledge academics expect them to exhibit), remind students of thinking critically, and draw on previously expounded study skill knowledge, linking these three elements throughout the course of the semester. The desired result is that international students attending ELSS sessions eventually decipher the code of academic culture surrounding assignment expectations, and are later able to confidently approach the assignment which awaits them.

3. Discussion

3.1. ELSS today and into the future

Today, the English Language Support Service continues to evolve and respond to student and Faculty need. As demand and international student numbers (now more diversified across Faculties) have increased, weekly contact with students has decreased from 4 hours of classes per week, which was the offering in the early stages of the program, to 1.5 or 2 hours per week, as required. With the availability of online classes, ELSS is projected to continue supporting international students, despite whether border closures as a result of COVID-19 restrict international students from commencing studies on campus. In student feedback collated from the first year of ELSS delivery, the necessity to maintain direct relevance in ELSS sessions to the students' university workload, including degree assignments, and in some cases course content, has highlighted the need to maintain a high level of flexibility within the program. The service has evolved from one which provided static and delineated academic skill support, to one which weaves and connects with the content with which students are engaging in their degree. In the students' second semester of study, if necessary, targeted Assignment Workshops and/or Study Skills Workshops are arranged intermittently, as the students are expected to have acquired an adequate academic skills base and confidence to move forward with their personal journey of independent learning. The dedicated English Language Support Service Moodle site has become a valuable tool for both ELSS staff and students alike. It is here that online classes take place, the recordings are stored, and relevant resources (both those used in class and offered as additional resources) are located. This repository of resources remains active for the duration of the students' enrolment, meaning that the students can draw on the information previously covered in ELSS sessions and apply it to their future studies once the support is no longer on offer.

The English Language Support Service is an opt-in program which runs concurrently alongside the students' degree program. It was identified early on that it was not possible to make ELSS a compulsory part of student study plans. Instead, students are encouraged to attend through weekly reminders, but the final choice is left up to them as independent learners. This is where the importance of recorded lectures becomes evident, with students having the option to engage anonymously and at a time which suits them. With that in mind, it is evident that competing priorities exist for students, and that attending supplementary classes in addition to their already demanding schedule is a commitment not all students will make. To help ease the burden of the anxiety of the first week of classes, ELSS classes do not run, allowing the students to orient themselves and to become aware of and accustomed to the challenges that await them. It is hoped that this initial experience allows for students to realise that additional support would be welcome and join ELSS classes as they commence Week Two. ELSS is promoted extensively during Orientation Week, in selected degree lectures and course Moodle sites in Week One, and via the ELSS Moodle site and email alerts sent directly to students' university and personal email accounts.

Student consultation hours are available for one-on-one academic or pastoral advice, and are offered face-to-face and online. However, the core idea of the English Language Support Service remains to aid international students by using a flexible and tailored approach, and for that support to be targeted to groups of students, rather than individual students for maximum effect, which includes peer-learning opportunities and efficient use of resources with limited ELSS staff supporting international students spread across many Faculties. Students appear to appreciate the anonymity afforded in an online classroom, where they are able to ask questions of each other and the lecturer in a chat box without fear of embarrassment. Furthermore, students are encouraged to inform the lecturer if a concept remains unclear in the course of the ELSS session taking place, and are often reminded that no question is too trivial. Where appropriate, the ELSS lecturer will take recommendations from students regarding what content they would like to see in future ELSS classes. Another attractive feature of the online classroom is the recording function, which allows a link to be sent out to students and to be embedded in the relevant section of the ELSS Moodle site. Looking to the future, the English Language Support Service will continue to adapt and respond to the needs of international students through the use of anonymous end-of-semester evaluations, further cultivation of partnerships with academics, and close alignment with the course expectations as they change and update from year to year.

3.2. Challenges and future improvements

As a final point, it should be pointed out that this university also has a large number of domestic students from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB), particularly at the University's metropolitan campus. Students who fall into this category often face similar challenges as international students when transitioning to a tertiary study environment. It is for this reason that ELSS has been flagged as a support option for domestic NESB students since Semester One, 2020. Learning Skills Advisors (LSAs) are often the first contact with students in academic distress, and are, from their meaningful interactions with students on the ground, able to refer domestic students to ELSS. Currently, domestic students have been asked to nominate whether they require access to ELSS, while international students are automatically included in all ELSS activities. A more effective systemic method is desired to ensure that this support becomes available to those NESB students who need it.

