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**Managing Language and Learning Diversity in Higher Education:
Enhancing the Graduate Experience**

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Abstract

The internationalisation of Higher Education in Australia has contributed towards tertiary classrooms becoming increasingly diverse in their student populations. Institutions and their staff are faced with the problem of managing this diversity, and ensuring quality learning for all students.

This paper reports on strategies adopted by a large and diverse Commerce and Economics Faculty at an Australian University, and discusses efforts to understand and address issues of language and learning diversity amongst its graduate student population. It reports on a study that investigated language diversity in a cohort of 381 students and found significant differences in English language capabilities, with 79% of international students requiring language support in comparison to 21% of local students. The study found no significant differences between international and local graduate students when language results were linked to average academic results.

The findings raised awareness of the need for educational support and assistance for students who were otherwise highly competent. They also acted as a catalyst for change in the Faculty's approach to managing the diverse needs of its students, with a major shift from accessing centralised support to the location of language and learning support *within* the Faculty. Initiatives reflecting this change, such as discipline specific support courses, the integration of this support into subjects, Faculty-specific induction programs, extensive involvement of academic staff, postgraduate staff training and colloquia, and the establishment of a Faculty-based Education Development Unit, are discussed in the context of this paper. [top](#)

Introduction

With the internationalisation and globalisation of Higher Education, Australian universities, like those in the United Kingdom and United States, have become increasingly diverse in their student populations (Grimes, 1995; Phillips, 1990; Scott, 1998), and staff more perplexed by the complexities of teaching to this diversity (Birkett, Ramburuth and Sadeli, 1996). Grimes (1995) identifies diverse students as being from non-English speaking backgrounds, disadvantaged backgrounds, non-traditional students, and students from other minority groups, whilst Phillips (1990) draws attention to the increasing enrolments of international students in Australian Higher Education institutions. Of the 147,130 international students studying in Australia in 1998, 49.9% were in the Higher Education sector, being drawn from seven of the ten top source countries in Asia (Australian Education International, 1998).

The changing student profiles have resulted in increasing pressure for institutions to develop effective organisational frameworks to manage issues of student diversity, provide appropriate educational support, and ensure quality learning and teaching (Hounsell, 1994). In addition, recent reports in Australia, such as the Business/Higher Education Round Table Reports (1993; 1995) and the Department of Employment,

Education, Training and Youth Affairs Report (1998) on employer satisfaction with graduate skills, have strongly advocated the development of effective learning, language and communication skills for both reasons of employability and life long learning (Candy, Crebert and O'Leary (1994). Similar expectations in the preparation of graduates have been echoed in reports in the US (Boyer Commission Report, 1998) and the UK (Dearing Report, 1997).

Traditionally, the structures used for the provision of educational support and academic skills development have tended to be based on centralised models, that is, centrally located and centrally funded 'Learning' or 'Language' Centres, external to the Faculties, providing generic skills development (Boylan, 1999; Johnson, 1997). More recently, the trend has been to locate education development strategies *within* the Faculties, where the teaching and learning occurs, where students' learning and language needs can be identified and addressed in the context of their disciplines, and where teaching staff input can be accessed (English, Bonanno, and Webb, 1995; Fe Day, 1998; Gibbs, 1996). However, as Hounsell (1994, p.89) aptly points out, there is no one structure or approach that is "intrinsically better than the other: the particular framework followed, together with the resources allocated to it, is likely to reflect and be attuned to each institution's distinctive organisational ethos and patterns of decision-making."

This paper discusses the approach adopted by a Commerce and Economics Faculty at an Australian University in managing the educational needs of its highly diverse student population and changes in the learning environment. [top](#)

Background

The Faculty of Commerce and Economics has an enrolment of approximately 5,000 students, 35% of whom are international students and 60% have English as a second language. Furthermore, 50 countries of domicile have been identified, 80 countries of birth, and over 55 different languages spoken at home. There are eight Schools in the Faculty, sustaining 20 disciplinary streams. Each stream not only has its discipline specific content, but discipline specific discourse or 'language' in which students must acquire competence.

