From Good Practice Principles to English Language Standards: What’s on the horizon?

Jacinta Webb
Learning and Teaching Unit
Queensland University of Technology

Abstract

We are entering a new phase in higher education, one that includes a new regulatory body. The 2008 Bradley Review of Higher Education examined and reported on the future direction of the higher education sector. It recommended a national quality assurance and regulatory agency supported by a new framework for higher education accreditation, quality assurance and regulation. This led to the establishment of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) Act 2011. In 2012, TEQSA became the new body that will register and evaluate the performance of higher education providers against the Higher Education Standards Framework. This will include five key areas: Provider Standards; Qualification Standards; Teaching and Learning Standards; Research Standards and Information Standards. This session introduces the TEQSA Higher Education Standards Framework agenda and invites discussion on the development, implementation and predicted outcomes of national English Language Standards within the first year of higher education and beyond.

Background

For some time now, the landscape in Australian universities has been changing. We now have very diverse campus communities that include students from a range of language and cultural backgrounds, prior educational experiences, and academic ability who spend fewer hours on campus (James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010). To cater for this diversity, what is needed is a more co-ordinated effort to develop and implement effective policies and improve practices for all students irrespective of linguistic, cultural or socio-economic backgrounds (Barthel, 2011). If we are to meet the demands of the changed nature of our cohorts, then universities need to develop robust institution-wide policies and strategies to enhance the English language development of all students.

One of the major barriers for English as an Additional Language (EAL) students affecting their ability to reach their academic potential, is the length of time they have been in the new environment (Bretag, 2007, p. 18). Many students are overwhelmed by the academic demands of university and are ill-equipped to successfully transition to their first year of study. Some academics are overwhelmed by a lack of support and professional development opportunities to enable them to improve their teaching of EAL students (both international and domestic) and are frustrated with inconsistent assessment practices. Poor teaching and assessment practices only confuse students, encourage plagiarism and the production of writing of low academic quality (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009). One of the key elements that impact on the transition of
commencing first year students identified by Yorke (2011) is the need for clear articulation of the level of academic skills and competencies expected in tertiary education.

As a result of the Knight Review (2011) and subsequent reforms to student visas, universities will vet some of their own students from key market areas such as China. Universities will need to demonstrate that high-quality education outcomes continue to be achieved and ensure students have appropriate English language skills. Concerns have been raised by the sector in terms of potential problems with some students being allowed to commence study with low International English Language Testing Scores (IELTS) and insufficient time to improve their levels of English proficiency. Murray (2010) argues that “students who enter university lacking the English competency necessary to pursue their studies effectively can suffer anxiety, frustration, de-motivation and an inability to engage with the learning process” (p. 66). Institutions will need to demonstrate that high-quality education outcomes continue to be achieved and ensure students have appropriate English language skills on entry to enable successful completion of courses in a timely manner.

Although the ability to produce work-ready graduates with high levels of English language proficiency is a key goal of all universities, there is a dissonance between students’ entry levels and the time needed to develop sufficient cognitive academic language proficiency equivalent to native English speakers. It is recommended by IELTS educators that at least 100 hours of intensive English language instruction are needed to achieve improvement of 0.5 bands on the IELTS scale (2005). If students are accepted with minimum IELTS scores, they will require a great deal of support to enable academic success.

One of the difficulties in moving this agenda forward is that many institutions still do not have an agreed definition of what constitutes English language proficiency. The notion of “proficiency” according to Murray (2011, p. 58) reveals three competences: English language proficiency, academic literacy and professional communication skills. Each of these, though interrelated, needs to be carefully examined by institutions in order to design and enact targeted programs of support. This support should be provided early enough in order to make a difference (Tinto, 2009).

The introduction of TEQSA Teaching and Learning Standards

TEQSA’s regulatory role is concerned with agreed minimum levels within the standards framework. The Teaching and Learning standards in higher education encompass:

• those dimensions of curriculum, teaching, learner support and assessment that establish the pre-conditions for the achievement of learning and educational outcomes fit for the awarding of a higher education qualification; and

• the explicit levels of attainment required of and achieved by students and graduates, individually and collectively, in defined areas of knowledge and skills. (DEEWR, 2011, p.3)

Teaching standards might best be viewed as “process” or ”delivery” standards. These are the aspects of institutional provision or educational delivery commonly accepted to have an effect on the quality of student learning. Learning standards are best viewed as outcome standards. Learning standards describe the nature and levels of student attainment—what students and graduates know and can do (DEEWR, 2011).
English language standards on the horizon

