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Student Diversity and Service Provision:
The Realities of Professional Skill Integration

W. Soontiens

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Background

International trends in service provision and the increasingly obvious nature of the world as a global village has not left the educational sector untouched. Since the early nineties the student composition at especially English medium universities has changed significantly. In Australia multiculturalism on university campuses is a reality with the majority of visiting students originating from South-East Asia (Chalmers and Volet, 1997). An outstanding attribute of Australian universities as service providers is their focus on equipping all students with disciplinary knowledge and expertise complemented by a range of highly developed professional skills. The skill development is predominantly a requirement of students, instructors, professional bodies and employers. In addition, international competition, new developments in teaching and learning and larger student numbers contribute to a significant change in the landscape of tertiary education (McInnes, James and Hartley, 2000).

In the Australian labour market, employers seek in graduates skills such as time management, written business communication, oral communication, interpersonal, team working, problem solving and comprehension of business processes (Neilson, 2000). In the Asian labour market, an Australian education, some postgraduate experience and English communication skills are highly regarded and in strong demand (Lyons, 2001), while experience in foreign cultures, languages and business are valued as crucial to bridge the knowledge gap between Asian and western business environments (Solomon, 1998). These labour market conditions imply that exposure to professional skills at Australian universities proves to be a vital component for employability in Asia and according to Murphy (1996) universities hope to increase the employability of their graduates by integrating transferable skills and competencies. The focus of curriculum development at Australian universities is on incorporating written communication, presentation and teamwork skills as generic attributes. Most Australian universities clearly spell out the inclusion of generic skills as a prerequisite for the successful completion of an undergraduate degree in their policy documents (Barrie and Jones, 1998).

As part of the Curtin University of Technology, based in Western Australia, the Curtin Business School (CBS) has implemented the Professional Skills Project (PSP). Curtin's overall goals and strategic plan for teaching and learning is to produce graduates who are well equipped for careers in their chosen fields. As integral part of this plan, the PSP aims to enhance both the professional skills and employability of CBS graduates (CBS(b), 2001) and simultaneously integrate the teaching and assessing of professional skills into the units of the Bachelor of Commerce degree program (CBS(a), 2001). On an operational level this leads to the establishment of a cross disciplinary Task Force. The task force identified communication (written, presenting and speaking out), teamwork, decision making, and computer and information literacy as the five key professional skills components to be embedded in the Commerce degree programs (CBS(a), 2000).

The PSP endeavours to expose all students to the same skills and does not differentiate between Australian and non-Australian or English and non-English first language students. In reality, there is a vast difference between Australian and non-Australian or English and non-English first language students.

Although the majority of non-Australian and non-English first language students originate from the Asian region there is a considerable amount of real differences. Culturally this includes Singaporean, Indonesians, Malaysians, Thai, Vietnamese, Burmese, Chinese, Taiwanese and inhabitants from Hong Kong. From an ethnic perspective there are considerable differences between Chinese, Indian and Malay Singaporeans and Chinese in Taiwan and in mainland China. On the language front there are similarities between Bahasa Indonesia and Bahasa Malaysia while Thai and Mandarin are not based on the alphabetical system at all. The

diversity of non-Australian, or for that matter English and non-English first language students renders it impossible to consider them as a homogeneous group.

There are however a number of similarities justifying a comparative study between Australian and non-Australian students. All students share the common experience of moving to a different country, ethnic environment and culture in order to study. In addition they all find themselves in an educational environment where the teaching style and learning context is different from their former experiences in terms of expectations, learning support and academic requirements (Chalmers and Volet, 1997). Similarly, there is justification for comparing English and non-English first language students. The vast majority of these students study in a language other than their first language. The diverse language background implies a complexity of a wide range of communication, language and literacy needs in the English teaching and learning context. This in turn leads to high levels of frustration, confusion and stress amongst non-English speaking background students trying to master the language of their disciplines and communicate with confidence and competence in the English tertiary environment (Ramburuth and Mason, 2000). Although some non-Australian students come from an English language secondary school education (Singapore and Hong Kong) the proficiency of English, especially academic discipline terminology, is often on a sub-standard level.

Although Australian universities attempt to create an equal opportunity environment for non-Australian, non-English students, the reality is that traditionally in a multicultural environment the dominant group tends to neglect their own cultural context. This happens because the dominant group and their culture are defined as 'standard' and everything else is deviant (Digh, 2001). The development of support mechanism and instruments in skill support risks being culturally biased and thus not accessible and appropriate to all students. At the Curtin Business School this potentially translates in a situation where Australian and English first language students would benefit more from the PSP than non-Australian, non-English first language students. The focus of this paper is to assess if there is indeed a greater benefit from skill support for Australian and English first language students.