Confronted with such diversity, it is hardly surprising that staff expressed concern about teaching students from vastly differing backgrounds and with differing abilities, especially English language ability which they perceived as being of "greatest concern", causing "extraordinary problems" and a possible "lowering of standards". Of particular concern was the language and learning abilities of graduate (coursework) international students, who may have completed their first degrees in home languages, and tend to have shorter periods of time to acculturate to new study environments and disciplines (Ballard, 1993; Todd, 1996). [top](#)

Investigating Language Diversity

To address staff concerns, a language diagnostic task was implemented to:

1. Systematically investigate the extent of diversity in terms of English language proficiency, the decision to implement a writing task being made on the basis that teaching staff identified it as the skill most evidently lacking and likely to impact on assessment;
2. Investigate the extent to which levels in language proficiency impacted on academic achievement;
3. Make recommendations (on the basis of findings) for appropriate support initiatives to address student needs.

Language Diagnostic Task

The language task was designed by language specialists and implemented under time constrained conditions (one hour). It was based on an article on 'Leadership' (selected from *Business Review Weekly*), with a brief set of multiple choice questions, followed by a writing task of approximately 300 words. The task was piloted with a sample of ten graduate students from English and non-English speaking backgrounds (including international students), to consider appropriateness in terms of language level and content. Assessment of the writing task was carried out by a team of trained IELTS (International English Language Testing System) and CULT (Combined Universities Language Test) assessors and experienced staff from a Language College. The use of trained language assessors, together with a set of clearly defined linguistic criteria and double marking strategies ensured reliability in assessing students' writing skills.

Grades allocated for writing competence identified both level of English language proficiency and level of support required. These were as follows:

- Grade A: Most competent in written communication, no help required
- Grade B: Competent in written communication, minor problems, participation in a relevant workshop recommended
- Grade C: Less competent in written communication, some major difficulties, short intensive course recommended
- Grade D: Least competent in written communication, major problems, long intensive course recommended.

English Language Levels

Of the 381 graduate students who obtained a language score, 375 records were verified (1.6% error). Analysis of the findings indicated that, overall, a significant number of students had language difficulties and would require support, as indicated in Table 1 below. Furthermore, comparisons in the language levels of the local and international cohorts ($t = 12.81$, $df = 379$, $p < 001$) identified significant differences between the two groups. The findings confirmed staff concerns about language diversity amongst students,

and drew attention to the need for immediate strategies to address the language needs of students in order to enhance learning.

Table 1: Distribution of Language Grades

	Overall	%	International		Local	
<i>Grade</i>			<i>Students</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Students</i>	<i>%</i>
A	141	37%	7	6%	132	51%
B	75	20%	18	15%	55	21%
C	80	21%	50	43%	28	11%
D	85	22%	42	36%	43	17%
Total	381	100%	117	100%	258	100%

Matching Language Competence and Academic Performance

The study also sought to investigate links between English language competence and academic performance, to gauge diversity in students' academic capabilities. This was done by matching students' writing grades (A, B, C, D) with their average academic results (presented in the form of mean percentages), at the end of their first year of study as indicated in Table 2.

Table 2: Language Grades Matched With Average Academic Results

Grade	Overall Av. Results	International St. Averages	Local St. Averages
A	68.69	69.94	67.57
B	65.25	68.11	65.44
C	62.14	62.36	64.55
D	61.68	61.64	59.86

The data indicated a consistent match between average academic results and language grades, suggesting a link between the two variables. From the data, it could be inferred that students with higher levels of language competence (grades A and B) tend to perform better than those with lower writing competence (grades C and D). The findings also suggested that international students with higher levels of English language competence (grades A and B), outperformed their local counterparts, consistent with the literature on international students from Asian countries (Biggs, 1996; Burns, 1991).

