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# Developing academic literacy through a decentralised model of English language provision

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Students entering English-medium universities frequently struggle to cope with the language demands of their degree programmes, despite having met the English language entry conditions stipulated by their receiving institutions. This can have significant repercussions for the teaching-learning process, for the student experience and for universities' reputations. Most universities, therefore, have in place some form of in-session English language support to develop students' language proficiency. Such provision tends to be centralised and to offer English for general academic purposes rather than language development that responds in a more nuanced way to the particular literacy needs of students' disciplines. In this article, we report on an alternative, decentralised model of language support, implemented in a School of Nursing and Midwifery, and which seeks to develop students' competency in the language skills required for their Nursing studies and professional practice. Results to date have been encouraging and provide further evidence that such tailored provision offers a potentially fruitful language development strategy.

**Keywords:** Academic literacy, professional communication skills, faculty-embedded English language provision, higher education, globalisation, IELTS

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## **Introduction**

Much has been written in recent years about the causes and consequences of the globalisation of higher education (HE), much of it highlighting the considerable potential benefits of multicultural, multilingual classrooms and the potential these create for the negotiation of interactions and the concomitant development of language and intercultural skills that serve to help foster global graduates by preparing students for a world characterised by what Vertovec (2010) has referred to as ‘superdiversity’, and more particularly the world of work. That is, a more diverse student demographic and the awareness and learning that takes place as students seek to negotiate meaning and traverse cultural differences in their interactions, are seen as providing a context in which students are able to develop valuable linguistic and intercultural skills and associated qualities such as tolerance, understanding, and the ability to adapt, develop effective communication strategies, integrate, and work collaboratively (Messelink, Van Maele & Spencer-Oatey; Montgomery, 2009; Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2016; Sweeney, Weaven & Herington, 2008; Volet & Ang, 1998). These attributes are highly desirable to future employers (Diamond et al., 2011; The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2012), and their growing importance as graduate qualities is reflected in their prominence in universities’ mission statements and efforts to produce work-ready graduates and thus high levels of graduate employability, with the attendant benefits around institutional ranking in league tables (British Council, 2016).

Crucially, the globalisation of HE has seen more and more universities offering programmes in the medium of English (see, for example, Dearden, 2014), not only as a way of showcasing their international credentials but also of competing, generating income through expanding international student recruitment and, in cases such as Japan (Shepherd, 2008; Lassegard, 2016) and Taiwan (Parr, 2017), compensating for falling domestic student

numbers. For those enrolling in such programmes, and for the parents who normally fund them, an English-medium education is frequently seen as representing a very worthwhile investment, the return on which is the increased likelihood of a good job with a good income, and with it the near guarantee of a good quality of life. Along with such benefits, however, internationalisation and the student diversity associated with it has also brought well-documented challenges concerning, for example, student integration and the intercultural competence of both students and academic staff (Byram, 1997; Volet & Ang, 2012). Yet, it is language proficiency, which lies at the heart of these things, which has received the most attention both in the academic literature, government reports and the media. The discourse here reflects growing concern that educational standards are being jeopardised by weak English language skills and sacrificed at the altar of profitability. There is evidence that academic staff see weak English as a source of considerable frustration and of their inability, often, to deliver curricula in full and with sufficient rigour. This, in turn, can undermine their professional integrity and sense of self-worth. In reporting on a Times Higher Education poll, Baty (2004) highlighted a number of key findings as follows:

- *84% of respondents agreed with the statement: 'The squeeze on resources for universities is "having an adverse effect on academic standards".' Half 'strongly agreed'.*
- *The sector now takes thousands of overseas students who 'place different pressures on standards with divergent learning cultures and, often, language problems'.*
- *Almost three quarters of respondents believed that their university has been forced to accept students who 'are not capable of benefiting' from university study.*

- *48% of academics agreed with the statement: 'I have felt obliged to pass a student whose performance did not really merit a pass'. 42% said 'decisions to fail students' work have been overruled at higher levels in the institution'.*

Invoking evidence that emerged from the 2009 report *Students and Universities* and the then Select Committee on Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills, Alderman (2010) has similarly spoken of:

