

# Good Practice Guidelines for the Development of Students' Academic and Professional Communication Skills

The development of all students' academic and professional communication skills in the English language is recognised as an essential graduate attribute. The ability to communicate knowledge and understandings acquired during degree studies or to communicate in professional settings needs to be developed in disciplinary and interdisciplinary contexts and in combination with other graduate attributes.

These guidelines recognise mastery of English language as the medium of communication for success in degree studies and the necessity of supporting all students in achieving this goal. The guidelines in this document incorporate and augment the English Language Standards for Higher Education (ELSHE)<sup>1</sup> developed in 2010 by the Federal Government steering committee convened by Australian Universities Quality Agency to establish the Good Practice Principles for English language proficiency for international students in Australian universities (GPP) in 2008/9. These English Language standards<sup>2</sup>, when approved, will apply to all students in the Australian Higher Education sector and will be used in Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency audits.

This document adopts the definition of 'English language proficiency' used in the ELSHE which is 'the ability of students to use the English language to make and communicate meaning appropriately in spoken and written contexts while completing their higher education studies and after they graduate'. This definition aligns with that of the other commonly used term in this area, namely, academic literacies, which is understood in the context of this document to mean the ability of students to communicate effectively in their specific discipline contexts.

These Good Practice guidelines take the view that the development of students' knowledge and understandings in their studies is intimately linked with the development of their communication skills. As students acquire new knowledge and understandings through teaching and learning activities, they will also mature in their communication skills.

## COURSE FOCUS

These guidelines recognise that students' communication skills are developed over the life of their studies and the integration of these skills into course curricula and learning outcomes needs to take place at strategic points within and across years of all courses. Mastery of communication skills for a range of audiences, purposes and in a variety of modes needs to be introduced, developed and assessed within each course, including Higher Degree by Research (HDR) courses.

## FROM ENTRY TO EXIT

A whole student lifecycle approach acknowledges the role of pathway providers in ensuring that students on entry have the communicative language ability for the commencement of their university studies and that this provides a solid basis for further developing students' communication skills within their degree studies. Both undergraduate and postgraduate students need to be made aware of the ways in which the University will support the development of their academic and professional communication skills during their courses and that there will be

appropriate emphasis placed on the attainment of these skills. Exit units of study, for example capstone units or other units which address workplace readiness, need to address students' professional communicative ability for employment. In addition, the need for students to take responsibility for the development of their communication skills through both curricula and extra curricula activities is recognised.

## LEADERSHIP

Leadership at the highest levels in the University is required to support those responsible for designing, implementing and monitoring the development of students' academic and professional communication. Course/year and unit co-ordinators, as well as academics specifically involved in the development of students' communication skills will play a key leadership role in carrying out strategies to embed communication skills in curricula, assessments and higher degree research programs and to evaluate their effectiveness. These activities can take place alongside curriculum renewal and internationalisation of the curriculum.

## GUIDELINE 1: Entry level skills

The university recognises the importance of students' entry-level communication skills and has strategies in place to monitor student performance in this area. *Strategies to achieve this may include:*

- Diagnosis of students' communication skills is undertaken on entry into undergraduate and postgraduate studies, including Higher Degree by Research students.
- Student performance by pre-entry pathway is monitored, analysed and communicated, where possible, to those involved in preparing students for university entry.

## GUIDELINE 2: Supporting skills development

Students are informed throughout their degree program about the importance of developing academic and professional communication skills and the nature and level of support provided. *Strategies to achieve this may include:*

- Orientation and transition programs ensure that students understand the communication skills required for their studies and the importance of further developing these skills.
- The informal curriculum as well as the formal curriculum supports students from all backgrounds in developing their social and intercultural communication skills.
- All unit of study outlines or other course materials provide information about specific resources available for students to develop their academic and professional communication.
- Students are advised of their responsibility in developing their academic and professional communication skills.

