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# International students, gatekeeping tests, and a model of EAP provision

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English language gatekeeping tests such as IELTS and TOEFL are today common currency in institutions of higher education globally. While their widespread use over the past forty years might be seen as an indication that they have served their purpose sufficiently well, they are something of a blunt instrument in that they do not prepare students for, or measure their proficiency in, the particular varieties of language and associated literacy practices with which they will need to engage as they enter their various academic disciplines. Given today's diverse student demographic, the need for *all* students to become conversant in these practices, and the fact that there is little prospect of universities doing away with the current suite of gatekeeping tests, important questions arise as to who should be responsible for developing students' academic literacy skills post-entry and within what organizational structures they should conduct their work. As models of provision where academic literacy is embedded in the curriculum become increasingly popular, this chapter proposes one such model, based on a decentralized hub-and-spoke design. The model responds to many of the often cited and significant logistical challenges around space in the curriculum and resourcing, and offers a possible equitable and sustainable solution.

## Introduction

There has been a good deal of debate in recent years focused on the efficacy of so-called gatekeeping tests, such as IELTS and TOEFL, used by universities to assess the linguistic readiness of prospective students to engage in degree level study (Coley, 1999; O'Loughlin, 2015; Ransom, 2009, Trenkic, 2018). Much of this has been driven by concerns over students meeting institutional language entry criteria but subsequently struggling to cope with the language demands of their studies. Meanwhile, evidence confirming or otherwise the validity of these tests has remained somewhat elusive with the many predictive validity studies that have been undertaken showing mixed results (Daller & Phelan, 2013; Dooley & Oliver, 2002; Ingram & Bayliss, 2007; Kerstjens & Nery, 2000; Schoepp, 2018) and offering little in the way of reassurance to test users. Within the context of unprecedented growth in international student numbers as a result of increased social mobility and the consequential globalization of higher education, questions concerning the suitability of these tests have taken on increased significance. Students who meet language entry requirements and then discover that they lack the language skills needed to successfully engage with their coursework can suffer stress, anxiety and failure; furthermore, they represent a risk to the reputations of their universities. This is especially so in cases where, due to weak language skills, students struggle in professional placements that form part of their degree programmes, or where they successfully graduate only to find themselves unable to communicate sufficiently well in their workplace contexts. In certain professions such as nursing and pharmacy, a lack of relevant language skills can result in a failure to secure professional registration (Allan & Westwood, 2016; Arkoudis et al., 2014).

For some, knowingly setting entry requirements too low or without due diligence is unethical and cause for disquiet not only because it is seen as accepting students under false pretenses but also because in what is an increasingly competitive higher education environment there is a suggestion that financial imperatives and the fee income generated

by international students may be compromising standards and forcing academic staff to simplify or 'dumb down' the curriculum, thus calling into question the rigour and quality of the degrees awarded by universities (Alderman, 2010; Baty, 2004; Harris, 2019; Quality Assurance Agency [UK], 2009).

### **Academic literacy and its misalignment with university gatekeeping tests**

However, while it may be the case that some institutions – intentionally or otherwise – set their language entry requirements too low, raising them is unlikely to improve the situation significantly. This is because gatekeeping tests assess students' proficiency in a generic variety of academic English but fail to assess their working knowledge of the particular literacy practices of their future disciplines. There are, of course, good reasons for this, not least of which is the cost to testing organizations of developing a suite of discipline-specific tests and having a sufficient number of appropriately qualified examiners familiar with those practices and, therefore, able to assess meaningfully students' exam scripts. Added to this is the fact that the existing testing regime is now deeply embedded in the sector, and while the gatekeeping tests universities depend on may be imperfect and somewhat blunt instruments, they are generally seen as broadly fit for purpose. Whether, in reality, this is the case is difficult to determine in the absence of incontrovertible evidence to the contrary in terms of educational standards and the academic fortunes of the students themselves who enroll on degree programmes.