*... pressures to maximise non-governmental sources of income, primarily from "full fee-paying" non-European students, to whom it is deemed prudent by these same senior leaderships to award qualifications to which they are often not entitled, so as to ensure future "market share" (Alderman, in The Guardian Online, March 10 2010).*

Furthermore, in its 2009 report, *Thematic Enquiries into Concerns about Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education in England*, the UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) noted that:

*... specific challenges have been identified with regard to the admission of students with English-language skills that are either insufficient to deal with the demands of their programme of study or have the potential to have a detrimental effect on the learning experience of all students (UK Quality Assurance Agency 2009, p. 2).*

While there are multiple factors that can help explain the fact of students successfully securing places on university degree programmes only to struggle, subsequently, to meet the language demands that they present, in this article we focus in particular on what we argue is a quite critical lack of alignment between the language focus of university English language gatekeeping tests such as IELTS and TOEFL, and the kind of language students require post-entry in order to navigate the demands of their degree studies. Specifically, we report on how effectively one particular model of in-session English language provision implemented at a university in Australia was seen to address this lack of alignment by moving away from centralised, generic academic language support to support that was wholly devolved to a School of Nursing located within the institution's Faculty of Medicine. The model was implemented on the basis that it would help ensure that language tuition responded more relevantly to the particular language needs of those students enrolled in the School.

### **The misalignment between gatekeeping tests and disciplinary language**

Many of the shortcomings of English language gatekeeping tests are well documented and include the setting of unrealistically low English language entry thresholds, security issues around test administration, and accepting as evidence of proficiency and in the absence of due diligence, multiple pathways and qualifications of indeterminable quality/validity (e.g. a grade on an English language foundation programme or a year of prior study on a vocational course, rather than a valid, internationally recognised IELTS or TOEFL score)<sup>2</sup>. However, one of the key weaknesses of such tests that has received far less attention in the literature concerns the fact that they reflect a monolithic rather than a plurilithic view of academic

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Coley's 1999 study in which reported that Australian universities were accepting 61 different types of proof of English proficiency, a situation which makes it difficult, if not impossible, for institutions to be certain about the English competence of their incoming students (Murray & Arkoudis, 2013, pp. 31-2)

literacy; that is they see academic literacy as a singular set of skills that are transferable across disciplines, rather than as particular sets of practices that are distinctive to each discipline and effectively help to define those disciplines and their respective communities of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991) – that is, communities bound together by ‘shared values, expertise and standards’ (Kogan, 2000, p. 210), or by what Wenger (1998) referred to as the *mutual engagement* of its members in a *joint enterprise*, drawing on a *shared repertoire* or discourse. This latter, more nuanced plurilithic perspective embodies the academic literacies approach most closely associated with the work of Lea and Street (1998, 1999). The fact that most high-stakes gatekeeping tests reflect a monolithic view of academic literacy means that instead of acquiring conversancy in the particular literacy practices of their future disciplines, students are learning generic academic English language (English for general academic purposes – EGAP) in order to secure university places. These tests are thus blunt instruments that have a washback effect on learning which fails to take sufficient account of the particular kinds of language students will need in their future studies. As we shall demonstrate, this misalignment has important implications for the kind of in-session language provision universities offer post-entry to support their students.

### **The argument for an academic literacies approach to in-session provision**

In their seminal article published in 1998, Lea and Street proposed an academic literacies approach to academic language development which emphasised the need to frame language not in terms of a set of general principles applicable across all disciplines (‘settings’) but as something specific to individual disciplines and in which learners need to become conversant if they are to gain membership of their respective communities of practice. This model:

...sees the literacy demands of the curriculum as involving a variety of communicative practices, including genres, fields and disciplines. From the student point of view a dominant feature of academic literacy practices is the requirement to switch practices between one setting and another, to deploy a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriate to each setting, and to handle the social meanings and identities that each evokes (Lea and Street *ibid.*: 159).

That is, the ability to use language effectively and appropriately within a given discipline constitutes a key part of a process of socialisation into that discipline through participating in its socially constituted traditions of meaning making. As Rex and McEachen note, those traditions:

... include not just concepts and associated vocabulary, but also rhetorical structures, the patterns of action, that are part of any tradition of meaning-making. They include characteristic ways of reaching consensus and expressing disagreement, of formulating arguments, of providing evidence, as well as characteristic genres for organizing thought and conversational action. (Rex & McEachen 1999, p. 69).