The Project

The third academic year level unit International Management 375 draws a huge diversity of students, especially in terms of language, cultural and ethnic background. This translates in a high skill diversity of students in terms of their ability to work in an English language environment. The skill diversity is further enhanced by the fact that students are allowed to complete a number of units with offshore partners and then transfer to Australia to complete their course. In addition there are a fair number of exchange students from a non-Australian and non-English background that enrol for the unit. In reality a large number of students thus have very little exposure to the Australian educational system or studying in an English language environment.

Skill development inherent to different units in a course is centrally supported by CBS through the Communication Skills Centre. In reality however, not all enrolled students experience the same exposure to the support services. This can mainly be attributed to the fact that a significant number of students are not comfortable in acknowledging their English language shortcomings or a misunderstanding of the role and functions of skill support systems. In support of the PSP a project was developed to support students in the development of their presentation and written communication skills. The choice of these specific skills was based on the fact that student literacy (including speaking, listening, reading and writing) is increasingly becoming a curriculum issue as the numbers of "English as second language students" increase in Australian universities (Ingleton, 1996). In addition, Neilson (2000) points out that: "if there is a dissatisfaction with graduate skills, it probably lies in the area of written communication. … students are not taught to write in a manner appropriate to business communications" (p.9). Opportunities for students to develop these skills were integrated into the unit and staff in the CBS Communications Skills Centre provided support.

During the course of the 13-week unit, students worked in self selected groups were required to submit a written assignment of about 3000 words on a topic relevant to the unit. In addition,

groups were expected to make two presentations on the assignment during the semester. Part of the CBS Professionals Skill project is that skills should be assessed (CBS(b), 2000) and in this unit the presentations and written assignment represent 40 per cent of the final mark for the unit. Of this, about 60 per cent assesses skills and 40 percent assesses academic content.

Although students were also involved in developing their teamwork skills through working in groups, no support was given in their activities and interaction in teams. The teamwork activity can, therefore, be interpreted as a comparison activity in terms of the impact of providing or not providing support on skill development.

Methodology

In order to assess the improvement of students' perceptions of their presentation, writing and teamwork skills, a questionnaire was developed to gather data on students' perceptions of their skill levels. The questionnaire included about 10 questions on each of the different skills using a five-point Likert scale as well as a number of demographic questions. These included country of origin and first language preferences.

The questionnaire was developed to serve three purposes. Firstly, to collect data on the perceptions of students at the beginning of the semester (week one). Secondly, to collect data on the perceptions of students after the presentations (between week 7 and 13) and at the end of the semester (week 13). Thirdly, to indicate to students the actual criteria that would be used to assess the skills throughout the course.

All students attending lectures in International Management 375 on the Bentley campus were requested to complete the self-assessment. After the data were collected in week one, a consultant from the Communication Skills Centre presented a 90-minute workshop on making presentations. Between weeks three and seven all groups had to make initial presentation. Feedback based on the skills as identified in the questionnaire was given to each group of presenters. Between weeks seven and thirteen all groups had to make final presentations. Students completed a questionnaire on their perceived presentation skills immediately after the presentation.

The written assignment was to be submitted to the CBS Communications Skills Centre before being assessed by the lecturer. Consultants read assignments, underlined errors and unclear expression and wrote comments and suggestions for improvement on a sheet developed for this purpose. It should be noted that assignments were not edited or corrected by Centre staff, rather it was stressed to students that they were responsible for making necessary improvements and corrections

As mentioned, the data on students' perceptions of their teamwork skills were collected to serve as comparison data in the sense that no support was provided to students to prepare them for or to address any problems that they may have had with team interactions. As stated previously, students, in week one, had free choice in the selection of team members and had to complete both presentations and the written assignment as part of that team.

Pre and post data gathered were analysed in terms of the demographics and responses to the different skills (presenting, writing and teamwork). In presenting the quantitative data analyses, wherever possible, estimates of effect sizes (ES) were used. Borg and Gall (1989) argue that effect sizes, when used appropriately, are a helpful method for assessing the practical significance of relationships and group differences

When interpreting the effect sizes the usual conventions were adhered to, namely:
- in relation to direction, positive effect sizes were interpreted as indicating higher post than pre scores and negative effect sizes indicated lower post than pre scores; and
- in relation to magnitude, an effect size of less than 0.2 was considered trivial; effect sizes between 0.2 and 0.5 were deemed small, moderate if they were between 0.5 and 0.8, and large if they were in excess of 0.8.

