

Keeping it real: Embedding academic skill development in a Business faculty (concurrent session: Assessed institutional initiative: CI 36)

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Faculty of Business at QUT

- Largest QUT Faculty, 27% international enrolments
- Australia's first Business school with triple international accreditation: EQUIS, AMBA, AACSB
- Assessed on: international engagement, quality of staff, programs and student learning, and on ability to continually maintain and improve these high standards
- Schools: Accountancy; Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations; Economics and Finance; Management

Faculty of Business Teaching and Learning team (established 2009)

- Embedded team – coordinator and four team members
 - Reporting to Assistant Dean, Teaching and Learning
 - Remit to contribute to all Faculty teaching and learning targets, including reaccreditation in 2010
 - Degree of autonomy on how to achieve remit by working to team strengths
 - Expertise and passion of myself and the team coordinator led us to concentrate on support for students' academic skills (language and learning) in the Business faculty
- New Faculty approach to developing students' academic and language skills: diagnostic test, 4S program, Faculty handbook (*Starting your Business degree: Academic skills for success* by Ros McCulloch and Andrea Reid)



Diagnostic test S1, 2009

- Conducted for a needs analysis of students' writing abilities and to identify 'at risk' students
 - Undertaken during lectures in a core Economics unit (1100 students) on a writing task independent of unit content (300-400 word response to stimulus piece on climate change)
 - Used modified marking MASUS marking criteria (Measuring Academic Skills of University Students), developed by the University of Sydney (can be accessed from http://sydney.edu.au/stuserv/documents/learning_centre/MASUS.pdf)
 - Provided students with detailed feedback on their writing along with recommendations for which classes to attend in developmental program that we set up (4S program= study+skills+support=success)
 - Pilot program included generic workshops on academic writing, academic skills, and language topics, and individual assessment advice sessions
- Results from the test: students generally wrote well in terms of structure and grammar....however the gaps in student skills were:
- ✗ ability to construct a reasoned argument
 - ✗ ability to make links between the complexity of the issue and suggested solutions, e.g. climate change can be addressed if we simply switch off the lights
 - ✗ use of appropriate academic tone
 - ✗ understanding of the task or the topic (many students confused climate change with pollution)

What we learned from our evaluation of the pilot program:

- Despite individual recommendations, there was low attendance at consults and workshops
- Strong message that generic programs do not engage students
- Promotion – continuous and just-in-time – is vital to success
- Closer collaboration with unit coordinators needed to promote program, achieve consistent approach on advice to students, and to emphasise the value of the program to students

Comparison with concurrent work in School of Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations (AMPR)

A different model was used for the work in AMPR:

4S program	AMPR model
Generic workshops	Targeted to units with high international student enrolments in Marketing program
Series of topics on general academic skills and language areas – an ‘add on’ to discipline studies	Weekly, semester-long program of discipline-specific academic skills workshops, assessment sessions and consultations
Delivered independently of units	Supported by unit coordinators
No means for students to access resources	Resources posted on unit Blackboard sites
Coordinator and tutors not integrated into units	Program coordinator integrated into units, e.g. access to Blackboard sites to post reminder messages and resources
Outcomes of AMPR work: high student uptake saw reduced tutor workloads and greater tutor satisfaction, positive student unit evaluations, lift in writing standards, reduced fail rate from 21% to 8%	

S2, 2009 application of AMPR results to 4S program

- Generic workshops replaced with assessment-specific sessions that integrate academic skills (semester-long workshop program around core unit assessment tasks)
- Increased individual assessment advice sessions from 20 to 30 minutes
- Increased promotion of the program and collaboration with unit coordinators
- Set up website for program resources



Evaluation of new approach to 4S program

- Increased attendance at workshops (across three semesters, numbers rose from 194, to 630 to 1006)
- Feedback from unit coordinators on reduced workloads
- Greater integration between 4S tutors and unit coordinators (assignment expectations, promotional slides and announcements, allocation of time to *teach writing*, tutor training, marking moderation)

Support from literature for embedded model

- Developmental rather than remedial (Skillen, Merten, Trivett and Percy, 1998)
- Student motivation high to attend discipline-specific classes (Durkin & Main, 2002)
- Students need to develop discipline vocabulary to succeed at tertiary study (Woodward-Kron, 2008)
- Close collaboration between discipline teachers and language and learning advisors needed to make embedding work (Durkin & Main, 2002)

Faculty handbook: *Starting your Business degree: Academic skills for success*

The Book:

- Written by Andrea Reid and Ros McCulloch from the Faculty Teaching and Learning team
- Each chapter targets an AACSB Assurance of Learning goal (graduate capabilities). There are five in all: knowledge and skills, critical thinking, professional communication (written and oral), teamwork, and social, cultural and ethical understanding
- Includes discipline examples
- Practical approach and easy to understand language, particularly accessible for international students
- Offers a consistent approach to academic/professional skills across the Faculty
- Toolkit of resources also created, to use for developing additional discipline-specific examples and teaching academic skills (usable by academic tutors and language/learning support staff)

Integration of the Book:

- All Faculty core units student received a free copy in S1, 2010
 - 4S assessment workshops use the book to teach skills such as structuring writing, referencing, giving oral presentations
 - Embedded in core units: tutor orientation, reference to relevant sections of the book in lectures, assignment feedback directed to relevant sections of the book
- Further integration: All staff and students to receive a free copy in S2, 2010; further use of exemplars by staff in other units, plans for PG version and further development of online resources and an instructor manual, interest from educational publishers for a general Business version to be marketed to other Australian institutions

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

- ❖ The principle of the 4S embedded approach is now fully accepted by Heads of School and staff in the Faculty
- ❖ The embedded approach has been extended into \$1million project focussing on enhancing the language and learning skills of international students
- ❖ The project: an LLA has been appointed to work in each school to further develop the embedded approach with international students

We developed our “6 Principles” for better learning outcomes and greater course satisfaction for international students:

- **Principle 1:** The more embedded and fine-grained the support work, the more likelihood it will be successful for improving international student learning
- **Principle 2:** Just-in-time, task-targeted support is more effective than generic and stand-alone programs
- **Principle 3:** One-to-one support will be perceived by international students as more helpful due to the combination of language and cultural issues
- **Principle 4:** Cultural reliance on ‘the authoritative pronouncement’ as well as language issues mean students need multiple explanation and reinforcement of task-instruction requirements
- **Principle 5:** Learning (knowledge and understanding) issues combine with cultural (‘face’) issues to make students more ready to request assistance from someone other than the expert-teacher
- **Principle 6:** The culture of ‘veneration’ and respect for authority will impact on students’ readiness and ability to undertake critical reflection and commentary and may persist throughout the period of study

References

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Woodward-Kron, R. (2008). More than just jargon – the nature and role of specialist language in learning disciplinary knowledge. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 7, 234-249.