IN-COURSE LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT

« A DISCUSSION PAPER »

For a National Symposium: English Language Competence of International Students | August 2007

About This Paper
This paper was commissioned by Australian Education International (AEI) in the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) as background for and to aid discussion at a National Symposium: *English Language Competence of International Students*, held on 14 August 2007 in Sydney. The preparation of this report was managed by the International Education Association of Australia (IEAA).

About AEI and DEST
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About the Authors

Dr Sophie Arkoudis is Senior Lecturer at the Centre for the Study in Higher Education, University of Melbourne.

Dr Sue Starfield is Director of the Learning Centre and a Visiting Fellow in the Department of Linguistics, University of New South Wales.

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FOREWORD

This Discussion Paper is one of three commissioned by Commissioned by Australian Education International in the Australian Department of Education, Science and Training for a one-day National Symposium, *English Language Competence of International Students,* held on Tuesday 14 August 2007 at the Sheraton on the Park Hotel, Sydney.

The Symposium will address the issues shaping the English language competence of international students and graduates in light of emerging research and in response to recent media coverage in Australia and overseas about the matter. The Symposium will address perceptions about the quality and effectiveness of the Australian international student program in relation to English language competence of international students. Outcomes form the Symposium will inform future policy and practice.

The Discussion papers prepared for the Symposium are:

> Discussion Paper 1: *Pathways – Preparation and Selection*
>
> Discussion Paper 2: *In-Course Language Development and Support*
>
> Discussion Paper 3: *Outcomes – Language, Employment and Further Study*

The aim of the Discussion Papers is to:

> Examine current knowledge and gaps in knowledge on the topic, drawing on Australian and where possible international research.
>
> Discuss implications for Australian policy and practice in this area.
>
> Identify critical issues for consideration by the Symposium.

The broad aim of the Symposium is to consider what we know about the efficacy of Australian policy and practice in this area and to consider directions for enhancement of our knowledge and practice.

Outcomes of the Symposium will be presented in a final Symposium Report for wide dissemination, including at the Australian International Education Conference to be held in Melbourne from 9-12 October 2007.

IEAA is delighted to be working with AEI to foster discussion and debate and to further industry and community understanding within Australia about the issue of English language competence of international students and thereby contributing to enhancing Australia's reputation as a high quality international education provider.

Dennis Murray
Executive Director
International Education Association of Australia

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper explores critical issues surrounding English language support programs within Australian education. It should be noted from the outset that most of the research cited in this paper is from higher education teaching contexts. This is due to the fact that there has been very little research within VET and schools concerning English language learning and teaching for international students. Moreover, the small amount of research that is available seems to reflect the issues that arise in the literature on higher education. For these reasons, higher education is fore grounded in this paper and where, applicable, references are made to other sectors.

Language and academic support programs (LAS) have evolved in response to the growing educational needs of international students and the concerns of their teachers. These programs have undergone a shift in emphasis from generic to discipline-specific skills teaching. The focus is on teaching language and academic skills rather than study skills. The emphasis is more developmental than remedial. While Australian English language support programs are further advanced in these aspects when compared to UK and USA higher education, the discussion in this paper emphasises that at this time of increased competition in the international education market we need to be exploring ways of developing best practice in English support programs.

This paper highlights issues for both policy and practice, which can lead to developing high quality English language support programs that enable international students to achieve within their academic communities and further increase the reputation of Australian education within the international student market. In order to achieve this, the following critical issues need to be addressed:

- Implementing post-entry testing programs such as The Diagnostic English Language Assessment (DELA) and the Diagnostic English Language Needs Assessment (DELNA) to identify 'at risk' students and offer targeted support for international students upon entry to courses.
- Supporting qualitative and quantitative evaluative research on the different models of language support and student outcomes across the sectors should be encouraged and clear outcome indicators developed.
- Researching the processes and practices involved in developing and maintaining effective collaboration between language support staff and disciplinary staff should be encouraged by educational institutions.
- Articulating clear career pathways and qualification levels for staff involved in academic English language teaching.
- Incorporating key stakeholders such as students, academic staff, language support staff, directors of teaching and learning and staff involved in recruitment and marketing in research, in order to inform policy and practice at an institutional, departmental and individual level.
- Extending quality assurance indicators to include academic English language learning and teaching for both onshore and offshore teaching programs across the different sectors.
- Developing best practice requires increased research and funding for English language programs to support English language development. Simply raising the minimum English language entry pathways will not address the issue of international students acquiring the English language knowledge and skills necessary for study at the appropriate level.

Without addressing some of these issues, it is very difficult to state whether the current Australian system is adequate, because we have very little evaluative evidence to justify any claims we may make.

1. INTRODUCTION

We are writing this paper in a climate in which there is great public concern about the language proficiency of international students. The Birrell (2006) study, extensive media coverage and the concerns of many academics and students echo this.

There appears on the face of it to be a mismatch between the popular view that language is a problem for overseas students and the large scale reviews we discuss in Section 3 which indicate no significant differences in overall pass rates of overseas and local students both in Australia and in the UK. The evidence from the UTS study also discussed in Section 3 and other case studies we examine suggests however that language is a barrier to student success.

How do we understand this disjuncture? Obviously, international students already receive large amounts of support which may be assisting their completion rates. Media coverage and anecdotal reports by academics suggest concern over assessment standards. As we propose, greater research is needed into this complex area and clear quality indicators of outcomes need to be developed by key stakeholders for onshore as well as offshore students.

Academic language learning is linked to a set of purposes that place high cognitive and linguistic demands on the learner. Students are learning the particular ways of thinking and communicating in their language of their disciplines – some call this academic discourse – and it can be challenging for native English speakers too. For second language speakers of English speakers particularly, the challenge is heightened; they not only have to learn the new disciplinary language but develop the additional linguistic resources to do this in English and function as a student in new social and cultural settings. North American studies consistently show that these students require at least five years of exposure to academic English to approximate native speaker norms (Cummins & Man Yee-Fun, 2007). Linguistic research into the varieties of language students encounter on North American university campuses reveals the highly complex and diverse language students encounter on a daily basis, not only in their readings and lectures but in the information on websites, handouts, in seminars and other contexts (Biber *et al*, 2002).

Many of the expectations academics have as to what counts as successful performance are tacit and as they are not trained as language teachers they may struggle to communicate to their students exactly what the language-related expectations of their discipline are. Moreover, they often do not see this as their role. Their responsibility is primarily in teaching the content of their discipline.

Pertinent to the theme of this paper is research that indicates that there are important differences between the writing required at university and that required to pass the IELTS test. Moore and Morton (2005) show that there is great diversity in the types of writing required of students in university coursework study and that this may constitute a challenge for students. Benesch (2007) too argues that the writing taught in foundations programs is very different from the writing required of students in higher education. We identify a mismatch between student expectation of their level of preparedness for university study based on their entry level status and the more complex world of disciplinary study. IELTS itself has pointed out that students will probably need to develop many of these skills during their course of study, in ways specific to particular academic domains (IELTS, 2006).

In this paper we review existing models of language support and development both local and international, we consider the contents of such programs and we examine ways in which students may access such programs. We conclude with a review of several case studies which provide evidence of outcomes and we identify a set of critical issues based on our discussion.

2. MODELS OF LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT

2.1 Introduction

This section will discuss the different English language support models as well as the length and amount of support provided. Different models can and do operate within education; more recently collaboration with disciplinary staff is seen as value adding. The responsibility for students' academic language development is still however largely seen as belonging to the English language support unit and the development of sustained collaboration with academic staff poses a number of challenges. Furthermore there is no clear agreement about the most effective models of support provision. Most of the papers reviewed focused mainly on issues of practice and the personal experiences of the English language support staff involved. While this is useful, the papers are limited in terms of the evaluation of programs and observable learning outcomes for the students.