In becoming socialised into their disciplines, students are both learning how to communicate in particular ways and to 'be' particular kinds of people: that is, to write (or indeed speak) 'as academics', 'as geographers', 'as social scientists' (Curry & Lillis 2003, p. 11). This notion resonates with Systemic Functional Linguistics and Halliday's idea that language develops to serve the particular purposes for which its users choose to employ it (Halliday 1978, 1985). It

is, therefore, a product of context, and familiarity with context and with the values that imbue it is critical to making the 'right' linguistic choices.

As we have indicated, the majority of pathways into university taken by international students tend to neither teach nor assess students' conversancy in the particular academic literacy practices of their future disciplines but focus instead on EGAP – what Lea and Street (ibid. pp. 158-159) referred to as 'study skills', the assumption being that such practices are generalizable across disciplines when, in reality, many of them will not be. Consequently, having met the entry conditions stipulated by their universities, students may struggle subsequently to complete their course work. This can be confronting and demoralising and set them up for failure.

Critically, the lack of alignment between the language focus of gatekeeping tests and the language students need to negotiate their degree work extends to the kind of academic support that universities typically offer students. Such support frequently adopts the kind of generic study skills approach criticised by Lea and Street, in which language is insufficiently tailored and contextualised to reflect the particular language activities and associated discourses, world views, social practices, genres, vocabulary etc. that students will be required to engage in as a function of their disciplines, both in the course of their studies and in some cases beyond, in their professional lives. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the attrition rates of in-session English language support classes are typically quite high (Lobo & Gurney, 2014). Students are pragmatic: in a context where other academic and social pressures make themselves felt, they will not invest time attending English classes when the content does not respond to their immediate academic needs, particularly in relation to assessed course work, but instead regurgitates information they have already learnt as a result of having had to achieved the EGAP-focussed test scores stipulated by their universities as a condition of entry.

Importantly, even where rigorous and responsive academic literacy programmes exist in universities, these may not necessarily accommodate all students' English language needs. This is particularly so in the case of professionally-oriented courses such as medicine, business, pharmacy and nursing, a number of which have their own accrediting bodies and require graduates to take and perform satisfactorily on English language proficiency tests, such as the OET (Occupational English Test). Students studying on such courses will need to acquire a degree of competency in the professional English of their fields, and while this will invariably overlap to a significant degree with the academic literacies they acquire as they engage with their disciplines and their respective discourses, they are not one and the same thing, as Arkoudis, Baik, and Richardson's (2013, p. 13) English Language Proficiency (ELP) developmental continuum illustrates (Figure 1).

[Figure 1 here]

### **A rationale for decentralising English language provision**

In the UK, Australia and the US, institutional English language support has tended to be staffed and delivered centrally via dedicated English language development units and writing centres or as part of larger cognate departments such as TESOL and Applied Linguistics. In this context, it is provided and perceived as a university service that students and academic staff may or may not utilise, rather than as something shaped by and fundamental to the disciplines. As Neumann (2001) observes, 'within such centralised provision, generic courses predominate. However, the research ... would suggest that student study skills may be better delivered within broad disciplinary contexts' (p.143). Murray (2016a, 2016b) has discussed in detail some of the benefits of a decentralised model of delivery that better enables

language development to occur within such ‘disciplinary contexts’ in a way that helps ensure it is more relevant. Among the benefits he cites are that it:

- serves to emphasise the fundamental relationship between academic literacies and disciplines, while de-emphasising the misleading construction of academic literacy in terms of a set of general skills that will, alone, equip students to cope with the academic demands of their studies (see also Wingate, 2006).
- enables English language teachers to understand the local context and its expectations and requirements, and to become experts in the discourses of the disciplines of the departments/faculties with which they are aligned, and therefore to better serve students by developing syllabi and materials that are better informed, relevant, and thus engaging.
- assists English language teachers to forge productive relationships with academic staff in the faculties/departments where they are located. This, in turn, helps them understand departmental priorities and student needs as well as influence policy and decision-making in the interests of increasing their effectiveness.
- helps highlight the value of what English language teachers do and the often considerable skill and experience underlying it. This has the potential to increase their influence within the institution and improve their conditions of service, with possible implications for their level of commitment to what they do.
- can force the institution and those responsible for English language provision to reflect on the nature of English language proficiency and provision; in particular, how the appropriacy/acceptability of student language should be determined given the increasing diversity of the student body, and the basis on which students are assessed

pre-entry as part of the gatekeeping process, as well as post-entry in their course work.

