English language standards for Higher Education

In 2008/2009, the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) funded a project to develop a set of *Good Practice Principles for English language proficiency for international students in Australian universities* (GPP). This project's focus was **international** students studying in Australian **universities**.

The project was undertaken by a steering committee convened by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA). The project was a quality enhancement activity for the Australian university sector and reflected extensive work being undertaken in many Australian universities. It built on the outcomes of a 2007 National Symposium commissioned by the Department of Education, Science and Training.

Following extensive consultations with the Australian higher education sector, the DEEWR reconvened the Good Practice Principles steering committee in 2010 (p. 12) and asked it to develop the principles into English standards that would apply to **all** students in the Australian **Higher Education sector**. The draft standards were submitted to the DEEWR in July 2010.

This document is the outcome of the work of the reconvened steering committee.

The inclusion of the ***English language standards for Higher Education*** (ELSHE) in a global standards framework is essential in the current context of developing a national framework for academic standards that would assist the higher education sector in setting up quality systems, in particular, to respond to recent government regulations and initiatives, such as the Knight recommendations and the Bradley Social Inclusion agenda.

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English Language Standards for Higher Education

Introduction

The project

This document provides standards for successful academic study in English in Australian higher education. The standards apply to **all higher education providers** operating in Australia.

This project was undertaken by a Steering Committee convened by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA). **Appendix A** lists members of the Steering Committee.

How should these standards be used?

In the first instance, the standards provide a set of external reference points for higher education providers. The standards are general statements for individual higher education providers to address in the context of their own operations and environment. The standards do not require and are not intended to produce a standardisation of approaches among providers. They are broad enough to allow for institutions to respond in ways appropriate to their particular situation.

These standards for providers are intended to complement the academic disciplinary outcome standards being developed through the ALTC Learning and Teaching Academic Standards project.

The Australian Government is introducing legislation to ensure that all higher education providers meet requirements in a new Higher Education Standards Framework, with providers to be subject to evaluations as determined by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA). The English language standards in future may be used by TEQSA in assessing higher education providers' performance against the Framework.

Definition of English language proficiency

For this project, 'English language proficiency' has been defined as 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. Such uses may range from a simple task such as discussing work with fellow students, to complex tasks such as writing an academic paper or delivering a speech to a professional audience.

While some students will enter higher education with a very high level of general English language proficiency, all students will need to acquire specific academic literacy skills during their studies, and the acquisition of these skills is part of improving English language proficiency. English language standards on entry are not adequate to ensure students' English language proficiency on graduation. However, some students will require greater assistance than others in developing specific aspects of their English language proficiency. It is for this reason that higher education providers should identify the developmental needs of individual students at an early stage of their studies.

Structure of the standards

There are six standards, which are listed on the next page. Succeeding pages provide:

- The standard
- An account of the expectations, i.e. actions that providers are expected to have implemented to meet the standard
- Examples of good practice, which are not intended to be prescriptive
- A brief explanation of the reasons for the standard.

the *English Language Standards for Higher Education*

1. The provider ensures that its students are sufficiently proficient in English to participate effectively in their higher education studies on entry.

2. The provider ensures that prospective and current students are informed about their responsibilities for further developing their English language proficiency during their higher education studies.

3. The provider ensures that resourcing for English language development meets students' needs throughout their studies.

4. The provider actively develops students' English language proficiency during their studies.

5. The provider ensures that students are appropriately proficient in English when they graduate.

6. The provider uses evidence from a variety of sources to monitor and improve its support for the development of students' English language proficiency.

Standard 1

The provider ensures that its students are sufficiently proficient in the English language to participate effectively in their higher education studies on entry.

Expectations

- The provider recognises that appropriate English language standards on entry are not of themselves adequate to ensure students' English language proficiency on graduation, and considers entry standards, the needs of the course of study and the support that is provided as a coherent whole.

- The higher education provider adheres to a formal policy that specifies English language entry criteria, including criteria for direct entry pathways, which are appropriate for the level of studies and the discipline and which are consistent with research evidence, including the recommendations of relevant testing organisations.