Statistical analyses of the data using F-tests (Fishers' LSD for multiple comparisons), with the level of significance at $\alpha=0.05$, indicated no significant differences between the international and local groups in academic performance at each of the different levels of language competence (grades A, B, C, D). The findings could be viewed as an indication of the capabilities of international students, and their ability to perform as well as their local counterparts (if not better), despite their language difficulties. [top](#)

Development of Student and Staff Related Support Initiatives

A major outcome of the study was recognition need for strategies to assist students in their language learning and communication skills development support staff understanding managing these issues diversity. Figure 1 provides an overview key initiatives introduced by Faculty its Education Unit (EDU):

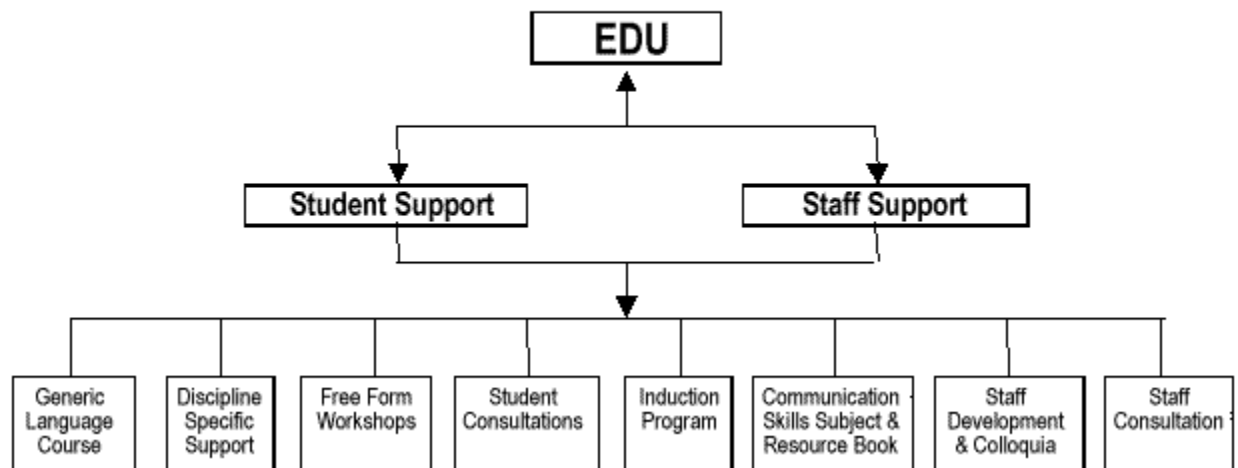


Figure 1: Graduate Support Initiatives

Generic External Support

The first initiative was to access an already established resource and collaborate with the University's centralised Learning Centre to provide language support courses for students identified as experiencing difficulties. Relevant workshops were prepared in essay writing, report writing, summarising and paraphrasing, reading and research writing, as well as in oral communication. While initial responses to the workshops were encouraging, the initiative failed for several reasons. Students interviewed indicated that there was a lack of time to attend, they were already struggling with their workloads and felt penalised, and many saw no direct links with their subjects. The following comments by a graduate international student provide a student's perspective:

We studied academic writing in my country. We know about grammar and can practise it. We also know about structure and how to write an essay. Everything

they taught me I already know. But I don't know about how to use *this* (referring to an extensive set of readings in a 'Banking and Finance' subject). I need more help to understand and write about the different kinds of information in my subjects. It is very difficult for me... Everybody feels the same like me...