2.2 Models of Practice

It is usual to find a centralised language and academic skills (LAS) unit in almost all of the Australian higher education institutions. Most of the LAS units are organisationally under Student Services, with a handful located within the office of the P/DVC Academic. Most LAS units appear to offer centralised support, while some universities have established faculty-based LAS units, especially in areas where there are large numbers of international students, such as economics. A few offer separate services for local and international students, however, these appear to be in the minority (Barthel, 2007). Some institutions also provide ESL for credit subjects. Each of these will be outlined below and issues relating to the effectiveness of the program will be discussed.

2.2.1 Centralised and Decentralised Services

A centralised LAS unit is responsible for delivering support programs to students. Ransom and Greig (2007), in conducting their benchmarking exercise with the Group of Eight universities in Australia and three international Universitas 21 partner institutions (Auckland, British Columbia and Nottingham), found that the centres at these institutions provided assistance by using a combination of individual consultations, workshops and self-access resources. Ransom and Greig also reported that the majority of the LAS staff stated that 'working closely with colleagues across the university was another way to support learning' (p. 7). Over the last five years it appears that centralised LAS units have moved from offering mainly generic support to students, to working closely with faculty staff in supporting students within their disciplinary learning. The educational rationale for this will be outlined below.

Decentralised services are defined in this paper as LAS units located within faculties. For the most part, they offer similar types of programs to those offered by centralised units, such as one-on-one consultation, workshops and working with faculty staff. However, they can have one advantage over centralised services, namely that LAS staff can develop a greater understanding of the academic language and learning needs of international students within a particular discipline.

There is limited research on whether centralised or decentralised models of support are more effective. Peach (2003) argues that there are both advantages and disadvantages for decentralised services in her analysis of Griffith University's move from centralised to faculty-based support program. She found that working in a faculty allowed LAS staff to work much more closely with academic staff. However, they were also positioned by academic staff as being responsible for the international students' learning and language development. There was very little collaboration within disciplinary teaching and learning advisors were 'put in a position to interpret what an academic wants or means' (p.129) for the students.

Many centralised as well as decentralised services work closely with faculty staff (Ransom & Greig, 2007; von Randow, 2005). However, the available research seems to indicate that there are issues around the separation of language and disciplinary teaching within one-on-one

consultations, workshops and working with faculty staff within both centralised and decentralised systems. The reason for this will be discussed in the following sections.

2.2.2 One-on-one Consultations
Most higher education institutions in Australia offer one-on-one appointments with students. The aim of one-on-one consultations is to develop students' language and academic skills. These sessions are not intended as a proofreading service and many LAS units state this very clearly on their websites. A variety of approaches exists within and across higher education contexts depending on the staff resources available.

These can include:
* 15 minute appointments in a drop in centre, usually the library;
* one to two hour booked appointments to discuss assignments; and
* thesis writing consultations that can range between 5 to 14 hours over a period of time.

Most universities place time limits on consultations, and some may request that students attend a minimum number of workshops offered within the LAS unit before they can access the one-on-one support (Ransom & Greig, 2007). It is generally very time and resources consuming work and most LAS units seem to be moving away from this type of work (Ransom & Greig, 2007; von Randow, 2005).

There has been very little recent research exploring the effectiveness of one-on-one consultations on student learning, with the exception of the work of Woodward-Kron (in press). Through a detailed analysis of the interactions between a learning skills advisor and a postgraduate international student, she concludes that while there is some evidence that an individual consultation has potential for scaffolding student learning, it is also a very time consuming process. She argues that one-on-one consultations can play an important role in students' writing development. However, she does not propose that they are more effective than other methods such as group work or thesis writers' circles. She argues that educational linguists need to make faculty and other stakeholders aware of the development of students understanding that occurs within individual consultations, in order to address the 'divisive conflicting perspectives and issues associated with individual consultation' (p.13), especially around separating language learning from disciplinary teaching and learning.

One of the main issues with one-on-one consultations is managing students' expectations (Ransom & Greig, 2007; von Randow, 2005) and this is a concern for both centralised and decentralised services. Students may see the service as providing proof reading and become very concerned when limits are placed on their access of the service (Peach, 2003). It is difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of one-on-one consultation. Most of the surveys reported in LAS annual reports focus on user satisfaction of the services and these tend to be very positive. There has been very little research on evaluating student learning and longer term outcomes and as stated below, this is difficult due the many intervening variables. Chanock (2007) has however recently presented a strong set of arguments for maintaining individual consultations in terms of her being able to feedback to academics and larger groups of students the insights gained in her one-on-one work.

2.2.3 Workshops
In conjunction with one-to-one consultations, almost all higher education institutions offer workshops for their students and some of these are specifically targeted to international students. The workshops can range from generic to discipline specific. A quick survey of the websites indicated that generic workshops covered such areas as oral presentations, academic writing and developing conversational skills. Discipline-specific workshops can include developing academic reading and writing skills in those disciplines. The workshops are usually run during each semester over between one to two hours per week, ranging across five to ten weeks.

One of the concerns associated with workshops, whether they be generic or discipline specific, is that student attendance can be erratic (Ransom & Greig, 2007; von Randow, 2005; Wingate, 2006). In addition, students who may attend these sessions fall into the category of the 'worried well', that is students who have adequate academic skills but are worried about their lack of expertise in western universities (Warwick, 2006).

Evidence, both anecdotal and also research-based suggests that some of the international students who require support do not attend workshops because they are struggling to meet the demands of their enrolled subjects. They believe they cannot offer more time to attend LAS workshops (University Planning Office, 2005; von Randow, 2005; Wingate, 2006). Another reason for the erratic attendance is that students may not consider the generic or discipline-specific programs as relevant to their studies, usually because they are not linked to the assessment of their subjects.

For international students, where the core disciplinary subjects and their lecturers are considered important in terms of learning, seeking support from outside the lecturer may seem inappropriate (Watkins, 2007). Yet while some LAS units report that international students are over-represented as a percentage of the total student population, it appears that workshops may not necessarily be attracting international students who are most in need of language support. In educational terms it would be important to have evidence of skill transfer ie are students able to apply the skills taught to their diverse disciplinary learning contexts? As outlined above, this again may prove difficult due to the many intervening variables.

2.2.4 ESL for Credit Subjects

Some universities offer ESL for credit subjects. Melles *et al* (2005) list eleven Australian universities that do so. These are either situated within particular faculties, or within an LAS unit. These subjects are accredited university subjects taught by academic staff, and are offered at undergraduate and postgraduate level. Most workshops are content and task based; that is, they utilise a set of topics and authentic tasks to develop and subsequently assess students' language development. The content and assigned reading is used as the context within which to develop learners' English language skills. The subjects are generally taught and assessed by ESL specialists. These subjects are an integrated part of the student load.

Only a minority of universities offer these subjects and, while they tend to focus on English language development within the disciplinary content, there is little evidence available of how successful students who complete these subjects are in their overall course. There is no research available that evaluates ESL-credit subjects in terms of how effective these programs are on student learning and outcomes. We need more evidence-based research evaluating the effectiveness of these programs and mapping students' outcomes.

2.2.5 Working Collaboratively with Disciplinary Staff

As stated above, there has been a shift in LAS work from centralised generic offerings to working more closely with academic staff in faculties. It is an important move as research indicates that students best develop their academic language competence within their disciplinary learning (Cummins, 1996). Greater alignment between English language development and disciplinary teaching has been advocated for many years by English language teaching experts as well as LAS experts (Arkoudis & Tran, 2007; Brinton & Jensen, 2002; Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989; Crandall & Kaufman, 2002; Dudley-Evans, 2001).