### **Models of decentralisation**

One model of decentralisation described by Murray (2016a<sup>3</sup>) involves English language specialists being aligned with particular faculties, but with oversight of all in-session English language provision being maintained centrally; for example; within an English Language Centre or Learning and Teaching Unit, where faculty teams may come together to share experience and engage in professional development activities. In the model he describes, although managed centrally, English language Faculty Coordinators wield a high degree of autonomy, managing a local team of English teachers and leading local English language initiatives in consultation with their own teams and with academics in the Faculty. In some cases, those initiatives will arise from dialogue with individual departments and serve the needs of those departments exclusively, while in other cases they may be the result of cross-departmental dialogue and result in forms of provision that serve all departments within the faculty. In both cases, though, the kinds of support activities and the nature of the language taught reflect the specific requirements of the disciplines within the faculty concerned. Ultimately, however, the Coordinators and the teachers they line manage are employed by and answerable to the central body that outsources their services, and they operate at a faculty rather than departmental level. One instantiation of this semi-devolved model of provision involves English language tutors co-teaching with mainstream lecturers (see, for example, Reynolds 2010), an arrangement which, as noted above, enables the English language tutor, over time, to develop an understanding of the discipline and the

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<sup>3</sup> See also Murray & Nallaya (2016) for a description of the model's implementation.

academic lecturer to develop sensitivity the language predicament of non-native English speaking students and to adjust their presentation of material accordingly. In this way, this symbiotic relationship between English language and mainstream academics functions as a form of staff development.

The model we describe below, although another example of decentralisation, is far less common and differs in one key respect; namely that the English language specialist is employed directly and in a full-time capacity by a School of Nursing & Midwifery (SoNM) in an Australian university, and as such operates entirely independently of university-wide English language support services and activities.

### ***The institutional context***

The School of Nursing & Midwifery is located within the Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences. In 2016, it enrolled 600 international nursing students and accounts for a growing proportion of the university's overall undergraduate international student population, up from 26% to 38% between 2009 and 2013. Almost all the international nursing students have English as a second or foreign language, are predominantly young adults, and are mostly of Asian origin, with a large cohort of Chinese students. The courses range from one to three years duration: one year in the case of students who have already achieved registration as nurses in their home countries, and two years in the case of those who have completed an undergraduate degree. Students complete two clinical placements per year as part of their degree.

Historically, the School relied on generic, centralised academic language support located on a separate campus, but found that an increasing number of international students continued to struggle academically and clinically due to weak English. A number of strategies were

adopted to address the problem, none of which proved successful. Initially, a small cohort of nursing staff attempted to supplement the central generic support provided to students, despite having no formal English language teaching qualifications or relevant experience. Subsequently, an external accredited third-party English language college was tasked with designing and delivering in-house language support. This strategy was abandoned after three years due to poor attendance, insufficient understanding of and focus on language that is responsive to the academic and professional needs of nursing students, and lack of visible proficiency gains among students.

This poor track record provided the impetus for the School to create a new position, *Associate Lecturer in Nursing and Midwifery (AL)*, with a remit to ‘design and teach an appropriate English as a Second Language support programme to accommodate the requirements of tertiary education to international students and students whose first language is not English’, and to ‘contribute to both teaching in the School’s programmes and to its research activities’. The person specification stipulated an individual from the university sector with a PhD in applied linguistics, or related area, a TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) background, and significant relevant teaching experience. Furthermore, it required somebody capable of conducting research, the rationale being that such a person would be able to systematically research (a) the context and associated student needs, (b) proposed pedagogical approaches and innovations, and (c) the extent to which the implementation of any such approaches/innovations had been successful and effective (evaluation).