Feedback such as this led to the realisation that lack of language competence may not be *the only issue*, but part of the more complex issue of managing language and learning within specific disciplines and subjects. [top](#)

Faculty Based Support Initiatives

There was growing acceptance of the view that, for learning and language assistance to be effective, it needed to be located *within* the Faculty and provided within subject specific contexts. There was recognition, too, that the 'Faculty based approach' would raise the profile of education support among students, staff and administrators, would be more likely to gain the direct involvement of academic staff, and would provide stronger incentive for students to participate. In keeping with current trends in education support and development in Australia (Brackenreg, 1994; English et al, 1995; Johnson, 1997) and internationally (Fe Day, 1998; Gibbs, 1996; Grimes, 1995), the Faculty established an Education Development Unit (EDU) to formulate education development policy, and to devise and implement appropriate support initiatives. A sample of key initiatives implemented to date are outlined below: [top](#)

Discipline Specific Support

Examples of support courses that aim at 'skills development' in relation to specific subjects, and are devised in conjunction with academic teaching staff include:

- Information Systems: Essay writing skills to support a targeted assignment. Skills to be developed include analysis of the topic, researching, planning and organisation of the essay, reasoning and argument, addressing the conventions of academic writing and referencing (as determined by the lecturer).
- Information, Library and Archival Studies: On-going (semester long) tutorial support and assistance. Skills to be developed include assignment writing skills such as analysing and interpreting questions, evaluating literature, organising information, referencing, and textual features of relevant genres (critical review, report, essay and thesis).
- Business Communication: Assistance to students in specific areas relevant for successful study in the subject. Skills to be developed include critical thinking skills for application in analysing case studies; speaking skills for oral presentations; business report writing skills (models devised in conjunction with the lecturer)
- Legal Foundations of Business: Development of critical thinking skills required for effective analyses of arguments in cases studied in the context of the subject. (A learning adviser with both language and legal expertise was employed to

devise and teach the support course, to effectively engage students in the language of the discipline).

- Strategic Human Resource Management: Skills to be developed in time management and reading effectively and critically, especially in relation to preparing for open-book exams.

It is hoped that, as more staff see the benefits of integrating skills development into the process of learning and managing subject content, more will access the support available. [top](#)

Free Form Workshops

Where possible, academic staff are encouraged to devise and offer workshops to bridge the knowledge base and enhance the required skills of students enrolled in their subjects. This strategy enables students to work through subject specific content and learning tasks, engage in the discourse of their discipline, and develop relevant skills under the guidance of an academic (usually the lecturer teaching the subject) in an informal learning environment. An example is the support workshop offered by a lecturer in the subject of 'Revenue Law', where many international students need additional assistance in developing an understanding of content as well as appropriate critical and analytical skills. Support workshops have now become an on-going part of effective teaching and learning in this subject. Incentives for academic staff include Faculty funding and reduced teaching loads. [top](#)

Communication Initiatives

In addition to support courses, a credit bearing postgraduate subject in 'Business Communication' has been successfully introduced, to broaden the language and communication opportunities available to students. Furthermore, students enrolling in the Faculty are provided with a 'Communication Skills Resource Book' on enrolment. The intention is to set a 'benchmark' for expected communication skills and to draw attention to the range of skills required for effective communication in academic and workplace contexts, and for life-long learning (Candy, Crebert, and O'Leary, 1994). The effectiveness of these initiatives is captured in the comments of a non-English speaking background student:

... While studying for my Masters Degree, I have written quite a number of reports, essays, etc. Despite putting in my best efforts, the marks I received have been very disappointing because most lecturers expect their students' written skills to be of Masters level. I didn't understand what they were referring to. After attending this course (Business Communication) and reading the (Communication Skills) Resource Book, I realised where some of my problems lies...By studying these disciplines and putting it into practice, it is possible to improve one's overall communication skills... [top](#)

Induction Programs

In keeping with the Faculty's specific approach, Faculty based Induction Programs are offered prior to the commencement of each session, to acculturate students to their new learning environment; familiarise them with teaching and learning expectations; introduce teaching staff in core subjects; offer workshops on strategies for effective study; introduce peers; and generally create a supportive, graduate learning culture and community. The Induction Programs are equally well supported by local and international students and have proved to be highly successful in achieving its purposes, as evident in high attendance rates and student feedback:

I...do not quite understand the teaching styles of Australia, therefore this is quite important for me to be familiar with it before the class begins. This Induction Program is like a warm up exercise. It makes me be familiar with the school staff, the classmates, the Uni and the subjects as well.