This partial misalignment of the language focus of gatekeeping tests with the particular 'varieties' of language – or discourses – that students need to master as they engage with their disciplines is reflected in a distinction, increasingly invoked in the applied linguistics literature, between English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) and English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) (Bruce, 2011; Jordan, 1997; Murray & Muller, 2019). As its name suggests, EGAP refers to the teaching and learning of academic English that is generic in nature, having 'a cross-disciplinary focus designed to provide students with a broad understanding of the principles of language use that apply to most, if not all, academic disciplines', and typically prioritizing the arts and humanities and social science disciplines over the pure sciences (Murray & Muller 2019: 258). ESAP, in contrast, essentially reflects an academic literacies perspective that recognises 'the requirement to switch practices between one setting [one discipline] 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 & Street 1998: 159; my parenthetical insert). These practices are captured in the nature of disciplinary discourses and the genres embedded within them and through which subject matter is expressed, explored, analyzed, and contested (Henderson & Hirst, 2006; Nesi & Gardner, 2012). They collectively help define a discipline, and through acquiring and appropriately deploying them and thereby becoming socialized into that discipline, an individual effectively secures membership of its community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1999; Wenger, 2010). This disciplinary variation in the way in which language incorporates linguistic, social, and cognitive elements embodies Halliday's idea, central to Systemic Functional Linguistics, that language develops to serve the particular purposes for which its users choose to employ it (Halliday, 1978); that is, economists for example, have developed and employ a shared set of practices that express the meanings and communicative purposes germane to their field, just as mathematicians, nurses etc. have to theirs.

If conversancy in the literacy practices of a given discipline is a necessary condition of the individual's ability to effectively and appropriately communicate within that discipline, then it is something that needs to be acquired by *all* students, and the fact that applicants' familiarity with those practices is not assessed at point of application is significant. Firstly, as I have indicated, it reflects a belief that current gatekeeping tests are seen as fulfilling their role sufficiently well as indicators of students' proficiency in EGAP, as evidenced by 'acceptable' dropout rates among non-native speaker students, and this militates against any inclination on the part of testing organisations to provide a suite of discipline-specific language gatekeeping tests that would be costly to develop yet would still likely have limited functionality given the necessarily selective nature of their content. Secondly, there are subjects taught at tertiary level, such as accounting, law, global sustainable development, astronomy and linguistics, that are generally not available in secondary school curricula, whether in English-speaking countries or elsewhere; as such there would be little point in assessing applicants' facility with the literacy practices of these disciplines. This could lead to an inequitable situation where those applicants looking to study subjects available in the secondary school curriculum would have their academic literacy assessed, while those applying to study subjects not featured in the secondary curriculum would not. Finally, the fact that universities do not assess students' conversancy in the literacy practices of their future disciplines reflects an historically held belief that regardless of their status as native or non-native speakers of English, they will acquire those practices under their own steam, through exposure to them during the course of their studies. Today's diverse student demographic is reason to call this belief into serious question, however.

Traditionally, university students have acquired the literacy practices of their disciplines through their engagement with reading texts, classroom discourse and feedback received on written assignments. While such an inductive process that is widely seen as obviating the need for direct pedagogical intervention may not be the most efficient way to develop conversancy in those practices, it could be argued that students who in the 1970s and 80s accounted for between 8 and 19 percent of young British school-leavers (Lambert, 2019) and as such constituted an academic elite, were arguably relatively well equipped to do so nonetheless, coming as they did to higher education with a significant measure of the required cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Ryan & Hellmundt, 2005) and the ability to adjust quickly to what Thomas (2002) and Sheridan (2011) have referred to as the institutional habitus. However, today's considerably higher levels of domestic student participation (50 per cent) and the increase in the overall linguistic, cultural, socioeconomic and educational diversity of the student demographic mean that we can make fewer assumptions regarding the knowledge and skills with which students – both local and international – come to their studies, and their ability to 'pick up' the academic literacies of their disciplines (Dunworth, Drury, Kralik & Moore, 2014, Wingate & Tribble, 2012). This fact amounts to a compelling argument for embedding the teaching of academic literacy within students' degree curricula in a manner that ensures equal opportunity for all students, while simultaneously removing the potential for extra-curricular language development activity to stigmatize those students for whom English is not a first language. As Arkoudis and Kelly have noted, 'the literature is unequivocal that high impact student learning occurs when communication skills are integrated within disciplinary learning and assessment' (2016: 4). Such integration, however, brings with it considerable logistical and cultural challenges and represents a significant departure from the traditional, service-based model of academic literacy support

that typically sees it delivered centrally by EAP teachers as an extra-curricular, non-credit bearing activity.

