Australian Universities Quality Agency

Good Practice Principles for English Language Proficiency for International Students in Australian Universities

March 2009

Introduction

The project

The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) in 2008 funded a project to develop a set of good practice principles for English language proficiency in academic studies.

This project's focus is international students studying in universities in Australia. However the Principles can be applied more generally to learning and teaching of all higher education students and they can be used by other post-secondary educational institutions.

The project was undertaken by a Steering Committee convened by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA). A list of Steering Committee members is given on the last page of this document.

The project is a quality enhancement activity for the Australian university sector and reflects extensive work being undertaken in many Australian universities. It builds on the outcomes of a 2007 National Symposium commissioned by the Department of Education, Science and Training. (The outcomes from this Symposium, and the evidence-based background papers that informed discussions at the Symposium, are available from the Australian Education International website at *www.aei.dest.gov.au*.)

Definition of English language proficiency

For this project, 'English language proficiency' has been defined as the ability of students to use the English language to make and communicate meaning in spoken and written contexts while completing their university studies. Such uses may range from a simple task such as discussing work with fellow students, to complex tasks such as writing an academic paper or delivering a speech to a professional audience. This view of proficiency as the ability to organise language to carry out a variety of communication tasks distinguishes the use of 'English language proficiency' from a narrow focus on language as a formal system concerned only with correct use of grammar and sentence

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structure. The project Steering Committee recognises that in many contexts the terms 'English language proficiency' and 'English language competence' are used interchangeably.

Context

English language proficiency has become an important issue in Australian higher education due in part to a heightened awareness of the role of English language ability in employment outcomes and the role of international graduates in meeting skill shortages in the Australian workforce. There is also an increased recognition within universities of the fundamental nature of language in learning and academic achievement for all students.

The rapid progress of global higher education is prompting universities in other countries to address the complex issues of learning and teaching in multilingual environments. Given the current prevalence of English in work and professional fields internationally, many universities are seeking better ways for students whose first language is not English to develop their disciplinary English language proficiency through academic studies.

For the retention and academic success of international students in Australian universities, a range of skills and strategies (in particular, written and oral communication) need to be made visible, explicit, and accessible and, importantly, integrated within specific disciplinary contexts. The Good Practice Principles are one way to demonstrate the commitment and leadership of Australian universities in the area of English language proficiency for international students with English as an additional language.

While attending to university entry requirements, the Steering Committee has emphasised the development of English language proficiency throughout students' studies. In doing so, the Steering Committee has been guided by a number of key ideas, as follows:

- With widening participation across tertiary education and the increasing numbers of international students, it can no longer be assumed that students enter their university study with the level of academic language proficiency required to participate effectively in their studies.

- Irrespective of the English language entry requirements of the university, most students, in particular those from language backgrounds other than English, will require English language development throughout the course of their studies.

- Different disciplines have different discourses of academic inquiry.

- Students' English language proficiency can be developed through appropriate course design, supplemented where necessary by other developmental activity.

- Development of academic language and learning is more likely to occur when it is linked to need (e.g. academic activities, assessment tasks).

- English language proficiency is one part of the wider graduate attribute agenda since English language communication skills are crucial for graduate employment.

How will the Good Practice Principles be used?

The Good Practice Principles have been developed in consultation with Australian universities and other stakeholders. They aim to describe what is known about current good practice, taking into account the diversity of Australian universities.

The Principles are general statements for individual universities to address in the context of their own operations and environment.

As one university stated in its response to the consultation draft: 'Because the missions, pedagogical approaches, and student populations at and within each university are increasingly diverse, the principles must be broad enough to allow for institutions to respond in ways appropriate to their particular situation'.

The expectation of the project Steering Committee is that universities will consider the Principles as they would consider other guidelines on good practice. As part of AUQA quality audits universities can expect to be asked about the way they have addressed the Principles, just as they are likely to be asked by AUQA auditors about their application of a range of other external reference documents for the university sector.

The examples of good practices given in the thematic guide are examples only and not intended to be prescriptive. They are provided to assist universities and other institutions in reviewing and improving their own activities.

Good Practice Principles

1. Universities are responsible for ensuring that their students are sufficiently competent in the English language to participate effectively in their university studies.[1]

2. Resourcing for English language development is adequate to meet students' needs throughout their studies.

3. Students have responsibilities for further developing their English language proficiency during their study at university and are advised of these responsibilities prior to enrolment.

4. Universities ensure that the English language entry pathways they approve for the admission of students enable these students to participate effectively in their studies.

5. English language proficiency and communication skills are important graduate attributes for all students.

6. Development of English language proficiency is integrated with curriculum design, assessment practices and course delivery through a variety of methods.

7. Students' English language development needs are diagnosed early in their studies and addressed, with ongoing opportunities for self-assessment.