### ***The role***

The responsibilities of the Associate Lecturer in Nursing & Midwifery, as outlined in the job description, are to:

- focus on international students (and local ESL students)
- provide face-to-face classes
- provide online support and teaching
- develop the nursing curriculum
- attend meetings
- undertake strategic activities which enhance international student teaching
- conduct research (as part of the balanced academic role)
- undertake any other duties as specified by the Head of School

There are number of notable points concerning this list. Firstly, the development of the nursing curriculum acknowledges the need to tailor language input according to the particular communication needs of nursing students. Secondly, attendance of meetings helps position the AL as an integral member of the department rather than somebody external, working ‘on the periphery’. This is important because it has the potential to influence significantly perceptions of the AL and their role and, by extension, the quality and quantity of their interactions with other staff in the School. In doing so, it helps the AL to understand more fully academics’ expectations and students’ needs and thus to respond more relevantly and effectively. Essentially, attendance of meetings opens up dialogue and serves as a rite of passage that makes the AL privy to and able to understand and influence key debates and discussions within the School, and the issues motivating them. Regular contact with others in the School, and the community membership this instils, is also promoted by the fact of the AL’s office being physically located alongside those of nursing lecturers and the efforts made

by the AL to socialise with them. Furthermore, the AL strives to make herself available to School staff, including clinical facilitators located in the hospitals and professional staff such as laboratory technicians. Thirdly, the requirement to undertake research helps further foster this sense of integration via a perceived commonality of purpose in relation to University's broader research agenda.

The AL is largely autonomous in her day-to-day activities, although her line manager (a nurse) oversees her workload, research and HR activities, while the Head of School (also a nurse) has overall executive direction of her activities.

Table 1 provides an overview of the student-focused activities in which the AL is engaged. The programme is voluntary, with most courses running for 7 weeks each consisting of 1-2 hours of class time. While there is no further commitment of student time expected beyond this, online and self-study extension activities are available for those who wish to work autonomously on their language development. Table 1 is not intended to be comprehensive, nor does it reflect the fact that the AL also provides a measure of professional development to School staff including: strategies for making themselves more comprehensible (e.g. avoiding unusual words and slang, reformulation of ideas, and clearer articulation of words); defining important terms; strategies for avoiding the marginalisation of ESL students in tutorials and lab exercises; understanding and imparting features of written and spoken discourse, and strategies for explaining how to engage in clinical communication and manage information-giving according to context. The AL also regularly co-teaches with nursing staff in the Professional Language Development programme, and occasionally within the nursing curriculum, particularly in laboratory sessions where communication issues can arise. Due to their resource-intensive nature and the fact that they reach a relatively small proportion of the trainee nurses, the use of one-on-one appointments

by the AL is restricted to assessing and drawing up study plans for students deemed to be significantly at risk due to weak language skills.

[Table 1 here please]

### *Efficacy of the model*

The model described above has been in place for eight years and although it was not implemented as part of a formal empirical study, the School was nonetheless keen to evaluate its performance. For this purpose, a number of indicators, widely employed across the education sector in Australia and elsewhere (see, for example, Ransom and Greig, 2007), were used: attendance, student evaluations, a peer review of the programme, a survey administered to nursing staff, and the extent of student online activity. Although cognisant of the fact of multiple factors having the potential to impact academic success (Arkoudis, Baik, & Richardson, 2013, pp. 49-51) and the difficulty of disaggregating them for the purpose of identifying causation, student nursing grades were nonetheless also cautiously invoked in evaluation of the model in an effort to further triangulate findings. Attendance and online usage data were sought on the basis that voluntary use of a service can indicate the effectiveness of that service, particularly when people revisit it. Student evaluations are standard practice for universities in Australia, and indeed elsewhere, and the *Student Evaluation of Teaching* forms – which are anonymous – serve in many universities as a form of evidence invoked in staff performance reports as well as in the wider education assessment and evaluation literature. Similarly, the use of peer review and (sometimes) teaching staff feedback as a means of evaluating course content and teaching quality is common practice in

the Australian higher education context. Ransom & Greig (2007, p. 9), for example, indicate that some formal feedback from faculty concerning the language support service on which they report was sought by just over half the universities in their study. Academic course grades, while subject to multiple intervening factors, were nonetheless seen as potentially bolstering the veracity of our findings by providing an alternative means of determining the efficacy of the model we describe. The decision was made to avoid student interviews and focus groups in favour of the anonymity afforded by the use of online feedback and the externally-processed and de-identified Student Evaluation of Teaching, and because of logistical issues presented by timetabling and geographical constraints and the time-intensive nature of the interview and focus group formats.

