

## Written and Oral Communication Skills of Students

**Approved by:** Academic Board on 19 September 1994  
**Date of effect:** 20 September 1994

### 1. Policy

#### (1) Selection of students

- (a) Existing admissions criteria regarding English language proficiency will be rigorously observed in the selection of students.
- (b) Faculties should review any inconsistencies or gaps in existing admissions policies (for example, those identified above) and revise and explore the use of additional strategies.

#### (2) Program and course development and review

- (a) In specifying the objectives and learning outcomes of programs and courses for approval and review, specific reference should be made to the generic skills of communication and how these are to be taught and assessed within the subject.
- (b) A process for early assessment of students' levels of communication skills should be integrated into the syllabus in order to identify needs and problems, and to assess continually these skills as part of overall course assessment.
- (c) Information should be provided to students about the role of communication skills in the subject generally, in the course specifically, and in the profession or workplace where appropriate.
- (d) In making evaluations of whether courses and teaching have achieved their stated objectives, specific reference should be made to the development and assessment of students' communication skills.

#### (3) Implementation of teaching

- (a) Teaching, learning and assessment processes should engage students in a wide range of communication activities.
- (b) The skills of communication within the subject should be explicitly addressed and taught within the subject.
- (c) The syllabus for a course should sequence the learning and development of communication skills within the subject through progressively more complex processes and tasks.
- (d) Induction programs should be devised to assist students from other cultures in making the transition to new styles of learning.

#### (4) Assessment

- (a) Assessment criteria regarding communication skills must be stated explicitly, and published prior to students' work for assessment tasks.

- (b) Assessment criteria regarding communication skills should be defined and explained adequately so as to provide students with useful and useable feedback.
  - (c) Sufficient formative assessment feedback should be provided to students on the communication of their assessment tasks, and sufficient opportunities provided for students to respond to that feedback.
- (5) Advice to and referral of students**
- (a) Work should be continued to develop appropriate criteria/test instruments to enable a minimum level (or appropriate levels) of communication skills to be identified, described, and tested within the subjects, and that these should form the basis for targeting incoming students with remedial needs.
  - (b) Information about the communication competence expected as a prerequisite for a program or course should be made explicit to students.
  - (c) Students who do not meet these levels of competence and are at risk of failing the course should be given accurate, consistent advice about courses of action.
  - (d) Systems for cross-referral of at-risk students should be established.
- (6) Professional development for teaching**  
More opportunities should be made available for academic staff to develop their understanding of the role of communication skills in their subjects, and in university education more generally; and of ways to develop and assess communication skills in their students.
- (7) Research and development**  
A co-coordinated approach should be adopted in targeting areas for further research into communication skills at university-level.
- (8) Resourcing**  
The requirement for additional resourcing to implement these policies should be addressed, perhaps through the use of funds targeted for quality enhancement.

## **2. Background and Context**

- (1) Good communication skills have always been valued as a desirable outcome of study at the University of Sydney. The statement of generic attributes of graduates from the University of Sydney, accepted by the Academic Board in 1993, signals their importance in the following statement:

"graduates should be able to identify, access, organise and communicate knowledge in both written and oral English".
- (2) The topic of students' communication skills has been raised before on innumerable occasions and a range of policies and practices has been developed over the last two decades in response to various aspects of communication skills. Yet, in spite of the recognition that mastery of communication in the discipline, and more generally, is a critical objective of university education, there are still gaps in our achievement of this objective.

- (3) This document presents a brief outline of the diversity of issues encompassed under the heading "communication skills", and then presents some recommendations and strategies for ensuring that students' communication skills are effectively fostered throughout their study at the University of Sydney.

### 3. What is meant by "communication skills"?

- (1) The University's Guide for New Students 1994 contains two entries which capture the two broad dimensions of the topic "communication skills". Under the category "English expression", the message concerns the need for students to have adequate English language proficiency, and to avoid making errors in their use of language. This message is mostly intended for students from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB), and native-English speakers who lack basic literacy skills. Under a second category, "Essay writing", the message is about the importance of developing advanced writing skills for particular academic disciplines. This message is directed at all students, including "average" and "above-average" students.

- (2) Thus, two broad dimensions of the issue of "communication skills" can be discerned:

- (a) Remedial needs

An adequate proficiency in the English language (for NESB students) coupled with adequate basic literacy skills (for all students) are generally assumed to be pre-requisite language skills for successful university study

- (b) Developmental needs

Competent development of academic discipline-specific literacy and oracy (oral communication skills) are skills of "language in use" which are generally assumed to be desirable outcomes of university study.