### **The challenges with embedding academic literacy in the curriculum**

There has of late been a notable surge in the number of articles reporting on efforts to embed academic literacy in the curriculum – an indication of a general shift in the field away from EGAP and towards ESAP (see, for example, Baik & Greig, 2009; Bohemia et al., 2007; Curnow & Liddicoat, 2008; Edwards, Goldsmith, Havery & James, 2021; McKay, 2013; Murray & Nallaya, 2016; Gunn et al., 2011; Wingate et al., 2011). Three features emerge as particularly salient in that literature and indicate some of the key challenges embedding presents. The first is the variation in the way in which the notion of embedding is understood and/or applied. The second is that very few cases report on embedding initiatives where academic content lecturers (ACLs) assume primary responsibility for imparting knowledge of their respective disciplines' literacy practices to their students, despite the fact they would appear to be best placed to do so. Indeed, given that those practices are fundamental and specific to each and every discipline, it is a matter of some curiosity that ACLs have traditionally assumed responsibility for imparting knowledge of discipline subject matter but *not* the means through which that knowledge is expressed, explored, analyzed, and contested. The third feature that emerges is that, in almost every case, authors report on only small-scale initiatives (often one course) rather than anything more ambitious. It seems that these initiatives are often locally based and/or serve to trial the approach, with a view to possible larger-scale implementation; yet evidence of such expansion is notable by its absence. As I hope to demonstrate, these three features are causally connected.

Importantly, the nature of the challenges faced during the process of embedding academic literacies will depend in large part on how embedding is conceived and whether what might be termed the 'hard form' or 'soft form' of embedding is being adopted. I use the hard form of embedding to refer to the case where space is created in degree curricula for academic literacy development and where primary responsibility for imparting the relevant practices lies with ACLs rather than EAP teachers. The soft form of embedding, in contrast, refers to the teaching of disciplinary academic literacy practices by EAP teachers outside of the regular curriculum but in such a way that input is designed and timed to support the delivery of degree course content and any associated tasks in which students are expected to engage. In this way, and as with the hard form of embedding, pedagogical interventions respond to the particular academic literacy needs of the moment and thereby assume immediate relevance. In so doing, they promote student motivation, engagement and thus learning.

Whichever form of embedding is adopted, one initial task that needs to be completed is the specification of those particular literacies and associated practices integral to a given discipline and which students are expected to master. This presents its own challenges as there is evidence that ACLs struggle to identify the literacies and associated practices of their particular disciplines despite demonstrating a working knowledge of them in their daily professional lives (Jacobs, 2005; Lea & Street 1998, 1999; Murray & Nallaya, 2016). While they have what Jacobs refers to as 'tacit' knowledge of their disciplines' discourse conventions (2005: 447), they have difficulty articulating that knowledge. There is, it seems,

a problem converting procedural to declarative knowledge and making what is implicit explicit, and this is where EAP teachers and academic developers can usefully work with ACLs to tease out the relevant literacies and their associated practices (Curnow & Liddicoat, 2008; Thies, 2012; Wingate, 2018). If the hard form of embedding is to be adopted, those literacies, once identified, then need to be strategically located in the curriculum – a process described in some detail by Curnow and Liddicoat (2008) in relation to an undergraduate Applied Linguistics degree programme. Having identified the academic literacies in which students would be expected to demonstrate competence upon completion of the programme, they describe how these were then distributed across the different assessment items for those core courses where they arose most naturally in the sense of being a prerequisite to engaging effectively with course content. In order to ensure that all students had the necessary exposure to these literacies and the opportunity to develop the associated discourse practices, they were embedded in core modules on the understanding that students would, in most cases, get additional exposure to them in other, optional modules.