- The provider verifies the accuracy and authenticity of the evidence provided by prospective students to satisfy its English language entry criteria.

- The provider systematically monitors the performance of students by entry pathway or by cohort and makes appropriate changes to entry criteria to ensure that it admits only those students who are able to participate effectively on entry.

- The higher education provider gives feedback to direct entry pathway providers on the comparative academic performance of students who have entered through pathway provisions and on the provider's satisfaction with the English language proficiency of entering students from the pathway provider.

- If the provider uses a test of English language proficiency to determine student entry, the provider is able to demonstrate the security, reliability and validity of the test that is applied.

Examples of Good Practice

- The provider has detailed and explicit statements of the measures of English language proficiency that it accepts for admission of students to a course of study, not limited to a list of particular standardised test scores.

- There are defined academic responsibilities for setting and reviewing entry standards.

- The provider's staff and students understand what is signified by English language test results, including the strengths and limitations of these tests.

- The provider has secure and documented processes to allow it to check and approve that entering students meet English language entry requirements, including the use of precedent databases. These processes are controlled by the provider, involve more than a single individual and are subject to internal audit. Exemptions are given rarely and follow documented procedures.

- The provider has clarified its expectations with direct entry pathway providers and there are formal agreements between the provider and direct entry pathway providers.

- In determining entry criteria, the provider takes advice from people with expertise in the development and assessment of English language proficiency.

Explanation

This standard is an overarching general statement reflective of the fact that higher education providers set entry standards for admission to their courses of study. Entry standards are designed to allow most students to graduate, if the students engage diligently with their studies and are provided with appropriate opportunities for development during their studies. English language entry standards form part of admission criteria.

The standard assumes that students will complete their studies with greater English language proficiency than when they enter a course of study but recognises that a reasonable level of proficiency is needed for students to participate effectively in their studies from the commencement of the course.

Most providers allow English language entry standards to be met by students through a variety of means, so many students do not need to take a recognised test of English language proficiency to meet English language entry requirements. Given the practical impossibility of equating these other means with English language test scores, higher education providers need to find other means to assure themselves that students entering through pathways (including articulation from other studies, completion of English language courses and foundation programs) are equipped to participate effectively in their studies. In practice, this means at a minimum that providers need to monitor how well students from different entry pathways are able to deal with the language requirements of their discipline at various levels of study and further develop their proficiency. (Simple measures of aggregate academic performance by cohort may not provide sufficient information.) Higher education providers need to satisfy themselves that their pathway providers' programs are likely to be appropriate and to convey their expectations clearly to providers of pathway programs. Higher education providers need to manage their relationships with pathway providers effectively, including giving feedback on their performance and drawing attention to problems.

While there may be limitations on the extent to which higher education providers feel able to change their English language admission requirements for some groups, e.g. school leavers and students articulating from vocational education and training (VET) providers, providers should make known to relevant authorities any concerns about the entry-level English language proficiency of students admitted through these pathways.

Standard 2

The provider ensures that prospective and current students are informed about their responsibilities for further developing their English language proficiency during their higher education studies.

Expectations

- The provider formally acknowledges significant responsibility for the ongoing development of its students' English language proficiency and provides explicit advice to students of the nature and level of support that will be given to help them meet expectations of graduate English language proficiency.

- The provider ensures that students know they must play an active role in developing their English language proficiency during their studies.

- The provider's education agents understand the provider's expectations for further development of students' English language proficiency.

- The provider's onshore and offshore educational partners understand the provider's expectations for further development of students' English language proficiency.

Examples of Good Practice

- The provider has a policy that includes its goals for the development of English language proficiency for all students.

- The provider has a charter of student rights and responsibilities which makes explicit reference to development of students' English language proficiency.

- As part of its orientation and transition programs, the provider ensures that students understand the English language proficiency required for their studies, the importance of further developing this proficiency, and how early identification of language development needs can assist them.

- The provider explains to new students how they will have opportunities during their studies to improve their intercultural competence and understanding of a range of English communication styles and why these opportunities are important.