This program helps me set my objectives and also gives me some motivation to work harder. The presence of the EDU really assures me that there'll always be help whenever we need it especially in writing assignments and doing my studies.
[top](#)

Generic Programs

A program of language, learning and academic skills development workshops is also offered to ensure that students who want to enhance generic skills in these areas are able to do so. These include small group workshops in Effective Time Management, Developing Critical Reading Skills, Developing Critical and Analytical Skills, Effective Listening and Note-taking, Assignment Writing, Making Oral Presentations, and Preparing for Tests and Exams. Despite being generic, the workshops are delivered in the context of the disciplines of Commerce and Economics. Whilst this initiative serves as a support mechanism where students do not have access to discipline specific support courses, the intention is to ultimately integrate generic skills development into subject teaching. [top](#)

Individual and Group Consultations

In addition, graduate students have access to consultations with learning and language advisers, with special provisions for evening consultations for part-time students. The 'group' mode of consultations is the preferred option, mainly because it addresses common problems, involves collaborative learning, is more interactive and more cost effective. However, from trends and frequency of visits, it is clear that students tend to prefer individual consultations for reasons of convenience. To assist with the demand for this form of support, a team of Peer Assistants from a range of disciplinary areas have been trained to provide assistance and advice. The Peer Assistants are familiar with specific needs of students studying in Commerce and Economics.

The intention of the Faculty (and its EDU) is to provide a 'platform' of wide ranging opportunities for graduate students to address learning, language and communication needs. The intention is also to support teaching staff in teaching to the diversity of their

students, addressing differing student needs, and integrating essential skills development into subject teaching. Whilst this has been achieved to some extent, it is not always possible to involve teaching staff as many find that they have "no time" because of heavy teaching loads, have competing research agendas, and "lack expertise" in the area. [top](#)

Staff Support and Staff Development Initiatives

In the education support framework being devised by the Faculty, staff development is viewed as an essential dimension to enhancing the learning experiences of students. Consequently, on-going colloquia for graduate teaching staff across the Faculty are convened to bring them together to share insights, explore issues of collective concern (e.g. management of student diversity, cross cultural learning, assessment), and identify possible solutions to these issues. Of particular significance to this paper was a colloquium on 'Managing Cultural Diversity' which focused on issues relating to effective cross-cultural teaching. The colloquium, led by consultants trained in Managing Cultural Diversity, was widely supported by graduate staff (with an attendance of over 80 staff members). Follow up sessions focused on developing team approaches to managing diversity across subjects, and strategies for internationalisation of the curricula.

Further colloquia are being planned to consider the effectiveness of the graduate support initiatives implemented to date; explore a more programmatic approach to providing support to ensure that all students in need are accessing the support provided; encourage more staff to work towards integrating appropriate learning and language skills into the context of subject teaching; consider further staff development strategies for valuing and managing diversity, and generally enhance the graduate learning experience.

Consultations are also provided to teaching teams or individual staff members on an on-going basis in relation teaching and learning. These consultations may focus on the provision of advice and information on classroom management issues, student management issues, teaching resources preparation, strategies for assessment, and information on current trends and directions in education development. [top](#)

Conclusion

The paper has outlined the evolution of one approach to managing increasing student diversity that has emerged partly as a result of the internationalisation of Higher Education in Australia. The initiatives outlined are in the early stages of development and implementation, with on-going modification and refinement being essential features of the structure established. This is essential as educational issues grow in complexity and students' needs change. The initiatives can both benefit from and contribute to the experiences of managing student diversity in other Higher Education institutions in Australia.

In its aim to further understand the needs of its graduate students, and to ensure quality learning and teaching, the Faculty continues to investigate issues of diversity, and is

currently engaged in an extensive 'Language, Learning and Cultural Diversity Project' across the Faculty. The outcomes of this investigation will contribute to enhanced diversity management, determine further initiatives and guide future directions. [top](#)

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