In exploring collaboration between LAS and disciplinary staff (Jones, Bonanno, & Scouller, 2001) found that different models can exist. These include:

- Adjunct (weak) where workshops are run outside of the students' timetabled course. This is similar to the generic workshops mentioned above, where there is little collaboration with academic staff, even though the workshops are conducted within faculties.
- Adjunct (strong) where workshops are designed for a specially targeted group of students usually focusing on teaching a particular genre or tasks within the contexts of the course. The degree of collaboration may vary in this approach.
- Integrated workshops support the development of academic literacy within the discipline. They claim that this support is usually delivered by the LAS staff and is timetabled into the students' course.
- Embedded approach refers to collaborative design of a curriculum where academic language skills are embedded within the teaching of the course. This usually requires LAS staff and academic staff to work closely together planning, developing material, teaching and assessing.

Within higher education and the schools' sector, there has been a move towards embedded approaches, where language and disciplinary teaching and learning are integrated to varying degrees within subjects. This is largely due to the opportunities it offers in terms of developing students' language skills within their disciplinary learning. The kinds of academic language that students are expected to master at the tertiary level vary enormously across and within disciplines and they are constantly evolving (O'Loughlin, 2002). However, the embedded approach can be very difficult to establish as we know very little about how to develop and maintain collaborative approaches. The case studies reviewed in section 4 however provide some interesting examples of successful collaborative work that could be drawn on.

In describing the different approaches to collaboration, Jones and colleagues (Jones *et al.*, 2001) do not consider the embedded approach as the best approach in all situations and propose that different approaches can be used in different situations. Drawing on their experience of developing embedded programs at the University of Sydney, they argue that these programs may be difficult to sustain largely due to issues of resourcing:

> Our past experience of fully embedded developmental approaches ... was based on the assumptions that all students need learning and language development and that their needs are similar and simultaneous. Since the two programs have not lasted past their original conception and have been 'watered down', these assumptions have started to be questioned by Faculty staff, our Centre and by the students.

They conclude that they have greater success with adjunct and integrated programs, where they have some control over what is taught, rather than embedded programs that can disappear due to changes in funding.

Some of the reasons embedded programs are difficult to maintain may have to do with resourcing. However, most of the research at tertiary level has focused on the linguistic demands of the content area, with particular focus on genres of writing, rather than the process of collaboration itself. Difficulties can emerge because of the differences in teaching philosophies, the priority of subject over language needs and the power relations between academic and LAS staff in tertiary institutions, as well as the competing and changing institutional priorities.

While many institutions may have policy documents that support the integration of English language development within disciplinary teaching (for example the Enabling Skills policy at the University of New South Wales (see Figure I in Appendix A for outline of the policy), these are proving difficult to implement at the practice level. Yet there are examples of successful embedded programs – such as those operating at the University of Wollongong and the University of Technology in Sydney. We need to better understand the process of collaboration between LAS and academic staff, and the institutional policies which support such practice. Examples of embedded-type programs will be discussed in further detail in section 4 below.

2.3 International Models of English Language Support

A quick scan of international programs revealed that Australian universities offer a diverse and multilayered approach to supporting international students, which is pedagogically more developed than other countries. In the UK, the most common form of support is from extra-curricular study skills courses (Wingate, 2006). These courses tend to be generic and focus on, for example, issues of plagiarism, academic writing and referencing. A number of universities offer ESL credit courses as well as one-on-one consultations (Ransom & Greig, 2007; von Randow, 2005).

The UK Higher Education Academy has supported research into the internationalisation of the curriculum and support for international students. The research projects funded have largely focused on integrating language and learning skills within disciplinary teaching for international students (The Higher Education Academy, 2007). The Higher Education Funding Council for England has invested heavily in *Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs).* The *Write Now* CETL*,* for example, states that its 'core rationale is for evidence-based and theory-based student support in the related areas of student writing and assessment' http://www.writenow.ac.uk/research.html (accessed 23 July 2007). This may indicate that, like Australia, the UK is moving towards a multi-layered approach to language and learning support, with an increasing emphasis on language support within disciplinary teaching.

The USA differs slightly from both the UK and Australia. Universities in the US have a longstanding tradition of teaching Freshman Composition to all undergraduate students as credit-bearing courses. As there is no uniform policy, however, US universities adopt varied approaches to supporting international students. These include sequenced ESL-credit subjects that students must complete before they can undertake mainstream studies (Song, 2006); simulated adjunct model, in which authentic content from an existing university course is embedded in the ESL curriculum (Brinton & Jensen, 2002); writing classes which are available to all students and teach academic writing (Benesch, 2007); and integrate content and language teaching within subjects (Crandall & Kaufman, 2002). Many universities also offer peer support via a writing centre. Not all of these models exist within every university. Australia has a far more diverse approach to language support within higher education.

2.4 Critical Issues Concerning Models of Support

The discussion above has revealed that a diverse and multi-layered approach to LAS has evolved within Australian higher education to cater for international students. These programs are delivered within both centralised and decentralised approaches. It seems clear that while many models exist, there is no clear agreement about the most effective models.

Most of the articles reviewed focused mainly on the individual experiences of the English language support staff involved in teaching programs to international students. While high levels of student satisfaction are evidenced, the articles are limited in terms of evaluation of programs and observable learning outcomes for the students. The move from generic to discipline-specific services appears to be a sound pedagogic move because it links language development with knowledge development. Although the LAS units have moved from generic to subject-specific support, we have little evidence about the effectiveness of any of the support programs offered. It was surprising to find the lack of research exploring the differences between generic and discipline-specific services in relation to student learning outcomes in their courses. Programs have evolved from generic to discipline specific, with specific targeting of international students within undergraduate, postgraduate course work, Masters and PhD, but there is little research investigating the benefits of the various approaches to student learning, English language development and outcomes.

In order to move forward and develop best practices, we need to conduct both quantitative and qualitative research evaluating language support practices.   This research should include stakeholders, such as students, academics, associate deans for teaching and learning, as well as the LAS staff involved.   While the educational practices of LAS centres have evolved, it appears that institutional thinking has moved more slowly to grasp the complexities involved in academic language development and its relation to disciplinary learning. We need to broaden our perspective on LAS units to include the wider higher education community and inform policy and practice.

3. MEANS OF ACCESSING/BEING REFERRED TO SUPPORT SERVICES

3.1 Introduction

Referral to support services tends to be left to the individual student or academic. Referral takes the form of encouragement rather than compulsion. The typical referral pathway is therefore one that has been termed 'falter first': students experience poor performance and subsequently seek out support. This may often be late in session as assignments are frequently returned mid-way through the first semester, thus reducing students' likelihood of accessing adequate, sustained support.

Few instances of system-wider referral have been identified and these are discussed below. The development of post-entry diagnostic assessment outlined below is evidence of a growing concern amongst institutions with the language levels on entry of NESB students whether these are attested to by IELTS, TOEFL, in-university pre-entry programs or ESL subjects taken in the school-leaving certificate.

A major inhibitor of early student access to support services is the expectation gap between the commencing student's perception of the language proficiency needed for academic success and participation in the life of the academic community as evidenced by their entry score and the reality of the complex academic language skills required in the university classroom. It is also becoming clear that many initiatives do not specifically target international students but include students considered NESB or English as an additional language (EAL) many of whom are recent arrivals in Australia and would share language related problems with NESB international students. This is not surprising, given the North American studies that indicate that it may take between 5-7 years for new migrants to reach grade appropriate norms in academic English, that is the language needed for successful disciplinary studies.

3.2 Self Selection

The most common method of referral is student self-referral, often following a recommendation by an academic or tutor following a poor assessment. University and Faculty Orientation events typically inform students of available support services. International Student Services are found at most Australian institutions and they will typically advise/refer students to on-campus language and academic skills support services. Information is available on websites and flyers. For example, at the University of New South Wales in 2005, 23% of students who had attended an academic skills workshop offered by the Learning Centre stated that they had found out about the workshop through a website; 15% reported that a friend had told them about the workshop program and 12% reported receiving information via email. In virtually all instances, attendance at support services is voluntary.