8. International students are supported from the outset to adapt to their academic, sociocultural and linguistic environments.

9. International students are encouraged and supported to enhance their English language development through effective social interaction on and off campus.

10. Universities use evidence from a variety of sources to monitor and improve their English language development activities.

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[1] For international students studying in Australia, it is a requirement of the National Code's standard 2 under the *Education Services for Overseas Students Act 2000* that 'registered providers ensure students' qualifications, experience and English language proficiency are appropriate for the course for which enrolment is sought'. This requirement is also relevant to Principle 4.

Thematic Guide with Explanation and Examples

Examples of good practices in relation to each of the 10 Principles are provided below under the following thematic areas:

1. University-wide Strategy, Policy and Resourcing

2. Prospective Students and Entry Standards

3. Curriculum Design and Delivery

4. Transition and Social and Academic Interaction

5. Quality Assurance

Theme 1: University-wide Strategy, Policy and Resourcing

Relevant Principles

Principle 1

Universities are responsible for ensuring that their students are sufficiently competent in the English language to participate effectively in their university studies.

Principle 2

Resourcing for English language development is adequate to meet students' needs throughout their studies.

Explanation

The first Good Practice Principle is an overarching general statement reflective of the fact that universities themselves set entry standards for admission to their courses (programs). Entry standards are designed to allow most students to graduate, if the students engage diligently with their studies. English language entry standards form part of admission criteria.

Universities also make decisions about the nature and extent of learning that students must demonstrate and therefore about the nature and extent of teaching and other learning activities to be provided. For students to be able to engage effectively in their academic studies in Australia, they must be able to communicate in English in a manner appropriate to these studies. It is assumed that academic studies in Australia necessarily involve ongoing development of students' discipline-specific English language proficiency. If some or many students are not able to participate at an appropriate level in their studies for reasons associated with their English language proficiency, a university will need to consider how to change its practices to better develop this proficiency. No university can guarantee that each and every student will participate effectively in their academic studies but every university should take responsibility for ensuring that the students it admits do not face unreasonable expectations of English language proficiency.

The second Good Practice Principle reflects the view that, having taken decisions on the extent of development of discipline-specific (and more general) English language proficiency its student population requires, a university should provide sufficient resources for development of this proficiency. A university should be able to demonstrate how resources for English language development are allocated and how it knows whether or not these resources are adequate to meet requirements. This resourcing needs to consider the needs of research students as well as coursework students and take into account funding for data collection and analysis.

Examples of Good Practices

- The university acknowledges significant responsibility for the ongoing development of its students' English language proficiency, while recognising that students play an active role developing their proficiency during their studies.

- The university has a policy that includes its goals for the development of English language proficiency for all students.

- The university has comprehensive plans to develop and monitor students' English language proficiency throughout their studies up to the time of graduation and recognises that implementation of these plans involves a range of groups within the university.

- The university ensures there are adequate resources for qualified academic language and learning staff to assist academics to integrate language development into curricula and to provide other forms of individual and group support to students.

- The university is able to demonstrate an objective basis for the allocation of resources for English language development commensurate with need.

- The university provides professional development assistance for staff to increase their understanding of, or expertise in, the development of English language proficiency.

Theme 2: Prospective Students and Entry Standards

Relevant Principles

Principle 3

Students have responsibilities for further developing their English language proficiency during their study at university and are advised of these responsibilities prior to enrolment.

Principle 4

Universities ensure that the English language entry pathways they approve for the admission of students enable these students to participate effectively in their studies.

Explanation

The third Good Practice Principle reflects mutuality in development of English language proficiency. While universities have responsibilities to set entry standards and provide means for students to develop their English language proficiency during their studies, students must also take responsibility for their own language development while at university, as part of taking responsibility for their learning. It is important that students are aware of this expectation before they commit to a course of study, so universities need to advise prospective students of their responsibilities while at university. Many Australian universities have charters of student rights and responsibilities but these may need to make more explicit reference to development of English language proficiency than at present.

The fourth Good Practice Principle refers back to Principle 1 and the fact that universities are able to determine their own requirements for admission*. Most universities provide for English language entry standards to be met by students through a variety of means, so many students with English as an additional language do not need to take a recognised test of English language proficiency to meet English language entry requirements. Given the practical impossibility of equating these other means with English language test scores, universities need to find other means to assure themselves that students entering through pathways (including articulation from other studies, completion of English language courses and foundation programs) are equipped to participate effectively in their studies. In practice, this means that universities need to monitor how well students from different entry pathways are able to deal with the language requirements of their discipline at various levels of study and further develop their proficiency. (Simple measures of aggregate academic performance by cohort may not provide sufficient information.) Universities need to ensure that their expectations are conveyed clearly to pathway providers. They need to manage their relationships with pathway providers effectively, including giving providers feedback on their performance and drawing attention to problems.