### *Attendance*

Of the approximately 520-600 international students registered on the programme in any given year, 230-260 students (38-50%) typically attend approximately 7-8 hours of English language development classes during the year. This compares favourably with the ~10% attendance that is typical of centralised English language support services offered by the university and is particularly notable given that attendance is not mandated and the fact of a nursing curriculum notoriously congested with an intensive workload and scheduled clinical placements. The commitment it indicates may, in part, be a product of the strong emphasis placed throughout the programme on the importance of the relationship between effective academic study, the ability to negotiate the professional communication demands of clinical placements, and successful performance on future English language tests for national nursing registration.

### *Student evaluations*

Both formal student evaluations of teaching (SETs) and informal evaluations are administered annually. Students respond anonymously and feedback is collected via a survey designed to elicit both quantitative and qualitative responses via a Likert scale and “Comment” sections respectively. Questions focus on satisfaction with the teacher, topic, feedback, materials, and effectiveness. From the outset, student responses have been consistently positive. In 2016, 276 responses were elicited from students across all topics covered on the course and an average 4.5/5.0 rating was given for course quality. The comments below, each made by different individuals (P1-P10) are representative of student feedback on the programme as elicited via the open questions featured in the survey:

(P1): *I definitely recommend it to other students*

(P2): *This class is much better than my tutorial in nursing because I have worked as a registered nurse in my home country and already done everything in hospital, what often confuse me in clinical environment here is just medical terms or some slang.*

(P3): *I'm a surgeon from china, and attend this lecture to improve my English ability.*

(P4): *I'm think these classes are really fit for students who prepare to attend OET. I've learned a lot from classes.*

(P5): *Make me feel the school cares about my English and it is important AFTER I graduate.*

(P6): *Reading over the words was EXTREMELY helpful for me. I feel comfortable reading & speaking medical terms when I leave her class.*

(P7): *It helps to be able to pronounce correctly and recognize the words on the textbook when I study.*

(P8): *I dont see any thing could replace this form of learning environment. Thank you!*

(P9): *Pretty good for nursing students cause it similar to real working situation', 'real hands-on practise.*

(P10): *Handovers is an extra help for students in placement and future workplace.*

The only changes to the provision which students cited as desirable were greater opportunities for practising and applying what they had learnt, the inclusion of more workshops, and an increase in class time.

#### *Peer review*

In 2013, a formal peer review of the programme was conducted by a nursing lecturer, a Chinese speaker of English as a foreign language. In her evaluation, when asked to identify any weaknesses in the quality of the teaching or materials, she wrote: 'I thought to myself it is like finding bones in an egg' (a Chinese idiom indicating 'an impossible task'). She highlighted a number of particular strengths in the provision; namely, the fact that classes were directly related to nursing contexts, helped prepare students for clinical placement and reflected cultural sensitivity and adaptation to different student ability levels; the responsiveness of the AL to student feedback; the promotion of opportunities for and encouragement of student interaction; and the sense of inclusion students felt.

#### *Nursing staff survey*

A simple, anonymous survey comprising six open-ended-questions was sent to all nursing staff in order to elicit their views on the decentralised model of provision adopted by the School. The questions were as follows:

- What benefits have *you* experienced as a result of having a full-time, dedicated English language development specialist employed by and within the School?
- How is it different to when the Student Learning Centre was providing the only support?
- What benefits do you believe *the students* have experienced as a result of having a full-time, dedicated English language development person employed by and within the School, as opposed to the Student Learning Centre?
- Do you have any evidence (concrete or anecdotal) of the success of the current English language support arrangement in the School of Nursing?
- Have you perceived any disadvantages with having an English language development specialist employed by and within the School?
- How and to what extent do you believe the qualities of the full-time dedicated English language development specialist are critical to the success of their work?