Moreover, with the exception of credit-bearing courses, attendance at support classes is in addition to the students' course load and can be perceived by struggling students as an additional burden rather than as a source of help. It is commonly believed that this situation is a factor in the weakest students not self-referring to support services or being unaware of the existence of such services until too late in the day for such help to be of assistance to the student.

However, as Stappenbelt (2006) and others have recognised, there is a mismatch on entry between student expectation of their preparedness to cope with the new academic environment and the reality of the learning context. Many international students appear to believe that their IELTS or other entry route is an indication that their language proficiency is adequate for university study rather than a minimum proficiency level. The Stappenbelt study indicates that the local pathway programs at UWA did not predict well for first-year success in the professional development component of the Engineering degree, while IELTS appeared to do so. Birrell's (2006) findings in regard to students entering university via onshore visas would lend support to this finding.

3.2.1 Pre-sessional Programs

Pre-sessional support programs are typically funded by AusAid for students on scholarships, mostly international postgraduates, and run for about three weeks directly prior to the term starting. These students will have already satisfied the entry requirements. These programs are thought to be a good means of acculturating students and providing them with an intensive opportunity to understand and practice the specific English and academic skills required by the university. These are available to any international students at a cost.   Institutions should consider the value that these courses provide and weigh this against the costs to the institution and consider whether there may be value in offering these programs more widely, particularly in the postgraduate coursework market.

3.3. Post-entry Diagnostic Assessment

A growing realisation that self selection is an imperfect means of recruiting students to available support has led some institutions to adopt more directive and proactive approaches involving post-entry, early diagnostic language assessment. The *Diagnostic English Language Assessment (*DELA) (University of Melbourne) and the *Diagnostic English Language Needs Assessment* (DELNA) (University of Auckland) testing are the leading examples of this approach. Testing takes place during orientation week with students referred by Faculties based on guidelines that identify students likely to benefit from language support. Exemption from DELA testing applies to students with IELTS scores of 7.0 or over, certain scores on pathway programs and various other indicators of sustained English-medium study.

At the University of Melbourne, 786 enrolled students sat the test in 2006 with 67% being identified as in need of additional academic English support. Testing is run centrally and results delivered to Faculties. Where the students' curriculum allow, students are referred to credit-bearing ESL subjects or alternatively to other support options. One of the major advantages of the early diagnostic assessments discussed in this section is that they are completed prior to high-stakes, in-class assessment task and serve as an early warning system to students.

Auckland has further developed the *DELA* with a two-part procedure: initial screening followed by more extended diagnosis. The computerised screening component consists of a vocabulary task (7 minutes) and a speed-reading task (10 minutes). Screening results are available to students within 24 hours. Students who attain a certain score on the screening tasks are unlikely to need specific English language support and do not need further diagnosis. Students who fall below the score are recommended to go on to the diagnostic component - a reading task (50 minutes), a listening task (30 minutes) and a writing task (30 minutes). Diagnosis results are available within 8 days.

The *DELNA* advice to students clearly states that its intention is to proactively provide students with an accurate assessment of their academic language skills and a prediction of their future performance. Students are advised that if their results suggest that they need further language support to enable them to make the most of their studies, they can be directed to help on campus, as soon as possible in their first semester rather than wait until they are facing difficulties with assignments, group work and examinations (http://www.delna.auckland.ac.nz/about.php). Students identified in the diagnostic component are invited to make an appointment with the *DELNA* Academic English Language Adviser to discuss their language profile and receive advice on language support options. This position has been set up in response to student feedback.

These initiatives have costs attached including test development, validation and ongoing monitoring, database development, student advising, etc. It may however be worth investigating whether the Auckland and Melbourne tests could be made available more widely. It appears that with the introduction of its new degree structure, the University of Melbourne is considering compulsory language testing and follow up support for international students.

The *Measuring the Academic Literacy Skills of University Students* (*MASUS*) first developed by the University of Sydney in 1993 is a flexible diagnostic assessment procedure used within discipline courses to assess students' writing skills according to four criteria:

- Use of source material
- Structure and development of text
- Control of academic writing style appropriate to the task
- Grammatical correctness

Assessment tasks are jointly devised by discipline teachers and LAS staff and students receive feedback on their strengths and weakness and are advised on what measures to take to develop their writing further. A cohort profile is also produced enabling whole of cohort weaknesses to be addressed within the curriculum. Since its inception, the literacy skills of over 12 000 students at the University have been assessed. The *MASUS* has had a significant impact in NSW and has been adapted at the Universities of New South Wales (see below) and Wollongong (see section 4).

The University of New South Wales (UNSW), in attempting to respond to the issues of providing students with a realistic assessment of their academic language proficiency and enabling them to access available support in a proactive manner has developed an academic literacy policy know as Enabling Skills (http://info.library.unsw.edu.au/skills/enabling.html). This policy, while not specifically targeting international students or NESB students, recognises that they may be more likely to fall into the 'at risk' category. The policy states that all commencing UNSW students should receive early feedback on a written task within their program of study by week 5 or equivalent to allow identification of students requiring substantial assistance, as well as areas of particular difficulty for whole classes, so that students can be assisted and difficult areas addressed. It further states that students identified as requiring substantial assistance in academic literacy and academic English-language skills will be allowed to enrol in credit-bearing courses in English and academic literacy. (see Figure 1, Appendix A).

Under this initiative a pilot project in 2005 trialled early diagnostic assessment in the second week of the first semester in 3 large first year classes and 3 postgraduate coursework programs. By week 5 of Session One, students were asked to complete a written task, contextualised to the specific discipline, and were provided with detailed feedback in relation to a set of core academic literacy criteria, adapted where needed to the disciplinary expectations.

The diagnostic tool adopted was the *MASUS (Measuring the Academic Literacy Skills of University Students*) procedure developed at the University of Sydney. The core areas are use of source material (reading comprehension); appropriate structure; academic style and grammar. Each student received a feedback sheet that outlined their 'academic literacy profile' in relation to the four criteria, while academics could access a profile of the academic literacy of the entire cohort and consider appropriate intervention strategies. Students who scored in bands one or two were considered to be 'at risk' in terms of their academic literacy ability. All these students were provided with some form of additional support. Across the three large first-year cohorts assessed, the proportion of students assessed as 'at risk' varied from 6 to 20%.

The key findings were:
- All students valued the opportunity to receive early feedback as to academic literacy requirements.
- Discipline specialists valued the opportunity to identify and discuss explicit academic literacy criteria with Learning Centre colleagues in the joint development of assessment tasks.
- Reading comprehension and structuring written text present major problems for many students.
- There is a need to explicitly scaffold the development of writing skills in first-year courses and in postgraduate coursework areas, particularly in regard to discipline-specific criteria for all students to some extent, and intensively for 'at risk' groupings.

- Fairly short interventions appear to make a difference. At risk students however may not take up these opportunities which involve what is perceived as additional work.
- A credit-bearing academic skills course contextualized to a specific discipline led to an on average student improvement of one band on the *MASUS* scale (see section 4).

While this policy has not been fully implemented, the Faculty of Engineering has developed a credit-bearing course with the Learning Centre and this year assessed the academic literacy of over 1000 commencing Engineering students via a tailored diagnostic assessment procedure. At risk students are being advised to enrol in *Academic Discourse in Engineering*, a 3 unit of credit course which is deemed equivalent to a General Education course. Once again, enrolment is optional although students are advised on the basis of their results to enrol. Offering credit-bearing courses can offset the costs of running the diagnostic assessment as the course fees can be used for this and to pay tutors.

A related initiative is the University of Melbourne's in-Faculty program for early identification of students likely to benefit from language support in first-year Law via class-based writing tasks carried out in the first week of compulsory first semester subjects (Larcombe & Malkin 2006). One-third of the students in the Law School are from a NESB with approximately 15% of commencing students being overseas fee-paying. As *DELA* was only available in 2005 to international students and felt to be an assessment of general academic English, the Faculty devised a law-specific, academic language assessment. Around 15% of the commencing cohort in 2005 and 2006 has been identified a likely to benefit from language and learning support via this contextualised diagnostic procedure, with about half being international. Interestingly, of the local students, the vast majority identified were not born in Australia and did not speak English at home. Various adjunct support programs were then offered to the identified students.