English Language Support Service classes are currently provided for students enrolled in undergraduate Nursing, Business, IT, and Health Science degrees and Masters of Business, Professional Accounting, IT, Engineering and Social Work degrees. Until this year, ELSS classes were run by one staff member, meaning that only online support was offered to students not enrolled at that campus. In a new development, additional staff members have been employed sessionally to facilitate classes and cater to student needs at our metropolitan campus. It is expected that additional ELSS lecturers will enable the program to flourish across all campuses and ease the burden of

administrative duties such as timetabling, promoting, identifying concentration of international students in courses, emailing reminders for upcoming classes, and subsequently emailing links to class recordings, and maintaining an extensive Moodle site. As new degrees are added to the scope of offerings at this regional university, ELSS will adapt to provide support in those areas. In an effort to further stimulate ELSS attendance and engagement, scheduling ELSS classes to avoid clashes with degree courses, an ever-present challenge, has been marked as a priority. Furthermore, employing new promotional avenues such as video clips featuring students who have had positive experiences and results from engaging with ELSS will be recorded and played at Orientation Week and selected Week One appearances in degree lectures. As a result, interest in ELSS offerings will potentially be piqued sooner, and a clear connection will be made evident to commencing students early on in their studies, possibly enticing them to consider engaging with ELSS early on, rather than waiting for the pressure and panic of assignment time.

4. Student evaluation and experience

At the completion of each semester, students are sent the option to participate in an anonymous survey, where they are asked to evaluate ELSS and provide anonymous comment regarding the support they have received for the past eleven weeks. Feedback is overwhelmingly positive, with students often expressing the desire to continue ELSS classes into their second semester. What follows is a compilation of student feedback from over the years:

“I think it is very helpful for me to get a better understanding with lectures.”

“It is an excellent program for international students. Referencing was very new to me. Received great support from [the ELSS lecturer]. Also had doubts regarding education system in Australia, which [the ELSS lecturer] helped us out in understanding. Also helped us in understanding Australian culture, people and the country.”

“Could please have more class time? Two classes per week is not enough.”

“More ELSS CLASS!!!”

“I want ELSS class next semester.”

“Regarding time schedule of ELSP program, I have faced difficulties in attending the program. So to be frank, I have asked for the change in schedule and the tutor [name] has changed the time schedule for me which was very helpful for me to attend the ELSP classes. So I recommend her teaching qualities and assistance with my assignment concerns was good. I'm very thankful for her support.”

“Overall, it was absolutely fantastic, it clarify some points I didn't catch in the lecture. [ELSS lecturer] was also great to talk to. I would recommend.”

Some students have also expressed a desire to further their English skills as part of ELSS, an indication that even after their first semester of study in Australia, they are uncertain that their English language skills are adequate:

“Can talk more about some topic like: English Idioms, Australia culture, Some skills related to placement or conversation skills.”

“I hope teacher can teach us English more than assignment.”

“I need individual concentration classes on improving my vocabulary.”

“I hope you can teach me grammar.”

Once feedback is collated, the ELSS lecturer considers the suggestions and evaluates which changes need to be implemented for the upcoming semester. Post-semester evaluation will continue to be a feature of the English Language Support Service, as the program endeavours to equip

commencing international and NESB students in the coming semesters. As ELSS is not an accredited course, end-of-semester feedback has not been collected through the eVALUate survey instrument which is used University-wide. Instead, the ELSS coordinator has designed and implemented surveys using LimeSurvey and Qualtrics platforms, encouraging students to participate through Moodle and email communication. Similarly, feedback is collected in the form of email communication students send to the ELSS lecturer as a form of expressing their thanks for the support they have obtained. Since student feedback has thus far been overwhelmingly positive, with students often indicating in follow-up emails or in post-semester surveys that they have received high marks after attending ELSS classes and workshops, there has not been an attempt to link ELSS attendance with degree grades. However, future plans to evaluate the effectiveness of ELSS further include matching and comparing student grades of students who attended ELSS with students who did not attend ELSS. As a final point, it appears that a pleasant bond is generally created between the ELSS lecturer (a neutral, third party) and students attending ELSS, due to the unique and continuous engagement provided through ELSS classes during the course of the semester – an additional distinctive feature of this support service.

5. Conclusion

This paper has outlined the purpose, development and delivery of the English Language Support Service for international and NESB students at a regional Australian university. While support is provided to international students at Australian universities, ELSS appears to be singular in the way that it delivers its support in the form of parallel weekly classes, rather than through sporadic embedded workshops or one-on-one consultations with students. Further, it delivers a service which considers, and is strongly based upon, the linguistic needs of the cohort. The weekly classes and intermittent workshops of which the support service is comprised have evolved to not only cover essential academic skills such as referencing, researching, academic writing and critical thinking, and course content at a linguistic level when required, but are intrinsically linked to breaking down the requirements of the students' degree assignments. The very nature of studying abroad and in a foreign academic and physical environment ensures that gaps in academic cultural knowledge will add to the pressure international students experience upon arrival and commencement of their studies. Many of the expectations placed on students in higher education form implicit knowledge (Freeman & Li, 2020), whereas this knowledge needs to be made explicit to our international students. The English Language Support Service is a specialised, student-centred program which provides international and NESB students experiencing the initial difficulties of transition to studying at an Australian university the opportunity to build the necessary skills to become successful independent learners in the Australian academic context.

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