- (3) Both the remedial and the developmental dimensions of students' communication skills must be considered in establishing policies and practices that will enhance the communication skills of our graduates. They are embraced in the definition used by DEST in its policy document on language and literacy, and adopted here as a working definition of communication skills:

"Literacy is the ability to read and use written information and to write appropriately, in a range of contexts. It is used to develop knowledge and understanding, to achieve personal growth and to function effectively in our society. ... Literacy involves the integration of speaking, listening, and critical thinking with reading and writing."<sup>(1)</sup>

- (4) These "literacy" skills are clearly fundamental to the acquisition of knowledge and skills, and the ability to use knowledge and skills for particular purposes, either during academic study or in work situations. Indeed, it could be argued that communication skills are the foundation on which learning depends. Without the ability to integrate the elements of communication competence effectively in their learning, students face a major hurdle in achieving mastery of their subjects of study. This competence includes the ability to access knowledge (through lectures, reading, and so on), to conserve knowledge, to use knowledge (synthesise, analyse, criticise...), to apply knowledge (problem-solving...), to extend knowledge (hypothesise...), and so on. Thus, effective communication may be seen as a set of enabling skills on which

learning, and assessment of that learning, depends and which is therefore an essential outcome of a university education in any field.

- (5) A brief history of concern about communication skills
- (a) From the mid-1970's, the topic of students' communication skills has continued to be discussed widely in the University. At that time, the Vice-Chancellor's Consultative Committee on Essay Writing, appointed to consider matters that related to students' written communication skills, made a number of recommendations for assessing and addressing students' needs, for example, that every department should develop a comprehensive guide to essay writing for students. In 1980, the Students' Representative Council tabled a "Submission on Essay Writing" which made recommendations on a broad range of topics including library resources, assessment practices, and the teaching of writing skills within the subjects. In the same year, a memorandum was circulated by the Registrar to all members of the teaching staff about "English expression". Similarly, students' oral communication skills have been a topic of continuing concern, with various measures adopted by particular faculties, such as the Faculty of Medicine, to address the needs and problems of students. Yet, in spite of this obvious commitment across the University to trying to solve the problems, there has been no university-wide policy as a guide. Some of the areas which have been addressed in the University have included the following:
- (i) admissions criteria regarding evidence of NESB students' English language proficiency levels
  - (ii) the status of HSC English in the calculation of the Tertiary Entrance Rank (replaced by the Universities Admissions Index)
  - (iii) the nature of plagiarism in students' work for assessment, and the types of punitive measures to be applied
  - (iv) the ethical dimensions of students receiving assistance with their work prior to submission for assessment
  - (v) the provision of information and guidelines to students about departmental practices and expectations, of the requirements for specific assessment tasks, of the details of assessment criteria, and of useful and adequate formative feedback on their communication of their learning
  - (vi) guidelines on the use of non-discriminatory language
  - (vii) the explicit teaching and assessment of communication skills within the subjects
  - (viii) the inclusion of communication tests as a barrier to progress through the degree (for example, in the Faculties of Medicine and Dentistry)
  - (ix) the provision of services (such as the Learning Centre) to support the University in the development of students' communication skills

- (x) the provision of the Advisory Centre for Overseas Students within the Faculty of Health Sciences
  - (xi) the adoption of a set of generic attributes of a University of Sydney graduate.
- (b) Our experience at the University of Sydney has not been unique. In other universities, similar problems have been identified, and a range of alternative strategies has been adopted. In most universities, it is possible for students to seek independently a range of programs to help them build up their communication skills, either in small groups or on a one-to-one basis. Additional strategies which have been adopted have included pre-sessional bridging programs for "special entry" students (for example, Flinders University<sup>(2)</sup>), first-year mandatory foundation subjects for all first-year students (for example, Murdoch University<sup>(3)</sup>), elective credit courses on communication skills within a particular award program (for example, in the Faculty of Engineering at University of Technology Sydney<sup>(4)</sup>), elective credit courses on academic writing skills regardless of faculty (for example, Macquarie University<sup>(5)</sup>), one-to-one language support within particular areas (for example, in the School of Economics at La Trobe University<sup>(6)</sup>), and screening and diagnostic tests of language proficiency in some subjects (for example, University of Melbourne<sup>(7)</sup>).
- (6) The place of communication skills in assuring the quality of our graduates
- (a) Whilst some changes have occurred since the 70's, there are still many areas where improvements could be made towards valuing and fostering students' communication skills. At a time when the University is increasingly being required to account for the "value" it is adding to all its incoming students, it is clear that continuing with an ad hoc approach will not be effective in being able to document how we are fostering good communication skills in our students.
  - (b) Not only is the need for accountability of processes and measurement of outcomes greater than ever, but also the student population itself is becoming increasingly more diverse. In accepting students with diverse prior experiences, the need to foster their communication skills may become more critical than ever before. For students entering the University from pathways other than HSC, there is no standard process for measuring their communicative competence as an element of their prior learning. For new school-leavers, the inclusion of their HSC English score in the calculation of the TER and UAI from 1995 may not exclude students with unacceptably low English language proficiency, but may simply locate them in a different faculty in their second or third choice of course. Moreover, evidence of the predictive value of HSC English for academic success is not conclusive. For example, whilst a correlation has been shown between progress in the undergraduate medical program and HSC English results<sup>(8)</sup>, these results were based on a very narrow TER range in the top percentile, and so may not be generalisable across all university programs. In a study of students' academic literacy skills in the first year of Accounting and Pharmacy<sup>(9)</sup>, only two of the four HSC English courses, 2-Unit Contemporary English and 2-Unit General English, were shown to correlate strongly with students' literacy skills, suggesting that the other courses are measuring skills other than language and literacy.