Results indicate that those students who attended the support achieved higher average marks than those who did not, while almost 20% of those students identified as at risk either withdrew or failed. Of concern however is the poor uptake of this support by the students referred to it. Furthermore, a number of the students were identified as requiring more intensive support over a lengthier period.

Similarly, since 1999, all incoming students to the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences at the University of Melbourne have been assessed post-entry for diagnostic purposes via a brief preliminary screening task. Further testing is carried out for students who achieve poorly on the initial screen. In the period 1999-2003, up to 30% of the commencing cohort were identified as having inadequate English for study purposes despite having satisfied the University's IELTS or TOEFL requirements, with 86% of the students being international.

4. EVIDENCE-BASED GOOD PRACTICE CASE STUDIES

4.1 Introduction

The discussion in this section focuses on examples of good practice within higher education, based on our own knowledge of programs that exist and on the literature available. A quick scan of quality assurance agencies revealed that there was hardly any material on English language support programs within the different sectors. The little that was available highlighted mentoring programs for international students to assist with settling them into the county. This emphasises a key critical issue within the different sectors, and that is the lack of any attention to English language issues within quality assurance agencies.

Essentially, when reviewing the evidence on the role of language in academic success at university, we are confronted with a paradox. Two large-scale studies of international students in the UK and Australia reveal no significant difference in the overall performance of international students despite levels of concern expressed in both countries. Drilling down to the level of class of pass does provide evidence that language proficiency may be a variable in outcome at this level. Clearly more detailed data is needed and stakeholders need to be aware of the different dimensions of the issues under examination.

This section reviews some of the available evidence on the relationship between English language proficiency and academic success, primarily at the level of courses and programs. Language emerges as a factor in student performance for both international and local students, with being from a NESB more broadly having an impact on success. While it is clear that language proficiency plays a role in academic success, exactly what the dimensions of this role are remain unclear. As will be seen below, this is in part due to how success is defined. In addition, most research into the performance of international students points to the difficulties inherent in distinguishing the relative roles of language factors from cultural and social ones.

As mentioned earlier, while numerous papers discuss approaches to support, there are few evidence-based case studies of interventions and programs that provide data on outcomes and even fewer that consider the issue of skill transfer, i.e., the extent to which academic skills taught/learnt in adjunct programs or credit-bearing English for Academic Purposes and content-based language courses can be seen to improve performance in students' discipline-based courses. Some of the case studies reviewed in 4.5 do however suggest that an integrated approach to academic skills and disciplinary content can have a positive impact on student learning outcomes even when the interventions are relatively small in scale.

4.2 Large Cohort Studies

It is significant however that recent large cohort studies of the performance of international students in Australia and the UK detect no substantial difference in the overall performance of international students when compared to domestic students. The Australian research used a measure known as the Student Progress Unit: the ratio of successfully completed subjects to subjects attempted. Mackintosh and Olsen's (2003) large-scale study of over 300 000 students found that whereas Australian students passed 89.4% of units attempted, international students passed 88.8%. While they concluded that there was no clear difference between the performance of Australian and international students, it is noteworthy that international students outperformed Australian students in Science, IT, Engineering, Agriculture/Environment, Education and Arts.

The authors of the report emphasise that these are important findings at a time when local news coverage claims to have evidence of quality failure at universities in order to cater for students with poor English levels seeking degrees. The study did not however consider the language background of the students.

A recent UK study of international students' progress (Morrison *et al*, 2005) may further illuminate the issue despite not considering language background as a variable as this data was not available to the authors. This study found that international students were less likely to achieve upper level passes at the degree level. Between 1995 and 2000, overseas undergraduate students achieved significantly fewer first or upper second class honours degrees than their domestic UK students. Although language background data was not available to the researchers, they note that, contrary to expectation, the performance of students from China, who are generally considered to face significant linguistic, cultural and educational difficulties when studying in the UK, did not differ significantly from that of UK students.

A University of Technology study (ELSSA Centre, 2001) may throw some light on this apparent paradox: how are the concerns about students' language proficiency and its impact on their academic success to be understood in the light of the above mentioned findings? A comparative analysis of average assessment marks and grades obtained by all UTS students (a total of 636 928 graded subject marks) over the five-year period 1996-2000 indicated that, overall, the grades of English-speaking students tend to be more towards the upper end of the scale (HD, D and C) with a higher concentration of non-English speaking background students at the lower end (P and Z – failing grade). The study further identifies international NESB students as performing less well academically than the local NESB students, viz-a-viz higher failure rates, fewer HD/D grades. While the study acknowledges that a variety of factors may affect students' academic performance, they stress that the single differentiating factor in the large scale study is language background.

Evidence of language support interventions is discussed below as well as evidence that relates to levels of language proficiency where available. Evidence is emerging that integrated language and content teaching can make a difference to student achievement. In some instances, fairly small scale interventions appear to make a fairly significant difference to performance. Student uptake of additional support appears to be an important factor.

4.3 Generic Workshops and Individual Consultations

It is notoriously difficult to measure the impact of student attendance at workshops and short courses on their academic study due to the large number of intervening variables *inter alia* motivation, anxiety, financial factors, disciplinary assessment practices as well as the difficulties attached to finding comparable groups. It should however be noted that the indicators typically used such as student satisfaction surveys overwhelmingly rate such services highly.

Manalo (2004) reports on measures used at the University of Auckland Student Learning Centre to assess the effectiveness of its work with international students. These include high levels of student uptake (about 20% of the student body in 2003); university student satisfaction surveys and some comparable group performance data. For example, it found that the 36 students who attended the week-long *Asia Pasifika* course, specifically aimed at Asian and other ethnic minority groups, obtained an average pass rate of 94.1% which compared favourably with the usual average pass rate of Asian undergraduate students at the university of around 80%.

A study of students who attended a thesis writing course for NESB students over a four-year period found that only four out of the total cohort of 72 withdrew or discontinued their postgraduate studies. The Centre also provides mini-case studies of students who have attended courses at the Centre, furnishing more qualitative information. This combination of quantitative and qualitative data is what is needed more widely when assessing these sorts of interventions.

4.4 English for Academic Purposes Courses

Jacobs evaluated an academic literacy course, 'Learning in English for Academic Purposes', for first-year NESB students at a South African university and was able to compare a sample of students who had attended the course with students from similar backgrounds who had not. While the sample group did not demonstrate improvement on the post-test scores at the end of their first-year of study, the control group (who had not participated in the course) had significantly deteriorated. These quantitative measures were complemented with qualitative data which lead to the continuation of the course being recommended.

4.5 Case Studies of Content-Based Interventions

As discussed previously, there is a growing literature that argues for sustained content-based second language instruction at the tertiary level as opposed to discrete language/study skills courses that assume a generic academic English content. This section reviews the published literature on eight such interventions from the perspective of outcomes rather than descriptions of the models or approaches used. These courses may be taught by language specialists but what distinguishes them is that they will involve a degree of collaboration with disciplinary specialists and ownership by the School/Faculty concerned. They may be aimed at international students only but increasingly they appear to acknowledge the problems inherent in identifying students in need of assistance solely on the basis of whether they have a student visa or not. The reality on the ground for academics is their multilingual diverse classrooms and, unlike administrators, they are mostly unaware of the specifics of the students' backgrounds. The picture is more complex in many instances as the (desirable) practice of embedding academic communication skills in 'mainstream' courses means that the students are from all language backgrounds and the impact on international students cannot be easily measured.