Explanation

This standard reflects mutuality in the development of English language proficiency. While higher education providers have responsibilities to set entry standards and provide means for students to develop their English language proficiency during their studies, students must also take responsibility for their own language development during their studies, as part of taking responsibility for their learning. It is important that students are aware of this expectation before they commit to a course of study, so providers need to advise prospective students of their responsibilities. Students also need to be aware of the importance of taking opportunities to develop their intercultural competence and capacities.

Standard 3

The provider ensures that resourcing for English language development meets students' needs throughout their studies.

Expectations

- The higher education provider identifies students' individual English language development needs early in their studies and addresses these needs.

- The provider ensures there are adequate resources for appropriately-qualified academic language and learning staff to meet the language and learning needs of students.

- The provider ensures there is adequate expertise available to assist academic staff to integrate English language proficiency into curricula and teaching.

- The provider ensures that academic staff know how to and are able to access professional assistance for the development of curricula, assessment tasks and teaching to develop English language proficiency in specific academic disciplinary contexts.

- The provider ensures that academic staff have opportunities to revise curricula and teaching to integrate English language proficiency with discipline-specific learning.

Examples of Good Practice

- The provider offers students opportunities to self-assess their language skills throughout their studies and to undertake developmental activities in response to the needs they identify.

- The provider has considered and addresses how best to meet the English language development needs of students studying online or remotely.

- The provider is able to demonstrate that its allocation of resources for English language development is commensurate with need.

- The provider has a clear statement of the responsibilities of various staff positions for developing students' English language proficiency.

- The provider offers professional development activities to develop the expertise of academic staff in understanding, promoting and integrating English language proficiency in differing disciplinary contexts.

Explanation

The standard recognises that, having identified the development of English language proficiency its students require, the provider needs to provide sufficient resources for development of proficiency. A provider should be able to demonstrate how resources for English language development are allocated and how it knows whether or not these resources are adequate to meet students' needs. Resourcing must ensure that adequate numbers of appropriately-qualified language and learning staff are engaged. (The Association for Academic Language and Learning (AALL) is developing in consultation with the Australian higher education sector, a statement on appropriate qualifications for academic language and learning professionals.) Further, resourcing needs to be provided to support academic staff to improve and revise curricula and their teaching to integrate English language proficiency with discipline-specific learning.

Standard 4

The provider actively develops students' English language proficiency during their studies.

Expectations

- The provider ensures that development by students of their English language proficiency is integrated into curriculum design, assessment practices and course delivery.

- Course learning outcomes include English language proficiency outcomes that are taught and assessed during the course and take account of the proficiency that is required of graduates in the discipline for employment or further study.

- The provider gives attention to all aspects of English language proficiency in assessment methods, e.g. attention to listening, speaking, reading and writing.

- The curriculum takes into account time for students to develop their English language proficiency within overall expected student workloads.

- The provider has considered how best to use work placements or practica to assist students to develop their English language proficiency in professional or employment settings.

- Course approvals and reviews consider the extent to which English language proficiency outcomes are designed into curricula, assessment and teaching.

- The provider ensures effective interaction of students from differing cultural and language backgrounds in regular academic activities.

- The provider ensures that students are encouraged and supported to enhance their English language development through effective intercultural social interaction in a range of formal and informal settings.

Examples of Good Practice

- As part of its orientation and induction programs for staff, the provider ensures that all its academics, including contract staff, understand the importance of further developing students' English language proficiency throughout the course.

- The provider offers fully contextualised, discipline-specific English language proficiency development within the course of study, for example through dedicated credit-bearing units or through specific learning activities.

- The provider has specific activities to assist online or distance education students to improve their spoken as well as their written English.

- The provider undertakes course mapping activities to identify and improve the ways in which appropriate English language proficiency will be achieved throughout the course of study.

Explanation

This standard acknowledges that different disciplines have different English language requirements and discourses and that most students do not enter higher education with 'ready-made' proficiency in the academic language of their discipline(s). It is based on a view that development of appropriate English language proficiency is more likely to occur when it is linked to need (e.g. discipline-specific academic activities, assessment tasks, practica).