*While there may be limitations on the extent to which universities feel able to change their English language admission requirements for some groups, e.g. school

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leavers and students articulating from vocational education and training (VET) providers, universities should make known any concerns about the English language proficiency of students admitted through these pathways.

Examples of Good Practices

- The university provides information for prospective and admitted students about the need for further development of their English language proficiency and advises students about the ways in which this development is supported by the university.

- All students are advised of the nature and level of support that will be given to help them meet the expectations that are placed on them.

- There is clear communication of the university's expectations for further development of students' English language proficiency to onshore and offshore educational partners and agents.

- The university has formal English language entry standards that reflect the particular needs of each discipline. In setting such entry standards, the university has given consideration to international norms. The university regularly reviews its standards, taking into account external reference points, and makes changes as appropriate.

- English language entry standards are not considered in isolation but in the context of the developmental support that the university will provide, so that entry standards, the needs of the course and the support that is provided form a coherent whole.

- The university has explicit statements of the English language qualifications that it accepts as equivalent to particular test scores (e.g. IELTS, TOEFL).

- There are defined academic responsibilities for setting and reviewing entry standards.

- Staff and students understand what is signified by IELTS or TOEFL or similar language test results, including the strengths and limitations of these tests.

- The university systematically reviews the academic performance of students entering through different pathways or channels.

- The university has secure and documented processes to allow it to check and approve that entering students meet English language entry requirements, including the use of precedent databases. These processes are controlled by the university, involve more than a single individual and are subject to internal audit. Exemptions are given rarely and follow documented procedures.

- The university has clarified its expectations with direct entry pathway providers and there are formal contracts between the university and direct entry pathway providers.

- The university provides feedback to direct entry providers on the performance of student cohorts.

- The university has mechanisms to assure itself of the quality and relevance of pathway programs and the adequacy of assessment practices of pathway providers.

Theme 3: Curriculum Design and Delivery

Relevant Principles

Principle 5
English language proficiency and communication skills are important graduate attributes for all students.

Principle 6
Development of English language proficiency is integrated with curriculum design, assessment practices and course delivery through a variety of methods.

Principle 7
Students' English language development needs are diagnosed early in their studies and addressed, with ongoing opportunities for self-assessment.

Explanation

The fifth Good Practice Principle recognises that when students graduate from an Australian university, they should possess the English language proficiency and communication skills to perform effectively in subsequent employment and professional activities and to engage in society more generally. The Principle holds equally for international students as for domestic students, especially as many graduates can expect to live and work in more than one country. This Principle is consistent with Australian universities' statements of graduate attributes, which almost without exception mention communication skills as a desired attribute, and one that research shows is crucial for employment on graduation. English language proficiency is sometimes treated as a 'taken for granted' element in communication skills. By highlighting it in this Principle, the implications for university studies become clear.

The sixth Good Practice Principle acknowledges that different disciplines have different English language requirements and discourses and that most students do not enter university with 'ready-made' proficiency in the academic language of their discipline(s). It is based on a view that development of appropriate English language proficiency is more likely to occur when it is linked to need (e.g. discipline-specific academic activities, assessment tasks, practica).

This Principle draws on expert advice, emerging practice and the available evidence on how to develop students' English language proficiency during their studies, taking account of the varying needs of students, especially students with English as an additional language. These sources indicate that while there is no single 'best' way to develop students' English language proficiency, contextualisation within disciplines and integration of language development across the curriculum seem likely to be effective approaches. 'Integration' in this context means taking a holistic view across a discipline to address needs through a variety of means, including: embedding language development through curriculum design and assessment; workshops or

credit-bearing units within a course; 'adjunct' workshops or sessions within a course; developing workplace communication through preparation for work placements and practica; and targeted individual or group support provided by academic language and learning experts. Similar ideas can be applied to support research students.

The seventh Good Practice Principle recognises that, irrespective of universities' English language entry requirements, students now enter university with quite widely varying degrees of English language proficiency. Early assessment of students' English language development needs means that students and staff identify these needs at a time when they can start to be addressed, rather than at a point when the stakes are much higher. At least 18 Australian universities are now adopting or examining tools for early diagnosis of students' English language development needs. Consistent with Principle 3, this Principle also recognises that providing students with ongoing opportunities to self-assess their English language development needs encourages students to take responsibility for this development.

Examples of Good Practices

- Curricula, teaching and assessment practices are designed to develop discipline-specific English language proficiency as part of the standard learning expected within a course.

- English language proficiency and course learning outcomes are aligned.

- The university gives attention to all aspects of language proficiency in assessment methods, e.g. attention to listening, speaking, reading and writing.