4.5.1 Beasley and Pearson Study

Beasley and Pearson (1999) carried out a longitudinal study from 1991-1997 of two second-year business courses which had a high proportion of international students. Each year between 14% and 18% of the students enrolled in Organisation and Management Development were identified via an in-class diagnostic assessment as in need of additional learning support. They compared the average grades of the identified students who took a weekly, optional, additional, content-based, team-taught support tutorial with the grades of those who but had been identified as in need of support but who did not attend. The majority of the students identified usually did attend the extra support classes, with international students predominating. An analysis of students' grades showed that those students who did not attend the extra classes had consistently, and often dramatically poorer outcomes.

Qualitative data indicated that students felt they had learned a great deal from the learning support classes; that they were satisfied with the content presented but still felt a need for additional learning support. The aspect of the support classes most valued by students was the focus on how to write better essays. Many students also found value in the input on how to improve their exam strategies, their sentence and paragraph construction, their oral presentation skills and their ability to analyse and construct an argument.

The authors conclude that although a majority of the attendees were south-east Asian students, often identified as having a learning deficit, these results indicate that such students can achieve very high standards at Australian universities if the learning environment is both supportive and appropriate. Moreover, the overall failure rate of the course dropped from 13% in 1991 to 1.5% in 1997, suggesting that the range of strategies implemented by the teaching team improved the learning and teaching of all the students, including the international students.

4.5.2 Bretag Study

Bretag *et al.*'s (2002) study points to the complexities involved in evaluating support initiatives. An analysis of course results in two information systems courses indicted that as a group, international students were more likely to fail and less likely to achieve a higher grade than local students. The team of content specialists and a language specialist put in place a number of strategies to improve the language, learning and acculturation of their students. These included training lecturers and tutors in classroom teaching strategies for NESB students and a weekly, team-taught support tutorial for students identified in the first tutorial as needing assistance with language and literacy.

Grade comparison at the end of the semester indicated that of the international NESB students invited to attend the additional content-based support tutorial, those who did attend achieved an overall higher result than those who did not. Interestingly, the students who attended the support tutorial were found to be achieving a higher average mark on all their courses studied than the group that chose not to attend. When students were offered five percent credit for active participation in the support tutorials and the majority of the students attended regularly, a positive correlation was found between tutorial attendance and grade scores.

For each support tutorial attended, students achieved an increase of 2.2 percent in their overall mark. In one of the three cohorts studied, the students who attended the support tutorial in fact achieved an overall average grade slightly higher than the non-identified students. As the authors point out, the difference in outcome of the two groups may reflect a higher degree of motivation in the attending group. On the other hand it is significant that a fairly small-scale intervention can impact positively on students' learning.

Student evaluations recommended that participation in support tutorials be graded and given credit and that all international ESL students should have access to a credit-bearing foundation course that would provide induction into the western academic environment

This promising study involves early diagnostic assessment, collaboration between language and disciplinary tutors and lecturers, staff training and additional tutorials with credit incentives. It has implications for academic workload, timetabling and curriculum, none insurmountable, and appears to deliver a relatively low-cost positive outcome. The introduction of additional credit appears to have resolved the problem of at-risk students not taking advantage of the support offered (Bretag 2004). The authors conclude that their results confirms North American research cited in Stoller and Grabe (1997) that demonstrated that content-based instruction leads to second language learners achieving comparable grades to native speaking students.

4.5.3 Lubbers and Dale Study

Lubbers and Dale (2005) describe an initiative that involved extensive collaboration between academics offering a postgraduate diploma and master of Accounting and English language specialists to support NESB students to develop a range of generic skills including report writing, critical thinking and oral communication in the context of their accounting studies. About 60 per cent of the students are from China and many of the local students are NESB.

The *Language for Professional Communication in Accounting* project has involved ongoing collaboration to produce an integrated program in which language specialists teach alongside accounting lecturers, the joint development of assessment tasks as well as joint assessment. Heightened awareness of the language dimensions of teaching and learning accounting are reported by the Accounting teachers while the language specialists report a greater understanding of the discipline-specific discourse. The project has been positively received by students but no evidence of outcomes was available.

4.5.4 University of Wollongong Studies

In further attempts to move beyond generic approaches that assisted only those students who self-identified as in need of assistance or were referred by their lecturers, and acknowledging that international students are not the only group of students who may benefit from support, the University of Wollongong has put in place a more developmental and integrated approach based on the view that all students will need to develop new or more sophisticated academic skills. The embedding of the language and learning skills within specific curricula also reduces the problem of skill transfer as students learn these within the disciplinary context.

Case study data is available indicating the effectiveness of this collaborative approach between discipline-based staff and learning and language specialists. There are four stages involved in the process which require prior agreement between course coordinators and learning specialists. These are: a skills inventory of the curriculum in terms of the tasks students are required to perform; assessment of all students' literacy and language skills; design and implementation of tertiary literacy instruction in context and evaluation of the student learning outcomes. Early diagnostic literacy assessment involves the joint development of an assessment task and marking criteria.

On completion of the diagnostic assessment, all students receive a literacy and language profile, identifying areas of strength and weakness. Instruction can then be offered in areas of identified need. 'Introduction to Management' is a compulsory first-year course with a large diverse student cohort. A diagnostic assessment that used the *MASUS* (see 3.3) was developed and carried out. The *MASUS* component was marked by discipline staff after training by the language specialists. Results indicted that both local and international NESB students were performing significantly less well across all *MASUS* criteria. Students were offered two support workshops and specially developed resources. An analysis of the students' final essay grades showed that those students who did not attend the essay-writing tutorial received significantly lower scores than those who attended. Both NESB and ESB students who had attended scored higher than their counterparts who had not attended. 85% of the students who had attended the integrated workshop stated that they would recommend it to fellow students.

The Biology case study focussed on two core first-year courses. 220 students enrolled in an introductory course on Evolution, Biodiversity and Environment received integrated explicit instruction on the academic skills deemed essential for tertiary success via two lectures and specifically designed resources. A comparison of the previous cohort's report assignment grades with those of the group that had received explicit instruction in report writing showed a statistically significant difference between the two groups with the later group achieving significantly higher grades. The following semester, students' reports in BIOL103 were assessed using the *MASUS* criteria and students' were provided with detailed feedback on their performance. Discipline staff and learning specialists co-taught workshops and produced instructional resources in the areas of identified weakness. Results on the final reports showed a statistically significant improvement on all of the *MASUS* criteria.

These two case studies provide evidence that explicit, integrated academic literacy instruction based in collaboration between disciplinary specialists and language and learning professionals can improve the writing skills of the entire cohort and of the NESB students who attend additional classes in particular. Institutions are however not necessarily set up to encourage this type of inter-disciplinary collaboration and it frequently is dependent on the enthusiasm of individual academics. The University of Wollongong appears to have gone some way to institutionalising these practices.

4.5.5 Larcombe & Malkin Study

The University of Melbourne Law School intervention (Larcombe & Malkin 2006) described in Section 3 also utilised in-class diagnostic writing exercises to identify potentially underachieving students. In addition, from 2006, all international ESL students have had to take the *DELA* (see section 3). The authors consider this to be an effective means to identify students with writing and comprehension difficulties who would benefit from support. They emphasise that over half the students referred to language support in 2005 and 2006 were local students. The diagnostic assessments were carried out by the Law lecturers concerned and found to be a very useful 'snapshot' of the students in their classes. In both years, about 15% of the cohort has been identified as likely to benefit from language and learning support (see section 3 for more detail). A short writing course, *Writing Essentials for Law*, was developed and taught by LAS staff as well as an *English for Law* workshop series. A number of students who had not been identified in the testing as needing support chose to attend these courses while many of the referred students did not attended, particularly the international students.

This study confirms the UTS finding on class of pass as students who were referred to language support who completed their first semester subjects were twice as likely to receive a Pass grade as those not referred. It also found that the referred students who did attend the recommended support programs achieved higher average marks than those who did not. The authors conclude that the challenge remains to ensure that students use language support at levels that would be needed to redress weak communication skills. A noteworthy finding is that 12 weeks of language and learning support in the first semester was not in itself able to 'remediate' all the weaknesses identified but this is in part due to student uptake of the services on offer. The authors conclude that support may be needed on a regular basis for an extended period of time and that early identification is crucial.