The standard draws on expert advice, emerging practice and the available evidence on how to develop students' English language proficiency during their studies, taking account of the varying needs of students, especially students with English as an additional language. These sources indicate that while there is no single 'best' way to develop students' English language proficiency, contextualisation within disciplines and integration

of language development across the curriculum seem likely to be effective approaches. 'Integration' in this context means taking a holistic view across a discipline to address needs through a variety of means, including: embedding language development through curriculum design and assessment; workshops or credit-bearing units within a course; 'adjunct' workshops or sessions within a course; developing workplace communication through preparation for work placements and practica; and targeted individual or group support provided by academic language and learning experts. Similar ideas can be applied to support research students. Particular strategies may be needed to support online or distance education students.

The standard also addresses the need for providers to develop effective strategies to ensure that all students have experience of a wide range of contexts where English is used and thus are able to extend the breadth and depth of their skills in using English appropriate to particular sociocultural or academic contexts.

Standard 5

The provider ensures that students are appropriately proficient in English when they graduate.

Expectations

- The higher education provider states clearly to students and other stakeholders its expectations of its graduates, including its expectations regarding English language proficiency encompassing a range of communication skills.

- English language proficiency is an explicit component of academic standards for the course of study and is aligned to disciplinary standards.

- The provider obtains regular information from students on the extent to which they consider their English language proficiency is improving.

- The provider has ongoing dialogue with industry and with professional accreditation and registration bodies about their expectations regarding English language proficiency and the English language proficiency of the provider's graduates.

Examples of good practice

- The provider has comprehensive plans to develop and monitor students' English language proficiency throughout their studies up to the time of graduation.

- The provider uses stated criteria to assess students' English language proficiency within assessment of course units.

- The course allows students to demonstrate the range of abilities and skills they have acquired throughout the course including appropriate English language proficiency, for example through capstone experiences.

- The provider has implemented ways for students to demonstrate their English language proficiency to prospective employers, professional referees, academics and others.

Explanation

This standard recognises that when students graduate with an Australian higher education qualification, they should possess the English language proficiency skills to communicate effectively in subsequent employment and professional activities or further study, and to engage in society more generally. This standard is consistent with most Australian universities' statements of graduate attributes, which mention high level communication skills as a desired attribute, and one that research shows is crucial for employment in Australia on graduation.

The standard focuses on student learning outcomes and how providers know that students have an appropriate level of English language proficiency when they graduate. The standard does not suggest that providers offer students an external test of English language proficiency. Currently-available tests of English language proficiency for entry to higher education studies are not designed to assess proficiency on exit. Consistent with the principles of quality assurance, the standard asks providers to develop means to assure themselves that graduating students have appropriate English language proficiency. If providers have addressed all the other standards, they will have considerable evidence to demonstrate how this standard is being met.

Standard 6

The provider uses evidence from a variety of sources to monitor and improve its support for the development of students' English language proficiency.

Expectations

- The provider regularly compares its policies and practices for English language development against those of comparable institutions nationally and internationally and considers these in developing policies and practices that reflect the specific needs of its students and the requirements of specific discipline areas.

- The provider systematically monitors the extent to which its academics consider students' English language proficiency on entry is appropriate and is developed through their studies.

- The provider systematically monitors the extent to which its graduates believe their English language proficiency was developed throughout their higher education studies.

- The provider makes adjustments as appropriate to its entry standards, resourcing, curricula, assessment practices or teaching to better meet students' needs for development of their English language proficiency.

Examples of good practice

- The provider uses research findings, including its own, to inform its strategies for the development of students' English language proficiency.

- The provider systematically monitors the extent to which employers are satisfied with the English language proficiency and communication skills of its graduates.

- The provider obtains comparative feedback from students on the forms of English language development support that they believe meet their needs most effectively.

Explanation

This standard uses the principle of continuous quality improvement, which entails the monitoring of outcomes and identification of ways to improve one or more elements of current practice. These elements include policies, procedures, projects and activities, curricula, resourcing and the ways in which 'results' are defined and assessed. Identification of improvements can occur through internal reflection, benchmarking and comparisons, research findings, or considering the views of students and other stakeholders.

Appendix A

Steering Committee Membership

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