The hard form of embedding is certainly a hard road to travel and it is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that there are few reports in the literature on attempts to implement it. One potential obstacle to implementation is the existing curriculum and whether there is sufficient space to enable the embedding process to take place. This can be a particular issue for curricula prescribed in part or in full by external professional bodies or that have been subject to other embedding initiatives that may be perceived as more ‘of the moment’ and thus a higher priority such as sustainability, experiential learning, and equality, diversity and inclusion. Another likely obstacle to the hard form of embedding is that of its reception by ACL’s tasked with teaching the literacies of their disciplines. Evidence suggests that there is likely to be considerable resistance here, with ACLs feeling that it is not part of their job and that they have neither the time nor the necessary skills set to undertake this role (Dunworth, Drury, Kralik & Moore, 2014; Murray & Nallaya, 2016) – something captured in the following quote from a study by Jenkins and Wingate (2015):

I am a Law lecturer . . . I am quite happy to help as far as I can . . . but you know I am not an English support teacher. I’m not trained to help people who really need specific targeted support, nor are any of my colleagues.

Personal experience suggests that ACLs tend to think of academic language and literacy rather narrowly in terms of grammar and syntax, resulting in this belief that they are unqualified to teach it. While this misperception can be addressed as part of the collaborative process of identifying and embedding academic literacies, it is nonetheless the case that ACLs will, in most cases, need to undergo professional development if they are to facilitate students’ acquisition of the literacy practices of their disciplines, and this can be an unsavoury prospect for many, and particularly for those who do not, anyway, see it as part of their role. This is not helped by the fact that academic staff are frequently at the sharp end of curricular and other initiatives many of which are quite disruptive, only to fizzle out leaving little or no evidence of any tangible and lasting outcomes. This is likely to breed scepticism and a reluctance to engage with any new curricular initiatives regardless of their apparent merits (Dunworth, Drury, Kralik & Moore, 2014). The securing of compliance can become difficult as a result, leading to a reluctance on the part of university senior management to put their weight behind the idea of embedding academic literacy in the

curriculum, particularly if there are no individuals within their ranks who feel qualified and moved to champion the idea and who remain in post long enough for it to take root, gain traction and bring about the change of culture ultimately required.

Given these challenges, the soft form of embedding would appear to offer a more workable alternative; yet even this would appear to be far from straightforward as the costs associated with resourcing it can be considerable and would likely be seen as prohibitive by most if not all institutions. If it is to be comparable to the hard form of embedding and ensure that all students receive support with academic literacy, it would require a team of EAP teachers large enough to service the needs of every discipline and its constituent degree programmes. Furthermore, it would present almost insurmountable scheduling difficulties: just as finding space in the curriculum to embed academic literacies would be problematic, the same would be true of finding sufficient space outside of the curriculum, given students' variable timetables, social lives etc. and their ability and willingness, therefore, to commit to academic literacy programmes. As a result of these constraints, what typically happens is that, in place of a comprehensive and thus equitable institution-wide scheme, ESAP tuition is either (a) centralized but with a faculty focus (e.g. English for Social Science Students; Arts and Humanities Students) or (b) the product of local, ad hoc departmental initiatives that have been forged from often longstanding professional and personal relationships between one or more EAP teachers and their ACL counterparts in the departments concerned. This latter situation makes for uneven and thus inequitable academic literacy support, lacking as it does the kind of systematic and comprehensive provision that can only come about through endorsement by university senior management.

There is, however, a particular realization of the devolved model of EAP provision that offers a more viable, alternative soft form of embedding which, while by no means perfect, is both cost effective in the sense of being scalable, and equitable in that ESAP resource is distributed evenly across the institution.

### **The hub-and-spoke model of ESAP provision**

Despite the increasing number of articles reporting on embedding initiatives of one kind or another, as I have indicated these often arise quite sporadically and independently of the kind of centralised provision that remains the mainstay of EAP support in universities and is typically delivered by English language centres, applied linguistics departments and other cognate departments, often complemented by related services offered by libraries, writing centres and careers and skills units. Within these structures, it tends to be English for general academic purposes that is taught on the basis of the utilitarian principle that while it may not go far in meeting the particular language needs of a given student or a specific cohort, it will benefit the majority of students *to some degree*. As I have indicated, where there is an attempt to acknowledge the different language needs of students working in different disciplines, this is usually reflected in ESAP classes set up to cater for students working within the same faculties – albeit in a variety of disciplines – with the result that, somewhat paradoxically, the content of these classes necessarily remains quite general in nature. In some cases, and as a complement to the (normally) free EGAP classes on offer to all students, individual departments with large intakes of international students may themselves fund ESAP classes for their own students.