4.5.6 UNSW Enabling Skills

In the Enabling Skills pilot study at UNSW (section 3), pre and post-testing using a *MASUS* diagnostic assessment of a group of international, postgraduate coursework NESB students demonstrated that a compulsory, credit-bearing, semester-long course in Academic Skills led to on average improvement of one band in the *MASUS* scale for each student. While initial testing showed that over 90% of the students were at risk for reading comprehension and structuring their answers effectively, 88% had difficulties with academic writing styles and 69% with grammatical correctness, post-testing indicated that only 26% of students continued to have difficulty with reading source material, only 20% were at risk for structure and only one student continued to have difficulty with writing styles

Of interest is that, despite no explicit grammar teaching, students nevertheless showed the greatest improvement in this area with no students scoring in the 'at risk' categories on this criterion in the post-test. Sustained, compulsory credit-bearing interventions can be seen to deliver improvement within a reasonable time period. The question of whether the skills learned in the academic skills course transfer to the remainder of the students' courses underlines the complexity of evaluating such initiatives as a variety of assessment practices appear be in place in the different courses, not all of which may require the reflective learning and critical thinking which the academic skills course promotes.

As identified in the University of Wollongong research, fairly small-scale interventions can promote enhanced learning outcomes. The Psychology pilot study at UNSW assessed over 700 students in the first-year course. The sixty students in the lowest bands were invited to attend five hours of report writing workshops, team-taught by an LAS specialist and a Psychology tutor. 27 students attended the majority of the workshops. In the initial testing, the 'at risk' group had a mean score of 2 whereas the next highest scoring group had a mean score of 4.4 which was a statistically significant difference. In the post-test, the at-risk group improved significantly and the difference between their mean score and that of the comparison group was no longer significantly different. The voluntary nature of the intervention tutorial meant that not all students chose to attend.

4.5.7 University of Melbourne Medical Faculty

A case study of international medical students at the University of Melbourne (Hawthorne *et al.* 2004) reports that English language ability plays a role in academic achievement with 24-29% of all commencing medical students found to be as risk academically over a five-year period, the majority of whom were international. In addition, a study of 650 students that correlated English language scores at entry with academic achievement in semesters one to five of the Bachelor of Medicine program found that those ranked lowest in terms of English-language ability obtained the poorest semester one subject scores and this initial disadvantage persisted to some degree until semesters three and five of the program.

As a response, the Faculty has instituted a well-resourced, faculty-specific, concurrent support program, the International Student Support Program (ISSP), to provide linguistic and cross-cultural support to all overseas born students. The problem-based learning curriculum was found to present particular communicative challenges to NESB international students leading to the development of a range of support strategies including training for staff. The support is targeted to students at specific points of need, including the clinical settings, and NESB students attend an 'Introduction to Clinical Communication Skills' program which has lead to improvements in the students' performance in their clinical examinations. In addition, students receive individualised, tailored support when a need is identified. It should be borne in mind firstly that medical students are a highly selected group and would be highly motivated to take advantage of support. Secondly, the Faculty has been able to put in places levels of support that other Faculties might find difficult to resource. That said, the Faculty has taken full responsibility for the support needs of its international and local NESB students in an exemplary program.

4.5.8 Integration in a first-year Accounting Course

Evidence of the extent to which external accreditation can provide an impetus for the explicit integration of the teaching of communication skills into the curriculum for the benefit of all students and for overseas-born students in particular is provided in a recent case study of a first-year accounting course (Sin *et al.* 2007). External accrediting bodies required the teaching of a range of generic skills, all of which involved a communicative component. Subject specialists and writing specialists developed an innovative approach using learning materials that combined accounting content, generic skills and writing. Students were assessed over three scaffolded writing assignments and the results show clear improvements in the later assignments with significantly more students achieving the higher levels of learning outcomes. The overseas student cohorts recorded dramatic improvements. These results have been replicated in successive interventions.

5. CONTENT OF SUPPORT

5.1 Language Development and Academic Skills

This section will explore the content of support offered within the different models. The issue of generic and subject-specific content was dealt with in the sections outlining the models of support. The focus of discussion here will be on the relationship between language development and disciplinary teaching in higher education. Irrespective of the models of delivery, tensions exist between English language and disciplinary teaching, largely because language support is offered as a separate service outside the main business of teaching, learning and assessment of disciplinary teaching and learning. This tension exists in the schools sector as well (Arkoudis, 2006; Love & Arkoudis, 2006).

Most LAS units define their work as developing academics skills. Ransom and Greig (2007) claim that the universities they visited 'reinforced the fundamental principle underlying all language and academic skills centres: that of assisting students to develop independent academic skills' (p. 7). Study or academic skills can refer to skills that can assist students in their studies. These can include how to reference correctly, take notes from a lecture or reading material, write essays or reports. These skills are useful to both first and second language learners.

More recently, the term 'academic literacy' has been used to refer to the fluent control and mastery of the discipline-specific norms, values and conventions for reading and writing as a means of exploring and constructing knowledge in higher education (Jacobs, 2005). This definition includes a set of skills that are considered important for studying in a university but focuses less on teaching academic grammar and vocabulary relevant to the academic discourse of the discipline (O'Loughlin, 2002), let alone any focus on language development, which is what English as a second language learners need in higher education in order to develop cognitive academic English language proficiency (Cummins & Man Yee-Fun, 2007). Both are considered important for international and other non-English speaking background students.

This raises three very important issues in relation to English language development. Firstly, there appears to be a tension between academic literacy/academic skills and the different language and learning needs of first and second language learners. The needs of these learners tend to be collapsed into one. However, the two groups of learners have different language and learning needs. While English language speakers may be accommodated within the skills model of support, English as second language learners need more than this. As stated above, they need English language development embedded within the disciplinary discourse of their field as well as the academic skill development, in order to be able to succeed in higher education. The needs of first and second language students need to be acknowledged within policies and practices in higher education, and resourced appropriately. For schools this means that support for language learning needs to be embedded within disciplinary teaching, so that the students are not left to 'sink or swim' (Love & Arkoudis, 2004).

Secondly, the voluntary nature of attendance and the complexities of second language development indicate the difficulty of developing international students' language skills within the current structure of support programs, even if students were to attend all the available sessions. Research conducted by Elder and O'Loughlin (2003) revealed that students enrolled in pre-sessional English language courses managed to increase their IELTS score by an average of 0.5 over a twelve-week period of intensive instruction. However, this was not the case for all students and the research noted that the increases were slower once students reached the upper bands of IELTS proficiency scores.

It would appear to be very difficult to develop English language skills in the workshop programs and even within ESL credit-bearing subjects given the limited time available for teaching and learning. English language development is complex and long-term. A University of Melbourne survey of international students who had completed their courses indicated that at least 30 percent mentioned that they struggled with English language throughout their course (University Planning Office, 2005). Students in secondary school struggle to develop their cognitive academic English language skills across the different disciplines (Brock, 2004).

This raises the question of whether language support programs, as they are currently structured, can claim to develop English language skills. We do have evidence of improvement in the case studies presented in Section 4. However, in order to support best practice, more sustained evidence-based research about English language development within the different models of support offered in higher education is needed.