The most salient points to emerge from the survey were the value staff placed on having an English language specialist always to hand who is cognisant of the particular language demands on nursing students and with whom they could consult on language and communication issues relating to professional practice, and particularly clinical placements. The ability to get a quick assessment of individual students and acquire strategies from the AL which they themselves could use to assist students also emerged as highly valued aspects

of the model and helped staff feel more empowered. The following extracts are representative:

*(P11): After consultation with her and having an understanding of the professional languages website that she has used I have been able to assist students better with some of their more language related issues. However there are times when I need an independent assessment especially therapy issues with students on clinical placement and [AL] has been well-placed to know the topic requirements and to be able to provide an independent assessment.*

*(P12): ... I can discuss students with [AL] and get her opinion on their language skills and identify strategies to assist them in developing their language ... We can refer students to Amanda for assessment of their language if we have concerns about their language/comprehension.*

*(P13): It is much more convenient now as [AL] is on campus so it is easier for us to discuss matters/strategies with her face to face. We can also go to her for general advice on issues that we may be having in the classroom so that she can suggest some strategies that may assist.*

The more professional communication focus of the local provision was emphatically viewed as a distinct advantage over centrally-delivered language support, as was its ease of access for students, and therefore the greater likelihood that they would utilise the support on offer:

*(P14): It means that the students can seek assistance on this campus- sometimes students were reluctant to go up to the main campus for assistance because it may have been inconvenient or they didn't know exactly where to go for the services on the main campus.*

As concrete evidence of the success of the model, respondents frequently cited cases of students who, following the ALs work with them, were better able to articulate their knowledge and pass subjects they had previously failed. They also made reference to students' acquisition and employment of language strategies, and their increased levels of confidence evident in class, workshops and professional practice:

*(P15): With students who have sought additional assistance from [AL] – either individually or come to the classes offered – they have definite strategies in place to help in improving their language and communication ... They are also more confident in their language ability if they have sought assistance from [AL] either individually or through the classes. Being more confident assists in their overall performance in classes, workshops and on PEP and usually results in better outcomes for the students.*

None of the respondents perceived any disadvantages with the model; indeed, one participant stated that, rather than any disadvantages, one unexpected advantage of focussing on professional communication was that it also attracted native-speaker students. This perhaps reflects an increasing sense within the HE sector that English language support is often interpreted too narrowly as non-native speaker provision and ignores the needs of the wider student population.

### *Online activity*

In 2016, a *Professional Language Development* website, created to support the English language Nursing support programme and hosted on the School's Learning Management System, registered 80,700 user logs and saw 786 active users. The site comprises resources designed to help both local as well as international students, reflecting the fact that the language of professional communication is important for all students. One student wrote of the webpage: '*very useful resources online which is really awesome*'. Usage recorded of the different sections of the website for the 2016-17 academic year was as follows:

Q&A Forum	6,486 views and posts
Clinical communication module	5,433 views
Medical Terminology resources	12,123 views
Computer games and apps	2,701 views
Referencing template	1,123 downloads
All quizzes	16,409 attempts

These statistics indicate a high level of student engagement.

### *Nursing course grades*

The possible influence of intervening factors notwithstanding, descriptive statistical data nonetheless suggest strongly that the very positive feedback on the provision delivered via the model translated into real performance gains by students in the Nursing programme.

Despite the fact that attendees were more likely to have failed academic and clinical subjects than the local and general international student cohorts prior to attending classes (an average of 0.52 topics failed versus 0.46 and 0.40 respectively), the number of English classes attended during the 2015-2016 academic year correlated positively with an increase in Grade Point Average ( $r = 0.20$ ) and negatively with the number of Fails ( $r = -0.10$ ), with attendees achieving a higher Grade Point Average (GPA 5.13/7) than both local students and the general international student cohort (GPA 4.76 and 4.89 respectively).