In June 2010, the English Language (EL) Standards Steering Group submitted a report to DEEWR for the Minister to approve another consultation process, which had as its aims to convert the DEEWR (2009) Good Practice Principles for English Language Proficiency for international Students in Australian Universities (henceforth “GPPs” for convenience) into EL standards. These have not yet been released for consultation (Barthel, 2011). The EL Standards were developed by a steering group, consisting of key English language experts that adapted the GPPs for use by TEQSA. Tensions in the GPPs Report (2009) have been discussed and documented in many places and include: the group of students it discusses, its definition of English language proficiency, its conflicting discourses of inclusion and exclusion, and the fact that it was only a best practice guide and therefore the GPPs could not be enforceable (Barthel, 2011; Harper, Prentice, & Wilson, 2011; Murray, 2010).

One of the aims of the draft EL Standards is to make the GPPs applicable to the entire higher education (HE) sector and to all HE students; and to mandate the acceptance of the GPPs as the English Language Standards for Higher Education and consequently form part of the TEQSA audit framework. The draft EL Standards describes universities as having the responsibility to ensure (i) students have adequate English skills and support, (ii) early diagnosis of poor performance and (iii) the integration of English language learning into the curriculum. The draft also suggests embedding English standards in assessment practices and including it in peer review benchmarking. The proposed standards would apply to all, not just international students (Trounson, 2011).

Current good practice in the sector, which is reflective of the EL standards, are systematic university-wide approaches to ensuring that all students have the necessary academic language ability (oral and written communication) to complete their studies. This is supported and endorsed by university and faculty-level policies and procedures and formally integrated into course structures, through credit bearing units. There is a move away from formalised high-cost post-enrolment formal language assessment (PELA) to academic language integration (ALI) where support is provided in the context of specific disciplines where staff who have expertise in language and learning development collaborate with discipline academics. Studies show that generic workshops fail to attract those who most need the support (Arkoudis & Starfield, 2007) as workshop content is often dissociated from discipline content.

EL development is still seen as someone else’s responsibility for “fixing” problems students have and not part of “everybody’s business.” There needs to be centralised coordination of the programs of support available based on the needs of the students and the expertise of academic and professional staff, student learning advisers, peer mentors, etc. The level of funding and type of support, time available, frequency of support, follow up, tracking and identification of at risk students varies across faculties and divisions within various institutions. Ideally the embedding of English language support and academic literacy in key units across courses should result from collaborative planning and teaching partnerships between language specialists working alongside discipline based academics.

Conclusion

Tinto (2009) argues that many universities do not change the prevailing values on campus that underlie the experience of diverse groups on campus and do little to address the deeper
roots of student attrition. Universities need to think about how they can build on the work already undertaken in implementing GPPs in order to implement EL Standards that are consistent with transition pedagogy and the literature on first year experience. They need to find successful ways to enhance productive academic and professional partnerships, renew curriculum, embed English language support within discipline studies, enhance professional development of staff and monitor student progress in order to improve student learning engagement for EAL students. By so doing, they will create an enhanced first year in higher education for all students.

Issues for Consideration:

1. What should the EL Standards look like?
2. What guidelines will TEQSA provide for meeting these standards?
3. Will universities be able to develop needs-based, flexible, local language policies and development strategies?

References:


### Nuts and Bolts Session Plan: 30 mins

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>5 mins</th>
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<tr>
<td>● Brief introduction and review of TEQSA agenda and introduction of English Language Standards, a proposed component of the Higher Education Standards Framework.</td>
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<td>● Reflection on where individual institutions are currently positioned in terms of alignment of GPPs with policies and practices.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Group discussion</th>
<th>15 mins</th>
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<td>● Key questions will guide discussions.</td>
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<td>● There will be an opportunity to report and discuss as a whole group.</td>
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<td>● An outcome for the session will be to raise awareness of issues and to share strategies to enable institutions to move from incorporating GPPs to English Language Standards.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Conclusion</th>
<th>10 mins</th>
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<td>● Participants will discuss the potential value of the English Language Standards in their own institutions.</td>
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<td>● Summarise participant’s ideas and concerns and suggest next steps.</td>
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<td>● Initiate a cross-institutional community of practice to continue beyond the IFYHE conference.</td>
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