- (c) Attempts to solve the problem by denying places to students with less adequate communication skills are unrealistic and do not account for the need to provide greater accessibility to university places for an increasingly broader cross-section of the population. Thus, whilst it is important to recognise the need for selection processes that filter out students who lack basic communicative competence, there will probably be an equal need to accept responsibility for assessing the needs of a more diverse student intake, and developing their communication skills as part of their university study. This means accepting responsibility not just for teaching students the content of a course, but also for teaching the processes of thinking and communicating within the course. To do this, we need a coherent approach which is integrated into the overall planning process for teaching and learning and which guides and supports the development of effective practices. A number of innovative teaching development projects are currently underway in some departments of the University, in collaboration with the Learning Centre, which will be useful in providing models of good practice.

#### **4. Key Areas for the Development of Policy and Practice**

The following key areas are identified for the development of policy and practice:

##### **(1) Selection of students**

Overall, there is a lack of consistency in admissions policies regarding evidence of English language proficiency, for example:

- (a) Local students entering undergraduate programs with a UAI based on the HSC are not required to sit for a specific test of English language proficiency. This is particularly a problem in the case of NESB students with low English language proficiency.
- (b) Local students entering graduate programs based on previous studies in NESB countries are not required to sit for an English language proficiency test.
- (c) Local students entering programs under special admissions schemes (for example mature-age entrants with no previous university experience) are not required to sit for an English language proficiency test unless their previous education was in a NESB country.
- (d) In spite of rigorous requirements regarding the admission of international students of NESB, there are reports of some faculties accepting students who have not satisfied the minimum requirements of English language proficiency.
- (e) There may be a conflict between the English language skills required for commencing a program at an overseas institution, and those required for completing the program on campus at Sydney.
- (f) Students using a TOEFL score to satisfy English language proficiency requirements may not have adequate listening and speaking skills to cope with the oral communication demands of their courses.
- (g) Even after providing evidence of an English language proficiency score, many students have difficulty with the demands of using English for the complex and abstract levels of thinking and communicating in their courses, particularly at the graduate level.

**(2) Program and course development and review**

- (a) Although a process is being developed for the University to assure the quality of proposed programs and courses, there currently appear to be few systematic measures taken to identify, and respond to, students' needs or problems regarding communication skills early in their studies, or continuing throughout their studies.
- (b) Similarly, there currently appear to be few systematic measures taken to foster explicitly the development of communication skills within the programs and courses, nor to assess students' progress over time in developing these skills as part of their developing mastery of the subject.
- (c) Although many departments have produced written guidelines for students that state explicitly the significance of written and oral communication within the subject, and more specifically the requirements for the range of communication tasks, this practice is not universal.
- (d) In the requirement for courses and teaching to be evaluated, specific reference is typically not made to issues related to students' development of communication skills.