In terms of the research dimension of the role, the AL has collaborated on a number of nursing-related research projects, particularly in relation to factors affecting student progress, and published in the areas of computer-assisted language learning, language testing, and policy, both of which have increased her integration into the School and the regard in which she and her work are held by colleagues. Furthermore, her work in ensuring that students have sufficient English ability to undertake the Nursing degree has resulted in positive changes to School policy (for example, recalibrating language entry levels to the Nursing course and introducing post-entry English testing) and also led to research on factors affecting student progress.

### *Some challenges of the model*

Implementation of the model did present a number of challenges, most of which might be considered relatively minor given the benefits it has generated. One challenge lay in the fact that because attendance of the English language development programme is voluntary, it does not generate an administrative 'topic code' required by the university system which controls processes such as room bookings. This has meant that logistical problems with running face-

to-face classes have sometimes been time-consuming and a source of frustration. Another challenge was that, initially, staff within the School were uncertain as to the nature and scope of the AL position and sometimes questioned the necessity of her work. This has resolved over time as a result of increased awareness of her activities and their efficacy, in combination with her development of strong working relationships with nursing colleagues and better integration into the School. What emerged, however, was the need, particularly within a decentralised model of English language provision, for those individuals responsible for its delivery to embody certain traits, and in particular the facility to proactively develop relationships with others, to self-manage and self-evaluate, and to acquire a good knowledge of the local context.

Finally, we would note that the model of decentralisation we have described is likely to be more financially viable in larger departments, where the number of international students tends to be greater, along with the funding to support it. In the case of the health sciences in particular, where the stakes are arguably highest, the English language proficiency of medical staff has been increasingly subject to professional, political and media scrutiny, there having been established a direct link between English language competency and the effective communication of diagnoses and treatments to patients. By extension, the universities who educate medical professionals need to reflect upon how they can most effectively mitigate risk to professional standards, patient safety and their own reputations by providing appropriate English language provision.

## **Conclusion**

We have argued that, largely due to the nature of gatekeeping tests used by universities to assess the language proficiency of applicants for whom English is not a first language, students often struggle with the language demands of their degree courses. This, we maintain, is because such tests, and the courses that prepare students to sit them, assess general academic language proficiency rather than students' conversancy in the particular academic literacies of their future disciplines. This misalignment can frequently be seen subsequently in the nature of the in-session English language support universities offer their students and which continues to be primarily of the general academic English variety that many will have studied pre-enrolment.

Where disciplinary literacies *are* taught to students, the models through which tuition is delivered vary. The model and its underlying rationale that we have reported on here is one of decentralisation. This in itself is somewhat unusual within the higher education context; however, what makes it even more so is the fact that the provision we have outlined is situated entirely within its own ecosystem, with no external reference points outside of the School where it was implemented: the individual is employed full-time by the school and is answerable only to the Head of School, rather than employed and managed centrally and assigned responsibility for students' language development needs within a particular faculty, for example. Indeed, despite sharing similar benefits, one might see the model described as a true example of decentralisation, rather than devolution with its continued implication of central control.

While further research on similar devolved forms of provision is to be welcomed, there is evidence to suggest that the model described here is not just viable but effective and advantageous, providing many of the benefits of decentralisation cited by Murray (2016a, 2016b), and more. The focus on professional language and communication, in particular, has certainly encouraged student engagement as they appreciate its relevance to both their

immediate studies and future professional needs. Furthermore, the positioning of the lecturer within the School of Nursing has both promoted better, more relevant teaching and generated useful independent and collaborative research, some of which promises to further improve English language provision in the School. The AL role has also served to raise awareness among staff of the nature of student communication problems, and with it the possibility of more sensitive and empathetic pedagogy and a greater enthusiasm for and engagement in their own relevant in-service professional development.

Having the AL employed by the School and whose services are exclusively devoted to it not only provides the role-holder herself with a sense of belonging, integration and personal investment but also gives staff within the School a sense that they ‘own’ the time and work of the AL and that there is permanence and continuity associated with English language provision – something often seen as less secure in centralised models of provision that are often subject to large-scale restructuring and the reallocation of funding between competing resources. This has fostered strong relationships with the AL and a spirit of collegiality, in part because investing in such relationships is seen as worthwhile and productive in the knowledge that the AL position is a stable one and represents a long-term commitment.

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