## GUIDELINE 3: Course design

Development of students' academic and professional communication skills is integrated into curriculum design, assessment practices and course delivery. *Strategies to achieve this may include:*

- Early diagnosis of students’ communication skills in first year core undergraduate and postgraduate units of study through a low stakes assessment task embedded into a selected unit(s) of study such that, where possible, such a task is undertaken by all new students.
- Diagnosis of higher degree research students’ communication skills, both written and oral, is carried out early in their candidature through appropriate communication tasks.
- Curriculum renewal incorporates the explicit introduction, development and ongoing assessment of students’ communication skills to a range of audiences, for a range of purposes and using a variety of modes.
- The curriculum is designed to enable students’ communicative language ability to mature along with their understanding, knowledge and practice in their course. This means that increasing standards of satisfactory communication in English are progressively expected in all degree programs.
- Good practice in explicit embedding of communication skills in the curriculum is disseminated and adaptation encouraged and monitored.
- Good practice in the assessment, marking and the provision of feedback for English as an Additional Language (EAL) students is shared with the aim of developing common understandings and a coordinated approach across degree courses.

#### GUIDELINE 4: Appropriate graduate skills

The university ensures that students’ academic and professional communication skills provide a solid basis for their future career.

*Strategies to achieve this may include:*

- Course learning outcomes and standards incorporate those relating to academic and professional communication skills.
- Student feedback on the development of specific communication skills is incorporated into relevant evaluation instruments, e.g. USE.
- Exit programs which address the professional communication skills required for employment are offered as part of courses. Such programs can include, for example, capstone units of study, internships or work experience or work related courses.
- Employer feedback and feedback from accreditation boards is sought on students’ work ready communication skills. Employability skills are seen as an integral outcome of a degree at The University of Sydney.

#### GUIDELINE 5: Resources to support development

Staffing and resourcing for the development of students’ academic and professional communication skills meet students’ needs throughout their studies in a whole course approach and are benchmarked against other Go8 universities. *Strategies to achieve this may include:*

- Adequate staff levels are maintained of academics with expertise in academic language and learning to support the development of students’ academic and professional communication.
- Professional development is provided for teaching staff by academics specialised in language and learning. In this way, communication skills can be embedded in curricula and assessments as part of the curriculum renewal process.
- Resourcing is provided for e-learning projects involving subject area academics, language and learning academics and e-learning specialists to work collaboratively to develop

resources to support students in developing their communication skills.

- Staff are provided with resources and guidelines on cultural sensitivity in teaching and assessment, including the use of varieties of English.

#### GUIDELINE 6: Monitoring processes

The university ensures that its policies and practices for the development of students’ academic and professional communication skills are continually monitored for improvement and comparison nationally and internationally. *Strategies to achieve this may include:*

- Curricula and degree courses are reviewed in the light of outcomes for academic and professional communication and action plans developed and monitored to address shortcomings.
- Feedback is collected on how courses have supported the development of graduates’ academic and professional communication skills.
- Student feedback on the development of specific communication skills is incorporated into relevant evaluation instruments.
- Feedback from accreditation boards on students’ communication skills is incorporated into curriculum review and course outcomes.

#### SUPPORT FOR COMMUNICATION DEVELOPMENT

The Learning Centre

[http://sydney.edu.au/stuserv/learning\\_centre/index.shtml](http://sydney.edu.au/stuserv/learning_centre/index.shtml)

The Writing Hub

[http://sydney.edu.au/arts/teaching\\_learning/writing\\_hub/](http://sydney.edu.au/arts/teaching_learning/writing_hub/)

The Centre for English Teaching <http://sydney.edu.au/cet/>

Careers Centre <http://sydney.edu.au/careers/>

[Written and Oral Communications Skills of Students Policy](http://sydney.edu.au/policies/showdoc.aspx?recnum=PDO)

[C2011/181&RendNum=0](http://sydney.edu.au/policies/showdoc.aspx?recnum=PDO)

#### FURTHER EXAMPLES

<http://degreesofproficiency.aall.org.au/>

<http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/projects/academicliteracies.htm>

#### GOVERNMENT GUIDELINES/PRINCIPLES

Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)

<http://www.aqf.edu.au/>

The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA)

<http://www.teqsa.gov.au/sites/default/files/EnglishLanguageProficiencyQATerms.pdf>

<http://www.innovation.gov.au/HigherEducation/ResourcesAndPublications/HigherEducationPublications/OtherPublications/Pages/GoodPracticePrinciples.aspx>

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.aall.org.au/sites/default/files/finalEnglishLanguageStandardsMay2012.pdf>

<sup>2</sup><http://www.innovation.gov.au/HigherEducation/ResourcesAndPublications/HigherEducationPublications/OtherPublications/Pages/GoodPracticePrinciples.aspx>