In summary, while there is no simple answer to the problem of determining educational significance of research results, effect sizes offer a viable method for assessing the educational significance of relationships and group differences (Borg and Call, 1989).

Data

For the purpose of this paper, the data analysis of the student responses to the questionnaires administered at the beginning and the end of the semester is based on the country of origin and preferred language of respondents. Responses are grouped in Australian and non-Australian, and English first language and non-English first language. Both the non-Australian and non-English students consist predominantly of students from Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Thailand, China, Brunei, and Vietnam as well as individuals from Zimbabwe, South Africa, Germany, Italy, Sweden and France. To simplify the writing in analysing the data, the terms English and non-English refers to the first language preference of the respondents. The analysis of the demographic data and responses to the questions on the exposure to professional skills are presented in Table 1. The data on the presentation skills are presented in Table 2 while the data on the writing and teamwork skills are presented in table 3 and table 4 respectively.

Demographics and skill exposure

From Table 1 it is clear that the students were predominantly from a non-English background (61 %) and have a non-Australian permanent residence (66 %). Most students were near the end of their course, with 55 per cent having completed between 10 and 20 units and 33 per cent having completed more than 20 units of the 24 required to graduate. Incidentally, 45 per cent of the students had completed less than 10 units at the Bentley campus in Australia, which explains the relative high percentage of non-Australians taking the unit.

Table 1: Demographic data and professional skill exposure

DEMOGRAPHICS					
	n		%		
Gender	Male	Female	Male	Female	
	55	76	42	58	
Language Background	English	Non-English	English	Non-English	
	51	80	39	61	
Permanent Residence	Australia	Other	Australia	Other	
	45	86	34	66	
Age	Under 21	21 and over	Under 21	21 and over	
	41	90	31	69	

UNITS COMPLETED						
	n			%		
	< 10	10 to 20	> 20	< 10	10 to 20	> 20
Total	11	72	43	8	55	33
At Bentley	59	37	30	45	28	23

SKILL EXPOSURE				N		%	
				Yes	No	Yes	No
Does multiple reinforcement improve professional skills				91	1	99	1
Professional skills add value to my qualification				92	0	100	0
The amount of exposure to skill development is	Too little	Just right	Too much	Too little	Just right	Too much	
	12	74	6	13	80	7	

General questions were included to assess the perceptions of students on the value and relevance of professional skills in units in general. The responses to these questions are overwhelming in the sense that all the respondents indicate that professional skills add value while 99 per cent agree that multiple reinforcement improves the skill level. The level of

exposure in the different units is assessed as just right by 80 per cent of students while 13 per cent would prefer more and 7 per cent would prefer less exposure.

Presentation skills

The results obtained from the data analysis on presentation skills are summarised in Table 2. Table 2 shows that on average Australian students improved slightly more than non-Australian students while English and non-English students improved virtually the same. Both Australian and English students improved significantly in being comfortable in presenting in English (1.1), and speaking in a loud and clear voice (1.4) compared to the other student groups. In addition, Australian students also showed a better improvement in their easy to structure the presentation, being comfortable when asked questions and their overall presentation performance (1.6, 1.10, 1.11). Non-Australian students improved significantly better in the use of aids to improve presentations (1.3).

Overall Australian students improved more in 10 of the 11 presentation skills compared to non-Australian respondents. This can probably be attributed to the environment wherein the presentations were assessed. Australians might perceive themselves at a higher level after comparing their own presentation skills with those of non-Australian (and mostly non-English) students. Although non-English students improved slightly more than English students in five of the nine issues, these changes were marginal.