The hub-and-spoke model I describe here was trialled at a higher education institution in Australia. The idea was that whilst oversight of the initiative would be maintained

centrally within its Learning and Teaching Unit (the hub), EAP teachers would be distributed across the four university faculties, where they would be physically based and operate as satellite units (the spokes). Each faculty team would be managed by a Faculty English Language Coordinator who was required to be research active and expected to encourage their team to engage in research relevant to their duties. Although teachers' contracts did not stipulate this as an obligation, it was felt that it would help professionalise the team, encourage reflection on their activities and the benefits and shortcomings of the model, and help generate ideas for improving its implementation.

The hub-and-spoke model was seen as having distinct advantages. Being physically located and thus a permanent presence within the faculties meant the teams themselves would feel more integrated and also be seen by faculty staff as 'belonging'. This meant that they could more easily forge productive relationships with academic staff in the various disciplines and would be privy to issues and debates that may have implications for the effective performance of their role and of which they might otherwise remain unaware. Moreover, they would have opportunities to input into those discussions and to influence their direction and outcomes. These kinds of interactions are key in at least two important respects. Firstly, they help ensure that EAP provision is more responsive to the local context by providing a means through which EAP teachers can better understand the nature of knowledge and its expression in relation to the disciplines of their particular faculty and the ways in which students are required to display their mastery of the relevant literacies through the particular types of assessment employed. Thus, over time, EAP teachers develop particular expertise and are able to shape their courses and source materials in such a way that they are optimally relevant and thus engaging for students. Secondly, they serve to raise awareness within the faculty and beyond of the nature of EAP and the specialist knowledge of those who teach it, a growing number of whom are research active (Dunworth, Drury, Kralik & Moore, 2014). This is often neither sufficiently understood nor acknowledged and it can mean that, among other things, students' language needs go unaddressed. Furthermore, this lack of understanding and recognition can perpetuate a perception of academic literacy as peripheral to core university business, with the result that EAP teachers are widely associated with service departments – something reflected in their generally disadvantageous conditions of service (part-time, hourly paid contracts, limited promotion prospects etc. (Jordan, 2002; MacDonald, 2016)) and the often modest institutional funding EAP activity attracts. Decentralizing academic literacy provision and locating it in the faculties where EAP teachers can collaborate with staff and be more responsive to the needs of *all* students in their constituent disciplines alleviates this problem while also helping to counteract the common perception of academic literacy tuition as a service activity directed solely at students seen as being in deficit and thus at risk, and designed to 'cure their ills' and "'fix" problems ... which are treated as a kind of pathology' (Lea & Street 1998: 158). These 'at-risk' students are, almost by default, non-native speakers of English who are consequently stigmatized.

Given the fact that financial and logistical constraints militated against tailored academic literacy provision being made available to each and every department in the faculty, a key element of the Faculty English Language Coordinators' role was to liaise closely with departments in order to identify their needs and then to deploy the EAP teachers in their respective teams as effectively as possible. This meant both that there was some variation in provision between different faculties and also that the nature of provision in any given faculty would change periodically. In other words, while support could not



comprehensively meet the particular academic literacy needs of students in every discipline, the Coordinators worked to secure the best compromise through adopting a strategy based on the principles of agility and flexibility. This meant that provision might, for example, comprise a combination of credit and/or non-credit bearing modules organized for particular departments, a cyclical series of workshops covering literacy practices shared across different disciplines, and individual writing surgeries.

The devolved model described was supported with the creation of a website that was similarly faculty based in its structure and the homepage of which presented students with four links, one for each faculty. Each link was a portal to resources specifically tailored to reflect the academic literacy needs of students studying in disciplines located within that faculty. It was understood from the outset that development of the website was a long-term project and that while the materials posted would initially reflect certain of the faculty's disciplines more than others and/or have relevance for multiple disciplines, in time and through a process of ongoing refinement they would become more focused on individual disciplines and more responsive to students' needs as EAP teachers became more attuned to the different disciplines. What was striking was the creativity and verve with which the four faculty teams applied themselves to the task of developing their online resources, and this was driven in part by a spirit of competitiveness that emerged. As a result, the rate of progress was impressive.