- The university encourages and supports international students (and others) to undertake a diagnostic assessment of their development needs for English language proficiency at a very early stage of their studies.

- The university offers students opportunities to self-assess their language skills throughout their studies and to undertake developmental activities in response to the needs they identify.

- The university has a clear statement of the respective responsibilities of individual academics, course and unit coordinators and academic language staff for developing students' English language proficiency.

- The university ensures that academic staff know how to access professional assistance for the development of curricula, assessment tasks and teaching to develop English language proficiency.

- The curriculum takes into account time for students to develop their English language capacity within overall expected student workloads.

- The university has considered how best to use work placements or practica to assist students to develop their English language proficiency in professional or employment settings.

- The university has considered ways for domestic and international students to demonstrate their English language proficiency to prospective employers, referees and other institutions.

Theme 4: Transition and Social and Academic Interaction

Relevant Principles

Principle 8

International students are supported from the outset to adapt to their academic, sociocultural and linguistic environments.

Principle 9

International students are encouraged and supported to enhance their English language development through effective social interaction on and off campus.

Explanation

The eighth Good Practice Principle aims to emphasise the role that effective academic and social acculturation can play in the development of international students' English language proficiency. In particular, it is important for international students with English as an additional language to enter an environment where they have opportunities and encouragement to develop their English language skills in ways that boost their confidence and willingness to experiment with the use of language while also contributing to their socialisation to their chosen discipline. This Principle recognises the growing emphasis placed by Australian universities on transition and orientation to academic language and skills for entering students. While there are substantial orientation programs for international students entering Australian universities, these are less commonly discipline-specific and may not provide support for international students to plan for the development of their English language proficiency. Universities might consider how best to introduce international students to supportive and competent English language speakers at orientation, e.g. through 'buddy' or peer mentor schemes.

The ninth Good Practice Principle builds on the eighth Principle but focuses on the need for universities to develop effective strategies (not only 'opportunities') to ensure that international students have experience of a wide range of contexts where English is used and thus are able to extend the breadth and depth of their skills in using English appropriate to the sociocultural or academic circumstances. One element in these strategies is supporting international students to feel that they are able to enrich the experience and cultural knowledge of others. Certainly, universities can consider ways to demonstrate that they genuinely value multilateral exchanges of experience and ideas among people from differing language backgrounds. Although universities cannot 'ensure' that international students have effective social interaction that develops their English language proficiency off campus they can develop strategies to assist international students to have these experiences.

Examples of Good Practices

- The university provides discipline-specific academic and learning skills acculturation, which includes consideration of language proficiency and communication skills.

- The university has implemented plans to ensure academic and social inclusion for its international students from the commencement of their stay in Australia.

- The university demonstrates that it values the role played by international students in enhancing the learning experiences for all its students.

- The university ensures effective interaction of students from differing cultural backgrounds in regular academic activities.

- The university creates opportunities for students to form intercultural social networks in their learning settings and to engage in cross-cultural discussion in the discipline area.

- The university ensures international students in Australia are supported to have social interaction with a range of people in Australian communities, as well as opportunities for sharing their own culture.

- The university's community engagement strategies include intercultural experiences for international students.

- The university supports faculties or other groups (alumni) to provide intercultural interaction in a professional or disciplinary context.

Theme 5: Quality Assurance

Relevant Principles

Principle 10

Universities use evidence from a variety of sources to monitor and improve their English language development activities.

Explanation

The tenth Good Practice Principle is derived from continuous quality improvement models, which entail the monitoring of outcomes and identification of ways to improve one or more elements of current practices. These elements include policies, procedures, projects and activities, curricula, resourcing and the ways in which 'results' are defined and assessed. Identification of improvements can occur through internal reflection, benchmarking and comparisons, research findings, or considering the views of students and other stakeholders.

Examples of Good Practices

- The university regularly compares its policies and practices for English language development against those of comparable institutions nationally and internationally and considers these in developing policies and practices that reflect the specific needs of its students and the requirements of specific discipline areas.

- Course reviews consider the extent to which development of English language proficiency and communication are taken into account in curriculum design and delivery.

- The university obtains regular information from students on the extent to which they consider their English language proficiency is improving.

- The university knows the extent to which its graduates are satisfied with the development of their English language proficiency through their time at university.

- The university knows the extent to which academics consider students' English language proficiency on entry is appropriate and is developed through their studies.

- The university knows the extent to which employers are satisfied with the English language proficiency and communication skills of its graduates.

- The university has ongoing dialogue with professional accreditation and registration bodies about their expectations regarding English language proficiency and the English language proficiency of the university's graduates.

- The university uses research findings, including its own, to inform its strategies for the development of students' English language proficiency.

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