Table 2: Presentation skills – Effect Sizes

	ITEM DESCRIPTION	Australian		Non-Australian		English		Non-English	
		g	sig	g	sig	g	sig	g	sig
1.1	I am comfortable presenting in English	0.70	**	0.17		0.54	**	0.23	*
1.2	I am confident when talking in front of an audience	0.72	**	0.70	**	0.67	**	0.73	**
1.3	I am able to use aids effectively to improve my presentation	0.00		0.54	**	0.32	*	0.38	*
1.4	I am comfortable speaking in a loud and clear voice	0.82	***	0.61	**	0.83	***	0.60	**
1.5	I am able to effectively make eye contact with the audience	0.57	**	0.47	*	0.45	*	0.54	**
1.6	I find it easy to structure my presentation	0.83	***	0.46	*	0.51	**	0.64	**
1.7	I am able to present without having to read from notes	0.74	**	0.59	**	0.64	**	0.63	**
1.8	I find it easy to stick to the time allocated	0.63	**	0.65	**	0.64	**	0.63	**
1.9	I can keep the audience interested	0.73	**	0.64	**	0.76	**	0.59	**
1.10	I feel comfortable when asked questions by the audience	0.97	***	0.63	**	0.72	**	0.78	**
1.11	Overall, I was a good presenter	0.94	***	0.77	**	0.87	***	0.82	***
Presentation Skill (average aspects: 1.1 to 1.11)		**0.65**	**	**0.51**	**	**0.58**	**	**0.56**	**

Note. Large effect size = *** Moderate effect size = ** Small Effect size =*

Writing skills

The data results of writing skills are expressed in effect sizes in table 3. From table 3 it is clear that Australian and English students improves significantly more than their non-Australian, non-English counterparts in terms of writing skills. The significance in the improvement was higher

in all but one (development of a structure (2.6)) writing skills. Non-Australians indicated a marginal decreased ability in expressing themselves in English and grammar and spelling abilities (2.1 and 2.2) contrary to a reasonable increase in skills by Australians. This reflects a possible overconfidence before the writing exercise and disillusion with the writing in English. The largest difference between Australians and non-Australians is concentrated in writing in English, the academic style, composing an appropriate introduction and conclusion and the professional presentation of the report (2.3 to 2.5 and 2.7).

Table 3: Writing skills – Effect sizes

Item #	ITEM DESCRIPTION	Australian		Non-Australian		English		Non-English	
		g	sig	g	sig	g	sig	g	sig
2.1	I find it easy to express myself in English	0.93	***	-0.12		0.67	**	0.01	
2.2	I have no problems with grammar and spelling	0.61	**	-0.12		0.38	*	0.02	
2.3	I find it easy to write in an academic style	0.82	***	0.07		0.56	**	0.20	*
2.4	I can construct an informative introduction	0.63	**	0.18		0.33	*	0.38	*
2.5	I am comfortable in writing a comprehensive summary	0.78	**	0.15		0.67	**	0.21	
2.6	I am able to develop a suitable structure for the content	0.67	**	0.64	**	0.76	**	0.60	**
2.7	I know how to present a report professionally	0.91	***	0.34	*	0.62	**	0.51	**
2.8	I find it easy to locate relevant resources	0.80	**	0.42	*	0.82	***	0.38	
2.9	I know how to reference when using the exact words of the author	0.66	**	0.31	*	0.80	***	0.17	
2.10	I know how to reference when paraphrasing the words of the author	0.67	**	0.22	*	0.82	***	0.08	
2.11	I know exactly how to construct a reference list	0.67	**	0.28	*	0.75	**	0.18	
2.12	Overall, I believe I am a good writer	1.02	***	0.32	*	0.85	***	0.37	*
Writing Skill (average aspects: 2.1 to 2.12)		**0.74**	**	**0.20**	*	**0.65**	**	**0.24**	*

Note. Large effect size = *** Moderate effect size = ** Small Effect size =*

English students indicated that their general improvement in writing skills was significantly higher than their non-English counterparts. This was reflected in all skills except the composition of the introduction (2.4) showing a higher improvement for English students. The difference in skill improvements on the language base was concentrated in the location and use of referencing, both in the text and in the reference list (2.8 to 2.11).

Teamwork Skills

Table 4 reflects data on the improvement of teamwork skills of respondents. Table 4 indicates that the improvement of teamwork skills by Australian and English students is overall significantly better than those of non-Australian, non-English students. The teamwork skills of non-Australian students have marginally improved in some aspects but overall resulted in a decreased skill level with six of the ten skill attributes having a negative value. Australian students increased skills significantly in working in the English language (3.1), being a team leader (3.6) and being a team worker (3.10). Both Australians and non-Australians, and for that matter English and non-English students indicated a decreased skill level in willingness to

learn from others and working in teams (3.8, 3.9). Incidentally, Australians indicated their resentment of working in teams to be marginally higher than non- Australians.