Despite working independently of each other, the faculty teams came together periodically for the purpose of professional development and sharing ideas and learning. Among other things, this led to a degree of cross-fertilization in respect of the content and presentation of the teams' online offerings and provided an opportunity to reflect on and evaluate progress in implementing the hub-and-spoke model.

### **The distribution of the teacher resource and the means of its funding**

Within the hub-and-spoke model, the types and scale of academic literacy provision able to be negotiated by Faculty English Language Coordinators will be dependent on the teacher resource they have available to them. This raises the question as to the basis on which that resource should be distributed across the faculties and ultimately how the model should be funded. A number of issues arise here: firstly, whether provision should be funded centrally or by individual faculties and their constituent departments; secondly, if funded centrally, whether there should be differential funding and if so on what basis; and thirdly, how funding should be raised and/or from which account(s) it should be drawn.

#### **Central funding**

Given that every discipline requires all of its students to become conversant in its particular literacy practices, and that few assumptions can be made about the extent to which students come equipped with knowledge of those practices, there is a strong argument for EAP to be centrally funded. However, this does not necessarily mean that resource should be distributed equally among faculties; rather, it would seem reasonable to take a proportional approach whereby larger faculties are better resourced in terms of the number of EAP teachers assigned to them. This is in sharp contrast to models that base distribution of resources not on student numbers but on faculty type (and its constituent departments)

and the longstanding and still quite prevalent belief that students in the more science-oriented disciplines have less need of literacy development – a notion that does not sit comfortably with an academic literacies perspective. Basing resource on *overall* student numbers is significant in that it acknowledges the need for *all* students to become conversant in the literacy practices of their disciplines and is therefore non-discriminatory in a way that approaches which apportion resource according to discipline and the number of international students they recruit are not.

Assuming provision is centrally funded, decisions will need to be made regarding the scale of the teacher resource it requires and how this is quantified – a difficult question as there is no end point as such to academic literacy development nor any easy way of measuring how and at what point ‘sufficient’ control of the relevant practices might reasonably be claimed. Consequently, while more teachers means more input and greater flexibility in meeting the needs of students with varied timetables, any determination of what is adequate resourcing is inevitably going to be quite notional and each institution will have its own view on what is required and financially viable. Historically, institutions have a broad, often quite poorly defined view of the extent to which academic literacy is a priority and simply specify the funding to be made available, without undertaking any meaningful exploration of the issue in consultation with the English language units responsible for its delivery and with whom real expertise resides. One senses, however, that this is beginning to change and that universities are not only increasingly seeing the provision of academic literacy support as a moral obligation they have towards their students but also as a marketing tool that can bring reputational benefits by highlighting their concern with maximising students’ academic potential through providing systematic and equitable academic literacy support on an institution-wide basis.

Whatever EAP funding is ultimately deemed appropriate and feasible, the apportioning of it on a per capita basis such that larger faculties receive proportionately more funding would seem to be a sensible and equitable approach the cost of which could be recouped indirectly via student fees or a central service charge levied on faculties. Such an arrangement need not preclude individual faculties or departments investing independently in additional EAP resource where they feel it is required.

## **Conclusion**

Any institutional model of academic literacy provision is almost inevitably going to be a compromise not only because resources will always be limited due to multiple competing institutional priorities and differing understandings and perceptions of the activity itself and the need for it, but also because of logistical factors around such things as timetabling and space in the curriculum. While the hub-and-spoke model is certainly not immune to the effects of many of these factors, it does offer a solution that is both equitable – by virtue of its underpinning belief that academic literacy and its development is relevant and should be equally accessible to all students, whatever their discipline – and scalable, such that the extent of that accessibility will depend on, and can be tailored according to, the financial circumstances of the institution concerned. The model also offers a degree of flexibility in that the faculty based EAP teams can decide, in consultation with ACLs and based on their developing knowledge of the local context, how the resources at their disposal can best be utilised.

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