Thirdly, what qualifications do English language staff require? There has been much debate about the professionalisation of LAS staff (Milnes, 2005). The above discussion highlights the need for formal postgraduate qualifications in Applied Linguistics or Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) qualifications. In exploring this issue we randomly selected 10 language and learning skills units' websites and sought to find information about the English language qualifications of the staff. Of the ten websites, one clearly indicated that all lecturers had postgraduate qualifications in applied linguistics, and/or teaching English as a second/foreign language. Three LAS units ranged from about 30% to 60% with similar qualifications. It was difficult to find the qualifications of the staff on the remaining six websites. The information gained from this exercise is inconclusive about the number of LAS staff with English language teaching qualifications. It does raise the question about what skills are necessary for LAS staff. Should they require a TESOL qualification? Do they need to know about the cultures of disciplinary teaching? Should they have a PhD if they are offering advice to PhD students? To what extent do they need to balance their knowledge of language and disciplinary teaching? Clearly, they need to be skilled professionals with postgraduate qualifications and a sophisticated skill set who can confidently engage with colleagues in disciplinary fields.

In many ways, LAS staff encounter different teaching environments from ELICOS teachers and foundation program teachers. They need to have training in advanced English language learning in academic contexts where the disciplinary concepts can be abstract and difficult to explain, and where teaching is very content obsessed (Biggs, 2003). LAS staff require a different set of skills from ELICOS, foundations and secondary school English language teachers. There should be distinct professional training and development, particularly with the move towards developing embedded programs.

It seems to us that if higher education providers are serious about quality in regard to English language support programs, then policy needs to reflect this by the professionalisation of LAS staff and the provision of clear career paths. Similar issues exist within VET and school ESL staff. Now is not the time to reduce English language support programs as a short term cost saving measure or rely solely on online resources to offer support. We need to focus on developing international best practice to attract international students by offering more not less support for English language development.

The above issues highlight the tensions between language and disciplinary teaching. These tend to position content or disciplinary staff as responsible for disciplinary teaching and the LAS staff as responsible for language teaching. This view assumes that English language is somehow disconnected from learning disciplinary knowledge. Yet research shows that language and disciplinary content are interconnected (Creese, 2005; Cummins & Man Yee-Fun, 2007; Davison & Williams, 2001; Halliday, 1994; Lemke, 1995; Stoller, 2004).

The teaching and learning approaches adopted by disciplinary staff are, in part, influenced by their perception of the role of language in learning. This is often constructed through their community of practice in their local English-speaking university context. If they consider English language as a conduit to conveying the content, then it is perceived as simply a means of communicating the material. As such it is marginal to the learning situation, almost invisible in the teaching and learning process. This view of English language learning is more closely linked to the transmission method of teaching. Constructivist views of teaching and learning however consider language as central to learning (Volet & Renshaw, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998). The students do not absorb the required disciplinary discourse by osmosis. It needs to be taught in order to meet the teaching objectives assessed through the assessment tasks.

The role of language in disciplinary teaching is crucial, not only in expressing the content but also in acculturating students to the academic discourse of the discipline (Morita, 2004). Recent theories of teaching and learning have replaced the transmission model, in which the academic fills the students' head with the relevant knowledge and language is simply the means to achieving this, with notions of community of practice (Wenger, 1998) or learning communities, where teaching and learning is characterised by participation in social practice, and where language and disciplinary knowledge play a significant role.

Within education there has been a shift in theorising teaching and learning, and along with that, the role of language in teaching disciplinary knowledge. Language is now considered much more than a conduit for disciplinary learning, it is central to student participation within the disciplinary community. This has implications for the role of the English support person in that academic English cannot be separated from the content, but is an integral part of learning and teaching disciplinary knowledge.

5.2 Critical Issues Concerning Content of Support

The above discussion has indicated that within English-medium educational contexts English language is naturalised, that is that it not seen as an issue that requires any special attention from the institution as a whole (Lo Bianco, personal communication). Students' English language difficulties are frequently seen as being amenable to a 'quick fix' approach outside of the mainstream.

As such English language forms part of the hidden curriculum, as it is assumed that students are able to understand and master the disciplinary discourse without specific assistance. An example of the institutionalised nature of this is to be found in the quote below from Carroll and Woodhouse (2006: 76) in discussing English language quality assurance for offshore teaching conducted by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA):

> One must consider the role that language itself plays in student learning. The construct of a language is heavily value-laden and context-specific, and the exploration in higher education of conceptually intricate ideas is affected by the language/s of content, instruction and assessment. This needs attention in the transnational context, and *is not a matter that typically arises in domestic quality assurance*. (our emphasis)

The fact that the role of language may not be considered in offshore programs is troubling. However the invisibility of English language in onshore programs is of concern given the media attention to Birrell's (2006) work earlier this year and the debate that has followed concerning English language standards in higher education and implications of 'soft' marking by academics. Furthermore, the latest report on the future and current directions of Australia's services export sector by the House Standing Committee on Economics, Finance and Public Administration (HSCEFPA, 2007) states that the Australia's market share in international education is stagnating. This reflects the strong and increasing global competition for international students.

We know that students from the Asia-Pacific region choose to study in English-speaking universities in order to gain a high-quality degree and, for those for whom English is an additional language, to develop their English language skills (Marginson & McBurnie, 2004). English language should be a feature of quality assurance within educational sectors in Australia. Developing indicators for monitoring English language teaching and learning would assist in this (Krause, Coates, & James, 2005). This would allow for best practice to develop and have a positive flow-on effect to offshore teaching contexts. The focus would be on developing programs that attract international students because they offer best practice in terms of English language support that could give Australia a market edge.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has outlined critical issues concerning language support programs in higher education. As Marginson (2007, p. 3) has argued, practice has 'run ahead of theorisation and empirical research'. The discussion above has highlighted several critical issues. These are:

- Implementing post-entry testing programs such as DELNA or DELA to identify 'at risk' students and offer targeted support for international students upon entry to courses.
- Supporting qualitative and quantitative evaluative research on the different models of language support and student outcomes across the sectors should be encouraged and clear outcome indicators developed.
- Researching the processes and practices involved in developing and maintaining effective collaboration between language support staff and disciplinary staff should be encouraged by educational institutions.
- Articulating clear career pathways and qualification levels for staff involved in English language teaching.
- Incorporating key stakeholders such as students, academic staff, language support staff, directors of teaching and learning and staff involved in recruitment and marketing in research, in order to inform policy and practice at an institutional, departmental and individual level.
- Extending quality assurance indicators to include academic English language learning and teaching for both onshore and offshore teaching programs across the different sectors.
- Developing best practice requires increased research and funding for English language programs to support English language development. Simply raising the minimum English language entry pathways will not address the issue of international students acquiring the English language knowledge and skills necessary for study.

In summary, English language support programs are an important and vital part of international students' successful experience of higher education. While language support programs have evolved and developed over the last ten years, largely in response to the increase in international student numbers, there is very little evidence-based research on the influence of these programs on students' English language learning and its relationship to academic success.

Within the field, many argue that it is difficult to conduct such research because of the many variables associated with learning a second language. However, designing large quantitative studies can reduce the influence of the variables (O'Loughlin, personal communication) and offer the sector evidence-based research through which programs can be justified, developed and integrated into the mainstream of teaching and learning. Student learning should be the focus of any research because that is where we can measure the quality of our programs. We should be concentrating on developing indicators for high quality programs if we aim to be one of the best providers of education for international students in the Asia-Pacific area.

This paper has highlighted critical issues for both policy and practice, which can lead to developing high quality English language support programs that enable international students to achieve within their academic communities and further increase the reputation of Australian higher education within the international student market.

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Appendix A

Figure 1. Enabling Skills Policy UNSW - outline

Helping Students Develop Enabling Skills

ALL NEW STUDENTS

Existing UNSW plagiarism deterrence strategies

DIAGNOSTIC PROCESS
Identification of language issues

Early in degree

ONLINE INFORMATION LITERACY TUTORIAL (broadly contextualised)

+

EARLY WRITING TASK

ALL STUDENTS

SOME STUDENTS

Concurrent Learning Centre support

Develop
ACADEMIC LITERACY
and
INFORMATION LITERACY
IN DISCIPLINARY CONTEXTS
in addition to developing other graduate attributes

Credit-Bearing Course In Academic Literacy

Progressively through degree