Table 4: Teamwork skills – Effect sizes

Item #	ITEM DESCRIPTION	Australian		Non-Australian		English		Non-English	
		g	sig	g	sig	g	sig	g	sig
3.1	It is easy to work in a team using English as the language of communication	0.52	**	-0.29	*	0.36	*	-0.24	*
3.2	I find it easy to stick to the preset time frames	0.43	*	-0.07		0.32	*	-0.02	
3.3	I try to make an equal contribution as a team member	0.28	*	-0.31	*	0.20	*	-0.31	*
3.4	I am sensitive to needs of members from other cultures	0.47	*	0.04		0.49	*	-0.02	
3.5	I realise that not everyone shares commitment and sense of responsibility	0.30	*	-0.08		0.06		0.06	
3.6	I prefer being the team leader	0.62	**	0.17		0.40	*	0.29	*
3.7	I am able to accommodate different attitudes and approaches	0.19		0.00		0.26	*	-0.07	
3.8	I am willing to learn a lot from other team members	-0.26	*	-0.29	*	-0.35	*	-0.22	*
3.9	I enjoy working in a team	-0.45	*	-0.32	*	-0.56	**	-0.23	*
3.10	Overall, I believe I am a good team worker	0.57	**	0.11		0.52	**	-0.11	
Team Working Skill (average aspects: 3.1 to 3.10)		**0.25**	*	**-0.09**		**0.15**		**-0.05**	

Note. Large effect size = *** Moderate effect size = ** Small Effect size =*

The experiences of non-English students as far as teamwork is concerned were predominantly negative with 8 of the 10 skill aspects generating a negative skill improvement. Overall English students indicate an improvement in being a good team member while non-English students indicate their position has deteriorated. In addition, the largest gap in skill changes between English and non-English students is in working in an English language team (3.1), making an equal contribution (3.3) and being sensitive to other cultures (3.4). In both skill aspects that English students indicated to have worsened, namely the willingness to learn from others and enjoying working in a team (3.8, 3.9), the deterioration is worse than for non-English students.

Shortcomings and Discussion

One of the major shortcomings of the study is the interpretation that Australians and English first language students are a homogeneous and uniform group. The reality is that anyone with Australian nationality could easily be educated in a different educational system and have migrated to Australia. At the same time, students from Singapore and Hong Kong consider themselves as English first language users while the nuances and complexity of grammar and terminology will differ vastly from the English used in Australia.

Another shortcoming is the inability to accurately determine the skill levels of students when entering or even while progressing through a program. The proficiency in English and familiarity with the Australian educational system is assumed to give Australian students a higher level of skills compared to non-Australian students. Measuring the perceived improvement of skills thus is potentially inaccurate.

The development and improvement of professional skills is subject to a vast number of external variables that have an impact on the lives and academic performance of students. Traditionally it is difficult to obtain direct empirical evidence of a link between the existence of

support services and positive academic outcomes and thus skill development. It is accepted however that the promotion and support of literacy and communication skills will address the literacy and communication skills of students (Ingleton, 1996). In addition, the experiences of students generally support the positive role that support services play (Promnitz & Germain, 1996).

The purpose of integrating professional skill development in units taught at CBS is partly to create opportunities for "non-English" students to diminish the skill divide. The reality however is that Australian and English first language students seem to benefit more from the skill integration than the "non-English" students. This raises the question whether the integration and assessment of skills are biased towards the Australian and English language culture and thus place "non-English" students on an unequal footing.

Data in this paper suggest that the more students were exposed and supported in the development of professional skills, the more confident students became in these skills or the more they perceived that their skills had improved and developed. These findings are true for both Australian, English and "non-English" students. The continuous exposure of students to presentations, both by themselves and peers throughout the unit seems to have contributed to the most significant improvement in the self assessed skills. Writing skills were supported by inputs from the CBS communications skills centre and subsequently also showed an improvement. The group of skills where no support was provided, namely teamwork, showed no improvement from students and even indicated that some of these skills were worse after the semester than they were perceived at the beginning of the semester.

Conclusion

The inclusion of professional skills in course offerings is not an option for any educational institution. Developing these skills and creating appropriate support mechanisms become major issues in an environment where students with diverse abilities, expectations and educational frameworks are brought together. In the Australian educational, English language environment it seems that "non-English" students do not derive an equal amount of benefits from support services. The challenge in managing support services to skill development is to integrate professional skill development in such a way that "non-English" students derive the same benefits than Australian, English first language students. Incidentally this includes professional skill support systems to be made neutral in that there is no bias towards the language or educational system in which they are developed.

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