**(3) Implementation of teaching**

- (a) In many courses, students are required to engage in only a limited range of communication tasks to satisfy the requirements of their courses. In most programs and courses, students will be required to exercise their receptive communication skills of listening and reading. However, in some instances, students may be rarely required to use their productive skills of speaking and writing. In the most extreme of cases, often in first-year courses, students may be not be placed in formal contexts requiring them to learn through speaking or writing, but may be assessed solely through writing in examinations.
- (b) There appears to be little explicit teaching of the processes of thinking and communicating within many courses which are heavily content-laden. Although a course may have the stated objective of fostering better communication skills in students, this objective may not be manifest in specific teaching processes. Rather, students may be simply provided with opportunities to communicate, and left to their own devices to develop the necessary skills.
- (c) The practice of progressively sequencing teaching activities and assessment tasks to reflect the learner's gradual development of understanding and skills is not universal. In many courses, for example, students are simply "thrown in at the deep end" with a first assignment which requires cognitively more advanced ways of thinking and communicating than are reasonable to expect of the novice.
- (d) Students from non-traditional backgrounds generally receive little additional support in their programs, and international students from culturally diverse backgrounds may receive inadequate induction to the academic culture of Australia, or assistance with the transition to different learning styles and expectations within the subject.

**(4) Assessment**

- (a) It appears that the criteria used in assessment of students are not always stated clearly both prior to the setting of assessment tasks and in returning grades. Moreover, these criteria do not always include specific statements about the status of language and literacy skills in the overall assessment.
- (b) Assessment is sometimes too concerned with content at the expense of communication of that content. For example, assessment of students' written work is sometimes carried out on the basis of a "key-word analysis", rather than on whether the writing demonstrates understanding of the relationships between key words.
- (c) Feedback to students on their work may omit reference to their demonstrated ability to communicate meaning appropriately for different contexts, or may not adequately explain the nature of the problems. For example, the comments "not well communicated" or "poor expression" do not provide students with useable information on which to base improvements.
- (d) Where only summative assessment is given, students do not have opportunities to develop their thinking and communication skills. For example, in a course for which there is only one written submission for assessment, students do not have an opportunity to respond to feedback in order to improve.

**(5) Advice to and referral of students**

- (a) Information about the communication competence expected as a prerequisite for a program or course is often not made explicit to students.
- (b) Students who do not have the communication skills necessary for effective performance in a course are sometimes advised inappropriately about possible forms of action. For example, students have been advised to discontinue in order to pursue their study of English, even though relevant programs of English language study are not available for them to take.

**(6) Professional development for teaching**

- (a) Academic staff have been appointed usually on the basis of their knowledge of the content of the subjects, and not necessarily on their ability to transmit that knowledge to students. Many teaching staff lack the skills needed to be able to integrate in their teaching a focus on the process of learning with the content of the subject.
- (b) Although the Institute for Teaching and Learning offers staff development workshops on topics relevant to the issue of students' communication skills, the opportunities for staff to develop their skills in this area are limited.
- (c) Some academic staff are resistant to the idea that they should have a responsibility to teach students how to communicate as part of the subject. One common justification for this is the belief that the subject curriculum should be heavily content-laden, and therefore does not allow space to include more.

**(7) Research and development**

Although the Learning Centre has been actively researching issues relevant to students' communication skills, for example, in developing instruments to



diagnostically assess students' literacy skills within their subjects, the resources devoted to this research are currently very limited.

## 5. References

1. Australian Department of Employment, Education and Training, Australia's Language: the Australian Language and Literacy Policy (Companion Volume to the policy information paper), Australian Government Publishing Service, August 1991, page 9.
2. Beasley, V (1988) "Developing academic literacy: the Flinders experience", in Taylor, G et al [Eds], Literacy by Degrees, Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press, Milton Keynes, UK.
3. Marshall, L (1989) "Building by learning skills: the integration of process and content", in Edwards, H and Barraclough S [Eds], Research and Development in Higher Education, Volume 11.
4. McGregor, H (1990) "Improving communication skills of engineering students", Eighth Australasian Learning and Language Conference Proceedings, Counselling Services, Queensland University of Technology.
5. Macquarie University Calendar 1994, Publications Unit, Office of Registrar and Vice-Principal, Macquarie University, November 1993.
6. Parry, S (1990) "The evaluative writing process - content and context in harmony", in Marshall, L [Ed], Learning from Each Other: Proceedings of the 7th Language and Learning Skills Conference, Educational Services and Teaching Resources Unit, Murdoch University.
7. Brochure on "The University Test of English as a Second Language", NLLIA Language Testing Centre, University of Melbourne.
8. Department of Behavioural Sciences in Medicine (1991), Demographic Profile of Students Admitted to Medicine I in 1990. Internal report, Faculty of Medicine, University of Sydney, February 1991.
9. Webb, C and Bonanno, H (1993), Measuring the Academic Skills of University of Sydney Students: The MASSUS Project Report, Learning Assistance Centre, University of Sydney, and July 1993.